

Between the original original position and nationalism

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. In this paper, I present a way in which John Rawls's original position thought experiment can be brought closer to nationalism. The social science laws can be taken from a nation's heritage.

Draft version: Version 3 (2nd July 2024).

I like to metaphorically portray liberalism and nationalism as two great landmasses separated by an ocean, and then ask the question, are there any islands between these continents? In this paper, I wish to present such an island.

John Rawls's original position thought experiment requires us to imagine self-interested individuals coming to an agreement on which principles institutions in a society will implement. These individuals lack knowledge which would lead them to be biased. For example, they do not know their talents, otherwise an individual with a certain talent will prefer principles which are highly advantageous to those with that talent and disadvantageous to those without. They also do not know their tastes: which authors they prefer or painters or musicians, and so forth. The original position thus does not look as if it will allow principles designed to encourage a nation-wide taste. In this paper, I present a revision to Rawls's original position which involves a concession to nationalism, for those who are after a concession.

The individuals in the original position, though lacking knowledge of various personal features, do know laws of social science, which they are to use when selecting principles from a menu (1999: 119). They must not prefer principles which are unrealizable owing to these laws.

Rawls seems to assume that there are a set of established laws which everyone doing the experiment can rely on, but is this really the case?

The in-between position I wish to describe is the original position but the social science laws one should use, or law proposals to be precise, depend on which nation one is in. If one is doing the experiment to determine policies for England, say, one should use the social science law proposals that dominate English intellectual heritage. And if one is doing the experiment for France, one should use social science law proposals that dominate the French intellectual heritage. That at least is the simple way of introducing the position, the island. It assumes there are dominant proposals in each national heritage.

But why would one ever take up this position? Taking England and France as our examples again, an answer is that the following situation obtains. The proposed laws of social science in one national tradition and the other are incompatible, but the English set has led to predictive successes focusing on data from England and the French set has led to predictive successes focusing on data from France.

Reference

Rawls, J. 1999 (revised edition). *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press.