

Justice and Private Life

Rawls presented his principles of justice as a theory meant to apply to the “basic structures” in society, rather than individuals’ choices or private family life. But sometimes practices in private life can systematically make some group of people worse off than another group. So if we really care about fairness, arguably we should care about those practices just as we care about the basic structures of society.

Example from Okin: Women are systematically underrepresented in positions of wealth and power. Okin says this is caused by our current family structure – the different roles mothers and fathers play; the different ways daughters and sons are raised, etc.

1. Suppose Okin is right that the underrepresentation of women is caused by our current (typical) family structure. What should we do about it?
 - A. Introduce stronger anti-discrimination laws, better parental leave policies, etc.?
 - B. Suppose A doesn’t work (remember Sweden – men and women get equal parental leave, but women tend to take it much more than men). Should the government try to change the culture, through education, advertising, etc.?
 - C. Suppose B doesn’t work. Should the government ban certain kinds of family structures?
2. Suppose that we know some strategy like B or C above would be effective. Should the government have the right to interfere with culture and private life in this case?
3. Think of a few more examples of social practices, expectations, etc. that systematically disadvantage certain groups of people. What should we do about those? Should the government intervene?
4. Thinking about your answers to 2 and 3: under what circumstances should the government be allowed to interfere with social practices in private life?

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