



# GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

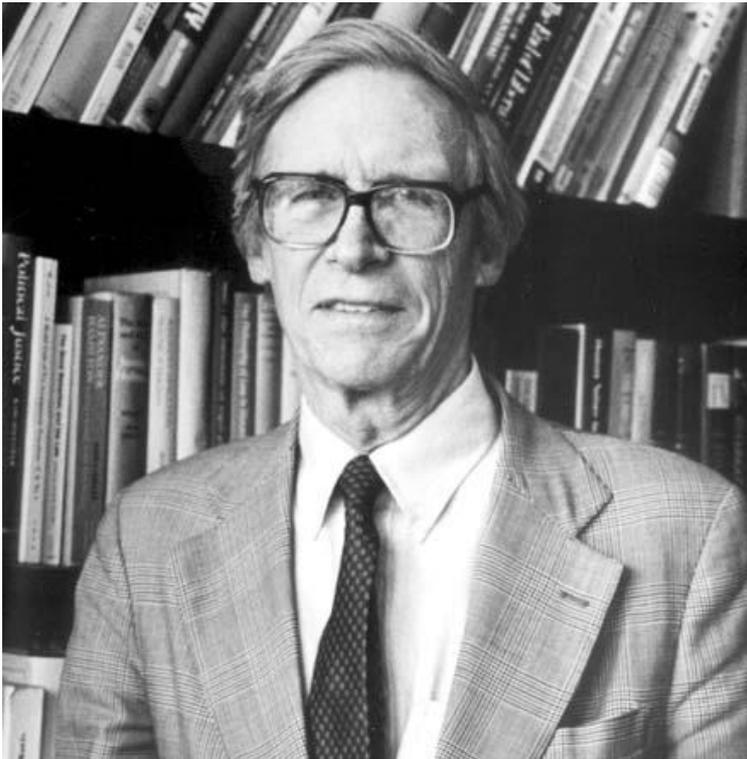
## JOHN RAWLS

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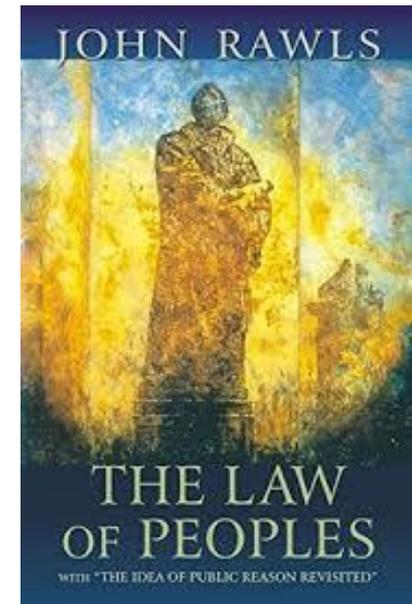
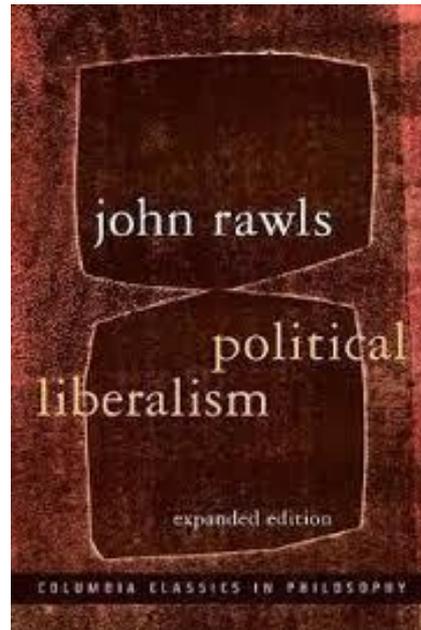
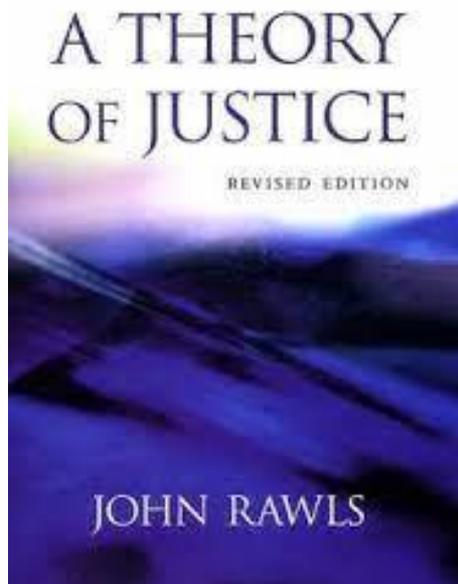


