

— PSIR OPTIONAL · UPSC CSE

EDITION 2026

PYQ Vault

560

questions

50

days

10

years of PYQs

DAY 3

Justice · 11 questions

Every question carries a *Flow Snapshot* — and a handwritten model answer on the channel. No PYQ *will be unfamiliar*.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2017 · 20 marks

Rawls' theory of justice is both contractual and distributive. Examine.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 contractual in method + distributive in result → the two bound together

R2 the hypothetical contract is the source → it generates and justifies the distribution

Body flow

revives contract tradition (**Locke** / **Rousseau** / **Kant**), hypothetical not historical → original position + veil of ignorance → impartial choice + maximin → fairness from a fair agreement → same contract fixes distribution → primary social goods → first principle (equal liberties) → second principle (fair equality of opportunity + Difference Principle) → least advantaged / **Barry's** chain principle → **Macpherson**: defence of the liberal democratic welfare state

Counter-view

Hampton: not truly contractual (veil, not bargaining, yields the principles)
↔ **Nozick**: distributive side is an end-state theory imposing a pattern

Conclusion routes

R1 a fair contract grounds a fair distribution → the two characters reinforce each other

R2 despite the critics, **Rawls** opened a new era in justice theory

Rawls theory is contractual in method and distributive in result, and the two are bound together. The hypothetical contract he builds is exactly what produces and justifies his principles of distribution.

John Rawls revives the social contract tradition of John Locke, Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, but his version is hypothetical, not historical. In the original position, free, equal and rational persons choose principles of justice behind a veil of ignorance. Not knowing their class, talents or social place, they reason impartially. Justice becomes fairness because the principles flow from a fair agreement.

The same contract settles distribution. Its principles govern the allocation of primary social goods - liberties, opportunities, income, wealth, powers and self-respect. The 1st principle guarantees equal basic liberties. The 2nd permits social and economic inequality only through fair equality of opportunity & the difference principle.

Norman Barry's chain principle conveys this: the weakest link decides the strength of the whole.

Critics still question both labels. Jean Hampton argues the theory is not truly contractual, since the veil, not real bargaining, yields the principles. Robert Nozick rejects the distributive side as an end-state theory that imposes a chosen pattern.

A fair contract grounds a fair distribution and this union opened a new era in thinking about justice.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 10 marks

Comment on distributive justice in about 150 words.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 fair allocation of benefits + burdens → **Aristotle's** classical form, distinct from corrective justice

R2 not *whether* to distribute but on *what basis* → the criterion is the real question

Body flow

definition (honour / wealth / assets / offices) → **Miller's** three criteria: rights / desert / need → mapping: **Hume**—rights—hierarchy / **Spencer**—desert—market / **Kropotkin**—need—solidarity → **Miller's** synthesis (merit + welfare) → **Rawls**: primary goods → Difference Principle → least advantaged → social + natural lottery

Counter-view

single-criterion positions pull apart → market-desert (**Spencer**) vs need (**Kropotkin**) → neither market alone nor redistribution alone suffices

Conclusion routes

R1 distributive justice = combining desert with need, not choosing

R2 modern theory (**Miller**, **Rawls**) leans to synthesis — efficiency with fairness for the worst-off

Distributive justice concerns the fair allocation of the benefits and burdens of social life - honour, wealth, assets and offices. Aristotle gave its classical form, distinguishing it from corrective justice and tying distribution to a just principle, not equal shares.

The real question is the basis of distribution. Following David Miller, in *Social Justice*, three criteria compete - acknowledged rights, desert and need - each connected to a social form: David Hume with rights & hierarchy, Herbert Spencer with desert and the market, Peter Kropotkin with need and solidarity. Miller argues that merit and welfare must be combined, since the market alone widens inequality while redistribution alone ignores efforts.

John Rawls proposes the modern view. He treats distribution as the fair sharing of primary social goods, and his Difference Principle permits inequality only

when it benefits the least advantage, correcting misfortune from the social and natural lottery.

