John Rawls and Human Welfare

John Watt

INTRODUCTION

John Rawls has been a dominant figure over the last generation of Western social philosophy. I know of four book-length studies of his thought – Barry (1973), Wolff (1977), Schaefer (1979) and Martin (1985) – and two volumes of collected essays: Daniels (1975) and Blocker and Smith (1980). Journal articles on him, most since the 1971 publication of *A Theory of Justice*, but some going back to the 1958 paper 'Justice as Fairness', are so numerous that a survey of them would be a substantial research undertaking. I know of no contemporary in the field who has attracted this sort of attention.

Of course not all of the literature is uncritical. However the critics are inevitably addressing themselves to the issues, in general, as Rawls has defined them. Disputing details with him is as eloquent an acknowledgement of his dominance as expounding and elaborating his ideas.

How is one to explain the immediacy and power of his impact on social philosophy? One explanation would be in terms of the originality and persuasive force of his work. This is obviously part of the answer. His writings on social justice combine a subtlety and complexity of reasoning with a distinctive strategy for approaching the issues, which R. P. Wolff, one of his more critical commentators, describes as 'one of the loveliest ideas in the history of social and political theory' (1977, p. 16).

However sheer originality has never carried a guarantee of immediate recognition. Hume's *Treatise*, which must be near the top of anybody's short list for the selection of the greatest philosophical work in the English language, fell dead-born from the press, as its author wryly complained, without reaching such distinction as even to excite a murmur among the zealots. Nearer to our own time Frege's work had to wait a considerable period to receive the recognition it would now be thought to deserve. Others no more obviously original, from Locke to Ayer and Wittgenstein, have had quick success in influencing the thought of their time.

How is this difference to be explained? The crude form of the answer which I would want to suggest is that those who enjoy immediate recognition have told people what they are willing and ready to hear. This can be expressed in more refined form. There is a dominant ideology of a period, which meshes with the dominant interests. The most 'successful' philosophical originators, particularly in the field of social theory, work with sets of concepts and principles sympathetic to the ideology and the interests which are currently dominant, and which are, so to speak, looking for a systematic formulation and rationale.

Locke's defence in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government* of the right to private property provides a convenient illustration. The basis of ownership, he asserts, is work: one has a right to anything with which one has 'mixed one's labour'. In isolation this would have been a startlingly revolutionary principle because, to take the case of land, most of it in Locke's Britain was owned by people who did not mix their labour with anything except foxes, while those who were most conspicuously mixing their labour with it owned virtually nothing. However Locke blunted the revolutionary point of the idea by adding a few qualifications which look, on any reasonable reading, to be in blatant conflict with it. These include the qualification that ownership entails the right to dispose of property as one thinks fit, including leaving it to one's children, who then have no need to re-establish their title by their own labour. Thus qualified, the principle that property rights are based on work can apply only to a first generation, the identification of which in most places would present some difficulty.

From a merely logical point of view, Locke's rationale seems indigestible. If mixing labour with material is the foundation of property rights, why is it that only the labour of a mythical first generation remains in the mixture, and in subsequent generations no degree of idleness in the rich, and no amount of sweat and blood spilled by the poor, seem to make any difference? Such incoherence, one would think, would not impress his contemporaries.

But it is precisely this lack of logical (and perhaps moral) integrity which was the secret of Locke's immediate appeal as a social theorist. The contradiction was functional. A mercantile elite had emerged and was emerging into a position of growing power, which included ownership of land as well as of capital and political influence. Its members needed a non-feudal rationale, particularly for their incursions into landholding, and in general for the somewhat more fluid class structure which was developing. Locke's central idea that property rights are based on labour provided the necessary break away from feudal thinking towards a more individualistic, private-enterprise approach to the subject. On the other hand the interests of the mercantile elite would not have been served by a *consistent* labour-based theory of property. No property-owning and employing class could welcome a clear argument that *anyone* who works on property has a right to a share in it. Hence the conflicting elements, including the right to bequeath, were as important as was the central idea, for the acceptability of Locke's rationale to the dominant interests of his time. The argument was sufficiently inconsistent to allow property-owners to suppose that it provided a justification for the existing state of affairs.

