



“Summary of article by John Rawls: Social Unity and Primary Goods” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 3: Human Well-Being and Economic Goals. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 276-279

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

### **“Summary of article by John Rawls: Social Unity and Primary Goods”**

(This article resolves certain points of ambiguity identified in the author's A Theory of Justice (1971). The author published a number of articles during the 1980s that represented an extended discussion of this work -- an evolution of ideas that eventually turned into Political Liberalism (1993). This article represents a midpoint in the transition: it was published exactly eleven years after the earlier book and eleven years before the later one. The summary of this article, in which Rawls distinguishes his approach to justice from that of utilitarianism, is informed by explanations that were elaborated in articles during the second half of this period.)

Normative economics, following a common utilitarian approach to justice, assumes that all rational members of society pursue a single common good: the maximization of social utility. Issues of justice that arise in these theories are considered in terms of this goal. An alternative approach is to view society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, and to consider issues of justice in terms of maintaining fair terms of cooperation. The author proposes the Kantian concept of "justice as fairness" as one version of this alternative, making the case that his approach to the nature of just claims and interpersonal comparisons is substantially different from that of utilitarianism and normative economics.

### **JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS: THE BASIC IDEA**

A central thesis of justice as fairness is that issues of justice apply to basic institutions, rather than to individuals, individual acts, or private exchanges. This is a political conception of justice, to be distinguished from metaphysical conceptions that are tied to a particular moral theory, such as utilitarianism. This conception starts with three assumptions. First, it can be developed and applied only to the basic institutions of a constitutional democracy. Second, people accept this political conception on the basis of fundamental ideas that already exist in a culture; an important example is the idea that society is a fair system of social cooperation in which citizens are free and equal and capable of cooperating over a whole life. Finally, different individuals may have opposing conceptions of their life objectives.

In dropping the assumption that there is a single common good to which all aspire, justice as fairness assumes that citizens with different ends will seek fair terms of cooperation to advance their mutual goals. However, cooperation is only possible if citizens are able to exercise the two powers of moral responsibility: the capacity and desire to honor fair terms of cooperation; and the capacity to decide upon, revise and rationally pursue a personal conception of the good.

Morally responsible individuals who exercise these two powers will regulate the pursuit of their ends as well as their demands on others in light of the two public principles of justice.

These principles are chosen from behind a veil of ignorance by parties representing the highest order interests of citizens, namely, to develop and exercise the two moral powers just cited. The first principle of justice recognizes that all citizens in a well ordered society have the same, equal basic liberties. This is prior to the second principle (sometimes called the difference principle) which holds that any social and economic inequality must (a) benefit the least advantaged members and (b) attach to offices and positions that are open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. The benefits and advantages mentioned in (a) are to be understood in terms of primary goods which may include basic liberties, such as freedom of association, freedom of movement and choice of occupation, positions of political and economic responsibility, income and wealth, and the social bases of self respect. Primary goods are features of social institutions; they represent the background conditions for the development and exercise of the two moral powers.

Fair terms of cooperation can only be established when there is a fair distributions of primary goods -- those resources that are necessary for the pursuit of one's rational life plan. The choice and ranking of primary goods requires a general account of rational plans of life -- an account that shows how our lives depend on primary goods for their formation, revision and execution. An index of primary goods permits interpersonal comparisons. This is a necessary basis for ensuring fair distributions of opportunities and freedoms. With justice as fairness, everyone's social situation can be assessed using the same index of primary goods. The appropriateness of claims to primary goods are settled by the two principles of justice. Thus, claims of justice turn on distributions of primary goods, not on welfare considerations (as in utilitarian formulations).

According to justice as fairness, rights to certain basic freedoms are prior to conceptions of the good in the sense that they limit permissible conceptions of the good to those that do not violate the fundamental (public) principles of justice. Normative economics has no such limitations — it implies that, so long as the design of institutions realizes the greatest good, individuals may pursue whatever goals they choose. However, since it is easy to describe realistic social institutions that allow the greatest satisfaction to arise without the preservation of basic liberties, basic liberties are more secure in a theory of justice as fairness.

## **A WELFARIST OBJECTION**

Some people have expensive tastes and can only be satisfied with a diet of exotic dishes and fine wine. Others have plain tastes and can be satisfied with a diet of milk, bread and beans. One objection to justice as fairness is that it is said to imply that everyone can be equally satisfied with the same resources. This objection is not fatal, first because justice as fairness is committed neither to the view that income and wealth are good indicators of satisfaction, nor to the claim that primary goods are a measure of psychological well being. Justice as fairness rejects the idea that comparing and maximizing satisfaction is central to issues of justice. Second, the theory is committed to the idea that people are responsible for the ends they pursue. If citizens are unable to find satisfaction with their income because of their expensive tastes this gives them no claims to additional resources. The appropriate use of primary goods relies on a capacity to assume

responsibility for one's goals and preferences. This capacity is implied by the moral power to form, revise and rationally pursue a conception of the good.

A theory of justice that holds individuals responsible for their goals is plausible only if (1) it is assumed that persons can regulate their goals and preferences in light of their expectations of primary goods over the course of a life; (2) interpersonal comparisons are based on an index of primary goods that are tied to the highest order interests of citizens as moral persons; and (3) everyone accepts, as an ideal underlying the public principles of justice, the conception of persons as moral citizen.

This view implies a social division of responsibility. Society is responsible for maintaining the public principles of justice, and individuals are responsible for revising and adjusting their conception of the good to their expected fair share of primary goods. Claims of justice attach to primary goods, rather than to desires or wants, no matter how strongly felt. Strong feelings about goals, or their intensive pursuit, do not constitute justification for a claim on resources.

### **INTERPERSONAL COMPARISONS: KOLM VS. JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS**

The dramatic and substantial differences between two approaches to issues of justice -- the utilitarian, and justice as fairness -- can be illustrated by considering their respective views on interpersonal comparisons. For instance, Serge Kolm argues for that the utilitarian position that normative economics should use "fundamental preferences" as the basis of interpersonal comparisons.<sup>1</sup> The basic idea behind fundamental preferences is that everyone has, at bottom, the same preferences. In a given society each citizen has a preference ordering over all possible situations that affect any person's well being. According to this view, it is possible for a representative individual to construct a social welfare function by sympathetically identifying with everyone's preference ordering. All citizens promote a single conception of the good that is common to all rational citizens.

Justice as fairness assumes a completely different conception of persons from that of Kolm's utilitarianism. Where Kolm assumes that every individual has the same basic preferences and goals, justice as fairness recognizes that individual's goals may be incommensurable. Where Kolm assumes that a representative individual can assess the good of others, justice as fairness assumes that persons can assess only their own overall situation. Finally, interpersonal comparisons based on an index of primary goods have nothing to do with preferences.

### **CONCLUSION**

The major difference between justice as fairness and utilitarian conceptions of justice is that justice as fairness begins with a shared conception of justice and is linked to a conception of the moral individual: someone who is responsible for his or her own goals, some of which may oppose the goals of others. It offers a more realistic and complex view of rational individuals as citizens who are more than a collection of utility maximizers out to satisfy their aims and desires. In pluralistic democratic societies, justice must be based on principles that support cooperation rather than on principles that define what is right in terms of a social good that obliterates differences among persons, their goals, and overall world views.

## Notes

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1. Serge Kolm-Christophe, *Justice et Equite* (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1972).