

Rawls, Self-Respect, and the Opportunity for Meaningful Work

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In the introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism* (hereafter, PLP), published in 1996, John Rawls says that one of the requirements for stability is “[s]ociety as an employer of last resort” (PLP, lix).¹ He explains: “[t]he lack of . . . the opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is destructive . . . of citizens’ self-respect” (PLP, lix). The relatively obscure provenance of these claims might make one doubt how strongly Rawls believes them. But he repeats them verbatim three years later, in the text of *The Law of Peoples* (LP, 50). Rawls implies in these claims that the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect. This constitutes a significant shift in his account of self-respect, one that has been overlooked.² In this paper, I examine it. I begin by clarifying Rawls’s account of self-respect in *A Theory of*

¹ References to Rawls’s works are given parenthetically in the text, as follows: TJ = *A Theory of Justice (Original Edition)*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); TJR = *A Theory of Justice (Revised Edition)*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); PL = *Political Liberalism (Original Edition)*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); PLP = *Political Liberalism (Paperback Edition)*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); CP = *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); LP = *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and JF = *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Except for the introduction to which I refer, the content of the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism* is identical to that of the original edition of this work.

² Rawls’s treatment of self-respect has received much attention, but mostly before the publication of his later writings, including PLP and *The Law of Peoples*. See, for example, Joshua Cohen, “Democratic Equality,” *Ethics* 99 (1989): 727-751; Stephen J. Massey, “Is Self-Respect a Moral or a Psychological Concept?” *Ethics* 93 (1983): 246-261; Gerald Doppelt “Rawls’ System of Justice: A Critique from the Left,” *Noûs* 15 (1981): 259-309; Stephen L. Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88 (1977): 36-49; and Henry Shue, “Liberty and Self-Respect,” *Ethics* 85 (1975): 195-203. An exception is Nir Eyal, “Perhaps the Most Important Primary Good’: Self-Respect and Rawls’s Principles of Justice,” *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 4 (2005): 195-219, but he does not mention this shift. Nien-hê Hsieh and Philippe Van Parijs draw attention to Rawls’s remarks on self-respect and work, but do not see them, as I do, as constituting a shift in his account of self-respect. See Nien-hê Hsieh, “Rawlsian Justice and Workplace Republicanism,” *Social Theory and Practice* 31 (2005): 1-28; and Philippe Van Parijs, “Difference Principles,” in Samuel Freeman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 200-240.

Justice (hereafter, *Theory*), then consider some post-*Theory* developments in it. After exploring the nature of Rawls's commitment to the opportunity for meaningful work, I ask why he comes to think it is a social basis of self-respect. I extract a partial answer from his writings, then speculate about his full reasoning. Finally, I consider whether Rawls is right that the opportunity for meaningful work is a social basis of self-respect. I give some reason to believe that he is.

While a principal purpose of this paper is to clarify and understand Rawls's account of self-respect, it is not of interest solely to those concerned about the proper interpretation of Rawls. It is of particular interest to Marxians: I show how Rawls's theory of justice evolved in a way that they long ago complained it should evolve. And it is of interest to political philosophers generally, as I make progress toward evaluating the claim that meaningful work is important for self-respect.

1. Rawls on the nature of self-respect

According to Rawls, self-respect has two elements. The first is a sense of one's "value" or "worth" (TJ, 440 and TJ, 256, respectively), and in particular, the conviction that one's "conception of the good . . . is worth carrying out" (TJ, 440). The second is "a confidence in one's ability, so far as it is within one's power, to fulfill one's intentions" (TJ, 440). In other words, Rawls thinks self-respect requires believing that one's life plan is worth pursuing and that one can successfully pursue it.

For a person to believe that his conception of the good is worth carrying out, Rawls says, it must satisfy the "Aristotelian Principle." This says that, other things equal, people "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” (TJ, 426).³ Here the complexity is to be understood not absolutely but relatively. What is complex for one person may not be for another (TJ, 441-442). This sense of worth is influenced, second, by the judgments of other people. Rawls says that “unless our endeavors are appreciated by our associates it is impossible for us to maintain the conviction that they are worthwhile” (TJ, 440; see also TJ, 544).

Our associates are the source of the second element of self-respect – viz., our confidence in our abilities to fulfill our intentions – as well. Their encouragement and support tend “to reduce the likelihood of failure and . . . provide support against the sense of self-doubt when mishaps occur” (TJ, 441).

