

Rawlsian Self-Respect¹

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Self-respect is a good whose value seems undeniable. As a consequence, it presents itself as a notion capable of justifying the value of other goods. Indeed it has been employed in this way by a number of philosophers (Boxill 1976; Held 1973; Postow 1979; Miller 1982; Mohr 1988). The most prominent of these is John Rawls. Rawls appeals to the good of self-respect to justify many features of “justice as fairness”—the highly influential account of distributive justice presented in *A Theory of Justice*.

Most who have considered the role of self-respect in Rawls’s theory, throughout the four decades since the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, have agreed that Rawls’s argument rests upon an irreparable equivocation between two different ideals of self-respect (Doppelt 2009; Eyal 2009; Moriarty 2009; Thomas 1978a, 1978b).² In the face of this critical consensus, I attempt to resurrect Rawls’s approach. I show first that Rawls relies upon an unambiguous notion of self-respect, though he sometimes is unclear as to whether this notion has merely instrumental or also intrinsic value. I show second that Rawls’s main objective in arguing that justice as fairness supports citizens’ self-respect is not, as many have thought, to show that his principles support citizens’ self-respect generally, but to show that his principles counter the effects of the market on lower class citizens’ sense of worth. This discussion

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² See also, Deigh 1983; Labukt 2009; Lane 1982; McKinnon 2003; and Yanal 1987. Distinctions among different types of self-respect that have bearing upon the supposed equivocation contained in Rawls’s account are discussed in Darwall 1977; Dillon 1992; Hudson 1980; Massey 1983; Middleton 2006; and Sachs 1981.

establishes that Rawls, in the end, sees self-respect primarily as an intrinsic good.

I proceed as follows. First I outline the equivocation objection. Second I argue that that Rawls's view of self-respect should be interpreted as the belief that the activities that make up one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation matter. Third I establish that this interpretation is consistent with all of Rawls's arguments justifying justice as fairness by appeal to self-respect. Finally, I show that these arguments are primarily designed to demonstrate that justice as fairness upholds the self-respect of lower class citizens in spite of their diminished class position.

THE ARGUMENT AND THE STANDARD CRITIQUE

Rawls's argument that his principles of justice preserve citizens' self-respect has the following structure. First, Rawls claims that self-respect—the secure conviction that one's plan of life is worth carrying out—is what he calls a “primary social good.” It is, along with wealth, liberties, and opportunities, a necessary all-purpose means for citizens (as moral persons) to achieve their ends. He maintains, second, that because self-respect has this special role, the provision of self-respect is a matter of justice. Indeed, political arrangements can be judged just or unjust in part on the basis of whether those arrangements sustain self-respect. Third, he argues that the arrangements proposed by justice as fairness indeed secure citizens' self-respect.³ He concludes that those arrangements are, to that extent, just.

Rawls's critics claim that this argument breaks down because the attitude Rawls identifies as a primary social good, and hence as necessary for agents to achieve their ends, is not the same attitude as the one he shows his principles to promote.⁴ The former attitude consists in believing one's conception of the good to have value; the latter consists in recognizing one's equal standing as a citizen. So, Rawls has not shown

³ For a discussion of the ways in which Rawls's two principles of distributive justice support citizens' self-respect see Cohen 1989.

⁴ Though there are subtle differences in meaning between such terms as “support,” “promote,” “secure,” “advance,” and the like, for stylistic reasons, I use these interchangeably when discussing Rawls's idea that social arrangements and principles of justice can contribute to or detract from citizens' self-respect.

that his principles ensure that citizens have the sense of worth they need to pursue their ends.

Furthermore, the argument goes, this problem cannot be fixed because the attitude said to be supported by justice as fairness is not plausibly counted a primary social good: one need not recognize one's equal civil status in order to pursue one's ends. And, the attitude Rawls identifies as a primary social good is not plausibly supported by his principles of justice. While the equal distribution of liberty, for example, might help citizens recognize their equal civil status, it will not likely cause them to believe their conceptions of the good to be valuable.

RAWLS'S ACCOUNT OF OUR SENSE OF WORTH

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls defines self-respect (or self-esteem—he uses the terms interchangeably) as follows: “First,” he says, “. . . [I]t 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” (1971: 440). Later, in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls characterizes self-respect⁵ thusly: “Self-respect is rooted in our self-confidence as a fully cooperating member of society capable of pursuing a worthwhile conception of the good over a complete life . . . The importance of self-respect is that it provides a secure sense of our own value, a firm conviction that our determinate conception of the good is worth carrying out” (1993: 318). So, there are two separate aspects to Rawls's account of self-respect. One involves confidence in one's capacity to pursue a conception of the good. Call this the “self-confidence aspect.” The other involves a secure belief that one's conception of the good is worth pursuing. Call this the “sense of one's value aspect.” Now, as it turns out, the self-confidence aspect of Rawls's account does very little justificatory work in his theory. His arguments that various features of justice as fairness support citizens' self-respect rarely invoke the self-confidence aspect. So, I will set aside, for the purposes of this paper, this aspect of Rawls's view and focus on the sense of worth aspect.

