

PLSC 118: Moral Foundations of Politics
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Nabeem Hashem

The Lottery of Babylon and the Justice of Random Chance

by Nabeem Hashem

In Borges' fictional short story, "The Lottery of Babylon," the citizens of Babylon are subjected to an institutionalized lottery that randomly determines each of their fates. Political power, income and wealth, and even natural capacities are distributed by chance and chance alone. Many would be horrified to hear of such a scheme- indeed, it would seem that in Babylon our cherished ideas of individualism and self-determination are replaced by complete helplessness at the hands of fate. At the same time, others might say that the Babylonians are in a position not too different from our own, as chance may dictate our lives in a way far greater than we might think. Questions of just distributions and the organization of political society are fundamental to our modes of political thought, so it is natural to ask whether this lottery, unrealistic as it may seem, could serve as a just distributive scheme in a society with the means to implement it. I make the claim that, while this particular distributive scheme embodies aspects of fairness, in the form it is presented in Borges' short story it ultimately fails to be wholly just, and is far from the best way to distribute goods in a society.

The lottery we are presented with in the story is one that repeats ad infinitum. Every aspect of the Babylonians' lives is continually left to chance. Thus, the lottery not only determines the initial distribution of power, wealth, and natural capacities in society, but also continues to randomly alter that distribution through repeated use. A single drawing could bring a man from riches to rags- as the narrator notes, "Like all the men of Babylon, I have been

proconsul; like all I have been a slave.” However, it would be illuminating to consider the lottery’s use as a determinant of initial distribution as well as its use as a repeatedly applied distribution mechanism in order to better understand our question of whether or not it is a just institution.

Suppose that the people of Babylon, with the introduction of the lottery, had all their wealth, power, and natural capacities set to zero, leaving them in a state of complete equality. The lottery would then determine who gets how much of each in society, creating an initial distribution which society would then build off of. We have no sense of what kind of distribution would be created- the lottery could result in a society of completely equal Babylonians or a society in which a small number are given great wealth and power and the masses are left poor and ignorant- we only know that there will be *some* kind of distribution. Is this mechanism of distributing goods in society just? To answer this question, I will frame our assessment in terms of Rawl’s theory of “justice as fairness,” as the foundations of his argument draw striking parallels to the hypothetical. The people of Babylon, in their initial state in which all their goods are set to zero, fit Rawl’s description of men in the original position. They are blind to all of their endowments as they do not yet exist. Further, they are in completely symmetric positions, unable to take advantage of any sort of bias to come to a conclusion about the just way to distribute goods in society. With all of these factors in mind, would they not then conclude that it would be most fair to distribute goods through a random lottery? No one man has the power to claim that he deserves a bigger piece of the pie than another, as he is the same as all other men. The lottery factors in the equality of all parties by leaving everything up to chance, so that no one is at an advantage or a disadvantage- everyone has an equal opportunity to the fate determined by the

lottery. In that sense, then, it would be argued that the lottery exhibits the quality of justice as fairness.

However, Rawls would note that the argument does not end there. As mentioned before, we have no idea what kind of distribution the lottery results in. The lottery could very well produce a steeply graded society in which the rich hold all political power and possess the greatest natural aptitudes. The poor could end up at the mercy of the wealthy. Such a scheme would certainly be unjust according to Rawls, as well as according to our own intuitions. Consider the parallel the situation draws to how wealth is distributed in our society. As a matter of policy, methods of wealth distribution are largely limited to institutions like taxation, where some of the wealth from the most fortunate in society is transferred to the less fortunate. But also consider how wealth is determined for people just entering into the society. Children are born into the circumstances of their parents- their natural capacities are determined by genetics, their ability to succeed and their projected level of income and power are influenced by the environment in which they grow up. Rawls calls this paradigm a *natural lottery* in the system of natural liberty. He says,

The existing distribution of income and wealth, say, is the cumulative effect of prior distributions of natural assets—that is, natural talents and abilities—as these have been developed or left unrealized, and their use favored or disfavored over time by social circumstances and such chance contingencies as accident and good fortune. Intuitively, the most obvious injustice of the system of natural liberty is that it permits distributive shares to be improperly influenced by these factors so arbitrary from a moral point of view.

Rawls concludes that the most fundamental injustice in the system of natural liberty is rooted in the arbitrariness by which it is governed. By this logic, the dominating influence of *any* arbitrary factors, even chance itself, on the determination of a distribution of wealth would render that distribution mechanism unjust if it resulted in a society where some were at a great advantage over others. Therefore, in the same way that there is a sense of injustice in the morally arbitrary metric that the natural lottery relies on, there is a sense of injustice in the equally arbitrary lottery creating such a graded distributive share when no one in the society has any previous legitimate claims to such advantages or disadvantages. The idea of having goods distributed based on chance exhibits a kind of fairness, but how can we call it just when it could potentially create such an unjust distribution? The justice of the scheme ultimately depends not only on the quintessential fairness behind random chance, but on the justice of the distribution it results in.

This idea can be further supported by Rawls' discussion of the distinction between *institutions as realized* and *institutions as abstract objects*. Rawls notes,

An institution may be thought of in two ways: first as an abstract object, that is, as a possible form of conduct expressed by a system of rules; and second, as the realization in the thought and conduct of certain persons at a certain time and place of the actions specified by these rules.... It seems best to say that it is the institution as realized and effectively and impartially administered which is just or unjust. The institution as an abstract object is just or unjust in the sense that any realization of it would be just or unjust.

