

7- Can we live together without common values?

Let us assume, to fix ideas, that a society is a more or less self-sufficient association of persons who in their relations to one another recognize certain rules of conduct as binding and who for the most part act in accordance with them. Suppose further that these rules specify a system of cooperation designed to advance the good of those taking part in it. Then, although a society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, it is typically marked by a conflict of interest as well as by an identity of interests. There is an identity of interests since social cooperation makes possible a better life than any would have if each were to live solely by his own efforts. There is a conflict of interests since persons are not indifferent as to how the greater benefits produced by their collaboration are distributed, for in order to pursue their ends they each prefer a larger to a lesser share. A set of principles is required for choosing among the various social arrangements which determine this division of advantages and for underwriting an agreement on the proper distributive share. These principles are the principles of social justice: they provide a way of assigning rights and duties in the basic institutions of society and they define the appropriate distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.

Rawls John (1921-2002)
A Theory of Justice (1971)

Biography

John Rawls is an American philosopher born February 21, 1921 in Baltimore and died November 24, 2002 in Lexington. Rawls is one of the most studied political philosophers of the twentieth century. Professor at the Universities of Princeton, Oxford, Cornell and Harvard until 1995, he was made famous by his major work, which he worked on since the 1960s and which appeared under the title *A Theory of Justice (Theory of Justice)* in 1971, translated by Catherine Audard, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

Rawls elaborates his theory during a period marked by the Vietnam War and the civil rights struggle, where the United States is traversed by profound cultural and social movements. Focusing on the notions of ethics and justice, his work revives a neglected contractual tradition and extends liberal thinking by seeking to rationally articulate individual freedom and social solidarity¹. His thought is widely commented and criticized in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Problematic

Each society, in general, is made up of a group of men connected by principles promoting the unity of the community. Is the reference to common values indispensable?

Position of the author

Politics, in other words, has nothing to say about human ends; it does not have to judge them but only to provide for the conditions of their compatibility and legitimate cohabitation, excluding only those which are not reasonable, that is to say those which refuse to admit the legitimate plurality of good designs. But politics does not lose its meaning when the community renounces seeking in its own way how to live. What happens to human society if everyone chooses what looks good to them and cares about others only in a negative way and leaves them alone? Is not this mutual indifference a form of contempt for others? Is

freedom not empty if it is reduced to an indistinct power of choosing without principle? What characterizes an authentically human community is it not the sharing of moral ideals and ethical traditions that gives life its meaning and its thickness.

Men form and form communities around common responses to these questions. But these communities are voluntary, they are based on the conviction of their members who can enter or leave them depending on whether they share the moral ideals they express, and the plurality of these communities and the ethical convictions that are there is an irreducible fact of today's societies.

Comment of the text

Rawl's theory of justice was still a considerable reference in political philosophy, including the concepts of freedom, justice and the common good. Despite this reputation she has been criticized by some philosophers:

- Robert Nozick in his book (Anarchy, State and Utopia) (published in 1974, only three years after the Theory of Justice) is considered the libertarian response to the book by John Rawls. Nozick taught Rawls's theory in his early years at Harvard.
- Pierre Bourdieu, The Theory of Justice by John Rawls attempts to rationalize wrongly laws that are by historical and arbitrary origin.
- H. L. A. Hart, Rawls would be in favor of a dogmatic idealism on American democracy.
- Stanley Cavell pledges to criticise perfectionism according to Rawls in elitism and especially the idea of a contract that would tie participants to agreements in principle rather than a conversation for today.