Moral and value judgments are viewed by many people as at base subjective, nonrational, and incapable of proof. In academic moral philosophy this view is reflected in the dominance in much of this century of what is known as meta-ethics—roughly, the logical analysis of moral language and of the structure of moral reasoning. Meta-ethics is concerned largely with philosophical questions about ethics rather than with substantive moral theories or issues themselves. This focus on meta-ethics, as well as the linguistic or analytic movement in philosophy generally, has vastly increased the philosophical sophistication and rigor of contemporary ethics. But on the debit side, moral and, in turn, political philosophers often have had very little to say directly relevant to the pressing moral issues of our time, and students as well as the general public have learned to look elsewhere for serious reflection on these issues.

This is not to say that substantive moral and political philosophy has ceased to exist. Utilitarianism, the view that human actions and social institutions are morally justified to the extent that they tend to maximize the happiness of those they affect, has long engaged the interest and allegiance of many moral philosophers; it is a simple and systematic theory, capable of serving both as an individual ethic and as a social and political philosophy. But utilitarianism has the fatal drawbacks of conflicting at important points with most persons' considered moral judgments, particularly those on justice, and of failing to provide a firm basis for our western liberal political tradition with its emphasis
on liberty and individual rights. A clear, systematic alternative moral theory has generally eluded moral philosophers. The social contract theory has been a leading alternative to utilitarianism as a social and political theory, but in traditional formulations such as Locke's it too has well-known difficulties and relatively few contemporary adherents.

Two central tasks then face contemporary moral and political philosophers. First, there is need for a broader and richer view of moral philosophy, one that firmly establishes the rational and philosophical bases of substantive or normative ethics and restores it to a place at the least co-equal with meta-ethics. Second, a systematic alternative to utilitarianism must be formulated to enable moral philosophers to proceed beyond piecemeal criticism and patching-up of utilitarianism and to illuminate the deeper issues dividing competing moral conceptions. In masterfully fulfilling both these extremely formidable tasks, John Rawls's book *A Theory of Justice* is perhaps the most important work of moral and political philosophy of this century. Rawls has renewed the social contract tradition in a highly sophisticated and attractive form that makes use of recent work in decision theory and economics and is not subject to the usual objections to contract theory, while at the same time presenting with great power the systematic alternative moral theory to utilitarianism that has long been wanting.

I

One goal for a moral theory is, to the extent possible, to give order and coherence, a rational structure, to our moral beliefs and thereby to show them to be more than simply a jumbled assortment of prejudice, self-interest, etc. On this view, a moral theory is modeled on the lines of a scientific theory and tested by its capacity to give order to our considered moral beliefs, to account for the different relative strength with which those beliefs are held, and to lend clarity and precision to our areas of moral uncertainty. By reducing all of morality to a single principle from which all secondary principles and particular judgments are derived, utilitarianism proposes one such structure. Rawls successfully shows over a wide range of cases that his theory of justice satisfies the test better than alternative theories such as utilitarianism. Nevertheless, since people's considered moral judgments change and conflict, it is not enough that a moral theory best fits and orders one particular set of such judgments.

Rawls's reinterpretation of social contract theory in effect offers another test of a moral theory. Traditional social contract theory focuses on an agreement between persons in a "state of nature" to enter into a society and to establish a government that they will be obligated
to obey; it is primarily a theory of political obligation. In Rawls's version of the contract theory, the relevant agreement is on particular moral principles, here principles of justice. The force of the agreement in the original position (as Rawls entitles it) depends on showing that the original position embodies conditions widely accepted as reasonable for the choice and in turn justification of moral principles. An argument that a particular moral principle or theory would be accepted under such conditions in preference to all plausible alternatives is then another means of supporting the moral theory. Moral philosophy becomes on Rawls's view a special part of the theory of rational choice or decision. The reformulation of social contract theory with the account of the original position is at the very heart of his entire philosophy and is, I believe, the most original and important element of his work.

The fundamental idea of Rawls's theory is a simple and powerful one—the principles of justice are those principles that free and equal rational persons would agree on for regulating their common association. The conditions of choice in the original position give content and precision to this idea; they insure that the choice, and hence the principles chosen, are fair to all. In this sense, fairness is the root moral notion in Rawls's theory. The function of the conception of justice chosen is, more specifically, to assign fundamental rights and duties, and benefits and burdens, within a society, to determine a proper balance between competing claims to the advantages of social life. A well-ordered society is one governed by a public conception of justice.