Rawls argues that we cannot determine the justness of the institution unless we determine the justness of the institution as realized. In this case, our considerations of the lottery as an abstract object deal only with the idea of random chance being a just determination of the initial

distribution of goods in a society. However, our considerations of the lottery as realized must not only include these considerations, but also considerations of the actual outcome of the lottery. Thus, while the use of random chance may seem fair as an abstract idea, the lottery fails to be just as it can realize unjust distributions of wealth.

This brings about another point in that, if the Babylonians in the initial position did indeed fit Rawls' description of the original position and were to follow some kind of maximin principle rather than being heavily influenced by greed, it is unlikely that they would actually find that the lottery to be the *most* just scheme to implement. Rather, as a matter of achieving the same degree of fairness and preventing the possibility of creating an unjust situation, the Babylonians would likely come to one of three conclusions. The first conclusion would be to distribute goods according to a fully egalitarian scheme. In this case, there would be no need for chance to determine the organization of society, as the scheme would adhere strictly to the equality of the citizens. The Babylonians could also come to a second conclusion where they decide that strict egalitarianism would lead to a less efficient society than a graded distribution. They would likely decide on the distribution that would maximize efficiency and then hold a lottery to determine who ends up getting what. The third conclusion would be to base the distribution of goods on a mixture of both efficiency and equality, and then have a lottery. This could be similar, for example, to the conclusion reached by the representatives in Rawls' original position- a distributive scheme based on equality of basic rights first and foremost and an egalitarian economic system where any inequalities would be in the benefit of the least fortunate.

However, only the first conclusion fully meets the requirements of justice in our argument. Even if we take efficiency into account, as long as we have a lottery, we have an arbitrary metric having a dominating influence over the distributive shares in society. If it is

determined that it would be efficient to have one person live in destitution and another live in extravagant wealth, with a lottery then being held to determine the two people who will end up living in those respective conditions, what is to say that it is just that those two particular people ended up in those particular positions? Again we are faced with a situation in which people are dealt advantages and disadvantages in society when no one had any previous legitimate claims to them. Even if it is known from the outset that a wholly unjust distribution of goods couldn't result from the lottery, this characteristic of the lottery prevents the two latter conclusions from being just, though they may still be more practical. The most just option would then be to distribute initial goods according to an egalitarian scheme from which society could then develop off of, which fully recognizes the idea that no one person is more deserving than another in an initial position. We have then come to a stronger conclusion than before, but one that is still consistent with our previous argument: the injustice of the lottery is a byproduct not only of the potentially unjust distributions it could create, but also of the morally arbitrary nature of the lottery itself.

I now turn to the investigation of the lottery as a repeated redistributive scheme. Suppose that, after the lottery determined an initial distribution, the lottery continued to determine the course of people's lives, providing a continuous source of punishments and rewards for the population and thus constantly redistributing goods in society. This is the manifestation of the lottery we see in Borges' short story- in the last line, the narrator, reflecting on the mysterious nature of the corporation that runs the massive lottery, notes, "Another, no less despicable, argues that it makes no difference whether one affirms or denies the reality of the shadowy corporation, because Babylon is nothing but an infinite game of chance." One might make the argument that the lottery in this form is actually more just than the lottery as a determinant of

initial distribution, as any unjust distribution produced by the initial iteration could be continually corrected for. One might find complete fairness in allowing everyone the opportunity to experience both the intense highs and the intense lows of life, allowing them to at one point be the head of government and at another point to be a pauper.

However, the issues with the justice of this lottery are far more fundamental than those we met in our previous discussion. At face value, the lottery is unflinchingly committed to the ideal of equal chance for all. Yet, we must distinguish *equal chance* from *equal opportunity*. Equal chance is based on having everyone subject to the same random determinants to establish their place in society. The individual's wills are ultimately disregarded in favor of the roll of a dice. Equal opportunity, on the other hand, is based on limiting the arbitrary factors that might prevent someone from being able to achieve a certain position in society. Affirmative action in the United States, for example, aims to even the playing field for minorities by attempting to limit the effects of the natural lottery. In a scheme committed to equal opportunity, there is room for a conception of the individual as a being of his own devices. The individual is able to make his own choices about how hard he wants to work to achieve higher positions in society and isn't hindered in his ability to follow through on those choices. If we are to believe that there is indeed value in the individual, we can surely agree that any mechanism that distributes goods in a society should be able to accommodate for this sense of workmanship. However, the lottery rejects equal opportunity and workmanship outright and instead adheres strictly to an almost perverted sense of equal chance. The lottery takes fairness to a twisted extreme, *fair* only in a sense that disregards human nature and the qualities that make us independent, thinking beings. Essentially, those subjected to the lottery become its slaves. Rawls posits that any political conception of justice should "assure for all citizens sufficient all-purpose means to make

effective use of their freedoms.” Yet, the lottery deprives citizens of this very right. Marx, in his own limited conception of justice, claims “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Yet, any citizen could make his contribution to society and only get punishment in return, or a reward far disproportionate to his contribution. No matter the conception of justice, the lottery fails to be just, as it deprives citizens of the fundamental right of having control over their own fate. Society becomes an organized chaos where citizens know nothing but the mercy or cruelty of chance.

The lottery in “The Lottery of Babylon” presents a unique scenario in our perpetual musings on the justness of distributive institutions in society. While the random chance aspect of the lottery gives the lottery a sense of fairness in a limited, abstract sense, we cannot separate the lottery itself from the distribution that it eventually creates. As I have shown, because of the fact that the lottery could potentially create an unjust distribution of goods, as well as the inherently morally arbitrary nature of random chance, it fails to be just as an initial distribution mechanism. Furthermore, in the form it is presented in Borges’ short story, in which the Babylonian’s lives are completely dictated by chance, the lottery infringes upon the rights and qualities most fundamental to human existence. Chance has its appeal, but our human condition can only reject it as the dictator of our fates.

Works Cited

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