

Freedom, Equality, and Social Justice: A Philosophical Analysis of Rawls' Principles

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Abstract: *In this essay, I use John Rawls' philosophical framework to analyze the connection between liberty, equality, and social justice. In my opinion, Rawls' idea of justice as fairness provides a logical and well-rounded method for setting up a just society. The study starts by examining the conceptual underpinnings of justice as fairness, particularly the notion of the original stance and the veil of ignorance, which guarantee impartiality and fairness in the choice of principles. I then discuss the first principle of justice, which ensures that everyone has the same fundamental freedoms, highlighting its significance in preserving freedom and human dignity. The second principle of justice, which emphasizes equality through fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle, is further examined in this study. I contend that Rawls permits inequality only when it helps the most disadvantaged members of society, rather than completely rejecting it. This strategy strikes a balance between social obligation and private freedom. Furthermore, I address the link between equality and liberty, demonstrating that, within Rawls' framework, these two ideals are complementary rather than antagonistic. The paper highlights Rawls' theory's advantages and disadvantages by addressing significant criticisms from libertarian, communitarian, and feminist viewpoints. In general, I contend that Rawls' ideas are still quite applicable when discussing current problems with justice, rights, and inequality. His thesis offers a solid intellectual basis for creating a just, inclusive, and democratic society.*

Keywords: John Rawls, Justice as Fairness, Liberty, Equality, Social Justice, Difference Principle.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In this study, I try to use John Rawls' philosophical framework to investigate the concepts of liberty, equality, and social justice. In my opinion, Rawls offers one of the most significant contemporary theories of justice that aims to strike a compromise between societal justice and individual freedom. Rawls' theory

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provides a potent and methodical way to consider justice in a democratic society in a world characterized by prejudice, inequality, and unequal access to opportunity. In addition to addressing past intellectual traditions, his approach offers a workable paradigm for establishing a just social structure. "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions" is how Rawls starts his theory (Rawls, 1999, p. 3). This statement, in my opinion, emphasizes the need to assess all institutions—political, economic, and social—according to their level of justice. According to Rawls, justice is a guiding principle that molds society's structure rather than merely being an abstract idea. He develops this idea through the concept of the "original position," where individuals imagine themselves behind a "veil of ignorance," unaware of their social status, abilities, or personal advantages. According to Rawls, this requirement guarantees equity as "no one knows his place in society... nor his fortune in the distribution of natural assets" (Rawls, 1999, p. 11). This thought experiment, in my opinion, is a potent method to guarantee equality and objectivity in decision-making.

Rawls suggests two justice concepts based on this approach. The first principle, which emphasizes liberty, asserts that every individual has an equal right to the greatest extent of fundamental freedoms that are compatible with those of others. This covers liberties like association, expression, and thought. The second principle deals with social fairness and equality, permitting inequality only when it helps the most disadvantaged elements of society. According to Rawls, social and economic disparities must be handled "to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" (Rawls, 1999, p. 72). I believe that this principle—often referred to as the difference principle—reflects a profound concern for justice and human dignity. Earlier philosophers like Immanuel Kant also had an impact on Rawls' theory, especially with regard to its emphasis on recognizing people as equal and free moral actors. According to Kant, people should never be viewed as mere means but rather as ends in and of themselves (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998, p. 38). In my view, Rawls expands on this notion by establishing a social structure in which people are valued as equal members of a just cooperative society.

Rawls' theory also addresses utilitarian perspectives, which emphasize increasing happiness for all, often at the expense of individual liberties. "The rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or to the calculus of social interests," according to Rawls, who challenges this viewpoint (Rawls, 1999, p. 4). This, in my opinion, demonstrates that justice must uphold individual liberties even when doing so is detrimental to the majority. As a result, I contend that Rawls' theory of justice offers a thorough and impartial approach to the concepts of social justice, equality, and liberty. It addresses the necessity for equity in the allocation of opportunities and resources while simultaneously acknowledging the significance of human freedom. In the current environment, where social injustice and inequality are still major concerns, Rawls' ideas are still insightful. The purpose of this study is to thoroughly examine these concepts and consider their applicability to modern political and ethical philosophy.

