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# The Cardinal Role of Respect and Self-Respect for Rawls's and Walzer's Theories of Justice<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The cardinal role that notions of respect and self-respect play in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* has already been abundantly examined in the literature. On the other hand, however, it has hardly been noticed that these notions are also central to Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*. Respect and self-respect are not only central topics of his chapter "Recognition", but constitute a central aim of a "complex egalitarian society" and of Walzer's theory of justice. This paper substantiates this thesis and elucidates Walzer's criticism of Rawls according to which "we need to distinguish between "self-respect" and "self-esteem".

## 1 Introduction

The cardinal role that notions of respect and self-respect play in Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* has already been abundantly examined in the literature (Bernick 1978, Eyal 2005, Keat and Miller 1974, Nielsen 1979, Shue 1975, Zaino 1998; recently in the context of Rawls's argument for stability Zink 2011). On the other hand, it has hardly been noticed that these notions are also central for Michael Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*.<sup>2</sup> While Walzer clearly distinguishes between "self-respect" and "self-esteem", Rawls uses the two terms as synonyms (Walzer 1983, p. 274; Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67). Rawls's failure to distinguish between these two notions has frequently been criticized and discussed.<sup>3</sup>

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1 For helpful comments on this paper I thank Tuğba Sevinç Yücel. For some improvements in style I am grateful to Barry Stocker.

2 The volume *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality*, edited by David Miller and Michael Walzer, deals with recognition and respect only on the sidelines (Miller and Walzer 1995). The articles in the volumes *Reading Walzer* and *Freiheit, soziale Güter und Gerechtigkeit* do not examine these notions at all (Benbaji and Sussmann 2014, Nusser 2012). A cooperative commentary edited on *Spheres of Justice* contains one article on recognition (Knoll and Spieker 2014). However, the author does not argue for a central role for recognition and respect in Walzer's theory of justice (Schütz 2014). The same is true for Russell Keat's and Arto Laitinen's articles (Keat 1997, Laitinen 2014).

3 Walzer 1983, pp. 274, 277, 335 (fn. 42); Darwall 1977; for more literature on this criticism and discussion see Zaino 1998, p. 738, n. 5. In a footnote to *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer refers

It is evident that notions of respect and self respect play a cardinal role in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. For him, "self-respect (or self-esteem)" is, as he repeatedly states, "perhaps the most important primary good" (Rawls 1971, pp. 440, 544; § 67, § 82). Rawls claims that the fact that his conception of justice as fairness "gives more support to self-esteem than other principles is a strong reason" that it would be adopted in the "original position" and chosen over competing conceptions (Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67; cf. pp. 178–79, § 29).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in *Political Liberalism* Rawls talks about "the fundamental importance of self-respect" and asserts "that self-respect is most effectively encouraged and supported by the two principles of justice" (Rawls 2005, p. 318, VIII, § 6). Rawls's conception of self-respect and its role in his theory of justice as fairness seem to undergo no significant modifications or developments after *A Theory of Justice*. However, Rawls's statements on self-respect and in particular the "bases of self-respect" and their status as primary goods in *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* are sometimes unclear and confusing.

After a short and partly critical second section on Rawls's understanding of respect and self-respect, this essay substantiates the thesis that notions of respect and self-respect play a cardinal role in Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*. Self-respect and self-esteem are not only central topics in his chapter "Recognition", but constitute a central aim of his whole theory of justice. Section three provides a very short introduction to Walzer's theory of distributive justice and to his chapter "Recognition". The fourth section examines his concepts of public honor and individual desert and shows that, in this context, Walzer advances a strong argument against Rawls's theory of justice. Section five substantiates the thesis that self-respect and self-esteem constitute a central aim of a "complex egalitarian society" and of Walzer's theory of justice.

## 2 John Rawls on Self-Respect

John Rawls not only claims that his conception of justice as fairness gives more support to self-respect than others, but argues that every conception of justice "should publicly express men's respect for one another" (Rawls 1971, p. 179,

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to David Sachs's distinction between "self-respect" and "self-esteem" (Sachs 1981) and comments: "David Sachs is one of the few contemporary philosophers who has written about this distinction" (Walzer 1983, p. 334, n. 38).

<sup>4</sup> In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls understands the "original position" mainly as a favorable interpretation of an "initial choice situation" for principles of justice (Rawls 1971, pp. 11–19, 118–192; § 3, § 4, §§ 20–30).

§ 29). Respect leads to self-respect and *vice versa*. Self-respect is “reciprocally self-supporting”. This means that “those who respect themselves are more likely to respect each other and conversely” (Rawls 1971, p. 179, § 29). For Rawls, “self-respect (or self-esteem)” is opposed to “self-contempt” and has two crucial aspects that are related to each other (Rawls 1971, p. 179, § 29). He defines these aspects in § 67 of *A Theory of Justice*. First, self-respect

includes a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that his conception of the good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out. And second, self-respect implies a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfill one’s intentions (Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67).