Rawls organizes the features of the original position under four headings. "The circumstances of justice" are those conditions that make human cooperation possible and necessary: persons of roughly similar physical and mental powers living together in conditions of moderate scarcity, vulnerable to attack and having their plans blocked by others, and each primarily concerned to advance his own interests. "The formal constraints of the concept of right," and of justice in particular, are determined by "the task of principles of right in adjusting the claims that persons make on their institutions and one another." They are that principles be general (containing no proper names), universally applied, and "publicly recognized as a final court of appeal for ordering the conflicting claims of moral persons." "The veil of ignorance" under which persons choose principles is a crucial part of the original position.

N]o one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his
Finally, "the rationality of the contracting parties" means that they prefer more of what Rawls calls primary goods—those things necessary to advance one's interests and plan of life, no matter what specific form they may take; and that within limits they do not suffer from envy—they are not willing to suffer a loss themselves if only others have less as well.

Some comment on the veil of ignorance is needed. I have said that the original position is designed to insure that the choice of principles and hence the principles themselves are fair. The principles of justice are moral principles, principles that would be chosen when persons take up the moral point of view, a central feature of which is impartiality—moral principles should not favor our own position simply because it is our own. The purpose of the veil of ignorance is to deny to the contracting parties the knowledge of their own characteristics and circumstances that would enable them to propose or insist on principles designed to favor themselves. The veil of ignorance is not, therefore, simply convenient in bringing about unanimity on principles of justice in the original position; it is necessary to the condition there of taking up the moral point of view. It is irrelevant that persons are never in fact under the veil of ignorance and in general never come together in the original position to choose principles of justice. The agreement or contract is explicitly a hypothetical one, expressing what free and equal rational persons would choose for their conception of justice. There is no actual historical agreement; rather, one can take up the standpoint of someone in the original position, and so the moral point of view, at any time.

The point of the veil of ignorance can be put somewhat differently. Rawls's theory of justice focuses initially and primarily on the just design of the institutions making up the basic structure of society—the political constitution and the principal social and economic arrangements. These institutions define various positions into which persons are born and which largely determine their expectations in life; they favor or disfavor persons born with different talents and abilities, those born into different social and economic classes, etc. But these inequalities in starting points and expectations in life cannot possibly be justi-

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1 P. 137.
2 The broad categories of primary goods are rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth, and self-respect.
fied by merit or desert. No one merits or deserves being born with superior intelligence or wealthy parents. This does not mean, however, that these inequalities are all unjust. They are simply the natural circumstances of human life, present to some degree among any group of persons living together. Many of these inequalities, being a man or a woman or intelligent or stupid, for example, are subject only to very limited human control, but how the social structure favors or disfavors persons with these characteristics can be controlled. The veil of ignorance insures that persons' choice of principles of justice is not influenced by their possession of unmerited and undeserved characteristics, by facts arbitrary from a moral point of view. The principles will then express the free and rational natures (in the Kantian sense, Rawls argues), unbiased by arbitrary contingencies, that all persons share.

Rawls's conception of justice is expressed by the following two principles, which he argues would be chosen in the original position:

**First Principle**
Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

**Second Principle**
Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both:
(a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and
(b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.\(^8\)

There are two priority rules for the application of the principles. The first principle is prior to the second in the sense that liberty can only be restricted for the sake of liberty, not for other social and economic advantages—a lesser liberty must strengthen the total system of liberty, and a less than equal liberty must be acceptable to those with the lesser liberty. The principle of equality of opportunity (2b) is prior to the difference principle (2a) in an analogous sense.

Rawls considers the principal alternative to his conception of justice to be some form of utilitarianism, which maximizes the net balance of satisfaction ("classical utilitarianism"), or satisfaction per capita ("average utilitarianism"), of all members of society. In either form, utilitarianism allows the sacrifice of liberty for social and economic advantage, and the sacrifice of some people's (including the least

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\(^8\) P. 302.
advantaged) liberty or social and economic advantage for the greater liberty or social and economic advantage of others. Rawls's conception of justice, on the other hand, gives a special place to liberty by making it inviolable for social and economic advantage, and to the least advantaged members of society by requiring that social and economic inequalities be arranged so as to maximize their expectations rather than the total satisfaction of all.