⁵ By now Rawls maintains that self-respect and self-esteem are not the same attitude and refers to the notion of self-worth that concerns him as “self-respect.” See Freeman 1999: 260.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS OUR ACTIVITIES

Let us assume, then, that Rawls is primarily concerned that citizens see their conceptions of the good as worth carrying out. That is to say, for Rawls, self-respecting citizens attach value of some sort to their conceptions of the good. And those who lack self-respect fail to attach such value to their ends. As mundane as this idea might seem, it is actually puzzling as an account of self-respect, for it seems to render self-respect an empty concept. To see this, consider someone—call him Marty—who has a career as a chef. Suppose Marty has adopted gourmet cooking as a substantial aspect of his conception of the good. Suppose, in other words, that Marty has adopted gourmet cooking as an end. Cooking for him is not merely an interest, an inclination, or a pastime. It is something to which he is committed.

Surely it follows directly from the fact that Marty has taken gourmet cooking as an end, that he values (in some sense) gourmet cooking. Given that gourmet cooking is at the center of Marty's conception of the good, to state that he values it is not to make an additional claim about his relation to gourmet cooking, for the claim that one values the components of one's conception of the good is plausibly counted a conceptual truth. It is hard to see how one could not value something that is by definition part of his set of values.

Taking a cue from Rawls's later characterization of self-respect, in which he invokes the idea of the citizen as a "fully cooperating member of society," I propose that we see Rawlsian self-respect not as a valuing stance toward one's ends or conception of the good, but as a valuing stance toward the activities that make up one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation. There is no conceptual barrier to a person failing to value these activities—to one's failing to see these activities as worth pursuing. And one's failing to see these as worth pursuing would indeed be likely to hinder one's pursuit of one's ends. It follows that viewing as worth doing the activities that make up one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation fits Rawls's characterization of a primary social good—a good that is necessary for one to pursue one's ends, whatever they are.

There are three cases where we can see how a failure to value the activities that make up one's contribution to a scheme of social

cooperation would impede one's pursuit of one's ends. If I am right that it is a conceptual truth that persons value their ends, it follows that if a person fails to value her contribution to a scheme of social cooperation that contribution is not an end for her. If she has no other ends, then she is, at it were, "at loose ends" and is hindered in the pursuit of her ends simply by not having any. In the more likely case that she does have other ends—other activities that she values to which her contribution to a scheme of cooperation is a means—then not valuing her contribution will make it difficult for her to pursue her ends simply by making it difficult to undertake the activities she must in order to pursue her ends.⁶ Another way that not valuing one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation can hinder one's pursuit of one's ends is that, in making one's (unvalued) contribution, one is not pursuing one's ends. One's ends and one's contribution pull apart and so one is deprived of the experience of fulfilling one's ends through the activities that one spends much of one's life doing. Indeed, I suspect that in claiming that social arrangements should encourage citizens to value their conceptions of the good what Rawls has in mind is that those arrangements should encourage, or at least allow, citizens to regard the activities that make up their contributions to society as among their ends.

So, let us suppose that Rawls's concern about citizens' self-respect is the concern that citizens believe that the activities that make up their contribution to a scheme of social cooperation are in some sense valuable. There are three ways that we might understand the attitude of valuing that one might have toward one's contribution.⁷ A person might see his contribution as valuable

⁶ I realize that this interpretation represents a significant departure from Rawls's stated view and that this interpretation—or perhaps, more accurately, modification—ultimately requires more argument than I have provided. I think this modification can be supported by the link, suggested in Rawls's work, between self-respect and the ideal of reciprocity that Rawls claims is expressed by his principles of justice. He says, for instance, that while the least advantaged in society "control fewer resources, they are doing their full share on terms recognized by all as mutually advantageous and consistent with everyone's self-respect" (2001: 139). Thanks to Jeffrey Moriarty for pointing out to me this passage.

⁷ Larry Thomas has interpreted this valuing stance as seeing oneself as having worth for her success in the pursuit of her conception of the good. I do not think that interpretation is supported very well by Rawls's writings, though there are some grounds for thinking that this notion is what Rawls has in mind in his description of the self-confidence aspect of self-respect. See Thomas 1978a and 1978b.

- (1) in the sense of being “meritorious,”⁸ or
- (2) in the sense of thinking it is good *for him* to undertake it, or
- (3) in the sense of judging that it matters.

We can get a grasp on these different attitudes of valuing by appealing again to our example of Marty. Let us suppose now, for the sake of simplicity, that Marty does not value cooking as an end; it is not part of his conception of the good. (Let us say that his conception of the good revolves around coaching soccer, which is what he does much of the time when he’s not cooking in a restaurant.) Cooking is simply the career Marty has chosen and he values it as a means to his ends. One way in which we might understand the valuing stance that Marty takes toward cooking is that he thinks that the activity of gourmet cooking has merit. He believes that gourmet cooking has high value in comparison with other activities as measured on an objective scale. Marty thinks, for example, that cooking endeavors, in comparison to, say, real estate sales endeavors have considerably more worth. Indeed, he has chosen cooking over real estate sales, let us say, for this reason.

