

MORAL DEFENSE OF JOHN RAWLS THEORY OF JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS

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Abstract

The increasing gap between the rich and the poor has created significant social and moral challenges, raising concerns about the responsibilities of the wealthy towards the less privileged. This study explores the ethical question of whether the rich should help the poor, using John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness as a framework. This research draws on Rawls' principles, particularly the difference principle and the original position, to examine whether societal structures should enforce redistributive justice to promote fairness. It uses the analytic method to critically engage with Rawls' concepts reviewing secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and credible online materials to provide a clear understanding of justice, fairness, and their implications for wealth redistribution. The findings show that Rawls' theory supports the view that inequalities are only acceptable when they benefit the least advantaged in society. It emphasizes the need for a societal framework that ensures equal opportunities and shared prosperity. The study highlights the moral and practical importance of the wealthy contributing to poverty reduction and promoting fairness. It concludes that Rawls' theory advocates for a balanced approach to justice, where the rich are encouraged to support the poor not just as an act of charity but as a moral duty rooted in fairness and societal cohesion. The research recommends policies and practices that reflect these principles to address economic inequalities and build a more just society.

Keywords: Justice, fairness, distribution of wealth, Rawls theory, just society, charity

Introduction

The question of whether the rich should help the poor has been a longstanding moral and philosophical debate. Across different societies, the existence of economic inequality highlights the gap between those with vast wealth and those struggling to meet basic needs. While some argue that wealth is a reward for individual effort and should not be redistributed, others emphasize the moral responsibility of the rich to support the less privileged. The increasing visibility of this divide in modern economies raises important ethical questions: should the rich be obligated to contribute more to societal welfare, and if so, how should such obligations be structured? Addressing these

questions is critical in understanding the foundations of a just society and the role of wealth redistribution in promoting fairness and equity.

Central to these debates is John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, which provides a philosophical framework for understanding the principles of justice in society. Rawls introduces two fundamental principles of justice: first, that every individual is entitled to equal basic rights and liberties; and second, that social and economic inequalities must be arranged to benefit the least advantaged. His difference principle specifically addresses wealth disparities by asserting that inequalities are justifiable only if they lead to improved conditions for the poorest members of society. This principle challenges traditional notions of individualism and meritocracy, suggesting instead that fairness must account for the unequal starting positions of individuals within a society (Rawls, 1971, pp. 60-62).

Rawls further develops his argument through the “original position” and the “veil of ignorance,” conceptual tools designed to ensure impartiality in defining principles of justice. In the original position, individuals are imagined as rational agents making decisions about societal rules without knowing their future status, wealth, or abilities. This veil of ignorance compels them to choose principles that safeguard the interests of the least advantaged, ensuring that justice is not biased by personal privilege. These concepts form the ethical foundation for wealth redistribution, arguing that fairness is achieved when the rich contribute to uplifting the poor. This study explores these ideas, examining their relevance in addressing contemporary issues of economic inequality. By interrogating the responsibilities of the wealthy through the lens of Rawls' theory, the study highlights the importance of justice as fairness in fostering a more equitable and cohesive society (pp. 136-139).

John Rawls' Theory of Justice as Fairness

John Rawls, in his ground breaking work *A Theory of Justice*, introduced a powerful theory that seeks to establish principles of justice that go beyond mere utilitarianism, which focuses on maximizing overall happiness or welfare. His theory, known as justice as fairness, offers a more nuanced approach to addressing social and economic inequalities. Rawls challenges the traditional views that justify inequality by the idea that the rich and successful deserve their wealth because

of individual merit. Instead, he proposes that fairness, not just efficiency or productivity, should be the central value when evaluating how goods and opportunities should be distributed in a society. Rawls presents two key principles of justice: the first principle guarantees equal basic liberties for all individuals, ensuring everyone has the same fundamental rights. The second principle, known as the difference principle, permits social and economic inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This difference principle fundamentally alters the way we think about wealth distribution, suggesting that social and economic inequalities are permissible only if they make life better for those who are worst off (pp. 60-62).

To help us understand how these principles of justice would be chosen in a fair manner, Rawls introduces the concepts of the “original position” and the “veil of ignorance.” The original position is a hypothetical scenario in which individuals, tasked with designing the rules of a just society, are placed behind a veil of ignorance. In this scenario, they are unaware of their own social or economic status, race, gender, or natural abilities. Without this knowledge, Rawls argues, individuals would make decisions that ensure fairness and avoid rules that might disproportionately benefit the rich or powerful. Because they do not know where they will end up in the social hierarchy, they would naturally choose policies that prioritize the welfare of the least advantaged, as they might find themselves in that vulnerable position. This process of decision-making, in which people are stripped of personal biases and self-interest, leads to a more impartial and just society (p. 136).

