



The difference principle and social welfare policies: A Rawlsian approach

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Abstract

The difference principle aims to establish a just society founded on equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity. Before we discuss a well-ordered and just society, it is essential to understand what society is. What type of society we call just society? According to all individuals, a society is good where an individual is in a privileged position. According to Rawls, it is unfair and unjust than what is just. Justice is the first virtue of a good society. Rawls is associated with political liberalism, which emphasises individual rights, equality, and the protection of fundamental liberties. He argues that a just society respects the political, social, and economic liberties of its citizens. Social welfare programs provide help and care to the people of society. It develops the society, and mainly it focuses on the underprivileged people, people who are going through poverty, poor education, and unemployment. It solves social problems like poverty, sickness, and suffering. It can help those who are unable to meet their basic needs. The difference principle promotes democratic legitimacy. It argues that any social and economic inequality in work strengthens the condition of the vulnerable section of society, which means it promotes fairness in democracy. Rawls' philosophy can be applicable when addressing the contemporary challenges that are associated with the unequal distribution of primary goods, services, and resources.

Keywords: Difference principle, justice, injustice, social welfare, underprivileged, unemployment

Introduction

John Rawls' difference principle plays a key role in discussions of social justice and welfare policies, which is articulated in "A THEORY OF JUSTICE" 1971. The difference principle aims to establish a just society founded on equal basic liberties and fair equality of opportunity. Before we discuss a well-ordered and just society, it is essential to understand what society is. What type of society we call just society? According to all individuals, a society is good where an individual is in a privileged position. According to Rawls, it is unfair and unjust than what is just. Justice is the first virtue of a good society (Daniel & Jibrin, 2019) [2]. Just distribution of primary goods is considered justice. Primary goods are the fundamental social and material resources that individuals need to pursue their life plans and achieve a meaningful existence. Individuals create a just society. The individual will decide on how society should be established. But before making a decision individual should be in an original position. The original position is one where an individual does not know about the actual position. No one knows about their Gender, race, religion, interests, wealth, skill, and social status, or even their physical abilities or disabilities, etc. In complete ignorance individual will not know who or what they will be. An individual will decide the point of view of the worst-off under the veil of ignorance. However, before choosing, you forgot everything about yourself. But the important thing is that during the choosing of policies under the veil of ignorance, you should choose policies where no individual is treated unequally. Generally, Rawls suggests more redistribution than the utilitarian social welfare function. The difference principle has significant implications for social welfare policies aimed at reducing social and economic disparities.

Two Principles of Justice

Rawls provides two principles of justice.

1. Equal basic liberty Principle

Every person is to have equal rights to a set of basic liberties, which must also be compatible with those of every other citizen.

2. Social and economic inequality are to be arranged so that they are both

- To the greatest benefit of the least advantaged. Any deviation from equal distribution of the resources can be accepted when it brings the greatest benefit to the least advantaged (Institute of Distance Education, 2021) [7]. (difference principle)
- Attached to offices, positions, and employment open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. It means that individuals should have an equal chance to succeed and attain positions of advantage based on their abilities and efforts rather than social circumstances or inherited privileges (Gaub, 2021) [4]. (equal opportunity principle)

Liberalism and Political Legitimacy

Rawls is associated with political liberalism, which emphasizes individual rights, equality, and the protection of fundamental liberties. He argues that a just society respects the political, social, and economic liberties of its citizens. Rawls proposes that political legitimacy rests on the acceptance of fair and just principles by all citizens regardless of their personal belief or comprehensive doctrines.

Overlapping consensus and Public Reason

Rawls suggests that a society can be sustained through an overlapping consensus, where citizens with diverse religious, philosophical, and moral beliefs can agree on a common set of principles. In an overlapping consensus, citizens agree on a shared set of principles and institutions necessary for fair cooperation in a pluralist society.

He introduces the concept of public reason, which requires citizens to justify their political positions and policies using publicly accessible reasons and arguments.

Maximin principle

Within the original position and under the veil of ignorance, an individual is motivated by the maximin principle. The maximin principle states that rational individuals, uncertain about their own position in society, would choose principles that maximize the benefit for the vulnerable members of society. This principle ensures that any inequalities in the distribution of primary goods are justified by the overall improvement of the least well-off.

Implication of Lexical Order

These principles are arranged in a hierarchical order. Lexical priority means that the equal liberty principle can't be sacrificed because of opportunity, and fair equality of opportunity can't be sacrificed because of the difference principle. The first principle is accorded absolute priority over the social and economic concerns. Within the second principle, the fair equality of opportunity takes priority over the difference principle. Rawls' theory of justice considered that fundamental rights are not sacrificed for economic and social advantages (Maurya, 2022) [8].

