

# Liberty, Equality, and Social Justice: A Philosophical Reflection on Rawls' Principle

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**Abstract:** *With an emphasis on the complex interrelationships between liberty, equality, and social justice in contemporary democracies, this essay provides a critical philosophical analysis of John Rawls's idea of justice as fairness. In my opinion, Rawls's theory offers a convincing normative framework that aims to resolve the conflict between individual liberty and the welfare of society via a morally sound system of justice. Rawls redefines equality as fairness in the organization of social and economic differences rather than uniform distribution by emphasizing equal basic liberties and promoting the difference principle. The philosophical underpinnings of Rawls's ideas are examined in this paper, with a focus on how he used the original position and the veil of ignorance as methodological tools to guarantee impartiality and moral objectivity in the choosing of justice principles. It also examines how Rawls's framework engages with more general traditions of social contract theory and liberal equality while responding to and criticizing utilitarianism. In addressing current challenges like economic inequality, social exclusion, and democratic legitimacy, I contend that Rawls's emphasis on the fundamental structure of society and the role of institutions in creating life chances remains fundamentally important. In order to place Rawls's model within current philosophical discussions, the study simultaneously accepts critical viewpoints that cast doubt on its application and universality. In the conclusion, this paper argues that Rawls's conception of justice as fairness still provides a strong and flexible framework for assessing and rethinking the moral underpinnings of social and political activity in the modern world.*

**Keywords:** *Justice as fairness, liberty, equality, social justice, distributive justice, liberal egalitarianism.*

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In his famous work *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls systematically and influentially articulates the philosophical discourse on liberty, equality, and social justice. In this paper, I contextualize my thinking within Rawls's ambition of reconciling freedom and equality through justice as fairness. As Rawls notes, utilitarianism often justifies sacrificing individual liberties for the sake of the majority. His intervention is a definitive answer. Rawls strongly believes that "justice is the first virtue of social institutions" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3), which morally constrains political and economic arrangements. A just society must guarantee each person an inviolable sphere of basic liberties, according to Rawls. His first justice principle argues that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls, 1971, p. 53). This formulation shows a strong commitment to liberal equality, which protects liberty in institutional systems. This notion provides a strong normative foundation for modern disputes on rights, citizenship, and democratic participation, especially in structurally unequal nations. Rawls' second principle, especially the difference principle, redefines equality and social justice. According to Rawls (1971, p. 83), inequality should be designed to favour the least advantaged. By permitting inequalities only when they benefit the poor, this concept contradicts laissez-faire liberalism and rigid egalitarianism. This seems like a moral way to humanize economic agreements without diminishing individual initiative. It shows a movement from equality as sameness to fairness based on institutional responsibility.

The "original position," regulated by the "veil of ignorance," assures impartiality in justice principle selection in Rawls's theory. This hypothetical setting guarantees fairness in debate because people are uninformed of their social rank, talents, or personal notions of the good, according to Rawls. He says "the principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance" (Rawls, 1971, p. 118). I believe this construct is a key tool for assessing real-world institutions, prompting us to consider if inequalities are justified under fairness. Rawls's theory also reframes social justice by highlighting institutions' role in correcting morally unjustified inequities. According to Rawls (1971, p. 102), the system of distribution is neither just nor unjust, but how institutions handle these realities determines justice. The ethical responsibility of the state and society to ensure distributive fairness is highlighted by shifting the focus from individual merit to structural arrangements. In my perspective, this idea is crucial in today's economic disparity, where institutional inequities sometimes appear normal. Rawls's implicit interaction with political philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill emphasizes his divergence from utilitarian logic. Rawls restores liberal democracy's ethical basis by prioritizing individual rights and fairness over utilitarianism's aggregate happiness. In this paper, I argue that Rawls's synthesis of liberty, equality, and social justice provides a coherent philosophical framework and a normative guidance for confronting modern moral issues. His definition of justice as fairness makes us rethink institutions, resource distribution, and freedom. Rawls' vision of society is morally grounded and practically revolutionary by merging equal liberty, fair equality of opportunity, and care for the least advantaged.

## 2 | THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS:

John Rawls' concept of "justice as fairness" reshapes political philosophy's moral foundations to balance liberty and equality. I see Rawls as presenting a moral framework to critique society's core structure, not just a distributing scheme. This belief holds that justice principles must be adopted fairly and impartially. According to Rawls (1971, p. 11), "justice as fairness" means "the principles of justice are agreed to in an initial situation that is fair". This fundamental premise identifies fairness as a justifying condition, not an outcome. I believe Rawls's emphasis on fairness as the procedural underpinning of justice is a major divergence from utilitarian traditions like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Bentham says "it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong" (Bentham, 1789/1996, p. 14), but Rawls prioritizes human inviolability. Rawls claims that "each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override" (Rawls, 1971,

p. 3). I see this as a strong ethical restraint on majoritarianism that protects individual rights. The two foundations of justice, lexically organized to safeguard liberty, underpin justice as fairness. The first principle protects equal basic liberties, while the second regulates social and economic inequality through fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle. According to Rawls (1971, p. 72), social and economic inequalities should be linked to open positions and fair equality of opportunity. I think this approach emphasizes substantive rather than formal equality, ensuring that people with identical talents and objectives have equal opportunities regardless of their social background.

