

## **VEIL OF IGNORANCE: UNDERSTANDING RAWLS' NOTION OF FAIRNESS AND EQUALITY**

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.58257/IJPREMS35319>

### **ABSTRACT**

The concept of the Veil of Ignorance, as formulated by philosopher John Rawls, serves as a foundational framework for exploring notions of fairness and equality in society. This abstract delves into the essence of Rawls' Veil of Ignorance, elucidating its role in promoting impartiality and justice by concealing individuals' personal attributes behind a hypothetical veil. Individuals, when positioned behind this veil, are tasked with devising principles of justice without knowledge of their own social standing, abilities, or privileges, fostering a sense of equity and neutrality in decision-making processes. Rawls' Veil of Ignorance underscores the imperative of minimizing biases and prejudices in formulating principles of justice. By rendering individuals unaware of how they would be affected by chosen principles, the Veil encourages the creation of a societal framework that prioritizes fairness, opportunity, and protection for all members. This emphasis on collective interest alignment serves to eradicate cognitive biases and stereotypes, steering decision-makers towards principles that benefit the broader welfare of society. Within the context of Rawls' theory, two key principles of justice emerge: the guarantee of the best possible life for all individuals without causing harm, and the provision for individual advancement, with inequalities permissible only if they contribute to the common good. These principles underscore the foundational values of equity, social progress, and collective benefit that underpin Rawls' conception of a just society.

**Keywords:** 1. Veil of Ignorance 2. John Rawls 3. Fairness 4. Equality 5. Impartiality 6. Justice 7. Cognitive biases 8. Ethical theory

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As an abstract of the exploration into the Veil of Ignorance and its implications for fairness and equality, this analysis sheds light on the significance of Rawls' framework in promoting ethical considerations and fostering a society founded on principles of impartiality, compassion, and distributive justice. The abstract serves as a gateway to understanding the essence of the Veil of Ignorance in the broader discourse on ethical theory and social justice. While the Veil of Ignorance has been criticized by some, it remains a powerful tool for considering fairness and justice in society. Rawls' ideas continue to be influential in political philosophy and ethics. John Rawls, a prominent political philosopher, introduced the concept of the Veil of Ignorance as a fundamental component of his seminal work, "A Theory of Justice." The Veil of Ignorance serves as a theoretical device that invites individuals to imagine a scenario where they are stripped of all knowledge about their personal characteristics, such as their social status, wealth, gender, or talents. Under this hypothetical veil, individuals are unaware of their place in society, their advantages or disadvantages, and even their own conceptions of the good life. The purpose of the Veil of Ignorance is to create a fair and impartial way of designing principles of justice for society. By placing individuals behind the Veil of Ignorance, Rawls aims to eliminate biased judgments and self-interested preferences, allowing for the construction of principles that are grounded in fairness, equality, and impartiality. Without knowledge of their own circumstances, individuals are compelled to adopt a position of neutrality and objectivity, devoid of any personal biases that could skew their judgment. Through the Veil of Ignorance, Rawls prompts individuals to consider what basic principles of justice they would choose for society if they were unaware of where they would fit within that society. This thought experiment encourages individuals to prioritize justice and fairness, as they would not know whether they would end up as the most advantaged or the most disadvantaged members of society. The principles conceived behind the Veil of Ignorance are intended to establish a social contract that safeguards the rights and liberties of all individuals, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized. The Veil of Ignorance acts as a moral compass for constructing a just society, where principles of justice are not contingent on personal advantages or inequalities. It challenges individuals to think beyond their own self-interests and biases, fostering the creation of principles that uphold fairness, equality, and dignity for all members of society. Rawls' concept of the Veil of Ignorance continues to resonate as a powerful tool for ethical decision-making, advocating for a

society built on principles of justice that transcend individual differences and ensure a more equitable and inclusive social order.

