

## JOHN RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

Rawls' theory of justice is universally recognized as the most important contribution in the twentieth century to the theory of social and political justice. His work, which has been translated into twenty languages, is simply indispensable to any effort to understand and evaluate the basic justice and limits of modern constitutional democracies. He has taken his place among the great political thinkers of the past and his work continues to be a model of systematic, deep, and reasoned analysis.

Rawls asks: What principles of justice, and what kind of public justification for those principles, are appropriate and reasonable for the most basic and important social, economic, and political institutions of a modern constitutional democracy, where citizens hold different moral, religious, and philosophical views and yet fully endorse the value of reasonable toleration in political matters? Rawls' major contribution to this question – and to the history of political theory – is that he answers it in a way that, he claims, can be fully acceptable to citizens who deeply disagree about their moral, religious, and philosophical commitments and yet who desire to respect each other as free and equal. On this basis, Rawls famously argues for two principles of justice that ensure the priority of basic liberties and that, at the same time, require that economic and social positions comply with a stringent ideal of fair equality of opportunity and the so-called “difference principle”, which holds that inequalities in the distribution of wealth, for example, must be justified as tending to the benefit of everyone, particularly, of those who obtain less. Rawls is especially sensitive to the question of the relation between religion and the state. His analysis, which he calls “political liberalism”, is of particular interest to anyone who is concerned about how a modern constitutional democracy can fairly and reasonably accommodate citizens who hold diametrically opposed views on matters of religion, morals, and philosophy. Reading Rawls will deeply and permanently affect the way one understands and appreciates the ideal and limits of democratic justice.

In this course, we will focus on one of Rawls' last complete presentations of his theory, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Harvard University Press, 2001). This

shorter book is particularly accessible to students who have no background in political philosophy or prior knowledge of Rawls' own theory. I wish to emphasize that I try to ensure that my presentations and class discussions are fully accessible to those with no previous background in Rawls or political theory. My aim is to enable students to acquire a solid and accurate basic grasp of Rawls' arguments, with the hope that this may be helpful to them in grappling with questions that interest them as law students and citizens of Israel.