

MICAH J. SCHWARTZMAN: I'm very happy to welcome Charles Larmore who will be delivering our Keynote address. I just want to say a few brief words of introduction. After earning his doctorate at Yale, Professor Larmore joined the faculty at Columbia, initially, at the Society of Fellows and then in the departments of philosophy in German.

In 1997, he left Columbia for the University of Chicago, where he was Professor of Philosophy and Political Science until 2006, when he became the W. Duncan MacMillan Family Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy at Brown University. Professor Larmore is author of more than 150 papers and 12 books, including *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, *The Romantic Legacy*, *Morals of Modernity*, and the *Autonomy of Morality*.

And putting the rest of us to shame, more than a half dozen titles in French, German, and as I understand it, Italian. His most recent book is *What is Political Philosophy?* And his address to us today is entitled "The Permanent Achievement of a Theory of Justice." Professor Larmore, thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

CHARLES LARMORE: Thank you, Micah. And thank you also to Blaine and Laurie for organizing this conference and for organizing the splendid weather outside. So I haven't seen in Providence for several months now. So thank you all for that. And I'm going to-- well, I was told, of course, I have to give my talk with my mask on, which is fine.

But the trouble is that I have a tendency, when I have my glasses on and the mask on, for my glasses to fog up. And I can't read my paper without my glasses. So we'll see how long it goes. But I may, at certain points, have to lower my mask. But I've been vaccinated. So the title of this talk is "The Permanent Achievement of a Theory of Justice."

So in 1907, Benedetto Croce published a retrospective book entitled *What is Living and What is Dead in the Philosophy of Hegel?* His aim was to distinguish those aspects of Hegel's system that must certainly be counted as unacceptable or confused. And those there is good reason to regard as correct.

In the following remarks, I, too, want to look back in retrospect at John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, published 50 years ago, to discern what this great work contains of universally indisputable importance. However, my aim is rather different from approaches. I do not propose to separate out the truths it contains from the surrounding errors.

Over the past half century, philosophers have disagreed about where such a line is to be drawn, and they will surely continue to do so. In this regard, *A Theory of Justice* is no different from any other major philosophical work. I want, instead, to lay out what we all ought to see, amidst the continuing controversies about the various elements of Rawls's account of distributive justice, to be the uncontroversial that is permanent achievement this book represents.

It's often said that the appearance of *A Theory of Justice* in 1971 rescued political philosophy from the doldrums into which it had sunk during the first half of the century, largely because of the hegemony of logical positivism. This view, seems to me, quite off the mark.

The 20th century political philosophy in the English-speaking world was by no means dormant before Rawls's first essays began appearing in the mid-1950s. Should be obvious if one thinks of such earlier figures as Hobhouse, Oakeshott, Popper, Arendt, Berlin, and Hart.

But more crucially, the idea that the enormous impact of *A Theory of Justice* lay in restoring political philosophy to its rightful place as an essential branch of philosophy misses the revolutionary significance of this work. Rawls's book demonstrated that justice-- and in particular, distributive justice-- could be the object of a detailed systematic theory at all.

To explain what I mean, I will first survey the best known objections to the very foundations of Rawls's theory. Each of them is a site of ongoing controversy. With regard to the various challenges they raise, Rawls may indeed be in the wrong. But what this survey should make apparent is the common assumption that all these objections, otherwise diverse, nonetheless make.

They all accept the legitimacy of the enterprise itself in which Rawls is engaged, namely, the construction of a comprehensive theory of distributive justice. Now, it's precisely such an undertaking that was unprecedented in the history of political philosophy.

Whereas, I will next go on to point out, no one-- not Plato or Aristotle or any medieval or modern thinker-- had ever so much as contemplated the possibility of developing a theory of this sort. I begin then with one of the most powerful critiques-- my view, anyway-- of Rawls's theory to appear.

It was Ronald Dworkin's essay "The Original Position," published in the *University of Chicago Law Review* 1973 and directed against the very framework in which Rawls housed his theory. I quote, "a hypothetical contract-- Dworkin protests it-- is not simply a pale form of an actual contract. It is no contract at all. No one is bound by a contract they would supposedly have agreed to under imagined conditions."

At best-- Dworkin claimed-- the contractarian form of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* is but a device for calling attention to some independent argument, as independent from the contractarian form, for the fairness of the two principles of justice being expounded.