# JOHN (JACK) RAWLS ANNIVERSARY EDITION!



- John Rawls (b. **1921** d. 2002) was an American philosopher
- *A Theory of Justice* was first published in **1971** (revised edition 1999).
- Probably the single most important work of contemporary political philosophy. It is credited with playing a large part in revitalizing political philosophy as an academic discipline.

# MAIN WORKS



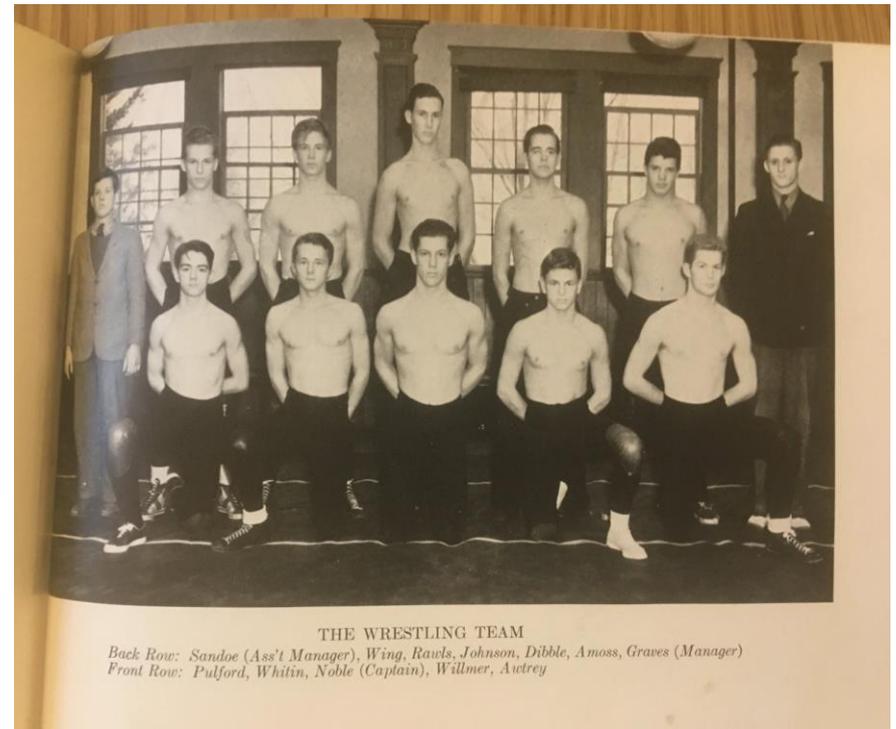
# BIOGRAPHY

- John (Bordley) Rawls – born Feb. 21, 1921 – Baltimore - second of 5 sons of William Lee, (corporate lawyer and unofficial adviser of the Democratic governor of Maryland) and Anna Abell, chapter president of the League of Women Voters
- Brother Bobby (pictured, right) died of diphtheria (caught from Jack)
  - Jack developed a stammer
- Brother Tommy died of pneumonia – also caught from Jack) the next year
- Jack felt terribly lucky, also noticing that other (black) kids were living in quite different circumstances



