

Justice and practical reason: Rationality, reasonableness, and thought-experimenting in Rawls

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE – RECEIVED: 21/01/2022 ACCEPTED: 28/04/2022

ABSTRACT: Rawls's central work, *A Theory of Justice*, is famously built around a thought experiment, the famous Original Position. It continues the tradition of hypothetical understanding of the social contract, enriching it with a new methodological tool, the introduction of the Veil of Ignorance. The Veil, the central thought experiment of Rawls's work, finely illustrates the road from merely instrumental rationality to the higher level, characterized by Rawls as "reasonableness". Rawls is here quite consistent throughout half a century of his reflections. Here we propose the reading in terms of layers–degrees of rationality in the wide sense, that is, the reading in terms of the reasonable and the rational in the narrow sense.

KEY WORDS: John Rawls, Veil of Ignorance, Original Position, thought experiments, rationality, reasonableness.

Introduction: The thought-experimental framework

Rawls is undoubtedly the greatest political philosopher in the analytic tradition in our time and probably the greatest political philosopher of our time, period, and his *A Theory of Justice* is the greatest work in contemporary political philosophy. *A Theory of Justice* has been at the center of the debate for half a century since its first appearance in 1971. Nowadays, it inspires developments connected to present-day social and political issues: from climate change, through constitutional law, to medical ethics. *A Theory of Justice* is built around the famous Original Position, characterized as a thought experiment by Rawls (2001: 17) himself. The

significance of the Original Position lies in the fact that it is a device of representation or, alternatively, a thought experiment for public- and self-clarification. We are to think of it as modeling two things:

First, it models what we regard – here and now – as fair conditions under which the representatives of citizens, viewed solely as free and equal persons, are to agree to the fair terms of cooperation whereby the basic structure is to be regulated.

Second, it models what we regard – here and now – as acceptable restrictions on the reasons on the basis of which the parties, situated in fair conditions, may properly put forward certain principles of political justice and reject others. (Rawls 2001: 17)

We shall be interested in the Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance thought experiment and the relation between the Veil and the layers of practical reason. Our leading question will be how the reasonable and the rational are related in view of the Original Position. We understand the Veil as a means of passing to the higher level, supplementing the rational with the reasonable. Here is a brief preview: We begin with a summary of Rawls on thought-experimenting and a warning about the topic being neglected in the vast literature on the Original Position and the Veil. We briefly place it on a simple map of various approaches to a social contract. Then we go shortly through the typical stages of a thought experiment as implemented in the Original Position: first, the formulation of the experimental design; second, the presentation; third, the (typically imaginative) contemplation of the scenario and some piece of reasoning; fourth, the decision (“intuition”) concerning the thesis/theory to be tested; fifth, variations and generalizations from the result (intuitive induction); and finally, the search for reflective equilibrium by discussing the alternatives and building an “equilibrated” theory.

In section two, we move to the issue of rationality, reading it in terms of layers–degrees. In the Original Position thought experiment, we shall argue, one models one’s convictions that come from one’s reasonableness. On the opposite, more pragmatic interpretation, stability is the main point of the Original Position thought-experiment tactics. We defend the more epistemological alternative: it is the normative insight that primarily motivates the thought experiment, and the particular political considerations, like stability, are just side-constraints on the solution investigated by the thought experiment.

The concluding third section points to the vitality and contemporary relevance of thought experiments in the tradition of the Original Position. It lists open questions of political reflection that the thought

experiment can usefully address. We also hope that our reading can be generalized to political thought experiments in general, such as Scanlon's and Habermas's upgrading of the parties in the initial position in various ways. There is the possibility of more egalitarian and social justice-related political thought experiments of the same general character worthy of exploring. So, to the task!

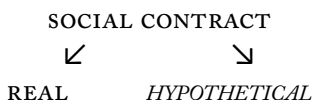
The Original Position is clearly a thought experiment, as Rawls (2001: 17 ff) himself insists in his *Justice as Fairness*, with the Veil of Ignorance as its centerpiece.¹ In his 1980 paper, Rawls famously characterizes his methodology as a “Kantian constructivism”. “Constructivism” here seems to mean a kind of proceduralism: the view stressing the actual production of the theory by the thinkers doing the thought experiment and reflecting upon it. The result then determines the content of the principles of justice. Commentators talk about “hypothetical proceduralism” – we see “hypothetical” as referring to the thought-experimental nature of the construction procedure.

