

## John Rawls in 32 seconds: Social Justice

Edward Morey, February 16, 2008



John Rawls (1921-2002) was an economist and philosopher who in 1971 published *A Theory of Justice*. He is considered by many scholars to be one of the most important political philosophers of the 20th century.

Put simply, he put forward a system for determining whether a society was **just**.

A just society, in his view, is a society whose rules for behavior, production and distribution are agreed upon by a group of rational self-interested people with no knowledge of who or what they will be in that society.

That is, one decides on the rules before one knows whether one will be intelligent or dumb, born into wealth or born into poverty, female or male, black or white, or even what generation one will be born into – you get the idea – it is called choosing behind the *veil of ignorance*.

Consider, for example a society with resources consistent with everyone having a middle-class standard of living but also consistent with 10% very wealthy and 90% poor. If you knew you would be one of the rich, there would be a good chance you would vote for the second allocation. But, how would you vote if you did not know? In general, rich people in market economies like market economies but poor people in market economies are less excited about this method of allocating resources and distributing goods and services.

Rawls was thinking only in terms of people but what if we added to the list that you did not know which species of animal you would be?

Rawls could be the making of an interesting course essay. You could read the *Theory of Justice* then propose the rules for a society where you did not know who or what you would be in that society. You can assume you would be human or alternatively assume you only know that you would be a sentient animal.

For more details see

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Theory\\_of\\_Justice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Theory_of_Justice)  
and from the Chronicle of Higher Education 7/2001, [The Enduring Influence of John Rawls](#)

