

## Comparing Visions of Justice: Rawls' Idealism vs. Sen's Pragmatism

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### ABSTRACT

John Rawls and Amartya Sen are two of the most influential figures in contemporary political philosophy, offering distinct and often contrasting approaches to justice. Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* lays the foundation for "justice as fairness," emphasizing principles designed under a "veil of ignorance" to ensure impartiality in institutional arrangements. Sen's *The Idea of Justice*, on the other hand, critiques Rawls' idealism and advocates for a practical, outcome-oriented approach centered on comparative justice and the capabilities of individuals. This paper explores the philosophical debate between Rawls and Sen, analyzing their shared goals, points of divergence, and implications for addressing contemporary global challenges, such as economic inequality, climate change, and democratic governance.

**Keywords-** Justice, John Rawls, Amartya Sen, Capabilities Approach, Comparative Justice, Philosophy of Justice, Institutional Justice.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Justice has been a central theme in philosophical inquiry, shaping our understanding of governance, equality, and individual rights. John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, redefined the discourse with his framework for justice as fairness, focusing on ideal institutional arrangements. His principles of equal basic liberties and the difference principle aim to ensure a fair distribution of resources while benefiting society's least advantaged members. Rawls' influential work sparked extensive debate and inspired further contributions to political philosophy. Critics have challenged his assumptions about human nature and the social contract, while others have sought to extend or modify his principles. Contemporary philosophers continue to grapple with questions of justice in the face of global challenges, such as climate change, economic inequality, and technological advancements.

Amartya Sen, however, challenges the assumptions underlying Rawls' framework. In *The Idea of Justice*, he critiques Rawls' reliance on ideal theory, arguing that it is impractical for addressing real-world issues. Sen's capabilities approach shifts the focus from institutional structures to individual freedoms and opportunities, emphasizing comparative justice over abstract ideals. Sen's approach emphasizes the importance of real-world outcomes and the actual lives people can lead, rather than focusing solely on theoretical institutional arrangements. This perspective aligns with Sen's broader work on development economics and his emphasis on human capabilities as a measure of societal progress. The debate between Rawls and Sen highlights a fundamental tension in political philosophy between ideal theory and practical application, challenging scholars to consider how abstract principles of justice can be effectively implemented in complex, diverse societies.

This paper examines the central arguments of Rawls and Sen, their points of convergence and

divergence, and the relevance of their ideas to contemporary socio-political challenges. The debate between these two thinkers provides a comprehensive understanding of justice that balances theoretical ideals with practical considerations.

## II. RAWLS' JUSTICE AS FAIRNESS

### 2.1 Core Concepts

John Rawls' concept of justice as fairness is a response to the utilitarian framework that dominated political philosophy. Unlike utilitarianism, which seeks the greatest happiness for the greatest number, Rawls argues that justice requires prioritizing individual rights and ensuring fairness for all, particularly the least advantaged. His framework is built on two principles. The first guarantees equal basic liberties such as freedom of speech, political participation, and the right to own property. These liberties form the foundation of a democratic society. The second, known as the difference principle, permits social and economic inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. This principle reflects Rawls' commitment to egalitarianism, ensuring that inequalities do not exacerbate societal divisions but rather uplift the most vulnerable. Together, these principles aim to create a society where fairness is institutionalized and individuals have equal opportunities to succeed.

### 2.2 Original Position and Veil of Ignorance

The original position is a hypothetical scenario in which rational individuals come together to design the principles of justice for their society. Rawls introduces the veil of ignorance as a mechanism to ensure impartiality. Under this veil, individuals are unaware of their own social status, natural talents, or personal preferences. This ignorance eliminates bias and self-interest, forcing individuals to adopt principles that are fair and just for all. Rawls argues that in such a situation, rational individuals would prioritize equal basic liberties and adopt the difference principle, as they would want safeguards in case they were among the least advantaged. The original position and veil of ignorance are central to Rawls' theory, ensuring that justice is not dictated by power or privilege but by fairness and equality.

### 2.3 Institutional Focus

Rawls places significant emphasis on institutions as the primary vehicles for implementing justice. According to his theory, a just society must establish institutions—such as legal systems, economic frameworks, and political structures—that uphold fairness and equality. These institutions must be designed to reflect the principles of justice as fairness, ensuring equal access to opportunities and resources. Rawls' focus on institutions stems from his belief that systemic change is necessary to address deep-rooted inequalities. By establishing fair institutions, societies can create an environment where individuals are not disadvantaged by

circumstances beyond their control, such as their family background or social status.