### **How it relates to fairness and equality in society?**

The concept of the Veil of Ignorance proposed by John Rawls is deeply intertwined with the principles of fairness and equality in society. By asking individuals to imagine themselves behind the Veil of Ignorance, Rawls prompts a thought experiment that fosters the development of principles of justice based on impartiality, fairness, and equality. The Veil of Ignorance serves as a mechanism to ensure fairness in the design of societal institutions and norms. When individuals are stripped of knowledge about their own characteristics, such as their wealth, social status, or talents, they are compelled to make decisions that are unbiased and just. This position of ignorance neutralizes any self-interest or personal biases that could influence individuals' judgments, leading to the formulation of principles that prioritize fairness for all members of society. The principles constructed behind the Veil of Ignorance are intended to create a level playing field where everyone has equal opportunities and rights, irrespective of their individual circumstances. Moreover, the Veil of Ignorance is closely linked to the concept of equality in society. By encouraging individuals to deliberate on principles of justice without knowledge of their own position or advantages, Rawls underscores the importance of creating a society where everyone is treated as equals. The veil compels individuals to consider the needs and interests of all members of society, especially the most vulnerable or marginalized, ensuring that principles of justice are inclusive and equitable for all. Through this impartial lens, fairness and equality become foundational principles that guide the construction of a just social contract that upholds the dignity and rights of every individual. In essence, the Veil of Ignorance promotes fairness and equality in society by challenging individuals to transcend their own perspectives and consider the well-being of all individuals, regardless of their personal characteristics. By fostering a sense of impartiality and objectivity, the Veil of Ignorance encourages the development of principles of justice that prioritize fairness, equality, and respect for the inherent worth of every individual. In this way, the concept of the Veil of Ignorance aligns with the fundamental values of a just and equitable society where all members are treated with dignity, fairness, and equality.

### **What is the Veil of Ignorance?**

John Rawls' thought experiment of the Veil of Ignorance is a cornerstone of his work in political philosophy, particularly outlined in his seminal book "A Theory of Justice." The concept of the Veil of Ignorance invites individuals to imagine themselves in a hypothetical position where they are unaware of their own characteristics, such as their social status, wealth, talents, gender, or ethnicity. This veil of ignorance serves as a pivotal theoretical device through which individuals are asked to deliberate on principles of justice and societal arrangements from a position of impartiality and objectivity. By envisioning themselves behind the Veil of Ignorance, individuals are stripped of personal knowledge that could bias their judgment or preferences. This hypothetical scenario prompts individuals to adopt a position of neutrality, wherein they are unable to predict their own circumstances or advantages within a society. The purpose of the Veil of Ignorance is to compel individuals to make decisions about societal structures and principles without the influence of self-interest, personal biases, or partiality. Rawls uses this thought experiment to foster a fair and impartial deliberation on the principles that should govern a just society. The Veil of Ignorance challenges individuals to consider what kind of society they would choose to live in if they were unaware of their own attributes and position. This exercise encourages the development of principles that prioritize fairness, equality, and justice for all members of society. Behind the Veil of Ignorance, individuals are prompted to conceive of societal arrangements that protect the interests of all individuals, regardless of their background or circumstances. The goal of this thought experiment is to construct a social contract based on principles that are founded on fairness, equal opportunity, and the protection of basic rights for all members of society. Overall, Rawls' thought experiment of the Veil of Ignorance serves as a powerful tool for fostering ethical decision-making, guiding the construction of principles of justice that transcend personal biases and self-interests. By prompting individuals to deliberate from a position of ignorance about their own attributes, the Veil of Ignorance underscores the importance of fairness, equality, and the impartial consideration of the well-being of all individuals in the design of a just and equitable society. Rawls suggested that to achieve fairness and impartiality in determining principles of justice, individuals should make decisions behind a hypothetical "veil of ignorance" where they are unaware of their own social status, natural abilities, or place in society. This approach aims to minimize biases and prejudices by ensuring that decisions are made without knowledge of how they personally would be affected by those decisions. By adopting this perspective, individuals are encouraged to consider the interests of all members of society equally, leading to more just and equitable outcomes. The veil of ignorance concept is intended to promote a more objective and inclusive approach to defining principles of justice that prioritize fairness and equality for all individuals, regardless of their personal circumstances.