This example is presented in order to introduce a suggestion. Perhaps the reason for the immediate and powerful impact of Rawls' theory of justice on Western social theory is that it can be perceived as providing a sophisticated rationale for a dominant ideology, and ultimately for a structure of power and privilege. This suggestion will be explored, and it will be argued that, while it needs to be qualified rather heavily, and there is nothing to correspond to the incoherence of Locke's approach to property, there is some justification for it.

WELFARE AND CONSUMPTION

I will attempt no general outline of modern Western ideology, but one central aspect of it will be stressed. Throughout the writings of Ivan Illich runs the theme that contemporary thinking is dominated by the concept of the consumer product, a thing which can be acquired and owned, well exemplified by the car and the television set: a material good which is designed, manufactured, packaged, advertised and marketed. Life, Illich maintains, is perceived primarily as the process of getting as many such possessions as possible. He complains about many modern institutions that they encourage us to think of other benefits which are not consumer goods as if they were.

Thus we perceive education as acquiring organised and certified programmes of instruction, health care as getting courses of treatment designed and sold by the medical authorities, recreation as owning a television set and consuming programmes of entertainment, transport as possessing cars and buying the fuel to use them, and so on. We even talk about *getting a job*, *having a good marriage*, or *having sex*, grammatical structures using a verb of possession and a noun, almost suggesting that these too are material goods like cars and television sets, in contrast with structures in which the main idea is expressed in the verb (*to work*, *to live happily together* and so on) which would reflect the perception of these as human activities to be engaged in, rather than things to be acquired and possessed.

Illich would want our view of life to be dominated by this concept of a human activity. An illustration is walking or talking, which cannot be provided by or acquired from anyone; we must *do* it. He urges us to see the whole of life not in terms of acquiring ready-made things and packaged services, but in terms of engaging in activities. Education, health, transportation, work, and so on should be seen as areas of action which we must each do for ourselves, individually, or more probably in informal, voluntary cooperation with others. But he is sharply aware of being at odds with a generation preoccupied by the acquisition of consumer products. Of course previous prophets have made the same charge about earlier generations. Wordsworth's line, 'Getting and spending we lay waste our powers' (from the sonnet *The World is Too Much With Us*) expresses the same thought, as does the idea of commodity fetishism. I want to suggest that part of the explanation of the immediate impact which Rawls' ideas have had is the ease with which he can be read as assuming and supporting the central importance of consumption in human life. I put it that way because his own values appear, on closer examination, to be different.

RAWLS' PRINCIPLES

I assume a general familiarity with Rawls' fundamental strategy. It makes use of a version of the social contract myth for an argument that rational people, committing themselves to participate in a newly-constituted society, but ignorant of the particular role which they would have in it, would find it reasonable to agree on a set of basic principles which provide a rationally defensible outline of the requirements of justice. I assume also a general familiarity with the principles which he thinks could in this way be justified:

> First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.
>
> Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all (Rawls, 1971, p. 60).

Principle IIa, labelled the difference principle, is later modified (p. 83) to make it more explicit that, in justifying a non-egalitarian system of rewards, one must first establish that the arrangements would maximise the benefits to the worst-off category of people, then look to the second poorest category, and so on. A just allocation of benefits is an equal allocation, unless an unequal allocation would increase the absolute level of benefits enjoyed even by the most disadvantaged group in the society. This would be fair because it would be reasonable for *anyone* to agree to it, even while visualising himself or herself on the lowest stratum. In discussing how this might work, Rawls writes:

> Supposedly ... the greater expectations allowed to entrepreneurs encourages [sic] them to do things which raise the long-term prospects of the labouring class. Their better prospects act as incentives so that the economic process is more efficient, innovation proceeds at a faster pace, and so on. Eventually the resulting material benefits spread throughout the system and to the least advantaged. I shall not consider how far these things are true. The point is that something of this kind must be argued if these inequalities are to be just by the difference principle (p. 78).