The deeper theory that underlies this account is, according to Dworkin, a rights-based theory, based, moreover, on the existence of natural rights-- rights that is whose validity and authority does not depend on any agreement or enactment by the citizens of the society.

The key natural right in question is said to be a right to-- as Dworkin said-- equal concern and respect in the design and administration of political institutions that govern them. A natural right that is not a product of the contract but a condition of admission to the original position, if indeed one really wants to use that expository device.

In short, Rawls was wrong to believe that the contractarian tradition offers the best or the proper antidote to the hegemony of utilitarian thought in Anglo-American moral and political philosophy. In his own theory, the contract framework is only window dressing. If Dworkin is right, then Rawls has misunderstood what he was really about.

The theory he has presented as a superior alternative to utilitarian views of social justice is actually-- according to Dworkin-- a natural right or natural law conception. In the later book *Justice is Fairness*, Rawls responded to Dworkin's critique.

He acknowledged that the original position of the contract supposedly instituted there are simply, as he said, a divisive representation designed for the purpose of public and self clarification-- Rawls's words-- just as in *A Theory of Justice* itself. He termed them an expository device.

This response seems inadequate, however, for the question that Dworkin raise is how clarifactory this device really is, if it masks the actual structure of the theory. I, myself, think that Rawls could have done a bit better for what the contract metaphor expresses. And what Dworkin's reconstruction of the theory fails to bring out is that justice consists in more than the proper distribution of rights and resources.

The validity of a contract, that is an actual contract, turns both on its terms and on the fact of agreement. So to the principles of justice in a true liberal democracy should be such that each citizen can see reason to affirm them in the light of the fact, in light of the shared recognition of the fact that others affirm them as well.

They must be affirmable from common ground amongst people who, otherwise, tend to differ about the good and the right. But Rawls already called publicity in *A Theory of Justice*, comes close to acknowledging this point as when he writes that a society is ruled by, as he says, a public conception of justice, if it is one in which everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice.

And he also says the condition of publicity for principles of justice is connoted by the contract phraseology. His later conception of public reason develops the point explicitly. All the same, this aspect of his conception of social justice, like the rest, would, no doubt, have come out more clearly if he had avoided the easily misleading talk about hypothetical contracts.

For the contract metaphor, even in this regard, remains but a phraseology. Next is the important and influential critique that Robert Nozick developed. Overall, this rejection of the idea that income and wealth should be distributed in accord with desert, when desert is defined in terms of effort.

It's wrong to hold-- so Rawls argued-- that individuals deserve what they acquire by their own efforts without thereby violating existing laws or more fundamentally, without undermining the ability of others to similarly acquire property by their own efforts. For-- as Rawls says-- the effort a person is willing to make is influenced by his natural abilities and skills and the alternatives open to him.

And he also says, one of the fixed points of our moral judgments is that no one deserves his place in the distribution of natural assets. Natural assets as well as the use people make of them are, according to Rawls, as he says numerous times, arbitrary from the moral point of view. Yet, Nozick objected. This is, of course, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.

He said, quote, "this line of argument attributes everything noteworthy about a person completely to certain sorts of external factors. So denigrating a person's autonomy and prime responsibility for his actions-- this is still Nozick-- is a risky line to take for a theory that otherwise wishes to buttress the dignity and self-respect of autonomous beings."

Nozick went, indeed, further. And in a remark that influenced many others, notably, Michael Sandel, to complain about Rawls's notion of an unencumbered self charge that Rawls-- and I quote him-- "presses very hard on the distinction between men-- human beings-- and their talents, assets, abilities, and special traits. Whether any coherent conception of the person remains when the distinction is suppressed is an open question." The end of the quote.

But the most damaging criticism that Nozick put forward lies in pointing out a very questionable assumption that Rawls was making throughout his discussion of desert. Rawls assumed that a person deserves something X, only if they deserve whatever they used in order to acquire X. But why assume, Nozick insightfully protested.

The desert, quote, "goes all the way down." I don't believe that Rawls ever answered directly this objection, that he never really faced it. And then there is HLA Hart's critique of the priority that Rawls attributes to his liberty principle, that is of the thesis "The Liberty Principle" that a basic liberty, covered by the first liberty principle, can be limited only for the sake of liberty itself.

That is only to ensure that the same liberty or a different basic liberty is properly protected and to adjust the one system of liberties in the best way. In his essay, in the same issue at the *University of Chicago Law Review*, Hart contended in almost every case where we think that an individual liberty should be limited.

