

Rawls' Theory of Justice in Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

In order to examine how two different philosophical traditions—Western liberalism and Islamic moral theology—address the concepts of justice, equality, and human welfare, this essay compares John Rawls' theory of justice with the Islamic understanding of "adl" (justice). The social contract tradition serves as the foundation for Rawls' "justice as fairness," which places a strong emphasis on rational consensus, equal basic liberties, and the difference principle—which states that inequalities are only acceptable when they help the least fortunate. Islamic justice, on the other hand, is based on divine revelation and is framed as a moral obligation and spiritual responsibility that stems from submission to God. This study investigates their theoretical underpinnings, economic ethics, and moral dimensions using a qualitative and hermeneutic methodology. According to the analysis, Islamic justice is theocentric, ethical, and divine, whereas Rawls's model is secular, procedural, and human-centered. Nonetheless, both frameworks support compassion, equity, and the defense of human dignity. The study concludes that combining Islam's moral and spiritual universality with Rawls's rational fairness provides a comprehensive paradigm of justice that balances freedom with moral responsibility, rights with duties, and reason with revelation. This helps to create a more comprehensive and universal conversation about justice in the modern world.

Keywords: Justice as Fairness, Islamic Justice ('Adl), John Rawls, Comparative Philosophy, Moral and Theological Ethics

I. Introduction

Justice has been one of the foremost virtues of human civilization and a foundation of ethical, social, and political philosophy since ancient times. The pursuit of justice has shaped laws, moral codes, and institutions in all human societies, from the most primitive communities to modern-day democratic states. Philosophers across the centuries—from Plato's vision of justice as harmony within the state and soul, to Aristotle's vision of distributive and corrective justice, to Kant's emphasis on moral autonomy and duty—have all discussed justice as the supreme virtue that supports both individual morality and social order. Justice governs the distribution of rights, the assignment of duties, and the maintenance of fairness and equality between persons.

In modern times, the discussion of justice has shifted from metaphysical and theological to secular and procedural grounds. John Rawls is a colossus among modern political philosophers, having transformed liberal philosophy with his life's work, *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls' "justice as fairness" is a bold attempt to reconcile liberty and equality in a pluralistic society. His philosophy is founded on two fundamental principles: the first guarantees equal basic liberties to all, and the second, known as the difference principle, allows for social and economic inequalities only if they assist the poorest sections of society. Using theoretical tools like the "original position" and the "veil of ignorance," Rawls tried to establish objective conditions for the choice of principles of justice to which rational and reasonable persons would consent. His book transformed political philosophy by establishing a moral foundation for liberal democracies in terms of equality, fairness, and rational consent.

In comparison, Islamic philosophy conceives of justice ('adl') as a God-ordained virtue that transcends social contracts and human conventions. Justice in Islam is framed as a moral imperative rather than a purely political or civic ideal and is applicable to every sphere of life—spiritual, ethical, economic, and legal. The Qur'an and the Sunnah reaffirm the centrality of justice as an expression of divine will and moral righteousness repeatedly. The Holy Qur'an states:

“Indeed, Allah commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin” (Qur'an 16:90).

For Muslims, therefore, justice is not merely an act of obedience to God but also a social necessity that ensures balance (mīzān), equality, and human dignity. It is fairness in judgment, honesty in dealings, and kindness to the vulnerable—thereby connecting social cohesion with spiritual accountability.

This paper seeks to study John Rawls's theory of justice through the lens of Islamic moral philosophy in a bid to see how two distinct yet profound traditions—Western liberalism and Islamic ethics—conceive of justice as the foundation of social order. By comparing Rawls's rational-procedural model with Islam's divinely

grounded moral framework, this study aims to determine the points of convergence and divergence, and to demonstrate how a conjoint insight into both systems can contribute to a broader and more universal theory of justice in contemporary times.

