

Ethics at a Glance

Rawlsian Ethics

Contemporary philosopher John Rawls provides one example of an ethical theory that places the concept of justice at its center. Rawls' primary concern is that we be able to design and evaluate social institutions and practices on the basis of principles of justice. The basis of such principles is found in a concept that Rawls termed the **original position**. Imagine a group of people representing the range of human diversity and then place them behind a veil of ignorance so that they no longer know who they are on the other side. Rawls contends that from this original position people would agree to establish a social order based on the moral standards of an egalitarian form of justice. That is, they would promote rules and institutions that would ensure their own well-being once the veil is lifted.

In its strictest sense, egalitarianism requires that all persons receive an equal distribution of certain political, social, and economic goods and rights; however, Rawls does not advocate a strict egalitarianism. He maintains that inequalities are inevitable but can be justified and minimized with at least two principles discoverable in the original position. The first is the **liberty principle**, which advocates that each person should have an equal right to as many basic liberties as possible and still allow a similar system of liberty for all (Munson 2004). That is, each individual should possess as much liberty to live and seek opportunity as is possible, short of infringing on the liberty interests of others.

The second principle that Rawls identifies is termed the **difference principle** and requires that social and economic inequalities be arranged so that they benefit those who are least advantaged. In other words, differences in wealth and social position are acceptable as long as they can be shown to benefit everyone and, in particular, those who have the fewest advantages. This principle also requires that systems allow for all people to have access to goods and positions under conditions of fair equality of opportunity based on both need and merit (Munson 2004).

Rawls believes that people in the original position would agree on a set of duties that one owes to both oneself and others. He termed these natural duties and includes among them the duties of justice, avoiding harm to others, promise keeping, and helping others in need. Such duties also suggest and support principles such as respect for persons, nonmaleficence, fidelity, beneficence, and a form of procedural justice.

Rawls' theory is obviously applicable to ethical issues in the larger health care system involving health policy and allocation of resources. Rawls would approach these issues from the particular perspective of individual liberties and rights. In addition, the concept of natural duties can also be applied to questions of autonomy and caregiver obligations. A strength of Rawls' theory is its dual emphasis on moral obligation and the need to mitigate the practical consequences of social systems. A primary criticism includes a question of whether the original position is, in fact, biased by Rawls' own privileged view of the current system.

For more on John Rawls and Rawlsian ethics see:

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Original Position.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/original-position/>

Wikipedia. A Theory of Justice. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Theory_of_Justice

Wikipedia. John Rawls. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Rawls