A different attitude of valuing that Marty might have toward his cooking activities is that he might see cooking as good *for him*. In this case, he does not think that cooking is objectively better than, e.g., real estate sales. He simply thinks that cooking is a better activity for him than, real estate sales, given his attributes, dispositions, etc. Perhaps he finds this judgment on the fact that he is good at cooking, or enjoys it, and that cooking does not require him, as real estate sales would, to talk to strangers, which he dislikes. This type of valuing is subjective in the following sense: one judges the value of an activity strictly in terms of its suitability for oneself without making a judgment about the value of the activity *per se*. The judgment is not “one ought to cook (rather than sell real estate)” but rather “given the sort of person I am, I ought to cook (rather than sell real estate).”

Consider now the last attitude of valuing listed above. This is the belief that one’s contribution matters. If Marty, our cook, has this attitude then he thinks that gourmet cooking is important—that it is not pointless or trivial or dispensable. He thinks that gourmet cooking is worthwhile; that it counts. He thinks that gourmet cooking meets a

⁸ Labukt 2009 and Yanal 1987 interpret Rawls along these lines.

threshold of being worth doing. He believes, in other words, that there is a place for it in society. In thinking this, he ascribes to gourmet cooking a kind of standing.

Moreover, to be self-respecting, Marty need not think that he is making an especially significant contribution to society. If he later decided to join a monastery and take up the contemplative life, Marty would have to admit that the nature of his contribution is not significant compared, to, say, policing or manufacturing. Indeed if the mattering view required one to believe that one's contribution was significant, the view would begin to collapse into the merit view, for one would be judging one's contribution on a scale of merit that attaches merit to contributions in reference to how significant those contributions are for a given society.⁹ The value associated with mattering, as I am understanding it, is independent of various judgments about the relative virtues of various contributions. It is a type of valuing that is orthogonal to the type of valuing one engages in when assessing contributions on the basis of their merits. Whatever citizens believe about the merits of their contribution to a system of social cooperation, to be self-respecting, citizens believe that their contribution is legitimate—that it has weight.

Now, if the source of the value of one's contribution on the mattering view is not its significance (or its other merits) but it nonetheless matters objectively, on what basis, one might ask, does it matter? Here, what I think Rawls has in mind is simply that one's contribution matters because it is what one has to offer. To deny that the contribution that one is suited or able to make to one's system of social cooperation matters is to say that one has nothing to offer to that system. So when Rawls claims that a just society preserves the self-respect of its citizens, he is saying that it is a matter of justice that citizens believe that they have something to offer—that they are never led to believe that,

⁹ An anonymous referee suggested to me that the mattering view might be understood along the following lines: one respects oneself when one judges oneself a good cooperator. One sees one's chosen activities as helping to form an overall better scheme of cooperation. My worry about such a view is that the notion that one ought to be a good cooperator seems as though it belongs to a comprehensive doctrine. It expresses a moral ideal of what sort of person one should strive to be. So, an ideal of self-respect founded upon this notion would be incompatible with Rawls's commitment to political liberalism.

though they are participating, they have no contribution to make.¹⁰ Self-respecting citizens, on my reading of Rawls, believe that whatever they are equipped to do to take part in their system of social cooperation is worth doing.

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE MATTERING INTERPRETATION

We can reject the merit interpretation of Rawlsian self-respect fairly swiftly. There is plenty of textual evidence, which I consider below, that implies that the merit view is not what Rawls has in mind. More importantly, though, if this *were* what Rawls has in mind, his view of self-respect would conflict with his view of conceptions of the good. Because Rawls thinks that every citizen should have self-respect, he would be committed, on the merit interpretation, to the idea that every citizen should have as part of his conception of the good the idea that persons' contributions can be assessed on an objective scale of merit. He would not be committed to a particular view of *which* contributions have merit—he would not be, that is, committed to a particular standard of merit. But he would be committed to the notion that all persons should have an objectivist view about the merit of various types of human activities. In the language of the later Rawls, we can say that Rawls would be committed to the idea that a reasonable comprehensive doctrine as such must contain the view that the various sorts of contributions people make to a scheme of social cooperation can be ranked on a scale of merit. But Rawls clearly does not restrict reasonable comprehensive doctrines in this way (1993: 58–66). He counts among the reasonable comprehensive doctrines those that deny the existence of an objective standard for assessing the merit of various human activities. So, we have a fairly strong reason to conclude that Rawls does not see self-respect as a secure conviction in the merit of our contributions to a scheme of social cooperation.

That leaves us with the good-for-oneself and the mattering interpretations of Rawlsian self-respect. Before outlining my argument for the

¹⁰ There may be, in rare cases, adult members of society who have virtually nothing to offer to a scheme of social cooperation. To encourage them to have self-respect, then, would be to encourage them to have a false belief. This problem is set aside by Rawls's conception of the citizen as a fully cooperating member of society.

matter interpretation, I must make a distinction between two types of circumstances that Rawls thinks sustain citizens' self-respect. When he explains that self-respect is a primary social good, Rawls gives us what I will call the "personal circumstances" that support individuals' self-respect. These include, first, the conformity of one's activities to the Aristotelian Principle and, second, the appreciation of one's activities by one's associates. When he explains why the tenets of justice as fairness secure citizens' self-respect, Rawls is identifying what I will call the "political circumstances" that support self-respect. There are three of these. The first is the duty of mutual respect, which Rawls thinks would be adopted by the parties in the original position along with his two principles of distributive justice. The two principles of distributive justice include, first, the equal liberty principle, which prescribes the equal distribution of the maximal degree of liberty compatible with its being distributed equally. The second allows inequalities of wealth provided that there is substantive equality of opportunity and that the inequalities maximally benefit the person with the least wealth. The second of these constraints on inequality is termed the "difference principle."