Thus, for Rawls, self-respect is tied to the pursuit of a suitably complex conception of the good within the context of an association of like-minded, supportive others. Of course, different people have different talents and conceptions of the good. So it is not that anyone’s self-respect will be affected by joining, or being excluded from, any association whatever. The associations that matter for a person are the ones whose activities are complex relative to her talents and form part of her conception of the good. Rawls’s comments on shame illustrate this last point. He says that shame is “evoked by shocks to our self-respect” (TJ, 443), and arises from “our not having or failing to exercise certain excellences” (TJ, 444), in particular, those that are relevant to our conceptions of the good. In this way, “feelings of shame are relative to our aspirations, to what we try to do and with whom we wish to associate” (TJ, 444).⁴ If running marathons

³ Given the comparative way this principle is formulated, it seems odd to speak of a conception of the good as “satisfying” or “failing to satisfy” it. Yet this is what Rawls does. I follow him in this practice.

⁴ For a criticism of this account of shame, see John Deigh, “Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique,” *Ethics* 93 (1983): 225-245.

is not part of my conception of the good, then on Rawls's view, my (relative) lack of stamina and failure to associate with marathoners will not give rise to shame, and will not damage my self-respect.

2. Rawls on the social bases of self-respect pre-PLP

As Rawls makes clear in later works, the primary good of self-respect – that which the state is responsible for distributing – “is not self-respect as an attitude toward oneself but the social bases of self-respect” (JF, 60). However, these are connected: “[t]he social bases of self-respect are those aspects of basic institutions that are normally essential if citizens are to have a lively sense of their own worth as moral persons” (CP, 366; see also CP, 314 and TJ, 256). Because they are only “normally essential” for people to have self-respect, the social bases are not *necessary conditions* of self-respect. We might instead say, using the terminology of social science, that they are key *determinants* of self-respect. In their absence, people are much less likely to have self-respect, but it is not certain that they will not have it. In this section, I present Rawls's pre-PLP account of the social bases of self-respect.

Rawls's most extensive treatment of this issue occurs in *Theory's* difficult section 82. There he says “the basis for self-esteem in a just society is not . . . one's income share but the publicly affirmed distribution of fundamental rights and liberties” (TJ, 544).⁵ In fact, income share and liberty are the only candidates Rawls explicitly considers as bases of self-respect in *Theory*.

⁵ In *Theory* and other early works, Rawls uses ‘self-respect’ and ‘self-esteem’ interchangeably (see TJ, 440-446). Most writers agree, however, that these concepts are different, and Rawls later agrees (CP, 260). For a discussion of some differences between self-respect and self-esteem, see David Sachs, “How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 346-360. I return to this issue in section 5.

Rawls thinks it would be a “great misfortune” if income share were the basis of self-respect (TJ, 545). Necessarily, the larger a percentage of the total income one person has, the smaller a percentage others have. People would be set “at odds with one another in the pursuit of their self-esteem,” (TJ, 545), making “the good of social union difficult if not impossible to achieve” (TJ, 546). This result could be avoided by enforcing an equal distribution of income. But, Rawls says, “[a]n equal division of all primary goods is irrational in view of the possibility of bettering everyone’s circumstances by accepting certain inequalities” (TJ, 546). In other words, we all do better when income is distributed unequally than when it is distributed equally.⁶

Evidently Rawls thinks that if liberty were the social basis of self-respect, this disastrous competition for self-respect would be avoided. Because there is nothing to be gained by distributing liberty unequally, it should be equally distributed.⁷ But can the equal distribution of liberty *support* self-respect? Rawls says it can, and in two ways. First, it publicly establishes people’s equal worth. Because of this conspicuous equality, “everyone has a similar and secure status when they meet to conduct the common affairs of the wider society” (TJ, 544). Second, it permits the existence of “communities of interest” in which individuals can find appreciation and support for their conceptions of the good (TJ, 544).⁸ Permitting the existence of a wide variety of such communities, as Rawls does, is integral to this account. He says that for citizens to have self-respect, it is not necessary that they be valued and supported by every association they belong to.

⁶ Rawls admits that people’s income share can affect their self-respect: the worse-off’s self-respect may be damaged by their envy of the better-off. He allows for adjustments to the difference principle to be made in these cases of “excusable envy” (about which more below). The goal is to ensure that one’s relative income does not, in fact, affect one’s self-respect.

⁷ For a counterexample to this claim, see Shue, “Liberty and Self-Respect,” p. 200.

⁸ For further discussion of this point, see Cohen, “Democratic Equality,” pp. 736-743.

Rather, 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” (TJ, 441). In a liberal society, all people are likely to find at least one such association.⁹

In his post-*Theory* works, Rawls continues to stress the importance of equal liberty for self-respect (see, e.g., PL, 318 and JF, 60). But in these works he says that other parts of his two principles support self-respect as well, including the fair value of political liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle (PL, 82 and PL, 318). The idea seems to be: people’s status will not be truly similar and secure, nor will they be truly free to pursue their conceptions of the good, unless they have, in addition to equal liberty, sufficient resources. These resources are supplied by the other parts of Rawls’s two principles.