II. Methodology

A qualitative and comparative analytical approach is used in this study. It looks at the Qur'an and John Rawls's "A Theory of Justice" as primary philosophical sources, as well as secondary commentary from contemporary political theorists and Islamic scholars. Using a hermeneutic approach, the study interprets justice as a moral and sociopolitical construct within two different frameworks: Islamic divine ethics and secular liberal rationalism. The study compares these conceptual underpinnings and finds both similarities (in equality, welfare, and fairness) and differences (in theological and metaphysical premises).

III. Theoretical Framework

Rawls's theory of justice has its roots in the social contract tradition, borrowing ideas from thinkers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. His "original position" and "veil of ignorance" are thought experiments designed to render judgments about just principles unbiased. Individuals, unaware of their position in society, their sex, or their fortune, would agree rationally on fair rules for all.

Rawls's first principle guarantees equal basic rights such as liberty and freedom of conscience. The second principle, otherwise referred to as the difference principle, justifies inequalities only when they are in favor of the least advantaged and are attached to offices that are open to all on fair conditions of equality of opportunity.

In contrast, Islamic justice relies on divine revelation. Justice is an attribute of Allah and a virtue enjoined upon the faithful. The Qur'an declares:

"O you who believe! Be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives" (Qur'an 4:135).

For Islam, justice entails responsibility, compassion, and fairness before God. Whereas Rawls distinguishes morality from theology, Islamic justice combines both within a comprehensive system of ethics wherein social justice, economic balance, and moral righteousness are inseparable.

IV. Comparative Analysis

Both John Rawls's theory of justice and the Islamic understanding of 'adl' (justice) seek to promote fairness, equality, and social harmony but differ substantially in their philosophical foundations. Rawls's understanding is secular, man-centered, and procedural, based on reason and contractual agreement, whereas Islamic justice is divine, God-based, and moral, founded upon revelation and religious responsibility. In spite of the difference, the two traditions are similarly concerned about human dignity, justice, and the safeguarding of the marginalized.

4.1. Philosophical Foundations: Reason and Revelation

The importance of impartiality and reason is at the heart of Rawls's philosophy. Rawls (1971) introduced the original position and the veil of ignorance as hypothetical tools to ensure objectivity in choosing principles of justice, building upon the social contract tradition of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Unaware of their social standing, people would agree on two fundamental principles: (1) equal basic liberties for all and (2) the difference principle, which permits inequality only when it helps the least fortunate. An anthropocentric framework—justice as a human invention derived from reasoned consensus rather than divine command—is reflected in this approach.

On the other hand, Islamic justice, or "adl," is theocentric and based on the idea that God (Allah), who is Al-'Adl—the Just, is the source of justice. "In fact, Allah commands justice and the doing of good," the Qur'an affirms (Qur'an 16:90, Yusuf Ali translation). Islam views justice as a divine requirement that has moral, legal, and spiritual components. It is not based on human reasoning, but rather on divine law (Shari'ah), which is demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) Sunnah. Islamic justice, as noted by Nasr (2002), reflects harmony between divine order and human behavior by bringing together the ethical and the spiritual. Islam sees justice as inextricably linked to faith (iman) and piety (taqwa), whereas Rawls separates morality from theology to maintain neutrality in pluralistic societies. However, the impartiality principle is upheld in both systems. The Qur'anic injunction, "O you who believe!" is metaphorically echoed by Rawls' "veil of ignorance." As witnesses to Allah, stand out resolutely for justice, even if it is against your parents, relatives, or yourself (Qur'an 4:135). Therefore, both traditions agree that justice must go beyond kinship, wealth, and personal prejudice.

4.2. Economic Justice: Redistribution and Social Responsibility

In economic terms, Rawls's difference principle closely parallels Islamic distributive ethics ('*adl-e-iqtisadi*'). Rawls (1971) argues that while inequalities are inevitable, they are justified only if they improve the situation of the least advantaged. This principle embodies compassionate egalitarianism—balancing liberty with social welfare.

Similarly, Islam includes economic justice in its ethical framework. The Qur'an warns against the monopoly of wealth and oppression: "So that wealth may not merely circulate among the rich of you" (Qur'an 59:7). Zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and Sadaqah (voluntary charity) are formalized by the Islamic economic system as a redistribution system so that the poor are kept alive and social equilibrium is maintained (Al-Ghazali, 1997). These obligations show Rawls's moral argument that inequalities only make sense if they benefit the disadvantaged.