2 | JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

According to my research on John Rawls' philosophy, the concept of "justice as fairness" offers a solid and unambiguous basis for comprehending the structure of a just society. In an effort to establish a system that upholds equality and liberty, Rawls advances this idea in opposition to both utilitarianism and conventional views of the social contract. In my view, justice as fairness is predicated on the notion that social structures ought to be equitable to every person, particularly when they are established in a way that guarantees impartiality and equality.

In his opening remarks, Rawls emphasizes that the most crucial quality of any social structure is fairness. "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions," he declares unequivocally (Rawls, 1999, p. 3). This implies, in my opinion, that a society cannot be deemed good if it is unjust, regardless of how effective or productive it may be. Laws, regulations, and institutions must be structured with justice in mind. Rawls' notion of justice as fairness is based on this concept. The concept of the "original position" is a

fundamental component of Rawls' conceptual framework. In this fictitious scenario, people band together to determine the values of justice that will guide their community. But they do so behind a "veil of ignorance," which implies that they are unaware of their own advantages, skills, or social standing. According to Rawls, "this guarantees that no one is favoured or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances" (Rawls, 1999, p. 17). This concept, in my opinion, is extremely potent since it establishes an impartial and equitable foundation for decision-making. It compels people to consider justice from a global perspective as opposed to their own interests.

Rawls contends that reasonable people would concur on two fundamental justice concepts based on this equitable process. While the second principle concentrates on social and economic inequality, the first principle ensures that everyone has equal basic liberties. Only when these disparities help everyone—especially the most disadvantaged members of society—are they permitted. According to Rawls, inequality must be set up "so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged" (Rawls, 1999, p. 72). This, in my opinion, demonstrates that fairness does not entail total equality but rather a system in which distinctions are only acceptable if they help the most disadvantaged. Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy also had an impact on Rawls' conception of justice. According to Kant (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998, p. 38), people should be viewed as goals in and of themselves rather than only as means to an end. In my view, Rawls integrates this concept by creating a framework in which every individual is valued as a free and equal moral agent. Instead of being forced from the outside, people choose the concepts of justice in reasonable circumstances.

However, utilitarianism, which emphasizes maximizing happiness for all, is harshly criticized by Rawls. He contends that if such a system serves the interests of the majority, it might permit the suffering of some people. In response, Rawls argues that "even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override the inviolability founded on justice that each person possesses" (Rawls, 1999, p. 3). This, in my opinion, emphasizes how crucial it is to defend people's rights and dignity. As a result, I contend that the idea of justice as fairness offers a thorough and impartial framework for comprehending social justice. It integrates the principles of equality and liberty into a logical and moral framework. Rawls guarantees the fairness and impartiality of the principles of justice by employing the initial position and the veil of ignorance. This idea is still very applicable as a framework for creating a fair and inclusive society in the current environment, where injustices and conflicts persist.

3 | THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUAL LIBERTY:

According to my analysis of John Rawls' theory of justice, the first and most essential component of his conception of justice as fairness is the principle of equal liberty. Because he feels that every person has a moral claim to fundamental freedoms that must be equally shared by all, Rawls prioritizes liberty. This idea, in my opinion, serves as the moral cornerstone of a just society in which everyone is treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their social or economic standing. According to Rawls, "Everyone is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls, 1999, p. 53). According to what I understand, this means that everyone should have access to the same fundamental liberties, and that these liberties should not be restricted unless doing so is required to safeguard the same liberties for other people. Freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and the ability to take part in political processes are some of these liberties. These rights are crucial for human growth and self-respect, in my opinion.

The fact that this concept takes precedence over other factors, such social or economic advantages, is a significant aspect of it. "Liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty itself," according to Rawls (Rawls, 1999, p. 54). This implies, in my opinion, that fundamental rights cannot be compromised in the name of increased prosperity or societal well-being. This concept is in direct opposition to utilitarian

ideas, which could defend restricting personal liberties if doing so benefits society as a whole. By maintaining that individual liberties are unalienable and must be safeguarded at all costs, Rawls opposes this strategy. Immanuel Kant had a significant philosophical effect on Rawls' principle of liberty. According to Kant, people should be viewed as goals in and of themselves rather than as means to an end because they are rational creatures (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998, p. 38). In my opinion, Rawls expands on this concept by guaranteeing that every individual has equal fundamental rights that cannot be disregarded or superseded. Respect for human autonomy and moral agency is reflected in the equal liberty principle.