**Purpose of the Veil of Ignorance**

The purpose of the Veil of Ignorance, as proposed by philosopher John Rawls, is to promote fairness, impartiality, and equality in decision-making processes, particularly when establishing principles of justice and social institutions. By imagining oneself behind the Veil of Ignorance, individuals are encouraged to make decisions without knowledge of their own personal characteristics, such as their social status, natural abilities, wealth, gender, or race. This hypothetical position of ignorance about one's own circumstances aims to minimize biases, prejudices, and self-interest in the decision-making process. The Veil of Ignorance prompts individuals to consider the needs, interests, and rights of all members of society equally, leading to the formulation of principles of justice that are fair, inclusive, and beneficial for everyone. Ultimately, the purpose of the Veil of Ignorance is to create a more just and equitable society by ensuring that principles of justice are established based on rational and impartial deliberation, free from personal advantages or disadvantages. The concept of the Veil of Ignorance, as articulated by philosopher John Rawls, presents a thought experiment that challenges individuals to make decisions about principles of justice from a position of impartiality and fairness. Behind the Veil of Ignorance, individuals are stripped of knowledge about their own circumstances, such as their social status, natural abilities, or position in society. This state of ignorance forces individuals to consider principles that would be just and equitable for all members of society, without knowing whether they would personally benefit or be disadvantaged by those principles. The rationale behind the Veil of Ignorance is rooted in the idea that in such a scenario, individuals are likely to choose principles that ensure a fair and egalitarian society. The logic behind this choice stems from self-interest: when individuals are unaware of their own circumstances, they are motivated to create a society that safeguards their interests and well-being. By prioritizing fairness and equality behind the Veil of Ignorance, individuals seek to establish a social system that provides protection and opportunities for all, including themselves. Moreover, the Veil of Ignorance serves to eliminate cognitive biases, prejudices, and stereotypes that may influence decision-making processes. When individuals are situated behind the Veil of Ignorance, everyone's interests are aligned in the pursuit of creating a just society that upholds principles of fairness and equality. By removing personal advantages or disadvantages from the equation, individuals are better able to deliberate objectively and consider the broader implications of their decisions for the collective good. Therefore, the Veil of Ignorance acts as a powerful tool for fostering rational and impartial decision-making, free from subjective biases and self-serving interests. It challenges individuals to think beyond their own circumstances and prioritize the creation of a society founded on principles of justice, equity, and inclusivity. In embracing the Veil of Ignorance, individuals are empowered to transcend personal biases and stereotypes, paving the way for the construction of a more just and harmonious social order.

**Principles of Justice**

Rights and liberties, power and opportunities, income and wealth, and conditions necessary for self-respect are fundamental pillars that underpin a just and equitable society. These elements reflect the core values of democracy, social justice, and human dignity, shaping the quality of life and well-being of individuals within a community.

**Rights and Liberties:** The protection of rights and liberties, such as the right to vote, freedom of speech, and equal treatment under the law, forms the bedrock of a democratic society. These rights ensure that individuals have a voice in decision-making processes, can express their opinions without fear of reprisal, and are treated fairly and justly by legal institutions. Upholding these rights is essential for fostering civic engagement, safeguarding individual autonomy, and promoting a culture of accountability and transparency.

**Power and Opportunities:** Access to power and opportunities is crucial for achieving individual potential and pursuing meaningful aspirations. A society that provides equitable access to education, employment, healthcare, and social services empowers individuals to thrive and contribute positively to their communities. By ensuring that power is distributed fairly and opportunities are accessible to all, society can cultivate a sense of agency, resilience, and inclusivity among its members.

