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Q2(c)

Explain how Rawls used the liberal and egalitarian perspective to develop his theory of justice

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · 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

- **State Rawls's aim:** a theory of justice for a constitutional democracy
- **Show the liberal side:** equal basic liberties, priority of right, original position
- **Show the egalitarian side:** fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle
- Keep the two together as one design

Revision summary

Rawls rebuilds the social contract as a choice of principles behind a **veil of ignorance**.

The liberal side is equal basic liberties with **lexical priority**, plus respect for persons as ends rather than a utilitarian aggregate.

The egalitarian side is fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle, which permits inequality only if it benefits the least advantaged.

Political Liberalism later seeks an overlapping consensus among reasonable doctrines without a state religion of the good.

Nozick, Cohen, Sen, and Dworkin attack or extend the hybrid, which shows that justice as fairness is both liberal and egalitarian by design.

Introduction

John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) rebuilt social-contract theory for a society of free and equal persons. He used liberal tools - rights, the priority of liberty, a hypothetical agreement - to reach egalitarian principles that **Nozick** would later reject as patterned redistribution. The theory is liberal and egalitarian at once, which is the point of the question.

Body

The liberal architecture

Rawls asks what principles persons would choose in an **original position** behind a **veil of ignorance**, not knowing their class, talent, sex, or conception of the good. This is liberalism's respect for persons as ends, in a Kantian register, without imposing one religious or perfectionist doctrine. The first principle is equal basic liberties: conscience, association, political liberty, the rule of law. These liberties have **lexical priority**. They are not to be traded for economic advantage, which is **Rawls's** answer to a crude utilitarianism that might sacrifice a minority's rights for aggregate welfare.

The priority of the right over the good, later restated in Political Liberalism as an overlapping consensus among reasonable comprehensive doctrines, keeps the state from becoming a church. **Isaiah Berlin**'s fear of a single positive liberty is met by protecting a scheme of equal liberties rather than one official flourishing.

The egalitarian architecture

Persons in the original position would not stop at formal liberty. They would insist on **fair equality of opportunity**: offices and schools open not only in law but in social fact, against a caste of birth. They would then choose the **difference principle**: social and economic inequalities are allowed only if they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, attached to offices open to all.

This is egalitarian because the benchmark is those who fare worst, and still liberal because inequality may remain if it raises the floor. **Nozick** attacks entitlement; **Cohen** says **Rawls** is too soft on the talented; **Sen** and **Dworkin** press on capabilities and resources. The hybrid is the design. Indian rights plus directive principles are a cousin, not a copy.

Flow diagram

Original position / veil -> Equal basic liberties
Original position / veil -> Fair opportunity
Original position / veil -> Difference principle
Equal basic liberties -> Liberal priority of right
Fair opportunity -> Egalitarian floor
Difference principle -> Egalitarian floor

Conclusion

Rawls used a liberal original position and the priority of equal liberties to justify an egalitarian pair of principles: fair opportunity and the difference principle. Justice as fairness is therefore not a compromise pasted together after the fact. It is one design in which liberal respect for persons generates a duty to those who would otherwise be left at the bottom.

Facts & figures

Two principles

Equal basic liberties first; then fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle for social and economic inequalities.

Veil of ignorance

Contractors do not know their place in society, which forces them to take seriously the position of the least advantaged.

Lexical priority

Basic liberties are not to be sacrificed for economic gain, which blocks a crude utilitarian trade-off.

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