In the vast literature on Rawls a great amount of the comment has been focussed on this difference principle. Even R. P. Wolff (1977), by no means in sympathy with its implications, treats it as the centre of his theory of justice. This is an interesting fact when Rawls himself does not give this principle the first priority: he argues at some length for the point that the first principle, the maximising of equal formal rights and freedoms, should have priority over the others. What is there about this difference principle which accounts for the way it has captured the attention of commentators and critics? I want to suggest two explanations for this.

The first explanation is that this principle lends itself to an

occupation much favoured in philosophy over the last few decades: extravagantly elaborate formal treatment of trivial examples. For instance we might be invited to consider the following options in distributing the proceeds of a business operation:

(1) Equal wages for all involved (say $50 per day);
(2) Moderate incentives for the most inventive (say $100), which result in such improvements in profitability that even the worst-paid category of worker is getting more than under equality (say $55);
(3) A still higher level for the best paid (say $500), an incentive which increases profits still more, and provides correspondingly better returns for most workers, but leaves only $45 for a small category of worst-paid workers.

Would it be rational, if we do not know what our place in this business would be, to prefer option 2, as the difference principle entails, or would it be equally or more rational to gamble more adventurously and choose option 3, which offers a high probability of the best available level of return, with only a small risk of reducing our benefits below those enjoyed under equality? Such examples often provide the starting-point for excursions into elaborate games-theory formalisation, and are familiar to anyone who has looked into the Rawls literature. Accepting their importance involves accepting a staggering trivilisation of human life to the ownership of dollars, and of justice in society to rules for the distribution of those dollars.

This tendency towards sophisticated and elaborate formal treatment of triviliased issues has characterised much of 20th-century English-language philosophy. In lending itself so well to that tendency Rawls' difference principle has provided, no doubt, much innocent diversion, and a considerable number of doctorates, but it is not plausible to suppose that the understanding of complex issues of social justice has been moved far forward by that style of treatment, on whatever level of sophistication.

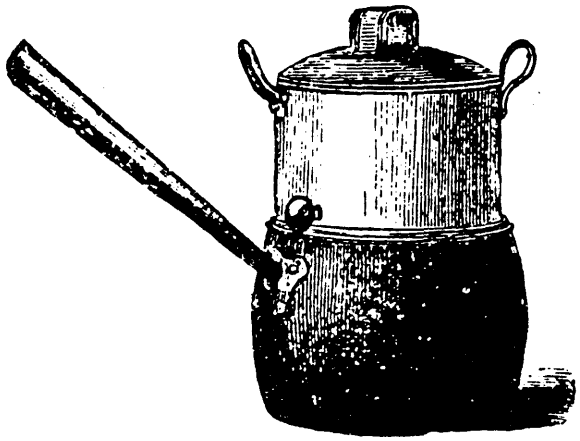
That, however, was a side issue. I want to explore more seriously another possible reason why this part of Rawls' reasoning in particular has caught the attention of his readers. This is the idea that that particular principle feeds into the ideology of the time, in ways which remain to be discussed.

THE APPLICABILITY OF THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE

Rawls' difference principle is hypothetical. It does not state that unequal distribution *is* justified because there *are* increased benefits even for the least advantaged. It states that it is only on this condition that inequality *would be* justified. It would be logically consistent to assert the principle but to deny that the condition is ever satisfied. On the other hand one would be unlikely to see much point in stating the principle unless one believed that the condition was satisfied reasonably frequently. I want to consider the limits to the application of the principle.