Rawls’ theory also emphasizes the importance of creating societal structures that aim to minimize harm to the disadvantaged and improve their conditions. In a just society, inequalities should not be allowed to persist if they contribute to the suffering of the least well-off. For example, Rawls argues that it is unacceptable for a society to justify extreme wealth for a few at the cost of widespread poverty and deprivation. Instead, Rawls advocates for policies and institutions that create equal opportunities for all and ensure that social and economic inequalities are arranged to benefit those who are most disadvantaged. Such policies might include measures like universal healthcare, free education, fair wages, and progressive taxation. In this way, Rawls’ vision of justice requires a redistribution of resources that focuses on lifting those at the bottom of the social ladder, ensuring that they have the same opportunities and liberties as everyone else. His theory

provides a moral foundation for wealth redistribution, not as a punishment for the rich, but as a necessary step to create a more just and fair society (pp. 60-62).

John Rawls and the Controversy on Wealth Redistribution

Wealth redistribution, as proposed by John Rawls, is not simply about voluntary acts of charity, but rather a necessary moral obligation for creating a just society. Rawls challenges traditional views that often treat wealth redistribution as a choice made by the rich or powerful. Instead, he argues that redistributing resources to benefit the least advantaged is a central aspect of ensuring fairness in society. According to Rawls' difference principle, inequalities are only acceptable if they benefit the least well-off members of society. This means that wealth and resources should not be hoarded by a few, but rather distributed in such a way that improves the lives of those who are struggling the most. In this context, wealth redistribution is framed as a fundamental moral responsibility, not a mere act of kindness or generosity. It becomes a central pillar of justice, aimed at improving equality and providing everyone with a fair shot at opportunities in life (Ibid).

One of the most important aspects of Rawls' theory is how it connects wealth redistribution to the creation of societal structures that guarantee fairness and equality. For Rawls, wealth redistribution should be seen not as a punishment for the rich but as a necessary component of a fair society. Policies like progressive taxation, where the wealthier pay a higher percentage of their income, and social welfare programs, such as universal healthcare and education, fit neatly into this framework. These policies are designed to reduce inequalities by transferring wealth and providing basic services to those in need. Rawls' ideas suggest that economic inequalities can be morally justified if they lead to a better situation for the poorest members of society. The idea behind progressive taxation, for instance, is that the wealthiest individuals, who can afford to contribute more, should help fund the programs that will lift the poorest out of poverty and provide them with the necessary resources to thrive. Welfare programs that offer food, housing, and healthcare help ensure that those at the bottom of the social ladder can meet their basic needs and have a fair chance to succeed. Rawls' framework challenges us to think of redistribution as an essential part of creating a society based on equality of opportunity, where everyone has the same chances to succeed (pp. 136-139).

In addition to Rawls' original framework, other philosophers have built on his ideas to explore wealth redistribution on a global scale. Thomas Pogge, for example, extends Rawls' ideas by arguing that wealth redistribution should not be confined to the boundaries of a single nation. He emphasizes that the global economic system often exacerbates inequalities between rich and poor countries, with wealthy nations benefiting from the poverty and exploitation of poorer ones. Pogge (2000, p. 78) asserts that wealthy nations have a moral obligation to assist in the redistribution of resources to help alleviate global poverty. He suggests that the current global system, which allows for widespread poverty in developing countries, is unjust, and wealthier nations must take responsibility for rectifying these imbalances. By focusing on global distributive justice, Pogge highlights the idea that wealth redistribution should be a worldwide effort, not just something that occurs within the borders of individual countries. In a similar vein, Amartya Sen (1999, p. 87) argues that wealth redistribution should be focused on expanding the capabilities of individuals. Those social and economic factors that allow people to live a fulfilling life. Sen's approach stresses the importance of not just giving money or resources, but ensuring that individuals have the capabilities and opportunities to improve their lives in meaningful ways. This includes access to education, healthcare, political participation, and social freedom. Sen believes that wealth redistribution should aim to expand these opportunities for all individuals, particularly those who are marginalized and disadvantaged. His work extends Rawls' emphasis on fairness, calling for the creation of policies that enhance people's ability to lead fulfilling and autonomous lives.

The ethical and practical dimensions of wealth redistribution are essential to fostering a society that is not only fair but also socially cohesive. When wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, it leads to greater social divisions, political instability, and the erosion of trust among citizens. Redistribution can help alleviate these issues by reducing poverty and inequality and fostering a sense of shared responsibility. By promoting fairness and addressing the needs of the least advantaged, wealth redistribution helps to prevent social unrest and encourages a more just society. Philosophers like Pogge and Sen remind us that the issue of wealth redistribution is not limited to national concerns. Global inequality, too, must be addressed, as it continues to fuel poverty and injustice in many parts of the world. The redistribution of wealth, whether within countries or globally, thus becomes a moral imperative, not just for alleviating immediate suffering, but for creating a more peaceful, stable, and just world.