One of the central difficulties in Rawls's theory can be suggested at this point. If ethics is part of the theory of rational choice, specifically of the choice of principles in the original position, then it is crucial whether Rawls's principles are in fact the best choice. Precisely what is most distinctive in Rawls's conception of justice—the absolute priority of liberty over social and economic advantages and of the expectations of the least advantaged—is most problematic. Since it is a balance of considerations which in Rawls's view favors his principles over plausible alternatives, it is impossible here to display his argument for them in even a summary form, and so in turn to evaluate it fairly.

The argument for accepting the priority of liberty in the original position rests primarily on the need to be able to honor one's religious and other moral obligations, the increasing importance of liberty relative to economic advantages once a certain minimal level of welfare is achieved, and the central role of equal liberties in maintaining a person's self-respect. Nevertheless, I think a person in the original position would prefer a principle allowing minor sacrifices in liberty to produce substantial economic benefits, especially in extreme cases such as conditions of severe economic underdevelopment. The priority of liberty rule must be weakened somewhat and spelled out in more detail for concrete cases. Rawls's theory nonetheless strengthens and illuminates the place of individual liberty and rights in a just society and shows why those rights must be equal rights, to a degree utilitarianism has never done.

I believe Rawls's arguments for the difference principle are even less decisive. It seems correct that a rational, self-interested person in the original position would reject a utility-maximizing principle for regulating social and economic inequalities, in part because it involves too high a risk of the sacrifice of one's own life prospects and so is too difficult to abide by if one turns out, in the real world, to be among the least advantaged. The difference principle, however, assumes, in effect, that all risk taking in the original position is irrational; it allows no possible gain in one's life prospects, should one turn out to be among the better off members of society, to compensate for even the smallest loss in one's prospects as one of the least advantaged. A mixed principle
providing certain guarantees, such as a minimal annual income, after which something like the average utilitarian principle applies, seems a better choice in the original position than the difference principle.

The most promising defense of the difference principle, which Rawls does not explore, lies in an explicitly ethical reformulation of the original position. In that restatement the parties view all natural and social differences in their starting points in life as unearned and undeserved, and the benefits accruing from putting their assets to work as consequently belonging equally and in common to all. The difference principle would allow them to put their talents and abilities to work most efficiently, consistent with the equal claim of all to the benefits from doing so; inequalities are justified only as incentives that must work to everyone's advantage.

A somewhat different issue is likely in the end to divide many of the moral and political philosophers who accept Rawls's theory from those who reject it. To frame this issue it is helpful to distinguish two levels at which Rawls's and alternative theories may be contrasted. First, theories may differ in the content of their conception of justice, and so in the particular judgments they entail; Rawls classifies theories according to the form their content takes. Utilitarianism, for example, consists of the single principle of utility maximization. Intuitionism, as Rawls understands it, does without the epistemological theses found in traditional versions; it is the view that no single principle accounts for our moral judgments, but that there are a plurality of first principles (or moral considerations or reasons) which may conflict with each other and for which there are no priority rules for weighing one against another. Rawls's theory with its two principles and priority rules is a middle ground between these two views.

Moral theories may also be contrasted according to how they propose to account for our substantive moral principles. Rawls's theory can be seen as representing our moral principles as the result of an agreement between free and equal rational parties for regulating their mutual interaction; here the social contract idea is central to Rawls's view. At this level of comparison, alternative views will reject not the content of Rawls's principles (though they may do this as well), but the social contract and Rawls's interpretation of it with the original position as the proper basis and justification of our moral principles. One historically prominent alternative is the perfectionist view, which Rawls rejects, that our moral principles must ultimately be based on a vision, secular or religious, of human excellence, of what man might at his best become. I consider Rawls's contractualist framework the most powerful account of the basis of justice that we have, and so do
not believe this criticism is especially damaging as regards justice. Since the contract view is to form the basis of an entire ethical theory, however, a full evaluation of it involves determining how well it accounts for other elements of morality such as gratitude, benevolence, fidelity, the moral virtues. While Rawls mentions most of these briefly, only justice, of course, is fully explored in *A Theory of Justice*; assessing the force of this objection, therefore, must await further elaboration of the contract theory. It is possible that no single view best accounts for all aspects of morality.