This principle's contribution to social justice is another significant feature. In the original perspective, people make moral decisions while hiding their social standing and personal benefits. According to Rawls, rational people would choose equal liberty for all in these circumstances because they would wish to safeguard themselves in case they found themselves in a precarious situation (Rawls, 1999, p. 11). According to what I understand, this demonstrates that the equal liberty principle is not only ethically just but also logical and useful. Equal liberty also contributes to the establishment of the prerequisites for social justice and equality. People cannot change their circumstances or fully engage in society without fundamental freedoms. In my view, liberty serves as the foundation for all other types of justice. It guarantees that everyone has an equal chance to express themselves, make decisions, and work toward their objectives. However, Rawls acknowledges that social order and liberty must coexist. One person's freedom should not interfere with another's. As a result, some limitations might be required, but only to safeguard the system of equal liberty as a whole. This guarantees that freedom is not abused and continues to be advantageous for all societal members. As a result, I contend that Rawls' theory of justice is fundamentally based on the idea of equal liberty. It ensures that everyone has the same fundamental freedoms and rights, which cannot be compromised for other advantages. This idea offers a solid basis for a fair and democratic society and demonstrates a profound regard for human dignity. Rawls' concept of equal liberty is still very relevant and useful for directing ethical and political thought in the modern world, where freedom and rights concerns are still hotly contested.

4 | EQUALITY AND THE SECOND PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE:

According to my analysis of John Rawls' theory of justice, his second principle of justice best captures the concept of equality. The second principle deals with how social and economic inequality should be structured in a just society, whereas the first principle concentrates on equal basic liberties. In my view, Rawls offers a balanced stance that permits inequality only under stringent guidelines that uphold justice and human dignity rather than outright rejecting it. Fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle are the two components of Rawls' second principle. According to Rawls (1999, p. 53), social and economic disparities must be set up so that they are "both reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and attached to positions and offices open to all." According to what I understand, this indicates that inequality is only acceptable if it serves every member of society and if everyone has an equal opportunity to attain advantageous positions. This concept stresses actual chances for individuals rather than just legal equality. Regardless of their social background, people with comparable skills and abilities should have equal opportunities to thrive, according to the first section, fair equality of opportunity. Jobs must be "open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity," according to Rawls (Rawls, 1999, p. 63). This idea is crucial, in my opinion, because it tackles systemic injustices like social inequality, poverty, and illiteracy. It guarantees that skill and hard work, rather than birth or privilege, determine success.

One of the most notable aspects of Rawls' theory is the second section, which is referred to as the difference principle. According to Rawls (1999, p. 72), inequality is only acceptable if it serves "the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society." This idea, in my opinion, shows a strong concern for moral duty and social justice. While total equality is not required, any inequality must improve

the lives of those who are most disadvantaged. For instance, greater pay or financial benefits are only acceptable if they improve society's general well-being, particularly that of the underprivileged. Rawls' rejection of utilitarianism has an impact on his approach to equality as well. He contends that a just society cannot permit some people to suffer in order to benefit others. According to Rawls (1999, p. 3), "even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override the inviolability founded on justice that each person possesses." This, in my opinion, emphasizes that equality is about respecting each person's rights and dignity rather than only allocating resources. Additionally, Rawls' concept of equality has connections to past philosophical traditions, particularly Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. According to Kant, everyone is morally equal and ought to be seen as ends in and of themselves (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998, p. 38). By making sure that institutions are built to reflect this moral equality, Rawls, in my opinion, expands this concept into the social and political realm.

