

# On the turn of self-respect toward its social basis in the primary social good

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**Abstract:** Rawls once regarded self-respect as one of the most important primary social goods, but eventually it turns to the social basis of self-respect. Rawls realized that self-respect as a subjective evaluative cannot be assigned as a social fundamental good. To protect people's self-respect, society needs to provide a social basic structure that is conducive to the formation and cultivation of self-respect, and this social basic structure is in line with the principle of justice proposed by Rawls.

**Keywords:** self-respect; the social basis of self-respect; primary social good; the principle of justice

## 1. Introduction

Rawls's theory of justice acts on the social structure, and an important part of the social structure is the rational distribution of primary social good. The primary social good can essentially be understood as a special class of social values, and their rational distribution contributes to the realization of the life plan of every rational person. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls shows that primary social good includes rights and liberties, power and opportunity, income and wealth, and self-respect. However, in *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*, self-respect as primary social good is replaced by the social basis of self-respect.

Although Rawls's revision of the content of the primary social good is obvious. But, due to the complexity of Rawls's academic theory, this revision has not been highly valued by the academic community and has not been studied in depth. Scholars prefer to elaborate on the matter as a basic fact or to provide some brief analysis of the causes. However, the revision of the content of primary social good also reflects the revision of the interpretation of primary social good.

Rawls has shown that he has not fully elaborated on the concept of the basic good of society and that the understanding of the specific content of the revision of primary social good can also lead us to further understand the various modifications of Rawls's interpretation of primary social good. To achieve this goal, we should start with the meaning of self-respect and thus clear that it cannot be used as a reason for primary social good, to further understand the revised meaning of the interpretation of primary social good.

## 2. Meaning of self-respect

### 2.1. Self-respect in the philosophical sphere

"Self-respect" was not created as a philosophical term, and intuitively, it is considered a psychological activity, subordinate to psychology. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze how the concept of "self-respect" enters the field of political philosophy studies and how it is concretely presented in this field. In reading Hegel's view, Fukuyama tries to show that the pursuit of material abundance cannot satisfy the demands of human nature and that people also desire to be respected and recognized. Fukuyama shows that, according to Hegel, the fundamental difference between human beings and animals does not lie in tool making or mastery of specific languages, but in the desire of human beings to be recognized by others, not only in a broad sense but based on their worth and dignity.

Accordingly, in Hegel's view, recognizing and valuing one's own value is the kernel of the need for "recognition," and this determination of value enables one to realize that one can overcome "bestiality," i.e., transcend purely physical desires; it also enables one to realize that one, as a spiritually It also makes one aware of one's self-will as an independent individual, free from interference, which in modern times is generally expressed as self-respect.

But if we do not strictly define the term itself, the same concept of "self-respect" has probably been used in political science for a long time. In the context of political science, self-respect is not some kind of innate but rather an acquired one and is divided into two categories. The first type of self-respect is based on the individual's awareness of "being human", and it expresses respect for the essence of what makes a human being human, i.e., a universal and fully consistent degree of self-respect based on mutual recognition of certain capabilities that any human individual possesses so that this The other kind of self-respect is based on the of people's consideration about the sum of their specific qualities and characteristics, which is more concerned with the characteristics, virtues, abilities or achievements of any individual. This self-respect is also called the self-respect of evaluation.

## **2.2. *Self-respect in the Rawlsian sense***

Rawls adopts Kant's view that people that people should not be treated only as means, but always as ends. This suggests that Rawls follows Kant's theory and emphasizes that self-respect is a sense of self-confidence in one's dignity as a human being and one's ends and that this self-respect is enjoyed equally by all people. <sup>[1]</sup>Rawls believes that people's self-respect comes directly from the use of their moral abilities, and those who use their moral abilities can gain a sense of justice and further pursue or change their conception of goodness, and people thus enjoy self-respect. This self-respect stems from the nature of human beings, which in Rawls' view is the self-respect given to each individual by the moral faculties that are common to all human beings. This self-respect, which does not vary in degree among individuals, is consistent with the qualities of recognized self-respect.

