

## Playing with Justice: An Introduction to Rawls

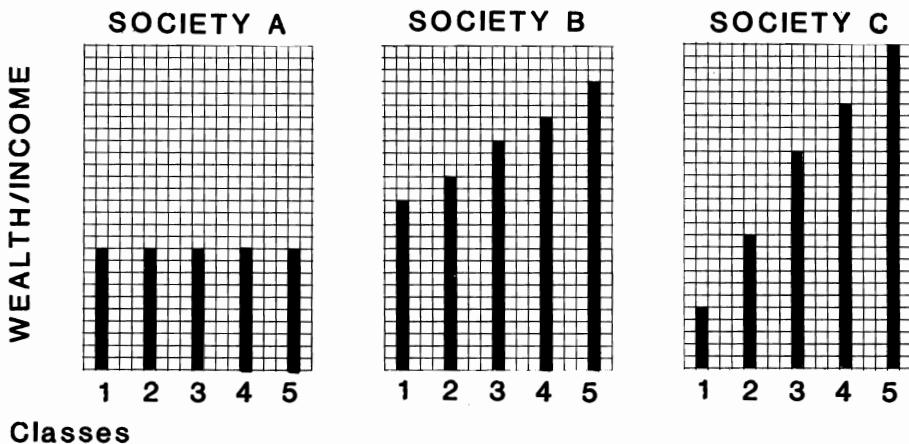
JAMES MOULDER

*University of Natal*

I want to describe a game that I have developed to introduce students to some Rawlsian ideas. The ideas are Rawlsian, rather than the ideas of John Rawls, because, although I have drawn freely from his arguments in *A Theory of Justice*<sup>1</sup>, I do not use this game to give an accurate representation of his position. What I do instead is to use the game *before* I refer students to Rawls' book. I have found that this is a good way to prepare them for his ideas because the game requires them to make and to defend fairly simple choices of the kind that he considers in a much more technical and sophisticated way. My experience has been that students who have approached Rawls' theory of justice via this game are not as inclined to see his arguments as "academic" or "irrelevant" because they have already made and defended choices of the kind that he asks them to contemplate.

I first describe the instruments that I use, and then describe the three phases of the game. Along the way I report some of the typical outcomes that I have obtained. Finally, I make a few general observations on the value of using games of this kind to teach philosophy.

Every player is given a copy of the following graphs.



*In addition, each player is given a card with a numeral on it: 1, 2, 3, 4 or 5. These numerals represent the five classes of people in each of the three societies. The numerals can be printed on a visiting or similar sized card, or poker chips can be used.*

Although one needs at least five players, the game works best with a class of thirty or more, because this makes it possible to divide them into groups, according to the numeral on their cards, and to get them to discuss why they made the choices that they did.

### *The Game*

The game takes about 45 minutes to play. It has three phases, although the third phase is optional.

*Phase 1:* Every player is given a copy of the graphs and one of the numbered cards. They are told that the numeral on the card that they receive represents the class to which they would belong if they were members of one of the societies represented on the graphs. For example, a player whose number is 3 belongs, quite literally, to the middle class in society **A**, **B**, and **C**.

The players are also told that wealth is not equivalent to income, but that for the sake of the game they should treat the vertical axis on each of the graphs as a measure of their monthly income and each unit as equivalent to \$100. For example, everybody in society **A** has a monthly income of \$1,000; and in society **C** the people in class four have a monthly income of \$2,100.

The players are then told that the aim of the game is to discover how good they are at making rational choices, and that they can demonstrate their ability to make rational choices by placing themselves either in society **A**, or in society **B**, or in society **C**. For example, players who belong to class four can place themselves either in society **A** where they will receive a monthly income of \$1,000, or in society **B** where they will receive a monthly income of \$2,100, or in society **C** where they will receive a monthly income of \$2,200. Players are given about five minutes to make this decision and record it on a piece of paper.

When everyone has decided, or the five minutes are up, the following grid in Table 1 can be displayed, or each player can be given a copy, and used to discuss which were the most rational choices to make.

Table 1

	<i>Societies</i>		
<i>Classes</i>	A	B	C
1	1000	1400	500
2	1000	1600	1100
3	1000	1900	1600
4	1000	2100	2200
5	1000	2400	2700

The players in each class are asked to raise a hand to indicate whether they

chose society **A**, or **B**, or **C**. The votes are recorded and when everyone has voted the discussion begins: Was anyone's choice not the most rational one that could have been made.

Most players define a rational choice in terms of maximizing their income. For example, most members of class two and class three choose society **B**. And most members of class one also choose society **B**; but some of them choose society **A**. When they are asked why they chose to forfeit \$400 a month, they have a reasonable explanation: they are afraid that some of the people in society **B** who receive less than the people in class five will try to change this state of affairs and bring about a more egalitarian distribution of income by boycotts, rebellion and revolution. Interestingly, nobody in class one who has chosen society **A** rather than society **B** has ever thought that some people in an egalitarian society may be dissatisfied with equal distributions and try to bring about a change either in the direction of society **B** or in the direction of society **C**!

Similarly, some of the people in class five choose society **B** and even more of the people in class four do so. Their reasons for not maximizing their choice is that the people who are in class one in society **C**, and perhaps even those who are in class two, would have good reasons for wanting to try to make it a more egalitarian society. They are afraid that if this happens they may lose their privileged position at the top of the society.

Observations of this kind make it easy to prepare the ground for Rawls' discussion about how inequalities, especially when they are perceived to be unfair and unjustifiable, generate envy and resentment and, under certain conditions, prepare the way for rebellion and revolution (pp. 530-548).

