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## SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON RAWLS AND SELF-RESPECT

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### ABSTRACT

While agreeing with Rawls as concerns the principles of justice proposed in *A Theory of Justice*, I argue in this essay that neither these principles by themselves nor the more specific recommendations offered by Rawls provide a firm enough basis for the self-respect of society's least well-off members, because Rawls pays insufficient attention to the symbolic dimension underlying the advertisement and promotion of luxury goods, the possession of which is systematically portrayed as having a bearing on the personal value of those who enjoy them.

### KEY-WORDS

Rawls. Self-respect. Principles of justice. Interpersonal comparisons of well-being. Social status.

### RESUMO

Embora estejamos de acordo com Rawls quanto aos princípios de justiça propostos em *Uma Teoria da Justiça*, argumentamos neste artigo que nem os princípios por si sós nem as recomendações mais específicas propostas por Rawls fornecem uma base suficientemente sólida para a auto-estima dos membros menos favorecidos da sociedade, porque Rawls não atenta o bastante para a dimensão simbólica da propaganda e promoção de bens de luxo, a posse dos quais é sistematicamente representada como tendo relevância para o valor pessoal daqueles que os usufruem.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Rawls. Auto-estima. Princípios de justiça. Comparações interssoais de bem-estar. Status social.

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My aim in this essay is to conduct an inquiry into a matter that should be of obvious interest to those who, in spite of having been convinced of the basic soundness of Rawls's arguments<sup>1</sup> for his two principles of justice – the principles which would be chosen by fully rational agents behind an appropriately defined veil of ignorance – still have some misgivings as to whether their application would lead, without some further provisions, to the establishment of a sufficiently egalitarian social order. The issue I intend to address, briefly stated, is this: would Rawls's principles of justice suffice to provide a solid enough foundation on which the least advantaged members of a well-ordered society could build their sense of self-respect?

That self-respect figures prominently in Rawls's thinking is, of course, beyond a doubt, since he takes it to be – alongside with rights, liberties, opportunities, income and wealth – one of the primary social goods that rational individuals are presumed to want as all-purpose means for the attainment of whatever legitimate ends they may happen to have. Most importantly for my purposes, Rawls is quite explicit in stating the relation between his two principles of justice and people's sense of their own worth. Thus, at one point he claims that “the public recognition of the two principles gives greater support to men's self-respect and this in turn increases the effectiveness of

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay I will limit myself to a consideration of what is said and argued for in *A Theory of Justice*. Though also relevant in a number of ways, *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement* does not seem to contain any modifications in Rawls's views on self-respect.

social cooperation” (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 155, revised edition, 1999). The point is made even more forcefully on the following page:

Thus a desirable feature of a conception of justice is that it should publicly express men’s respect for one another. In this way they insure a sense of their own value. Now the two principles achieve this end. For when society follows these principles, everyone’s good is included in a scheme of mutual benefit and this public affirmation in institutions of each man’s endeavors supports men’s self-esteem. The establishment of equal liberty and the operation of the difference principle are bound to have this effect (*op. cit.* p. 156).

In contrast to the above, I shall maintain that although the self-respect of society’s worst-off would indeed be promoted to a very considerable degree by its acknowledgement of, and allegiance to, the two principles of justice, some important empirical facts of life in industrial societies may still cast a serious doubt on whether the adoption of the two principles would of itself provide the self-respect of society’s worst-off with a firm enough basis. It almost goes without saying that such an appeal to empirical realities strikes me as a legitimate move in the context of this discussion. In a number of places, Rawls himself is happy to let this sort of considerations play an important role in his philosophy, as is shown in a passage pertaining to the application of the second principle of justice: “Society should take into account economic efficiency and the requirements of

organization and technology. If there are inequalities in income and wealth, and differences in authority and degrees of responsibility, that work to make everyone better off in comparison with the benchmark of equality, why not permit them?" (*A Theory of Justice*, pp. 130-31).

The empirical facts which I believe create some problems for Rawls's take on self-respect pertain to the way in which the primary good of wealth is very often portrayed – in capitalist societies, at any rate – as being vitally important to the perceived prestige and social status of the individuals who have a larger share in the distribution of material goods. Since I intend to address what I take to be the strengths of Rawls's political philosophy before taking up what I consider to be an important weakness, it is well that I begin by quoting one of the formulations of Rawls's two principles of justice, as a preliminary to a consideration of their contribution to the self-respect of society's worst-off.

