ETHICAL DILEMMA: THE SHOPKEEPER’S ACTION: IMMANUEL KANT

Is doing the right thing because of a fear of consequence a just action?

READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

IMMANUEL KANT, GROUNDWORK FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS (1785)

According to utilitarians, the right thing to do is always to maximize happiness. Libertarians think that the right thing to do is most often to let people do whatever they want. John Locke’s theory says that there are unalienable rights, afforded to every human being by the “law of nature.”
The philosopher Immanuel Kant thought that each of these views was mistaken. Against the utilitarians, Kant held that freedom—and not happiness—is the goal of morality; against the libertarians, Kant denied that freedom is doing whatever one wants; and against Locke, he held that morality, duty, and rights have their basis in human reason, not in a law of nature.

So who got it right?

1. According to Kant, morality is doing the right thing just because you know it’s the right thing. Is that true? Kant imagines a shopkeeper who does not overcharge his customers only because he fears that word of his dishonesty will spread and he’ll lose money. Kant thinks there’s nothing morally worthy about his action; his honesty is mere prudence, mere selfishness. Do you agree?

2. Kant imagines a second person, who is naturally sweet and kind and loving. She always does the right thing—but only because being good brings her pleasure. Kant thinks that her actions are not really moral because, like the actions of the prudent shopkeeper, they aim at personal pleasure. Sure, it’s a good thing that she wants to help people, but Kant thinks there is no deep reason to admire her. Do you agree?

3. Kant also thinks the naturally kind person is not really moral because she acts out of habit. According to Kant, habits can be useful, but not moral. Is that right? Is your childhood education really just a kind of conditioning and not really moral? What is moral character, anyway? Is it what you tend to do, or is it your attitude?

4. Suppose that Charlie is always up to mischief, but Frank is always there to stop it. As a result, Charlie tends to do the right thing. But he always wants to do the wrong thing. Is Charlie moral?

5. Kant thinks that morality is a kind of law; everyone has to obey it. Therefore, he thinks it must be the case that everyone could obey it. This is his test for morality. According to Kant, your action is moral only if it’s done from a motive that everyone else could act on at the same time as you’re acting on it.

6. But is that right? On the one hand, the test shows that you shouldn’t lie to people to get what you want. If everyone lied to get what they want, and then you were to try, nobody would believe you. On the other hand, what if you want to visit a nature preserve? If everyone were to visit at the same time, they would destroy it. But you know they won’t visit, so isn’t it alright for you to go? Is there something problematic about an action that can never be open to everyone? Does Kant have a point?

7. Is Kant right that you must always have humanity or human reason as your end? Is there something immoral about someone who seeks only pleasure—like a couch potato—at the expense of developing his mind?

8. Kant thinks that every rational human being has dignity, and that everyone’s worth is infinite. Is that true? Do murderers have dignity? (Kant thinks they do, because they have
the capacity to choose to do the right thing.)

9. If all people have dignity and infinite worth, then how do we make choices about life and death? Suppose we have to choose between repairing a road in Boston and vaccinating children in Toledo. If we repair the road, ten fewer children will die in car accidents in Boston. If we vaccinate, twenty children will be saved in Toledo. If everyone has infinite worth, how do we choose? What would a utilitarian say?

10. According to Kant, the goal of morality is freedom. But for Kant, freedom is not just doing whatever you want. It’s living by your own reason. Brainwashing, advertising, cravings, and desires—all of these make you unfree.

11. Is Kant right about freedom? Isn’t freedom just the ability to do what you want, when you want? What difference does it make that some of your desires are implanted in you through advertising?

