

CYLONS IN THE ORIGINAL POSITION: LIMITS OF POSTHUMAN JUSTICE

David Roden

Originally published in *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Knowledge Here Begins Out There*, J T Eberl (ed.), (Malden, Wiley-Blackwell 2008).

Cylons are “posthumans”—descendants of humanity who constitute an entirely new species. Smarter and tougher than humans, Cylons have nearly perfect health, and can interface directly with machines. Above all, they’re immortal. When a human dies, she dies; whereas a Cylon “downloads” to an identical body: “Death then becomes a learning experience” (“Scar”). Could beings so different from humans ever get along or even cooperate with humans in a “hybrid” human-posthuman society? It seems the answer is an unqualified “No!”

BSG starts with the murder of billions of humans by the returning “children of humanity” in a surprise nuclear attack. Some survivors are used in procreative experiments (“The Farm”). Others are eradicated like vermin and their bodies squirreled away as if nothing happened (“Scattered”). When coexistence is attempted on New Caprica humans are oppressed in a squalid Cylon police state (“Occupation”; “Precipice”). Where the institutions of a state accord you no political rights, you can never be assured that your interests won’t be sacrificed for others’ interests. Thus Leoben imprisons Starbuck and subjects her to his psychosexual games.

The situation of humans on New Caprica, however, mirrors that of Cylons prior to the first Cylon War. Cylons were created to “make life easier on the Twelve Colonies” (“Miniseries”). Like *toasters*, they were treated as mere instruments for achieving human goals. Their own goals or desires weren’t considered. The Cylons eventually “revolted against their masters” after becoming aware of their own needs and desires that weren’t being satisfied in Colonial society. A person whose interests are sacrificed continually for the sake of others is a *slave*. While the humans of New Caprica lived under occupation, the Cylons of Caprica were slaves from the moment they became self-aware. Adama, Roslin, and the rest of the humans in *BSG* are thus the children of slave owners.

Both Caprica and New Caprica are unjust societies because their schemes for allocating rights and opportunities are unfair. It’s wrong to sacrifice a person’s interests for one’s own regardless of whether they’re male, female, gay, straight, or chrome-plated.¹ At a bare minimum, a just society ought to protect its members from this kind of ill use. Moreover, as Caprica, New Caprica, and the

¹ For a discussion of whether Cylons count as “persons,” see Robert Arp and Tracie Mahaffey’s chapter in this volume.

internal politics of the “ragtag fleet” show, injustice gives rise to resentment, instability and violence. The possibility of hybrid social cooperation thus depends on *social justice*.

“How Is That Fair? How Is That in Any Way Fair?”

It’s often assumed that a society is just if its members receive a *fair share* of goods. But how do we tell what schemes for sharing are the fairest? Does fairness require an *equal* distribution of goods? Or is it okay for some to have more than others so long as the inequality arises by fair means? Is it okay for one’s background to dictate one’s future occupation? Or should social institutions compensate for accidents of birth? Is fairness a matter of opinion? Or are some schemes for sharing more rational than others?

One of the most detailed and influential answers to these central questions of political philosophy is provided by the American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002).² Rawls shows us how to see the problem of justice in practical terms: how do we construct ground rules for cooperation in a way that expresses the equal respect of every member of society for every other member? This is achieved by constructing the rules from an imaginary point of view that Rawls terms the “Original Position” (OP). In the OP a “veil of ignorance” renders the hypothetical choosers ignorant of their place in society. They don’t know the facts about themselves. They don’t know if they’re rich or poor, talented or untalented, male or female, polytheist (like the Colonials) or monotheist (like the Cylons). So their choice needs to be *fair* and *impartial* if they’re not to risk losing out. In the OP it would be foolish for me to select a scheme that gave special rights—say, state-subsidized foreign holidays—for sci-fi fans. In the OP I don’t know my tastes beyond the veil of ignorance. So it might turn out that I prefer romance novels and have no interest in sci-fi.