Rawls's use of the original stance and the veil of ignorance as representations shows his uniqueness. These concepts hold that moral reasoning without arbitrary conditions produces justice. According to Rawls (1971, p. 118), no one knows their social station, class, or fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities. Self-interest does not bias the chosen principles due to this epistemic restriction. This technique offers a persuasive moral objective model that encourages universalism, in my analysis. Rawls's view of justice as fairness resembles Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant's, but notably differs. "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau, 1762/1997, p. 41) highlights the conflict between natural freedom and social inequality, which Rawls aims to overcome institutionally. Rawls's emphasis on moral equality is also influenced by Kant's belief that people are ends in themselves. Kant advises seeing humanity as an end, not just a means (Kant, 1785/1998, p. 38). I believe Rawls turns this moral necessity into a political framework that embeds respect for persons in social structures. Justice as fairness is a moral vision that includes liberty, equality, and institutional accountability, not just a distributive concept. It tests persistent inequities for fairness while safeguarding core freedoms essential to individual dignity. I think Rawls's theory is still significant in political discourse because it provides a normative standard for social structures. By basing justice in fairness, Rawls proposes a philosophically rigorous and ethically persuasive paradigm that can resolve the longstanding conflict between individual liberty and social well-being.

### 3 | THE PRINCIPLE OF LIBERTY: PRIORITY AND UNIVERSALITY

In John Rawls's notion of justice as fairness, liberty is the moral underpinning of a just society. In my view, Rawls's emphasis on liberty's priority and universality shows a deep commitment to human equality and the security of essential freedoms before social and economic gain. In his first principle of justice, Rawls states that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls, 1971, p. 53). I believe this principle creates liberty as a prerequisite for the lawful exercise of all other rights and possibilities. Rawls prioritizes liberty, thus it cannot be sacrificed for economic or social efficiency. Rawls states that "the priority of liberty means that liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty itself" (Rawls, 1971, p. 250). I think Rawls' lexical ordering distinguishes him from utilitarian and consequentialist traditions, which allow restricting individual liberty for collective welfare. Rawls believes that certain rights, including as freedom of thought, conscience, expression, and association, are inviolable and must be protected to all citizens within a just governmental framework. In the classical liberal tradition, John Stuart Mill emphasized the importance of liberty, arguing that power should only be used to prevent harm to others (Mill, 1859/1974, p. 68). Rawls, like Mill, values individual freedom, but he embeds it in an egalitarian framework. Rawls wants to make the institutional conditions needed for the fair value of liberty available to all, unlike Mill, who concentrates on governmental involvement. Thus, Rawls's liberty is substantively achieved through just social structures.

Rawls's idea of liberty's universality emphasizes its fair distribution among society's members. This universality stems from Kant's view of free and equal moral agents. Kant's belief that freedom is a fundamental right for all humans (Kant, 1797/1991, p. 63) provides a philosophical underpinning for Rawls's concept. I think Rawls turns this moral ideal into a political guideline by ensuring that institutions respect and safeguard everyone's freedom. Rawls also considers social factors that may hinder liberty.

He emphasizes the “fair value” of political liberty, stating that citizens must have both formal rights and real chances to exercise them. According to Rawls (1971, p. 198), “the fair value of the political liberties is to be secured”. This is an important intervention against socio-economic inequalities that distort democratic participation and prevent the wealthy few from monopolizing liberty. Liberty’s universality means compatibility with others’ liberty, requiring a system of equal rights that harmonizes individual liberties within a common social framework. Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that “obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty” (Rousseau, 1762/1997, p. 54), implying that true freedom is achieved within a just and communal order. I think Rawls’s equal liberty premise balances individual autonomy and social cooperation. Thus, Rawls’s theory of justice is based on liberty’s priority and universality. It guarantees basic freedoms’ inviolability, equal distribution, and institutional arrangements that make them truly available to all. I believe this premise is crucial for modern political theory, providing a strong framework for assessing the legitimacy of social and political institutions in an unequal world.

