

RAWLS' DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE: ABSOLUTE vs. RELATIVE INEQUALITY

Geoff Briggs
PHIL 350/400 // Dr. Ryan Wasserman
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1. INTRODUCTION

In the book “A Theory of Justice”, John Rawls examines the notion of a just society. More specifically, he develops a conception of justice—*Justice as Fairness*—derived from his novel interpretation of the social contract. Central to his account are two lexically-ordered principles of justice by which primary social institutions, or *the basic structure of society*, are ideally to be organized and regulated. Broadly speaking, the second of Rawls’ two principles pertains to “the distribution of income and wealth”, and its formulation is to be understood as an expression of Rawls’ *Difference Principle*—roughly, the principle that “inequality in expectation is permissible only if lowering it would make the [worst-off] class even more worse off.”^{1 2}

I want to suggest that Rawls’ Difference Principle (DP) entails the following worrisome outcome: Because DP maximizes the *absolute* level of expectation (and disregards the *relative* level), it authorizes potentially immense levels of inequality, such that this inequality itself can become a source of social discord and injustice. This paper will (§2) present Rawls’ formulation of DP, (§3) motivate the worrisome outcome entailed by DP, and (§4) offer a prima facie plausible solution in the form of an addendum to DP.

2. RAWLS' DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE

An important motivation for developing the Difference Principle was to overcome what Rawls saw as a major shortcoming of classical Utilitarianism. Rawls noted that “[a] striking

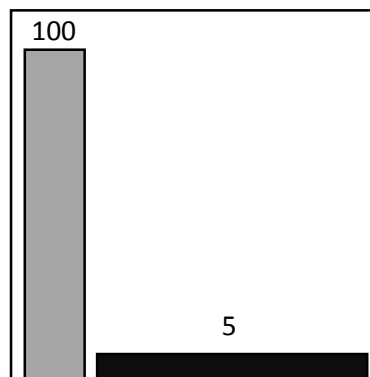
¹ Rawls (1971), pg. 61.

² *Ibid*, pg. 78.

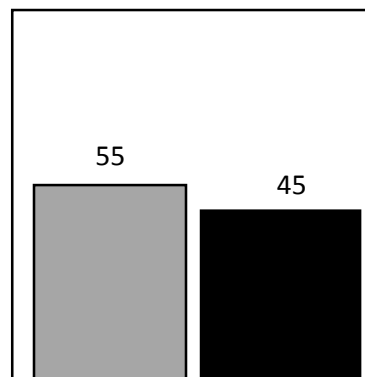
feature of the Utilitarian view of justice is that it does not matter, except indirectly, how [the] sum of satisfactions is distributed among individuals”.³ In other words, Utilitarianism is merely concerned with maximizing *aggregate* welfare for a society, and says nothing about the *distribution* of this welfare amongst individuals. Rawls says that those in the *original position*—the hypothetical rational agents charged with selecting principles of justice, while ignorant of any differentiating characteristics of themselves or others—would not opt for Utilitarianism, on the grounds that they would “rule out justifying institutions on the grounds that the hardships of some are offset by a greater good in the aggregate”.⁴ Instead, says Rawls, those in the original position (OP) would opt for something like the Difference Principle, which can be understood as follows:

DP: The higher expectations of those better situated are just IFF they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society.⁵

To see the problem Rawls had with Utilitarianism, and how DP overcomes it, consider the following illustrations (assume these are the only two possible distributions for this society):



[Fig. 1]



[Fig. 2]

The grey bars represent the “best-off” class, and the black bars represent the “worst-off” class,

³ *Ibid*, pg. 26.

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 15.

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 75; see also pg. 83 for the Difference Principle as embedded in the 2nd Principle of Justice.

while the width of the bar represents population size, and the height represents level of *expectation*—roughly, the life prospects of realizing rational plans and well-being.⁶ In figure 1, the aggregate expectation is 105 units, while in figure 2 the aggregate expectation for society is 100 units.⁷ Classical Utilitarianism would select the society in figure 1, because it has a maximized aggregate expectation. But the problem Rawls highlights is that the distribution in figure 1 is such that the best-off are *hugely* advantaged relative to the worst-off. Meanwhile, though figure 2 has a lower aggregate level of expectation, it has a much more equal distribution amongst the population. Rawls' DP would authorize selecting the distribution represented in figure 2, because the additional advantage conferred to the best-off in figure 1 does not improve the expectations of the worst-off; in fact, here, it does just the opposite. And this is precisely the role DP plays in Rawls' theory—it provides us with a principle by which to select a just arrangement for society by facilitating considerations *not only* of aggregate expectations, but also the distribution thereof, and helps to avoid situations like that in figure 1. With this brief sketch of DP in hand, we are now situated to understand the worrisome outcome entailed by DP.