These two aspects describe the desirable mental state of a person who has self-respect. A person’s sense of her own value cannot be achieved by an isolated individual because it essentially depends on an intersubjective or social dimension. For Rawls, “our self-respect normally depends upon the respect of others. Unless we feel that our endeavors are honored by them, it is difficult if not impossible for us to maintain the conviction that our ends are worth advancing” (Rawls 1971, p. 178, § 29). Self-respect depends on “finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others” (Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67).

For Rawls, a person’s sense of her own value is not primarily linked to her job, income or wealth, but to her conception of the good or her plan of life. According to his theory, human beings are equal as moral persons. Moral persons are defined by both their capabilities of having a sense of justice and of having a “conception of their good (as expressed by a rational plan of life)” (Rawls 1971, pp. 19, 505; § 4, § 77).<sup>5</sup> In the modern world, individuals “have different plans of life” and “there exists a diversity of philosophical and religious belief” (Rawls 1971, p. 127, § 22). According to Rawls’s “thin theory” of the good, “a person’s good is determined by what is for him the most rational plan of life given reasonable favorable circumstances” (Rawls 1971, pp. 395–396, § 60). If a person’s rational plan of life is recognized or approved by the other members of society, the person develops the conviction that her plan is worth carrying out and, as a consequence, develops a sense of her own value.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Rawls 2005, pp. 310–324, VIII, §§ 5–6. For Rawls, “the capacity for moral personality is a sufficient condition for being entitled to equal justice” (Rawls 1971, p. 505, § 77).

<sup>6</sup> Rawls declares about the opposite scenario, in which a person’s rational plan of life is not socially recognized or approved: “When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution” (Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67).

The social recognition or approval of the different plans of life in a just society is in particular expressed by Rawls's first principle of justice that calls for "an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties" (Rawls 1971, p. 302; § 46). The first principle, which includes the equal liberty of conscience and the right to vote and to be eligible for public office, ensures equal citizenship and thus a similar and secure status for all members of society. On this basis, "a variety of communities and associations" or "free communities of interest" can be established that allow all citizens to carry out their plans of life (Rawls 1971, pp. 441, 544; § 67, § 82). In a just society, the equal distribution of the fundamental rights and liberties guaranteed by the first principle constitutes the basis for self-respect (Rawls 1971, p. 544, § 82).

Rawls emphasizes that among his two principles it is in particular the equal liberty principle that is supposed to promote and sustain self-respect: "The basis for self-esteem in a just society is not then one's income share but the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties" (Rawls 1971, p. 544; § 82; cf. Rawls 2005, p. 318, VIII, § 6). Rawls's argument from self-respect is not only an important argument for his conception of justice as fairness in general, but in particular for the priority of liberty among the two principles (Rawls 1971, pp. 541–548, 544–546, § 82; cf. Shue 1975, Taylor 2003). Critics have rightly objected that individual self-respect depends to a considerable amount also on one's income share and that the importance Rawls gives to self-respect among the primary goods calls for less socioeconomic inequality than Rawls's difference principle allows (Barry 1973, p. 32<sup>7</sup>; Eyal 2005; Keat and Miller 1974; Miler 1978, p. 18; Nielsen 1979; Zaino 1998). In modern work and market societies, the social status and self-respect of a person depends to a high degree on her job and on being able to buy a certain set of commodities.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barry criticizes Rawls: "That equality of self-respect may be as much or more hindered by inequalities of wealth or power themselves apparently does not occur to him" (Barry 1973, p. 32). This criticism is exaggerated because Rawls clearly states about his idea that the "precedence of liberty entails equality in the social bases of self-respect": "Now it is quite possible that this idea cannot be carried through completely. To some extent men's sense of their own worth may hinge upon their institutional position and their income share" (Rawls 1971, p. 546, § 82; cf. p. 534, § 80; cf. Zaino 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Walzer's analysis of sociologist Lee Rainwater's studies on the "social meaning of income", according to which in industrial societies money buys membership (Walzer 1983, pp. 105–106). Walzer also quotes another sociologist and refers to the difference between the society of feudal Europe and modern bourgeois society: "Status, Frank Parfin argues, is a function of place, profession, and office, not of particular recognitions of particular achievements. The abolition of titles is not the abolition of classes. Conceptions of honor are more controversial than they

According to the second aspect, “self-respect implies a confidence in one’s ability, so far as it is within one’s power, to fulfill one’s intentions”. This second aspect is related to the first one in terms of being its prerequisite. A person must have the confidence that she has the ability to fulfill her particular plan of life in order to follow it through and to have “the will to strive for” it. If we are “plagued by failure and self-doubt” we cannot “continue in our endeavors” (Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67).

