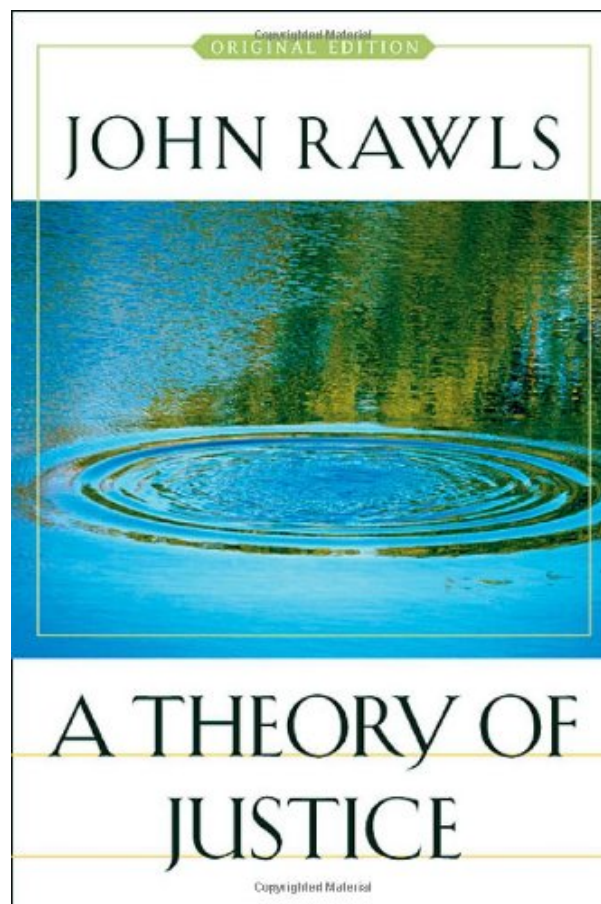
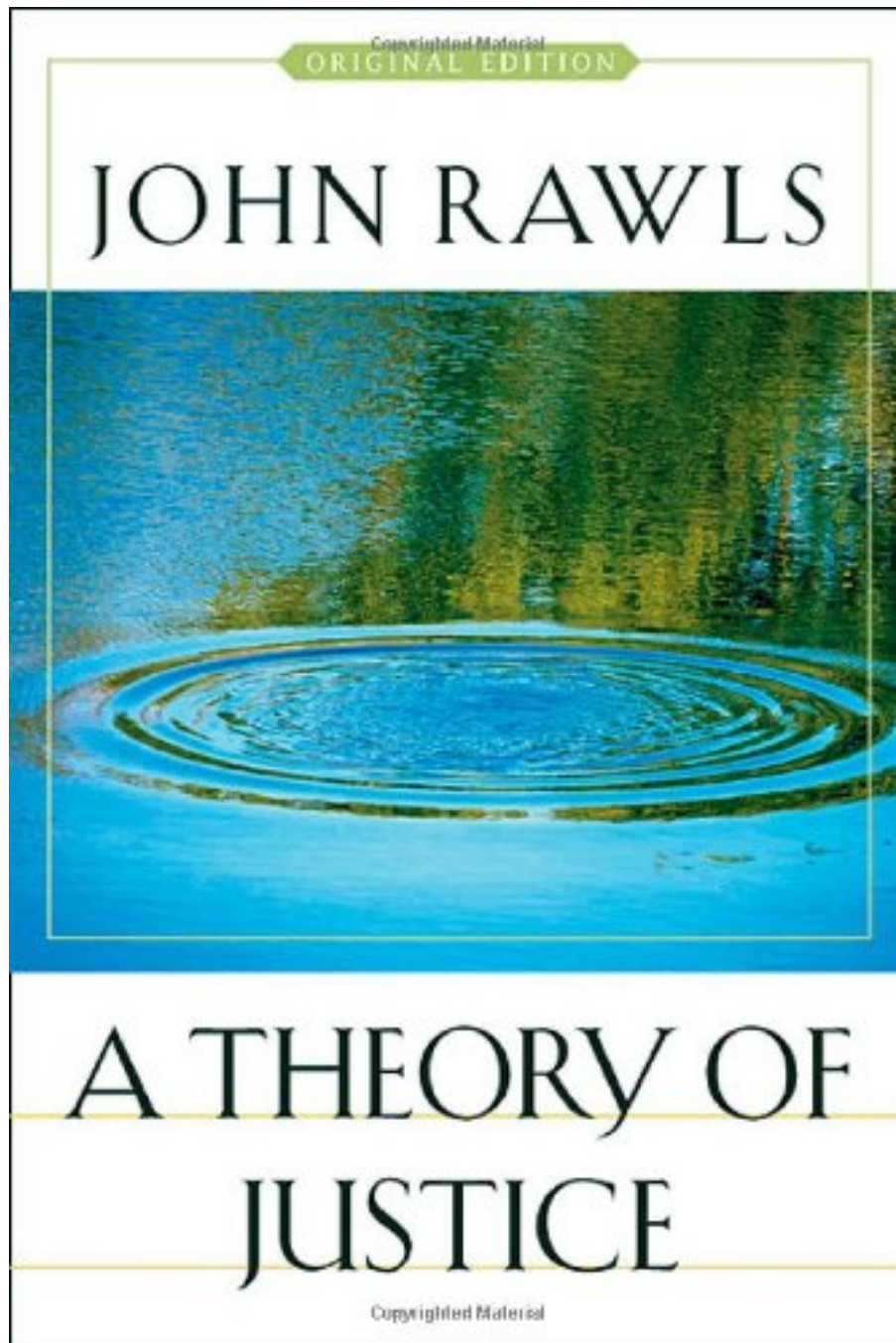