Here we encounter a strange paradox in the literature: a growing interest in methodology, accompanied by silence on the thought-experimental character of the central construction. For instance, Floyd (2015), in his “Rawls’ methodological blueprint” – although discussing methodology – does not mention thought experiment at all. In *A Companion to Rawls* (Mandle and Reidy 2014), methodological chapters by Laden, Krasnoff, Freeman, Stemplowska, and Swift and Mandle also do not mention it in any of the hundred pages of material. The only author who does is Reidy (2014: 20), who speaks about “wild thought experiments”. In the voluminous *Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, thought experiment is mentioned only in a single quote from Rawls himself. Three hundred forty pages of *The Philosophy of Rawls: Moral Psychology and Community* (Weithman 1999) have no mention of the psychology of reasoning in the Original Position (all sorts of issues are mentioned, but nothing on the cognitive psychology of the Original Position). Also, Hinton's (2015) very focused *The Original Position* does not contain much on the

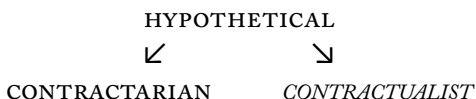
¹ Let me quote Freeman on the Original Position as a thought experiment: “It may well be impracticable for you and me to bracket all our knowledge of our primary values and particular circumstances in making life choices. But the original position is a thought experiment, and like most thought experiments it depicts unrealistic if not physically impossible situations. Here once again it is important to emphasize just what the veil of ignorance and the original position are designed to do. The veil of ignorance is a vivid representation of the kinds of reasons and information that are relevant to a decision on principles of justice for the basic structure of a society in which moral persons regard themselves as free and equal” (Freeman 2007: 160).

Original Position as a thought experiment. In short, the Original Position thought experiment has not explicitly been analyzed as a thought experiment nor compared with other successful thought experiments in the history of philosophy. So let us point briefly to the general character, structure, mechanisms, and stages of the Original Position viewed as a thought experiment.

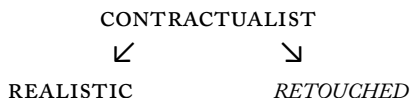
First, we need to place the Original Position thought experiment within the space of various social contract doctrines. Rawls started simply by adhering to the social contract doctrine, and the Veil and the Original Position came later (see the historical reconstruction in Gaus and Thrasher 2015). So, start from the contract tradition and distinguish the views that see the contract as a real, historical event (Hobbes) and those that see it as a hypothetical one, and place Rawls among the latter:



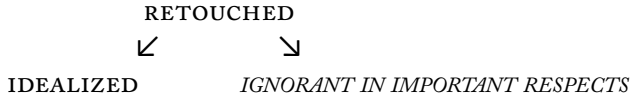
Next, distinguish *contractarian*, prudential agreement between rational egoists roughly equal in power (Gauthier), from *contractualist* agreement of free and equal moral persons, and place the Rawlsian agreement in the latter category:



Then distinguish two kinds of contractualist scenarios. In the first one, the persons are left as they are, without theoretical “retouch” or any sort of embellishment (Kant). In the second, the retouched one, they are thought-experimentally somewhat transformed, intellectually and morally embellished. We noted with Freeman that the imagined thought-experimental situation in the Original Position is “unrealistic if not physically impossible”. So, clearly, Rawls belongs to the latter category:



Next, we distinguish two kinds of retouch: either idealizing, to some extent (Habermas, Scanlon), or simply ignorance assuming.



The Original Position thought experiment belongs to the latter category. To summarize: Rawls's project is hypothetical and contractualist, with important retouch of the characters imagined, namely with the assumption that they are ignorant of the important aspects of their position and their actual motivations.

Consider now the stages of the thought experiment (for the general theory of stages of thought experiments, see Miscevic 2022: ch. 2). Start with a hypothetical *stage zero* of the author's construction of the thought experiment. He (I have Rawls in mind) has to decide the general shape and the details of the scenario to be presented, as the experimenter does in real-life laboratory experiments.