It is in order to secure other values, besides liberty, or to prevent harms other than the loss of liberty. If freedom of self-government, for instance, needs to be limited by a Bill of Rights protecting such liberties, as the freedom of speech, the restriction cannot be understood as serving to maximize individual liberty overall.

Rather, it must be the value of freedom of speech. It is the various sorts of good it involves or promotes that requires the constraints to be placed on self-government. Or the limitations placed on freedom of speech itself, as through the institution of libel and slander laws, can only be justified by the need to prevent certain kinds of pain and unhappiness.

One may claim that in principle, liberty takes priority over other values involved in justice. But when it comes to working out how a just society should, in fact, look, we must find-- Hart was arguing-- that individual liberty is but one value among others. Moreover, Hart's critique reaches even further.

For in the back of his mind, I believe, was a sort of conception of justice that Rawls called intuitionist and that he, Rawls, was doing his best to avoid, namely, the pluralist idea that justice itself involves a number of ultimate values-- liberty, avoidance of harm, satisfaction of needs, and so on-- that have to always be weighed against one another in determining what counts as just social arrangements.

Like Dworkin, though in a different direction, Hart believed that Rawls had misunderstood the actual tendency of his thinking. I'm not persuaded that Rawls's reply to Hart's objection in Rawls's essay "The Basic Liberties and Their Priority," 1981, is entirely successful.

His reply consists basically in substituting for the original notion that conflicts between liberties are to be handled by reference to what the representative equal citizen would prefer on the basis of their rational interests. The new notion that referenced is to be made to what such citizens would prefer in order to exercise their two moral powers-- that is a sense of justice and the capacity to work out a conception of the good.

I suspect that the other values that, as Hart charged, come into play when determining how individual liberty is to be limited, have now simply been housed within the makeup of these two moral powers. Another line of fundamental criticism focuses on the way that Rawls's basic definition of a society shapes or more exactly, profoundly distorts his conception of social justice.

A society-- Rawls writes at the very beginning of *A Theory of Justice*-- I quote him-- "is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage." This is the interpretation of society that, as he states explicitly, structures his theory of justice as fairness. However, this definition of a society will hardly do. First, society is nothing like a venture.

It consists in shared habits, of thought and action that making us who we are, enable us to take up the ventures that we do pursue. But more directly relevant to questions of justice, there is the inevitable fact that a great many members of society are in no position to take part in relations of social cooperation for mutual advantage.

Think of infants, the mentally disabled, and the doddering elderly, which, especially with the advances of modern society, we all have a good chance of becoming and remaining for a considerable amount of time. It surely, as Martha Nussbaum has insisted in her book *Frontiers of Justice*, they, too, are subjects of distributive justice.

And *A Theory of Justice* that focuses solely on citizens of relatively sound mind and body is importantly false to the inherent vicissitudes of the human condition. Yet another profound critique of *A Theory of Justice* was developed by G.A. or Jerry Cohen. It has two connected parts, signaled in the title of Cohen's major work *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, 2008.

According to him, Rawls confuses fundamental principles of justice on the one hand, with rules of social regulation on the other. Whereas, the former fundamental principles of justice, according to Cohen, defined the ideally fair distribution of the essential benefits and burdens of social life without regard to the question of how social life ought to be arranged in the light of facts about human nature and people's beliefs and motivations.

The latter, rules of social regulation, seek on the basis of precisely such facts to apply fundamental principles of justice to the solution of various social problems. Rawls, Cohen claimed, fails to properly distinguish the two since his theory of justice is built around what are called, ever since Hume, the circumstances of justice-- limited scarcity, limited altruism, people's conflicting ends and purposes.

Factors, which in reality, are relevant only for determining the rules of social regulation. This part of Cohen's critique seems to me very weak. Aristotle, for instance, likewise regarded justice as a purely moral ideal. Yet he, Aristotle, thought it laughable that the gods would care about justice, making contracts and returning deposits, as he says, since they face none of the social problems that human beings do.

In general, I think Cohen thought, normative principles are responses to problems that arise in the world in which we live. Indeed, such principles refer to what we may call standing reasons for how to think erect. The principle that were not to help anyone in distress is tantamount to the proposition that one has, as a rule, good reason to do so.

And reasons themselves consists in the way that empirical facts count in favor of certain of our possibilities of thought and action. Principles of justice are similarly fact dependent. Nevertheless, there are certainly facts about what people want and believe, on which it cannot be supposed, that the nature of justice depends.

