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John Rawls: Justice as Fairness

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John Rawls: Justice as Fairness

Suppose you must write the rules of a society. You do not know if you will be born rich or poor. John Rawls built a famous theory of justice on that one question.

The idea in brief

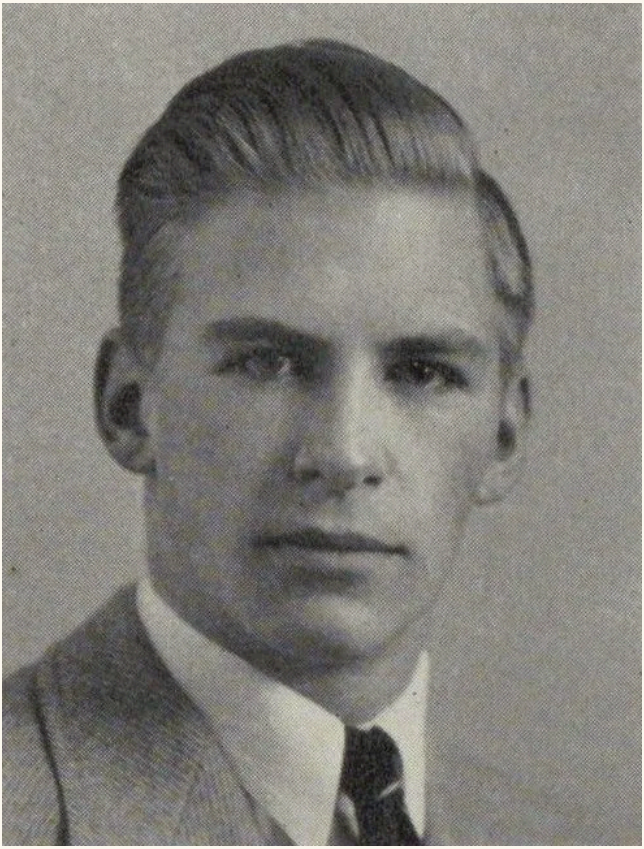
- **Original position:** people choose the rules of society from a fair starting point.
- **Veil of ignorance:** they do not know their own class, talents or background.
- **Two principles:** equal basic liberties first, then inequality only if it helps the worst off.
- **Critics:** utilitarians and Robert Nozick disagree with him.

Who Was John Rawls, and What Did He Argue?

Who was John Rawls?

John Rawls (1921-2002) was an American philosopher. He taught at Harvard. His 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* is one of the most studied works in political philosophy.

He called his idea **justice as fairness**. A just society, he said, is one whose rules everyone could accept as fair.



John Rawls, 1943. Photo: Princeton University, Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Which older idea does he build on?

Rawls revives the **social contract** idea. Locke and Hobbes also asked what rules free people would agree on. Rawls changes one thing. His people must agree *without knowing where they stand*.

Read the older versions in Locke on the social contract.

The Original Position and the Veil of Ignorance



The thought experiment in three steps. Original diagram.

What is the original position?

It is an imagined meeting. People gather to choose the basic rules of their society before it exists. It is a thought experiment, not a real event.

What is the veil of ignorance?

The veil hides facts about you. You do not know your wealth, race, gender, talents or social class. You do not know your religion or your view of a good life.

Without that knowledge, you cannot rig the rules in your own favour. You might land anywhere. So you pick rules you could live with in any position.

- **Game analogy:** you design the game before you learn which player you will be.
- **Safety net:** someone who might be born poor will want protection for the poor.

Quick check 1. Behind the veil, people choose rules without knowing their own place in society. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Think it through. *Why would ignorance make people fairer?*

Show the explanation

Self-interest is still at work. But when you cannot tell which person you will be, your interest points to rules that protect everyone. Fairness comes from the setup, not from kindness.

The Two Principles of Justice

What is the first principle?

Each person has an equal right to the same basic liberties. These include free speech, freedom of conscience, the vote and the rule of law.

Rawls gives this principle **priority**. Basic liberties cannot be traded away for more income, even for the poor.

What is the second principle?

Social and economic inequalities are allowed only on two conditions.

- **Fair equality of opportunity:** jobs and offices are open to all with equal chances.
- **Difference principle:** the inequality must work to the greatest benefit of the **least advantaged** members.

The order matters. Liberty comes first. Fair opportunity comes second. The difference principle comes third.

> **Quick check 2.** Rawls says a government may limit free speech if it makes the poor richer. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What the Difference Principle Allows

Does Rawls demand perfect equality?

No. He accepts some inequality. A surgeon may earn far more than a clerk. The test is simple. Does the pay gap also help the poorest?

If higher pay draws skilled doctors and funds better hospitals that the poor also use, the gap is fair. If the gap only enriches the top, it fails.

- **Passes:** a tax policy that lets high earners keep more but funds services for the poorest.
- **Fails:** a policy that raises everyone's income but bans criticism of the government.

> **Quick check 3.** The difference principle demands that everyone earns the same. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Rawls Against Utilitarianism, and Nozick's Reply

How is Rawls different from a utilitarian?