At *stage one* comes the presentation of the scenario thus constructed to the experimental subject. Here, as we shall see, Rawls is quite stingy with information. The reader is imagined to be behind the Veil of Ignorance and ignore important features of her life and her general situation. (As one of my reviewers noted, we should stress that the parties are not aware for which stage of the society's history they are making a decision. And the same is with resources: the society might be at a stage where lots of natural resources are available, or where the resources have been all used up. The parties of the Original Position are also heads of families, so Rawls expects the parties to make a decision, partly from a position of the next generation, or the next-next generation). But how the reader should reason in this situation is far from clear, as "concrete and specific matters of justice" are also to be considered. The role of particular items of ignorance (shall I be male or female?) and the form and function of my specific judgments I am to form (I don't want to be discriminated in the latter case) are hardly even sketched (commentators like Freeman have been jumping in with more concrete proposals). The stress is on principles tested by the particular judgments, and here the presentation is somewhat more detailed and informative. And finally, the bulk of information goes to a comparison of various proposed principles and doctrines, like utilitarianism, that are supposed to support their various versions.

At *stage two*, the experimental subject comes to understand the questions she is asked: from the very concrete ones (how would you feel if you had modest professional abilities and had to live in a strongly meritocratic society?) to the more general ones (how do you feel about racial discrimination?) and to the very general and most crucial questions (what principles would you accept for the society you are going to live in?).

At *stage three* comes the tentative production, “modeling” of the scenario at the conscious level. I imagine being. Then some unconscious processing might get in. The stage concerns the production of the answer, involving the generation of intuition, for instance, how I would feel in the victim’s shoes. This probably involves reasoning at the unconscious level; for example, I might have to control my arrogance and belief that yes, my colleagues are not as good as I am, and the like. This might result in an immediate, unconscious intuition, such as yes, I would feel terrible....

At the *fourth stage*, the thinker comes out with explicit judgment (intuition) at the conscious level, usually geared to the particular example and having little generality (again, I would feel terrible, etc.). This ends the core thought experiment.

There is a *fifth stage*, which Rawls does not explicitly consider in his description of the thought experiment. The thinker often has to do some varying and generalizing at the conscious and reflective level and, perhaps, at the unconscious one too. Sometimes this process of going through related micro-thought experiments is called intuitive induction. I end up with a general belief that my behavior is morally unacceptable no matter what; such kind of treatment is awful; I would feel this for sure if someone did treat me thus. Here, some very important issues come into play. Who is to participate? The liberal tradition suggests it should be all members of the society. But how far does “society” go? The contrast of statism and cosmopolitanism raises its head here.

Then, I, the reader, am supposed to be reflective enough and go one step further, to *stage six*, which is very much privileged by Rawls. First, I consciously perform the aggregation of micro-thought experiments; second, I try to harmonize the results of these micro-thought experiments with each other; and finally, I arrive at a judgment of their coherence with other moral intuitions. In other words, this philosophical unification can be described in terms of reflective equilibrium, first narrow and then wide. In the latter, the general knowledge of a more empirical kind is brought into play. I arrive at the important and challenging task of comparing the result with all we know about life and politics, both at

the personal experiential level and from history and social and natural sciences, reaching a wide reflective equilibrium as the final result.

What can we learn from such an analysis? One topic is the role of rationality in the whole process, and to this we now turn.

Rationality, reasonableness, and thought-experimenting

We now address the issue of rationality from the specifically thought-experimental position. First, a terminological remark. It is well known that in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls talks of “rationality”, and then in later works (at least from the beginning of the 1980s) introduces the “reasonable” as a higher form of reason-following attitudes. In his usage, the rational person is “thought to have a coherent set of preferences between the options open to him” (Rawls 1971: 124). Such a person ranks these options according to how well they further his or her purposes and follow the dictates of his or her desires. In *Political Liberalism*, he introduces the notion of the “reasonable”, by first pointing to everyday speech: “We say: ‘Their proposal was perfectly rational given their strong bargaining position, but it was nevertheless highly unreasonable, even outrageous’” (Rawls 1993: 48). Rawls (1993: 48) then notes that persons are reasonable in one basic aspect when “they are ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly”. Then he stresses the contrast between the two notions: “What rational agents lack is the particular form of moral sensibility that underlies the desire to engage in fair cooperation as such, and to do so on terms that others as equals might reasonably be expected to endorse” (Rawls 1993: 48). And he adds, quite dramatically, that rational agents come close to being psychopathic when their interests are solely of benefit to themselves.