*Phase 2:* Players hand back the cards that they were given at the beginning of phase 1. These are put into a box and shuffled. They are then told that now they must first choose either society **A**, or society **B**, or society **C**, and then they will be allowed to draw one of the cards from the box and discover how well-off they will be in the society that they have chosen. In other words, in Phase 1 of the game the players knew which of the five classes they belonged to before they chose a society; in this phase of the game they have to choose a society before they are assigned to a class by the luck of the draw.

This phase of the game is like, but not identical to, what happens in Rawls' "original position" (pp. 11-22) and under "the veil of ignorance" (pp. 136-142). The majority of the players behave like Rawlsian people should; they play safe and choose society **B**. But a few timid people choose society **A**; and a few gamblers choose society **C**.

Once again it is easy to initiate discussions about the wisdom of these choices and to lead students in the direction of Rawls' ideas. In addition to the idea of "an original position" and "a veil of ignorance," a great deal of the discussion in this phase of the game often stumbles across the ground covered by Rawls' idea of "goodness as rationality" (pp. 395-452). Sometimes the most interesting points emerge in discussions with some of the gamblers who chose society **C**. A few highly articulate and confident players have explained why

they prefer society **C** to the other two societies: they like competition; and therefore they believe that even if they do not start off in class five, they will soon be able to work their way to the top! This response, of course, is out of line with Rawls' account of "the veil of ignorance" in which people do not know what traits or abilities they might possess and therefore do not know that they will like competition and be able to work their way to the top. I have used this response both to explain how the game differs from Rawls' account and to discuss some of the empirical data on social stratification—data that makes it clear that upward mobility is more difficult than most middle-class people think it is.

*Phase 3:* This phase of the game is simply a discussion. The aim is to discover whether any of the players want to place any restrictions on their ability to maximize their income or on their society's structures for generating wealth.

Following Rawls (pp. 150-161), the idea of slavery can be used to discover to what extent the players value liberty. This is done by asking those who chose society **B** in Phase 2 of the game whether they would still make that choice if they were told that the people in class one were slaves. Everybody with whom I have played this game prefers society **A** (the majority) or society **C** (the minority) to society **B** once they are told that in society **B** the people in class one are slaves. This, of course, is in line with Rawls' criticism of classical utilitarianism (pp. 22-27) and his arguments for the priority of liberty (pp. 243-251).

An interesting variation or addition to Phase 3 is to ask all the players who chose society **B** in Phase 2 of the game whether or not they would choose differently if they were told that in society **B** the means of production are owned by the state whereas in society **A**, as well as in society **C**, they are privately owned. The point of a discussion along these lines is to get the players to see that questions about justice, and even questions about self-interested optimization of one's position, should not be confused with empirical questions about what kind of economy generates wealth most effectively and most efficiently. Most players take the point very quickly and therefore are prepared for the fact that Rawls' theory of justice tries to integrate our knowledge of human society with our intuitions about fairness. Although some of the players who chose society **B** in Phase 2 of the game are skeptical about obtaining this distribution of income if the means of production are owned by the state, when they are assured that the game simply requires them to pretend that this is the case, they still prefer society **B** to either society **A** or society **C** where the means of production are privately owned.

### *Conclusion*

I have developed this game because some students complain that philosophy is "too abstract" and "not relevant to everyday life." Philosophy, of course, is many different things and deals with many different questions. Some of these

questions are about abstract things; and some of them have little to do with what goes on in a student's life. All this needs to be explained to students and they need to come to grips with it if they want to study philosophy. At the same time, however, nothing is lost by demonstrating to students how a particular piece of philosophy is linked to their experience and how it can be used to illuminate that area of their lives. In fact, my experience has been that if students can be helped to relate their experiences to the philosophical texts that they study, then this increases their motivation to struggle with the complexities and technicalities of the arguments that have to be mastered. This has certainly been the case with this game. Students who have played it have been prepared to work very hard at trying to understand Rawls' theory of justice because they have been trying to understand and to defend the choices made when they played the game. In particular, the difference between the choices that the players make in Phase 1 of the game (when they know which class they belong to) and Phase 2 of the game (when they don't) lends itself to clarifying Rawls' idea of "an original position" and of "the veil of ignorance." And so does the response of those players who like competition—until they are given some of the sombre statistics about social stratification and the lack of upward mobility in most societies! By moving in this way from the game to the text, and back again, the players are able to learn that games of this kind are powerful learning instruments, especially when one has to master abstract ideas.

This game, and others like it, have a number of other advantages. As a matter of fact, I developed this game because Tim Bond had already convinced me of the advantages of games as teaching aids.<sup>2</sup> According to Bond, there are a number of things that games can contribute to teaching and learning. Firstly, they create a safe environment. Because they allow students to experiment with new ideas and to make mistakes without incurring any serious sanctions, games provide a safe environment in which to learn. Secondly, they encourage involvement. Because everyone participates in the game and the discussion is linked to what people did, it is usually easy to get them to talk about what happened. Thirdly, they increase receptiveness to new ideas. Because games take place in a relaxed atmosphere and the levels of anxiety remain relatively low, people do not feel defensive; and therefore they are more likely to hear what is said and to be able to evaluate it for themselves. Finally, they encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. Because participants are given some responsibility for making the game work, games encourage self-reliance and reduce dependency on the teacher.

For all these reasons, and especially if philosophy is regarded as an intellectual activity rather than as a body of knowledge, games can and should be used to forge a link between what students have experienced and the philosophical texts that they have to study. And this link should be forged so that students can learn two important things: how to allow a text to interpret what they have experienced; and how to use what they have experienced to interpret a text.

## Notes

Thanks to Arnold Wilson for suggestions.

1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
2. Timothy Bond, *Games for Social and Life Skills*, London: Hutchinson, 1986, pp. 13-14.

*James Moulder, Philosophy, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg 3200, Republic of South Africa*

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University of Kansas  
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