Rawls difference principle to social welfare policies

Social welfare programs provide help and care to the people of society. It develops the society, and mainly it focuses on the underprivileged people, people who are going through poverty, poor education, and unemployment. It solves social problems like poverty, sickness, and suffering. It can help those who are unable to meet their basic needs. Generally, it means service by the government, volunteers, and organizations. The basic aim of social welfare policies is to promote social justice and reduce inequality. According to Rawls, Social welfare Policies refer to the well-being of the disadvantaged member is maximized. According to Rawls, justice is about the distribution of resources; procedure doesn't matter; what matters is the distribution itself. Procedure is secondary and can be changed. So, distributive justice is the most just society that maximizes the well-being of its worst-off member of society rather than maximizing the total utility of society. (Gaub, O.P, 2023) [5].

Justification of Social Welfare Policies and Redistribution

Any departure from equal distribution of the primary goods and services can be justified only when it can be proved to bring advantages to the worst-off member of society (Daniel & Jibrin, 2019) [2]. This principle provides redistributive policies such as progressive taxation, universal health care, public education and assistance, social and economic safety nets such as unemployment benefits, minimum wage laws, disability assistance, and labour protection, etc.

Priority to the Least Advantaged

Welfare policies are designed not only to promote overall economic growth but also to provide opportunity and well-being of the individual, especially those who are least advantaged. The objective of social welfare policies is to reduce poverty, income, and goods redistribution. Here, redistribution is acceptable if it brings the greatest benefit to the worst-off in society.

Fair Equality of Opportunity

Equality of opportunity means being entitled to the same rights and opportunities to develop their skills and talents and to pursue their goals and ambitions. According to Rawls, Social and economic inequalities should be attached to offices and positions open to all under the conditions of fair equality of opportunity. Rawls argues that Social and economic inequalities are just if everyone gets equal chances to make choices. Social and economic inequalities are not just about whether people's fate depends on their circumstances (Wolf, 2008) [9]. Here, Rawls talks about the unequal social circumstances and unequal natural circumstances. In natural circumstances in which we have no control, this happens not because of our choices but because of our circumstances. If we want to end these circumstances that create inequality in society here, we should apply the difference principle.

Limits to Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism focuses on overall happiness. It is based on the principle greatest happiness of the greatest number, which can allow sacrificing the well-being of some individuals if it benefits the majority of individuals. The utilitarian principle doesn't guarantee fair distribution of goods and services, fundamental rights, and freedom; it allows extreme inequality if it increases overall happiness. Rawls, in contrast, talks about the difference principle, which justifies inequalities if it benefits the least advantaged.

Difference Principle and Public Justification

In the Rawlsian Approach, public justification refers to the idea that political principles should be acceptable to all reasonable citizens. The difference principle states that inequalities are only allowed if they benefit the vulnerable people. The principle is chosen in the original position behind the veil of ignorance. It strengthens its public justification as fairness, rationality, and impartiality. Here difference principle stands for distributive justice (Buckland, 2024) [1].

Difference Principle and Democratic Legitimacy

The difference principle promotes democratic legitimacy. It argues that any social and economic inequality in work strengthens the condition of the vulnerable section of society, which means it promotes fairness in democracy. In our society, extreme poverty exists. Where there is extreme poverty, there is a risk of political exclusion of the disadvantaged. So, the difference principle provides the condition where all citizens can actively participate in the democratic institution and decision-making process.

Addressing challenges and criticisms

Critics argue that Rawls neglects the cultural norms and communal values in shaping justice. It gives more importance to the individual and neglects the collective well-being. Rawls theory is based on the unrealistic assumption. In a veil of ignorance, individuals make decisions in the real world without the knowledge of social and economic conditions.

1. Socialists' critique of justice: Rawls concept of democratic equity based on the difference principle is vulgar. It is a vulgar justification of inequalities. In lexical order, Rawls gives priority to liberty, then fair

equality of opportunity, then the difference principle (Freeman, 2007) [3]. The difference principle is in the third position. Socialist. It is a theory of injustice, because it gives more importance to liberty and equality than the difference principle. In socialist perspectives, the difference principle should be placed on first position. The socialist believes in a welfare state.