Both aspects of self-respect, and in particular the first, are associated with what Rawls calls the “Aristotelian Principle”. This principle “is a principle of motivation” and “runs as follows: other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity” (Rawls 1971, pp. 426–427, § 65). Rawls illustrates this principle referring to people who are able to play both checkers and chess. As chess is a more ingenious and complicated game than checkers, it leads to more enjoyment. Therefore, such kinds of people are more motivated to play the former than the latter (Rawls 1971, p. 426–427, § 65). Analogously, people enjoy their plans of life much more if these plans succeed as a

call upon their natural capacities in an interesting fashion. When activities fail to satisfy the Aristotelian Principle, they are likely to seem dull and flat, and to give us no feeling of competence or a sense that they are worth doing. A person tends to be more confident of his value when his abilities are both fully realized and organized in ways of suitable complexity and refinement (Rawls 1971, p. 440, § 67).

The more a person’s plan of life allows her to develop and exercise her capacities and abilities and the more this plan of life is recognized or approved by the other members of society, the more she will be able to develop a sense of her own value or self-respect.

Rawls discusses the objection that the high demands of the Aristotelian Principle make it difficult for less gifted individuals to gain recognition for their personal life plans from others. However, he counters this objection by claiming that it “normally suffices that for each person there is some association (one or more) to which he belongs and within which the activities that are rational for him are publicly affirmed by others. In this way we acquire a sense that what we do in everyday life is worthwhile” (Rawls 1971, p. 441, § 67). Rawls does not give concrete examples of the kind of associations and communities

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were under the old regime, but distributions are still patterned, now dominated by occupation rather than blood or rank” (Walzer 1983, p. 256).

he has in mind. In all likelihood he thinks of a variety of clubs, societies, unions, corporations and such like. Being a member of such kinds of associations also has a beneficial effect on self-respect: Associative “ties strengthen the second aspect of self-esteem, since they tend to reduce the likelihood of failure and provide support against the sense of self-doubt when mishaps occur” (Rawls 1971, p. 441, § 67).

As a Kantian, Rawls not only talks about “principles of justice for institutions”, but also about “principles of natural duty and obligations that apply to individuals” (Rawls 1971, p. 333, chap. VI). His theory claims that in an “original position of equality”, free and rational persons would also choose principles of natural duty. One important natural duty is the “duty of mutual respect”: “This is the duty to show a person the respect which is due to him as a moral being” (Rawls 1971, p. 337, § 51). As already mentioned, moral beings are defined as persons with a sense of justice and with a conception of their good. In correspondence to the two aspects of moral personality, mutual respect is shown “in our willingness to see the situation of others from their point of view, from the perspective of their conception of their good; and in our being prepared to give reasons for our actions whenever the interests of others are materially affected” (Rawls 1971, p. 337, § 51).<sup>9</sup> Rawls convincingly claims that everyone benefits “from living in a society where the duty of mutual respect is honored” and that such a duty supports everyone’s sense of her own value and thus self-respect.

This short clarification and critique of Rawls’s view of respect and self-respect allows for a final criticism of his central term “bases of self-respect”. Rawls introduces this term together with his “general conception of justice”, from which he derives his two principles of justice. This “general conception” reads: “All social values – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage” (Rawls 1971, p. 62, § 11; cf. p. 303, § 46). In this important section of Rawls’s book the term “bases of self-respect” remains opaque. After introducing his “general conception”, Rawls tells his readers that “liberty and opportunity, income and wealth”

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<sup>9</sup> Rawls further explains his statement: “When called for, reasons are to be addressed to those concerned; they are to be offered in good faith, in the belief that they are sound reasons as defined by a mutually acceptable conception of justice which takes the good of everyone into account. Thus to respect another as a moral person is to try to understand his aims and interests from his standpoint and to present him with considerations that enable him to accept the constraints on his conduct” (Rawls 1971, pp. 337–338, § 51). In this context, in a footnote that says “On the notion of respect” Rawls refers to Bernard Williams 1962, pp. 118–119.

are “primary goods, that is, things that every rational man is presumed to want” and that these primary goods are distributed by “the basic structure of society”<sup>10</sup> (Rawls 1971, p. 62, § 11). At this point, he mentions for the first time that also self-respect is an important primary good. However, he does not only stay silent about what exactly the social bases of this primary good are, but also does not indicate whether these bases should also be considered as a primary good.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, these bases are listed among the primary goods that are to be distributed equally;<sup>12</sup> on the other, he only mentions self-respect and not its bases in his enumeration of the chief primary goods on this page.

