

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTION

UPSC 2016 · 15 marks

Critically analyse John Rawl's argument for democratic equality.

FLOW SNAPSHOT — how the answer moves

Intro routes

R1 Rawls = most systematic liberal bid to join liberty + equality → democratic equality its core form
R2 justice as fairness via original position / veil of ignorance → contingencies neutralised → persons as ends

Body flow

original position + veil → anti-utilitarian (person as end, no sacrifice for aggregate) → first principle: equal basic liberties + lexical priority → second principle: fair equality of opportunity prior to difference principle → difference principle benefits least advantaged → three combine: freedom + equality, inequality constrained, weakest protected

Counter-view

Arneson: only mitigates contingencies, not truly egalitarian → **Sen**: resources not capabilities, equal resources ≠ equal real freedom

Conclusion routes

R1 strength = least advantaged shielded from utilitarian trade-offs
R2 limit = weighs means, not the real freedom to live a valued life

John Rawls offers the most systematic liberal attempt to hold liberty and equality together; democratic equality is its core form. His argument builds justice as fairness on the original position and the veil of ignorance, devices meant to neutralise the effects of natural and social contingencies. Each person is treated as an end with the moral powers needed for autonomy, so no individual or minority can be sacrificed for aggregate welfare.

Democratic equality combines three commitments. The first principle guarantees equal basic liberties, including political rights and holds lexical priority—these liberties cannot be traded for economic gain. The second principle adds fair equality of opportunity, which itself takes priority over the difference principle.

The difference principle then permits inequality only when it works to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.

The argument draws strong criticism. Richard Ayneson holds that the difference principle only mitigates contingencies, stopping short of real equality. Amartya Sen argues that Rawls's index measures resources rather than capabilities, and equal resources do not guarantee equal real freedom, since people differ in health, gender & circumstance.

Rawls's strength lies in shielding the least advantaged from utilitarian trade-offs, its limit is that it weighs means not the freedom to live a valued life.