First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others.

Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all. (*op. cit.* p. 53).

One of Rawls's most important, and exhaustively argued for, claims in *A Theory of Justice* – a claim which I am inclined to accept, but which I will not undertake to defend here – is that the first principle is *lexically prior*

to the second. Rawls's contention is that the liberties which the first principle is meant to secure can never be sacrificed, even if by allowing this to happen a society might come up with greater social and economic gains – roughly the things whose distribution the second principle is supposed to regulate – than would be the case if the first principle were upheld in an exceptionless way.

However, in arguing that the first principle takes precedence over the second, Rawls is by no means led to think that the first principle can be thought of in complete isolation from the second. On the contrary, his exposition makes it clear that his two principles of justice are interestingly related. That this is, in fact, the case is shown if we remind ourselves that the liberties secured by the first principle are of two sorts. Even if one might be willing to grant that existing democratic societies make effective constitutional provisions for such *negative* liberties – which amount roughly to guarantees against interference and oppression from others – as freedom of expression, freedom of thought and the civil liberties, it is highly doubtful, to say the least, whether most citizens living in such societies can avail themselves to a sufficient degree of the *positive* liberty to take part in political affairs, and thereby help to shape the life of the community. Apart from noting that the *negative* liberties are, if anything, even more sacred than the *positive*, Rawls does not spend too much time discussing the difference between the two. In any event, my point in singling out political liberty for discussion in this connection is that it brings out very clearly, perhaps more so than the other liberties, the way in

which the first principle, though *lexically prior* to the second principle in the way envisaged by Rawls, is at the same time dependent, for its successful application, on the taming of the sorts of inequalities addressed by the latter, for if, to use Rawls's expression, the "fair value" of the political liberties is to be ensured, one has to advert to the way in which wealth and positions of authority are distributed throughout society as a whole. Rawls's point is that, although in principle all people living in a democratic society have the same right to participate in the political life of the community, by publicizing their views, holding public office, being voted for, and so on, the fact remains that, in practice, the richer and more powerful, having far larger means than most citizens do, are likely to benefit a great deal more from such a right. This is an eminently reasonable claim to make, since these more privileged individuals can avail themselves of their greater wealth and power to do such things as lobbying, supporting candidates who are likely to enact policies meant to further their interests, and the like.

In order that the fair value of political liberty be ensured, measures ought to be taken to prevent certain groups or individuals from having an undue power to influence the outcome of the political process. Rawls plausibly argues that the way to accomplish this is by preventing excessive concentrations of power and wealth to exist in the first place. In other words, power and wealth should not be too unevenly distributed, if political liberty is to have its fair value. As will be seen below, the fact that Rawls explicitly extols the virtues of

a social order in which differences in income and wealth cannot exceed certain limits is a fortunate one in that it helps forestall a natural objection that might be raised by those who might be inclined not to hold the second principle of justice in sufficiently high esteem as far as its bearing on the self-respect of the least well-off members of society is concerned.

Now, subject to the proviso that excessive concentrations of wealth be avoided, one might grant that the first principle of justice could indeed do its fair share in promoting the self-respect of the least advantaged members of society. For all individuals' sense of their own worth, no matter what their social or economic background, would be promoted by a shared awareness that all have the same basic freedoms and guarantees against interference and oppression, along with a fair chance to exert influence in the public arena.

That economic and social inequalities have a bearing on the self-respect of the least well-off members of society can be seen, as has been the case so far, in connection with their likely effects on the obtaining of the conditions which make it possible for the scheme of liberties upheld by the first principle of justice to be firmly established and thus become actual, rather than merely formal.

It can also, of course, be appreciated more directly by a consideration of just how people are likely to regard the inequalities which are explicitly allowed by the second principle of justice.

Now, the contribution made by the second principle to the self-respect of the worst-off citizens can



be said to rest on their realization that not just any inequalities in income and wealth may be allowed to exist in the well-ordered society envisaged by Rawls, but only those inequalities of which they may also be beneficiaries. As the above quotation from pp. 130-31 of *A Theory of Justice* reminds us, it is arguably the case, as a matter of empirical fact, that the least advantaged citizens can fare better in a society in which inequalities in wealth and power consistent with, and even necessary for, greater economic productivity and growth, may be allowed to exist, than they would if strict egalitarianism were enforced in connection with the distribution of material goods and the access to positions of authority. Such a strict egalitarianism might lead to the establishment of a society whose members were, in the worst-case scenario equally, though regrettably, poor, and, in any event, worse-off than they could be if inequalities of a desirable sort were found to be acceptable.