Only much later in the book, when Rawls introduces the grounds for the priority of the equal liberty principle, he makes clear what he means with his term “bases of self respect”. He mentions that “the precedence of liberty entails equality in the social bases of self-respect” and – as already mentioned – states: “The basis for self-esteem in a just society is not then one’s income share but the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties” (Rawls 1971, pp. 546, 544; § 82). Therefore, the social bases of self-respect are primarily identical with the rights and liberties secured by the first principle of justice. This late clarification demonstrates that Rawls was not careful when he phrased his “general conception of justice” because his enumeration of those social values that “are to be distributed equally” lists “liberty and opportunity, income and wealth,

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**10** The basic structure of the society is composed out of its most important institutions: “By major institutions I understand the political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements. Thus the legal protection of freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, competitive markets, private property in the means of production, and the monogamous family [...]. Taken together as one scheme, the major institutions define men’s rights and duties and influence their life-prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do” (Rawls 1971, p. 7, § 2).

**11** Nir Eyal claims that Rawls mentions only five social primary goods including the social bases of self-respect (Eyal 2005, p. 195). However, in the context of his “general conception of justice” Rawls designates only self-respect as a primary good. Eyal seems to be unaware of this problem regarding the difference between self-respect and its social bases.

**12** It seems that Nir Eyal, who has been mentioned in the preceding footnote, is also not aware of Rawls’s “general conception of justice” because he asserts that Rawls nowhere states how the bases of self-respect should be distributed (the first reference to self-respect in the context of the “general conception” has been overlooked in creating the index of *A Theory of Justice*). Eyal claims in his paper that the distributive principle of the social bases of self-respect is Rawls’s “covert” principle of justice and undertakes to reconstruct it. The result of this reconstruction is that “justice mandates that each social basis for self-respect be equalized” (Eyal 2005, p. 195–196). However, already in his “general conception of justice” Rawls’s states clearly that the bases of self-respect should be “distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage” (Rawls 1971, p. 62, § 11; cf. p. 546, § 82).



and the bases of self-respect” (M.K.’s italics). The word “and” before “the bases of self-respect” suggests or implies that these bases are something different from all of the afore-mentioned primary goods, which is not the case. Liberty is a primary good that is also the main social basis for self-respect. Therefore, both self-respect and its bases are primary goods. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls pronounces that also “fair equality of opportunity” counts as a social basis for self-respect (Rawls 2005, p. 203, V, § 7; for several other bases see Eyal 2005, pp. 196, 212). In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls also states clearly that the social bases of self-respect count as one out of five primary goods. However, confusingly enough, now he doesn’t list self-respect anymore as a primary good (Rawls 2005, pp. 308–309, 319, VIII, § 4, § 6). In *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement*, Rawls declares “that it is not self-respect as an attitude toward oneself but the social bases of self-respect that count as a primary good” (Rawls 2001, p. 60).<sup>13</sup>

### 3 Walzer’s Theory of Distributive Justice and his Chapter on Recognition

In the preface of the German edition of *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer points out what he holds to be the main difference between his and Rawls’s theory of justice. According to Rawls, his two principles of justice are sufficient to regulate the distribution of all desirable social goods, like liberty, opportunity, income and offices. Against this claim, Walzer argues that the broad range of different social goods – membership, welfare, security, free time, education, recognition, political power, etc. – cannot be reduced to “a short list of basic goods”, and neither are two principles of justice sufficient to regulate the just distribution of all these social goods (Walzer 1983, p. 5; Walzer 1992, p. 12). Rather, Walzer calls for a diverse set of rules, standards and principles for the distribution of all different social goods. While “from Plato onward” the majority of philosophers who have written about justice assume that “there is one, and only one, distributive system”, Walzer argues for a pluralist approach that encompasses a variety of distributions and distributive principles. He claims “that the principles of justice are themselves pluralist in form; that different social goods ought to be distributed for different reasons, in accordance with different procedures, by different agents” (Walzer 1983, pp. 5–6). For him, there is only one universal procedural

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<sup>13</sup> In the corresponding footnote he states: “*Theory* is ambiguous on this point. It fails to distinguish between self-respect as an attitude, the preserving of which is a fundamental interest, and the social bases that help to support that attitude” (Rawls 2001, p. 60).



rule: each social good should be distributed according to the criteria valid for its own sphere (Walzer 1992, p. 12). Walzer's main suggestion for the multiplicity of social goods and the complexity of distributive systems is his idea of "complex equality". This remarkable idea reconciles the common egalitarian demand for social equality with the recognition of a large number of social inequalities. According to Walzer's republican theory of distributive justice, a just distribution of all social goods leads to a "complex egalitarian society" in which every citizen is equally free from domination and tyranny (Walzer 1983, p. 17; cf. Knoll 2014).