There is no terminological duality in *A Theory of Justice*, whereas in the later work, it becomes crucial. This raises a number of issues. There is a terminological problem of characterizing the wider genus of reason-following attitudes that would encompass the two kinds. I shall talk about “wide rationality” to refer to the genus. How should we understand the two kinds? I propose a reading in terms of stages or layers—degrees of accordance with reason – the wide rationality. We would then have two basic layers or stages of reason-following attitudes (or rational attitudes in the wider sense of “rational”): the lower level of mere rationality and the higher level of being reasonable.

However, the central issue is the following: How are the reasonable and the rational related in view of the Original Position? In the literature, one finds two interpretations. In the first interpretation, the higher kind, the reasonable, is, so to speak, supporting from the outside the rational decisions taken from behind the Veil. In the second interpretation, the reasonable is immanent in the construction of the Original Position, though not mentioned under this name in *A Theory of Justice*: the Veil is a means of passing to the higher level, from rationality to reasonableness. In the first interpretation, it is stability that is the main point of reasonableness. Weithman points to the connection between the two:

Rawls then uses what I have called the “basic stability argument” to show that members of the WOS [well-ordered society] would affirm their sense of justice on the basis of their diverse comprehensive doctrines. He assumes that people follow their comprehensive views. The second and third steps of the argument [...] say that an overlapping consensus would obtain in a WOS. (Weithman 2011: 340)

However, this seems to minimize the role of reason in the construction of the Original Position thought experiment. No wonder some have claimed “that Rawls’s new-found concerns with stability and consensus had resulted, in the words of one critic [i.e., Holmes 1993: 39], in ‘a slighting of economic justice and the plight of the worst-off, which was central in *Theory of Justice*” (Wenar 2004: 265). Other criticisms in a similar spirit came from Brian Barry (1995), Susan Moller Okin (1993), and Bruce Ackerman (1994).

My preferred alternative is the second interpretation: reasonableness is immanent in and constitutive for the Original Position thought experiment because it takes the rational parties from their simple rationality to the higher normative (quasi-moral) condition. In the Original Position thought experiment, we model our convictions that come from our reasonableness. Rawls himself seems to have seen matters in this way, 10 years after his *A Theory of Justice*:

... the reasonable conditions imposed on the parties in the original position constrain them in reaching a rational agreement on principles of justice as they try to advance the good of those they represent. In each case the reasonable has priority over the rational and subordinates it absolutely. (Rawls 2001: 82)

This is very different from the first interpretation. Consider the second interpretation reading by Leif Wenar:

The original position is a thought experiment meant to move from [...] conceptions of fairness, freedom, and equality to determinate principles of justice. In the original position, rational representatives of reasonable citizens choose principles

of justice under conditions that are reasonable relative to the conceptions of citizen and society outlined. (Wenar 2004: 271)

I very much agree. One should look at Rawls's works like "Kantian constructivism" (1980) and *Justice as Fairness* (2001) for the relevant formulations of the constitutive role of reasonableness in the thought experiment. Here is a typical quote:

... the Reasonable presupposes and subordinates the Rational. It defines the fair terms of cooperation acceptable to all within some group of separately identifiable persons, each of whom possesses and can exercise the two moral powers. All have a conception of their good which defines their rational advantage, and everyone has a normally effective sense of justice: a capacity to honor the fair terms of cooperation. The Reasonable presupposes the Rational, because, without conceptions of the good that move members of the group, there is no point to social cooperation nor to notions of right and justice, even though such cooperation realizes values that go beyond what conceptions of the good specify taken alone. The Reasonable subordinates the Rational because its principles limit, and in a Kantian doctrine limit absolutely, the final ends that can be pursued.

Thus, in the original position we view the Reasonable as expressed by the framework of constraints within which the deliberations of the parties (as rationally autonomous agents of construction) take place. (Rawls 1980: 530)

The rational/reasonable contrast helps to understand the division of the thought-experimental situation into two micro-scenarios. In the first, we are invited to imagine persons endowed with their normal skills and powers, ascribing to them a certain amount of reasonableness and the will to live together. They search for a common arrangement, a contract. Then, in the second, these persons are represented by "parties" behind the Veil of Ignorance. Here is a quote from Rawls in *Political Liberalism*:

Two different parts of the original position must be carefully distinguished. These parts correspond to the two powers of moral personality, or to what I have called "the capacity to be reasonable" and "the capacity to be rational". While the original position as a whole represents both moral powers, and therefore represents the full conception of the person, the parties as rationally autonomous representatives of persons in society represent only the rational: the parties agree to those principles which they believe are best for those they represent as seen from these persons' conception of the good and their capacity to form, revise, and rationally to pursue such a conception, so far as the parties can know these things. (Rawls 1993: 305).