Now, the plausibility of the claim that the second principle of justice would contribute to the self-respect of the worst-off citizens by providing them with a sense that the whole social and economic structure is accountable to their needs and aspirations would seem to depend on how the meaning of the expression “the worst-off citizens” is construed. In order that such a principle may indeed be cherished by the least advantaged members of society, it is imperative that the description “the worst-off citizens” should be taken to mean “the worst-off citizens in a given society at a particular point in time”. Naturally enough, the concept

of well-being and how the members of a given society think of their standing in it are relative to their historical setting, rather than to the possession and enjoyment of some commodities and comforts thought of in abstraction from the historical process. The least advantaged citizens of present-day societies would find little solace in a general awareness of the fact that economic growth throughout history has had the consequence that, despite the still existing inequalities, the worst-off citizens in our day and age may, in many cases, enjoy a higher standard of living than would the worst-off of past centuries or even past decades. More pointedly, it may not even much matter to them that they live better than their grandparents or even parents did. It is reasonable to suppose that, for each historical setting, the way in which people relate to their material situation – and are thus in a position to see their self-respect boosted or otherwise – is conditioned by what material aspirations may find satisfaction in that particular setting, given the realities of the current economic and social order, rather than by reference to some ahistorical set of criteria.

Therefore, if one were to find with hindsight that economic growth in some industrial society has meant, in the context of existing inequalities, improved living standards for the worst-off, in a comparison with that enjoyed by their remote or immediate ancestors, one would be scarcely justified in saying that the second principle of justice has been complied with after all. Quite obviously, it might still be the case that the inequalities have not always benefited the worst-off. And

even if such inequalities have chanced to have the desirable effect of benefiting all citizens, this need not imply that the principle has been in operation in any significant sort of way, at least in regard to its effects on the self-esteem of the worst-off. Having higher aspirations, prompted by what the material reality of the present day makes them see as worth desiring, today's worst-off need not be much heartened by the thought that their lot is better than their ancestors'.

I have no intention to suggest that Rawls would deny any of this. The whole point of making these comments is to add vividness and concreteness to this discussion of the relation between the second principle of justice and the self-respect of society's worst-off citizens. The above remarks help one to see that this principle, in holding that economic inequalities are only admissible if they make it possible for the worst-off members of society to be better-off than they would otherwise be, can only be seen to have a real bite and a genuine bearing on the self-respect of the worst-off if what it means for these people to become better-off is understood in an appropriate way.

In light of the above remarks concerning the way in which citizens' attitude towards the material goods and comforts at their disposal depends on their historical setting, and the material aspirations that such a setting makes it possible for citizens to have, I should like to maintain that the self-respect of the least advantaged members of a society is only truly addressed by the second principle of justice if it is interpreted as meaning that economic inequalities should only be allowed to

exist if they have as a consequence benefits to which the worst-off may aspire to enjoy in their lifetimes. Moreover, these benefits are to be seen as such in the context of the material culture of the times.

This is very likely what Rawls meant all along. However, I believe that the above way of setting out the relation between the second principle of justice and self-respect – in particular, the self-respect of the least advantaged – has the merit of clearly tying in the principle with the pursuit of personal prosperity. In the above construal, compliance with the second principle of justice has a positive effect on the self-respect of the worst-off by assuring them that inequalities are only to be admitted if they make it possible for them to experience personal prosperity in the course of their lives, as measured by the standards of the times. This being the case, the worst-off will perhaps find no reason to reject the existing social order, inequalities and all, because they can rest assured that things are arranged in such a way as to ensure that the overall material progress of society will improve their condition. Now, if any individual member of the least advantaged groups of society can feel confident that, whenever his society as a whole experiences some measure of economic growth, he will, in virtue of the very nature of the social contract accepted by all, be able to say – after some arbitrarily defined period of time has elapsed – “I am better-off now than I was before”, this may well give him a sense of being a valued member of society – someone to the betterment of whose condition the whole society is committed.

Now, in the above paragraph I used the sentence “I am better-off now than I was before” quite purposefully. For it captures in a natural way one of the attitudes that people may have regarding their social and economic situation. People may indeed assess their level of material well-being “internally”, as it were, disregarding how well others are faring, and come to see with pleasure that, as far as material possessions and comforts go, they are doing better now than they did before.

