

“What if...”

Student 2:

female – UU MA program: Medicine; faculty: Medicine

Farah and the Veil of Ignorance

It is Sunday in the late afternoon. Farah has positioned her face towards a small but warming autumn sun. Even though she is listening to the new album of her recently discovered favorite artist Burna Boy, she feels frustrated. She is all caught up by Dutch politics, something she wouldn't have thought she would bother about in a million years. She is thinking about the conversation with Mila last week. Mila showed her short videos of Geert Wilders, shouting toward an excited crowd that Dutch people should come first and that asylum seekers are 'fortune seekers'. Wilders blames the housing problem on immigrants.

A shiver goes down her spine, thinking about his words.

After the conversation, she Googled Wilders and found this on his party website. *“And it is irresponsible that to this day a literally unlimited influx of asylum seekers is allowed ... Because there is no part of our society that is not affected by the admission of so many fortune seekers. Our culture and Western way of life are threatened by the entry of large numbers of people, often from non-Western, Islamic countries.”*

After a while, her mind wanders off to a theory she recently heard. Yesterday, she stumbled upon John Rawls's theory of Social Justice and listed a podcast about it. The podcast talked about the 'Veil of Ignorance'; a concept she finds super interesting. It explained the idea as something like this:

Imagine a group of people gathered in a room, about to design the rules of a new society. But before they begin, a veil falls over them, erasing their memories of who they are. They don't know if they're rich or poor, healthy or sick, what race they are, what gender they are, or what religion they follow. They could wake up in this new society as anyone — so, to protect themselves from the worst outcomes, they decide to create rules that are fair and just for everyone. This way, no matter who they turn out to be, they can live with dignity and equality.

Lost in thought, she feels a tap on her shoulder. Farah looks up and sees her mother smiling at her. 'Dear, are you all caught up again in your thoughts?' Let's eat, it is dinner time. Farah follows her mother inside. After dinner, tomato rice, her favorite (!), she feels tired. "Good night, Mom. I am going to bed, it was quite a long day", Farah says. Her mother kisses her on the cheek and wishes her good night.

Farah blinks her eyes. At first, she is blinded by a bright beam of light. She blinks again. Suddenly, she notices a soft, thin fabric draped over her head that prevents her from seeing clearly. She feels like herself, but at the same time, she does not, like something



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is off. Then, she hears an unfamiliar voice: ‘Hello, is someone there?’ She notices she is sitting at a table in a chair. “Yes, how are you?” she asks. And then she realizes, she does not know who she is herself. “I don’t know,” the voice answers, “but I feel we are supposed to discuss some things”. Then it strikes her, she is *in* the Veil of Ignorance! Feeling like she has been talking for days, Farah and the stranger thoroughly discuss how society should be and how governments should take responsibility for ensuring equal opportunity for everyone.

After a while, she and the stranger come to a conclusion. “We can reasonably agree that we should treat people with dignity. Life is a lottery, you do not know where you will end up after the Veil. Let us at least provide reasonable shelter and allow everyone to enjoy education. Oh, and something else: let’s save the word ‘happiness seeker’ for tourists that travel for fun, not for people who left their homes because of the terrible horrors they had to endure,” Farah says. “I agree with you, you never know where you end up in the world, we should at least show respect for each other”, the voice replies.

Farah wakes up from her alarm. After a few minutes, she realizes she had the weirdest dream. She discussed how society should be designed to ensure equality and fair distribution of opportunity for every citizen. And things could be so different! If others, especially Geert Wilders, had this experience, the world would be such a better place! Maybe it was even Geert she was talking to in her dream!

For four months, she has been in Ter Apel, a small town in the Netherlands, in an asylum seekers centre. She is a young woman like any other but was born in Sudan. She recently fled to the Netherlands together with a dear friend and her mother because of violent wars and natural disasters in her country. This was, and is still, extremely impactful. She tries to get used to the centre, the people, and the Dutch customs she is now suddenly introduced to. She struggles with the stigma that asylum seekers have in this country. But if the ‘Veil of Ignorance’ of Rawls could be used, the world could be a much better place! She prays and crosses her fingers that politicians will have the dream she had and that they will really feel what it means to not know where you will be born, what race you will be, what religion you’ll have, and what gender you’ll be. She prays that they realize how privileged they are.

Then, change is only one dream away.