# SCHOOL YEARS

- Jack started schooling at Calvert School (a private, co-educational school), where he received a lot of additional support and private tutoring from one of his teachers
- After two years at a public school, he was sent to a private boarding, episcopal school which he did not enjoy
- From 1939, Princeton (he quit wrestling and football but kept baseball); Ivy club
  - He tried a few subjects before settling on philosophy
  - Norman Malcolm



## LATER

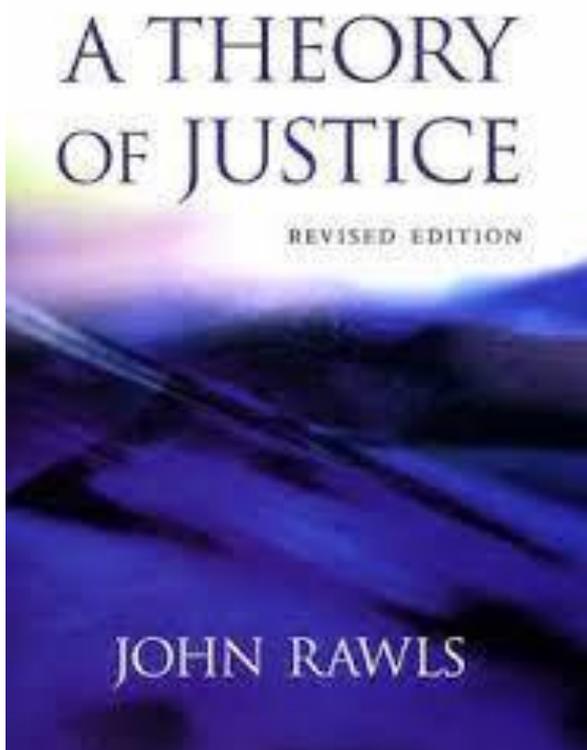


- 1943 – he enlisted in the army; made it to sergeant but was demoted because he refused to punish a soldier
  - ‘singularly undistinguished’
- Left (as a private) in 1946
  - Became an atheist
- Went back to Princeton for graduate studies under Walter Stace, a graduate of Trinity and former mayor of Colombo
- Met his wife in 1948

# ACADEMIC CAREER

- 1950-52 – Princeton (discussion groups on economics)
- 1952-53 – Fulbright fellowship at Oxford
- 1953-56 – Cornell (boring)
- 1959-60 – Harvard
- 1960-62 – MIT – heavy admin (he developed the humanities subdivision)
- 1962 – onwards – Harvard
  - Campaigned against the Vietnam war, and against 2-S deferments but was defeated
- 4 children – one (Alec) an extreme right-wing blogger

# ANOTHER BIT OF LUCK



- 1969-70 – Jack goes to Stanford to finish TJ
- Arrived with a 200-page typescript that grew and grew
- April 1970 – incendiary bombs had been exploded in the building
- **Rawls's typescript survived!!**
- TJ – published in 1971 after a very hard year (keeping the peace between Putnam and Quine/Goodman)

# JUSTICE – WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

- ***‘Justice is the first virtue of social institutions***

*As truth is of systems of thought.’*

- TJ - Principles of justice for the basic structure of a (well-ordered) society

- The basic structure = the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation

- Major institutions = political constitution and principal economic and social arrangements

# THE MAIN IDEA – JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS

- **All social primary goods should be distributed *equally*, unless an *unequal* distribution of any, or all, of these goods is to the *greatest* advantage of the *worst-off***
  - *The sensible thing is to acknowledge as the first step a principle of justice requiring an equal distribution [...] if there are inequalities in income and wealth [...] that work to make everyone better off, why not permit them? (pp. 130-131)*
- Primary goods: all-purpose means (liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, bases of self-respect)
- The worst-off – positions in society (not actual people)

## RAWLS – THE 2/3 PRINCIPLES

- **First Principle: Basic liberty:** each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties, compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all
- **Second Principle :** social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
  - (a) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of *fair equality of opportunity* (*social primary goods*) and
  - to the **greatest** benefit of the least advantaged (the **difference** principle)
- Principles are **lexically** ordered