Freeman joins in:

... a rarely noted feature of his argument: it involves in effect two social contracts. First, hypothetical agents situated equally in the original position unanimously agree to principles of justice. This agreement has attracted the most attention

from Rawls's critics. But hypothetical agreement in the original position is patterned on the general acceptability of a conception of justice by free and equal persons with a sense of justice in a well-ordered society. (Freeman 2007: 183)

The two micro-scenarios correspond to the two kinds of reason-following attitudes. The parties in the initial micro-scenario are egoistical and rational; thanks to the Veil of Ignorance, in the second micro-scenario, they start approaching reasonable views about justice. So much about the contrast and the virtues of the first interpretation.

At this point, a critic might object that the defender of the first interpretation, Weithman, did build reasonableness into the Original Position itself by referring to his claims like the following:

... the conclusion about full deliberative rationality that Rawls really wants, a conclusion I expressed as:

C_{PL} : Each member of the WOS judges, from the viewpoint of full deliberative rationality, that the balance of her reasons tilts in favor of maintaining her desire to live up to the values and ideals of justice as fairness. (Weithman 2011: 303).

Unfortunately for Weithman, C_{PL} is not explicit enough as a claim of the inner involvement of reasonableness in the thought-experimental construction of the Original Position. Other authors join in, coming close to the second interpretation. For instance, Larry Krasnoff (2015), in his summary of the issue, entitled "The reasonable and the rational", talks of the rationality of liberal political values, which are meant to be expressed in the constraints of the Original Position itself, and claims that "these constraints are justified because they express the idea of the reasonable, the desire to justify political principles on terms that all can equally accept. The reasonable subordinates the rational, in the sense that we should rationally justify our political claims only in reasonable terms" (697).

I believe that the need for a higher form of wide rationality is already implicit in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls in *Justice as Fairness* points to *A Theory of Justice* (§§ 3 and 4) as already illustrating the same normative demands (characterized in *A Theory of Justice* as "moral"). *Justice as Fairness* takes us explicitly from economic means–end rationality to the higher level, involving normative demands: in *A Theory of Justice*, it is still called "rationality"; in the later work, it is "the reasonable". As Rawls (2001:82) notes in *Justice as Fairness*, the distinction parallels Kant's distinction between the hypothetical imperative and the categorical imperative.

The general methodological framework just noted takes us from general theory to particular "applied" philosophical problems. To use

the helpful metaphor of upward/downward movement in philosophy by Jonathan Wolf (2019), who speaks of two directions in reflection – the descending and the ascending – the thrust of *A Theory of Justice* clearly belongs to the former.² This is typical for political thought experiments. Take the classical paradigm of Plato’s *Republic* featuring a downward movement, application of a general theory, and the definition of justice. Veil-of-Ignorance literature is strictly in this tradition; it appears to be one of the most promising applications of general philosophical strategy to particular issues of our time! To summarize: The basic convictions constitutive of the idea of the Veil come from our reasonableness; it is the highest level of accordance with reason that is constitutive for the thought experiment.

Conclusion and the way forward

Our overview, hopefully, points to the general importance of thought-experimenting in the methodology of political thought, which is interesting for political epistemology, the discipline at the intersection of political philosophy, epistemology, and empirical psychology. As we just noted, the basic convictions constitutive for the idea of the Veil come from our reasonableness: it is the highest level of accordance with reason that is constitutive for the thought experiment.

The central thought experiment of Rawls’s work, the Veil, finely illustrates the road from merely instrumental rationality to the higher level, characterized by Rawls as “reasonableness”; Rawls is here quite consistent throughout half a century of his reflections. The Veil continues to inspire philosophers. Famous thought-experimenters Habermas and Scanlon come close to it, with important changes. A legion of authors employs the Veil or Veil-like political thought experiments to central political issues of our time, from cosmopolitanism to ecology. It is not merely “a part of our usable past”, as some critics (Forrester 2019: 279) would claim; it is alive and well and ready to be further developed in any direction needed.

