**Question: Discuss Rawls’ views on Justice.**

**Answer:** John Rawls has contributed significantly to modern notions of justice and equality. In his landmark work, A Theory of Justice, Rawls argues that the principles of justice are those that fair-minded and rational individuals would choose from an impartial perspective. Rawls calls this impartial perspective the ‘original position.’ In the original position, we do not know most of the socially significant facts about ourselves – race, sex, religion, economic class, social class, natural talents and so on. Rawls refers to this lack of knowledge as the ‘veil of ignorance.’ Under this veil of ignorance, we are then asked to decide the basic principles necessary for the organization of a society best suited for the fulfillment of our aims and interests. Rawls argues that in such a situation, the principles chosen would be ones on which rational participants would agree. This is because from behind the veil of ignorance, I do not know if I am the strongest or the smartest, so to protect myself, I would prefer those principles of justice which would be fair to all.  Carrying out this thought-experiment, Rawls comes up with the following two basic principles, one concerned with liberty, the other with the just distribution of goods.

1) Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

In other words, choosing from behind a veil of ignorance, a rational person would want everyone in the society to have the same right to basic liberties as anyone else. Otherwise that person might end up a victim of discrimination. The basic liberties of citizens are the political liberty to vote and run for office, [freedom of speech](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech) and assembly, liberty of conscience, freedom of personal property and freedom from arbitrary arrest.

(2) Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that (a) they are to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society, and b) offices and positions must be open to everyone under conditions of *fair equality of opportunity.*

To understand a), imagine two situations.  In the first, most people earn a high wage, but ten percent of the population can barely earn enough to survive. In the second case, although the average standard of living is far lower, the worst off ten per cent of the population have a reasonable standard of living. For someone choosing in the original position, Rawls claims, the second of the two situations is preferable because it guarantees that everyone in the society will be achieving a reasonable standard of living.

b) says that any social or economic inequalities associated with particular offices or jobs can only exist if these offices or jobs are open to everyone under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. No one should be excluded from, for instance, the best-paid jobs on non-relevant grounds such as sexual orientation or race.

Rawls says that the two principles he puts forward as the rational choices of anyone in the original position are ordered *lexically.*What this means is that they are ranked in such a way that the first principle has to be satisfied before considering the second; the second before moving on to the third and so on. Here this means that the right to equal liberty is the most basic principle in his theory, and always takes priority. The balancing act that Rawls tries to achieve with his two principles is to preserve freedoms while enhancing opportunity.