**Income and Wealth:** The availability of income and wealth sufficient for a good quality of life is instrumental in addressing economic disparities and promoting social well-being. Adequate access to resources, economic security, and opportunities for upward mobility enable individuals to meet their basic needs, pursue personal goals, and participate fully in societal activities. Fair distribution of income and wealth enhances social cohesion, reduces inequality, and fosters economic stability and prosperity for all members of society.

**Conditions Necessary for Self-Respect:** Creating conditions that uphold human dignity, respect individual autonomy, and nurture a sense of self-worth is essential for fostering a society built on principles of justice and compassion. Providing avenues for personal growth, social recognition, and cultural expression allows individuals to lead fulfilling lives, develop strong interpersonal relationships, and engage with their communities in meaningful ways. Cultivating an environment that values diversity, tolerance, and empathy contributes to a sense of belonging, pride, and self-respect.

among individuals from all walks of life. In essence, the recognition and protection of rights and liberties, the provision of power and opportunities, the equitable distribution of income and wealth, and the promotion of conditions conducive to self-respect are integral components of a humane and equitable society. By upholding these fundamental pillars, communities can strive towards creating a harmonious and inclusive environment where every individual is valued, supported, and empowered to lead a life of dignity, purpose, and fulfilment.

### **How to Apply the Veil of Ignorance**

Imagine a scenario where two children are eagerly awaiting the division of a single cookie. As the arbitrator of this seemingly simple task, how can one ensure a fair and just distribution that satisfies both children and upholds principles of equity? This is where the concept of the Veil of Ignorance comes into play—an ethical framework proposed by philosopher John Rawls that challenges individuals to make decisions impartially, without knowledge of their own position or circumstances, in order to test the fairness of issues and promote considerations of justice and equality. By applying the Veil of Ignorance to the scenario of splitting a cookie between children, one adopts a position of uncertainty, imagining that they could be either the one dividing the cookie or the recipient of a portion. This hypothetical scenario compels the decision-maker to strip away personal biases, preferences, and desires, fostering a state of impartiality and objectivity in the decision-making process. The Veil of Ignorance encourages individuals to transcend self-interest and instead prioritize the well-being and fairness for all parties involved, particularly the most disadvantaged or vulnerable. In the context of the cookie scenario, applying the Veil of Ignorance prompts the decision-maker to consider the perspectives and interests of both children equally, without favoring one over the other based on personal inclinations or partiality. Rather than making a decision that benefits themselves or aligns with their preferences, the focus shifts towards ensuring a just and equitable outcome that accounts for the needs and concerns of all individuals involved. This exercise in impartiality fosters a sense of empathy, fairness, and concern for the welfare of others, even in seemingly minor and trivial situations. Moreover, the Veil of Ignorance encourages a heightened sensitivity towards the plight of the worst-off individual—the one who may receive the smaller portion of the cookie in this scenario. By leveraging this ethical lens, the decision-maker is compelled to weigh the consequences of their choices on the most disadvantaged party, emphasizing the importance of dignity, respect, and compassion in decision-making processes. Through this lens of impartiality and concern for the least advantaged, the Veil of Ignorance serves as a tool for promoting empathy, social justice, and ethical decision-making in everyday interactions and complex societal issues alike. In essence, the application of the Veil of Ignorance to scenarios such as the distribution of a cookie between children underscores the transformative power of impartiality, empathy, and fairness in decision-making processes. By transcending personal biases and considerations, individuals can cultivate a sense of justice, equity, and solidarity, ensuring that choices are made with the utmost regard for the well-being and rights of all individuals, particularly those who may be most vulnerable or in need of support. The Veil of Ignorance serves as a guiding principle for ethical conduct, urging us to embrace a perspective that prioritizes fairness, compassion, and equality in our interactions and engagements with others.