Rawls further shows that a person's self-respect has two aspects. First, consistent with what we have previously discussed, a person's self-respect consists of his sense of self-worth, his conception of the good, the specific plans he envisions for his life, and a definite belief that his efforts to achieve these almost are worthwhile. Second, self-respect consists of a person's confidence that he can to achieve his self-intentions, inasmuch as this confidence is inseparable from the individual's abilities.

This self-respect contains two layers: first, someone's self-approval of his or her own value and what he or she wants, i.e., his or her life values and conception of goodness; and second, someone's self-approval of his or her ability to pursue his or her own conception of goodness and to realize his or her life plan. It can be attributed to the self-respect that someone acquires based on current value judgments and future pursuits, recognition of the ability to achieve one's own goals. Obviously, each person's evaluation of himself or herself and his or her capabilities must be different, and this self-respect is consistent with the qualities of evaluative self-respect.

We might say that Rawls achieves a balance between the self-respect of recognition and the self-respect of evaluation mentioned above in constructing his theory of self-respect.

## **3. The refutation of self-respect as the primary good**

### **3.1. *Refutation of acknowledged self-respect***

Recognized self-respect cannot be a primary social good. This is because it is not directly controlled by society and society cannot be held responsible for its distribution. In Rawls' view, human beings acquire recognized self-respect as a result of two moral capacities. But having moral competence is only a prerequisite for gaining self-respect, while the use of one's two moral faculties in life is the basis for recognized self-respect, i.e., one's life needs to be guided by one's own self-selected conception of the good and sense of justice.

However, regardless of the conditions provided by society, even in a just society, there are often some people who do not use their moral capacities appropriately, who do not develop, and who have difficulty developing, a proper sense of justice and goodness; there are even some people who are in denial about the use of their moral capacities, who do not try to develop some sense of justice and goodness at all, but indulge in some kind of chaotic, irrational and even harmful to the lives of others. Society can admonish and even discipline these people for their harmful behavior, but it cannot compel them to use their moral capacities, and thus society does not have the power to "make people respect themselves". This means that individuals bear primary responsibility for their own recognized self-respect.

In conclusion, recognized self-respect cannot be uniformly distributed and overburdened by the basic structures of society. For we cannot deny that in a society with a good environment there are also

people who, for various reasons, do not use their moral capacities to the fullest. Society can only create a good social condition that allows people to form and develop their own sense of justice and goodness, but it is the level at which individuals use their moral capacities that effectively determines whether or not they can achieve recognized self-respect.

### ***3.2. Refutation of the self-respect of evaluation***

It is also impossible to consider evaluative self-respect as one of the primary social good. Evaluative self-respect takes into account the way a person measures himself or herself and his or her specific life plans, and it also reflects a measure of his or her ability to see if he or she is able to achieve his or her life goals. It is also difficult not to think that evaluative self-respect is governed by one's attitude about oneself and that this self-respect depends to a large extent on how one perceives one's worth, the value of one's life plan, and one's own abilities, subjective judgments that obviously cannot be assigned by the basic structures of society.

At the same time, evaluated self-respect is also influenced by the evaluations of others and society. After all, people desire to have their personality or behavior affirmed or praised by others. With positive communication and even encouragement, people are more likely to feel satisfied and think their daily behavior is worth doing. But even so, there are times when an individual's self-respect is diametrically opposed to the evaluation of others because people are influenced by the psychological factor of "self-confidence and low self-respect", and a person with low self-respect, even if he is considered excellent according to the general view of society, may still have a low opinion of himself, and vice versa.