According to Walzer's relativist approach, social goods tend to have different meanings in different societies. The claim of his interpretative method is that the proper distributive criteria of social goods are intrinsic to each particular social good. It is the meaning of each social good that determines the criterion of its just distribution.<sup>14</sup> Walzer argues, for example, that the appropriate understanding of the meaning of medical care and welfare reveals to us that these goods should not be sold but allocated according to need (Walzer 1983, pp. 64–90). The consequence of Walzer's claim that the meaning of each social good determines its criterion of just distribution is that each social good and its distinct meaning constitutes – as he puts it metaphorically – a separate and relatively autonomous sphere of justice: "When meanings are distinct, distributions must be autonomous. Every social good or set of goods constitutes, as it were, a distributive sphere within which only certain criteria and arrangements are appropriate" (Walzer 1983, p. 10). In the case of medical care and welfare in general, these constitute a sphere in which the proper criterion for a just distribution is need. Office, on the other hand, constitutes a sphere in which the suitable criterion is qualification (Walzer 1983, pp. 135–139, 143–147). If all social goods are distributed autonomously and according to their meanings, a "complex egalitarian society" has been reached.

In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer examines questions of self-esteem and self-respect mainly in the chapter "Recognition". Walzer is aware that the modern philosophy of recognition goes back to Hegel who he quotes twice: "they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other" (Walzer 1983, pp. 259, 278). For Hegel, self-consciousness and personal identity depend on recognition by others, which is usually the result of some kind of struggle. In line with this, Walzer calls his first subchapter, in which he approaches his topic from a historical perspective, "The Struggle for Recognition".<sup>15</sup> Like Hegel in the famous chapter on

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<sup>14</sup> For the difficulties of Walzer's claim that the meaning of each social good determines its criterion of just distribution see Miller 1995, pp. 5–10.

<sup>15</sup> Likewise, the title of Axel Honneth's Habilitationsschrift, which also draws on Hegel's early Jena writings, is *Kampf um Anerkennung* (Honneth 1992).

master and servant, Walzer is interested in the changes that go along with the progress from hierarchical society of feudal Europe to modern bourgeois society. In the former society, social ranks and hereditary titles go along with a certain degree of honor: “Titles are instant recognitions” (Walzer 1983, p. 250). In the latter societies, titles based on blood lose their central importance. The hierarchy of titles among men is substituted by the single title “Master” or “Mister”:

In a society of misters, careers are open to talents, recognitions to whoever can win them. To paraphrase Hobbes, the equality of titles breeds an equality of hope and then a general competition. The struggle for honor that raged among aristocrats [...] is now entered by everyman. It is not, however, aristocratic honor that everyman is after. As the struggle is broadened, so the social good at issue is infinitely diversified, and its name is multiplied. *Honor, respect, esteem, praise, prestige, status, reputation, dignity, rank, regard, admiration, worth, distinction, deference, homage, appreciation, glory, fame, celebrity* [...] (Walzer 1983, p. 252).

In modern bourgeois society, people have no fixed places and ranks, and there exists a plurality of methods by which a variety of forms of recognition can be gained from others. People usually are preoccupied with their own claims to recognition and thus are reluctant to recognize others. However, Walzer is right in observing that people also have the need to give recognition: “we need heroes, men and women whom we can admire without negotiation and without constraint” (Walzer 1983, p. 254). Nevertheless, as recognition is a scarce good and as everyone can compete to obtain it, in modern society life becomes – as probably Hobbes noticed for the first time – a race for better places and more recognition. For Walzer, this is an ambivalent development: “A society of misters is a world of hope, effort, and endless anxiety” (Walzer 1983, p. 254). Recognition is a social good that is mostly distributed unequally. People have different skills and talents and will thus obtain different degrees of recognition. Modern bourgeois society does not promise “equality of outcomes” but “equality of opportunity” (Walzer 1983, p. 256).

Walzer is aware that modern societies do not make good on this promise. He criticizes the social reality that there are still classes and that social status does not depend mainly on individual qualities and “particular achievements”, but on the achievement of professional status or an “office”<sup>16</sup>. Walzer condemns

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**16** Walzer defines *office* “as any position in which the political community as a whole takes an interest, choosing the person who holds it or regulating the procedures by which he is chosen” (Walzer 1983, p. 129). According to this definition, most jobs in the modern world have turned into offices because “the state controls licensing procedures and participates in the enforcement

that “office holders command respect in the same way that they command high salaries, without having to prove their worth to their fellow workers or to their clients” (Walzer 1983, p. 256). As he shows in the chapter “Office”, the distribution of this social good is so important because “so much else is distributed along with office (or some offices): honor and status, power and prerogative, wealth and comfort” (Walzer 1983, p. 155). As a consequence, in modern societies the struggle for recognition becomes a struggle for office or for jobs and income (Walzer 1983, p. 256).