Taking types of benefit one at a time (which, I shall suggest later, is not a legitimate overall strategy, but which is a necessary tactical move at this stage), it is obvious that the condition cannot be met for all types. In the jargon of games theory, it can work only in non-zero-sum games, in which the amount of benefit available for distribution is open to increase as a result of moves made by the players. This cannot apply, for instance, to land ownership in a society where all land is already owned. The amount of the benefit is fixed, and one person can get more of it only at the cost of others getting less. It is not that one can ask whether the poor are getting more of it as a result of the even larger share given to the rich, investigate the question empirically, and reach a negative conclusion. The question cannot sensibly be asked. With this example a more realistic principle of justice than the difference principle would be the celebrated observation of the Imam Ali: 'No man becomes rich unless some poor men lack bread.' In the original position from which the social contract is negotiated, behind the veil of ignorance which obscures one's future role, the only possible options for Rawls' rational person considering land ownership in isolation would be for equal shares or communal ownership.

It is clear that the difference principle could not apply to any range of public benefits which are commonally owned and available to all, such as parks, roads, protection from aggression, sewerage systems, and so on. These can certainly be increased and improved by human ingenuity, but if they are, as they are often not, genuinely public goods, that is, equally available to all, the question whether the poor are getting more of them as a result of the rich getting much more again, cannot intelligibly arise. Neither does it seem to apply to natural benefits such as clean air, which is not a product of human ingenuity or entrepreneurial skill (in fact these have done little but damage to it). The principle assumes private property—a distribution of goods into individual hands—but as we have seen in the case of land, it is not applicable to *all* privately owned goods. It cannot be applied directly to money, because its applicability depends on the type of more fundamental benefit on which the money is to be spent. If it is to buy land, for instance, the condition in the difference principle cannot conceivably be satisfied; for the purchase of some other types of good it might be.

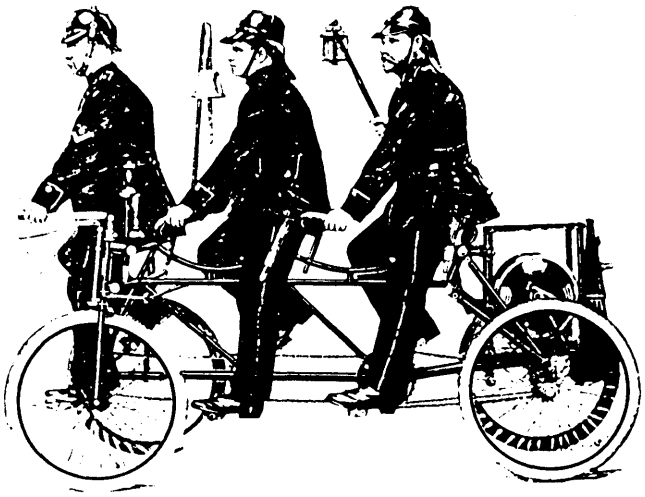


The principle is most obviously applicable to a particular type of benefit: mass-produced consumer goods such as cars, television sets, packaged entertainment and so on: products which are devised, manufactured, advertised, marketed into private hands, and consumed. It is in this area of goods that the assumptions required by the difference principle are most obviously justified. There can be, and has been, a vast increase in the amount of such things available for distribution, and this is presumably due at least in part to the high rewards available to the successful entrepreneur and innovator, so that one can sensibly ask the question whether the poor have also benefitted from all this well-rewarded initiative. And the answer is no doubt affirmative; ownership and consumption of such goods have enormously increased even among the poorest categories of people in Western society over the last two or three generations.

However, it makes little sense to think about social justice in a piecemeal fashion, asking separately whether the television

sets, the cars and so on are fairly distributed. Some people choose not to own television sets, so the fact that they do not own them is not a demonstration of injustice. A judgement of a society as more or less just in the distributive sense is essentially a holistic judgement which spans the full range of satisfactions available in that society, and considers the fairness of their distribution.

How substantial a contribution to the understanding of social justice in this holistic sense is made by Rawls' difference principle? One's answer to this will depend on the degree to which one sees the important satisfactions in human life as coming from sources such as privately-owned consumer products, to which the principle can intelligibly be applied, and the degree to which one sees them as coming from sources to which the principle cannot be applied, some of which have been mentioned, and more of which are yet to be discussed. It is suggested that the immediacy of Rawls' impact on Western social theory, and in particular the focussing of attention on the difference principle as the core feature of his thought, are symptoms of our tendency to see life's values primarily in terms of ownership and consumption.