It should be clear that since individuals play a decisive role in determining their own self-respect, this self-respect is quite dependent on the standards by which individuals evaluate themselves, and due to the differences of people as evaluation subjects, the evaluation standards in society and should be diverse, so it is difficult to form a completely uniform standard. Even if people can form a consensus on some of their views, individuals may produce evaluations that are inconsistent with social standards because of their psychological states. These evaluations also do not have the corresponding objectivity and thus lack sufficient persuasiveness.

## **4. The social basis of self-respect**

Although we exclude the possibility of recognizing and evaluating self-respect as the primary good of society, Rawls has also explained the possibility of making self-respect "most important primary good". Therefore, we cannot directly ignore the important value of self-respect for human beings, but we may construct a social basis of self-respect instead. <sup>[2]</sup>Rawls shows that the social basis of self-respect should be an integral part of the basic institutions of society, and its basic role is to promote members of society to feel their own value and to gain self-confidence to continue to advance their life goals.

We can thus argue that it is necessary to construct a social structure that is conducive to the formation and development of self-respect, and Rawls showed that his theory of justice is precisely the doctrine "applicable to the basic structure of society. A society structured following this theory of justice must be the one most conducive to the preservation of human self-respect, and therefore the social basis of self-respect should be consistent with the specific principles of justice constructed by Rawls.

### ***4.1. Equal liberty as the social basis of self-respect***

Concerning the first principle of justice as the social basis of self-respect, the fundamental rights and freedoms affirmed by any society and possessed by its members are closely related to their self-respect. The liberty discussed here is the basic liberty prescribed by society, which is interrelated and equal, without excessive consideration of their priority. According to Rawls' First Principle of Justice, the guarantee of liberty first gives equal liberty to citizens, or that everyone is equally free, thus affirming the equal status of citizens and presenting the most basic possibility for the existence of self-respect. This is also how the first principle of justice serves as the social basis of self-respect.

Equal liberty establishes, first of all, the equal political status of citizens in society. When we consider the self-respect of recognition, we achieve the two moral faculties that are common to people,

as discussed above. Members of a society can recognize the citizenship of other members of the society and believe that because of this status they are empowered to use their moral capacities in social discipline and that others can understand that they have these capacities as well. Thus, the recognition of equal citizenship implies the determination of the use of each other's moral capacities; the determination of the use of moral capacities also implies the affirmation of people's undifferentiated self-respect for each other. These kinds of undifferentiated affirmations among citizens with equal political identities show the mutual agreement of those who believe that the other and know that the other also believes that they can use their moral capacities, and there is no reason why this should not be classified as a guarantee of acknowledged self-respect.

The principle of equal liberty allows us to affirm, in the basic structure of society, the free and equal political status of its members. This status is an affirmation of a political identity, and a mutually consistent political identity gives a consensus of mutual agreement and provides support for the self-respect of recognition.

#### ***4.2. Difference principle as the social basis of self-respect***

Rawls argues that even if people's economic superiority cannot be a source of self-esteem, the principle of difference, which is "itself a form of reciprocity" and endorsed by all members of society, can serve as the social basis of self-respect.<sup>[3]</sup> The difference principle is a reaffirmation of the equal political status of the citizens of a society. In contemporary society, according to some traditional or widespread notions, people's self-respect is linked to their economic level. However, Rawls disagrees with this view and believes that economic advantage should not be the basis of people's self-respect, but rather the distribution of basic rights of individuals should be the basis of people's self-respect. In short, people should not differentiate their self-respect because they are richer or poorer than others. But in reality, people may consider their economic and social disparities, and then a social basis of self-respect should be able to reduce people's economic inequality.

The "maximim rule" in the difference principle requires that social and economic inequalities should exist only in the best interests of the least advantaged class in society. The original purpose of the difference principle is to eliminate socio-economic inequalities as much as possible and to fundamentally eliminate the false dependence of human self-respect on one's economic status. More importantly, the principle of differentiation eliminates a disagreement about the evaluated self-respect and consolidates a condition of evaluated self-respect, because the difference principle provides a possibility for the most disadvantaged in society to obtain as many resources as possible. Even if one's self-respect is not directly related to one's economic conditions, for the individual, the economic base that he or she possesses not only promotes or constrains one's ability to conceive a life plan that seems worthwhile to him or her but also harvests or hinders his or her ability to realize his or her life plan.