Justice as Fairness and Wealth Inequality

The issue of wealth inequality has been one of the most debated topics in modern societies. With the wealth gap widening between the rich and the poor, social tensions and barriers to equality of opportunity have become increasingly evident. John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness offers a valuable approach to understanding and addressing wealth inequality in a way that respects the dignity of all individuals. Rawls (1971, pp. 79-78) argues that the principle of justice must prioritize the least advantaged members of society, ensuring that their well-being is improved through fair redistribution of resources. His difference principle suggests that any inequalities in wealth are acceptable only if they benefit the least advantaged groups. This framework is designed to reduce the disparities that can limit the opportunities of individuals who are born into poverty or disadvantage. In societies where wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, the opportunities for the rest of the population become restricted, limiting social mobility and fostering long-term inequality.

The growing wealth gap presents a significant challenge to the realization of a just society. Rawls' framework challenges the accumulation of wealth by individuals or groups that do not contribute to the greater good. While it is often argued that individuals should be free to accumulate wealth as they wish, Rawls' approach suggests that such wealth should come with a moral responsibility to ensure that the benefits of society are shared equitably. His theory suggests that it is not enough for the rich to simply engage in charitable acts; systemic solutions must be in place to ensure that the least advantaged are given the resources and opportunities they need to thrive. A perfect example of this can be seen in the limitations of billionaire philanthropy. While the charitable donations of wealthy individuals can have positive effects, they often fail to address the deeper structural issues that cause inequality in the first place. For instance, private donations to educational initiatives may provide temporary relief, but they do not guarantee universal access to education, nor do they address underlying issues like quality or accessibility (Smith, Jones & Taylor, 2018, p. 112).

Rawls advocates for social policies rooted in justice as fairness that would ensure equal access to essential services, such as education, healthcare, and housing, for everyone. For instance, universal education would provide all children, regardless of their socio-economic background, with the

opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for success. Similarly, access to affordable healthcare is crucial for ensuring that an individual's health does not become an obstacle to achieving their goals. A robust social safety net that includes programs for unemployment, housing, and welfare would further ensure that those who are struggling have the support they need. These types of policies are not only in line with Rawls' difference principle, but they are also effective in fostering social mobility and reducing inequality. Studies have shown that societies with more equitable access to resources experience better social outcomes, including higher levels of education, better health, and reduced crime rates. For instance, Smith et al (2018, p. 112) found that regions with higher investments in public services like healthcare and education tend to have lower poverty rates and a stronger middle class, validating Rawls' argument that fairness, as part of a just society, is key to addressing wealth inequality.

Evaluation

The implementation of Rawlsian justice faces many challenges. Political resistance is one of the main obstacles. Wealthy individuals and corporations often resist policies that would involve higher taxes or the redistribution of wealth, arguing that such measures would harm the economy or reduce their incentives to innovate and create jobs. Additionally, certain ideological beliefs, such as the belief in minimal government intervention, can also make it difficult to implement policies aimed at reducing wealth inequality. Overcoming these barriers is crucial, and requires a shift in both policy and mind-set. It is important to recognize that the accumulation of wealth by a small percentage of the population can have negative consequences for society as a whole, limiting access to essential services and creating a cycle of poverty. Addressing these issues requires political will and a commitment to policies that benefit all members of society, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. While the road to achieving Rawls' vision of justice as fairness is difficult, it is essential if society is to reduce the barriers to equality of opportunity and create a fairer distribution of wealth.

Therefore, Rawls' theory provides a compelling moral framework for addressing wealth inequality. By prioritizing the needs of the least advantaged and ensuring that economic inequalities are only allowed when they benefit the disadvantaged, Rawls' approach offers a clear path toward creating a more just society. Through policies such as universal education, healthcare, and a comprehensive

social safety net, we can work toward achieving the fairness and equality that Rawls envisions. While political and ideological resistance remains a challenge, Rawls' ideas offer hope for creating a more equitable and just world.

Conclusion

This study has explored the ethical question of whether the rich ought to help the poor, using John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness as the central idea. Rawls argues that wealth redistribution is not just an act of charity, but a moral responsibility. He believes that fairness and equality of opportunity are the foundations of a just society. According to Rawls, when wealth is unfairly distributed, it creates not just economic problems but moral ones. His theory calls for society to prioritize the needs of the least advantaged members. Policies should aim to reduce inequality by ensuring that everyone, especially the disadvantaged, has access to the same opportunities and resources. For Rawls, helping the poor is not optional, but a duty that ensures fairness and justice for all. Redistribution of wealth is necessary to build a society that values everyone equally, rather than allowing extreme wealth to remain in the hands of a few (Rawls, 1971, p. 136).

The study also reveals that wealth inequality harms society in many ways. When wealth is concentrated among a small group, it limits opportunities for the majority and creates social divides. People who are poor often have limited access to important services like education, healthcare, and housing, which makes it harder for them to escape poverty. Rawls' ideas show that wealth redistribution is not only fair but necessary to fix these problems. His principles suggest that society must put policies in place that focus on helping the least advantaged and improving their well-being. This approach helps reduce social tension and creates a more stable society where everyone has a fair chance. By following Rawls' justice as fairness, wealth redistribution becomes a way to promote equality and strengthen social bonds, leading to a society that works for everyone, not just the wealthy few (p. 141).

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