This brings us to the open questions and further possible developments of the Rawlsian thought experiment and its lessons. Here my preference would be for more egalitarian and social justice-related

² Wolf (2019) calls the opposite direction the one of ascending or “engaged” philosophy: from a particular problem to general insights, say from ideological (say, religious) conflicts to principles for peaceful cohabitation. Rawls’s *Political Liberalism* might be an example in this direction.

political thought experiments, perhaps in the manner of Scanlon, but more leftist than his work, thus combining the political spirit of Rawls with the methodological suggestions from Scanlon (and Habermas as well, but let us leave this for another occasion).³

Further, but still very close to our topic, one can use political thought experiments against politically vicious epistemology. Consider the typical epistemic-political vices, like polarization and tendency to extremism: how can the spirit of thought-experimenting help? By respecting and interiorizing the diversity of perspectives and thus leading to toleration, which is the strategy Rawls anticipated in *Political Liberalism*. This strategy would also offer theoretical services to worried continentals, from H. Arendt on: they lucidly see the problem, and thought experiments can then provide a more rational, worked-out response.

The critics of Rawls stressed his connections to his contemporaries and to political problems of his time, suggesting that the present-day issues escape the Rawlsian perspective (the most detailed in this tradition is perhaps Forrester 2019). My proposal would go in the opposite direction, suggesting widening and deepening the range of application. There is no need to stay with classical market liberalism; one can go more towards the left, preserving the Rawlsian spirit.

Also, and crucially, one can address the issue of the range of participants in the Original Position, following the proposals of Beitz (1979) and Pogge (1989, 2013). The world is becoming more and more connected. We need to widen the pluralist perspective! So, stress the possible cosmopolitan basic structure, working out a possible thought-experimental perspective (along the lines of authors like Beitz and Pogge, and against the original reservations of Rawls himself). Forrester (2019), in her book on Rawls, dedicates a chapter to this perspective: “In the face of the crises of the 1970s, many political philosophers tried to extend the Rawlsian rules across time as well as space, into the future as well as across the globe” (172). So, we have both aspects of the kind recognized by Wolf: the upward, “engaged” aspect, concerned with answering the challenge of globalization, and the downward aspect, building a wide cosmopolitan theory of justice, to be applied to particular concrete issues. Of course, there is more available at the level of concrete political arrangement: on the one hand, the role of trans-national, but less than

³ On my reading, Rawls is closer to Scanlon than Scanlon himself thinks (and also Joshua Cohen in his “The original position and Scanlon’s contractualism” in Hinton 2015).

global systems, prominently the EU, and on the other, the issue of multipolarity and the task of bringing together the present-day main players.

So much about global issues. On the more local side, consider the groups within and the issues connected to diversity. Here, the upward development (“engaged” political philosophy) would turn to new or newly discovered prominent groups, marked, for instance, by race, gender, sexual orientation, disabled people, and a lot of other groups (see Rawls 2001: §19, anticipating the use of Rawlsian strategy concerning groups of different ethnic status and the like; but note that Rawls is very reserved about these issues, as my reviewer pointed out). In the relevant thought experiments, we shall be invited to take their perspective, from behind the Veil.

What will come after cosmopolitanism and topics of pluralism? One direction is thought experiments concerning environmental issues and the relation of cosmopolitanism and environmentalism, and then, probably, a whole range of new problems.⁴ In brief, Rawlsian thought-experimenting is alive and well and could, in its general form, overcome the political limitation of its time of birth and continue into our future, philosophical as well as political.

Acknowledgments

This paper was presented at the conference “*Teorija pravедnosti: pedeset godina poslije*” (“*Theory of Justice: Half a century later*”) held in Zagreb, November 16–17, 2021. Thanks to Miomir Matulović, with whom I have been teaching Rawls for several semesters to law students, as well as to Ana Matan and Janos Kis for the discussion in Zagreb. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer of *Prolegomena* for the useful comments.

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⁴ Notice, for example, the title of Martin D. Carcieri’s book: *Applying Rawls in the Twenty-First Century: Race, Gender, the Drug War, and the Right to Die* (2015). There is more; for example, new technologies like humanoid robots. Might we need new principles and their top-down applications? Here we can only be guessing. Not to mention methodological issues and innovations, like testing the reactions to the Veil of Ignorance in an experimental setting; see, e.g., Wolf and Dron (2015), as well as Huang, Greene and Bazerman (2019).

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