12. Or does Kant have a point? Is it possible to be unfree even if no one holds you back? Is it possible to be a slave to your impulses, cravings, or desires? Isn’t it liberating to learn to how to control your impulses and desires?
ETHICAL DILEMMA: THE SHOPKEEPER’S ACTION: IMMANUEL KANT

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READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

IMMANUEL KANT, GROUNDWORK FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS (1785)

LECTURE 11 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (BEGINNER)

LECTURE 11 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (ADVANCED)

These days, it seems that cash is king. But are there things that money shouldn’t be able to buy? Are there things that should not be treated as market goods or services?
Consider the following cases:

**Civic Duty**
In the American Civil War, men who were drafted into the army had the option of hiring a substitute to take their place, or paying a commutation fee to avoid military service. What do you think of these options?

1. Are substitution and commutation tantamount to selling off one's duty as a citizen?
2. Does the practice of hiring substitutes wrongly exploit poor people who are desperate and have no other option but to agree to be a substitute?
3. Does the morality of buying one's way out of the army depend on whether it is during a war or in peacetime?
4. What is the moral difference between hiring a substitute and avoiding service by bribery, for instance?
5. Today no one is conscripted. Those who serve in the army volunteer to do so in exchange for a salary and other benefits. What is the relevant moral difference between today's system and a system of conscription that provides for the option to hire a substitute? Aren't people who agree to be substitutes merely volunteering to join the army for money?
6. Can utilitarianism, libertarianism, or Lockean rights theory make sense of the view that citizens have a duty to serve their country?
7. Do you think that every citizen has a moral duty either to serve in the military or to perform some form of national service? If so, do you think this duty can be fulfilled by hiring someone else to perform it?
8. “Substitution contracts maximize happiness because they give each party what he most wants—money, and avoidance of military service.” Do you agree? Is this a good argument for the moral permissibility of substitution contracts?
9. “So long as they are voluntary, substitution contracts are fair.” Do you agree? What counts as a voluntary market exchange? Don’t people sometimes enter agreements because they are desperate or not well informed about the full cost or the danger? Do the conditions under which people enter agreements matter to the fairness of the agreements? Do the conditions matter to the validity of the consent? What background conditions are necessary for seemingly voluntary agreements to be fair?

**Motherhood**
A commercial surrogacy contract is an agreement to carry to term someone else's baby in one's own body in exchange for money. What do you think about the morality of such contracts?

1. Should people be allowed to act as surrogate mothers? Should prospective parents be allowed to pay for their services?
2. Suppose the surrogate mother changes her mind and wants to keep the baby. Should surrogacy contracts be enforced by the courts?

3. A utilitarian would say that surrogacy contracts should be allowed, if they maximize happiness. A libertarian would say that people should be free to use their own bodies in whatever way they like, provided they do not violate other people's rights. What do you think? Do either utilitarians or Libertarians have the right answer?

4. Consider Elizabeth Anderson’s argument against surrogate motherhood. She thinks that surrogate motherhood “commodifies” children and women's labor. But, thinks Anderson, to value these things in the way one values a commodity is inconsistent with the appropriate way of valuing them. The appropriate way of valuing children, for instance, is to love them, and not to treat them as fungible and exchangeable for money. Therefore, says Anderson, surrogate motherhood is wrong.

5. Is Anderson right? Does her argument against surrogate motherhood imply that we shouldn’t commodify ourselves either (because that would be inconsistent with valuing ourselves)? So, should we abstain from selling our services to the army, for instance? Is a paid army impermissible?
ETHICAL DILEMMA: LYING TO A MURDERER: IMMANUEL KANT

Is lying always morally wrong?

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3. Kant also thinks the naturally kind person is not really moral because she acts out of habit. According to Kant, habits can be useful, but not moral. Is that right? Is your childhood education really just a kind of conditioning and not really moral? What is moral character, anyway? Is it what you tend to do, or is it your attitude?

4. Suppose that Charlie is always up to mischief, but Frank is always there to stop it. As a result, Charlie tends to do the right thing. But he always wants to do the wrong thing. Is Charlie moral?

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LECTURE 12 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (ADVANCED)
ETHICAL DILEMMA: LYING TO A MURDERER: IMMANUEL KANT

Is lying always morally wrong?

READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

IMMANUEL KANT, GROUNDWORK FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS (1785)

LECTURE 12 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (BEGINNER)

LECTURE 12 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (ADVANCED)

These days, it seems that cash is king. But are there things that money shouldn't be able to buy? Are there things that should not be treated as market goods or services?
Consider the following cases:

**Civic Duty**
In the American Civil War, men who were drafted into the army had the option of hiring a substitute to take their place, or paying a commutation fee to avoid military service. What do you think of these options?

1. Are substitution and commutation tantamount to selling off one’s duty as a citizen?
2. Does the practice of hiring substitutes wrongly exploit poor people who are desperate and have no other option but to agree to be a substitute?
3. Does the morality of buying one’s way out of the army depend on whether it is during a war or in peacetime?
4. What is the moral difference between hiring a substitute and avoiding service by bribery, for instance?
5. Today no one is conscripted. Those who serve in the army volunteer to do so in exchange for a salary and other benefits. What is the relevant moral difference between today’s system and a system of conscription that provides for the option to hire a substitute? Aren’t people who agree to be substitutes merely volunteering to join the army for money?
6. Can utilitarianism, libertarianism, or Lockean rights theory make sense of the view that citizens have a duty to serve their country?
7. Do you think that every citizen has a moral duty either to serve in the military or to perform some form of national service? If so, do you think this duty can be fulfilled by hiring someone else to perform it?
8. “Substitution contracts maximize happiness because they give each party what he most wants—money, and avoidance of military service.” Do you agree? Is this a good argument for the moral permissibility of substitution contracts?
9. “So long as they are voluntary, substitution contracts are fair.” Do you agree? What counts as a voluntary market exchange? Don’t people sometimes enter agreements because they are desperate or not well informed about the full cost or the danger? Do the conditions under which people enter agreements matter to the fairness of the agreements? Do the conditions matter to the validity of the consent? What background conditions are necessary for seemingly voluntary agreements to be fair?

**Motherhood**
A commercial surrogacy contract is an agreement to carry to term someone else’s baby in one’s own body in exchange for money. What do you think about the morality of such contracts?

1. Should people be allowed to act as surrogate mothers? Should prospective parents be allowed to pay for their services?
2. Suppose the surrogate mother changes her mind and wants to keep the baby. Should surrogacy contracts be enforced by the courts?

3. A utilitarian would say that surrogacy contracts should be allowed, if they maximize happiness. A libertarian would say that people should be free to use their own bodies in whatever way they like, provided they do not violate other people’s rights. What do you think? Do either utilitarians or Libertarians have the right answer?

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5. Is Anderson right? Does her argument against surrogate motherhood imply that we shouldn’t commodify ourselves either (because that would be inconsistent with valuing ourselves)? So, should we abstain from selling our services to the army, for instance? Is a paid army impermissible?
ETHICAL DILEMMA: LYING TO A MURDERER: IMMANUEL KANT

Is lying always morally wrong?

READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

JOHN RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE (1971)
– LECTURE 13 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (BEGINNER)

What is justice? According to John Rawls, principles of justice are whatever principles would be agreed to behind a “veil of ignorance,” where no one knows his or her age, sex, race, intelligence, strength, social position, family wealth, religion, or even life goals.
If we were unaware of these particular facts about ourselves, we would not propose social rules designed to give ourselves an unfair advantage over other people. Therefore, according to Rawls, the principles we would agree to behind a veil of ignorance would be fair and just.

Was Rawls right?