# THE INTUITIVE ARGUMENT

- Conception of justice that counters (to a degree) the accidents of natural endowments and the contingencies of social circumstance
- (significant) inequalities - because of 'merit'
- But 'merit', i.e. talent (natural); not earned or deserved
  - ‘no one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favourable starting place...it does not follow that we should eliminate these distinctions. The basic structure can be arranged so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate’
- ‘The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust’ (p. 87)

# THE 'PROPER' ARGUMENT

- **Assumptions:**

- Reasonable disagreement: people have different ideas about the good life (conceptions of the good)
- Also different positions in society, endowments etc

→ biased in their own favour

So, if we want to decide on a fair distribution of burdens and benefits in society - impartiality

How? – by removing knowledge of factors that create bias

# THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

- 'The aim [of the veil of ignorance] is to rule out those principles that it would be rational to propose for acceptance, however little the chance of success, only if one knew certain things that are irrelevant from the standpoint of justice. For example, if a man knew that he was wealthy, he might find it rational to advance the principle that various taxes for welfare measures be counted unjust; if he knew that he was poor, he would most likely propose the contrary principle.'

## THE ORIGINAL POSITION

- Parties are: rational, representatives of real citizens, **mutually disinterested**, equally situated (e.g. same power to veto, make proposals, etc...)
- Parties don't know: a) their place in society, b) class position, c) social station, d) natural endowments (intelligence, physical strength, psychological predispositions) e) conception of the good, f) gender/race
  - also don't have any specific facts about the economic or cultural circumstances of their society

**But** know basic principles of social theory and human behaviour; reasonable pluralism and moderate scarcity

# DECISION PROCEDURE

- Parties are rational and self-interested
- Must decide mainly between the 2 principle and the principle of average utility
  - = directs society to maximise the average utility (per capita) ( $\neq$ classical principle: total utility)
  - Utility = desire satisfaction; can be compared across people
- They will apply the ***maximin strategy*** (*maximising the minimum, i.e. priority for the worst-off*)
  - ***Why? Is it crazy?***

# MAXIMIN

- Decision procedure for situations where one of the options can lead to different outcomes
- Suppose you have 10K
  - Savings account → 11k in two years
  - Invest in the stock market → between 7k and 17K in two years

Maximin: savings account (superior worst case scenario)

- Is this rational? Why not gamble?
  - In real life, we have probabilities; not in OP