Walzer speculates on a better alternative to the existing social situation, in which recognition is closely tied to professional status or to holding an office. If these ties were cut, the result could be what he calls “the free appraisal of each person by each other person” (Walzer 1983, p. 257). In such a social arrangement, particular performances and achievements would lead to particular recognitions. For example, respect would not be tied to mere office holding, but to “helpfulness in office” (Walzer 1983, p. 257). The highest honor would only come “to office holders who perform well” (Walzer 1983, p. 272). However, Walzer admits that we don’t exactly know how “such world would look like” (Walzer 1983, p. 257).

## 4 Walzer on Public Honor and Individual Desert. A Strong Argument against Rawls’s Theory of Justice

In the subchapter “The Struggle for Recognition”, Walzer refers primarily to “individual distributions” of respect, honor, and esteem. However, he is aware that there are also “a variety of collective distributions: rewards, prizes, medals, citations, wreaths of laurel” (Walzer 1983, p. 259). Public honor is the reward for outstanding performances, accomplishments or works attributed to an individual or a group of individuals. One of Walzer’s main examples for the distribution of public honor is the Nobel Prize in literature. According to his theory, every social good should be distributed in regard to its meaning. Public honor constitutes a separate sphere in which the appropriate criterion for distributions is individual desert: “The crucial standard for public honor is desert” (Walzer 1983, p. 259). Analogously, “punishment, the most important example of public dishonor”,

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of standards for professional practice. Indeed, any employment for which academic certification is required is a kind of office” (Walzer 1983, pp. 130–131).

should be allotted to those individuals who deserve it (Walzer 1983, p. 268). Walzer understands desert not as a subjective or relative criterion but as an “objective measure”: “Hence it is distributed by juries, whose members deliver not an opinion but a verdict – a “true speech” about the qualities of the recipients. And on juries thought is not free; it is bound by evidence and rules” (Walzer 1983, p. 259, cf. 268).

Desert is one of three criteria that Walzer distinguishes in his first and pivotal chapter “Complex Equality”.<sup>17</sup> An important characteristic of desert is that it “seems to require an especially close connection between particular goods and particular persons” (Walzer 1983, p. 24). In his chapter “Office”, in which he distinguishes between qualification and desert, Walzer outlines his concept of desert:

*Desert* implies a very strict sort of entitlement, such that the title precedes and determines the selection, while *qualification* is a much looser idea. A prize, for example, can be deserved because it already belongs to the person who has given the best performance; it remains only to identify that person. Price committees are like juries in that they look backward and aim at an objective decision. An office, by contrast, cannot be deserved because it belongs to the people who are served by it, and they or their agents are free (within limits I will specify later) to make any choice they please (Walzer 1983, p. 136; Walzer’s italics).

If an author has written a novel that is generally agreed to be the best novel of this year, he is entitled to or deserves the Nobel Prize in literature for this year (Walzer 1983, p. 137).

In the literature, it has not always been noticed that Walzer’s subchapter “Public Honor and Individual Desert” contains a strong argument against a core element and central moral intuition of Rawls’s theory of justice. For Rawls, the “inequalities of birth and natural endowment are undeserved”: “No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society” (Rawls 1971, p. 100, 102, cf. 103–104; § 17). Rawls introduces his principle of fair opportunity that provides as much compensation as possible for talented individuals born into less favorable social positions as a consequence of this moral judgment. He also introduces his difference principle as a consequence of this moral intuition (Rawls 1971, pp. 73–75, 100–108; § 12,

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<sup>17</sup> Like “free exchange” and “need”, “desert” is a criterion that meets Walzer’s “open-ended distributive principle. *No social good x should be distributed to men and women who possess some other good y merely because they possess y and without regard to the meaning of x*” (Walzer 1983, pp. 20–21).

§ 17).<sup>18</sup> The difference principle should be understood as the principle of the welfare state because its social application requires the redistribution of social income towards the less favored members of society (cf. Knoll 2013). For Rawls, the less favored members of society are also defined by having less capabilities and talents and thus less resources to generate a high income (Rawls 1999, p. 83). However, such an “outcome of the natural lottery” is “arbitrary from a moral perspective” (Rawls 1971, p. 74, § 12). Therefore, it gives rise to “claims of redress” (Rawls 1971, p. 101, § 17). The undeserved bad luck of the less fortunate in the distribution of natural talents has to be compensated: “Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out” (Rawls 1971, p. 101, § 17). Rawls justifies this with his claim that the favored individuals do not deserve their superior endowments and talents.