#### 4 | EQUALITY AND THE DIFFERENCE PRINCIPLE:

The difference principle is John Rawls’s most unique and intellectually rigorous explanation of equality in justice as fairness. Rawls’ morally sensitive framework allows inequalities only where they serve justice, not as a mere levelling of all social and economic distinctions. According to Rawls (1971, p. 83), social and economic imbalances should help the least advantaged. Thus, the difference principle rethinks distributive justice by guaranteeing that differences benefit the poor rather than eradicating them. Rawls presents a persuasive alternative to pure egalitarianism and laissez-faire individualism, in my opinion. The former attempts to eliminate inequalities, often at the sacrifice of efficiency and personal initiative, whereas the latter justifies gaps based on merit or market outcomes without considering structural injustice. Rawls grounds equality on fairness to balance these extremes. According to Rawls (1971, p. 62), social goods such as liberty, opportunity, income, wealth, and self-respect should be divided equally unless unequal distribution benefits everyone. I believe this principle redefines equality as a social and institutional idea that justifies inequalities rather than their presence.

Rawls’s critique of morally arbitrary characteristics like natural talent and social background illuminates the difference principle’s philosophical relevance. According to Rawls (1971, p. 102), while the natural distribution is neither just nor unjust, how institutions handle these realities determines justice. I see this as a major break from meritocratic ideologies that attribute success to individual effort. Rawls transfers the moral focus from natural and social endowments to institution design, stressing that they must compensate for these arbitrary inequities in ways that benefit all, especially the least advantaged. This stance resonates with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s egalitarian insights but critically develops them. According to Rousseau (1755/1984, p. 84), it is against nature for a few to indulge in excess while the majority lacks basic essentials. Rawls offers a systematic approach to severe inequality in constitutional democracies, while Rousseau emphasizes its moral wrongdoing. I think Rousseau’s morality is operationalized by the difference principle’s institutional structures for resource allocation. Karl Marx’s class inequality analysis exposes capitalist systems’ exploitation, which Rawls’s theory critiques. Marx’s “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (Marx, 1875/1978, p. 531) vision of distributive justice is based on human need. I believe Rawls’ difference principle moderates radical equality by balancing individual incentives with communal accountability. It allows inequities if they benefit the poor, retaining efficiency and fairness.

By making positions and offices truly available, Rawls’s emphasis on fair equality of opportunity supports the difference principle. He believes such possibilities must be open and achievable regardless of socioeconomic background. This emphasizes the assumption that equality is procedural and distributive, requiring fair competition and participation. I believe the difference principle is a groundbreaking contribution to political philosophy, providing a moral framework for assessing economic and social inequality. It challenges our beliefs about merit, desert, and market justice, making

us question our institutional ethics. Rawls links inequality to the well-being of the poor to create a realistic and transformative vision of equality. It states that a just society helps everybody, especially the marginalized, through social and economic systems.

## 5 | SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN:

John Rawls' institutional theory, where justice is a structural characteristic of society's essential institutions, best addresses social justice. Rawls's theory of justice as fairness centers moral evaluation on the "basic structure of society" and holds that key social, political, and economic institutions shape individuals' lives. In summary, "the basic structure is the primary subject of justice because its effects are so profound and present from the start" (Rawls, 1971, p. 7). I suggest that this knowledge moves justice discourse from individual actions to systemic arrangements, emphasizing institutional design's ethical duty. According to Rawls, a just society must be formed around ideals that free and equal people would choose under fair conditions. Liberty and equality become societal realities when these values are institutionalized. Rawls adds that "institutions are just when no arbitrary distinctions are made between persons in the assigning of basic rights and duties" (Rawls, 1971, p. 5). I believe this ideal requires institutional structures to aggressively eliminate prejudice and systemic disadvantage that undermine equal citizenship. The moral importance of institutional design in Rawls's theory echoes but modifies prior social contract traditions. Thomas Hobbes believes that "the end of this institution is the peace and defence of them all" (Hobbes, 1651/1996, p. 120) and that the state is an artificial creation to avoid nature's turmoil. Hobbes favours security, but Rawls prioritizes fairness and distributive justice in political structures. John Locke believes governments exist "for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties and estates" (Locke, 1689/1988, p. 350). In my argument, Rawls blends this liberal concern for rights into a more egalitarian framework that addresses socio-economic inequities through institutions.

Rawls's understanding of social and natural variables' moral arbitrariness shapes his social justice theory. He says "what is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts" (Rawls, 1971, p. 102). This suggests that institutions should offset the impact of unequal starting places to protect individuals from outside factors. This suggests that redistributive policies and welfare arrangements should follow the difference principle to benefit the poor.