And here, the second part of Cohen's critique is very much stronger. No one should think that the fair distribution of resources has to respect some people's exceptional greed. They wish to be richer than their neighbors or their prejudices with regard to various religious or ethnic groups.

So too, Cohen may well be justified in charging that Rawls was wrong to let the terms of economic justice be shaped by the self-interest of the more, quote, "talented and productive members of society", rewarding them-- in accordance with the difference principle-- with greater wealth so that they will have the incentive to engage in those activities whose effect is to make the least well-off better off than they otherwise would be.

If this objection is sound, then his, Cohen's, more far reaching point may also be valid, namely, that the egalitarian ethos, he puts it. At the heart of Rawls's principles of justice, governing the basic structure of society should also-- contrary to the moral division of labor central to Rawls's own theory-- animate, in a truly just society, the day-to-day lives of citizens and thus, lead them to forego through agreeing, for example, to appropriate taxation the incentives of high salaries in order to do what they individually can do to better the condition of the worse off.

Finally, I would like to pour some luster, if I may add a basic objection of my own to this illustrious list. Near the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls declared. He says justice is the first virtue of social institutions as truth is of systems of thought. He continues, a theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised if it is untrue.

Likewise, laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. This is not, however, the-- as Rawls says-- common sense conviction he supposes it to be. To be short, social institutions that are unjust are importantly defective. And steps should be taken, if possible, to bring the society closer to what justice requires.

But should the reform or abolition of unjust institutions take precedence over every other sort of consideration at the expense of whatever other merits the institutions may possess? This is apparently what Rawls meant when he attributed to justice the status of a first virtue. He explained, an injustice is intolerable only when-- sorry. [INAUDIBLE]

An injustice is tolerable, says Rawls, only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice. Yet is this true? Consider once again Rawls's statement that society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage. I've already indicated why this is a poor definition and how it distorts his idea of social justice.

But the idea of Rawls had in mind is that the justice of a society's institutions has to do with the terms on which they enable cooperation among its members. Although people can count as cooperating if they're acting together so as to produce results that are to the advantage of them all, relative to the absence of cooperation, the rules by which they cooperate are unjust if some profit more from the results than they should and others less.

Because for instance, the rules have been dictated by differences in power among the parties concerned. Relations of mutual advantage are just only if they are also fair. However-- and this is my objection-- precisely because unjust institutions may still be mutually advantageous, reforming or abolishing them simply because they are unjust, without attending to any other considerations, can sometimes mean a loss in social cooperation.

Perhaps, if such an institution is eliminated, no other way of coordinating people's actions in this area of society will then be feasible. Or perhaps, making the rules of the institution more just will lead those who profited from the previous arrangement to no longer take part in the institution's activities. Not in every case, of course, does cooperation serve to achieve some actual good.

Gang of thieves can work together. But when it does, it may do so without its terms being just. A fact, we can make a useful product even though its workers are exploited. For that reason, the pursuit of justice sometimes needs to be weighed against the importance of there being cooperation at all. Depending on the circumstances, justice may not always prove to be the first or overriding virtue of social institutions.

But they can embody valuable forms of cooperation, however unjust their defining rules may happen to be. The situation is not, in fact, so different with truth and systems of thought, Rawls's analogy. All else being equal, Rawls is right. A theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised if it is untrue.

But sometimes, it can be better to hold on to an overarching view of things-- we know to be, in certain respects, false but only approximately true-- if the alternative is to have no such view at all or one whose content has been reduced to the parts that appears strictly true. For without a general vision of that sort, we may lack the ability to orient ourselves in the world to make sense, if only partially, of the things that interest us.

Truth is certainly the supreme virtue of systems of thought, as justice is of social institutions. Truth and justice are what we ultimately aim at. But they're not necessarily the first virtue that is the value whose pursuit must always outweigh all other considerations.

Now my purpose in running through these critiques of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* has not been to adjudicate where the truth lies, even when I was reciting my own objection. Instead, I've wanted, first of all, to underscore how fundamental they all are. They do not consist in calling into question some specific step in Rawls's arguments, however crucial that step may be. They have not, in other words, been like John Harsanyi's objection.

The behind the veil of ignorance, where the probabilities of where they may end up in the various distributive schemes under consideration are unknown, the parties in the original position would not resort to roles as rule of maximum but instead, relying on the principle of insufficient reason, would assign equal probabilities to the different outcomes, and thus, opt for the difference principle but for a version of average utilitarianism.