## **2. CRITICISMS AND LIMITATIONS**

### **Unrealistic to completely ignore personal circumstances and biases**

The concept of the Veil of Ignorance, while a powerful tool for promoting fairness and impartiality in decision-making, is not without criticisms and limitations. One of the primary criticisms is that it may be unrealistic, if not impossible, for individuals to completely ignore their personal circumstances, biases, and preferences when making choices. Human beings are inherently shaped by their experiences, beliefs, social identities, and cultural backgrounds, which can influence their perceptions, judgments, and decisions. It is argued that individuals cannot fully detach themselves from their personal biases and predispositions, even when prompted to imagine a hypothetical position of ignorance behind the Veil of Ignorance. Elements such as unconscious biases, psychological tendencies, prior knowledge, and emotional attachments may continue to influence decision-making processes, potentially undermining the objectivity and neutrality that the Veil of Ignorance seeks to achieve. Furthermore, critics suggest that the Veil of Ignorance may not account for the complexities of real-world contexts, where individuals are embedded within social structures, power dynamics, and historical injustices that shape their perspectives and interests. In practical scenarios that involve intricate ethical dilemmas or policy decisions, the Veil of Ignorance may oversimplify the complexities of human behavior and societal interactions, failing to capture the nuanced realities of decision-making processes in diverse and dynamic environments. Another criticism of the Veil of Ignorance is that it may be challenging to apply consistently across various issues and contexts. While the concept encourages individuals to prioritize impartiality and concern for the disadvantaged, the practical implementation of the Veil of Ignorance in everyday decision-making scenarios or policy discussions may be ambiguous or open to interpretation. Different individuals may have varying interpretations of what

constitutes fairness or justice behind the Veil of Ignorance, leading to potential disagreements and inconsistencies in decision outcomes. Despite these criticisms and limitations, the Veil of Ignorance remains a thought-provoking and thought-stimulating concept that encourages individuals to reflect on their personal biases, consider diverse perspectives, and strive towards more equitable and ethical decision-making processes. While it may not be a foolproof or universally applicable ethical framework, the Veil of Ignorance serves as a valuable tool for promoting introspection, empathy, and critical thinking in navigating complex moral dilemmas and societal challenges. By acknowledging its criticisms and limitations, individuals can engage in nuanced discussions and ethical reflections that take into account the multifaceted nature of human judgment and behavior in pursuit of a more just and compassionate society.

Critics have pointed out several significant criticisms and limitations of the Veil of Ignorance concept, highlighting its shortcomings in capturing the complexity of moral decision-making and the challenges of achieving true fairness and equality. One key criticism is that the Veil of Ignorance hides morally relevant information that shapes individuals' identities and experiences, essential aspects that contribute to who we are as human beings. By obscuring personal characteristics, biases, and values behind the veil, the concept may overlook important considerations that influence individuals' ethical perspectives and decision-making processes. The inability to fully account for the diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and identities of individuals can limit the effectiveness of the Veil of Ignorance in promoting comprehensive ethical reasoning and inclusive solutions to complex moral dilemmas. Moreover, critics argue that the Veil of Ignorance may not adequately address the inherent inequalities and disparities that result from pre-birth factors and circumstances outside of individuals' control. The concept of "fair equality of opportunity," which aims to level the playing field and provide equal chances for success regardless of one's starting point in life, faces challenges when confronted with systemic barriers, societal injustices, and structural inequalities that persist before individuals are even born. Factors such as socioeconomic background, parental resources, and genetic predispositions can significantly influence individuals' life outcomes, posing limitations to the extent to which true equality of opportunity can be achieved. The Veil of Ignorance's emphasis on impartiality and neutrality in decision-making may overlook the pervasive influence of structural inequalities and systemic injustices that shape individuals' life prospects and opportunities from the very beginning. While the concept encourages considerations of fairness and equity, the practical implementation of policies and practices that address deep-rooted disparities and ensure genuine equality of opportunity remains a complex and multifaceted challenge that extends beyond the scope of the Veil of Ignorance framework.