Ronald Dworkin, a political theorist, believes that a just society must treat its citizens "as equals, that is, with equal concern and respect" (Dworkin, 1977, p. 180). Rawls' institutional theory unifies liberty, opportunity, and distribution, while Dworkin emphasizes resource equality. Both thinkers agree that justice involves institutional systems that promote human dignity, not only formal equality. Through Amartya Sen's capacity approach, institutions' impact on social justice may be critically analysed. Sen criticizes resource-based paradigms by emphasizing human potential. According to Sen (1999, p. 75), "the focus has to be on what people can actually achieve". I believe Sen emphasizes individual potential whereas Rawls emphasizes institutional justice. These viewpoints deepen our understanding of procedural and substantive social justice. Rawls's theory provides a valuable framework for assessing institutional architecture in societies with significant inequities and structural injustices. Rawls provides a morally sound and practically relevant framework for social justice by arguing that the basic structure must ensure equal liberties, fair chances, and the greatest benefit to the least advantaged. Thus, institutional design brings liberty and equality to life. Just institutions make social cooperation fair and fulfil the promise of justice as fairness.

## 6 | RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY:

John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness remains relevant in modern culture because it provides a robust normative framework for tackling complicated moral and political issues. In a world of growing economic inequality, identity-based conflicts, and democratic problems, Rawls's synthesis of liberty, equality, and social justice remains relevant to social institution ethics. His belief that "justice is the first virtue of social

institutions" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3) is a useful benchmark for assessing modern political systems, especially in countries that prioritize efficiency and progress over fairness. Rawls's critique of inequality and stress on social and natural conditions' moral arbitrariness are particularly relevant now. In an era with increasing income gaps and unequal chances, Rawls's difference principle offers a strong foundation for distributive justice. According to Thomas Piketty (2014, p. 19), "inequality is not necessarily bad in itself: the key question is to justify it". This supports Rawls's notion that inequalities are acceptable only when they assist the poor. I think Rawls's approach is a good way to evaluate current capitalist economies and encourages politicians to align economic systems with fairness and inclusivity. Rawls's emphasis on equal basic liberties is especially important in modern democratic societies, where civil and political freedoms are constantly challenged. As authoritarianism and democratic standards decline, "equal basic liberties" must be protected (Rawls, 1971, p. 53). Amartya Sen says "freedom is central to the process of development" (Sen, 1999, p. 36). This confluence confirms that liberty is a political ideal and a necessary prerequisite for human flourishing, needing institutional protection and public engagement.

Rawls's theory also helps address global justice and multiculturalism. Although first defined in a confined national society, Rawls extended justice as fairness to the international sphere in *The Law of Peoples*. Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the universality of human dignity to expand this approach. Nussbaum claims that "the capabilities approach is fully universal: the capabilities in question are held to be important for each and every citizen, in each and every nation" (2011, p. 40). Rawls's commitment to moral equality underpins global ethical frameworks while inviting critical engagement and extension. Rawls's ideas are also relevant to social justice and identity politics issues. Nancy Fraser says "justice today requires both redistribution and recognition" (Fraser, 2003, p. 9). I propose adding cultural and social inclusion into Rawls's institutional design to solve these issues, even though his theory focuses on distributive justice. His emphasis on fairness and equal respect morally underpins fighting race, gender, and class inequities. However, Rawls's theory has critics, and such engagements help keep it relevant. Michael Sandel argues that "we cannot regard ourselves as independent of our ends" (Sandel, 1982, p. 179), challenging Rawls' abstract individualism. I acknowledge this critique, but I believe Rawls's model can be used as a heuristic to ensure moral impartiality, even if it needs to be supplemented with context-sensitive techniques. Rawls's theory's ability to bridge moral philosophy and practical politics makes it important. It provides a framework for assessing institutions, influencing policy, and promoting social justice and inclusivity. Rawls offers an idealistic and pragmatic worldview by emphasizing liberty, equality, and social justice. In a period of uncertainty and division, his view of justice as fairness is essential for rethinking social and political ethics.

## 7 | CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, this study critically examined John Rawls's concept of justice as fairness as a philosophical framework that reconciles liberty, equality, and social justice. One of the most persuasive attempts to create a morally grounded vision of a just society that prioritizes basic liberty and equality is Rawls's theory. His explanation of the difference principle and the two principles of justice show how disparities can only be justified if they benefit the least advantaged, redefining distributive justice. I suggest that Rawls's focus on society's underlying structure as the issue of justice is essential for assessing modern institutions. Rawls opposes utilitarian and laissez-faire theories by emphasizing fairness as the basis of legitimacy, saying that social cooperation must respect the equal moral worth of all individuals. His theories of the initial stance and veil of ignorance continue to promote moral and political reasoning impartiality and critical thought. Rawls's framework remains relevant because it may be applied to global inequalities, democratic inadequacies, and recognition battles. His theory permits debate and evolution, especially regarding cultural and contextual complications, but its normative core is essential. Through his concept of justice as fairness, Rawls improves philosophical debate and offers a revolutionary framework for a more just, inclusive, and humane social order in the modern world.

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