In conclusion, the advantage of the difference principle lies not only in the elimination of the false dependence of human self-respect on economic conditions but also in the ability to provide the most disadvantaged with as much material security as possible, so that all members of society can receive as much support as possible for the development of their own evaluated self-respect.

#### ***4.3. The principle of equality of fair opportunity as the social basis for self-respect***

Opportunity is also one of the fundamental good of society as defined by Rawls, and the fundamental good enables citizens to develop and use their own moral capacities, and thus to form and pursue their conceptions of good and corresponding plans of life. The primary social good is the social conditions and the means that people can rely on in this process and that are compatible with their purposes. This opportunity can influence the promotion of the development and use of both moral capacities of citizens, and fair equality of opportunity can thus become a social basis for self-respect.

Equality of fair opportunity is a kind of substantive equality, which Rawls believed could somewhat avoid the influence of innate conditions on people's equal status. Rawls assumes that there is a distribution of natural talents and that if a group of people, even though they are of different social origin and class and have different developmental statuses before adulthood, have the same natural talents and abilities, and the same specific person will to use them, then they should have "the same prospects of success".

Further, for a society whose members have similar motivations and talents, they should have essentially equal access to education and be able to achieve similar prospects. We can argue that people

with the same abilities and aspirations should have the same access to open social positions, regardless of their innate social status. This requirement effectively affirms the equal citizenship of people in a society, even if they belong to different classes. This would give equal educational opportunities to people with the same motivations and endowments and would provide an effective way to promote equal citizens to develop the competencies necessary for their own ideas of good, thereby increasing their possibilities for realizing their ideas of goodness. [4]

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, opportunity, as a primary social good, when combined with the principle of equality of fair opportunity in the principle of justice, can promote the equal treatment of different classes of citizens in society itself and promote the realization of their self-respect.

In fact, in *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement*, Rawls's explanation has three main points: First, the primary social good is a variety of social conditions and means suited to various ends. For citizens, the social conditions and means appropriate to various ends are generally necessary for the full development and full use of their two moral faculties, as well as to pursue their clear conception of the good. Here, Rawls is concerned with the social conditions and normal environment in which human beings live in a democratic society.

Secondly, the primary social good is something that is needed and demanded from the point of view of man's political conception, and from the political conception of man, man as a citizen is a full, lifelong member of social cooperation, and not a pure human being who has nothing to do with any normative concept.

Third, the primary social good is what citizens need to live their whole lives as free and equal human beings, not simply the object of reasonable desire, desire, affection, or even desire. Rawls emphasizes that the explanation of the basic good does not depend solely on psychological, social, and historical facts, but also on general knowledge of people's lives.

Rawls tries to show that, First of all, the the primary social good is not people's subjective and psychologically reasonable desires, but has objectivity and publicity, especially the characteristics of a system. Second, the basic social goodness is not a common human preference, but rather a limitation that defines the primary social good as what is necessary for citizens of a democratic society. Finally, the selection of the primary social good does not depend on historical and psychological facts, but on common sense derived from the present human life and its conditions. This is also the fundamental reason for inducing changes in the specific content of primary social good. [5]

Rawls' specialization of self-respect as the primary social good shows his profound understanding of the psychological state of human beings and the influence of society on human psychology, and also reflects his unique insight into the primary social good. And the use of the social basis of self-respect as the primary social good is also a reuse of Rawls' two principles of justice. A basic social structure that conforms to the principles of justice should be most favorable to the inspiration and protection of human self-respect, and Rawls has thus once again demonstrated the coherence of his theory.

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