3. RELATIVE vs. ABSOLUTE EXPECTATION

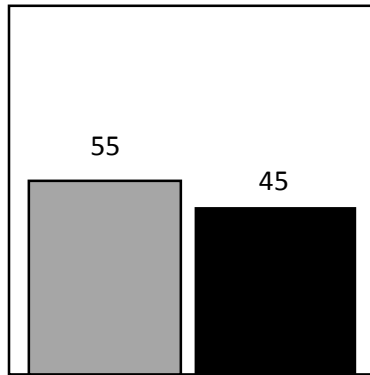
3.1. The Worry

While DP succeeds in overcoming the distribution problem afflicting classical Utilitarianism, it suffers from its own problem. The problem is that by focusing on the *absolute* rather than the *relative* level of expectations of the worst-off, DP authorizes potentially immense levels of inequality, just so long as this inequality results in a higher absolute level of expectation

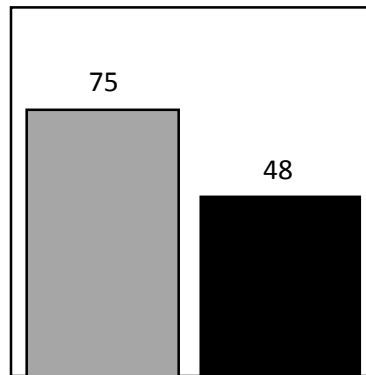
⁶ *Ibid*, see discussion of 'Expectations' on pg. 64, 93.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 64. The units in figures 1 and 2 are arbitrary; they are for comparison purposes only.

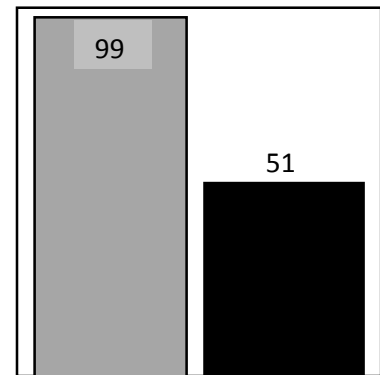
for the worst-off.⁸ And if this inequality between the best-off and worst-off is great enough, it can itself become a source of injustice. To see how this might be so, consider the following illustrations.



[Fig. 3]



[Fig. 4]



[Fig. 5]

In figure 3, there is a relatively equal distribution, but DP sanctions—indeed *requires*—the move from this distribution to the one represented in figure 4.⁹ Similarly, DP sanctions the move from figure 4’s distribution to that represented in figure 5. For although the relative inequality between the best and worst-off classes increases from fig. 3 to fig. 4, and again from fig. 4 to fig. 5, so too does the absolute level of the worst-off’s expectations increase. And it is with this absolute level of expectations that DP is exclusively concerned. This is where the worry about DP arises—that *at some point* the relative level of inequality authorized by DP will be so great as to itself become a source of injustice.¹⁰

⁸ A related worry is that DP “implies that any benefit, no matter how small, to the worst-off...will outweigh any loss to [the] better-off”; see Arrow, Kenneth (see references).

⁹ To understand why DP requires this, consider the negative formulation of DP: *Inequality in expectation is unjust unless the worst-off would be even more worse-off without that inequality*. So, to move “backwards” from the situation represented in fig. 4 to fig. 3 would violate DP, because it would leave the worst-off with a lower absolute level of expectations about their life prospects than before.

¹⁰ One sense of the phrase ‘at some point’ might be that there is some absolute value threshold of relative inequality below which DP is just and above which DP is unjust. I would ideally like to avoid taking such a strong (and potentially arbitrary) position. Rather than an absolute point, I would merely suggest that as the relative inequality between best-off and worst-off increases, so too does DP become increasingly unjust. So, perhaps it is better understood as a sort of gradient, rather than a sort of binary (i.e., just/unjust).