The second political circumstance that supports citizens' self-respect, according to Rawls, is the difference principle and the third is the "lexical ordering" of his two principles, also known as the doctrine of the priority of liberty. This doctrine prohibits constraining liberty for the sake of increased wealth.

In what follows, I examine Rawls's explanation of both the personal and political circumstances that sustain self-respect. I show that citizens' self-respect is supported by all of these circumstances when self-respect is understood as the mattering notion. However, citizens' self-respect is supported only by the personal circumstances, and perhaps by one of political circumstances, when self-respect is understood as the good-for-oneself notion. It follows that if Rawls were offering the good-for-oneself view in his account of self-respect as a primary social good, then he would indeed be offering an equivocal account of self-respect, as critics have maintained.

Moreover, Rawls, to a certain degree, invites this objection because the passages explaining the political circumstances that secure self-respect are often cryptic. Rawls is attempting in these passages to show that certain aspects of his view are justified by the fact that they

promote self-respect. Yet, in each case, he briefly describes the aspect that he wishes to justify and then simply asserts that this aspect advances citizens' self-respect. He does not make explicit the connection between the aspect and self-respect and he rarely speaks in terms of the definition of self-respect that he has proposed—the conviction that one's endeavors are worth carrying out. The reader, then, is left wondering how the feature of Rawls's view that is said to secure citizens' self-respect in fact advances the ideal of self-respect he has identified as primary social good.

As I see it, critics have, first, taken Rawls to be defending the good-for-oneself or the merit view when he describes the personal circumstances that support self-respect. Second, they have argued (not implausibly) that the political circumstances cannot be understood to promote self-respect when it is interpreted in this way. The political circumstances, they claim, suggest a different notion of self-respect, namely a belief in one's equal worth as a citizen.¹¹ My contention is simply that all the circumstances that Rawls identifies as sustaining self-respect are consistent with the mattering interpretation of self-respect. So the generous reading of Rawls attributes to him that interpretation.

THE PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES SUPPORTING SELF-RESPECT

Rawls says, “[T]he circumstances that support the first aspect of self-esteem, the sense of our own worth, are essentially two: (1) having a rational plan of life, and in particular one that satisfies the Aristotelian principle; and (2) finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed” (1971: 440). The Aristotelian Principle is a principle of human psychology that says “other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate and trained

¹¹ Doppelt sees Rawls as characterizing self-respect as an appraisal of the value of the life one pursues and an appraisal of the standards that are most appropriate for judging that life. He claims that this ideal is “an empirical notion devoid of normative content” and that it is “subjective” (2009: 128, 134). Eyal characterizes Rawlsian self-respect as “confidence in the value of one's plans” but does not state what sort of value he thinks Rawls has in mind (2009: 202). He claims that, in any case, this confidence is distinct from the Kantian ideal of self-respect as “confidence that one has the dignity of persons” (2009: 203). This is the ideal he thinks Rawls invokes throughout most of *A Theory of Justice*. Doppelt makes a similar claim (2009: 133).

abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity” (1971: 426).¹² One’s activities satisfy the Aristotelian Principle when they make sufficient use of and adequately contribute to the cultivation of one’s capabilities.

The Aristotelian Principle is related to self-respect in the following straightforward way: one is more likely to respect oneself to the extent that one undertakes activities that fulfill the Aristotelian Principle. Rawls says,

I assume then that someone’s plan of life will lack a certain attraction for him if it fails to call upon his 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 in his value when his abilities are both fully realized and organized in ways of suitable complexity and refinement. (1971: 440)

In other words, the more one’s activities incorporate the exercise and development of one’s talents, the more likely one is to value them and, in this sense, be sure of one’s own worth.

The second personal circumstance that supports individuals’ self-respect—others’ appreciation of our life plans—is influenced by the Aristotelian Principle. Rawls asserts,

For while it is true that unless our endeavors are appreciated by our associates it is impossible for us to maintain the conviction that they are worthwhile, it is also true that others tend to value them only if what we do elicits their admiration or gives them pleasure. Thus the activities that display intricate and subtle talents, and manifest discrimination and refinement, are valued both by the person himself and those around him. (1971: 441)

So, the degree of complexity in the activities that make up one’s life plan influences one’s self-respect both directly and indirectly. One’s sense of worth is bolstered by one’s engaging in complex activities and by one’s associates’ appreciation of one’s endeavors. But one’s associates’ appreciation of one’s endeavors depends upon one’s endeavors incorporating complex activities.

¹² For a critical discussion of the Aristotelian Principle, see Shue 1975.

