

Nationalism and the original position

John Rawls's original position is a method for deciding which principles institutions should abide by. Rawls thinks the principles should be fair and that fair principles would be chosen by self-interested individuals who lack knowledge of biasing factors. For example, we model each person as lacking knowledge of their talents and family attachments, otherwise each will prefer an agreement tailored to people of their talent or who are members of their family, e.g. only family members can govern. Below are some objections nationalists might make to the procedure – I *don't* wish to encourage these but I think it is mainly one which is discussed.

Cannot imagine it. A well-known objection is that one cannot imagine thinking as these individuals would (Sandel 1984: 86, 90). The knowledge that they lack, including loyalties, is too much a part of who we are for us to carry out the thought experiment. In the jargon of the literature, the self is not prior to knowledge of ends for us to imagine being selves without knowledge of ends. A reply to this treats the thought experiment as a deduction (1999: 119).

Not my fairness. The nationalist may object that they do not have this liberal concept, or conception, of fairness. Rather their concept of fairness is “That country gets to protect its customs, so we get to protect ours.” Even if they can do the thought experiment, they are not moved by its results. The objector may be told the alternative is unstable in our societies.

Other values matter. The nationalist might accept the concept of fairness involved but just say that other values matter in determining which principles institutions should realize, including protecting aspects of a national tradition. The Rawlsian may want to say, “Liberalism is our national tradition,” to this and the previous objection, but consider monarchies, etc.

Primary goods. What individuals in the thought experiment want is as many goods as possible of the kind Rawls calls “primary goods,” which all rational individuals are presumed to want. Nationalists might disagree with Rawls's list of such goods and say that it should include being part of a group with a shared identity. The Rawlsian can reply that only some people want that and it is within rationality not to.

Other social science laws. Individuals in the original position are not supposed to choose principles which cannot be realized, given a general knowledge of social science. The nationalist might propose other laws of social science to the laws Rawls acknowledges. For example, the following would prevent any decision without knowledge of the national character of the society they inhabit, which individuals in the original position do not have:

I am convinced you cannot change any of the fundamental things in the character of a nation. What it is important to do is come to understand that character,—and—in a nationalist age—to make the best of it. That would be *intelligent* nationalism—if any nationalism can be intelligent. (Lewis 1938: 96)

References

- Lewis, W. 1938. *The Mysterious Mr. Bull*. London: Robert Hale.
- Rawls, J. 1999 (revised edition). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.
- Sandel, M. 1984. The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self. *Political Theory* 12: 81-96.