A utilitarian adds up total happiness. A policy can pass even if a small group suffers, as long as the total rises. Imagine a policy that makes 90% of people slightly richer and crushes the poorest 10%. A strict utilitarian could accept it.

Rawls blocks that trade. Each person has rights that a larger total cannot override.

Compare the two in Utilitarianism: Bentham and Mill.

What was Robert Nozick's criticism?

Robert Nozick answered in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974). He argued that people have a right to keep what they gain by fair exchange.

His famous example is a basketball star. Fans freely pay to watch him play. The star becomes rich. Nozick asks what is unjust there, since nobody was forced. He saw heavy redistribution as a violation of liberty.

Thinker	Test of a just society	Main worry
Rawls	Fair rules chosen behind the veil	Helping the worst off
Utilitarian	Greatest total happiness	A suffering minority
Nozick	Fair exchange and free choice	Too much redistribution

Political Liberalism: The Later Refinement

Why did Rawls revise his theory?

Critics said his first book assumed too much agreement on values. Real societies hold many religious and moral views.

In *Political Liberalism* (1993), he asked for less. Citizens need agree only on fair **political** rules. They need not share one deep belief. People with very different worldviews can still live under one just system.

Rawls and the Reservation Debate in India

How do people use Rawls in Indian debates?

Rawls wrote about the United States, not India. But scholars use his ideas to discuss reservation and welfare targeting.

The difference principle gives one reason for policies that help the most disadvantaged. Equal treatment alone may not be fair when starting points differ. A quota can then be defended as correcting for disadvantages that no one chose.

The Constitution allows special provisions of this kind in Articles 15(4) and 16(4). The Supreme Court's *Indra Sawhney* judgment (1992) set limits and introduced the creamy layer test for OBCs.

Think it through. *Does the creamy layer rule fit Rawls?*

Show the explanation

Partly. The difference principle targets the *least* advantaged. Excluding the better-off within a group keeps help flowing to those who need it most. Whether the line is drawn correctly is still debated.

Exam Angle

- Define the **veil of ignorance** in one line, then link it to fair rules.
- Always state the two principles in order: liberty first, then the difference principle.
- For a comparison question, set Rawls against utilitarianism and Nozick, as in the table above.
- Use a short example. The surgeon and the clerk pay gap works well.

How does Rawls help in an administrative case?

Situation	Rawlsian question
Designing a welfare scheme	Does it help the least advantaged most?
Allocating scarce seats or funds	Would I accept this rule without knowing my own place?
Limiting a right in an emergency	Does it trade away a basic liberty?

Sources: britannica.com; plato.stanford.edu

Practice MCQs

1. What does the veil of ignorance hide from the people choosing society's rules?

A. The laws of other countries

B. The cost of the rules

C. Their own class, talents and background

D. Only their names

See answer ↓

2. Which book by John Rawls was published in 1971?

A. Political Liberalism

B. Anarchy, State, and Utopia

C. A Theory of Justice

D. The Law of Peoples

See answer ↓

3. Which principle does Rawls rank first?

A. Maximum total happiness

B. The difference principle

C. Equal basic liberties

D. Free market exchange

See answer ↓

4. Under the difference principle, when is inequality acceptable?

A. When it benefits the least advantaged

B. Never

C. When it rewards hard work only

D. When the majority approves

See answer ↓

5. Which criticism of Rawls came from Robert Nozick?

A. The theory ignores equal liberty

B. The poor deserve no help

C. Society needs no rules

D. Redistribution can violate the right to keep what is gained by fair exchange

See answer ↓

6. Why did Rawls write Political Liberalism (1993)?

A. To drop the idea of justice

B. To support utilitarianism

C. To study Indian law

D. To answer the claim that his theory assumed too much agreement on values

See answer ↓

7. How does Rawls differ from a strict utilitarian?

A. He ignores the poor

B. He blocks trading away a minority's basic rights for a larger total

C. He rejects all rules

D. He allows a majority gain to override a minority's basic rights

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** Behind the veil, people do not know their wealth, race, gender or talents. So they cannot rig rules in their own favour. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** A Theory of Justice (1971) set out justice as fairness. Political Liberalism came in 1993. Anarchy, State, and Utopia is by Nozick. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** His first principle gives everyone equal basic liberties. It has priority over the second principle. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** Rawls allows inequality only if it also improves the position of the worst off, such as a pay gap that funds better hospitals. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** Nozick, in Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974), argued that heavy redistribution can violate individual liberty. ↑ Q5
6. **D.** Critics said real societies hold many deep views. Rawls then asked for agreement only on fair political rules. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** A strict utilitarian may accept a policy that harms a small group if the total rises. Rawls does not allow that trade. ↑ Q7

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** That ignorance is what makes the choice fair. ↑ 1
2. **False.** His first principle ranks above the second. Basic liberties cannot be sold for economic gain. ↑ 2
3. **False.** It allows inequality only when that inequality improves the position of the worst off. ↑ 3

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