Distributive justice thus turns on combining desert with need, not choosing between them.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 10 marks

Comment on substantive justice in about 150 words.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 procedural = fair rules / method → substantive = fair outcome → judged by condition of the disadvantaged

R2 justice not only in a neutral process → asks who actually gains → outcome-test over rule-test

Body flow

content + outcome of laws, real distribution → close to socialism → can the poor improve their condition → needs-based over rights-based → progressive extension of self-development opportunity → state central: curb wealth concentration, redistribution / welfare / land reform → **Young**: change unjust structures, not just individual remedies → **Rawls**: substantive concern inside a procedural theory (Difference Principle)

Counter-view

liberal worry: outcome-focus can weaken liberty and formal equality → substantive reply: formal equality alone leaves injustice untouched

Conclusion routes

R1 procedure fixes the method, substance fixes the result → both needed; substance gives justice its social content

R2 in a deeply unequal society formal equality is not enough → substantive justice makes equality material

Procedural justice asks whether the rules were fair; substantive justice asks whether the outcome is fair. It judges justice by the actual condition of the disadvantaged, not the neutrality of the process.

Substantive justice evaluates the content & outcome of laws and policies, and the real distribution of rights and opportunities. It corresponds broadly to socialism, since the test is whether the poor and underprivileged can improve their condition. It is needs-based, not rights-based and demands progressive extension of self-development opportunities to disadvantaged groups.

This makes the state central: it must check concentration of wealth & widen opportunity through redistribution, welfare, and land reform. According to Iris Marion Young, this means changing the structures that reproduce injustice, not only individual remedies.

Even John Rawls, within a procedural theory, carries a substantive concern in his Difference Principle. The liberal worry is that stressing outcomes can weaken liberty; substantive justice replies that formal equality alone leaves injustice untouched.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2018 · 15 marks

Analyse John Rawls' justification of discrimination to achieve the goals of justice.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 liberal-egalitarian puzzle → how can fairness permit any inequality

R2 discrimination just only if it lifts the least advantaged → inequality as instrument of equality

Body flow

moral arbitrariness of talent / birth → Difference Principle = democratic equality → not charity but reciprocity → **Barry's** chain principle → forms: affirmative action, taxation, welfare, reservations → liberty lexically prior → sits between socialism and libertarianism

Counter-view

Nozick (talents as common assets, entitlement violated) vs **Sen** (primary goods miss capability)

Conclusion routes

R1 inequality conditional on the good of the worst-off → corrective for arbitrary disadvantage

R2 discrimination defensible only as correction → makes liberalism more humane

John Rawls is a liberal egalitarian, and his theory carries a clear puzzle: how can justice as fairness permit inequality? His answer is that discrimination - unequal treatment - is just only when it raises the position of the least advantaged.

Rawls begins from a moral claim: natural talents & social starting points are morally arbitrary, since the abilities one is born with are unearned. His Difference Principle therefore permits inequality only when it works to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged - what he calls democratic equality.

This is not charity but institutional reciprocity. Norman Barry's chain principle captures the idea: the worst-off, like a chain's weakest link, measure the justice of the whole. Throughout, equal liberty stays lexically prior, separating Rawls from both socialist equality & libertarian liberty.

Critics pull in opposite directions. Robert Nozick argues that redistribution treats talents as common assets and violates individual entitlement. Amartya Sen replies that equal primary goods ignore capability differences, so the deprived need more than goods.

Rawls's justification thus links inequality to the good of the worst-off. Discrimination is just only a corrective for morally arbitrary disadvantage - a defence that makes liberalism more humane.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2019 · 15 marks

Examine communitarian perspectives on justice.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 reject liberal abstract self → justice from the situated self → good over right

R2 liberalism = individual + right prior → communitarian turn = community + good prior → justice must be socially grounded

Body flow

Sandel: self constituted by ends, "wholly without character," identity discovered in community → **MacIntyre**: virtues / obligations within traditions, no society-less morality, justice needs social conception of good → **Walzer**: positive account, goods carry social meanings, complex equality (no sphere dominates another)

Counter-view

corrective real (identity social, state not neutral) vs community norms preserve hierarchy / patriarchy / caste; recognition must still answer liberty + equality (Shah Bano)

Conclusion routes

R1 communitarianism restores culture + common good to justice

R2 defensible justice holds community + individual freedom together, neither silencing the other

Communitarianism approaches justice by rejecting the abstract, choosing individual of liberal theory. The self, it argues, is shaped by language, history, religion and culture, not prior to society. Justice must begin from this situated self and give the good priority over the right.

Michael Sandel turns this against the liberal self. The self is not prior to its ends but constituted by them; a person stripped of such attachments is "wholly without character."

