JOHN RAWLS' ORIGINAL POSITION
A Simulation[1]

This simulation takes the form of a competitive game played out over two rounds. Round 1 simulates persons collectively choosing a distributive principle for a prospective society in a condition of full information, with all the biases that entails. Round 2 simulates persons choosing principles of justice from the Rawlsian "original position," where the contractors must make their choice from behind a "veil of ignorance." In addition to providing a deeper intuitive grasp of the thought experiment Rawls employs in *A Theory of Justice*, the simulation allows participants to experience the plausibility of the specific conclusions Rawls arrives at in developing his theory of justice as fairness.

Rules of Play

Objective: The point of the game, in both rounds, is to maximize one's own *personal utility score*.

Order of Play:

Round 1

1. Distribute Character Cards
2. Debate Distributive Principles
3. Choose a Distributive Principle
4. Choose a Career & Calculate Productivity
5. Aggregate the Total Productivity
6. Distribute the Total Productivity
7. Determine Personal Utilities

Round 2

1. Debate Distributive Principles
2. Choose a Distributive Principle
3. Distribute Character Cards
4. Choose a Career & Calculate Productivity
5. Aggregate the Total Productivity
6. Distribute the Total Productivity
7. Determine Personal Utilities

Round 1:

Step 1: Distribute Character Cards

At the beginning of Round 1, each player is randomly given a *character card*. The character card determines the fictional person the player will represent in this round. A player's character card establishes two key pieces of information: the player's *skill level* and *personality type*. (These pieces of information are often abbreviated in the form of a letter-number combination—e.g., "A-2" is personality type "A", skill level "2".)

[1] Created by Brian Palmiter, 2019.

Skill level: Each character has a skill level of either 1 (low) or 2 (high).[2] Being highly skilled provides two advantages. First, highly skilled players have the ability to choose the *career* they prefer. For example, a player with skill level 2 may choose between Career A and Career B, while a player with skill level 1 may only pursue Career A. (See Table 1 below for more details.) Second, no matter what career the character ultimately chooses, being more skilled makes a character more productive in their chosen career. (See *productivity* below.)

Personality type: A character's personality type reflects the intrinsic satisfaction they would derive from each of the careers. For example, characters with personality type A find Career A fulfilling (+3 *personal utility*) and Career B unfulfilling (-3 personal utility).

Table 1: Personality and Career Satisfaction

		Personality Type	
Career Path (skill level required)	*Marginal Product*	*Type A*	*Type B*
Career A (TL ≥ 1)	2	3	-3
Career B (TL ≥ 2)	6	-3	3

Productivity: Productivity represents the "primary goods" a player's character generates through their productive activities.[3] A player's productivity is calculated by multiplying their skill with the marginal product of their chosen career (see Table 1). For example, a player with skill level 2 who chooses to pursue Career B will have a productivity of 12: 2 [Skill] x 6 [Marginal Product of Career B].

Step 2: Debate Distributive Principles

Once players have their character cards and thus know their skill levels and personality types, but before they choose their careers, they are presented with a set of potential *distributive principles* for their society. The players have 10 minutes to debate amongst themselves which principle should be chosen for their society. At the end of the debate period, everyone will be expected to vote on the principle they prefer. The winning principle will be the one that will be used to distribute a share of the sum total of productivity from all players to each players as *primary goods*.

NOTE: Let players reason it out on their own for the first 5 minutes. Then, provide a chart showing the actual expected distributions for each player if each principle is chosen. Charts will vary depending on the distribution of skill and personality types. These can easily be calculated with the accompanying Excel file, "Simulation Utility Calculator."

[2] "Skill" is understood to be an unspecified combination of innate physical gifts and the ineradicable differences in nurture provided by the family in early life. What counts as "skill" will vary depending on what is valued by a specific society at that moment in history. For Rawls on justice and the distribution of natural assets, see especially *TJ* §§12 and 17.

[3] Rawls defines primary goods to be "things that every rational man is presumed to want. These goods normally have a use whatever a person's rational plan of life. For simplicity, assume that the chief primary goods at the disposition of society are rights, liberties, and opportunities, and income and wealth." (TJ §11, p. 54).

Distributive principles: Each principle is a rule for how productivity is parceled out as shares of primary goods. Here are three potential distributive principles. (Principles may be added or removed as desired. "Welfare egalitarianism" and "sufficiency" are two good additions. However, each additional principle complicates the debate and analysis, which requires more time.)