To further illustrate the worry, consider the following example that Lawrence Crocker discusses in his essay “Equality, Solidarity, and Rawls’ MaxiMin”:

We have a close community in which there are no significant social divisions. Income, wealth, and other advantages are equal to within a few percentages. There is only one way to modify the society to produce a different distribution. On the new distribution, 5 percent of the people would have ten times their previous incomes, and everyone else would have 1 percent more than his or her previous income. It would be nice for the 5 percent to have their incomes increased so dramatically. The 1 percent benefit for the remaining 95 percent of the population seems an advantage so modest as to barely deserve consideration, but it is a slight plus. On the other hand, the enormous inequality which would be introduced by this transition would amount to the division of society into two distinct castes. There would be two castes even if the inequality of wealth did not engender an inequality of political power.¹¹

So, more perspicuously stated, the worry is that DP’s emphasis on the absolute level of expectations entails the possibility of discord, frustration, or relegation to a lower caste for the worst-off as a result of an immensely unequal *relative* level of expectations. If that’s true, and the presence of this discord, frustration, lower status and the like represents a hindrance (or the absence of which would *remove* a hindrance) to the least-favored class realizing their rational life goals, then the DP’s formulation is a possible source of injustice. And if *that* is true, then by focusing exclusively on *absolute* levels of expectations the Difference Principle fails to take seriously the moral significance of the *relative* level of expectations of the least-favored.

3.2. Rawls’ Response to the Worry

Even Rawls seems to anticipate something like the above worry, saying “A person’s lesser position...may be so great as to wound his self-respect”, and that “society may permit such large disparities in [expectations] that under existing social conditions these differences cannot help but cause a loss of self-esteem.”¹² But he dismisses this concern, saying that “*Although in theory the difference principle permits indefinitely large inequalities in return for small gains*

¹¹ Crocker (1977), pg. 265-6.

¹² Rawls (1971), pg. 534.

to the less favored [or worst-off], the spread of income and wealth should not be excessive in practice”.¹³

While Rawls suggests that in practice the worry under discussion will likely never come to fruition, it is nevertheless unclear as to how or in what way his account can avoid this worrisome outcome which is, as Rawls himself notes, entailed by the Difference Principle. One of Rawls’ suggestions is that the numerous groups one might belong to would make it difficult to even determine one’s relative disadvantage—he says “the plurality of associations in a well-ordered society...tends to reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility, of variations in men’s prospects.”¹⁴ This is all very well, it seems, just so long as one has a sufficient number of associations, but not so satisfying an answer for those lacking such a “plurality of associations”.

A second response from Rawls is that although the worry about DP is apt, it is, nevertheless, not any more troublesome than the entailments of other conceptions of justice. He says “there seems to be no reason why the hazards of particular envy should be worse in a society regulated by justice as fairness than by any other conception.”¹⁵ This response is also less than satisfying, because while Rawls’ assertion here may be true, it nevertheless seems to undermine one of his primary motivations for developing his account that appears in “A Theory of Justice”, which was to provide an alternative account to those of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, which suffer from similar problems. So, if all of these accounts fair similarly well in this respect, by what reasoning would one opt for Rawls’ account, rather than the others?

A third response from Rawls is that the citizenry in his ideal society would hold mutual respect and esteem in such high regard that those “more advantaged [would] not make an

¹³ *Ibid*, pg. 536; my emphasis

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pg. 536.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 537.

ostentatious display of their higher estate calculated to demean the condition of those who have less.”¹⁶ I think this response is probably the best, but it is also less than satisfying. For while this may be generally true, it is easy to imagine an individual whose realization of life plans requires that he make an ostentatious show of his advantage. Furthermore, those who are worse-off may be disturbed by a *non*-ostentatious show—like seeing their neighbors driving expensive sports cars, sailing in yachts, or drinking rare imported wines, while they pedal their 10-speed bicycles, wear hand-me-downs, and drink soy milk.

