

See also: Plato 50-55 • Thomas Hobbes 112-15 • John Locke 130-33 • Jean-Jacques Rousseau 154-59 • Noam Chomsky 304-05

parties are ones that genuinely honor impartiality, and don't, for example, take race, class, creed, natural talent, or disability into account. In other words, if I don't know what my place in society will be, rational self-interest compels me to vote for a world in which everyone is treated fairly.

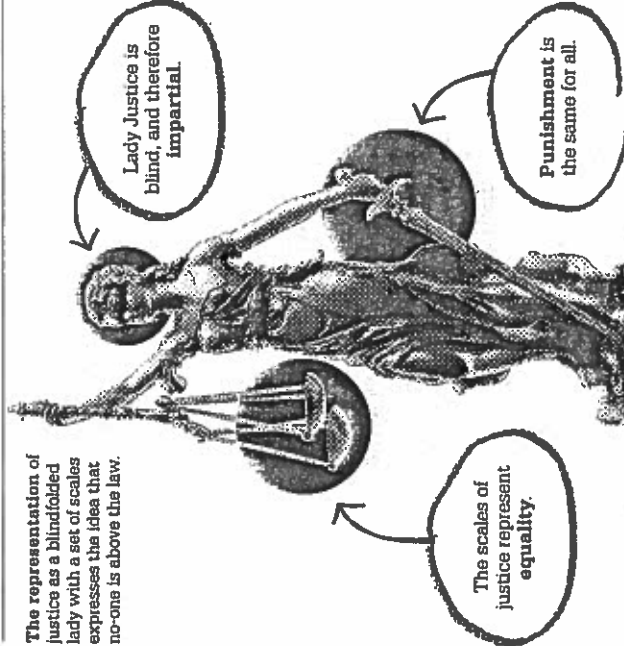
Rationality versus charity

It is important to note that for Rawls this is not a story about how justice has actually arisen in the world. Instead, he gives us a way of testing our theories of justice against an impartial benchmark. If they fail to measure up, his point is that it is our reason, and not simply our charity, that has failed. ■

about establishing the principles of justice? What rules do they lay down? If they are interested in a truly rational and impartial justice, then there are countless rules that have to be discounted immediately. For example, the rule "if your name is John, you must always eat last", is neither rational nor impartial, even if it may be to your advantage if your name is "John".

In such a position, says Rawls, what we need to do is cast a "veil of ignorance" over all the facts of our lives, such as who we are, and where we were born, and then ask what kind of rules it would be best for us to live by. Rawls' point is that the only rules that could rationally be agreed on by all

The representation of justice as a blindfolded lady with a set of scales expresses the idea that no-one is above the law.



Key works

- 1971 *A Theory of Justice*
- 1993 *Political Liberalism*
- 1999 *The Law of Peoples*
- 2000 *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*
- 2001 *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*

John Rawls

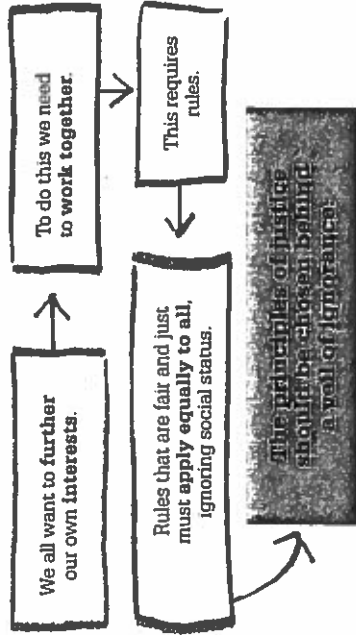
John Rawls was born in 1921 in Maryland, USA. He studied at Princeton University, then joined the army and served in the Pacific during World War II. After the war, in which he saw the ruins of Hiroshima, he resigned from the army and returned to studying philosophy, earning his PhD from Princeton in 1950.

Rawls undertook further study at Oxford University, where he met philosopher Isaiah Berlin, before returning to the US to teach. After a period at Cornell and MIT, he moved to Harvard, where he wrote *A Theory of Justice*. While at Harvard, he also taught up-and-coming philosophers Thomas Nagel and Martha Nussbaum.

In 1995 Rawls suffered the first of several strokes, but continued working until his death in 2002.

THE PRINCIPLES OF JUSTICE ARE CHOSEN BEHIND A VEIL OF IGNORANCE

JOHN RAWLS (1921-2002)



social contract is made. From this Rawls establishes principles of justice on which, he claims, all rational beings should agree.

The original position

Imagine that a group of strangers is marooned on a desert island, and that, after giving up hope of being rescued, they decide to start a new society from scratch. Each of the survivors wants to further their own interests, but each also sees that they can only do so by working together in some way—in other words, by forming a social contract. The question is: how do they go

In his book *A Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971, political philosopher John Rawls argues for a re-evaluation of justice in terms of what he calls "justice as fairness." His approach falls into the tradition known as social contract theory, which sees the rule of law as a form of contract that individuals enter into because it yields benefits that exceed what they can attain individually. Rawls' version of this theory involves a thought experiment in which people are made ignorant of their place in society, or placed in what he calls the "original position" in which the



TEXT

philosophy

Contract theory

Plato discusses the justice and the just *The Republic*.

Thomas Hobbes sets out social contract in *Leviathan*.

John Locke develops theory in his *Second Treatise of Government*.

Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* are later adopted by revolutionaries.

Robert Nozick criticizes "original position" in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

John Rawls defends his views in his book, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*.