

Economics questions: the John Rawls question

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This is one of a series of posts that will ask what the most pertinent question raised by a prominent influencer of [political economy](#) might have been, and what the relevance of that question might be today. There is a list of all posts in the series at the end of each entry. The [origin of this series is noted here](#).

After the first two posts in this series, the topics have been chosen by me, and this is one of those. This series has been produced using what I describe as directed AI searches to establish positions with which I agree, followed by final editing before publication.

This post refers to [John Rawls](#), an American philosopher, whose writing has had a considerable influence on my thinking. His most notable book was [A Theory of Justice](#), which might fairly be described as a modern classic and brought Kant's thinking into the modern era.

Why is Rawls in this series? Firstly, because of his influence on me. Some people are here simply for that reason. Second, because he provides a compelling framework in which to think about the political economy, in my opinion. that narratives can change thinking on political economy. And third, because he talked about justice, and without justice, political economy is more than capable of delivering abuse.

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) redefined moral and political philosophy for the modern age. In a century when economics had displaced ethics, Rawls reintroduced a simple but powerful idea: that of fairness.

He asked us to imagine a "veil of ignorance." Behind that veil, we do not know who we will be. We have no idea if we might be rich or poor, healthy or sick, powerful or powerless. He then asked if, knowing only that we will have to live under whatever rules we choose, what kind of society would we design?

Rawls believed that rational people behind this veil would not choose a system that leaves most in poverty so that a few might prosper. They would, instead, design institutions that guarantee basic rights for all, ensure opportunity, and allow inequality only when it benefits the least advantaged.

It was a profound moral test, and one that economics has largely failed, whether before or after he wrote. Hence, we get the Rawls Question: *if a just society is one we would choose without knowing our own position in it, why do we tolerate an economy we know to be unjust?*

Justice as fairness

Rawls's project was to rescue liberalism from moral emptiness. He accepted that individuals differ in talent, luck, and circumstance. But justice, he argued, demands that those advantages work for everyone. Inequality could be tolerated only if it improved the situation of the least well-off, which is what he called the difference principle.

This was not socialism; it was moral realism. It recognised that fairness requires more than formal equality. It requires a structure of opportunity and security that allows every person to flourish.

In Rawls's world, liberty and equality were not enemies but partners. Freedom meant little without fairness.

The moral poverty of economics

Where Rawls built a theory of justice, economists constructed instead a theory of efficiency. The market became the moral arbiter in that model: distribution was treated as secondary, to be corrected (if at all) after production. In this form of economics, inequality was explained away as an incentive, and poverty as personal failure.

Economists adhering to such ideas might claim that markets reward productivity, but, as Rawls would see it, they mainly reward position, which is the luck of birth, inheritance, and circumstance. Behind the veil of ignorance, he argued, no one would design a system that makes housing, healthcare, and security luxuries of class and yet that is precisely what we have. We have, in effect, built an economy that fails Rawls's test at every level.

The myth of meritocracy

Rawls did not reject inequality, but he exposed the myth that it reflects merit. Natural talent, family wealth, and social capital are all arbitrary from a moral point of view. We cannot, he said, claim rewards for the lottery of birth. The purpose of a just society is to neutralise, not magnify, those accidents, yet the modern meritocracy does the opposite. It converts privilege into entitlement and wealth into virtue. Behind its rhetoric of opportunity lies a rigged game in which the winners design the rules and the

losers are blamed for losing. Behind the veil of ignorance, who would choose that?

The political capture of fairness

Rawls's theory implied an active, redistributive state; not a leviathan, but a guarantor of fairness. That requires progressive taxation, public education, universal healthcare, and social insurance. But since the 1980s, neoliberal politics has reversed that order. Taxes have been cut at the top, welfare eroded, and public services hollowed out. Fairness has been rebranded as dependency; solidarity as inefficiency. The very concept of justice as fairness has been replaced by the cynicism of markets as morality.

This is the moral failure of our time: to know what justice requires and to choose its opposite.

The Rawlsian test today

If we applied Rawls's veil of ignorance today, would anyone design a society where:

*

The richest 1% own more than half of all wealth?

*

Access to housing depends on speculation?

*

A child's education is determined, more than anything else, by their postcode?

*

Health outcomes largely mirror income?

No one would, and yet we knowingly preserve this world. That is the scandal Rawls forces us to confront.

What answering Rawls requires

To answer the Rawls Question is to rebuild politics on the foundation of fairness. It requires:

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Progressive taxation that funds universal rights and limits inherited privilege.

*

The provision of universal public goods such as health, education, care, and housing as

the precondition of liberty.

*

Democratic renewal so that citizens are empowered to shape institutions rather than being ruled by markets.

*

Moral education so that a public understanding that justice is not charity, but the condition of freedom, is created and nourished.

Inference

The Rawls Question cuts to the heart of our collective hypocrisy. We know, behind the veil of ignorance, what justice demands, but we simply refuse to enact it. We choose systems that reward advantage, punish disadvantage, and then call the result inevitable.

Rawls offered a moral mirror. It shows that fairness is not utopian but rational and that its existence is the only basis on which a diverse society can coexist in peace.

The tragedy is that we have allowed economics to replace ethics, and efficiency to eclipse justice. The task, then, is simple but radical: to rebuild the economy as if fairness mattered.

Behind the veil of ignorance, we would all choose it. In front of it, we have forgotten how.

Previous posts in this series

* [***The economic questions***](#)

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* [***Economic questions: The Mark Carney Question***](#)

* [***Economics questions: The Keynes question***](#)

* [***Economics questions: The Karl Marx question***](#)

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