***John Rawls***



John Rawls was (b. 1921 – d. 2002) an American moral and political philosopher who held prestigious academics appointments at both Harvard (U.S.) and Oxford (U.K.) universities. Rawls’ impact in the field of political philosophy should not be underestimated; according to the English philosopher Jonathan Woolf “while there might be a dispute about the second most important political philosopher of the 20th century, there could be no dispute about the most important: John Rawls.” Rawls’ most influential work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), laid out three foundational principles to his theory: the original position, reflective equilibrium, and principles of justice. In a nutshell, Rawls argues that justice should be based on an unbiased, ideal conception of it. However, he recognizes that applications of justice in the world gets very messy and thus we should seek it in relation to the specifics of situations not based on a set of absolutes about right and wrong. Additionally, he contends that the social and economic inequalities which inevitably exist in the world should be arranged to benefit the “least-advantaged members of society” (Difference Principle). It is clear that Rawls would be (not sure if he spoke directly about it or not) opposed to the Apartheid government in South Africa; work from the end of his life even indicates he might have supported the actions of the boys in our Hearing. For example, in *The Law of Peoples* (1999) he argues that “violations of human rights can legitimize military intervention in the violating states.” It also seems likely that he would support the Restorative Justice work of South Africa’s TRC because while he allowed for violent resistance to oppression “he also expressed the hope that such societies could be induced to reform peacefully by the good example of liberal and decent peoples.” In fact, this latter viewpoint is what defines the essential thinking of his theory: we should strive to always do what we think we should do in our most noble and unbiased moments. [Sources for this abstract: Wikipedia entries on “John Rawls” and “A Theory of Justice.”]

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**VIDEO:**

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