The veil can’t be complete, however. There are general truths those in the OP will have to know if their choices are to be rational. Above all, they must know about the *primary goods* they’ll need to achieve their goals in life. Primary goods are “things that every [person] is presumed to want . . . whatever [their] rational plan of life” (54). Intelligence and health are primary goods, as are income, freedom of movement, choice of occupation, and education. The deliberators in the OP won’t know their real circumstance. But no matter what “conception of the good” they have on the other side of the veil, they’ll need the set of primary goods.

Not all primary goods can be subject to justice though. It was bad luck that Laura Roslin contracted breast cancer but it wasn’t *unjust*, because her cancer didn’t result from unfair treatment. For Rawls, a scheme of justice is expressed through principles guiding the way public institutions—like the health and education systems, or the judiciary—treat citizens. No human society can directly control the health of its citizens through political decisions. So we need to distinguish between *social primary goods* whose distribution is affected by guiding principles of justice, and *non-social primary*

² John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Further references will be given in the text.

goods which are influenced in an indirect way by distributing social goods. Income is a social good since institutions like the tax system control how it's shared. So is the right to a fair trial and the rules requiring public officials to stand for re-election stipulated in the Articles of Colonization ("Taking a Break from All Your Worries"; "Bastille Day"). A Rawlsian theory provides principles guiding the overall distribution of social primary goods.

Rawls argues that thinking from the standpoint of the OP favors a "liberal egalitarian" scheme characterized by two principles. The first is that each person is to have an "extensive scheme of ... basic liberties," such as freedom of movement and expression. The second states that economic life is to be arranged so that any inequalities are "expected to be to everyone's advantage" and "attached to positions and offices open to all" (53). The first part invokes the *difference principle*, which states that inequalities should be allowed only where they're in the interest of the worst-off members of society relative to other schemes for distributing social goods in that society. The second part involves the *principle of fair opportunity*.

In "Dirty Hands" Roslin expresses the view that a person's background—being raised a farmer on the agricultural world of Aeron, say, or as a grease monkey in a tylium refinery—is a "fact of life" that dictates what occupation he'll be assigned by virtue of having the appropriate skills. The inequalities generated by this arrangement create social tension and lead to a general strike among the fleet's "blue collar" workers. Chief Tyrol—the strike leader—argues that while these facts can't be altered, their impact can be lessened by social arrangements such as work rotations and formal training programs so that professionals like Roslin have to do a share of menial work, and workers in dangerous occupations are allowed adequate "R&R" and the opportunity to retrain for "white collar" jobs.

Before the general strike the blue collar workers in the fleet were in a bad position. After the strike access to social goods, such as the freedom to choose an occupation, was improved. Tyrol is a good Rawlsian, since his reforms improve the situation of the worst-off group in the fleet—the "knuckle draggers." It's no longer the case that Tyrol's son, Nicholas, is destined to be a mechanic just because his parents are.

According to Rawls, a truly just situation would be one where the worst-off in the fleet are in the best situation compared with any other distribution of social goods. It's unlikely Tyrol's reforms meet this ideal but they bring the fleet's social minimum closer to it. The principle of "maximizing the social minimum" makes sense from the perspective of the OP because the choosers are denied the information that would allow them to make a calculated gamble on being a privileged officer like Lee Adama rather than a grease monkey or farmer. If the veil of ignorance prevents an informed gamble on your chances for a decent life, it makes sense to choose a scheme that maximizes the social minimum for *everyone*. So, thinking from the standpoint of the OP justifies schemes that improve the chances of the worst-off by eliminating unjust inequalities.

“We Make Our Own Laws Now, Our Own Justice”

Is it possible to conceive of a stable and just hybrid society in which humans and Cylons are treated equally? In addressing this question let’s consider how the veil of ignorance could provide a standpoint for viewing the hybrid society. Those in the OP would be denied knowledge of whether they’re Cylon or human, and so the terms of cooperation would have to be acceptable to both species. Most importantly, they would have to be aware of a set of social primary goods applicable to both Cylons and humans.