Against this claim, Walzer argues that public honor “cannot exist as a good unless there are deserving men and women” (Walzer 1983, p. 261).<sup>19</sup> In his critique of Rawls, Walzer partly follows Nozick’s criticism (Nozick 1974, pp. 213–216, 228). Walzer attacks Rawls:

Advocates of equality have often felt compelled to deny the reality of desert. The people we call deserving, they argue, are simply lucky. [...] How are we to conceive of these men and women once we have come to view their capacities and achievements as accidental accessories, like hats and coats they just happen to be wearing? How, indeed, are they to conceive of themselves? The reflective forms of recognition, self-esteem and self-respect, our most important possessions [...] must seem meaningless to individuals all of whose qualities are nothing but the luck of the draw (Walzer 1983, pp. 260–261).

Rawls abstracts persons from their individual qualities and capabilities. Against this abstraction, Walzer argues firstly that it does not leave “us with *persons* at all” (Walzer 1983, p. 261; Walzer’s italics). Secondly, he claims that we cannot be proud of our achievements if the qualities that led to them are not an integral part of our personality. If we don’t deserve any recognition for who we are and for our achievements, and if we cannot be proud of ourselves, we cannot develop self-esteem and self-respect. The fact that Walzer calls self-esteem and self-re-

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**18** The final statement of the difference principle in *A Theory of Justice* reads: “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are [...] (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle” (Rawls 1971, p. 302, § 46).

**19** Walzer advocates the questionable thesis that the “recognition of deserving men and women, and of all deserving men and women, is possible only in a democracy” (Walzer 1983, p. 267). The validity of this thesis cannot be discussed in this paper.

spect “our most important possessions” demonstrates how important these notions are for him and his theory of justice.

## 5 The Importance of Self-Respect for Walzer’s Theory of Justice

As already mentioned, Walzer criticizes Rawls for not distinguishing between self-esteem and self-respect. For his own distinction between these two concepts, Walzer is indebted to David Sachs’s article “How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem” (Sachs 1981). If the jury for the Nobel Prize in literature pronounces its verdict about the best novel of the year, it expresses its esteem for the work and the author. The author internalizes this judgment and develops as its reflective-form “self-esteem”, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “a favorable appreciation or opinion of oneself”. Like esteem, self-esteem “is a relational concept”: “men and women value themselves – just as they are valued – in comparison with others” (Walzer 1983, p. 274). Of course, usually there is no official jury that judges our value, and therefore we have to make our own judgments about ourselves:

In order to enjoy self-esteem, we probably have to convince ourselves (even if this means deceiving ourselves) that we deserve it, and we can’t do that without a little help from our friends. But we are judges in our own case; we pack the jury as best we can, and we fake the verdict whenever we can. About this sort of thing, no one feels guilty; such trails are all-too-human (Walzer 1983, p. 278).

Even if we successfully convince ourselves of our own value, self-esteem depends to a large degree on the opinion of others. It also depends on social value judgments that are connected to different kinds of jobs and salaries. Therefore, like in the hierarchical society of feudal Europe, in the modern bourgeois society there exists no equality of esteem and self-esteem (cf. Walzer 1983, pp. 255–256, 279).

In line with the Oxford English Dictionary, Walzer defines “self-respect” as “a proper regard for the dignity of one’s person or one’s position” (Walzer 1983, p. 274). A person regards the dignity of her position – e.g. as a teacher or a doctor – and thus herself, if she measures up to the professional code or the general norm that is valid for this position in her society: “What is at stake is the dignity of the position and the integrity of the person who holds it. He ought not lower himself for some personal advantage; he ought not sell himself short; he ought not to endure such-and-such an affront” (Walzer 1983,

pp. 274–275). Contrary to self-esteem, self-respect is not a relational concept or the outcome of a competitive practice. It is enough that I know the norm and measure myself against it. Whether I succeed in measuring up to the norm or not is independent from others succeeding or failing to do so. Self-respect is “a normative concept, dependent upon our moral understanding of persons and positions” (Walzer 1983, p. 274).