2. **Feminists' critique of justice:** Sasan Moller Okin and Carole Pateman criticized him for separating personal from political. A woman faces many inequalities in the private sphere. Rawls theory of justice ignores the need for discussion of the theory from the perspective of women in the family. Feminists argue that Rawls theory of justice fails to address gender inequality in the family and domestic sphere, such as unpaid work and gender division of labour, etc. The Rawls entire idea of justice is masculinity. We should talk about care where we involve women more.
3. **Libertarian critique of justice:** Rawls theory compromises liberty for the sake of equality. It goes against the principle of human dignity. Why should the meritorious person work for the benefit of a disadvantaged person? Nozick argues that it is an immoral and involuntary transfer, and it is akin to forced labor. It violates the moral principles. Transfer should be based on voluntary, not on force or fraud. Critics argue that Rawls theory of justice gives more importance to achieving equality of outcomes, neglecting equal opportunity and meritocracy. It is against the principle of non-aggression. Nozick supports the minimal state where the minimum intervention of state in economic activities of individual. According to Nozick state have no role in distributive justice.
4. **Marxist critique of justice:** Marxist criticized Rawls for the principle of justice where individuals take decisions in an original position under the veil of ignorance. Any decision without the knowledge of societal and economic conditions is valueless. It is also biased towards capitalism. It fails to address the social inequalities and exploitation inherent in capitalist society,
5. **Communitarian critique of justice:** Communitarian argues that Rawls theory of justice neglects the community and its value. The Rawlsian approach is an individualistic approach, which gives more importance to individual rights and freedom rather than the well-being of the community. Michael Sandel believes that justice should give importance to shared values and the common good rather than individual rights and freedom. Communitarian argues that justice should respect the diversity of culture, values, and practices. Communitarian also criticizes Rawls difference principle, which leads to excessive redistribution, which undermines individual incentives. Communitarian question on the relevance of the veil of ignorance and emphasizes that individuals can't be detached from their actual position; they are inherently shaped by their social circumstances (Heywood, A. 2015) [6].

Strengths and weaknesses of the difference principle

Strengths of the difference principle

Rawls philosophy can be applicable when addressing the contemporary challenges which are associated with the unequal distribution of primary goods, services, and resources. Rawls difference principle, which is based on justice, but there are certain weaknesses in this principle.

1. The principle focused on the vulnerable section of society. It provides fairness to the least advantaged, which promotes social justice and an equitable society.
2. The difference principle is morally important to the needs of those who are worst off. It encourages economic stability with fairness. By which the vulnerable section of society actively participated in public sphere activities.
3. The principle supports fair equality of opportunity, which allows individuals to fulfill their needs regardless of their position. The strength of this principle is that it doesn't ignore inequality, which is a basic feature of human society. Rawls justified this inequality and address that this inequality is justified for the development of society.
4. In a veil of ignorance, where people are unaware of their actual position and take decisions impartially. It ensures fairness, equality, and impartiality. It is an efficient way to develop this kind of principle to govern a society that is not based on an authoritarian society but based on a welfare society where the worst-off will have all possible opportunities and rights.
5. It ensures unity and prevents struggle between classes. Because everyone, every one especially the needy, benefits from inequalities.

According to Rawls, there is no need to remove inequality, which is impossible. Inequality is a basic element that creates a just society, but it should be justified.

Weaknesses of the difference principle

There is a certain weakness in this principle

1. In a complex society, it is difficult to identify who is actually disadvantaged. In some cases, people are disadvantaged because of their own choice. Here inequality can't be justified. Inequality can be justified where natural and social circumstances are responsible for inequality.
2. This principle potentially harms economic growth, because it discourages high earner from working hard if their wealth benefits others through force.
3. In a complex society, it is difficult to apply these difference principles where different kinds of individuals live. It is difficult to identify which policy is good for the least advantaged.
4. It neglects individual merit, skill, capacity, and effort. It gives importance to equality over individual merit, hard work, and responsibility.

John Rawls Theory provides a significant contribution to political philosophy. Through the liberty principle, Rawls guarantees equal liberty and rights to all people. It defends helping the most disadvantaged people in society. In his theory, he not only talks about political justice but also talks about social justice. A Rawlsian approach that aims to prioritize social welfare policies prioritizes justice, fairness, and equality, particularly the least advantaged section of society. This principle offers a strong ethical justification for welfare policies that address inequalities while fostering a stable society.

Conclusion

It advocates for a system that focuses on individual freedom with collective well-being. It aims to reduce economic disparities by providing opportunities to the least advantaged. According to the Rawlsian approach, in order to strengthen a chain, we should start with strengthening its weakest link, the provision of special concessions, subsidies, or protection. Rawls political thought had a profound impact on contemporary political theory and continues to shape discussion on justice, equality, and liberalism. His focus on fairness, impartiality, and the protection of basic liberties has influenced debates on social justice and the role of the state. Critics argue that Rawls theory may not adequately account for cultural, religious, or communitarian values and may prioritize individual rights over collective goals.

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