## III. SEN'S COMPARATIVE JUSTICE AND CAPABILITIES APPROACH

### 3.1 Critique of Ideal Theory

Amartya Sen critiques Rawls' reliance on ideal theory, arguing that it is impractical and disconnected from real-world challenges. Ideal theory, according to Sen, envisions a perfectly just society without addressing how to achieve it. Sen contends that this focus on theoretical perfection neglects the urgent need to address manifest injustices, such as poverty, inequality, and discrimination. He advocates for a comparative approach to justice that evaluates existing social arrangements and prioritizes the elimination of injustices. For Sen, justice is not about achieving an unattainable ideal but about making incremental improvements that enhance people's lives.

### 3.2 Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach is a cornerstone of Sen's philosophy. Unlike Rawls, who focuses on distributing resources (primary goods), Sen emphasizes the importance of individuals' abilities to use these resources to achieve meaningful outcomes. Capabilities refer to the freedoms individuals have to lead lives they value, encompassing access to education, healthcare, employment, and social participation. Sen argues that justice must focus on enhancing these capabilities rather than merely ensuring resource equality. For example, providing equal educational resources may not result in equal educational outcomes if some individuals face systemic barriers such as poverty or discrimination. The capabilities approach shifts the focus from what individuals have to what they can do, highlighting the need for tailored solutions to address inequalities.

### 3.3 Practical Justice

Sen's emphasis on practical justice reflects his commitment to real-world applicability. He argues that justice must be evaluated based on tangible outcomes rather than abstract principles. This requires identifying specific injustices and taking actionable steps to address them. Sen also highlights the role of public reasoning and democratic deliberation in achieving justice. By involving diverse perspectives in decision-making processes, societies can ensure that justice is inclusive and responsive to the needs of all members. This practical approach makes Sen's philosophy particularly relevant for addressing contemporary challenges such as poverty, climate change, and global inequality.

### 4. Points of Convergence

Despite their differing approaches, Rawls and Sen share common ground in their pursuit of justice and equality. Both philosophers recognize the importance of protecting individual freedoms, though they conceptualize these freedoms differently. Rawls

emphasizes equal basic liberties as fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech, political participation, and property ownership. Sen, on the other hand, expands this concept to include capabilities—the substantive freedoms individuals have to lead lives they value.

Another shared priority is addressing inequality. Rawls' difference principle provides a framework for redistributing resources to benefit the least advantaged, while Sen's capabilities approach focuses on enhancing opportunities for marginalized groups. Both philosophers also value democratic engagement as a means of achieving justice. Rawls emphasizes public justification within institutions, ensuring that policies are transparent and equitable. Sen advocates for inclusive public reasoning, which involves diverse voices in identifying and addressing injustices. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of justice that balances systemic reforms with grassroots participation.

#### IV. POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

##### 5.1 *Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory*

Rawls' ideal theory envisions a perfectly just society, offering a framework for designing institutions that reflect principles of fairness. While this approach provides a theoretical benchmark, it has been criticized for its lack of practical relevance. Sen argues that real-world challenges require a non-ideal approach, focusing on comparative justice and the elimination of existing injustices. He critiques Rawls for being overly abstract and disconnected from the urgent needs of marginalized communities. Sen's non-ideal theory prioritizes actionable solutions that improve lives in tangible ways, making it more applicable to real-world policy-making.

##### 5.2 *Resources vs. Capabilities*

Rawls focuses on distributing primary goods, such as income, wealth, and opportunities, assuming that equal distribution will lead to justice. Sen challenges this view, arguing that individuals' ability to convert resources into meaningful outcomes varies due to personal and societal factors. For example, a person with a disability may require additional resources to achieve the same level of mobility as an able-bodied individual. The capabilities approach emphasizes enhancing these substantive freedoms, highlighting the limitations of a purely resource-based perspective.