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John Rawls draws on the most subtle techniques of contemporary analytic philosophy to provide the social contract tradition with what is, from a philosophical point of view at least, the most formidable defense it has yet received ...[and] makes available the powerful intellectual resources and the comprehensive approach that have so far eluded antiutilitarians. (Marshall Cohen New York Times Book Review)

The most substantial and interesting contribution to moral philosophy since the war. (Stuart Hampshire New York Review of Books)

I mean...to press my recommendation of [this book] to non-philosophers, especially those holding positions of responsibility in law and government. For the topic with which it deals is central to this country's purposes, and the misunderstanding of that topic is central to its difficulties. (Peter Caws New Republic)

## **About the Author**

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Though the revised edition of *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1999, is the definitive statement of Rawls's view, so much of the extensive literature on Rawls's theory refers to the first edition. This reissue makes the first edition once again available for scholars and serious students of Rawls's work.

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218 of 235 people found the following review helpful.

Justice as Fairness

By D. Craig

This is one of the most important books on social philosophy written in the last century. As the other misinformed reviews illustrate, Rawls requires careful reading and a conviction to work through his arguments. Basically, Rawls tries to argue for a theory of Justice based on non-utilitarian principles. How can we have a Just Society that preserves individual rights and at the same time functions above the level of anarchy? Tilting too far one way results in a Communistic state that places the group above the individual. Tilting too far the other way results in a state that is a "war of all against all".

Rawls proposes that we arrive at a conception of Justice using minimal assumptions. He uses something called the "Veil of Ignorance" to derive his principles of Justice. This "Veil of Ignorance" assumes we would act in our own self-interest, but we don't know where in society we would end up. Given these two principles, people act in their own self-interest but not knowing what place they might occupy in society, Rawls argues that we would come up with two principles of Justice; 1) each person has the most extensive basic liberties that are compatible for everyone having these liberties, and 2) social inequalities will be arranged so that they benefit everyone and such that we all have equal access to beneficial social positions. (Some reviews here apparently feel that Rawls was trying to describe an historical situation with the Veil of Ignorance. I would suggest that they actually read Rawls.)

What Rawls is arguing is that taking a very minimal assumption about human nature (we rationally act in our own self interest) and assuming that no one knows his or her eventual social position, we will come up with these two principles of Justice (Justice as Fairness). A society is Just if it provides the most extensive set of liberties possible to everyone in the society and if it contains ways to balance social inequalities and provide equal access. Most people (even the Ann Rand folk) would agree with the first principle (equal rights), but likely have problems with the second.

Most of the people writing reviews, I believe, have not really read what Rawls has written or understood what they have read. If you want to disagree with Rawls then you must meet him with argument and reason, and not vituperative comment. I may not agree with everything in this book, but I must first understand Rawls' powerful arguments and reasoning before I can propose alternative ideas. Love him or hate him, Rawls cannot be ignored and neither can this book.

111 of 117 people found the following review helpful.

The Original Edition isn't for first timers; get the Revised Edition

By Not me, but somebody else

Rawls significantly revised his book after its initial publication, clarifying points and answering criticisms, and he considers the Revised Edition to be the definitive version. But the Original Edition is what comes up in Amazon searches, with no indication that there even is a revised edition, so use the ISBN to do your search to find it:

0-674-00078-1

or

9780674000780

In the introduction, the publishers of the reprinted Original Edition said they wanted it to remain in print mainly for Rawls scholars, to trace his thought.

