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Q2(b)

Rawls' idea of the 'liberal self' is too individualistic. Explain, in this context, the communitarian critique of Rawls' theory of justice

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Justice

Justice: Conceptions of justice with special reference to Rawl's theory of justice and its communitarian critiques.

Core demand of the question

- **Rawls'** idea of the 'liberal self' is too individualistic. Explain, in this context, the communitarian critique of **Rawls'** theory of justice. (15 marks)

Revision summary

Rawls's original position models persons as free and equal choosers who do not know their social identities.

Sandel calls this an unencumbered self that cannot explain unchosen obligations.

Walzer, MacIntyre, and Taylor add social meanings, narrative, and recognition.

Political Liberalism replies that the self of justice is political, not a full metaphysics of the person.

Indian group rights and **Ambedkar's** civil equality show both the force and the limit of the communitarian critique.

Introduction

John Rawls models persons in the **original position** as free and equal, choosing principles of justice behind a veil of ignorance. Communitarian critics say that this 'liberal self' is too individualistic because it strips away the communities, histories, and goods that actually make a person who she is.

Body

Rawls's liberal self

- In A Theory of Justice (1971), parties in the **original position** do not know their class, talent, sex, or conception of the good.
- They choose equal basic liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle, which permits inequality only if it benefits the least advantaged.
- **The self is prior to its ends:** persons can revise their plans of life, so the state should not impose a single comprehensive good.
- **Mill's** individuality is an ancestor of this picture; **Hobbes's** atom of fear is not, because **Rawls's** persons are reasonable, not only self-preserving.

Communitarian critique

- **Michael Sandel** in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* argued that the unencumbered self cannot account for obligations of membership, gratitude, and shared identity that we do not choose in a bargain.
- If the self is prior to its ends, civic republican virtue and constitutive attachments become optional tastes, which Sandel says is false to moral experience.
- **Michael Walzer** rejected a single original-position metric. Justice is internal to social meanings: what a doctor, a citizen, or a religious office may claim is not decided by one veil.
- **Alasdair MacIntyre** treated the liberal self as a person without a narrative, which cannot make sense of desert or tradition.
- **Charles Taylor** added that identity is dialogical and that recognition by others is a condition of freedom, not an extra.

Rawls's later reply and the Indian bearing

- In *Political Liberalism*, **Rawls** presented the self of justice as a political, not metaphysical, conception: citizens of a constitutional regime, overlapping in a public reason, not unencumbered souls in all of life.
- The reply meets part of Sandel's charge about comprehensive individualism. It does not meet Walzer's claim that goods are sphere-specific.
- Indian personal law, **Articles 25 to 30**, and caste as a lived membership show Walzer's point: people are not only veil-of-ignorance choosers.
- **Ambedkar** still required that those memberships not cancel civil liberty, which keeps a Rawlsian priority of equal basic liberties against an unlimited communitarian veto.
- **A fair comment therefore holds both:** **Rawls**'s device is too thin as a picture of the whole person, and still useful as a test of the basic structure of a constitutional state.

Flow diagram

Rawls original position -> Unencumbered self
 Communitarians -> Sandel membership
 Communitarians -> Walzer social meanings
 Rawls original position -> Political Liberalism
 Political Liberalism -> Basic liberties still first

Conclusion

Communitarians say **Rawls**'s liberal self is too individualistic because it abstracts persons from constitutive communities. Sandel, Walzer, MacIntyre, and Taylor state the critique. **Rawls** later recast the self as political. Equal basic liberties remain the limit on any community's claim.

Facts & figures

Original position

Hypothetical situation in which parties choose principles of justice behind a veil of ignorance.

Sandel, 1982

Liberalism and the Limits of Justice is the main statement that **Rawls**'s self is unencumbered.

Walzer, 1983

Spheres of Justice argues that criteria of justice follow social meanings, not one original-position metric.

Political Liberalism, 1993

Rawls's recasting of justice as a political conception for constitutional citizens.

Articles 25 to 30

Indian group and religion rights that treat persons as members, not only as abstract choosers.

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