Alasdair MacIntyre extends this to morality. Virtues and obligations grow within traditions; a morality belonging to no particular society exists nowhere. Justice therefore needs a social conception of the good.

Michael Walzer, in *Spheres of Justice*, offers a positive account. Goods carry social meanings, and his idea of complex equality holds that dominance in one sphere, like money, must not invade another, like office, health or politics.

The corrective is real: identity is socially formed and no state is fully neutral. But community norms can preserve hierarchy, patriarchy and caste. Cultural recognition must still answer liberty and equality, as the Shah Bano debate shows.

Communitarianism restores culture and the common good to justice. A defensible conception, though, must hold community and individual freedom together, letting neither silence the other.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2020 · 20 marks

Make a comparative assessment of the Greek perspective of justice with the Rawlsian concept of justice.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 both treat justice as organising principle of political life → but opposite foundations (good-first vs right-first)

R2 Greek fits person to a settled role → **Rawls** secures fair terms among free equals → good precedes right vs right precedes good

Body flow

Plato: harmony / each to his own function / no meddling → **Aristotle**: justice as central virtue + distributive justice by merit / proportional equality → Greek = teleological, duty-centred, hierarchical, inequality accepted → **Rawls**: moral equality → original position + veil of ignorance → equal liberty first + Difference Principle → **Barry's** chain principle / weakest link → right precedes good / free to pursue own conception of the good

Counter-view

Greek rootedness in virtue and common good vs **Rawlsian** moral equality and protection of the least advantaged → perfecting the citizen vs guaranteeing fair terms among those who disagree on the good

Conclusion routes

R1 movement from polis ethics to constitutional pluralism

R2 from a justice that assigns roles to a justice that guarantees equality and freedom

Greek thinkers and John Rawls both treat justice as the organising principle of political life, but they build it on opposite foundations. For the Greeks the good life comes first and justice fits each person to a settled role; for Rawls the right comes first and justice secures fair terms among free and equal persons.

Plato sees justice as harmony. Each person does the work suited to his nature and does not meddle in another's; each class keeps its proper place. Aristotle treats justice as the central virtue and the bond that holds the polis together. His distributive justice gives honours, wealth & offices in proportion to merit - equals treated equally, unequals unequally according to relevant differences. Greek justice is therefore technological, duty-centred & hierarchical, accepting inherent inequality.

Rawls begins instead from the moral equality of citizens. In the original position, behind the veil of ignorance, free and rational persons choose principles without knowing their place.

Norman Barry's chain principle shows this concern for the weakest link. Here the right precedes the good: citizens may pursue their own conceptions of the good.

Greek justice perfects the citizen for a fixed common good; Rawls protects fair terms among persons who disagree about the good. The movement from one to the other is the movement from polis ethics to constitutional pluralism — from a justice that assigns roles to a justice that guarantees equality and freedom.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2021 · 20 marks

How has Rawls enriched the idea of justice in liberalism?

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 pre-Rawls liberal justice = liberty + formal equality + procedural fairness → thin on distribution

R2 utilitarianism widens to aggregate welfare → minority sacrificed → Rawls keeps liberty, adds egalitarian correction

Body flow

Kantian inviolability / anti-utilitarian → original position + veil of ignorance → impartial, Archimedean standpoint → two principles → liberty lexically first (liberal core) + fair equality of opportunity + Difference Principle → equality enters as a demand of justice → welfare + property-owning democracy as right, not charity → **Macpherson**: liberal democratic welfare state

Counter-view

Nozick (end-state, violates entitlement) vs **Sen** (capabilities beyond primary goods); **Marxist** line — veil hides private property

Conclusion routes

R1 liberty given grounding, equality given direction

R2 more humane liberalism + revival of normative theory → reset the terms of the justice debate

Classical liberalism reduced justice to liberty, formal equality, and procedural fairness; utilitarianism widened it to aggregate welfare but allowed the minority to be sacrificed for the majority.

John Rawls enriched liberal justice by keeping liberty central while giving it an egalitarian & distributive correction.

His starting move is Kantian and anti-utilitarian. Each person has an inviolability that the welfare of society as a whole cannot override; no one may be used merely as a means to the end of others.

Rawls then gives liberalism a fair procedural foundation. In the original position, free and equal persons choose principles behind a veil of ignorance that hides class, talent and fortune. Stripped of morally arbitrary advantage, they reason impartially, as from an Archimedean point.