The principle is not Rawls' private property. The gist of it, expressed in assertive rather than hypothetical form (i.e. high rewards for the most productive *do* bring absolute improvements to the lives of everyone, including the poorest, and therefore a high degree of inequality *is* just and reasonable from everyone's point of view) can be found in numerous sources, from before and after the publication of his works. These sources include the writings of 20th-century defenders of unregenerate capitalism such as Ayn Rand and Milton Friedman, who tend to take on an unashamedly materialistic, consumption-based view of human well-being. Taken in isolation, as it often is, the difference principle chimes harmoniously with that view of life. At various points in *A Theory of Justice* Rawls makes it clear that he is not a supporter of unregenerate capitalism, and would want to see substantial income redistribution through taxation and social welfare programmes, to ensure a reasonable degree of material well-being for the least advantaged (e.g. p. 87). This does not negate the point that the difference principle is at home within a set of values centred on consumption.

In spelling out how a justification for equality would work, Rawls implies by the way that the argument applies only, or primarily, to material consumer goods:

> The economic process is more efficient, innovation proceeds at a faster pace, and so on. Eventually the resulting *material benefits* spread through the whole system and to the least advantaged (p. 78, my emphasis).

R. P. Wolff concludes his lucid and perceptive book on Rawls with the criticism that his theory of justice is limited to the distribution of material goods, and is therefore based on a view of human welfare which is restricted to private ownership and consumption: 'Rawls' ... theory, however qualified and complicated, is in the end a theory of pure distribution' (1977, p. 210). There are two questions to ask about this criticism. The first is what alternative view of human welfare one would want to put forward; the second is whether that criticism can be fairly levelled at Rawls' theory in general. I shall take the first question first.

HUMAN GOOD AS ACTIVITY

To the consumption-based conception of human welfare Wolff opposes

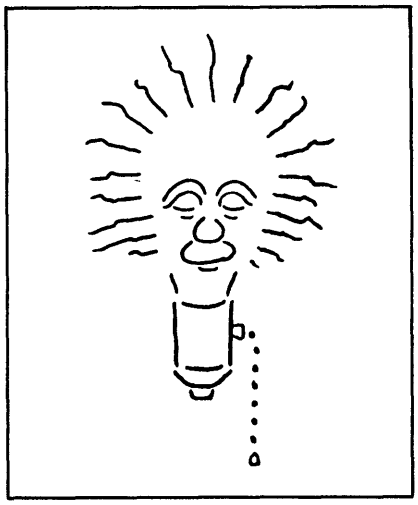
> a much older tradition, going back to Aristotle and finding its most powerful expression in the writings of the young Marx, according to which creative, productive, rational *activity* is the good for men. Consumption is essential to life; its gratifications form a component of the good life when properly integrated into a healthy and well-ordered psyche. But consumption is not, and cannot be, the end for man. For Marx ... labour of the right sort is an indispensable element of the good life (1977, pp. 208-9).

This passage brings us back within sight of the earlier brief discussion of Illich and his criticism of the values of contemporary 'advanced' societies. Marx and Wolff emphasise the need for productive *labour* in a fully human life, but as Illich illustrates, there are many other dimensions to the point of view which places the major values and meaning of life in activities rather than in possessions (unless one broadens the concept of labour unreasonably, to include all activities). It is also seen as important to be involved in *making communal decisions* rather than merely being the recipients of decisions made by the authorities, to engage in *recreational activities* rather than merely owning and enjoying recreational products and programmes marketed by commercial interests, to *pursue interests* and *acquire skills* rather than merely being the recipients of educational packages purveyed by the schools, to *live healthily* rather than merely buying treatments from the medical professionals when we are unwell, and so on through innumerable other aspects of life. This point of view rests on ideals of individual creativity and autonomy, and the conviction that a life of conformity and consumption is less than human.