The critiques I have summarized, by contrast, are all engaged in contesting the basic shape itself that Rawls gave to his theory. As I emphasized at the outset, however, I've also wanted to indicate, at least implicitly, what these critiques continue to share with roles.

Whether they bemoan the contractualist form of his theory of justice, its dismissal of desert, its resistance to pluralism, its neglect of human frailty, its moral division of labor, or its failure to recognize competing values, they, nonetheless, accept the legitimacy of the sort of comprehensive theory that Rawls developed.

When Nozick wrote-- also, in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*-- that political philosophers now must either work within Rawls's theory or explain why not, he clearly meant that those in the latter camp, like himself, ought to aim to produce an alternative theory of similar ambition and thoroughness.

It's impossible, Nozick continued, to finish his book without a new and inspiring vision of what a moral theory may attempt to do and unite, of how beautiful a whole theory can be. That was precisely, in laying out a theory of this scope, that Rawls changed forever, I believe, the landscape of political philosophy.

No one had ever before resented a systematic, tightly-argued account of the principles, their implications, and the ordering among them, that ought to govern the distribution of rights and duties, resources, opportunities, and positions in society, including the way these principles and the basic institutions embodying them interconnect with human psychology and the nature of the human good.

One might think that Plato's *Republic*, whose ancient subtitle was indeed on justice, is already such a work. But in fact, what it has to say about social justice itself is very rudimentary, as I'm sure you probably all had experienced if you had to teach the book. Says Plato, every person is to do the one thing for which they are, by nature, most suited. Whatever.

We can, of course, set out to reconstruct a comprehensive theory of justice from Plato's Republican laws as we also can from book five of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, from Aquinas's discussions of justice in the *Summa Theologiae* and in his commentary on Aristotle's ethics, from the writings of Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, from Ponce [INAUDIBLE] in the *Metaphysik der Sitten*, or from chapter five of Mill's *Utilitarianism*.

Indeed, many have written books to, precisely, this purpose, inspired indeed, by Rawls's example. But imagine a book that undertook to reconstruct or flesh out Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. What could that possibly mean? We already have a more than 500-page book by Rawls that gives us his theory in full detail. If anything, we need efforts to distill the essence or gist of his conception of justice.

As Nozick intimated, political philosophy, with the publication of this book, would never be the same again. Rawls showed by example how distributive justice could be made the object, not merely of demands and grievances, reflections, and principles but of a systematic theory, encompassing extended arguments, methodological discussion, point-by-point comparison with alternatives, and many interlocking parts.

It's not merely a matter of the length of the book. He showed what an actual theory of justice would look like. An important question is, why Rawls was able to do what he did? We mustn't, of course, discount the role of individual genius. But genius flourishes only in enabling circumstances. It cannot have been by chance that *A Theory of Justice* appeared when it did.

What were the historical factors that favor the elaboration of what deserves to be called, I think, in the full sense of that term, the first true theory of justice. One decisive influence was the increasing realization in the 18th century, pioneered by thinkers such as Rousseau and Adam Smith, that social hierarchies and economic relations are not preordained but instead of the contingent result of human interactions, if not, perhaps, if anyone's conscious design.

In particular, the newly emerging science of economics made it apparent that poverty and need as well as large disparities between rich and poor are far from ineluctable. In principle, they can, therefore, be remedied so as to bring about a fairer distribution of the benefits and burdens of society. Another crucial element was the nearly two centuries of experience with successive endeavors to devise and reform liberal and democratic institutions.

Much had been learned of general import from drawing up constitutions and grappling with the difficulties and dangers of democratic self-rule. Without this intellectual and political background, the sort of all-embracing theory of justice that Rawls produced, tying together complex accounts of political liberty and economic fairness, would not have been possible.

Pointing out the preconditions, historical preconditions for the writing of *A Theory of Justice* does not imply any sort of historical relativism. The idea is not to put in doubt the universal validity that Rawls, at least in this book, claimed for his account of distributive justice. For the modern developments I've mentioned involved above, after all, discoveries of what is in fact true.

People in the past were wrong-- were they not-- to believe at the shape of human society was divinely instituted as opposed to being a human construction. No doubt, it would have been next to impossible to realize Rawls's conception of justice in premodern societies, realize in the sense of put into practice. But is it any more feasible today?