# DECISION IN THE OP

**But** – the decision behind the veil of ignorance isn't like a normal decision. Specifically, the following is true:

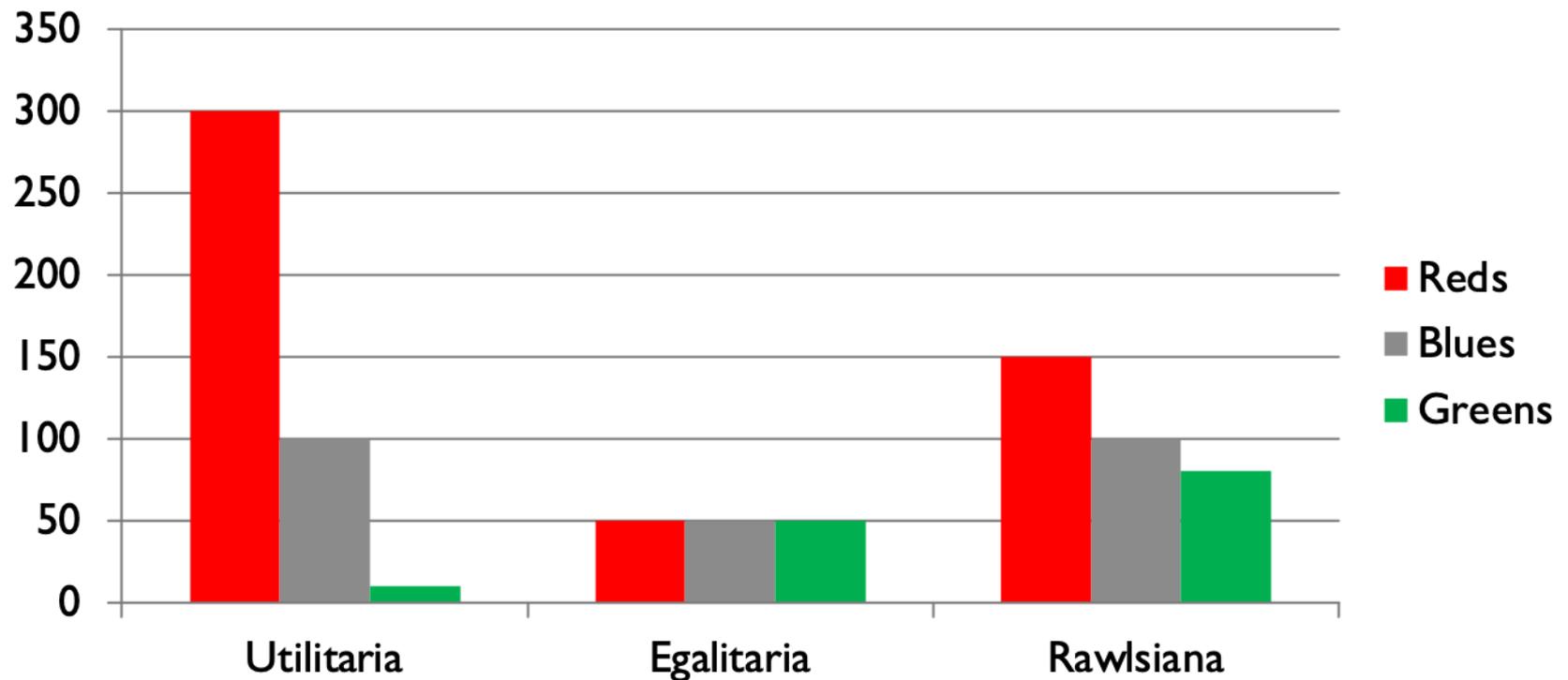
**1. Radical Uncertainty:** You have no information on the probability of where you will end up in society, once the veil is lifted.

**2. Finality:** There's no going back. This is a once-off process with no renegotiations.

**3. Importance:** The outcomes of this decision will determine the opportunities you have in life, and will affect all of your future choices.

■ Also, this applies to the design of the basic structure!

# THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE IN ACTION!



# WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN?

- More redistribution?
  - Yes but not only
- Property-owning democracy or liberal/democratic socialism
  - Not laissez-faire capitalism, welfare-state capitalism, state socialism
- **Pre-** distribution
  - Pre-tax incomes more equally distributed – prevents the emergence of an underclass
  - High and progressive inheritance tax

# PROPERTY OWNING-DEMOCRACY

- In property-owning democracy, ... the aim is to realize in the basic institutions the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal. To do this, those institutions must, from the outset, put in the hands of citizens generally, and not only of a few, sufficient productive means for them to be fully cooperating members of society on a footing of equality (*Justice as Fairness – A restatement*, p. 140).

# GLOBAL EGALITARIANISM?

- Rawls: no!
  - Only applies to the basic structure of closed society, cooperative venture
  - No cooperation/basic structure at the global level
- Not quite true: Thomas Pogge and Charles Beitz
- R: well, not the right kind
  - The debate goes on...

# SUMMARY

## Rawls – justice as fairness

- principles of justice for the basic structure of a closed, well-ordered society
- liberal egalitarianism
- But actually **priority** of the worst off (prioritarianism)

## Further readings:

- Daniels, N. (ed) *Reading Rawls*
- Freeman, S. – *Rawls*
- Pogge, T. – *John Rawls: His life and theory of Justice*