

Does ‘manna from heaven’ matter for theories of justice?

The uses and significance of a curious philosophical example offered against Rawls

Nobody has ever seen manna falling from heaven. Yet, philosophers as different as Robert Nozick and G. A. Cohen have used this counterfactual scenario to criticize John Rawls’s difference principle. Nozick, on the one hand, has used it to pull justice away from equality. In *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, he claims that the difference principle would be plausible ‘if things fell from heaven like manna, and no one had any special entitlement to any portion of it’ (1974, 198). This is not our world, however, given that things are produced by people, and that there are differential entitlements attached to what people do. Cohen, on the other hand, has used manna to push justice towards equality. In *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, he writes that, if manna fell from heaven so as to set inequalities to the greatest benefit of the worse off, even so there would be injustice. This is because, for Cohen, strict equality is the right principle of justice for manna-laden worlds—which are in fact representations of our world, since ‘the raw resources of the planet Earth are on a moral par with manna from heaven’ (2008, 317). Now, all this talk about ‘manna’ and ‘heaven’ seems completely out of place from a Rawlsian point of view. For, among Rawls’s legacies, we find his distinctive ‘political’ and ‘institutional’ orientations. Justice is primarily about the values that ‘arise in virtue of certain special features of the political relationship,’ which is ‘a relationship of persons within the basic structure of society’ (2001, 182). Heavenly things are outside this scope. Thus, we ask: What is the point in advancing ‘manna-from-heaven’ examples? How have they been used against Rawls in particular? Should the Rawlsian framework make room for them? Answering these questions, we argue, enables us to assess Rawls’s contemporary echoes from an original point of view.