1. If an agreement is entered into voluntarily, is it necessarily fair?
2. Suppose you own a leaky toilet, and a plumber tells you that it will cost $2000 to repair. You agree to this price, not knowing that the usual price for the same type of repair is $200. Is the contract between you and the plumber voluntary? Is the contract fair?
3. Suppose a man comes to your door and asks you to buy a newspaper subscription at a discounted price. You do not particularly enjoy the newspaper he's selling, but you have heard from your neighbors that the man will make a habit of stealing your mail out of spite if you refuse to buy a subscription. Reluctantly, you agree to buy a subscription, at a discounted price. Is the contract voluntary? Is it fair?
4. According to Rawls, principles of justice are whatever principles we would all agree to govern our society if we were ignorant of our personal qualities and therefore unable to take advantage of one another. Is this the right way to think about principles of justice? Should we abstract from our personal qualities, strengths, and aspirations in choosing principles of justice to govern our society?
5. Do you agree that no one should be able to propose a rule that benefits white men, just because he's a white man—or to propose a rule that benefits aristocrats, just because he's an aristocrat?
6. Do you think you should be able to make reference to your religious beliefs, or your life goals, when proposing rules for society? Is it possible to make such an important decision without knowing who you are and what goals and beliefs you have?
7. “A just person is blind to the differences between people, and treats everyone equally.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. “A just law is blind to the differences between people, and treats everyone equally.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
ETHICAL DILEMMA: LYING TO A MURDERER: IMMANUEL KANT

Is lying always morally wrong?

READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

JOHN RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE (1971)

LECTURE 13 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (BEGINNER)

LECTURE 13 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (ADVANCED)

What is justice? According to the philosopher John Rawls, principles of justice are the outcome of a special kind of agreement. They are the principles that we would all agree to if we were choosing rules for our society and no one had any unfair bargaining power.
But how can we ensure that no one has any unfair bargaining power? Rawls’s answer is that we have to limit our knowledge. So he imagines that we all find ourselves behind a “veil of ignorance.” Behind this veil, you do not know anything about yourself. You do not know your sex, your race, or the social class you belong to. You do not know how strong or weak you are, how stupid or intelligent, or whether you are disabled. You do not even know what your goals in life are, or whether you practice a religion.

In this situation of ignorance, it’s not possible for anyone to propose social rules designed to benefit himself or herself over other people. And so, Rawls thinks, whatever social rules we would agree to in this situation would be fair and just.

Is this the right way to think about principles of justice?

**A Fair Contract**

Rawls thinks that we can understand what justice is by considering the idea of a fair agreement. According to Rawls, an agreement is not necessarily fair even if it is voluntary. In order to be fair, an agreement must also be made against a background of equality. It is unfair if one of the contracting parties is able to take advantage of the other party because he is stronger, richer, better informed or simply more powerful.

Is Rawls right about what counts as a fair agreement?

1. If an agreement was entered into voluntarily, is that enough to ensure that the terms agreed to are fair?
2. Suppose you have a leaky toilet, and a plumber tells you that it will cost $2000 to repair. You agree to this price, not knowing that the usual price for the same type of repair is $200. Is the contract between you and the plumber voluntary? Is the contract fair?
3. Suppose a man comes to your door and asks you to buy a newspaper subscription at a discounted price. You do not particularly like the newspaper he’s selling, but you have heard from your neighbors that the man will make a habit of stealing your mail out of spite if you refuse to buy a subscription. Reluctantly, you agree to buy a subscription, at a discounted price. Is the contract voluntary? Is it fair?
4. Imagine that you are shipwrecked at sea, floating in the open ocean with no hope of rescue. A pirate ship comes upon you and the captain offers to fish you out of the water—but only if you agree to be the ship’s cabin boy forever. The captain does not exert any other pressure. He simply makes his offer and says, politely, “Take or leave it.”
If you agree to the captain's offer, are you morally bound to remain the ship's cabin boy forever? Would it be morally wrong for you to try to escape from your bondage when the ship reaches the next port? Why or why not?

1. Imagine that you are poor and cannot find work due to an economic recession. One day a new employer comes to town and offers you a job in his factory for a wage of 50 cents per hour. The employer exerts no pressure. He simply makes his offer and says, politely, "Take it or leave it." You accept the offer, not without gratitude, because you have no reasonable alternative. Is the contract between you and your new employer voluntary? Is the contract fair?