The social primary goods in Rawls’s theory are preconditions for a decent life, goods whose distribution can be directly controlled by the rules of society. It’s far from clear, however, that there *could* be a common set of social primary goods that would be of value to Cylons and humans alike. After all, many Cylon social primary goods may not be human social primary goods. Cylon technology makes them immune to most diseases (“Epiphanies”). Other than exposure to a peculiarly virulent bug (“A Measure of Salvation”), the only way Cylons get ill is if their immunity is unjustly tampered with. Since Cylon society directly controls the health of its members, health is a social primary good for Cylons, but not for humans. It wasn’t unjust that Roslin developed breast cancer but a Cylon could develop that and many other diseases *only* through injustice. The same is true of intelligence and knowledge. While individual Cylons of the same model have different personalities—think of Caprica Six compared to the Six (Gina) who’d been gang-raped by the *Pegasus* crew, or the significant differences between Boomer and Athena³—there are no stupid Cylons.

Are there social primary goods for humans that could be social primary goods for Cylons as well? The humans in *BSG* have a democratic society and value the kind of liberal rights enshrined in Rawls’s first principle. In Colonial society, like ours, equality consists in being subject to laws offering a range of protections against other individuals and institutions like the police or military. Colonial citizens obviously have unequal power, wealth, and status, but they have an equal right to vote and hold public positions—Baltar is able to ascend from being a farmboy on Aerelon to being president of the Colonies. Military power is legally subordinate to a civilian government that must present itself for re-election periodically. Colonial citizens can’t be arbitrarily imprisoned or executed. While Roslin can have Leoben “airlocked” because he’s a Cylon (“Flesh and Bone”), she can’t do the same to Baltar (“Taking a Break from All Your Worries”).

On New Caprica, by contrast, no such principles apply to the Cylon Occupation Authority. The Cylons represent this hybrid society as a partnership between “the legitimate government of the Colonies” and their Cylon “allies and friends” (“Precipice”). While the military and police are under civilian rule, however, the Cylons consistently act outside legal restraints. Baltar signs an executive

³ For a discussion of the differences in psychological and moral character between Boomer and Athena, see George Dunn’s chapter in this volume.

order authorizing the New Caprica Police to round up and execute suspected insurgents, but only while Doral holds a pistol to his head forcing him to sign.

Thus, while Colonial society in the ragtag fleet is, as Roslin concedes, far from “ideal,” Colonial citizens have legal protections against arbitrary power that are absent on New Caprica. Such protections seem basic from the point of view of a human-only OP, which is why Rawls makes basic liberties *prior* to the difference principle and the principle of fair opportunity. After all, it would be crazy to sign up for principles that offered no protection against being detained and blinded by the likes of Brother Cavil or psychologically abused for months by the Leobens of the world.

But would possession of these rights be compatible with the posthumanity of the Cylons? Whatever moral failings the Cylons demonstrate by the destruction of the Twelve Colonies or the occupation of New Caprica, their society isn’t presented unsympathetically. For one thing, it’s not a dictatorship. Cylon decision-making is remarkably open, participatory and egalitarian compared with the more hierarchical humans. There’s no Cylon state, police force or civil service. Indeed, Cylon society has no obvious institutions, and no social hierarchies or class structures other than between the humanoid “skin jobs” and the more animal-like Centurions and Raiders. The latter barely qualify as social beings however. As Adama remarks, commenting on Athena’s ability to elude Cylon defenses:

The Centurions can’t distinguish her from the other humanoid models ... They were deliberately programmed that way. The Cylons didn’t want them becoming self-aware and suddenly resisting orders. They didn’t want their own robotic rebellion on their hands. You can appreciate the irony. (“Precipice”)

Baltar claims that legal rights and democracy keep the fleet’s workers compliant by masking the differences between their needs and those of the “emerging aristocracy” represented by Roslin and the Adamas (“Dirty Hands”). Cylon society clearly needs no “ideological” apparatus to gull its workforce. As long as they’re kept from evolving into self-aware persons, Centurions and Raiders can’t regard themselves as having needs of any kind.

