



How do secularists think about decisions? (Part 1) – Public reason giving

KEY QUESTIONS ??

- How do secularists think about decisions?
- What are religious privilege, tolerance and discrimination?

STIMULUS

7B's Sandwiches

Class 7B have done so well on their RE test that Mrs Butcher has decided to reward them with a big plate of bacon sandwiches. However, six students have a moral conviction which means they don't want to eat them.

- Yvette is Jewish; she doesn't want to violate a widely held Jewish belief that pork products aren't Kosher and shouldn't be eaten.
- Tayyab is Muslim; he doesn't want to violate a widely held Islamic belief that pork products aren't Halal and shouldn't be eaten.
- Sasha is Christian; she's come to believe that eating meat is a sin and her god doesn't want her to. This belief isn't shared by most Christians.
- Patrick is an atheist; he believes that the only reason people accept meat eating is because of religious influence, and that the only rational diet is pescetarianism.
- Veronika is a lifelong vegan; veganism is an important part of her life and central to her ethical and dietary decision making.
- Toby decided this morning that eating meat is ethically wrong after visiting a farm on the weekend and reading about the pork industry.

Because different people can have different ethical stances informed by their worldviews, secularists believe:

- Personal ethical preferences arising from religious, non-religious or irreligious convictions should not be presumed to be of more or less worth.

So

- Personal ethical preferences aren't sufficient to compel others. Rules which affect others need to be justified.

And

- We can persuade people to agree with our personal ethical preferences, but we can't force them to.

So

- Sometimes we need to protect people from having others' personal ethical preferences imposed on them.

A Theory of Justice

When it comes to decisions where religion affects the rights of others, arguments for or against a secularist approach tend to focus on fairness. However, we often disagree over what's fair.

Secularists draw a distinction between decisions which affect the individual – which they believe only need to be justified in terms of their own moral code, preferences or worldview – and decisions which affect the rights of others – which they believe must be justified in terms of rational, shared principles. This doesn't mean that people can't be motivated by religion or irreligion, but that their arguments need separate justification.

John Rawls (1921–2002) was a moral and political philosopher who considered such problems. Among other things Rawls was interested in fairness and how we could make fair decisions that affect all of us. One of the things that Rawls thought about is our natural tendency to think of ourselves as rational, and to feel stronger about unfairness which disadvantages us (discrimination) than about unfairness which advantages us (privilege).

Rawls wrote a lot about justice and moral thought experiments to try and come up with fair ways to make decisions. Among these ideas, two are particularly relevant to secularism: “public reason giving” and the “veil of ignorance” (sometimes called “the original position”).

In the veil of ignorance experiment (in *A Theory of Justice*, 1971) we try to get around our natural tendency to base our ideas of fairness on what benefits us. To do this we imagine we have stepped behind a veil of ignorance; behind this veil we don't know anything about our personal circumstances. We don't know if we are rich or poor, religious or not, short or tall, man or woman, gay or straight or black or white.

Rawls imagined that if we had to make decisions from behind this veil that they would be fair. For example, if we didn't know whether we were rich or poor, we would surely not design a world where the rich ate the poor. If we didn't know whether or not we believed in any particular gods, then would we make a law that privileged, or discriminated against belief in deities?

In his book *Political Liberalism* (1993) Rawls thought about what it meant for the state to make fair decisions in the context of citizens who deeply disagree on philosophical, religious, and moral issues. Rawls argued that public policy decisions should be based on “public reasons” that are broad principles that reasonable people can agree on, rather than “non-public reasons” – which are more akin to personal preference.

From the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: *“Public reason requires that the moral or political rules that regulate our common life be, in some sense, justifiable or acceptable to all those persons over whom the rules purport to have authority.”*

EXERCISES

- Q1.** How do you think Rawls' idea of the veil of ignorance and public reason giving might help us make fairer decisions?
- Q2.** What might be some problems or disagreements with this approach?
- Q3.** If you were behind the veil of ignorance, would you want government decisions to be based on religion?
- Q4.** Why or why not?

STIMULUS

Poker and Solitaire

Imagine Jamila is playing solitaire (a single person card game) when she notices that a card which should be face down has accidentally been shuffled face up. Knowing what this card is might make it easier for Jamila to win the game, Jamila needs to decide whether to carry on playing or to reshuffle the cards. We might disagree about what the fair thing to do is, but this decision only seems to affect her.

Next imagine Jamila and George are playing poker against each other. When shuffling the cards George accidentally sees a card he shouldn't have, and this knowledge might be an advantage. George wants to keep playing, but Jamila wants to reshuffle the cards and start again.

Again, we might disagree about what the fair thing to do is, but this time the decision will affect other people. Jamila and George try to agree a fair way of deciding.

First Jamila says they should reshuffle the cards and points to a passage in her *Poker Bible* – an authoritative, some might say holy book – to support her case. George disagrees and points out that the passage is open to interpretation, and in any case, he doesn't think the *Poker Bible* is authoritative – he prefers the *Bible of Poker*.

Next George says they should get an authority figure to make the decision for them, and they should ask the inventor of poker – Tod. But Jamila says Tod isn't here right now, and she's not even sure Tod did invent poker. George replies that he knows Tod really well, Tod's his mate and he's studied Tod's ways. If Tod was here, George is sure Tod would say to play on.

"Well," says Jamila, "I think I'm more important than you and more trustworthy. So, we should reshuffle the cards."

"That's not fair," George retorts. "I'm just as important as you and I think I'm just as trustworthy." At this point the friends are in serious disagreement.

George calmly explains why he thinks it would be fair to carry on playing, but Jamila equally calmly explains why she thinks they should reshuffle. Both feel the other only thinks their decision is fair because it might benefit them.

EXERCISES

Q5. In the Jamila and George story, how might they use the veil of ignorance thought experiment to try and decide what is fair?

Q6. How is this story an analogy for decisions that affect the rights of others, particularly those that involve religion?

STIMULUS

Are we behind the veil?

In other resources we considered some common things that secularists and others notice about religion and society, one of which was:

- People's ideas of what gods want often coincide with their own desires or moral preferences.

Many secularists (whether or not they are religious, and whether or not they believe that particular gods exist) argue that we are in fact behind a veil of ignorance of sorts. They argue that when someone suggests a course of action based on their belief that either a god or a religion wants it, we can't know if this is true, and so must assess the course of action on its own merits.

TAKE IT FURTHER

- Create a poster to explain the principles of the veil of ignorance and a veil of ignorance thought experiment.
- Research a critique of Rawls' idea of the veil of ignorance and public reason giving. Do you find it compelling? Why or why not?
- Read the Wikipedia article on John Rawls for a summary of his major theories on fairness and justice, with links to more detailed explanations.
- Find a representation of the veil of ignorance in popular culture. For example this Dr Who episode:
<https://io9.gizmodo.com/the-great-hero-of-the-doctor-who-anniversary-special-is-1470394088>
- Contrast the use of “public reason” in the work of Immanuel Kant, John Rawls and a third philosopher of your choice. How might each of their interpretations be used to support or oppose secularism?