Needless to say, another possible take on one’s economic situation is that of being tempted to assess it by comparing it with that of others. Realistically, and as a matter of general human psychology, both attitudes are likely to be present. And they clearly need not be confined to the material domain. Individuals engaged in all sorts of endeavors, say, those of an athletic, artistic, or academic sort, can be expected to assess their current accomplishments both in comparison with what they were capable of doing before, and in comparison with the accomplishments of other people engaged in similar activities. Clearly, these diverse attitudes may lead individuals to think of their material situation in two different, and, on occasion, possibly conflicting ways. Any individual might form a “relative-to-one’s-former-state conception of one’s well-being” along with a “relative-to-others conception of one’s well-being”.

Now, if we have another look at the second principle, we will be easily able to see that all that is stated therein is that, in order to be admissible, inequalities in wealth and power have to be so constituted as to make it possible for the worst-off to

also reap material benefits from the overall economic progress which is consistent with such inequalities. The principle does not, in itself, preclude inequalities from becoming ever larger. Assuming that the two “psychologies” mentioned above will probably be found in varying degrees among the citizens of any modern society, the fact that the second principle of justice is not inconsistent with the existence of an ever widening gap between the most and the least advantaged members of society might be regarded as problematic for Rawls. After all, such a widening gap would not be found to be congenial to people whenever they entertain the “relative-to-others conception of one’s well-being”, as they are certainly likely to do, on occasion, as a matter of human psychological constitution. Because it might kindle the fires of such destructive feelings as envy and resentment, the ever widening gap would act as a socially divisive factor, preventing the harmonious social order conceived by Rawls from becoming a reality.

Fortunately for Rawls’ theory, he thinks that excessive material inequalities, which, as seen earlier, should not exist in any case if the first principle of justice is to be unhindered in its operation, would not be likely to prevail in the social order which he envisages. Provided that there is “fair equality of opportunity”, excessive inequalities should not be a problem. As Rawls points out in Section 26 of *A Theory of Justice*, “While nothing guarantees that inequalities will not be significant, there is a persistent tendency for them to be leveled down by the increasing availability of educated talent and ever widening opportunities” (*op. cit.* pp. 136-37).

One may thus count among the merits of Rawls's theory the fact that it naturally forestalls the objection that ever widening economic gaps, not ruled out by the second principle, might – on the plausible assumption that the “relative-to-others conception of one's well-being” is found to exist, in varying degrees, among most people – cause the worst-off members of society to feel dejected and humiliated by their realization of their ever worsening relative position in the social scale, in spite of economic gains that they might glean from the economic growth experienced by society as a whole.

All the same, I believe that there is something to be gained by giving such a sketch of an objection that might be raised to Rawls's theory, even if we find the objection itself to be untenable. For, on the way to offering such a sketch, I was led to explicitly formulate what I take to be two attitudes that people are likely to have towards their material well-being.

Even if we start out from the assumption that inequalities are inevitable, and, to some extent, desirable, in that they may make it possible for the worst-off members of society to enjoy greater personal prosperity – a prosperity which, such individuals, in so far as they are influenced by the “relative-to-one's-former-state conception of one's well-being” can be expected to relate to pleurably – some consideration has still to be given to the fact that the “relative-to-others conception of one's well-being” will not go away.

One might, presumably, find the importance that I attach to the latter conception to be unnecessary and gratuitous. One might argue that political philosophy

should not be too worked-up by the existence and the effects of the sort of psychology that I am addressing here. After all, one might say that inequalities are necessary and consistent with personal prosperity. While the “relative-to-others conception of one’s well-being” may go on existing, this would give the worst-off, who are beneficiaries of the prosperity which the social order makes it possible for them to enjoy, no grounds for complaining.

If we have recourse to analogies found in another domains, it must be granted that it is hardly the case that other aspiring basketball players in Michael Jordan’s high-school team could be entitled to any sort of societal compensation on the grounds that they might regard themselves as under-achievers in comparison with Jordan. Similarly, and especially if one factors in equality of opportunity, the less gifted artists who belonged in Picasso’s circle, or the less accomplished philosophers who associated with Wittgenstein, can hardly be said to have legitimate reasons for complaining, just on the grounds that they were not nearly as outstanding as Picasso or Wittgenstein.