Concerns with feasibility cut both ways. To what extent can constitutional democracy flourish and economic justice be advanced in an age like ours, ruled by the polarizing and conspiracy-mongering influence of the internet and social media? If today's imperfect democratic societies-- we have changed the paper a bit to keep up with current events and in response to what [INAUDIBLE] to me earlier.

If today's imperfect democratic societies cannot or only with great reluctance, more shall we resolve to impose emergency measures, such as mandatory vaccination, so as to achieve the herd immunity needed to contain a life-endangering pandemic. What chance have they to muster the common purpose and resources to lessen or even confront the impending catastrophes that climate change will surely bring?

The political ideals we see reason to endorse and the prospects for putting them into practice are two quite separate things. It no more detracts from the groundbreaking achievement of Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, but it rests on historical preconditions, then that history itself stands in the way of this theory ever becoming a reality.

Well, my question, whether we really need a theory of justice in the ideal, like the one that Rawls presented. Thus, Amartya Sen has argued that we can make comparative judgments about whether one society or social arrangement is more just than another, without having to specify what would count as a fully or ideally-just society.

Sen denies that-- he says-- the identification of the best is necessary to rank any two alternatives in terms of justice. That's in his book *The Idea of Justice* but also an article in the *Journal of Philosophy*, 2006. His example, by way of analogy, Sen's, is that we can compare the heights of-- hope I'm saying it right-- Kanchenjunga and [INAUDIBLE], two of the very high mountains-- without having to refer to the tallest mountain in the world, namely, Everest.

However, justice is not like height and extensive magnitude or even like loudness and intensive magnitude with respect to which we can rank things as more or less, without having to appeal to what would count as the most, the highest, or the loudest. If justice can be understood as a magnitude at all-- and if so, then surely as an intensive magnitude-- it is very deafening kind from such magnitudes-- magnitudes of height allow us.

When we compare two societies in terms of a particular aspect of justice, for instance, the value given to individual liberty, and judge of the one is, in this respect, at least, more just than the other because it guarantees not merely freedom of conscience, like the other, but also freedom of assembly, we have to have, at our disposal, a list of basic liberties that we regard as essential to a just society, where we have to suppose that this is a complete list that we have-- in other words, a conception of the ideal justice society, at least in regard to the protection of individual liberty.

For if this were incomplete, then we could not assume that in some further regard, not mentioned on our existing list, the other society guarantees a form of individual liberty that the first does not. We cannot, that is exclude the possibility, that it is no less just or maybe even more just than the first. The reason for this difference is that justice and height or loudness between them is not hard to discern.

Height and loudness are essentially comparative notions. Nothing is, per se, tall or loud. When we say that something is simply tall or loud, you mean that it is taller or louder than the average or than what we are used to. Everest may be the tallest mountain in existence, but we can certainly imagine a taller one.

Apparently, so I informed myself, Kanchenjunga was thought, until the 1850s, to be taller than the-- some Italian-- sorry, some Indian mathematicians discovered as well. For exactly this reason, it makes no sense to say of anything that it is perfectly tall or perfectly loud. But justice, by contrast, is not an essentially comparative concept that we can, of course, compare different social arrangements in terms of their justice.

It's instead, by its nature, an absolute notion. It makes sense to say that something, societies say, is just per se just. And what is then meant is that it is fully, perfectly just. When we say that one social arrangement is more just than another, you mean, therefore, that it is-- perhaps only in a certain respect-- closer to being quite simply just, ideally just.

On this point, if not on others, Plato seems to be entirely right when he has Socrates say in the *Republic* that quote, "it is in order to have an ideal pattern that we have been seeking with justice itself is like." No doubt, certain parts of *A Theory of Justice* involved insights into the nature of justice that were, in fact, never grasped so clearly before.

And they constitute lasting discoveries that future theorizing about justice ought to incorporate. Yet, they do not constitute what I consider to be the permanent, incontestable achievement of this book. After all, we can be sure that since it is a work of philosophy, the value of those parts, too, will be disputed or even dismissed by some.

What makes *A Theory of Justice*, the book, an extraordinary event, unparalleled in the history of political philosophy, that everyone must acknowledge, lies elsewhere. It lies in Rawls having demonstrated the possibility of a comprehensive, that is wide-ranging, fully-explicit, systematically-argued theory of distributive justice. He showed, for the first time, what can be done. Thanks.

[APPLAUSE]