**Justice, Impartiality, and Ignorance**

According to Rawls, justice is the outcome of a fair contract. However, for Rawls a contract is guaranteed to be fair only if the contracting parties are not able to take advantage of each other. Rawls therefore proposes that the principles of justice are the outcome of a special, hypothetical contract, concluded between behind a "veil of ignorance," where no one knows any of his personal qualities, strengths, or weaknesses.

Is the right way to think about principles of justice?

1. Should we abstract from our personal qualities, strengths, and aspirations in choosing principles of justice to govern our society?
2. Do you agree that no one should be able to propose a rule that benefits white men, just because he's a white man—or to propose a rule that benefits aristocrats, just because he's an aristocrat?
3. Do you think that you should be able to make reference to your religious beliefs, or your life goals, when proposing rules for society? Is it even possible to make such an important decision without knowing who you are and what goals and beliefs you have?
4. You often have to think about what would be fair, and how to treat people justly. In thinking about justice in everyday life, do you try to make yourself color-blind, sex-blind, race-blind, intelligence-blind, and treat people with equal consideration? Or do you think that treating people fairly is compatible with showing greater concern for some people than for others? Does fairness require you to be blind to the differences between people?
5. Would your answer to the previous question be different if you were a public official? Is it fair for a teacher to privilege her favorite student? Is it fair for a police officer to treat people differently because of the color of their skin, or because of their religion? Is it fair to judge some people more leniently than other people just because you like them more, or because you know them better?
6. As a matter of justice, should laws always be blind to the differences between people?
What do you owe a contractor who did unrequested work?

READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

JOHN RAWLS, A THEORY OF JUSTICE (1971)

— LECTURE 14 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (BEGINNER)

What is justice? According to John Rawls, principles of justice are whatever principles would be agreed to behind a “veil of ignorance,” where no one knows his or her age, sex, race, intelligence, strength, social position, family wealth, religion, or even life goals.

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3. Do you think that you should be able to make reference to your religious beliefs, or your life goals, when proposing rules for society? Is it even possible to make such an important decision without knowing who you are and what goals and beliefs you have?
4. You often have to think about what would be fair, and how to treat people justly. In thinking about justice in everyday life, do you try to make yourself color-blind, sex-blind, race-blind, intelligence-blind, and treat people with equal consideration? Or do you think that treating people fairly is compatible with showing greater concern for some people than for others? Does fairness require you to be blind to the differences between people?
5. Would your answer to the previous question be different if you were a public official? Is it fair for a teacher to privilege her favorite student? Is it fair for a police officer to treat people differently because of the color of their skin, or because of their religion? Is it fair to judge some people more leniently than other people just because you like them more, or because you know them better?
6. As a matter of justice, should laws always be blind to the differences between people?
ETHELICAL DILEMMA: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: JOHN RAWLS

How would you have government intervene on behalf of economic inequality?

READINGS AND DISCUSSION GUIDES

– LECTURE 15 – DISCUSSION GUIDE (BEGINNER)

According to the philosopher John Rawls, principles of justice are the outcome of a special kind of hypothetical agreement.

They are the principles we would agree to if we were choosing rules for our society behind a “veil of ignorance,” where no one knows his or her age, sex, race, intelligence, strength, social position, family wealth, religion, or even life goals. Behind this “veil of ignorance,” it is impossible for anyone to propose social rules designed to benefit him more than other people. Therefore, Rawls argues, the principles we would agree to behind the veil of ignorance would be fair and just.

Rawls thinks that two principles would be agreed to behind this “veil of ignorance,” and these are his principles of justice. Let’s see if you agree with them.

1. Rawls’s first principle says that everyone should have the same set of basic liberties, including the freedom of speech and conscience, the right to hold office and to vote for elected officials, freedom from arbitrary arrest, the right to hold personal property, and so on. Do you agree?
2. Rawls's first principle says that everyone should have an equal chance to run for public office. By law, however, U.S. citizens who were born outside of the United States are not eligible to run for president. Is this law inconsistent with Rawls's first principle? Do you consider this law unjust?