From this Key derive two principles. The first secures equal basic liberties, preserving the liberal core. The second admits inequality only under fair equality of opportunity and the Difference Principle: "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged."

Equality thus enters liberalism as a demand of justice. Redistribution, welfare and a property-owning democracy become matters of right, not charity. Macpherson reads the result as a defence of the liberal democratic welfare state.

Critics make several objections – Robert Nozick calls it an end-state theory, Marxists argue the veil hides private property and Amartya Sen wants capabilities beyond primary goods. Nevertheless, Rawls made liberalism more humane and revived normative political theory.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 15 marks

Examine the entitlement theory of justice.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 justice as history of holdings, not a pattern → **Locke**, inviolable rights

R2 entitlement vs patterned / end-state justice → just history, not just shape

Body flow

reject patterned / end-state → three principles (acquisition → transfer → rectification) → maxim → fair process makes inequality untroubling → minimal nightwatchman state → redistribution as means-to-ends → critique of **Rawls'** Difference Principle

Counter-view

ignores unequal starting points → historical injustice unverifiable → "voluntary" transfers may be socially unequal → minimal state blind to structural deprivation

Conclusion routes

R1 strong defence of liberty / silent on outcomes

R2 protects the person / leaves society's basic structure unjudged

Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, treats justice not as a pattern to be reached but as a question of how holding came about. Following John Locke, he holds that individuals have inviolable rights, and that a distribution is just only if its history is just.

Justice rests on three rules: just acquisition, leaving "enough and as good" for others; voluntary just transfer, free of force or fraud; and rectification of past wrongs. His maxim conveys it: "From everyone as they choose, to everyone as they are chosen".

From this follows the minimal, nightwatchman state, limited to guarding against force, theft and fraud and enforcing contracts. Any wider state violates rights: redistribution uses the better-off for the worst-off, treating persons as means - the charge Nozick presses against John Rawls's Difference Principle.

However, the theory passes over unequal starting points. Historical injustice makes present entitlement hard to verify and transfers that are formally voluntary may be socially unequal. A minimal state cannot touch structural deprivation.

Entitlement theory is a powerful defence of liberty and the inviolable person. But by judging only the history of holdings, it leaves the justice of outcomes, and of society's structure, unanswered.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2022 · 20 marks

Dr. Ambedkar's idea of social justice leads to 'egalitarian justice' as compared to Rawls' 'justice as fairness' which aims at the notion of 'pure procedural justice'. Comment.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 both are egalitarians → share the end, differ in route → substantive vs procedural

R2 question separates two routes to equality → **Ambedkar** reshapes outcomes / **Rawls** designs a fair procedure and accepts its result

Body flow

Ambedkar: caste oppression + social humiliation → justice never merely formal → "simply another name for liberty, equality, fraternity" → must become material facts → political equality vs economic inequality threatens democracy → substantive, group-conscious remedy (reservations, labour rights, land redistribution, state action) → **Rawls**: fair starting point → original position + veil of ignorance → identity-blind, unanimous choice → whatever chosen is just → equal liberties + fair opportunity + Difference Principle → inequality only if it helps the least advantaged

Counter-view

contrast must be qualified → **Rawls**' procedure is already egalitarian → Difference Principle can itself justify reservations / welfare → so divergence is route, not goal → **Ambedkar** = direct, group-based caste correction / **Rawls** = identity-blind least-advantaged standard → identity-blindness may miss a birth-fixed hierarchy

Conclusion routes

R1 shared egalitarian aim, different routes (group correction vs fair procedure)

R2 Indian Constitution (justice, liberty, equality, fraternity) resonates most with **Ambedkar's** egalitarian justice

The statement separates two routes to equality, but both thinkers remain egalitarians. Dr. Ambedkar and John Rawls want the same end; they differ in how they reach it. Ambedkar reshapes social outcomes, while Rawls designs a fair procedure and accepts whatever it yields.

Ambedkar's justice grows out of caste oppression & social humiliation, so it can never be merely formal. For him, justice was "simply another name for liberty, equality and fraternity," and these had to become material facts. He saw the danger of a society that grants political equality while remaining economically unequal and held that this contradiction could destroy democracy.

His remedy is substantive and group conscious - reservations, labour rights, land redistribution & active state effort against inherited hierarchy. Democracy, for him, was a way of associated living.

