

The Original Position

- 1 What the parties are like: how they think, what they want, etc.
 - a. *Mutual disinterest*: the parties are motivated only by their own interests. They have no special interest in helping or harming any other party, with one exception (see *generational concern*). (§25)
 - b. *Generational concern*: the parties care about the next two generations of their families, even though they are not in the circumstances of justice with respect to one another. (§22, pp. 128-9)
 - c. *Rationality*: the parties take efficient means to their ends. Given their *mutual disinterest* and the *thin theory of the good*, that means they maximize their *primary social goods*. (§25)
 - d. *Equality*: the parties are all equal. Indeed, they're indistinguishable, such that there might as well be just one.

- 2 What the parties do
 - a. Choose principles to govern the *basic structure of society* the "major social institutions" that "distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation." Examples: "the political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements", legal protection of free thought, competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family. (§2)
 - b. Choose from a *list of alternatives* given in §22, p. 124.

- c. Assume that there will be *full compliance* with these principles. See also *sense of justice* (p. 145)
- d. Respect *formal conditions* on ethical principles. The parties can only choose principles that meet these conditions (§23):
 - i. *generality and universality*: the principles apply to everyone.
 - ii. *publicity*: the principles will be public knowledge.
 - iii. *ordering*: the principles resolve all claims.
 - iv. *finality*: there is no appeal to higher principles.
- e. Respect the *strains of commitment*. The parties cannot choose rules that they could not keep. (§29)

3 What the parties don't know

The *veil of ignorance* prevents them from knowing (§24, p. 137-8):

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| a. Who they are. | e. Their attitude towards risk. |
| b. Their natural abilities. | f. What their society is like, its levels of economic development and civilization, etc. |
| c. Their place in society. | |
| d. Their conception of the good. | |

Why? “we must nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and natural circumstances to their own advantage” (p. 136). Eliminate bias due to “arbitrary contingencies” (p. 141).

4 What the parties know

Note: these things have to be true in order for the parties to know them.

- a. The parties know that they live in the *circumstances of justice*. These are objective (material resources are neither drastically scarce nor abundant) and

subjective (people are neither completely benevolent nor malevolent). That means social cooperation is possible and desirable: it produces benefits compared with general egoism. But they disagree about how to distribute the benefits of social cooperation. (§22)

- b. The parties know *general information* from the social sciences. But they don't know anything specific about their own society, aside from the fact that it's in the circumstances of justice. (§24, pp. 137-8)
- c. The parties know that they have a *sense of justice*, meaning they will all abide by the principles they choose. (§25) At the same time, they know that they cannot abide by any rules, no matter how demanding. See the *strains of commitment*.
- d. The parties know the *thin theory of the good*, meaning they know that their good consists in pursuing a 'rational plan of life'. It is "thin" because it contains no information about what that plan is. Consequently, all the parties know is that they need things that they could use for any plan, no matter what it is. Those are *primary social goods*. (§60)
- e. *Primary social goods* the parties know that there are some things that are useful for *any* rational plan of life: liberty, opportunities, wealth, sense of self-worth. (§11, p. 62; §15)