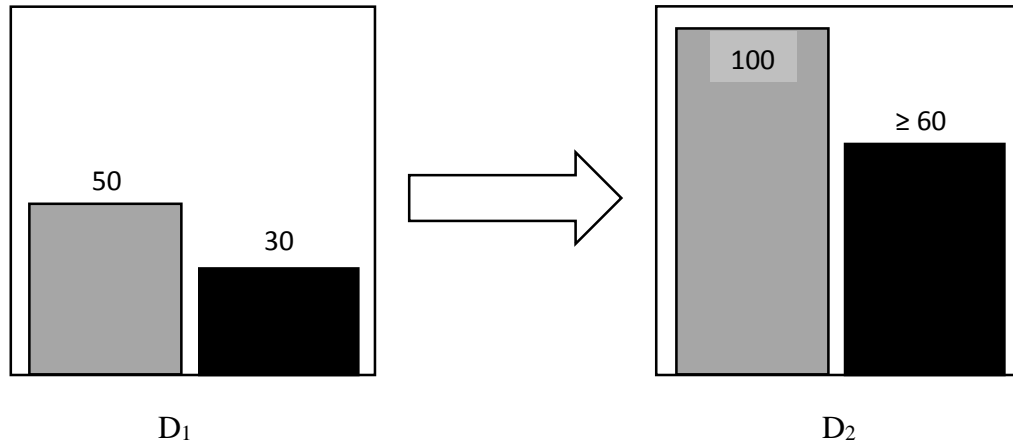
4. SUGGESTING AN ADDENDUM TO DP

While all of the foregoing responses seem sensible, the worry about DP still remains, for there is no principle or rule by which the immense relative inequalities between best-off and worst-off are to be forestalled. And it is my suggestion that a principle, or rule, or some additional condition or addendum to DP is required to provide a robust theoretical impediment to DP-sanctioned distributions such that the best-off are *hugely* advantaged relative to the worst-off. Otherwise, we must do as Rawls does and rely on the weak supposition that these worrisome theoretical entailments of DP will fail to manifest in practice.

My humble suggestion is that because the problem seems to arise when moving from one DP-sanctioned distribution to another that has a higher absolute level of expectation for worst-off, but a lower relative expectation, the solution is to put a cap on the amount of *relative* inequality that is allowed when moving from an initial distribution to a second. One very simple way to do this is would be to stipulate that the relative level of expectation of those worst-off in a

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 537.

second distribution is not to exceed the level that existed in the initial distribution. To illustrate this point, consider the following simplified examples:



So, the initial distribution, D_1 , has a relative level of expectation of 5:3. On my suggested addendum, to move from D_1 to D_2 requires that the relative expectation of 5:3 not be exceeded. So for example, to move the best-off from 50 to 100 units is justified *only if* the expectations of the worst-off increase to 60 units (or greater) in D_2 .

More precisely formulated, the addendum would look like this:¹⁷

$$\text{Addendum: } \frac{B^* - B}{W^* - W} \leq B/W$$

Where: B^* = the absolute level of expectations for best-off in the 2nd distribution.
 B = the absolute level of expectations for best-off in the initial distribution.
 W^* = the absolute level of expectations for worst-off in the 2nd distribution.
 W = the absolute level of expectations for worst-off in the initial distribution.
 B/W = the relative expectations of the best-off over the worst-off.

In this way, the addendum (i) allows for inequality, (ii) this inequality is still subject to DP (i.e.,

¹⁷ Credit is due to Crocker (see References) for inspiring me to formulate my addendum to DP in mathematical terms.

benefits the worst-off), *but it also* (iii) precludes the sort of increases in relative expectation that were illustrated in fig. 3-5. It is important to keep in mind that this addendum is merely a humble suggestion; I realize that there will doubtless be concerns stemming from the addendum, but it is an initial, prima facie plausible suggestion for trying to forestall the sort of immense relative inequalities that even Rawls himself acknowledges are entailed by the Difference Principle.

5. CONCLUSION

John Rawls' book "A Theory of Justice" represents an immense contribution to the field of political philosophy, in no small part because of his two principles of justice expressed therein. And while his second principle of justice relies on the intuitively appealing understanding of just inequality encapsulated in the *Difference Principle*, there is nevertheless a worrisome entailment of this principle—that even extraordinary levels of inequality are considered just, so long as this inequality redounds to the benefit of the worst-off class of society. I have suggested that the potentially immense level of inequality can itself become a source of injustice by hindering the realization of individual's rational life plans and well-being. And that if that is so, then the difference principle requires the inclusion of some formal provision to safeguard against such inequalities. I then suggested that the prima facie plausible addendum to the Difference Principle I offer could provide such a safeguard, and would thereby ensure that Rawls' two principles do not ultimately justify what would amount to immense, socially divisive inequalities.

REFERENCES

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2. Crocker, Lawrence (1977), *Equality, Solidarity, and Rawls' MaxiMin*, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 262-266
3. Arrow, Kenneth (1973), *Some Ordinalist-Utilitarian Notes on Rawls Theory of Justice by John Rawls*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 70, No. 9, pp. 245-263.
4. Also, special thanks to Dr. Ryan Wasserman for his productive discussion of this topic with me.