

The age of liberal adulthood: a puzzle for Rawlsians

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. In this paper, I present a puzzle for Rawlsians given an attractive way for them to approach defining an adult citizen.

During the debates over whether Britain should leave the European Union, there was some discussion of whether citizens younger than the age of 18 should be allowed to vote. Is it an injustice even that the vote was not given to 16 year olds? (I think at age 16, I would have voted to remain but at age 18 I would have voted to leave.)

Now John Rawls has an informal model for working out what is just. There are some self-interested individuals who know general facts about human beings but lack specific knowledge about themselves, because then each individual would be biased towards their own case. We have them select from a menu of options – the best menu that we can conceive. The option that individuals select as in their interests is the most just option. We can simply apply this method to the question of who counts as an adult citizen, in terms of voting rights. Give them a menu of ages to select from, regarding which citizens have the vote, and what they select determines the age of adulthood in a just society.

But these individuals in Rawls's model, his famous original position, are supposed to be adults. They are not supposed to be infants or even people with the permanent mental age of nine years old. So we have a circularity puzzle: a good way of resolving debates about who counts as an adult is by using Rawls's rational actor method but that method already requires resolving the question of who counts as an adult. What should we do?

I anticipate a sociologist saying, “Surely there is an expert in this matter and the puzzle has already occurred to them and they have made a flowchart of options and they can tell you the strengths and weaknesses of each option.” I doubt there is any flowchart, because one has to look into whether “ $a=a$ ” is ever informative. It seems to me that Rawlsians avoid that kind of material. But I shall release this paper now in case things are fast changing.

Reference

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