The fact that the second principle of liberty complements the first is another significant feature. According to Rawls, liberty comes before equality, which means that fundamental liberties cannot be compromised for financial gain. However, the second premise guarantees that social and economic structures are equitable and advantageous to everyone once equal liberty is established. This harmony between equality and liberty is, in my opinion, one of Rawls' theory's strongest points. As a result, I contend that Rawls' second principle of justice offers a thorough and useful strategy for achieving equality. Although it acknowledges the possibility of inequality, it establishes unambiguous moral boundaries for its justification. Rawls provides an ethical and practical paradigm of social justice by focusing on equitable possibilities and the welfare of the least fortunate. This idea is still very applicable today, when social injustice and economic inequality are significant issues, and it continues to offer helpful direction for creating a just and inclusive society.

5 | THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIBERTY AND EQUALITY:

According to my research on John Rawls' theory of justice, equality and liberty are closely related concepts that jointly serve as the cornerstone of a just society rather than being diametrically opposed ideals. Instead of treating liberty and equality as distinct or opposing concepts, Rawls incorporates them within his concept of justice as fairness. This balanced approach, which avoids the extremes of both exact equality and unlimited freedom, is, in my opinion, one of his theory's most significant qualities. In his first principle, Rawls expressly prioritizes liberty, saying that "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls, 1999, p. 53). According to what I understand, this concept guarantees that everyone has access to the same basic liberties, including freedom of association, expression, and thinking. These rights are crucial because they uphold people's dignity and enable them to reach their full potential. But Rawls also maintains that liberty must be equal, which means that no one should have more fundamental rights than another. This, in my opinion, demonstrates that equality is a component of liberty itself.

Simultaneously, Rawls presents equality through his second principle of justice, which emphasizes equitable opportunities and resource allocation. He contends that social and economic disparities can only be justified if they are advantageous to all parties, particularly the most disadvantaged (Rawls, 1999, p. 72). This principle, in my opinion, guarantees that equality is not disregarded in the quest for liberty. It acknowledges that for people without finances or social support, liberty may become meaningless in the absence of equitable distribution and opportunities. When we take into account the initial position's role, the relationship between equality and liberty becomes more evident. In this hypothetical scenario, people make moral decisions while hiding their future social standing behind a veil of ignorance. According to Rawls, this need guarantees equity since "no one is advantaged or disadvantaged" while selecting principles (Rawls, 1999, p. 17). In my opinion, reasonable people would want both fair equality and equal liberty in such a scenario since they would want to defend themselves in any circumstance. This demonstrates that equality and liberty are complementary rather than antagonistic. Immanuel Kant's

moral philosophy, which emphasizes that all people are free and equal rational creatures, can also be related to Rawls' method. According to Kant, people should be viewed as ends in and of themselves (Kant, trans. Gregor, 1998, p. 38). According to what I understand, Rawls expands on this concept by making sure that equality and liberty are upheld within the framework of society. While equality guarantees that every person is treated fairly and with equal respect, liberty safeguards individual sovereignty.

Rawls creates a priority rule between equality and liberty, which is another crucial aspect. He contends that social or economic benefits cannot come at the expense of fundamental liberty. According to Rawls (1999, p. 54), "liberty can be restricted only for the sake of liberty itself." This implies that equality must function within the parameters of liberty. However, equality is essential to creating just distribution and fair chances after equal liberty is established. Thus, I contend that in Rawls' theory, liberty and equality have a mutually supportive and balanced connection. While equality guarantees that this freedom is meaningful and available to everyone, liberty guarantees that people are free and respected. They collectively serve as the cornerstone of social justice. Rawls' theory provides a workable answer in today's reality, where arguments between equality and freedom frequently occur, by demonstrating that both ideals can coexist in a just and fair society. This realization is still very applicable to today's problems of social justice, rights, and inequality.

