

If you didn't know who you'd be, would you design t...

Published: January 13, 2026, 3:53 am

What if we designed society before we knew who we'd be in it? Philosopher John Rawls asked that question in *A Theory of Justice*, and his answer was revolutionary. Fairness, he said, means building institutions that protect everyone, not just the powerful.

In this video, I explore how Rawls' veil of ignorance could reshape politics, taxation, and economics today, and why justice must be built into policy rather than be added as charity.

What would you change if you didn't know where you'd stand?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPAMQer1K8I?si=O-b-s9AF8B4gFhj->

This is the audio version:

https://www.podbean.com/player-v2/?i=t43ic-19b0e22-pb&from=pb6admin&share=1&download=1&rtl=0&font=Arial&skin=f6f6f6&font-color=auto&logo_link=episode_page&btn-skin=c73a3a

This is the transcript:

What would happen if we lived life behind a veil of ignorance? That's a question that a philosopher called [John Rawls](#) asked in the early 1970s. He wrote a book he called *A Theory of Justice* and suggested that we imagine what life would be like if we'd arrived in this world not knowing who we would be.

Would we be rich or poor? Healthy, or ill? Born in the United Kingdom, or Nigeria, or Australia, or a Pacific Island?

And would we know what our race or faith or anything else was?

No. That's what Rawls said we should imagine. The veil of ignorance was that we should arrive in this world not knowing anything about ourselves, and then design institutions that were fair for everyone, despite the fact that we would not know who we were before we had to live within them.

He said that if we did have such institutions that were fair to everyone, whoever they were, then we would have passed the test of justice.

And let's be clear about this. What he was saying was, forget privilege, power, gender, race, and class, and whatever else it is that divides us. We should try to imagine living in a society where such things didn't matter with regard to our outcomes in life.

After all, if we did have to think in that way, would we risk living in a society that leaves millions of people in poverty? We wouldn't.

We wouldn't live in a world that was misogynistic because we might be a woman.

We wouldn't live in a world which was homophobic because we might be homosexual.

We wouldn't live in a world that was unfair to people of one faith who were prejudiced against people of another faith, because we wouldn't know what our faith might be.

And we wouldn't prejudice people on where they were born, because we wouldn't know where we might be born.

The point is that moral reasoning demands empathy that is structured into policy, and that's what his veil of ignorance was all about. He wasn't arguing that fairness was charity. He was saying it was rationally prudent to design morality into a system of justice because that will be the outcome if we didn't know our own place within society, and anything that creates an imbalance in favour of one part of society over another, particularly where the prejudice is in favour of those already powerful, must indicate not a fairness within that system but an imbalance based upon prejudice.

So he argued that there were two principles of justice.

The first was that equal basic rights and liberties must exist for everyone, whoever they are.

And secondly, that if inequalities are allowed, and they are inevitable in any society, then they must only be allowed if they benefit the least well off.

That's what he called the difference principle: inequality must serve justice and not erode it. Freedom and fairness are absolutely complementary and not opposites in this worldview.

And why does this matter now? Well, today's politics clearly rewards privilege, and it punishes vulnerability. Economic rules are written to entrench wealth and not to provide opportunity. Rawls' framework gives us a moral map back to reason and care.

It asks, why would we agree to live under today's rules if we didn't know where we were going to be within society before we had picked them? And the answer is, of course, we wouldn't pick those rules. They were picked by people who knew they did have privilege, and they did have power. And the consequence is that some of us are excluded.

So how do we move from this theory to practice? The answer is that an enlightened government would actually look to apply John Rawls' logic directly.

- * It would try to guarantee essentials to everyone.*
- * The opportunity to earn an income through full employment.*
- * Housing for everyone through the provision of social housing, where necessary.*
- * Healthcare through a national health service, free to everyone at the point of supply.*
- * Education throughout life, but critically from nursery to postgraduate.*
- * And of course, dignity for all, and freedom from prejudice.*
- * And we would design taxes to level life chances and not just to raise revenue.*
- * Whilst we might make well-being, and not GDP, the test of real progress within our economy, as I have long argued.*

In the Rawlsian state, spending would be aimed first at those least advantaged. The difference principle would be put into action. There would be no subsidy for the wealthy as we get now in so many of our tax allowances and reliefs, before poverty had been relieved for everyone.

Taxation would be designed for redistribution and participation, and public investment would be in place as a moral obligation and not just to provide a fiscal stimulus to business.

Transparency and deliberation would also be an essential part of democratic justice. So our current systems of voting, and our current systems where people aren't consulted on outcomes, would be unacceptable. We would have to involve people in decision-making processes.

Now, of course, you can say all of this is utopian, but utopia is a direction and not a destination. Of course, it's an ideal, but what is wrong with aiming for an ideal? What is wrong with aiming for the best? We tell young people that is what they should try to do, so why can't we apply the same principle to society?

Justice evolves with understanding and not ideology. And this isn't a dogma of ideology, it is a dogma of understanding of what justice is and what the preconditions of it are.

A society that aims for fairness ends up with stronger, more stable and more humane structures in which people can live. The impossible becomes inevitable once we decide that we want it.

And looking at this in terms of political economy, economics right now is stripped of ethics, and the result has been chaos and inequality. Rawls would restore the moral architecture to our economic design. He would demand that an enlightened government embeds fairness in law, budgets and institutions. And again, that's not utopia. It's a simple delivery of moral adulthood, if you like, in public life, grown-up decision-making on behalf of everyone.

What would this mean for us? Well, it means we have to demand policies that pass this veil of ignorance test. We have to ask of every decision, does this improve the life of the least well off? And if it doesn't, what should we be doing instead, because that's a better option? Justice has to become for us, the politics of care made real.

John Rawls said justice is the first virtue of social institutions, just as truth is of systems of thought. And he was right. Justice has to be written everywhere in our society, but it isn't.

Enlightened government isn't about perfection. It's about direction, a direction towards fairness, towards equality, and towards shared security. That's the moral horizon that John Rawls defined, and my argument is that it's worth walking in that direction because the alternative is so much worse.

What do you think? Do you think we should have a society that is fair, whoever we are? Do you think that governments should be run on that basis? Do you think that our tax systems should be run on that basis? Do you think that the world will be happier, better, richer, and more fulfilled on that basis? Let us know. There's a poll down below.

Poll

[poll id="242"]

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

Comments

When commenting, please take note of this blog's comment policy, [which is available here](#). ***Contravening this policy will result in comments being deleted before or after initial publication at the editor's sole discretion and without explanation being required or offered.***