

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 19

Journey Through Space

It is the year 3136. A starship is on its way from earth to colonize a distant planet. Despite advances in astrophysics and space technology, the journey will take several generations of earth time. To prevent ageing, the passengers are put into a kind of hibernation. They can think but all have totally forgotten, for the duration of the journey, their name, gender, ethnicity, class, status, income, age, level of intelligence, health and fitness, personality traits, religion, political attitudes and physical attractiveness.

No one knows, for example, whether they will be in a minority group in certain respects, or the majority. Nor does anyone know whether most of the other people will be cleverer or stronger than themselves, or whether on the contrary they will be amongst the brightest, healthiest, most energetic and most capable.

The condition of space hibernation means that everyone is in a cocoon, and cannot even debate with others, let alone form coalitions and majorities. They can, however, all think.

You are a passenger on the starship and you spend your time wondering what kind of society you will wish to help establish when the starship eventually arrives at its destination. What in your view should be the guiding principles for the new society? What rights will all members of the society have? What responsibilities?

Think about: care of children and older people; education; law and order; treatment of minorities; personal freedoms; decision-making.

The metaphor of a spaceship in which the travellers plan a new society, but without knowing what their own personal characteristics and interests are, was developed by Brian Wren in his book *Education for Justice*, SCM Press, 1976. His purpose was to explain a key idea in *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls, first published by Harvard University Press in 1971.

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