Now, Rawls is aware that it might seem that only very talented people who are surrounded by other very talented people are likely to have self-respect on this view of what encourages self-respect. He denies that this is the case, however, because the Aristotelian Principle, he says, “is always relative to the individual” (1971: 441). A person’s activities fulfill the Aristotelian Principle if they are suitably complex *given his capabilities*.¹³ Moreover, societies are diverse in their associations so a person can find a group of people with similar tastes and capability levels who will affirm his undertakings (1971: 441–2). As long as this is the case, then, each person, no matter the extent of his capabilities, will have the opportunity to come to value his endeavors.

Rawls’s account of the relation between self-respect and both the Aristotelian Principle and the appreciation of others is consistent with both the good-for-oneself and the mattering interpretations of self-respect. If one finds one’s activities challenging and engaging one will be led to think that those activities are both suitable for oneself and that they matter. Insofar as Marty, for example, finds gourmet cooking challenging, he is inclined to think that gourmet cooking is an activity that *he* should pursue. He is inclined to think that gourmet cooking is good for him to do. But it is also likely that Marty would conclude from the fact that he finds cooking interesting and engaging that cooking *itself* matters—that cooking is good to do *simpliciter*. If our endeavors bring us satisfaction, we tend to think, as Rawls says, that they are worth doing.

Likewise, if others appreciate our undertakings, we are likely to make a number of inferences about the worth of those undertakings. Suppose Marty’s friends and neighbors appreciate his cooking skills. They commend him for his cooking, let us say, and seek out opportunities to sample his food. This fact might encourage Marty to believe that cooking is a good activity for him to engage in. He might interpret the appreciation of his associates as confirming his judgment that *he* ought to pursue cooking. It is certainly likely, though, that Marty will infer from the appreciation of his associates that cooking is worth pursuing in other senses. In particular, this appreciation is likely to cause him to think that cooking itself matters—that cooking is a worthwhile and

¹³ This notion strongly suggests that Rawls does not see self-respect as a belief in the objective merit of one’s conception of the good.

important activity. Surely he is likely to think not just that gourmet cooking is good for *him* to do, nor merely that *his* gourmet cooking matters to *his friends*, but that gourmet cooking is a worthwhile activity. So, Rawls's appeal to the Aristotelian Principle and the appreciation of others as personal supports for self-respect is consistent with both the good-for-oneself and the mattering interpretations of self-respect.

THE POLITICAL CIRCUMSTANCES SUPPORTING SELF-RESPECT

The duty of mutual respect

After describing the two personal circumstances that support citizens' self-respect, Rawls intimates that they are not sufficient to ensure citizens' self-respect. He suggests that they are sufficient only "... whenever in public life citizens respect one another's ends and adjudicate their political claims in ways that also support their self-esteem. It is precisely this background condition," he continues, "that is maintained by the principles of justice" (1971: 442). So, the public norm requiring citizens to *respect* one another's contributions referred to in this passage is to be distinguished from the *appreciation* of one another's contributions that takes place within associations.

We can get an idea of what is involved in respecting one another's contributions by looking at Rawls's account of the duty of mutual respect, for Rawls claims that the parties in the original position would adopt the duty of mutual respect *precisely because* the self-respect of those whom they represent would be at risk in a society in which this duty is absent (1971: 178–9). So, it is reasonable to conclude that the attitude expressed through the observance of the duty of mutual respect is part of what is involved in the respecting of others' contributions that is necessary for citizens to have full self-respect.

The duty of mutual respect, Rawls says,

[I]s the duty to show a person the respect that is due to him as a moral being, that is, as a being with a sense of justice and a conception of the good.... Mutual respect is shown in several ways: 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 being prepared to give reasons for our actions whenever the interests of others are materially affected. (1971: 337)

If this duty is plausibly seen as encouraging citizens to believe, among other things, that their contributions to a scheme of cooperation matter, then we have grounds for thinking that the view of self-respect he describes as a primary social good consists in that belief. I submit that the passage above implies that showing respect includes recognizing that others' contributions matter. Moreover, if we assume that the kind of respect one is shown determines the kind of *self-respect* one acquires, then we can conclude that when one's contribution is judged by others to matter, one tends oneself to judge that one's contribution matters. It follows that Rawls's account of the duty of mutual respect gives us grounds for attributing to him a view of self-respect as the belief that the activities making up one's contribution to a scheme of cooperation matter.

Consider the two actions or attitudes that Rawls identifies as paradigmatic of respecting others: being willing to see things from their point of view and being willing to give them reasons for our actions. A willingness to see things from another's perspective conveys one's belief in the legitimacy of that perspective. It conveys a sense that one regards the other's point of view as having standing. One may not fully understand the other's point of view or agree with it. One may in fact feel alienated from it. But in being willing to take it up, as it were, one shows that one regards it as significant or important, not trivial or silly. A willingness to provide reasons for one's actions expresses one's realization that we may act in ways that might interfere with or limit others' projects only if there are good reasons for doing so. It expresses, in other words, the idea that one sees another's projects, again, as having standing, and acknowledges that others are entitled, all things equal, to undertake their projects.