However, just as it would be morally unacceptable for Jordan, Picasso or Wittgenstein to scorn or humiliate their lesser contemporaries, it is also not proper or acceptable for society to make the worst-off experience their condition in a way that is too painful – which could be the case even if the second principle of justice were strictly complied with.

Thus, my contention is not, of course, that measures should be implemented with a view to



eliminating all the social conditions which may give occasion for the “relative-to-others conception of one’s well-being” to be entertained. This would amount to an absurdity on a par with an attempt to eliminate the conditions which enable some outstanding individuals to excel at what they do, simply on the grounds that others might come to resent the fact that they cannot achieve quite the same degree of excellence.

Rather, my contention is that society should do its best to prevent “material under-achievers” from regarding their situation as humiliating. Given that the “relative-to-others conception of one’s well-being” will not go away, society should deal with it by ensuring that inequality will not be experienced by the worst-off members of society as a form of humiliation.

In Section 81 of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls deals with the problem of envy. Naturally enough, envy is part of what material under-achievers might experience if they are in the grips of the sort of psychology which I have been talking about here in connection with the “relative-to-others conception of one’s well-being”<sup>2</sup>. Rawls believes that envy would not amount to much of a problem. Part of his argument runs as follows;

Although in theory the difference principle permits indefinitely large inequalities in return for small gains to the less favored, the spread of income and wealth should not be excessive in practice, given the

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<sup>2</sup> I suppose I should apologize for the extreme inelegance of coinages such as these. However, since such coinages may save space, I hope this will not be found to be inexcusable.

requisite background institutions (§ 26). Moreover, the plurality of associations in a well-ordered society, each with its secure internal life, tends to reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility of variations in men's prospects. For we tend to compare our circumstances with others in the same or in a similar group as ourselves, or in positions that we regard as relevant to our aspirations. The various associations in society tend to divide it in so many groups, the discrepancies between these divisions not attracting the kind of attention which unsettles the lives of those less well-placed. (*op. cit.* p. 470).

For my part, I find it doubtful whether one may indeed reduce "the painful visibility in variations in men's prospects" by bringing about the sort of conditions referred to by Rawls. I do not think it would be particularly desirable, either.

It is certainly unlikely that the visibility *as such* of these variations can be reduced. Given the easy flow of information in modern life, the worst-off can hardly fail to have some knowledge of what the life of the richest members of society is like, even if such knowledge as exists can scarcely fail to be contaminated by 'mythologizing'<sup>3</sup> of some sort. Rawls's point in saying that such visibility would not be painful because people tend to compare their circumstances "with others in the same or in a similar group" as themselves is, I believe, insufficiently backed by argumentation. After all, as a

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<sup>3</sup> In this connection, I will have more to say about what I take to be Rawls's failure to note key role played by certain types of symbolism associated with the pursuit of material goods.

predictable part of life in any society, well-off and not so well-off people come into contact with each other on a daily basis, in the course of engaging in such relations as “boss and chauffeur”, “customer and tailor”, and so on. These contacts may be recurrent, rather than occasional, and even give rise to relationships which may acquire some degree of personal intimacy, which may be experienced as pleasant or unpleasant by the parties involved. Is it really a safe bet to suggest that “Joe the butler” thinks of his position in society primarily by comparing it to people in his own social group, never or seldom taking into account the life-style of his employer’s family?

So, if Rawls were right in arguing that the ‘painful visibility’ he has in mind can be reduced by having society being divided up into noncomparing groups, each with its own set of aspirations and roughly the same chance to fulfill them, it would seem that the only totally safe way to achieve this would be by establishing a society made up of fairly segregated groups, with very little opportunity for personal intercourse. Of course, I have no intention to suggest that Rawls would condone this.

Still, there is something slightly patronizing in Rawls’s talk of people’s aspirations being shaped (and desirably so!) by the internal life of the groups they associate with. This seems to involve insufficient recognition of the possibility and legitimacy of upward social mobility, which presumably requires that one be capable of having aspirations that are not constrained by what prevails in one’s social group.

To my mind, the way to truly avoid the “painful visibility” of other people’s better life-prospects – a

visibility which may be detrimental to the self-respect of the worst-off – is best approached by invoking considerations which are overlooked in Rawls’s account.