II

Rawls spends virtually the entire middle third of his book describing in some detail a basic structure of society that satisfies his principles of justice, and the rights and duties to which the principles give rise. In part, this is to illustrate the content of the principles and thereby to avoid the shortcoming of many political principles, for example, the principle of justice that equals should be treated equally, of being either purely formal or overly general and so failing to provide definite guidance for the concrete situations in which they are to be applied. More important, perhaps, is that one test of the adequacy of the theory of justice itself is whether it determines a political conception not in conflict at important points with our considered political views. For determining the detailed requirements of his principles of justice, Rawls throughout appeals to his interpretation of the social contract idea, that is, to what would be agreed upon by the parties in the original position.

For the application of the principles, the social structure is divided into two parts, the first covering the system of liberties, the second covering the social and economic advantages. The initial question is the choice of a political constitution. The equal liberties required by the first principle are the familiar ones of western liberal democracies:

[P]olitical liberty (the right to vote and to be eligible for public office) together with freedom of speech and assembly; liberty of conscience and freedom of thought; freedom of the person along with the right to hold (personal) property; and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law.⁴

For the adoption of legislation persons in the original position would select a majority voting rule. Any other rule fails to maximize liberty by allowing a minority to override or check a majority and so to in-

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⁴ P. 61.
fringe its liberty. Because of differences in beliefs and limitations in information, even persons with the same conception of justice may disagree about which proposal on a particular policy issue most satisfies their common conception of justice. Acceptance of the majority principle in effect represents an agreement to share the burden of disagreement on the justice of legislative proposals.

The equality of opportunity clause requires equal chances or life expectations for those similarly endowed and motivated, and is satisfied by the maintenance of equal liberties in the constitution and the provision of equal educational opportunities and open access to employment. Satisfaction of the difference principle requiring maximization of the advantages of the worst-off representative person is more complex. Justice in Rawls's theory covers the distribution of primary goods, those things that, under the veil of ignorance in the original position, everyone can know he will need to further his aims whatever they may turn out to be; the difference principle regulates the distribution of the particular primary goods of income and wealth. Rawls suggests that within the background of a capitalist market economy four branches or functions of government are necessary to satisfy the difference principle: first, an allocation branch to prevent formation of unreasonable market power, keep markets competitive, and correct for externalities; second, a stabilization branch to bring about strong effective demand and maintain full employment; third, a transfer branch to set and maintain a social minimum; and fourth, a distribution branch to impose gift and inheritance taxes, as well as general income or expenditure taxes. The first two branches are to maintain the efficiency of the market economy; the third takes into account and gives appropriate weight to claims of need; the fourth prevents concentrations of power that would undermine the value of equal liberty and fair equality of opportunity, and raises revenues to make transfer payments and finance the provision of public goods. Different claims (for example, need, contribution, efficiency, etc.) commonly associated with conceptions of justice are accounted for by different branches, and the import of different conceptions of justice will be in the different balances they strike between these claims.

To satisfy Rawls's difference principle the crucial task is to set the guaranteed minimum income maintained by the transfer branch so as to maximize the expectations of the least advantaged. This raises the problem of justice between different generations. Every generation but the first receives an accumulation of cultural and productive capital from generations that have preceded it and must pass on its fair share of such capital to generations to come. The idea of the original position
is again used to determine the proper savings rate: persons must decide how much they would be willing to save at each stage of civilization without knowing to which stage or generation they belong. The just savings rate so selected would prohibit both the very rapid accumulation of capital in the early stages of economic development and the maintenance of a forced saving rate beyond the point necessary to make just institutions possible. The social minimum maintained by the transfer branch must then be set as high as possible consistent with saving the amount that justice requires for the particular level of development.

The primary problem of justice on Rawls's theory is the procedural one of setting up the proper social and political institutions and letting the system run; the resulting distribution, whatever it turns out to be, will be just. That is the import of the sketch above, of a constitution insuring equal liberties, and of the governmental functions satisfying the difference principle while maintaining equality of opportunity. None of the features of the basic structure of a just society proposed by Rawls is particularly novel. The strength of his view lies rather in showing how these familiar social and political institutions and principles together fit into and are required by a single unified moral and social conception of justice.

Utilitarianism is the primary alternative theory that Rawls considers and little is said of the relation his theory bears to Marxism or socialism. While the just society sketched by Rawls assumes a capitalist market economy, it clearly corrects the worst abuses of laissez faire capitalism, and it would be a mistake to take Rawls as an apologist for capitalism. Moreover, he emphasizes that his sketch of a basic structure of society satisfying his principles illustrates only one way those principles might be satisfied, and that a socialist economy limiting or prohibiting the private ownership of nonpersonal property might satisfy them as well. The theory of justice, so far as Rawls has carried it, is neutral regarding the choice between capitalist and socialist market systems.