In these remarks, Rawls says he is not altering the account of the social bases of self-respect he gave in *Theory*, but merely highlighting aspects of it he downplayed. For example, in a footnote in *Political Liberalism*, he says “[i]n the discussion [in *Theory*] of the equal political liberties as a basis of self-respect . . . the fair value of these liberties is not mentioned. It should have been” (PL, 318). It might be wondered whether this is an accurate self-assessment. Many writers, drawing on *Theory*, ascribe to Rawls the beliefs that (i) liberty is the sole basis of self-respect, and (ii) the social bases of self-respect

⁹ Rawls’s belief in the importance of self-respect is often cited as *a* (but not *the only*) reason why he gives his first principle of justice, which demands equality in the distribution of basic liberties, priority over his second, which governs the distribution of wealth and other primary goods. See, for example, Eyal, “Perhaps the Most,” p. 199; Robert S. Taylor, “Rawls’s Defense of the Priority of Liberty: A Kantian Reconstruction,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 31 (2003): 246-271, pp. 249-251; Doppelt, “Rawls’ System,” pp. 261-266; and Shue, “Liberty and Self-Respect.” Because without it, “nothing may seem worth doing” (TJ, 440), self-respect must be secured before the other primary goods. This is accomplished, on this interpretation of Rawls, by distributing liberty equally.

must be equally distributed.¹⁰ Rawls's claim that "the precedence of liberty entails equality in the social bases of self-esteem" (TJ, 546) is especially suggestive of these beliefs. In later works, however, as is already apparent, Rawls denies both of them. This is manifest in his claim that parts of his two principles besides the liberty principle support self-respect. It is confirmed in "Social Unity and Primary Goods," where he says that while "all citizens in a well-ordered society have the same equal basic liberties," one of the "permissible differences" among them is their share of the social bases of self-respect (CP, 363). This contradicts (i) and (ii).

I think Rawls's self-assessment *is* accurate. Despite his suggestive statements, it is incorrect to ascribe (i) and (ii) to the Rawls of *Theory*. These claims are inconsistent with his explanation there of how equal liberty creates self-respect. It does this, in part, by allowing people to join associations of like-minded others. This is typically impossible without a certain amount of wealth. It follows that, because wealth is a "normally essential" social condition of self-respect, it is a social basis of self-respect, and that, because wealth may be unequally distributed, at least some of the social bases of self-respect may be unequally distributed. Note that this is consistent with Rawls's rejection of income *share* – as opposed income or wealth *generally* – as a social basis of self-respect in *Theory*.¹¹

¹⁰ See, for example, Eyal, "Perhaps the Most," p. 197; Norman Daniels, "Equal Liberty and the Unequal Worth of Liberty," in his (ed.), *Reading Rawls* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp. 253-282, pp. 273-275; Doppelt, "Rawls' System," p. 261; and Shue, "Liberty and Self-Respect," pp. 198-199. Cohen, "Democratic Equality," is a notable exception; he ascribes neither claim to Rawls.

¹¹ Rawls is clearer in the revised edition of *Theory* that his first principle of justice – equal liberty – is not the sole basis of self-respect (see TJR, 478-480). He stresses in particular that the difference principle plays a vital role in creating the social conditions in which it is possible for people to look to their status as equal citizens for self-respect. This makes the conditions themselves, on Rawls's account, bases of self-respect. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to my attention.

3. The nature of Rawls's new commitment

What Rawls says about self-respect in his recent writings usually confirms, or draws out implications of, the account given above. However, as seen, he adds to it in PLP, where he says that “[t]he lack of . . . the opportunity for meaningful work and occupation is destructive . . . of citizens’ self-respect” (PLP, lix; LP, 50). Because a lack of it is destructive of self-respect, the opportunity for meaningful work (hereafter, OMW) qualifies, on Rawls’s definition, as a social basis of self-respect (CP, 366; see also CP, 314 and TJ, 256). I devote the remainder of the paper to examining this development in Rawls’s account of self-respect. In this section, I clarify, to the extent his writings permit, the nature of his commitment to the OMW. We will see that Rawls leaves open more questions than he answers.