Rawls begins instead from a fair starting point. In the original position, behind the veil of ignorance, identity-blind contractors unanimously choose principles, and whatever they choose is treated as just. The procedure yields equal basic liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the Difference Principle, which permits inequality only when it benefits the least advantaged.

The real divergence is one of route. Ambedkar attacks group based caste deprivation directly, while Rawls works through an identity-blind least advantaged position that may not reach a hierarchy fixed by birth. India's constitutional commitment to justice, liberty, equality and fraternity resonates most with Ambedkar's egalitarian justice.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2023 · 15 marks

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

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 original position + veil of ignorance → chooser stripped of class / gender / talents / good → the "unencumbered self"

R2 liberal self too individualistic → a theory built on it misreads moral life → communitarian charge staked

Body flow

Sandel: self constituted by its ends, not prior → "wholly without character" → neutral state misreads justice, rights only a remedy for individualism → **MacIntyre**: morality lives in narrative + tradition → **Taylor**: anti-atomism, self within webs of interlocution → **Walzer**: no universal metric, complex equality from social meanings of goods → unifying move: good prior to right

Counter-view

community norms can shield hierarchy / patriarchy / caste → **Rawls'** *Political Liberalism* (overlapping consensus) answers the metaphysical-self charge

Conclusion routes

R1 critique exposes the embeddedness **Rawls** understated, without destroying justice as fairness

R2 it sharpens liberalism toward a more situated self rather than replacing it

Rawls builds justice as fairness on the original position, where free and equal persons choose principles behind a veil of ignorance, stripped of class, gender, talents and any conception of the good. Communitarians read this chooser as an "unencumbered self."

Michael Sandel, in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, denies that the self is prior to its ends. The self is constituted by its ends; identity is discovered through community, not chosen behind a veil. To imagine a person without such constitutive attachments, he says, is to imagine one "wholly without character." For Sandel, rights are a remedy for individualism and Rawls's neutral state mistakes this for justice itself.

Alasdair MacIntyre roots morality in narrative & tradition: one cannot ask what am I to do without knowing which story one belongs to. Charles Taylor rejects atomism, placing the self within "webs of interlocution."

Michael Walzer redirects this at the theory itself, replacing a universal metric with a complex equality rooted in the social meanings of goods.

The shared move is the priority of the good over the right. The critique rightly exposes the embeddedness Rawls understated - though community can shield hierarchy, and his later Political Liberalism answers much of it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2025 · 15 marks

Explain how Rawls used the liberal and egalitarian perspective to develop his concept of distributive justice.

• FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 justice = fair distribution of primary goods → built by fusing liberty + correction of arbitrary advantage

R2 Rawls the liberal egalitarian, between absolute liberty and absolute equality → distribution from fair procedure, not charity

Body flow

social contract method + original position → veil strips class / talent / lottery → First Principle: equal basic liberty, lexically prior (liberal element) → talents / birth morally arbitrary → maximin reasoning → Second Principle: fair equality of opportunity + Difference Principle (egalitarian element) → primary goods steered toward least advantaged

Counter-view

Nozick: end-state / entitlement violation; **Marxists**: veil hides private property; **Sen**: capabilities beyond primary goods

Conclusion routes

R1 liberty prior, inequality conditional → liberalism made humane and anti-utilitarian

R2 distributive justice as synthesis → redistribution a requirement of fairness, welfare state given a philosophical defence

John Rawls considers justice to be the fair distribution of primary social goods — liberties, opportunities, income, wealth and self-respect. He builds it by joining two commitments: a liberal concern for individual liberty and an egalitarian concern to correct morally undeserved advantage. The device that unites them is the original position.

The liberal element comes first. Reviving the social contract method, he imagines free and equal persons choosing principles behind a veil of ignorance, where no one knows their class, talents or place in the natural lottery. This impartial standpoint produces his First Principle: each person has an equal claim to the same basic liberties, lexically prior to everything else.

The egalitarian element follows from the same veil. Since natural talent and social birth are morally arbitrary, no party can bargain from privilege. Reasoning through the maximin rule, the parties protect the worst-off in the Second Principle.

However the critics diverge : Nozick reads it as an end-state violation of entitlement, Marxists hold the veil hides private property and Sen wants capabilities beyond primary goods.

Distributive justice thus reconciles the two perspectives. Liberty is secured first ; inequality earns only conditional legitimacy. Redistribution becomes a requirement of fairness, not charity.

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