1. Laissez faire: Each player receives a share of the total productivity as primary goods equal to their individual contribution to the total productivity.
2. Resource egalitarianism: The total productivity is divided into equal shares (rounded to the nearest whole number) and distributed to each player as primary goods.
3. Maximin: The total productivity is distributed equally unless the worst off player can be made better off by giving another player a larger share. (Note: There are two versions of this principle. One version measures "worst off" in terms of resources, and the other measures "worst off" in terms of welfare.)

Primary Goods: A player's primary goods value is the portion of the total productivity distributed to them. This will vary depending on the principle of distribution chosen. Having more primary goods is always a good thing.

Personal utility: Each player adds their primary goods and their career satisfaction values to determine their *personal utility* score. The goal of the game is to maximize personal utility. The utility scores of other players do not matter. (In other words, a score of 5 is better than a score of 4 regardless of the relative scores of the other players.)[4]

Step 3: Choose a Distributive Principle

Poll players to determine which principle is most preferred. All players must vote, and each vote counts equally. If no principle receives an absolute majority of votes cast, a runoff is held between the two principles that received the most support in the first round.

Step 4: Choose a Career & Calculate Productivity

Now that players know what the distributive principle will be for this society, they each must choose a career. Once their career is selected, they have all the information necessary to calculate their individual productivity. Additionally, they should fill out the career satisfaction modifier in their personal utility score.

Step 5: Aggregate the Total Productivity

Each player reports their individual productivity score. These scores are summed to determine the total productivity of the society.

Step 6: Distribute the Total Productivity

The total productivity is distributed to players according to the distribution principle chosen in Step 3. Each player's share is recorded as their primary goods value.

Step 7: Determine Personal Utilities

[4] For Rawls' account of the irrelevance of envy when reasoning from the original position, see *TJ* §§80-81.

Players sum their career satisfaction value and their primary goods value to determine their personal utility score. Again, maximizing this score is the point of the game.

Round 2:

Round 2 works similarly to Round 1 with one big difference: to simulate Rawls' "veil of ignorance," players debate and vote on a distributive principle before they know what their character card will be. This means they must choose a principle without knowing their skill level or personality type. Note that the deck from which character cards will be drawn may or may not contain all the same characters from Round 1. This means that not just who has what traits, but the distribution of traits itself may not be the same as Round 1.

Step 1: Debate Distributive Principles
As in Round 1, players have 10 minutes to debate the same set of distributive principles.

Step 2: Choose a Distributive Principle
Poll players to determine which principle is most preferred. All players must vote, and each vote counts equally. If no principle receives an absolute majority of votes cast, a runoff is held between the two principles that received the most support in the first round.

Step 3: Distribute Character Cards
Each player receives a character card from the shuffled deck.

Step 4: Choose a Career & Calculate Productivity
Now that players know what the distributive principle will be for this society, and who they are within that society, they each must choose one of the careers. Once their career is selected, they have all the information necessary to calculate their individual productivity. Additionally, they should fill out the career satisfaction modifier in their personal utility score.

Step 5: Aggregate the Total Productivity
Each player reports their individual productivity score. These scores are summed to determine the total productivity of the society.

Step 6: Distribute the Total Productivity
The total productivity is distributed to players according to the distribution principle chosen in Step 2. Each player's share is recorded as their primary goods value.

Step 7: Determine Personal Utilities
Players sum their career satisfaction value and their primary goods value to determine their personal utility score. Again, maximizing this score is the point of the game.

DEBRIEFING GUIDE

Potential Discussion Questions:

1. Obviously Round 2 is intended to simulate Rawls' original position thought experiment. What are the points of analogy you see? What are the clearest points of disanalogy? Are any of the points of disanalogy fatal to the simulation?

2. What does might Round 1 be thought to simulate? [Reality? Hobbes' state of nature?]

3. Rawls' original position thought experiment is famous (or infamous) for trying to eliminate influences that are "arbitrary from a moral point of view."[5] What were those factors in this simulation? Would you agree that they are all "arbitrary from a moral point of view"?

4. How did the fact of diverse personality types impact your thinking about the best strategy in each round?

5. Which distributive principle was easiest to eliminate in each round? In which round was the decision of distributive principle easier? Should the decision have been unanimous in either round?