In general, I think it would be a mistake to suppose that there must be irreconcilable divisions between Rawls and Marxists or socialists. In the first place, their concerns often diverge rather than conflict: a central aspect of Marxism, for example, is its theory of social and historical change, a question entirely ignored by Rawls's theory of justice. Marx's vision of a socialist society in which injustice finally disappears assumed relative abundance, making questions of economic justice less central, while Rawls is concerned with justice in conditions of moderate scarcity. Moreover, the basic concern of Rawls's theory with the conditions allowing free individual development and creating fair terms of social cooperation certainly does not seem contrary to the guiding spirit
of Marxism or socialism. If Rawls's theory helps to clarify and narrow the theoretical ground between liberalism and socialism, it would be no small benefit.

Socialists might thus accept much of Rawls's theory while still challenging his claim that a capitalist market economy, supplemented as his theory requires, satisfies, or best satisfies, his principles of justice. This might be done in at least two somewhat different ways. First, they might argue that the concentrated economic power created by the private ownership of productive capital, and the closely intertwined relations between economic and political power, will tend to undermine the value of the equal liberties and equality of opportunity that Rawls's principles require. Second, they might concede that either capitalist or socialist economic arrangements, supplemented by the proper background institutions, can be just, but argue that other important social values besides justice—for example, furthering a sense of community or increasing worker participation in economic decision making beyond that required by justice—are more compatible with socialist economic arrangements. It is particularly important in assessing the relation of Rawls's theory to socialism to stress that his theory is an account only of the nature of a just society, and is not a complete social philosophy or ideal encompassing other values besides justice. Just how Rawls's theory of justice is related to a wider social philosophy needs more discussion than he gives it. Both of the above lines of socialist criticism of Rawls's theory of justice are potentially strong ones, but even if successful they demand revision only in the application of the principles of justice and leave the essentials of the theory untouched. Nonetheless, Rawls's discussion of the institutional application of his principles would have been improved by more attention to the socialist tradition.

To round out his account of the just society Rawls uses his ethical interpretation of the social contract framework, the original position, to determine the political duties and obligations of a citizen living under the constitution and political institutions sketched above. He argues that there is a natural duty to help establish and support just institutions that requires obeying just and also, within limits, unjust laws. Since it is impossible to devise political institutions that will insure that only just laws will be passed, accepting just institutions, as persons in the original position would do, necessarily involves accepting institutions whose results at times may seem to be unjust. The limits to our duty to obey the law are elucidated through an account of the two principal forms of justified non-obedience, civil disobedience, which is primarily a political appeal to the majority's sense of justice aimed at
changing some policy or law, and conscientious refusal, or disobedience necessary to keep from violating one's moral, religious or other deeply held principles. Rawls locates both forms of nonobedience firmly within, and indeed as significant elements of, the theory of free democratic government. The power of Rawls's treatment of the nature and limits of political duty, like that of the institutional framework that, he argues, justice requires, lies not in any particular novelty, though he is consistently very sensitive to important distinctions and issues, but in the way those duties are shown to follow from his basic idea of the fair terms of social cooperation between free and equal rational persons.

III

Having exhibited the theory of justice as fairness and illustrated its application to the design of the basic social structure, Rawls turns to supporting his theory by showing that a society regulated by his principles of justice would be stable, and that it is an important part of a person's good to have and maintain a sense of justice defined by his principles. The stability of a particular conception of justice will depend on the strength of the sense of justice developed and maintained in a society regulated by that conception.

Following mainly the work of Piaget and Kohlberg, Rawls offers a psychological account of the development through childhood of a person's sense of justice. He distinguishes three stages of morality: a morality of authority based on love of the parents and a desire to follow the injunctions they lay down; a morality of association derived through participation in cooperative activities and characterized by the cooperative virtues of justice and fairness, fidelity and trust, integrity and impartiality; and a morality of principle developed from participating in and benefiting from just institutions and characterized by the principles of justice. At each stage the root psychological response is one of reciprocity, a tendency to answer in kind the love of the parents, the fair play of associates and the society regulated by a public conception of justice. The development in a well-ordered society of the stages of morality and of moral attitudes like indignation and resentment is based on and results from our possession of certain natural attitudes or affections such as friendship, mutual trust, etc.; only one lacking these natural feelings could in turn lack the moral feelings. Contrary to those who, like Freud and Marx, view morality as artificially imposed and in conflict with human nature, Rawls sees its development as a natural process, a natural part of human life. A society regulated by his principles of justice will be stable because the principles and the desire to act on them will be developed and continually reinforced in its
members by fundamental natural attitudes and psychological laws. It will tend to produce, more than a society regulated by an alternative conception such as the utilitarians, the sense of justice in its members necessary to its maintenance and stability.