However, the two systems differ regarding the source of moral authority. Redistribution in Rawls's liberal framework has its sources in rational consensus and social cooperation among equals. Redistribution, in Islam, is compulsory as opposed to voluntary and derives from the belief that money or wealth belongs to God ultimately and human beings are only trustees (*amanah*). Islamic economic justice is not only material equality, as Iqbal (1930) and Rahman (1982) noted—it purifies both the soul and riches, harmonizing morality and economics.

Furthermore, Rawls's economic justice theory prioritizes social stability, while Islam connects justice to divine accountability in the afterlife. Zakat is not only an economic tool but a form of worship (*ibadah*) that guarantees the belief that social equity cannot be separated from moral excellence. To this extent, while the two theories may prioritize fairness and eschew exploitation, Islamic justice situates economic welfare within a broader metaphysical context.

4.3. Political and Moral Dimensions: Freedom, Rights, and Responsibility

Politically, Rawls's first principle of justice—the guarantee of equal basic liberties—corresponds with Islam's emphasis on fundamental human rights, including the protection of life (*nafs*), faith (*din*), property (*mal*), intellect ('*aql*'), and dignity ('*ird*'). These principles form the core of the *Maqasid al-Shari'ah*, the higher objectives of Islamic law, designed to preserve human welfare and social harmony (Nasr, 2002). Both frameworks recognize justice as the condition for stability and cooperation in society.

Their conceptions of freedom, however, are very distinct. Rawls's liberalism is a matter of individual autonomy—every person's freedom to live his or her own conception of the good life, provided that it does not infringe the rights of others (Rawls, 1993). His theory is morally neutral, affirms no ethical or religious doctrine, nor denies any of them. Islam, however, places freedom under moral accountability. Liberty in the sense that is eternally true in the Islamic teaching is liberty to do what is right, and not what one desires. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) explained, "The most beloved of people to Allah are those who are most beneficial to others" (*al-Mu'jam al-Awsat*, 6/139). Liberty thus must be for the sake of justice and public good, and not gratification of self.

Rawls's theory is set in a secular state seeking equality between different conceptions of the moral. Islam envisions a moral community (*ummah*) under the laws of God that equate individual rights with universal obligations. Whereas Rawlsian justice only ensures procedural equality, Islamic justice seeks moral perfection and spiritual balance, extending justice not only to social contracts but also between God and humankind.

4.4. Convergence and Contemporary Relevance

Although their underlying epistemological roots are distinct, Rawlsian and Islamic justificatory theories of justice share key ideals—human dignity, compassion, and protection of the vulnerable. Both reject oppression, exploitation, and privilege on arbitrary reasons, such as wealth or birth. Both theories imagine a society where justice secures equality of opportunity, respect for rights, and common responsibility.

In contemporary thought, this coming together has valuable potential. Rawls's rational and procedural system can refine Islamic governance by emphasizing institutional openness, participatory decision, and fairness in resource sharing. Islamic ethics, conversely, can add to Rawlsian liberalism's moral depth by introducing spiritual responsibility and virtue ethics to civic life. Together, these visions can help build a robust model of justice—one that marries reason and revelation, rights and responsibility, and liberty and moral responsibility.

Lastly, the comparative examination of Rawls's justice as fairness and Islam's '*adl*' shows that human pursuit of justice transcends geography, culture, and theology. Both traditions, with differing sources—reason and revelation—meet each other in the search to create a just, merciful, and fair world.

V. Critical Discussion

The comparative dialogue between Rawls's theory of justice and the Islamic conception of 'adl' expresses not only philosophical disagreement but also prospects of cross-fertilization. Both theories are concerned with establishing fairness, equality, and social stability; however, they differ in their metaphysical grounding, moral orientation, and epistemological assumptions. Rawls's theory is a product of Enlightenment rationalism, built on secular liberal foundations that prioritize individual autonomy and procedural fairness (Rawls, 1971). In contrast, the Islamic understanding of justice is theocentric, where moral order and social equity are manifestations of obedience to God's command (Nasr, 2002).