Rawls says in his introduction to the 1999 publication of the Revised Edition, "This revised text includes what I believe are significant improvements...(and is) superior to the original."

87 of 93 people found the following review helpful.

Just Read It

By ctdreyer

Surely, A Theory of Justice is among the most important and influential texts in contemporary philosophy. And it is, of course, the central text in contemporary political philosophy. Want just a few reasons to think this is an important text that you ought to read? Here you go: Rawls develops and defends a new theory of justice, he provides a new way to extend some of the basic ideas in the social contract tradition, his text was crucial in resurrecting Kantian moral theory, his work has helped to bring constructivist meta-ethical positions back into prominence, the book develops some new and influential criticisms of utilitarianism, and

it includes an explication of the method of reflective equilibrium and demonstrates how it can be applied in moral theory, etc.

This is a long, intricate, and densely argued book, and there's no hope of summarizing even its main claims in this review. Consequently, I'll simply aim to give a very sketchy account of the structure of his main argument here.

Rawls's theory is a theory of justice as it applies to the basic institutions of a single society. He calls his theory "justice as fairness." It is not that he thinks justice is simply fairness, or that a just society is a fair one. Rather, people choose principles of justice in a position that is supposed to be fair; their choices in this fair position determine the correct principles of justice. The principles of justice determine the nature of a just society; they apply to the basic structure of society--to its fundamental institutions. They will be understood by people who accept them as principles telling them how their society should be structured with respect to how it provides people with their basic rights and liberties, how it determines people's opportunities in life, and how it structures the institutions in which people acquire wealth and income.

The fair position for choosing these principles is what Rawls calls "the original position." His argument has the following structure: he describes the original position, and then he argues that parties in the original position would choose a particular set of principles of justice. The principles chosen constitute the correct theory of justice.

The first part of the argument is a detailed account of the original position. Parties in the original position are placed behind a veil of ignorance, where they are stripped of certain types of knowledge. In particular, they lose all the knowledge of the contingent facts concerning their own standing in life and the details of life in their society. Furthermore, they lose knowledge of their particular talents, desires, psychological traits, skills, etc. Why prefer this as a position in which principles of justice are to be chosen? The main idea is that it allows us to see the people as coming to fair terms for social cooperation, for this is supposed to be a fair situation for selecting the principles. Parties behind the veil are unable to rig the principles of justice to benefit themselves rather than others; they aren't allowed to use their position or talents to strongarm people into selecting principles that aren't to those people's benefit; and they aren't allowed to craft the principles to suit their actual needs, aims, desires, etc. However, parties in the original position do possess the sort of general knowledge about human psychology, human societies, and the natural world that would be required to choose between principles of justice.

Now, importantly, placing individuals in the original position depends on a particular moral view; this is supposed to reflect our considered judgments about justice and fairness. It is a way of drawing out what we actually think about these things. This is not a historical argument: the original position isn't supposed to be a description of some situation people were once in. Nor is this an argument grounded in some account of human nature and psychology: the parties in the original position aren't supposed to reflect something of importance about human psychology. (One should see section 40 for an account of this as a Kantian conception of justice, though. Here Rawls may be resting his theory on an account of us as beings of a certain sort. But, again, this is a philosophical and moral account of persons; this isn't the sort of thing you're going to find out about by doing ordinary sociology, anthropology, or psychology.)

In the next part of his argument Rawls claims that parties in the original position would agree upon the following principles of justice. The first principle is that individuals are to possess greatest amount of basic rights and liberties compatible with similar rights and liberties for others. The relevant rights and liberties are the right to vote and to hold public office, freedom of thought, freedom of speech and assembly, the right to own property and to avoid unreasonable search and seizure, etc. The second principle is that there is to be fair equality of opportunity with respect to positions of authority and responsibility, and that inequalities in wealth and income are to be for the benefit of all, and particularly for the benefit of the worst-off group. The first principle is to be satisfied before the second one, so rights and liberties cannot be sacrificed in the interest of securing more wealth or income for any or all people. And one should notice that these principles do not clearly imply anything about how the institutions in which people acquire wealth and income are to be ordered or regulated. This will depend on which set of institutions would actually meet the requirements set

by the second principles, and this will depend on empirical facts about how the world works. Moreover, it should be pointed out that many ways of ordering and regulating these institutions will be ruled out by the first principle, irrespective of how well off they would make the worst-off group.

This, clearly, should be read by anyone interested in contemporary analytic philosophy, and it is an absolutely crucial text for people studying ethics or political philosophy.

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