

Obituary for John Rawls

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John Rawls, the Harvard Professor, died last month. He was, without question, the most important political philosopher of the Twentieth century. It is a terrible time to lose him because America, and the world, is faced with dire questions of justice, rights, and political stability. These are questions that Rawls spent his life pursuing, and his answers, while not always convincing, taught us a great deal about ourselves, and our political priorities.

Few people have heard of Rawls. In part, this is because he shied away from publicity, but mostly this is because Americans tend not to regard philosophy as important. Many college students who become interested in the subject are pressured by their parents to study something else because, their parents claim, philosophy is not practical. It is, in fact, quite difficult to get a job as a philosopher, but philosophy itself is far from useless. Virtually everything that we value comes out of philosophy in one form or another.

Political philosophy, for example, is responsible for the creation of individual rights, theories of justice and equality, the creation of capitalism and the free market (and, of course, opposing theories such as communism and anarchy). It brings us the right to free speech, and the institutions that support artistic and religious expression. Rawls told us that every person has rights that cannot be taken away, even if sacrificing them might benefit society. He argued that every person has rights that politicians cannot compromise, even if it helps them win an important goal. Our government, according to Rawls, must accept these rights and work around them. These are practical lessons, ones we ought not forget in the rush towards homeland security.

Like Rawls, the Declaration of Independence tells us that all “all Men are created equal” But unlike Rawls, it offers no argument in defense of its position. It begins with the clause, “we hold these truths to be self-evident”, but “self-evident” means only that these truths were obvious to its writer. Thus, Thomas Jefferson simply asserted that which he regarded as unquestionable. He didn’t argue for it, and that leaves the question of individual

rights open to any and all challenges, even stupid ones.

What does a country do when faced with a person, group, or nation that claims that such rights are not obvious but dubious? What do we do when faced with an enemy – foreign or domestic – who rejects justice? Wars were fought for much less; wars *are being fought* for much less. Believers in the rights announced by the Declaration of Independence need a theory that can justify inalienable rights more convincingly than by simply appealing to Jefferson’s personal preference. This is where John Rawls comes in.

In his 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls attempted to provide a justification of rights that would apply to all people, for all time, that everyone would ultimately consent to no matter who they are or what religious or cultural beliefs they held. This is a massive achievement, and in addition to a lifetime of success in his chosen field, it won him the Medal of Honor from Bill Clinton in 1999.

Rawls revised his theory throughout his career but his early work will be his most lasting. It will be read for generations alongside the greatest of philosophers, partly because at its heart, is a deeply moving compassion. Rawls argues that inequality can only be justified when it benefits the least advantaged, and that the true meaning of community is the acknowledgment that, in some fundamental way, we all share each other’s fate. In a time when our leaders lust for war and neglect our social policies, when Americans ignore the political process and acquiesce as our most cherished rights are threatened, when we take away these same rights from immigrants and visitors who are simply repeating the history that most of our own families have lived, some advice from John Rawls would be very useful.

Rawls gave us a gift that we should not soon forget: a triumph that creates only winners, and no losers. It is a work of justice: practical, beautiful, and very *very* relevant. John Rawls was born in Baltimore. He was an infantryman in the Pacific during World War II, and taught at Princeton, Cornell, MIT, and Harvard. He died at the age of 81, and is survived by his wife, four children, and four grandchildren.