6. In Round 1, how much impact did the actual distribution of traits have on the principle chosen? In Round 2, how did the lack of information about the distribution of traits impact the principle chosen?

7. According to the rules of the game, each player's productivity is gathered into a collective pool in Step 5, which is then redistributed according to the agreed upon principle in Step 6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of thinking about productivity in this way? How does this model square with your intuitions about actual productivity in society?

8. Do players "deserve" their personal utility scores more in Round 1 or Round 2? Does the choice of distributive principle affect how much they can be said to deserve their personal utility scores?

9. In the simulation, the maximin strategy [and welfare egalitarianism] is capable of achieving perfect efficiency, just like laissez faire. Is this plausible in the real world? [E.g., no, in the real world people have a personal incentive to pose as A-2, despite being B-2.]

[5] TJ, §4, p. 14.

CHARACTER CARD

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Name _____

Personality Type _____

Skill Level _____

Career Choice _____

Career Satisfaction _____ (varies by personality type; see reference table below)

Contribution to Social Productivity _____ (*Skill*) x _____ (*Marginal Product of Chosen Career*) = _____ (*Productivity*)

Share of Primary Goods _____ (varies by distributive principle chosen)

Personal Utility _____ (*Career Satisfaction*) + _____ (*Share of Primary Goods*) = _____ (*Personal Utility*)

		Career Satisfaction	
	Marginal Product	Type A	Type B
Career A (Skill ≥ 1)	2	3	-3
Career B (Skill ≥ 2)	6	-3	3

CHARACTER CARD

PROFILE "A-1"

Name _____

Personality Type A

Skill Level 1

Career Choice A

Career Satisfaction 3 (varies by personality type; see reference table below)

Contribution to Social Productivity

1	x	2	=	2
Skill		*Marginal Product of Chosen Career*		*Productivity*

Share of Primary Goods _____ (varies by distributive principle chosen)

Personal Utility

3	+		=	
Career Satisfaction		*Share of Primary Goods*		*Personal Utility*

		Career Satisfaction	
	Marginal Product	Type A	Type B
Career A (Skill ≥ 1)	2	3	-3
Career B (Skill ≥ 2)	6	-3	3

CHARACTER CARD

PROFILE "A-2"

Name _____

Personality Type A

Skill Level 2

Career Choice _____

Career Satisfaction _____ (varies by personality type; see reference table below)

Contribution to Social Productivity

2 (*Skill*) x _____ (*Marginal Product of Chosen Career*) = _____ (*Productivity*)

Share of Primary Goods _____ (varies by distributive principle chosen)

Personal Utility

_____ (*Career Satisfaction*) + _____ (*Share of Primary Goods*) = _____ (*Personal Utility*)

		Career Satisfaction	
	Marginal Product	Type A	Type B
Career A (Skill ≥ 1)	2	3	-3
Career B (Skill ≥ 2)	6	-3	3

CHARACTER CARD

PROFILE "B-1"

Name _____

Personality Type B

Skill Level 1

Career Choice A

Career Satisfaction -3 (varies by personality type; see reference table below)

Contribution to Social Productivity

1	x	2	=	2
Skill		*Marginal Product of Chosen Career*		*Productivity*

Share of Primary Goods _____ (varies by distributive principle chosen)

Personal Utility

-3	+	_____	=	
Career Satisfaction		*Share of Primary Goods*		*Personal Utility*

		Career Satisfaction	
	Marginal Product	Type A	Type B
Career A (Skill ≥ 1)	2	3	-3
Career B (Skill ≥ 2)	6	-3	3

CHARACTER CARD

PROFILE "B-2"

Name _____

Personality Type B

Skill Level 2

Career Choice _____

Career Satisfaction _____ (varies by personality type; see reference table below)

Contribution to Social Productivity

2 (*Skill*) x _____ (*Marginal Product of Chosen Career*) = _____ (*Productivity*)

Share of Primary Goods _____ (varies by distributive principle chosen)

Personal Utility

_____ (*Career Satisfaction*) + _____ (*Share of Primary Goods*) = _____ (*Personal Utility*)

		Career Satisfaction	
	Marginal Product	Type A	Type B
Career A (Skill ≥ 1)	2	3	-3
Career B (Skill ≥ 2)	6	-3	3