

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.