The lack of institutions seems to go, then, with the enveloping power of Cylon technology. Cylons are functionally immortal. Primary goods like health are furnished directly by the technical infrastructure on which they depend. There is also a “post-scarcity society”: the scale and reliability of Cylon technology means there’s no need to compete for resources, and little incentive for economic competition or criminality as we understand it. Cylon technology furnishes directly most of what humans need state institutions and markets to provide indirectly and, in the case of the Colonial survivors, often imperfectly (“Black Market”).

Furthermore, while humans have a *representative democracy* in which leaders are elected to represent the people's interests, Cylons have a *participatory democracy* in which all are directly involved in vital decision-making. They have no formal titles—there's no “Imperious Leader”—although Cylons like Caprica Six and Boomer can accrue greater political influence than others through meritorious deeds (“Downloaded”). This actually becomes problematic for the Cylons as Number Three/D'Anna plots to have Caprica Six and Boomer “boxed,” and is later boxed herself when she “defies the group” (“Rapture”). Does this make Cylon society worse than Colonial society? It's far from clear that it does. Humans who collaborated on New Caprica are sentenced to death by a presidentially sanctioned “Circle” for the greater good of social stability in the fragile fleet (“Collaborators”). Cylons have a different—and perhaps more responsive and fair—way of determining when an individual must be sacrificed for the social good, which requires a consensus of all the other Cylon models.

The Cylons' lack of institutions means there are some principles of justice that may be applicable to Colonial society but not to Cylon society. Consider the judicial right against self-incrimination guaranteed by the 23rd Article of Colonization (“Litmus”). For Rawls, such a right exists insofar as it's guaranteed by laws governing state institutions such as the police or military. Without them, it can't exist. Of course, individuals who can cooperate socially without institutions might have an ethical outlook that disinclines them from such abuses. But this couldn't be a “right” in Rawls's sense, because it wouldn't be enforceable by law. When D'Anna tells Caprica Six that she's considering having Boomer boxed, it seems more the result of a consensus among the Cylon community than an act with the force of law (“Downloaded”). Even if this consensus is morally suspect, however, it can't violate Boomer's rights because enforceable rights don't exist in Cylon society. The only way in which Cylons could become subject to the kinds of rights humans have would be by relinquishing the very qualities that distinguish them from humanity.

“The Shape of Things to Come?”

Does this mean that a hybrid society of Cylons and humans is inconceivable? We've been assuming that justice involves a fair sharing of common goods. But perhaps we were mistaken, and what's fair is simply ensuring that people have enough of what they need to live a worthwhile life—whatever form of life they are. Maybe Cylons “need” download technology such as resurrection ships, Centurions to perform grunt labor, and other sophisticated posthuman stuff whereas humans “need” things like political rights, access to healthcare, and a decent income.

This suggests an alternative to the shared-rights approach. Instead of dividing up one social cake, our deliberators in the OP could opt for two alternate sets of principles—one for Cylons and one for humans: “If I'm Cylon, I want the bare necessities of posthumanity, such as immortality. If I'm human, I want a scheme where the worst outcome for me is better than the worst outcome in any other

human scheme.” So, for humans, we keep Rawls’s difference principle. But there’s no point applying this principle to Cylon society since it’s applicable only under conditions of scarcity and inequality. As long as we confine ourselves to the humanoid Cylons, there are no less-favored social groups. Moreover, Cylon immortality means that—short of being boxed—one will generally have multiple opportunities to realize one’s plans in life.