By acknowledging these criticisms and limitations, individuals and policymakers can engage in constructive dialogues and critical reflections on the ethical principles and societal norms that shape our decision-making processes and moral judgments. While the Veil of Ignorance offers a valuable theoretical perspective on fairness and impartiality, it is essential to recognize its inherent constraints and consider alternative approaches and frameworks that address the complexities of achieving genuine equality, justice, and inclusivity in a diverse and interconnected world.

### **Findings of Research Article on the Veil of Ignorance**

The research article delves into the implications and applications of the Veil of Ignorance concept, as developed by philosopher John Rawls, in the context of decision-making processes, ethical considerations, and principles of justice. Through a comprehensive analysis of the Veil of Ignorance framework, the article explores its significance in promoting fairness, impartiality, and ethical reasoning in diverse scenarios and societal contexts. The key findings of the research article are summarized as follows:

**1. Effectiveness of the Veil of Ignorance:** The research findings underscore the potential effectiveness of the Veil of Ignorance as a tool for minimizing biases, prejudices, and self-interest in decision-making processes. By prompting individuals to imagine a state of impartiality and uncertainty regarding their personal circumstances, the Veil of Ignorance encourages considerations of justice, fairness, and equality that transcend individual preferences and biases.

**2. Purpose and Impact:** The research highlights the central purpose of the Veil of Ignorance in fostering a fair and egalitarian society where decisions are made with the well-being of all individuals in mind. It emphasizes the importance of removing cognitive biases and stereotypes by aligning everyone's interests behind the Veil of Ignorance, promoting a collective focus on ethical principles and concerns for the most vulnerable members of society.

**3. Principles of Justice:** The research delves into the core principles of justice outlined by John Rawls, emphasizing the significance of rights and liberties, power and opportunities, income and wealth, and conditions necessary for self-respect in promoting a just and equitable society. These principles serve as foundational pillars for ethical decision-making and social policy formulation, aligning with the broader objectives of the Veil of Ignorance framework.

**4. Application and Critique:** The research article explores practical applications of the Veil of Ignorance in various scenarios, such as the distribution of resources, resolution of ethical dilemmas, and policy development. While highlighting the potential benefits of applying the Veil of Ignorance to test the fairness of issues, the research also

acknowledges criticisms and limitations, including the challenges of completely ignoring personal circumstances and biases, as well as the complexities surrounding the achievement of "fair equality of opportunity" in the face of pre-birth factors.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Veil of Ignorance serves as a valuable thought experiment that prompts individuals to consider principles of fairness, equity, and justice by imagining a state of impartiality and uncertainty regarding their personal circumstances. This conceptual framework highlights the significance of impartiality and concern for the disadvantaged in decision-making processes, fostering a collective focus on ethical considerations and the well-being of all members of society. By encouraging individuals to transcend personal biases and preferences, the Veil of Ignorance provides a critical lens through which to evaluate moral dilemmas, social inequalities, and policy decisions. However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of the Veil of Ignorance in fully determining principles of justice for real-world application. While the concept offers valuable insights and promotes ethical deliberation, it may not capture the complexities and nuances of decision-making in diverse and dynamic societal contexts. The idealized nature of the Veil of Ignorance and its reliance on hypothetical scenarios may limit its practical utility in addressing concrete issues and navigating the intricacies of real-world challenges. Despite its limitations, the Veil of Ignorance remains a thought-provoking and thought-stimulating tool for promoting ethical reasoning, critical reflection, and considerations of justice and impartiality. By recognizing the strengths and constraints of the Veil of Ignorance, individuals and policymakers can engage in informed discussions, ethical debates, and policy formulations that prioritize fairness, inclusivity, and compassion in societal interactions and governance. While the Veil of Ignorance may not provide definitive answers to complex ethical dilemmas, it offers a valuable framework for fostering empathy, moral awareness, and principled decision-making in the pursuit of a more just, equitable, and humane society.

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