Can Rawls' difference principle be applied intelligibly to the satisfactions embedded in activities? In general, no. Consider for example the activity of making communal decisions, involvement in which is a potential source of a sense of one's own worth as a valued person with a valued position in the structure of the community. Does it make sense to suppose that by giving some people more power than others, a community could increase the decision-making power of the least powerful also? This would obviously be as nonsensical as the same supposition applied to land ownership. The way to maximise the political power of the least powerful could only be through equal involvement.

It does not seem possible to treat activities, and the satisfactions involved in them, as constituting a non-zero-sum game: that is, as open to indefinite increase by the exercise of initia-

tive and inventiveness. No doubt new activities are constantly developed as a result of technological change (water skiing, playing computer games, and so on) but there is only so much time in a human life. It is a familiar observation in 'advanced' societies that people no longer make their own jam, build their own furniture or grow their own vegetables. It is arguable that one cannot sensibly think of the sum or range of human activities and the satisfactions available from these as open to expansion; there is change but no increase, so that television watching replaces singing around pianos, computer games replace card games, and so on.



A proponent of Illich's point of view would go a good deal further, and argue that the inventive and entrepreneurial creativity which has given us the consumer society has brought about an actual *deterioration* of the range and quality of activities available to people, and of satisfactions involved in them. Watching television is more a form of passivity than of activity, riding trail bikes is not only less physically active than hiking, but it destroys some of the satisfactions which people go to the forest to find, and so on. Turning from recreation to work, while 20th-century technology has increased the overall range of occupations, the resulting specialisation has led to a reduction in the range of activities involved in the job of the typical worker, so that most people at work go through predetermined motions rather than being actively and creatively involved.

I shall not comment on the general defensibility of this black view of the results of contemporary technology. Clearly it is reasonable in some instances but not in others, and it seems to me an impossible task to judge fairly whether it is reasonable across the whole of life and society. I will retreat to a less exposed position. There is no reason to expect commercial inventiveness and entrepreneurship to generate an increase in the quantity and range of activities in people's lives, in the same way in which it generates an increase in the quantity and range of consumer goods. Therefore to the extent that one sees genuinely human satisfactions as coming from activities rather than from possessions and consumption, one will not find Rawls' difference principle a useful tool to employ in thinking about social justice.

There is another way of looking at the relations between the difference principle, the view that the meaning of life is in action more than in ownership, and egalitarianism. It is best explained by illustration. Imagine a technologically simple and egalitarian village society in which available activities include varied work on farming land and around houses, festivals, religious rituals, recreational activities which take place in public spaces and involve no elaborate equipment, communal decision-making meetings, and sitting around gossiping at the village well. Compare this with a technologically richer society in which the available activities are in one sense much more varied. They include a wide range of types of specialised work, a range of recreational activities some of which require considerable private resources and equipment, such as cruising in yachts and skiing holidays in the French Alps, as well as lower-key options. Being economically complex, this society is committed to much larger political units, so that making political decisions is another specialised occupation rather than a universal involvement.

In the first society most of the available activities are available to all, partly because of the modest scale and the modest level of technology. The second is inevitably much less egalitarian, partly because of the larger scale and the more elaborate technology (a connection pointed out by Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*). Many of the available activities (skiing in the French Alps, ocean cruising) are too elaborate and expensive to be available to any but a minority. Others, such as watching television and shopping at supermarkets, are available to virtually everyone.

Is it possible that a shift from the first way of life to the second, which would involve a great increase in the inequality of benefits, might be defended as just under Rawls' difference principle because it involves an increase in the absolute level of the benefits enjoyed by the least advantaged class? I ask the question in the context of a view of life's satisfactions as coming more from activities than from possessions. The answer, I think, must be negative. In the first place, the institutions which put great effort and resources into supporting the activities of the rich sometimes produce an impoverishment of the activities available to the poor. Consider the difference usually found between public transport in places where almost everyone uses it, and in places where the more affluent half of the population always use private vehicles.