3. Rawls's first principle says that everyone should have an equal chance to influence legislation and political affairs. However, today wealthy individuals and corporations exercise much more influence on the government and the laws than the average citizen might. Is this unjust?

4. Before the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, only white people were legally permitted to compete for the best jobs in many places in the United States. African Americans were often denied the same opportunities as whites, even if they were equally talented. Why, according to Rawls' theory of justice, was this unjust?

5. Often poor children who are very talented have unequal opportunities because their parents lack the money to send them to good schools, to pay for private lessons, and so on. Compared to equally talented children of rich parents, poor kids have fewer opportunities to develop their talents. Why, according to Rawls' theory of justice, is this unjust?

6. Why, according to Rawls, should talented and hard-working poor children have the same chances of success as rich children? Do you agree with him? Suppose that providing equal educational opportunity for all children would require substantial taxes on the rich. After all, it would cost a lot of money to provide schools of the same quality to everyone. Do you believe that such taxes are required as a matter of justice?

7. Rawls' second principle says that people who are equally talented and equally motivated should have equal chances of success. This principle would likely require steep inheritance taxes. After all, children who inherit lots of money have a huge advantage in the competition for jobs, money, and success. Do you think that children should be able to inherit great wealth from their parents? Should they be allowed to get very expensive, private math lessons, or singing lessons, or basketball lessons? What if such lessons give them a huge, unearned advantage in the race for jobs, careers, and wealth? Is it just for poor children to have much lower prospects as a result?

8. Rawls's second principle also holds that social and economic inequality can be justified only if it works to the advantage of the least advantaged members of society. Not even superior effort makes a person deserving of special rewards. After all, argues Rawls, your ability to make a good effort is partly dependent on how good your childhood was, whether your parents loved you and provided encouragement, or whether you were neglected and abandoned. These are all factors over which you had no control. Therefore, if you are now able to make a good effort, you can't really claim credit for it.

Do you agree? Is it true that you can't really claim credit for your upbringing? Surely, your habits and temperaments today are partly the result of your upbringing. Does this mean that you don't really deserve what you get from making an effort?
1. Think of some of the advantages that you have in your life. Do you deserve them more than other people who lack them? Why?
2. Do you think it's unjust if some people do not get to vote merely because they are a woman or a member of a racial or ethnic minority?
3. Do you think it's unjust if some people get paid less money for the same job merely because they are a woman or a member of a racial or ethnic minority?
4. If you answered “yes” to the last two questions, do you think it's also unjust if some people are much worse off than others merely because they were born with fewer talents or with a debilitating disease and the need for expensive medicines? Why should people be worse off merely because of the way they were born?
ETHICAL DILEMMA: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT: JOHN RAWLS

How would you have government intervene on behalf of economic inequality?

According to the philosopher John Rawls, principles of justice are the outcome of a special kind of hypothetical agreement. They are the principles we would agree to if we were choosing rules for our society behind a “veil of ignorance,” where no one knows his or her age, sex, race, intelligence, strength, social position, family wealth, religion, or even life goals. Such ignorance makes it impossible for anyone to propose social rules designed to benefit him more than other people. Therefore, Rawls argues, the principles we would agree to behind a veil of ignorance would be fair and just.
Rawls’s First Principle

Rawls thinks that two principles would be agreed to behind the veil of ignorance. His first principle says that everyone should have the same set of basic liberties, including the freedoms of speech and conscience, the right to hold office and to vote for elected officials, freedom from arbitrary arrest, the right to hold personal property, and so on. According to the first principle, a society in which some people are slaves or serfs, or in which very few people get a say in the government, would be unjust.

1. Do you agree that everyone should have the same basic liberties, whether they are a man or a woman, young or old, rich or poor, part of the minority or part of the majority?
2. Which liberties should everyone have?
3. Why would it be unfair for some people to have more liberty than other people? Rawls thinks that the unfairness is explained by the idea of a hypothetical agreement made behind a “veil of ignorance.” For example, people would not agree to a system of liberties for men only if they didn’t know whether they themselves would wind up being men or women.

