

1973-06-11: [EQUALITY] How plurality of associations attenuates envy.

Rawls on Envy (#81), P.536-7. Although in theory the difference principle permits indefinitely large inequalities in return for small gains to the less favored, the spread of income and wealth should not be excessive in practice, given the requisite background institutions (#29). Moreover the plurality of associations in a well-ordered society, each its its secure internal life, tends to reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility, of variations in men's prospects, For we tend to compare our circumstances with others in the same or in a similar group as ourselves, or in positions that we regard~ as relevant to our aspirations. The various associations in society tend to divide it into so many non-comparing groups, the discrepancies between these divisions not attracting the kind of attention which unsettles the lives of those less well placed.

[REGiesey] Although Rawls is using this to adjust personal matters in his imagined well-ordered society (for he goes on to speak about equal justice applying in public encounters of all people, and the mutual acceptance of each other's dignity in a society ruled by justice as fairness), it is apt for most historical circumstances. It is a principle that might guide the considerations of life chances of different strata throughout western history, and so eliminate the necessity to speak of group conflict as a meaningful element at all stages. But it, too, changes over time. It is very difficult today, in the age of TV, for anyone not to know what the range of differences in his life from all others; this, at least, in comparison to a peasant in the middle ages who might never glimpse the high life of the nobles, and if he did certainly not aspire to emulate it. But in a society where wealth counts above all, the idea of "queen for a day" lets everyone believe that "there but for the grace of wealth go I."

Still, the superior principle is this: most people make peace with their life chances, as they view them, and seek associations which allow for meaningful participation and achievement. In general, the lower on the social order one finds himself the more private (or if public, the moral local) his associations are, and the higher one finds himself the more he considers his functions to be public, because of the power he actually exercise over public affairs by his wealth and position.