ABSTRACT. Rawls's Difference Principle holds that basic social institutions are just if they maximize the worst-off individual's potential welfare, which depends on the vector of amounts of "primary goods." As Rawls recognized, the multiplicity of primary goods poses an index number problem. This paper uses the machinery of social choice to characterize the class of procedures for aggregating quantities of several primary goods into a composite ordinal index that are consistent with Rawls's analysis. Only very simple and unattractive aggregation methods in which the various primary goods play roles of radically different magnitudes are compatible with Rawls's argument.

Keywords: index numbers, justice, primary goods, Rawls.

Rawls's Difference Principle holds that basic social institutions are just if they maximize the worst-off individual's potential welfare, which depends on the vector of amounts of "primary goods." These goods are defined by Rawls as the "things that every rational man is presumed to want" (p. 62), and include opportunities, power, income, wealth, and the "social bases of self-respect." The multiplicity of primary goods poses an unavoidable index number problem, as Rawls clearly recognized. Most formal discussions of the Difference Principle, however, ignore this aggregation problem and simply assume the existence of an ordinal index of primary goods. Others dispense with the notion of primary goods altogether and treat such an ordinal index as representing an ordering of interpersonally-comparable utility levels. Rawls, however, rejects the latter interpretation (pp. 94–95).

The purpose of this paper is to characterize the class of procedures for aggregating quantities of several primary goods into a composite ordinal index that are consistent with Rawls's analysis. I argue that the indexation problem is formally identical to certain versions of the preference aggregation problem in the theory of social choice. I use the machinery of social choice to demonstrate that the set of admissible procedures is extremely restrictive. Only very simple and unattractive aggregation methods in which the various primary goods play roles of radically different magnitudes are compatible with Rawls's argument.
different magnitudes are compatible with Rawls’s argument. This conclusion seriously weakens the appeal of multiple primary goods as the informational basis for a principle of distributive justice.

I first present a bare outline of some relevant aspects of Rawls’s argument for his two principles of justice, including the Difference Principle. Rawls argues that rational agents would choose his principles if they were placed in a hypothetical situation he calls the “Original Position,” in which they are deprived of certain information that they would require to behave in self-interested ways. Rawls calls these informational constraints the “veil of ignorance.” Parties in the Original Position are unaware of their social status, abilities, and tastes. Of the last of these, they know only that all individuals’ preferences are monotonically increasing in amounts of the primary goods. They are ignorant of the characteristics of their own societies, including the nature of their governments, cultures, and economic circumstances. They do have some general social-science knowledge about the workings of society.

Application of the Difference Principle requires that amounts of the composite good be ordinally comparable among persons. I suppose, then, that this information is to be summarized by an ordering \( R \) over the set of positions, defined as the product space \( N \times X \), where \( N \) is the set of individuals and \( X \) is the set of potentially feasible social alternatives. The expression \((i,x) \preceq (j,y)\) means that “individual \( i \) has at least as large a bundle of primary goods in state \( x \) as \( j \) has in \( y \).” Let \( \tilde{R} \) and \( \tilde{I} \) denote the asymmetric and symmetric parts, respectively, of \( R \).

I assume that the information about the distribution of particular primary goods in various states also comes in the form of an ordering of \( N \times X \). Let \( M = \{1, \ldots, m\} \) be the set of primary goods; for any \( k \in M \), \((i,x) \tilde{R}_k (j,y)\) means that “\( i \) has at least as much of primary good \( k \) in state \( x \) as \( j \) has in \( y \).” Thus the task of the parties in the Original Position is to devise a rule for aggregating an \( m \)-tuple of orderings of \( N \times X \) into a single such ordering.

This formulation must confront a number of objections. Barber (1974), among others, has disputed the ability of an actual policy-maker charged with implementing Rawls’s rule to acquire the interpersonally-comparable information necessary to compute such a composite ordering. Barber’s objection probably has considerable force, but I will not address it here. If Rawls’s argument is sound, then at least this much information