But the more important point I want to make is that the benefits enjoyed by people, the richness of their lives in society, cannot be measured on any absolute scale, as Rawls' principle requires; it is necessary to take into account comparisons with the norms for the societies in which they live. In gauging the richness of a style of life from the activities in which the people concerned are involved, one would not take into account just any describable activity; only those which have some social significance in the local context would be important. Hopping on one leg is an activity available in any society to anyone who has at least one leg, but it has no social significance anywhere as far as I know, so its availability is not particularly important. By contrast, golf is an institutionalised activity with social significance, so its availability is important. Its social significance varies greatly, however, between a country like Australia where it is available to the majority, and

playing it implies identification with the mainstream, and a country like Japan, where it is available only to the affluent, and playing it implies identification with an elite.

In the first society which was imagined, where most available activities are open to anyone, anyone can enjoy the satisfaction of being fully involved in the life of the community, with the sense of personal worth which accompanies that involvement. In the second society this is not so. Political decision-making and the higher-status jobs and recreational activities are all closed to the poor, who cannot fail to be aware of that fact. The range of jobs and recreational activities which *are* available to them, while in another society they might have quite different social significance, will inevitably in this setting identify them not with the mainstream or the elite, but with the disadvantaged strata. It is impossible that they could enjoy the satisfaction of being fully involved in the activities which constitute that society's way of life, with the sense of personal worth which accompanies that involvement.

It seems to me that the difference principle cannot be applied beyond the limits of a materialistic, consumption-based conception of human welfare. It is impossible, when thinking of the important satisfactions which are derived from involvement in the socially significant activities of a society, to imagine that increased inequality might lead to an enrichment of the lives of the worst-off class. The assumptions required by the principle (the possibility of indefinite expansion of the sum of satisfactions, and the possibility of an absolute, culture-free measure of the well-being of people) do not apply. (Indeed the latter assumption does not apply to material possessions either, but that is another issue.)

How is one to account, then, for the way in which Rawls' difference principle has engaged the attention of so many social theorists? The major explanation which I offer is that, as Illich asserts, the dominant ideology of our time is centrally concerned with the private ownership of manufactured and marketed products, and that principle works best within this very restricted area of human well-being. Focussing on consumer goods, and taking the difference principle out of its context in the rest of Rawls' theory, it is easy to see this line of argument as providing a justification for the contemporary Western way of life, with its high degree of inequality, and thus as providing support for the dominant interests of the period.

RAWLS' VALUES

It must be said that Rawls does not share these values. He does not take his difference principle out of the context of the rest of his theory, and does not even give it first priority. He is no anti-egalitarian. At various points in the complex argument of *A Theory of Justice* he returns to this theme:

> It may be worthwhile to recall the importance of preventing excessive accumulations of property and wealth and of maintaining equal opportunities of education for all (p. 73).

He clearly allows the possibility that a society in which the means of production are communally owned could meet the requirements of his principles of justice, and suggests that in a private-enterprise society inheritance and gift taxes, and restrictions to the right of bequest, are needed in order to redistribute resources and opportunities (p. 277). At several points he stresses the need for an adequate tax-supported social security system to guarantee a reasonable minimum of benefits to all.

He has a related objection to the accumulation of excessive political power, and uses this as a further argument against the accumulation of excessive wealth:

> The liberties protected by the principle of participation lose much of their value whenever those who have greater private means are permitted to use their advantages to control the course of public debate... In a society allowing private ownership of the means of production, property and wealth must be kept widely distributed, and government monies provided on a regular basis to encourage free public discussion (p. 225).

He is not a defender of a crude view of human well-being as based solely or primarily on ownership of material goods and consumption of pre-packaged services. His 'thin theory of the good' requires careful reading if it is not to be misunderstood. He outlines it in this way:

> For simplicity, assume that the chief primary goods at the disposition of society are rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth (p. 62).