Both of these attitudes would likely encourage individual citizens to think that their contributions to the cooperative scheme in which they are participating with other citizens matters. When one's fellow citizens acknowledge the standing of one's perspective and projects, they acknowledge that one's perspective and projects matter. Given that our perspectives and our projects are intimately bound up with our contributions to a cooperative scheme, acknowledging the standing of our perspectives and projects includes acknowledging the standing of our contributions, and hence recognizing that our contributions matter. For example, to see, in the public forum, Marty's situation from his

point of view, the fellow citizens of Marty would have to see things from the point of view of someone who has a career as a chef. And in being prepared to give reasons for their actions that affect others' interests, Marty's fellow citizens would have to be willing to justify their support for policies that might negatively affect restaurant workers. By acting in these ways, Marty's fellow citizens would fulfill the duty of mutual respect and in so doing convey their belief that Marty's contribution to the scheme of cooperation they share with him matters. So, by acting in these ways, Marty's fellow citizens encourage Marty to believe that his contribution matters. It follows that the duty of mutual respect can be seen to support citizens' self-respect where their self-respect is understood as the belief that their contribution to a scheme of social cooperation matters.

Notice that a failure to be respected by one's fellow citizens would not typically cause one to cease to think that the activities making up one's contribution are good for oneself. That others disrespect those activities would not likely make one change one's mind about the suitability of those activities for oneself. One's judgment that an activity is good for oneself is founded primarily upon features of oneself, not upon factors such as the respect of other citizens who are not, in Rawls's words, one's associates. One might be dismayed that the activities one judges good for oneself to undertake are not respected by one's fellow citizens, but this is different from doubting whether one's activities are well suited to the kind of person one is. Being disrespected in the public forum, then, is not likely to diminish one's self-respect if self-respect is understood as a belief that one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation is valuable for oneself. It follows that Rawls's discussion of the duty of mutual respect does not support the good-for-onself interpretation of self-respect.

The difference principle

The difference principle, which is a principle governing the distribution of wealth, allows inequalities, but only those that maximally benefit the least well off. Part of Rawls's argument that the difference principle supports citizens' self-respect is contained in his remarks about envy. Envy, Rawls says, "is the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others. . . . We envy those persons whose situation is superior to

ours . . . and we are willing to deprive them of their greater benefits even if it is necessary to give up something ourselves” (1971: 532).

Rawls is concerned about envy because he thinks that the unequal distribution of wealth in a society can damage citizens’ self-respect to an extent that gives rise to envy and in turn to instability. Indeed, he claims that the primary cause of envy is the absence of self-respect. “[T]he main psychological root of the liability to envy,” Rawls says, “is a lack of self-confidence in our own worth combined with a sense of impotence” (1971: 535). Moreover, according to Rawls, when people’s self-respect is damaged by their having considerably less wealth than others, the envy that they feel toward the better off is excusable. That is to say, we cannot expect the less fortunate to overcome their envy in that case; rather we are obliged to change the political arrangements that reduce their self-respect and foment envy. Because Rawls’s theory allows for inequality of wealth, he must consider whether his theory recommends arrangements that are likely to induce excusable envy.

In the end Rawls thinks that the difference principle will *not* generate excusable envy because, first, it does not encourage large disparities of wealth, and second it allows only those disparities that are to greatest advantage of those who have the least wealth. Citizens are not inclined toward envy when “the greater advantages of some are in return for compensating benefits for the less favored” (1971, 536). We can set aside the issue of whether or not this is a strong argument. I simply want to pinpoint the notion of self-respect that is at work in Rawls’s claim that distributive inequality can seriously injure citizens’ self-respect and that this injured self-respect tends to generate envy.

A plausible reconstruction of the reasoning behind Rawls’s contention that distributive inequality may damage the self-respect of the less well off is as follows. If one’s contribution is remunerated far less than the contributions of others, then one will come to see one’s endeavors as unimportant or insignificant. The relatively small reward one receives for making one’s contribution inclines one to judge that others see one’s contribution as mattering little and this leads one to doubt oneself that one’s contribution matters. If “what we do in everyday life” brings us a scanty wage or salary, which in turn gives us access to few of the advantages our scheme of social cooperation creates, then we are inclined to conclude that what we do does not matter (1971: 441). This feeling that what we do does not matter can induce hostility toward

those who engage in activities that we see as mattering on account of the high compensation garnered by those activities. And this hostility can generate a desire to impose a loss, even at a cost to ourselves, on those who engage in those activities.

Notice that if one's activities are poorly remunerated one does not typically cease to see those activities as good for oneself. If one thinks that e.g., gourmet cooking is good for oneself, the fact that one gets remunerated little for it is not likely to change that assessment. Again, this is because one's judgment that an activity is good for oneself is founded upon features of oneself, not upon factors such as prestige or compensation. One might, of course, choose to make a contribution that involves activities for which one is not well suited because one prefers wealth and prestige. But this phenomenon is compatible with the idea that one's judgment about what is good for oneself is generally unaffected by how well remunerated one is for one's activities. Having considerably less wealth than others, then, is not likely to diminish one's self-respect if self-respect is understood as a belief that one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation is valuable for oneself. It follows that Rawls's discussion of envy does not support the good-for-onself interpretation of self-respect.

