3.5 Liberal Thinkers: John Stuart Mill and John Rawls: 30-minute Pack

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Short answers may use bullet points. For levels-marked questions write a well-structured, developed response using accurate knowledge of Mill and Rawls and precise terminology. The final 30-mark essay must be answered in full sentences.

1 This question asks for a brief evaluation: give two criticisms of Rawls's original position as a method for limiting individual freedom, with concise explanation.

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

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2 Evaluate the extent to which John Stuart Mill and John Rawls agree on the limits of individual freedom. In your answer anchor arguments in Mill's On Liberty and Rawls's A Theory of Justice, and reach a reasoned judgement.

(Total for Question 2 is 24 marks)

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Mark scheme · 3.5 Liberal Thinkers: John Stuart Mill and John Rawls: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

first criticism identified, e.g. that the original position is too abstract and detached from real social conditions	**B1**
brief explanation of that criticism, e.g. abstraction may ignore existing inequalities or cultural differences that affect justice	**B1**
second criticism identified, e.g. that the veil of ignorance ignores personal attachments and responsibilities, making its impartial choices unrealistic	**B1**
brief explanation of that criticism, e.g. critics argue people behind the veil would not accept severe limits on liberty if they cared about family or community obligations	**B1**

Answer: Two criticisms: (1) the original position is overly abstract and may ignore real world social and historical factors, so the principles chosen might be ill-suited to actual societies; (2) the veil of ignorance removes personal attachments and responsibilities, producing an unrealistic deliberator who may accept limits on freedom that real people with family ties or cultural duties would reject.

Question 2

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of Mill and Rawls with little or no developed analysis or evaluation. Statements may be general and unsupported by textual reference.	**1-6**
Level 2 Clear knowledge of Mill and Rawls and some developed analysis of their views on limits to freedom. Evaluation is present but may be one-sided or lacking in depth and precise textual anchors.	**7-12**
Level 3 Detailed and accurate knowledge of both thinkers used to construct a sustained analysis comparing their justifications for limits on freedom, with balanced evaluation and some judgement.	**13-18**
Level 4 Authoritative, precise and comprehensive analysis and evaluation of Mill and Rawls that directly compares their accounts of permissible limits on freedom, uses detailed textual and conceptual evidence, engages with counterarguments and reaches a clearly argued, balanced and original judgement.	**19-24**

Indicative content:

- Agreement point: both thinkers accept that individual freedom is not absolute and that some limits can be justified. Mill allows interference to prevent harm to others. Rawls allows limits to secure a just basic structure and to permit inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged.
- Agreement development: both seek impartial justification. Mill builds an ethical utilitarian defence that protects individuality to promote general welfare, while Rawls uses the original position as a form of contractualist impartiality yielding principles that can limit liberty for fairness.
- Disagreement point: Mill prioritises protection of individuality and free expression, resisting state interference except to prevent harm, and is sceptical of broad redistributive demands that excessively limit personal liberty. Rawls, by contrast, can justify far-reaching restrictions on economic freedom through the difference principle and institutional design chosen behind the veil of ignorance.
- Disagreement development: show examples, e.g. Mill would oppose paternalistic laws that limit adult self-regarding behaviour even if such choices are harmful to the person, whereas Rawls might endorse redistribution via taxation that limits some economic freedoms because it improves the position of the worst off, chosen by agents who do not know their future place.
- Methodological contrast: Mill grounds limits in utilitarian reasoning and the intrinsic value of individuality, while Rawls grounds limits in a deontic contractualist framework that privileges justice as fairness, so their normative bases lead to different practical conclusions when liberty conflicts with distributive justice.
- Tension over democracy and majorities: Mill fears the tyranny of the majority and defends civil liberties to protect minorities; Rawls also protects basic liberties as inviolable in his first principle, so there is common ground in protecting certain liberties from majority infringement, though Rawls places basic liberties at the top of a lexical ordering which constrains possible redistributive measures only to those that respect basic liberties.
- Evaluation of limits: assess whether Mill's harm principle gives clearer guidance in everyday cases than Rawls's more structural principles. Consider critiques such as vagueness in defining harm for Mill, and Rawlsian abstraction and potential practical difficulties in applying the difference principle.
- Judgement: a balanced conclusion might argue Mill and Rawls agree at a general level that liberty needs principled limits and both protect core liberties, but they differ significantly in scope and justification. Rawls permits institutional constraints for distributive justice that Mill would resist, while Mill gives stronger protection to individual autonomy in self-regarding matters. The extent of agreement is therefore limited: they converge on protecting basic civil liberties but diverge on economic limits and the role of redistribution.

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