To show that it is a good for a member of a well-ordered society to have and maintain his sense of justice, Rawls first fills out his theory of the good. Roughly, what is good is what "it is rational to want in things of its kind." A person's good is determined by the rational life plan for him given his nature and circumstances, and his desires, purposes, etc. are criticizable according to whether they are part of or inconsistent with his rational life plan. Rawls's interpretation of the social contract theory makes the theory of the good, like the theory of right and justice, part of the general theory of rational choice or decision. While there are principles of rational choice to guide the choice of life plans, at some point that choice will rest on direct self-knowledge of what we want and how much we want it. No unanimity is assumed in the choice of life plans, that is in persons' good; diversity here exists and is desirable. Unanimity is only required in the choice of principles of right and justice that govern the social interaction of persons in pursuit of their diverse and sometimes conflicting goods. Maintaining one's sense of justice is then part of a person's good, of his rational life plan, because of its strong tie to the natural affections and because of the various important benefits that accrue from living in and being a member of a justly ordered society. Not the least of these is the strong tendency of such a society, because of the firm inviolability of each member that it secures, to reinforce its members' self-respect, their conviction that their own conception of the good or plan of life is worth carrying out and their confidence in their ability to do so.

A very considerable merit of Rawls's moral theory is that it locates the proper place for diversity in morals while at the same time establishing the objectivity of morality and showing how far it is the same for all rational persons. The correct recognition that a person's good is at some point determined by what he wants, and that people's wants differ, has led many to adopt a form of moral skepticism according to which agreement can never in principle be assured and all morality is subjective and nonrational. Rawls's theory of the good extracts the grain of truth in this view by including a direct appeal to what persons want, while avoiding a complete moral skepticism by showing the constraints that rationality places on what may form a part of someone's good. And, more important, with the theory of primary goods and the argu-

5 P. 405.
ment for his principles of justice being chosen in the original position, he shows where and how general agreement on moral principles is possible and the sense in which moral principles are rational and objective. Too much recent moral and political philosophy has overstated the case against achieving a general consensus on the objectivity and rationality of moral judgments and principles.

Having already indicated what seem to me some of the principal difficulties in Rawls's theory, I want to try to forestall one tempting, but I think misguided, criticism. It may be argued that since the situation of persons in the real world is different from that of persons in the original position, what is agreed to in the original position has little if any relevance for real persons. However, the original position is an explicitly hypothetical construction designed to express the most reasonable conditions for choice of moral principles in general, and principles of justice in particular. What must be shown is that Rawls's characterization of the original position fails to do this. While there is certainly room for argument on some of the details of his characterization (for example, the account of primary goods or the condition of nonenviousness), I doubt that serious challenges to the theory along these lines will succeed. A more generalized version of this objection claims that the entire rationalist aim of providing a deduction of moral principles is misguided. But since Rawls explicitly acknowledges that the principles of justice are contingent in that they depend on certain general empirical facts about persons and their circumstances, and that the conditions of the original position are neither logically necessary nor morally neutral, the objection is unwarranted; it is an a priori insistence that rational justification of moral principles is impossible when what is required is to show that the specific justification Rawls offers fails.

While Rawls's book is a work of moral and political philosophy of the very first order, it is at the same time quite accessible to the educated general reader. It is exceedingly clearly written and argued throughout. The main argument, though developed with great care, is simple and elegant and requires no special philosophical training to be grasped. And most important, the book is concerned with issues of fundamental importance to every citizen, such as the nature and extent of individual rights and liberties, the fair distribution of income and wealth, and the limits of the citizen's obligation to obey the law. In formulating a comprehensive nonutilitarian theory of the just society, Rawls has powerfully extended and enriched the social contract tradition of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant and illuminated the central issues of moral and political philosophy at their very heart.