The priority of liberty

The doctrine of the priority of liberty is justified by Rawls largely in terms of its support for citizens' self-respect. This doctrine states that, when a society has reached a level of wealth that allows all citizens a decent standard of living, constraints on liberty that would increase citizens' wealth should not be permitted. The merits of Rawls's argument for the priority of liberty have been much discussed (Doppelt 1981; Shue 1974/75; Hart 1979; Neilson 1979; Taylor 2003). I do not hope here to add anything to that discussion; I confine myself to showing that Rawls's argument for the doctrine supports the idea of self-respect as a conviction that one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation matters.

There are two types of restrictions on liberty, according to Rawls, that might be imposed for the sake of increasing wealth (1971: 244). First, liberty might be less extensive but still distributed equally. Second, liberty might be distributed unequally—it might be limited for only some citizens. The first type of restriction might seem justified if

it resulted in an increase in wealth, consistent with the difference principle, for all citizens. The second type of restriction might seem justified if it resulted in an increase in wealth, consistent with the difference principle, for those with less liberty. Both types of restriction, Rawls thinks, are in fact unjustified because they would damage citizens' self-respect. He argues that the parties in the original position, as they are concerned to promote the good of self-respect, would therefore adopt the doctrine of the priority of liberty.

There is no doubt that Rawls's argument that an *unequal* distribution of liberty would damage citizens' self-respect invokes the importance of civil equality. Unequal liberty, he tells us, would damage the self-respect of those with fewer liberties by

publicly establishing their inferiority as defined by the basic structure of society. This subordinate ranking in the public forum experienced in the attempt to take part in political and economic life, and felt in dealing with those who have a greater liberty, would indeed be humiliating and destructive of self-esteem. (1971: 545)

The idea seems to be that people would lack self-respect if they were forced to see themselves as civilly inferior to their compatriots. This idea is compatible with a notion of self-respect as a secure conviction in one's civil equality. But it is also compatible with a notion of self-respect as a secure conviction that one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation matters. The reason for this mutual compatibility is that the fact that civil inferiority can *cause* diminished self-respect, as the quoted passage suggests, does not entail that the content of self-respect is (or is only) a belief in one's civil equality. Indeed Rawls implies that it is not merely the civil inequality itself that undermines the self-respect of the civilly inferior but also "the hardships arising from political and civic inequality and from cultural and ethnic discrimination" (1971: 545). Surely having an inferior civil status has a host of effects on one's sense of oneself. And it seems reasonable to think that being marginalized and discriminated against can lead one to believe that one's more politically advantaged compatriots care little about one's contribution to society, and this can lead one to doubt oneself that one's contribution matters.

Rawls's account of the injuries to self-respect that arise from civil inferiority strongly suggests that injuries to self-respect would arise also

from economic inferiority. Surely having a low rank in an economic hierarchy would impose hardships on citizens similar to those imposed by having a low rank in a political hierarchy. Though not literally second-class citizens, the poor are often politically powerless and disenfranchised. The poor no doubt feel their inferiority in attempting to take part in political and economic life alongside the wealthy and are prone to experience humiliation and diminished self-respect. So, it appears that inequality of wealth would also damage citizens' self-respect. Yet Rawls's theory permits this kind of inequality.

Rawls gets around this problem in the following way. His argument for the priority of liberty assumes that citizens have what he calls "a need for status." This is the need to be valued by others, which valuing, Rawls claims, is a prerequisite for self-respect. This need can be met in the political domain either by one's economic status or one's civil status. Rawls thinks political institutions should be arranged so that the need for status is met by something that gives people equal status, because this will support the self-respect of all citizens. Because there are independent reasons, according to Rawls, for allowing inequality of wealth, then if wealth is positioned as the ground for status, the need for status will be satisfied by something that gives people unequal status, and so will put the self-respect of those with less status at risk. It follows that the need for status should be satisfied by an equal distribution of liberty. Rawls concludes,

In a well-ordered society then self-respect is secured by the public affirmation of the status of equal citizenship for all; the distribution of material means is left to take care of itself in accordance with pure procedural justice. Of course doing this assumes the requisite background conditions which narrow the range of inequalities so excusable envy does not arise. (1971: 545)

Rawls's argument that an equal but less expansive liberty undermines self-respect also supports the mattering interpretation of self-respect. His argument is as follows. As the economic conditions of a society improve, so that everyone enjoys a comfortable standard of living, citizens' interests in pursuing their life plans as they see fit increases. They are no longer preoccupied with subsistence and so can focus on, e.g. their spiritual needs. Human beings, as such, develop and pursue their plans, Rawls says, within "communities of interest." They undertake their endeavors, that is, by means of attachments to others who

share their interests and ideals. The associations that are necessary for people to pursue their life plans flourish only when citizens are afforded extensive liberties (1971: 542–43).¹⁴ Liberty, in short, gives rise to pluralism.

