

## Rawls Biog.

**John Rawls** (February 21, 1921 - November 24, 2002) was a Professor of Political Philosophy at Harvard University and author of *A Theory of Justice* (1971), *Political Liberalism*, and *The Law of Peoples*.

### Biographical Sketch

John Borden (Bordley) Rawls was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He was the second of five sons to William Lee Rawls and Anna Abell Stump. Rawls only attended school in Baltimore for a short time before transferring to a renowned Episcopalian preparatory school in Connecticut called Kent. Upon graduation in 1939, Rawls went on to Princeton University where he became interested in philosophy. In 1943, he completed his Bachelor of Arts degree and joined the army. During this time (World War II), Rawls served as an infantryman in the Pacific where he toured New Guinea, the Philippines, and Japan and witnessed the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima. After this experience, Rawls turned down the offer of becoming an officer and left the army as a private in 1946. Shortly thereafter, he returned to Princeton to write a doctorate in moral philosophy. Rawls then married Margaret Fox, a Brown graduate, in 1949. Margaret and John had a shared interest in indexing - they spent their first holiday together writing the index for a book on Nietzsche, and Rawls wrote the index for *A Theory of Justice* himself. After earning his Ph.D. from Princeton in 1950, Rawls decided to teach there until 1952 when he received a Fulbright Fellowship to Oxford University (Christ Church), where he was influenced by the liberal political theorist and historian of ideas Isaiah Berlin. Next, he returned to the United States, serving first as an assistant and then associate professor at Cornell University. Finally in 1962, he became a full professor of philosophy at Cornell. Another accomplishment made in the early 1960s was his achievement of a tenured position at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, he moved to Harvard University two years later, where he remained for almost forty years. Unfortunately, Rawls suffered the first of several strokes in 1995, which severely impeded his ability to continue working. Nonetheless, he was still able to complete a work entitled, *The Law of Peoples*, which contains the most complete statement of his views on international justice.

### Rawls's Contribution to Political and Moral Philosophy

Rawls is noted for his contributions to liberal political philosophy. Among the ideas from Rawls's work that have received wide attention are:

The two principles of justice (the liberty principle and the difference principle).

The original position and the veil of ignorance.

Reflective equilibrium.

Overlapping consensus.

Public reason.

Many academic philosophers believe that Rawls has made an important and lasting contribution to political philosophy. Others find Rawls's work unpersuasive and disengaged from political praxis. There is general agreement, however, that the publication of *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 led to a revival in the academic study of political philosophy. Rawls's work has crossed disciplinary lines, receiving serious attention from economists, legal scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and theologians. Rawls has the unique distinction among contemporary political philosophers of being frequently cited by the courts of law in the United States.

## A Theory of Justice

### Method: The Original Position and Reflective Equilibrium

In his most famous book, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argued for the two principles using the thought experiment of the original position, from which representatives would select principles of justice from behind a veil of ignorance. Rawls saw the original position as a development of the social contract theories associated with Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke. Rawls argued that the representative parties in the original position would select justice as fairness, including the liberty principle and the difference principle, to govern the basic structure of society. In addition to the original position, Rawls relied on the notion of reflective equilibrium, which tests the results obtained from the original position against our considered judgments about particular cases.

### The Two Principles of Justice: The Liberty Principle and the Difference Principle

The two principles of justice are the liberty principle and the difference principle. The two principles are intended to apply to the basic structure of society--the fundamental political and economic arrangements--as opposed to particular actions by governmental officials or individual statutes. The liberty principle requires that the basic structure provide each citizen with a fully adequate scheme of basic liberties--such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and due process of law. The difference principle requires that inequalities in wealth and social position be arranged so as to benefit the worst off group in society. Rawls states that the two principles are lexically ordered, with the liberty principle taking precedence over the difference principle in the case of conflict.

Rawls revised the two principles over time. *A Theory of Justice* contains the first and most widely cited version of the principles, but Rawls modified them in *Political Liberalism* and *Justice as Fairness*. All three works should be consulted for a full appreciation of the content and meaning of the two principles.

### Criticism of A Theory of Justice

Rawls's work was (respectfully) contested by his libertarian Harvard colleague Robert Nozick, and today Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) are often read in conjunction with each other to examine the points of disagreement between social liberals and libertarians.

Philosophers who have attempted to improve or clarify *A Theory of Justice* include Martha Nussbaum, who has reinterpreted Rawls's arguments in terms of capabilities or 'substantial freedoms', a concept borrowed from Amartya Sen.

### Political Liberalism

Rawls's later work focused on the question of stability: could a society ordered by the two principles of justice endure? His answer to this question is contained in a collection of lectures titled *Political Liberalism*. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls introduced the idea of an overlapping consensus--or agreement on justice as fairness between citizens who hold different religious and philosophical views (or conceptions of the good). *Political Liberalism* also introduced the idea of public reason--the common reason of all citizens.

### Annotated Bibliography

#### Works by Rawls

John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Paperback edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). The hardback edition published in 1993 is not identical. The paperback adds a valuable

new introduction and an essay titled "Reply to Habermas."

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Revised edition, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999), ISBN 0-674-00077-3. The revised edition incorporates changes that Rawls made for translated editions of *A Theory of Justice*. The original edition was published in 1971. Some Rawls scholars use the abbreviation TJ to refer to this work.

John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited"* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), ISBN 0-674-00079-X. This slim book includes two works originally published elsewhere, an essay entitled "The Law of Peoples" and another entitled "Public Reason Revisited."

John Rawls, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), ISBN 0-674-1379-6. This collection of shorter papers was edited by Samuel Freeman. Two of the papers in this collection, "The Law of Peoples" and "Public Reason Revisited," are available separately in the *Law of Peoples* monograph published the same year. One other essay, *Reply to Habermas*, was added to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism*. Otherwise, this collection is comprehensive. However, one important unpublished work, Rawls's dissertation, is not included.

John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000). This collection of lectures was edited by Barbara Herman. It has an introduction on modern moral philosophy from 1600-1800 and then lectures on Hume, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel.

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2001). This shorter summary of the main arguments of Rawls's political philosophy was edited by Erin Kelly. Many versions of this were circulated in typescript and much of the material was delivered by Rawls in lectures when he taught courses covering his own work at Harvard University.

#### Selected Secondary Literature

Reading Rawls: *Critical Studies of A Theory of Justice*, edited by Norman Daniels (New York: Basic Books, 1974) ISBN, 465-06854-5. This anthology collects many of the important early reactions to *A Theory of Justice*, including a famous essay by H.L.A. Hart.

Chandran Kukathas & Philip Petit, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and its Critics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) ISBN 1-8047-1768-0. This is a short study of Rawls's work and critical reactions. Philip Petit is a prominent political philosopher in his own right.

*Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) ISBN 0-5216-5706-7. This anthology includes essays by prominent philosophers, including Thomas Nagel, T.M. Scanlon, Onora O'Neil, and Martha Nussbaum.

#### Awards

Schock Prize for Logic and Philosophy (1999)