Is Rawls right to think that the unfairness of a society that distributes liberties unequally is best explained by the idea of an agreement behind the veil of ignorance? If not, what explains the unfairness?

1. Rawls’s first principle says that everyone should have an equal chance to run for public office. Do you agree? By law, U.S. citizens who were born outside of the United States are not eligible to run for president. Do you think this law is unjust? Does Rawls’s theory provide the best way of thinking about the justice or injustice of this law?
2. Rawls’s first principle says that everyone should an equal chance to influence legislation and political affairs. However, today wealthy individuals and corporations exercise much more influence on the government and the laws than the average citizen might. Is this unjust? If so, do you think that Rawls’ theory best explains why it is unjust?

Fair Equality of Opportunity

Rawls’s second principle of justice has two parts. The first part says that society must ensure that there is fair equality of opportunity. Fair equality of opportunity is different from formal equality of opportunity, or the idea of careers open to talents.
There is even a lack of *formal* equal opportunities when the best jobs are *legally* restricted to members of a powerful group. This was the case in the United States before the Civil Rights Movement and racial desegregation. However, there can be inequality of opportunity even without such legal restrictions. Often, poor kids who are very talented have unequal opportunities because their parents lack the money to send them to good schools, to pay for private lessons, and so on. Compared to equally talented children of rich parents, poor kids have fewer opportunities to develop their talents.

According to Rawls’s idea of fair equality of opportunity, this is unjust. People with the same natural talents and the same willingness to use them should have the same chances of success, no matter how rich or poor their parents, no matter their sex, or race, or any other social distinction. Do you agree?

1. If you think that poor kids should have the same chances of success as equally talented rich kids, does that mean you agree with Rawls’s second principle? Suppose it turns out that satisfying this principle would require enormous taxes on the rich. After all, it would cost a lot of money to provide schools of the exact same quality to everyone. Do you think that justice requires such taxation?

2. Rawls’s idea of fair of equality of opportunity could also be seen to require steep inheritance taxes. After all, children who inherit lots of money have a huge advantage in the competition for jobs, money, and success. Do you think that children should be able to inherit great wealth from their parents?

3. Should the children of rich parents be allowed to get very expensive, private math lessons, or singing lessons, or basketball lessons? What if such lessons give them a huge, unearned advantage in the race for jobs, careers, and wealth? Is it just for poor children to have much lower prospects as a result?

**The Difference Principle**

The second part of Rawls’s second principle is called the difference principle, and it is even more egalitarian than Rawls's idea of fair equality of opportunity.
The difference principle says that there should be no differences in income and wealth, except those differences that make even the least advantaged members of society better off. Not even superior effort makes a person deserving of special rewards. After all, argues Rawls, your ability to make a good effort is partly dependent on how good your childhood was, whether your parents loved you and provided encouragement, or whether you were neglected and abandoned. All of these are factors over which you had no control. Therefore, if you are now able to make a good effort, you can’t really claim credit for it. Do you agree?

1. Is it true that you can’t really claim credit for your upbringing? Surely, your habits and temperaments today are partly the result of your upbringing. Does this mean that you don’t really deserve what you get from making an effort?
2. Think of some of the advantages that you have in your life. Do you deserve them more than other people who lack them? If so, why? If not, should these advantages be provided to everyone?
3. Do you think it’s unjust if some people do not get to vote in elections merely because they are a woman or merely because of the color of their skin?
4. Do you think it’s unjust if some people earn much less money and are much worse off than others merely because they are a woman or a member of a racial or ethnic minority?
5. If you answered “yes” to the last two questions, do you think it’s also unjust if some people are much worse off than others merely because they were born with fewer talents or with a debilitating disease and the need for expensive medicines? Why should people be worse off merely because of the way they were born?