These are primary goods in the sense that *whatever* goals one might want to pursue, and without even knowing, in the original position of the social contract, what one's goals will be, one will see a need for freedom, opportunities and resources in order to pursue them. That is, income and wealth, even rights and liberties, are not presented as *ultimate* values, but as universal prerequisites for the achievement of any ultimate values.

Rawls acknowledges on occasion that the ultimate values of human life are found more often in activities than in possession and consumption. In explaining the need for genuinely open access to all positions of a just society, he points out that without this, some would be

> debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties ... one of the main forms of human good (p. 84).

Some of the spirit of the argument in this paper about the need for people to be involved in the mainstream activities of their society can be found in a discussion of self-respect towards the end of *A Theory of Justice*. The section looks like an afterthought, included in an effort to remedy problems in the main argument, and it is inadequately incorporated into that argu-

ment. Nevertheless Rawls acknowledges in it (in conflict with his earlier explanation of what he meant by a primary good) that 'perhaps the most important primary good is that of self-respect' (p. 440). Further, he acknowledges that the main source of self-respect is the sense of being involved in roles and activities which command the respect of other people.

The values which emerge from a careful reading of *A Theory of Justice* are liberal and humane. However it is a complex, difficult book, and a careful reading is needed, in order to arrive at an adequate, balanced impression of those values. On a more casual reading the dominant impression is made by Rawls' use of the social contract myth to derive just one of his principles of justice: the difference principle. The reason for this which I have suggested is that this principle in isolation is so compatible with aspects of the dominant ideology of our time, particularly the materialistic, consumption-dominated conception of human good, and the anti-egalitarian attitudes typical of Western societies. We tend to filter out of our perception the elements of the argument which are less compatible with entrenched ways of thinking and perceiving.

The dominant understanding of the force of Rawls' argument is therefore not just or fair to the man's own values and intentions. Even the comment of a careful critic like Wolff (1977, p. 210) that 'Rawls' ... theory, however qualified and complicated, is in the end a theory of pure distribution', is not fair to him. Nevertheless one can see how his exposition of his position makes possible this selective understanding of his intentions. He does not seriously and directly confront the crucial issues, how few of the sources of human satisfaction there are to which his difference principle can be applied, and how many to which it cannot. This area of vagueness leaves it open to his readers to suppose that the principle might be applied to all the sources and forms of well-being, in order to build a defence of inequality across the whole of life: an understanding of him which lends itself to supporting the ideology and the dominant interests of contemporary Western societies.

References

Barry, B. (1973), *A Liberal Theory of Justice*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

Blocker, H. G. and Smith, E. H. (eds.) (1980), *John Rawls' Theory of Justice: An Introduction*, Athens, Ohio University Press.

Daniels, N. (ed.), *Reading Rawls: Critical Studies of A Theory of Justice*, New York, Basic Books.

Martin, R. (1985), *Rawls and Rights*, Lawrence, Kansas, University of Kansas Press.

Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Schaefer, D. L. (1979), *Justice or Tyranny: A Critique of John Rawls' A Theory of Justice*, Port Washington, New York, Kennikat Press.

Wolff, R. P. (1977), *Understanding Rawls: A Reconstruction and Critique of A Theory of Justice*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.

The Oxford Literary Review

COLONIALISM
& other essays

Gauri Viswanathan	The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India
Benita Parry	Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse
Graham Pechey	On the Borders of Bakhtin: Dialogization, Decolonization
Kenneth Lea	'In the Most Highly Developed Societies': Lyotard and Postmodernism
Jean-François Lyotard	Notes on Legitimation
Timothy J.A. Clark	Time After Time: Temporality, Temporalization
Beverley Brown	Kant for the Eighties: Comments on Hillis Miller's "The Search for Grounds in Literary Studies"
Rachel Bowlby	Promoting Dorian Grey

Vol.9 £6.95 Overseas £8 or $13.95
Institutions £15 Overseas £17.50 or $30
Make cheques payable to OLR

ISBN 0 9511080 1 8 ISSN 0305 1498
OLR, Dept. English, The University, Southampton SO9 5NH, UK