6 | CRITIQUES AND CONTEMPORARY DEBATES:

According to my research on John Rawls' theory of justice, while his concept of justice as fairness has had a great deal of influence, it has also come under heavy attack from other philosophical stances. These criticisms are significant because they highlight both the shortcomings and the advantages of Rawls' theory and contribute to a deeper understanding of liberty, equality, and social justice. In my opinion, participating in these discussions enables us to observe how Rawls' theories continue to influence modern political philosophy. Robert Nozick, a libertarian, offers one of the most well-known criticisms. Nozick is adamantly against any kind of wealth redistribution as well as Rawls' difference principle. According to him, "taxation of earnings from labour is on a par with forced labour" (Nozick, 1974, p. 169). According to what I understand, Nozick holds that people have unalienable rights to their property and that any attempt by the government to redistribute resources is an infringement on individual liberty. This criticism, in my opinion, undermines Rawls' attempt to strike a compromise between equality and liberty by emphasizing individual freedom and little government involvement.

Communitarian scholars like Michael Sandel, who contend that Rawls' theory is overly individualistic, offer another significant criticism. Sandel argues that the concept of the "original position" misses the social and cultural conditions that influence people. According to him, Rawls' theory presupposes "a self that is prior to its ends" (Sandel, 1982, p. 62). This, in my opinion, indicates that Rawls ignores people's relationships, customs, and communal values in favour of treating them as solitary decision-makers. The question of whether justice can be comprehended in isolation from social identity and shared meanings is brought up by this criticism. In a similar vein, Alasdair MacIntyre contends that contemporary theories such as Rawls' overlook the significance of moral customs and virtues. According to him, "the self has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 221). In my opinion, this viewpoint emphasizes the influence of historical and cultural conditions on moral judgments and undermines Rawls' emphasis on abstract principles. Important criticisms of Rawls' theory have also been made by feminist philosophers. According to Susan Moller Okin, Rawls fails to sufficiently address gender inequality, particularly in the home. "The family is a major social institution that must be included in any theory of justice," she notes (Okin, 1989, p. 16). This criticism, in my opinion, demonstrates how Rawls' framework might ignore significant instances of injustice that occur in both public and private spheres. This, in my opinion, broadens the conversation about justice to encompass everyday social interactions in addition to formal institutions.

Many modern philosophers still uphold and expand upon Rawls' theories in spite of these objections. Amartya Sen, for instance, acknowledges Rawls' contribution but contends that justice should prioritize real human potential over idealized institutions. According to Sen (2009, p. 18), "justice is not only about the establishment of just institutions but also about the realization of lives people can lead." This method, in my opinion, makes Rawls' theory more useful and applicable to actual circumstances, particularly when it comes to tackling poverty and global inequality. As a result, I contend that the criticisms and current discussions surrounding Rawls' theory are important additions to the continuing advancement of political philosophy rather than merely criticisms. They draw attention to significant concerns including global inequity, gender justice, community values, and individual freedom. However, these arguments demonstrate that Rawls' theory continues to be a key point of reference for conversations about social justice, equality, and liberty. In the complicated world of today, where opposing viewpoints frequently clash, responding to these criticisms aids in the development of a more inclusive and well-rounded conception of justice.

7 | CONCLUSION:

Using John Rawls' philosophical framework, I have examined the fundamental concepts of liberty, equality, and social justice in this paper. In my view, Rawls' theory of justice as fairness offers a reasonable and useful framework for comprehending the structure of a just society. His first equal liberty concept guarantees that each person has the same fundamental freedoms and rights, which are necessary for moral growth and human dignity. His second principle of justice, which emphasizes that social and economic disparities must assist the least advantaged and be linked to equitable possibilities for all, simultaneously tackles the problem of inequality. In my opinion, Rawls skilfully reconciles equality and liberty without taking any extreme stances. He demonstrates how equality without freedom can restrict personal autonomy, whereas freedom without justice can result in inequality. Rawls establishes a framework that is both practically applicable and ethically sound by prioritizing fundamental rights and then controlling inequality through the difference principle. By highlighting its shortcomings and potential for development, the criticisms of Rawls' theory—including those from libertarian, communitarian, and feminist viewpoints—further enhance the conversation. These arguments, in my opinion, emphasize Rawls' theory's significance as a basis for continuing philosophical investigation rather than undermining it. I contend that Rawls' ideas are still very applicable in the modern world, where concerns about justice, equality, and rights continue to influence social and political life. His theory provides a useful framework for creating a just, inclusive, and democratic society.

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