As has been seen, the second principle of justice is meant to impose constraints on the economic and social inequalities that are admissible in a well-ordered society. These inequalities should be arranged so as to benefit the worst-off. Moreover, the inequalities should not exceed certain limits. This precludes an excessively uneven distribution of the primary goods of income and wealth. Income and wealth are, of course, what one needs to have in order to acquire a satisfying provision of material goods and comforts of a varied sort. Absent from Rawls’s account is some consideration of the way in which people relate to the possessions which income and wealth make it possible for them to acquire.

A small inventory of the sorts of material goods and comforts to the possession of which people can be expected to aspire would, of course, include such things as food, housing, means of transportation, clothing, leisure opportunities, and the like. In view of the fact that at least a minimum provision of some of these goods may furnish individuals with the bare essentials needed for their very survival and as a precondition for leading any sort of life at all – a life which can be devoted to a host of different pursuits –, the goods considered may be said to have a *use value*.

Clearly, they may be and often are enjoyed for their own sake. Thus, I would like to say that they can also have an *enjoyment value*. Such basic material goods as food and clothing may obviously be found to be a

source of pleasure, quite apart from their use value. Now, there are some sumptuary goods, say, emeralds and rubies, which do not seem to have a use value in any clear sense. This naturally does not prevent those few people who own such sumptuary goods from deriving great enjoyment from owning them. Moreover, such an enjoyment does not seem to be based solely on the pleasure afforded by the possession of beautiful objects.

Rather, it would appear to be enhanced dramatically by the realization that not very many other people own or can realistically aspire to own this sort of goods. For their owners, sumptuary goods serve to clearly indicate that they belong to a small, privileged set of people. Sumptuary goods may be regarded as the sort of thing whose possession confers social status and prestige on their possessors. So, I would like to say that they also have a *symbolic value*.

Having distinguished between *use value*, *enjoyment value*, and *symbolic value*, we are immediately in a position to see that people can relate to the material goods mentioned above in any of three ways, or in any combination of them. Thus, a luxury sports car may be a pleasure to drive. It may also signal both to its owner and to others that he enjoys a high degree of social status. And, of course, it is also a means of simply getting from one place to another. Again, I have no intention to suggest that distinctions of this sort are limited to the material domain. Michelangelo may have thought of his work as a painter and sculptor as a form of making a living. We can only surmise that he also derived great satisfaction from his work. And, given his superior

achievements, he might have derived additional satisfaction from the realization that he belonged in a historically select group.

We have seen that, as a matter of human psychology, individuals may be expected to relate in complex ways to the material possessions which income and wealth make it possible for them to acquire. These are issues that Rawls tends to pay insufficient attention to. Most importantly, he seems to overlook the fact that people are not encouraged to pursue such goods in some sort of ideological or symbolic vacuum. In particular, the way in which luxury goods are advertised should give us pause. Naturally enough, they are not simply singled out for attention for their use value, which they share with less sophisticated items serving similar purposes. Nor are they exclusively extolled in connection with their enjoyment value. Rather, it is very often the case that the underlying message conveyed by those who promote such goods is tantamount to a statement to the effect that those who possess them are members of a very special, exclusive, intrinsically superior group of people. Glamorous, idealized portraits of the lives of the rich and famous – the sort of mythologizing I mentioned above – may have much the same effect.

Naturally enough, the way in which the symbolic value of some goods is thus highlighted may function as a powerful incentive to snobbish attitudes among a few, and to resentment among the many who may interpret such underlying messages as amounting to a statement of their inferiority. The above considerations lead me to believe that the “painful visibility of variations in men’s

prospects” is best avoided if society sees to it that restraint is exercised in the symbolic dimension pertaining to the advertisement and promotion of material goods and comforts and to the portraying of the lives of the most advantaged members of society.

This seems to lie entirely beyond the reach of Rawls’s two principles of justice. Nor do other aspects of his theory seem to take sufficiently into account the issues I addressed above. We might perhaps conclude that Rawls’s theory does not, in itself, go far enough when it comes to the need to foster the self-respect of society’s worst-off members. So far as I can see, the only possible response that Rawlsians might give to the above considerations would consist in pointing out that acceptance of the two principles of justice – in particular, their acceptance by the most advantaged members of society – could only be secured by appealing to their sense of justice, and that individuals who did come to accept the principles in the first place would be unlikely to engage in the improper uses of symbolism I alluded to in the preceding. Let us hope that such a response would be a correct one.

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