While the valid norms and standards for the diverse professional positions and social ranks differ, in democracies general and equal norms also exist for the proper regard of all persons as citizens. In order to achieve self-respect as citizens, persons have to be publicly recognized as such by the political community. The community has to show equal respect to its members by giving them “the same legal and political rights”, like equal voting rights (Walzer 1983, p. 277). As a result of the equal respect among members of the political community, persons can have proper regard for their dignity as citizens. Self-respect in “any substantive sense” is “a function of membership” (Walzer 1983, p. 278; cf. Walzer’s chapter “Membership”, 1983, pp. 31–63). Self-respect also presupposes that persons are considered to be owners of their qualities and their character and thus responsible for their actions (Walzer 1983, p. 279).

Self-respect requires “some substantial connection” to the groups one belongs to as a member, like one’s professional group, one’s political community, or a political movement:

That’s why expulsion from the movement or exile from the community can be so serious a punishment. It attacks both the external and the reflective forms of honor. Prolonged unemployment and poverty are similarly threatening: they represent a kind of economic exile, a punishment that we are loathe to say that anyone deserves. The welfare state is an effort to avoid this punishment, to gather in the economic exiles, to guarantee effective membership. But even when it does this in the best possible way, meeting needs without degrading persons, it doesn’t guarantee self-respect; it only helps to make it possible. This is, perhaps, the deepest purpose of distributive justice. When all social goods, from membership to political power, are distributed for the right reasons, then the conditions for self-respect will have been established as best as they can be. But there will still be men and women who suffer from a lack of self-respect (Walzer 1983, p. 278).

In *Spheres of Justice*, Walzer conceives of a just society as a democratic welfare state. In the book, he argues for “an expanded American welfare state”, in which each citizen receives welfare benefits “according to his socially recognized needs” (Walzer 1983, pp. 90–91). The quote above demonstrates that a democratic welfare state is in particular necessary in order to allow citizens to develop self-respect. To enable self-respect is, for Walzer, “perhaps, the deepest purpose of distributive justice”. In a “complex egalitarian society”, in which all social goods are distributed according to their social meanings, “the conditions for



self-respect will have been established as best as they can be". The "experience of complex equality will breed, though it can never guarantee, self-respect" (Walzer 1983, p. 280). These important statements elucidate that the notions of respect and self-respect play a central role in Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*.

That the development of citizen's self-respect is a fundamental aim of Walzer's theory of justice is also demonstrated by the fact that he comes back to this topic in the concluding paragraph of his book. In the passage, Walzer states that the unequal distribution of goods in a "complex egalitarian society" is "no affront to our dignity, no denial of our moral or political capacity" (Walzer 1983, p. 321). As citizens have the possibility to succeed and experience recognition in many different spheres, failings in some spheres do not constitute an affront to their dignity. The "deep strengths of complex equality" are, as Walzer declares in the concluding sentence of his work, "mutual respect and a shared self-respect", which together are "the source of its possible endurance" (Walzer 1983, p. 321).

## 6 Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated that notions of respect and self-respect play a central role in Rawls's and Walzer's theories of justice. As these two theories are amongst the most important works in contemporary political theory and philosophy, the paper has also shown that respect and self-respect are amongst the most important topics in this field. Rawls's and Walzer's theories of justice are the result of different approaches to political philosophy. While Rawls speculates on the ideal of a well-ordered society, Walzer interprets the world we live in and the moral norms it contains. In their approaches to respect and self-respect, both mainly focus on the equal respect that is due to citizens of a democracy. However, also in this context, Walzer rightfully criticizes Rawls for not distinguishing between self-esteem and self-respect (Walzer 1983, pp. 272, 277, 335, fn. 42). As a consequence of this flaw, Rawls's theory does not catch sight of the many different forms of recognition distributed in modern societies and its corresponding effects on the self or on individual persons. This blind spot might also be the result of Rawls's focus on the basic structure of society as the only agent distributing social goods.

Although both political philosophers argue for a welfare state, only Walzer succeeds in showing that such a social arrangement is essential for safeguarding

self-respect.<sup>20</sup> A main reason for this is that Rawls assigns an exaggerated role to classical rights and liberties for promoting and sustaining self-respect and underestimates the role that jobs or income play for achieving this goal. Finally, as Walzer's criticism of Rawls's concept of persons implies, this concept is hardly compatible with the role that Rawls ascribes to self-respect and self-esteem in his theory of justice.

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**20** Cf. Knoll 2013. In *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement*, Rawls emphasizes "the distinction between a property-owning democracy, which realizes all the main political values expressed by the two principles of justice, and a capitalist welfare state, which does not. We think of such a democracy as an alternative to capitalism" (Rawls 2001, p. 135–136). He also states that this "distinction is not sufficiently noted in *Theory*" (Rawls 2001, p. 135). This article has mainly focused on Rawls's account of self-respect in *A Theory of Justice*. It does not discuss whether some of the above mentioned criticisms of this account could be mitigated by including Rawls's last revisions of his theory.

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