One of the reasons pluralism is required for citizens to undertake their projects is because it is within various associations that citizens come to attach value to their activities—to regard their activities as worth doing. One can pursue one’s ends adequately only when one values the activities that make up one’s contribution to a cooperative scheme, and the primary way one comes to value those activities is by being surrounded by similar others who confirm their value. Because liberty is required for the emergence and survival of communities of interest, liberty is required for citizens to experience their associates appreciating their endeavors, and it is therefore required for citizens believing in the worth of their endeavors. Liberty sustains citizens’ self-respect, then, by securing one of the personal circumstances that upholds self-respect. Because the mattering notion of self-respect is supported by Rawls’s claim that self-respect depends upon the appreciation of others, the mattering notion is supported by Rawls’s claim that self-respect depends upon a more expansive liberty since the role of liberty is to afford citizens the opportunity to feel that their activities are appreciated by others.

(Notice that the good-for-oneself view of self-respect is also supported by Rawls’s claim that liberty secures citizens’ self-respect by creating one of the personal circumstances upholding self-respect. This follows from the fact that Rawls’s account of the personal circumstances is compatible with both the good-for-oneself and the mattering interpretations of self-respect.)

SELF-RESPECT, PRIMARY GOODS, AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

I have argued that Rawls’s theory of justice employs a univocal notion of self-respect as the belief that the activities that make up one’s contribution to a scheme of social cooperation matter. In what follows, I maintain that Rawls nonetheless equivocates on the value

¹⁴ For the importance of social groups for the development of self-respect see McKinnon 2000.

of self-respect, sometimes regarding it as merely instrumental and other times as intrinsic. I argue further that his main interest in stressing the importance of self-respect is to explain how justice as fairness avoids what he sees as an objectionable outcome of markets—the specific sense of inferiority that might burden those at the bottom of class hierarchies. Rawls thinks, on my reading, that unless institutions within market societies are carefully designed, citizens who lose out in market competition will fail to see the worth of their contribution to a system of cooperation that nonetheless relies on their contribution. The centrality of this preoccupation reveals that Rawls sees self-respect, in the end, as having intrinsic worth.

In identifying self-respect as a primary social good, Rawls claims that self-respect is good chiefly as a means—like wealth and opportunities, its value lies in its enabling us to carry out our ends, or at any rate to do with ease or with pleasure. Moreover, his account of the personal circumstances supporting self-respect suggests that Rawls sees the risk of diminished self-respect as equally distributed throughout the population. Each of us, to be fully self-respecting, he says, needs to undertake activities that are sufficiently complex and needs for our associates to affirm these activities. It seems that any of us might fail in these regards.

But it is clear that the political circumstances are what really matter on Rawls's view, for he tells us that these personal circumstances are sufficient only in an environment of mutual respect, equal liberty, and limited inequality of wealth.¹⁵ His account of the political circumstances, moreover, suggests that Rawls is largely concerned with the self-respect of citizens who have less wealth and prestige than others. This is especially obvious in his treatment of envy where he assures us that under the difference principle *the less fortunate* will lack grounds to doubt their worth. This concern, however, is also implied by his discussions of the duty of mutual respect and the priority of liberty. In those passages Rawls strongly suggests that so long as the economically less well off are treated with respect by other citizens in the public forum and afforded equal liberty, they will have secure self-respect.

¹⁵ I leave out expansive liberty here because Rawls's argument for the importance of expansive liberty for sustaining self-respect is that such liberty is a precondition for one of the personal circumstances sustaining self-respect.

Now, if the value of self-respect resides merely in its enabling us to fulfill our ends, then we should expect that Rawls's concern for the security of the self-respect of the less fortunate would be a concern that the less fortunate will be hindered in fulfilling their ends. It appears from his discussion of the political circumstances, though, that Rawls is not worried that the less fortunate will be hindered in this way. Rather he seems concerned with the bare fact of the potentially diminished self-respect of the less fortunate.

Consider again his accounts of the connection between self-respect and the difference principle, the duty of mutual respect and the priority of liberty. In these accounts at no point does Rawls say or imply that self-respect is important so that citizens can adequately fulfill their ends. It seems quite clear that in these discussions Rawls takes a diminished or insecure sense of worth to be bad in itself. To be encouraged to think less of oneself by having one's projects publicly demoted or one's perspective ignored or by being given fewer rights is to be wronged, Rawls thinks, regardless of the effects of this damaged sense of worth upon one's ability to pursue one's ends. On my interpretation of Rawlsian self-respect, then, Rawls thinks that when citizens are encouraged by political institutions to believe that their contributions to society do not matter, they have been wronged. And this is regardless of the debilitating effects this belief may have on their carrying out their life plans.

I have maintained that Rawls's account of self-respect does not have the major flaw that has been attributed to it. Rawls offers us one notion of self-respect. It is the conviction that the activities making up one's contribution to a scheme of social cooperation matter. Rawls suggests that this conviction is instrumentally good insofar as it helps us to pursue our ends, or at least to pursue them with pleasure. But that is not its chief importance. He thinks that this conviction is also intrinsically good, for he clearly regards its absence as bad in itself. It is the hallmark of just society, Rawls believes, that it secure this belief for everyone, especially lower class individuals who are at risk of thinking that their contributions are not worthwhile.

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