From a critical perspective, Rawls's concept of justice has been praised for its philosophical consistency and pragmatic viability in plural societies. His theory provides a plausible account of achieving impartiality and equality through the original position and veil of ignorance (Rawls, 1971). Critics, however, argue that Rawls's model is morally thin because it severs justice from any higher moral order. By grounding justice in human reason and social agreement alone, Rawls runs the danger of construing morality as procedural neutrality (Sandel, 1982). In contrast, Islamic justice insists that legality and morality are inseparable, and any form of justice not directed by the divine is not ultimately valid (Qur'an 5:44). Islamic justice, then, has a transcendental character—it is not simply a means to social unity but a means of spiritual accountability as well.

A second necessary distinction is in moral motivation. In Rawlsian theory, individuals are motivated by rational self-interest in a just society. The "rational actor" in the original position seeks to guarantee fairness through consensus, as opposed to moral virtue (Rawls, 1993). Islam, however, grounds justice in moral virtue and God consciousness (taqwa). The Qur'an repeatedly identifies justice with faith and righteousness, and commands believers to "stand firmly for justice, even if it be against themselves" (Qur'an 4:135). Thus, the Islamic model integrates ethics and spirituality in a way that Rawls's procedural liberalism does not. The implication is that while Rawlsian justice can ensure institutional justice, it may lack the moral content to invoke genuine compassion, honesty, and self-restraint on the part of individuals.

Furthermore, on the economic side, Rawls's difference principle and Islam's concept of Zakat are both interested in helping the poor, but the reasoning is different. For Rawls, redistribution is an acceptable choice for the sake of justice and social stability. For Islam, redistribution is a moral obligation and an act of worship (Rahman, 1982). The distinction between moral obligation and rational agreement is the difference here: Rawls's citizens act together because it is in their common interest, but Islam's believers give due to moral conviction and responsibility to Allah. Thus, Islamic justice provides not only social but also spiritual rewards for justice—a dimension absent in purely secular theories.

Despite these differences, both systems have complementary strengths to contribute. Rawls's emphasis on institutional design, objectivity, and human equality could strengthen the administrative and procedural aspects of justice in Muslim societies. Conversely, Islam's moral and spiritual dimension could deepen the ethical content of Rawlsian liberalism by adding a transcendent moral anchor. As An-Na'im (1990) argues, a synthesis between religious morality and secular proceduralism would be capable of leading to a more holistic model of justice that would encompass both the divine and human realms.

Lastly, the comparative critique illustrates that while Rawls's "justice as fairness" is a socially stable and rationally coherent model, it is incomplete without a moral foundation in spiritual accountability. Islamic justice, conversely, while divinely complete, can be supplemented by Rawls's institutional reasonableness and procedural transparency. As such, an integrated model—drawing on Rawls's rational fairness and Islam's moral universality—is the best way forward toward a complete and enduring concept of justice in an increasingly pluralistic world.

VI. Conclusion

The comparison of John Rawls's theory of justice and the Islamic concept of 'adl reflects that even though these frameworks emerge from distinct epistemological and moral origins, they converge in the universal search for justice, equality, and human dignity. Rawls's liberal scheme, founded on rational consensus and procedural neutrality, provides a rational foundation for justice in secular and pluralistic societies. However, its separation of morality from metaphysics renders it insufficient to address the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. The Islamic theory of justice, founded on divine revelation, integrates law, morality, and religion through emphasizing accountability to God and love of others.

Synthesizing these traditions gives us a holistic paradigm of justice—one that synthesizes reason and revelation and balances individual rights with a sense of collective moral obligation. By bringing together Rawls's institutional rationality and Islam's moral and spiritual depth, societies can foster justice that is not only socially equitable but also ethically and spiritually fulfilling. Finally, Rawlsian and Islamic perspectives both affirm that an actual justice exists transcending cultural and ideologic differences, as shared human aspiration for order, equity, and the moral flourishing of all.

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