##### 5.3 *Institutions vs. Outcomes*

Rawls emphasizes the role of institutions in creating a just society, advocating for systemic changes to ensure fairness and equality. Sen, however, focuses on outcomes and the practical impacts of policies. He argues that justice cannot be confined to institutional arrangements but must be evaluated based on their ability to reduce injustices and enhance individual well-being. This divergence highlights the tension between structural reforms and immediate, outcome-oriented actions.

#### V. RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

##### 6.1 *Economic Inequality*

Economic inequality remains a pressing global issue, and both Rawls and Sen offer valuable insights for addressing it. Rawls' difference principle provides a framework for redistributing wealth and resources to benefit the least advantaged, ensuring that inequality does not undermine social cohesion. Sen's capabilities approach complements this by emphasizing access to education, healthcare, and opportunities that empower individuals to overcome systemic barriers. Together, their ideas highlight the need for both structural reforms and targeted interventions to reduce inequality.

##### 6.2 *Global Justice*

Sen extends the scope of justice beyond national borders, addressing global challenges such as climate change, migration, and economic globalization. His emphasis on global interconnectedness highlights the need for international cooperation to tackle transnational injustices. Rawls' focus on domestic justice, while valuable, is less applicable in this context. Sen's comparative approach offers a more flexible framework for addressing global inequalities, making it particularly relevant for contemporary debates on global justice.

##### 6.3 *Democratic Deficits*

Both Rawls and Sen emphasize the role of democracy in achieving justice. Rawls focuses on public justification within institutional frameworks, ensuring that policies are transparent and equitable. Sen advocates for inclusive public reasoning, which involves diverse voices in identifying and addressing injustices. These perspectives are particularly relevant in addressing contemporary democratic challenges, such as political polarization, governance failures, and the erosion of public trust in institutions.

#### VI. CRITIQUES AND CHALLENGES

##### 7.1 *Limitations of Rawls*

Rawls' ideal theory has been criticized for being overly abstract and disconnected from real-world challenges. Critics argue that his focus on ideal institutional arrangements neglects the urgent need to address immediate injustices, such as poverty and discrimination. Additionally, his framework is largely nation-centric, offering limited guidance for addressing global inequalities.

##### 7.2 *Limitations of Sen*

Sen's comparative approach, while pragmatic, lacks a comprehensive framework for evaluating justice. The capabilities approach faces challenges in operationalization, particularly in quantifying and measuring capabilities across diverse contexts. Critics argue that this lack of standardization makes it difficult to apply Sen's philosophy consistently in policy-making.

## VII. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should explore synergies between Rawls' institutional focus and Sen's outcome-oriented approach to develop a more holistic understanding of justice. Efforts should be made to operationalize the capabilities approach, creating standardized metrics that can guide policy decisions. Research on global justice should build on Sen's ideas, addressing transnational issues such as climate change, migration, and economic globalization. Additionally, both frameworks can be extended to address emerging challenges in technology and artificial intelligence, exploring their implications for privacy, equality, and governance. Integrating these perspectives can provide actionable solutions for creating a more just and equitable world.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the distinct yet complementary perspectives on justice put forth by John Rawls and Amartya Sen. Rawls' concept of justice as fairness, rooted in ideal theory, presents a framework aimed at ensuring equity through institutional systems that emphasize equality and prioritize the most disadvantaged. His principles, particularly the difference principle and the notion of the veil of ignorance, offer a compelling vision for an equitable society, although they have been subject to criticism for their idealism and perceived disconnect from real-world issues.

Conversely, Amartya Sen's capabilities approach provides a pragmatic critique of Rawls' idealism, focusing on actual outcomes and individual freedoms rather than theoretical models of justice. Sen challenges the premises of ideal theory by highlighting comparative justice and the significance of enhancing individuals' capacities to lead meaningful lives. His approach addresses the complexities of global issues, such as economic disparity and climate change, by considering not only institutional fairness but also the practical conditions necessary for human development. Both Rawls and Sen have made substantial contributions to the discourse on justice, offering crucial insights that continue to shape contemporary political philosophy.

However, their contrasting views on the nature of justice and the function of institutions suggest that a comprehensive understanding of justice necessitates integrating both ideal and practical aspects. Future research and policy initiatives must strike a balance between the idealistic goals of fairness and the concrete realities of human capabilities, ensuring that justice is not only theorized but also implemented in the diverse contexts of contemporary global society.

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