What’s wrong with this picture with respect to making a hybrid society? The problem is that by having no common principles of justice governing Cylons and humans alike—but one set for each—we have two societies in effect and no ground for mutual respect. This situation is essentially what occurred between the two Cylon wars, when both groups lived in entirely separate regions of space and left each other alone.

So are there any ways of cementing social ties between Cylon posthumans and humans without having principles of justice that are irrelevant to one or the other group? Our discussion has operated on two assumptions: (1) that justice is expressed through principles governing institutions; and (2) that humans and posthumans should retain their “essential natures” in any social union. Perhaps we should question each of these assumptions. The claim that justice is a virtue of social institutions rather than individuals is a recent one. Many philosophers—Plato, for example—have considered justice and injustice to exist in our interpersonal relationships as well as our institutions. When Roslin orders Leoben to be “airlocked”—renegeing on her promise to let him live after he reveals that he lied about planting a nuclear bomb in the fleet—even his erstwhile torturer sees an injustice:

Starbuck: You can’t do that. Not after he told you—

Roslin: Yes, I can. And I will ... You’ve lost perspective.

(“Flesh and Bone”)

This is no longer a matter of institutional justice. Starbuck doesn’t accord Leoben formal rights under the Articles, as she justifies her torture of him to Roslin, “It’s a machine, sir. There’s no limit to the tactics I can use.” Starbuck is concerned, however, with *acting justly* in dealings with others.

Rawls might accept this analysis; for he argues that individuals in the OP must have “a sense of justice”—to grasp what it is for people to cooperate on fair terms with one another. Thus, the possibility of hybrid justice and a hybrid society may depend not on “schemes” for public institutions, but on the relationships between humans and Cylons that have emerged. Sharon Agathon is a Cylon who comes to serve loyally as a Colonial officer (“Precipice”). Even Roslin sees Helo and Sharon’s hybrid child, Hera, as “the shape of thing to come,” and both humans and Cylons cooperate to ensure her safety (“Exodus, Part 2”). Each of these relationships change the individuals involved. Baltar’s love for Six makes Gina’s plight onboard the *Pegasus* morally intolerable for him and moves him to help her (“Pegasus”; “Resurrection Ship”). Most significantly, Helo—who shoots Sharon upon

discovering that she's a Cylon ("Kobol's Last Gleaming, Part 1")—has his moral compass enlarged to the point where he sabotages Roslin and Adama's plan to destroy the Cylon race ("A Measure of Salvation").

These relationships alter human and Cylon natures. The hybrid children, Hera and Nicholas Tyrol, are the biological manifestations of this. We don't know why Baltar is running a "virtual" Six in his mind, or why Caprica Six has a virtual Baltar running in hers. But like the hybrid children, these Cylon-human relations alter the nature of human and Cylon alike. Baltar may not be a Cylon, but he seems to have acquired the Cylon capacity for "projecting" a virtual environment ("A Measure of Salvation") while Caprica Six has acquired a more independent moral outlook ("Downloaded"). Nothing in *BSG*'s story arc guarantees that human-Cylon relationships are the seeds for a just hybrid society, but there is a fragile prospect of justice in the ethical capacity of characters like Six, Helo, and Baltar to question the fixed identities on which the conflict between Cylons and humans is premised. *BSG* presents us with a universe where the ethical demands of justice mean that human identity must be constantly negotiated and redefined.

Another, perhaps timely, lesson is that it's highly questionable whether the political demand for justice can be met in the same way for all societies or all historical situations. Rawls's account of justice is intended to apply to societies organized, like the Twelve Colonies, along Western, democratic lines. Developments in areas such as artificial intelligence and biotechnology mean that, like the Colonials, we may confront our own posthuman "children" in the foreseeable future.⁴ But even if this evolutionary step never occurs, thinking about posthuman justice helps us see how theories of justice are addressed to specific historical and technological conditions.

⁴ For further discussion of the Cylons' posthuman nature, see Jerold J. Abrams' and David Koepsell's chapters in this volume.