

Summary Article: **Rawls, John**

From *Political Philosophy A-Z*

Rawls is the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century. He spent virtually his entire career at Harvard, and published a series of works that form the *locus classicus* of contemporary liberal political thought. His most important work is probably still *A Theory of Justice* which reinvigorated political philosophy at the time of its publication in 1971. The theory expounds the basis of a liberal and roughly egalitarian state on the basis of a **contract theory**, reviving the traditions of **Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau** and, most closely, **Kant**. In doing so, Rawls turned the tide of utilitarian thinking in political philosophy. Rawls's model introduces key techniques and methodologies to political philosophy which are outlined elsewhere. His is a contract theory in which individuals behind the **veil of ignorance** choose principles of **justice** and **lexical priority** relations between them. This model is designed to conform to revised intuitions about social justice reached through a process of **reflective equilibrium**. The principles that arise are a commitment to liberal **rights**, to **equality of opportunity** and to the **difference principle**.

In more recent work, Rawls has refined his approach, expressing his commitments a little more cautiously (some say to their detriment). In *Political Liberalism* (1993), he argues that liberal theory ought not to aim at **perfectionism**, but that liberal institutions are justifiable as the outcome of an overlapping consensus amongst individuals who do not share the same comprehensive theory. In *The Law of Peoples* (1999), Rawls extended his concerns from the principles of justice that ought to cover a single state to the concerns about international justice. Communitarians and libertarians provide the most comprehensive critics of Rawls's views, the former condemning the abstraction and atomism that is thought to vitiate his method, the latter condemning his endorsement of redistribution.

See **distributive justice; justice; original position; reflective equilibrium**

Further reading

- Daniels, Norman (1975), *Reading Rawls: Critical Studies on Rawls' 'Theory of Justice'*, New York: Basic Books.

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Rawls, John. (2007). In J. Pike, *Political philosophy A-Z*. Edinburg, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
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Chicago

"Rawls, John." In *Political Philosophy A-Z*, by Jon Pike. Edinburgh University Press, 2007. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/rawls_john_1921

Harvard

Rawls, John. (2007). In J. Pike, *Political philosophy A-Z*. [Online]. Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/rawls_john_1921 [Accessed 19 September 2019].

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"Rawls, John." *Political Philosophy A-Z*, Jon Pike, Edinburgh University Press, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/rawls_john_1921. Accessed 19 Sep. 2019.