Before beginning, it should be noted that Rawls’s concern about meaningless work is not new. In *Theory*, he says that in a well-ordered society, “no one need be servilely dependent on others and made to choose between monotonous and routine occupations which are deadening to human thought and sensibility” (TJ, 529). And certain pre-PLP elements of his system promote the outcome in which people have access to meaningful work, especially the principle of fair equality of opportunity. Many who hold meaningless jobs are forced into them by their lack of education and training. Fair opportunity ameliorates this condition. However, this is not tantamount to a meaningful work provision, at least not of the robust sort Rawls has in mind in PLP. There he says *one* requirement for stability is “a certain fair equality of opportunity” (PLP, lix; LP, 50), and a *separate* requirement is “society as an employer of last resort,” the purpose of which is to provide citizens “the opportunity for meaningful work” (PLP, lix; LP, 50). So,

while in *Theory*, Rawls may have hoped that a society structured according to his two principles, including fair opportunity, would provide citizens with enough meaningful work, by PLP, he seems to have accepted that it might not.¹²

How, then, should we understand Rawls's commitment to the OMW? The first and fundamental question is whether he intends it as an element of his theory of justice, or as a policy that would be selected at the legislative stage in a well-ordered society with certain features. It may seem natural to regard it in the second way. This is how Rawls treats excusable envy (of the better-off by the worse-off), another factor that may affect self-respect. Whether the distribution generated by the difference principle should be adjusted in this case, he says, "is best decided from the standpoint of the legislative stage where the parties have more information about social circumstances" (TJ, 546). It may seem, similarly, that information about social circumstances is necessary to determine whether the meaningfulness of work affects self-respect. On the other hand, Rawls says that "society as an employer of last resort" – one of the purposes of which is to provide citizens with meaningful work – is one of the requirements "satisfied by the principles of justice of all liberal conceptions" (LP, 50). This implies that the OMW is an essential part of any liberal conception of justice, including justice as fairness, not a policy appropriate for some well-ordered societies but not others.

Adjudicating this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. But this will not impede our inquiry. I am interested in why Rawls thinks the OMW is a social basis of self-

¹² One might wonder why Rawls is worried that a well-ordered society will have this shortcoming. Fair equality of opportunity ensures that citizens will have access to the education and training necessary to perform meaningful work, while the difference principle ensures (presumably) that people need not accept such work only at the cost of earning less than a subsistence wage. However, markets are imperfect. They can fail for a variety of reasons to provide goods, including working conditions, that people want – or at least as quickly as people want. Rawls may support an OMW provision as a kind of a backstop against market failure, one which may never come into use. To suggest, as he does, that society be an employer of last resort is not to suggest that society actually employ anyone.

respect, and whether he is right to think so. These issues can be pursued whether we understand Rawls's meaningful work provision as an element of justice or as a policy that might be selected at the legislative stage.

A second question concerns the extent of Rawls's support for meaningful work. Given that providing people with the OMW is likely to be costly, how important is it compared to, in particular, the goal of maximizing the worst-off group's economic position? If we are guided by his treatment of the other bases of self-respect, then he must think the former is more important than the latter. Because self-respect is "perhaps the most important primary good" (TJ, 440), Rawls prioritizes distributions that secure it over those that maximize the worst-off group's economic position. This is obvious in the case of the basic liberties, which are crucial for self-respect, and which are distributed by his first principle of justice. It is also apparent in his treatment of educational opportunity. Because education provides "for each individual a secure sense of his own worth" (TJ, 101), Rawls says, resources for it "are not to be allotted solely or necessarily mainly according to their return as estimated in productive trained abilities, but also according to their worth in enriching the personal and social life of citizens" (TJ, 107). Finally, we see this priority in Rawls's treatment of excusable envy. In the event that severe inequalities of wealth damage the worst-off group's self-respect, Rawls favors a distribution in which their self-respect is preserved but their economic position is not maximized over one in which their economic position is maximized but their self-respect is damaged (TJ, 546). I suggest Rawls would treat the OMW similarly. That is, he would favor a distribution in

which all have the OMW, and then, consistent with that distribution, favor one in which the worst-off's economic position is maximized.¹³

A third question about Rawls's commitment to the OMW concerns what it means to have it. This question falls into two parts. First, what makes work *meaningful*? According to standard accounts, it must be complex and varied, and give the worker considerable decision-making power.¹⁴ There is reason to believe that Rawls would endorse these accounts. Recall that in *Theory*, he inveighs against "monotonous and routine occupations which are deadening to human thought and sensibility" (TJ, 529). The opposites of these qualities, arguably, are the standard conditions for meaningful work. But are there any other conditions for meaningful work? And which jobs satisfy them? The second part of the question is: what does it mean to have the *opportunity* for meaningful work? Must a person always have the option of leaving a meaningless job and taking up a meaningful one? Or is it sufficient that she have this option once, or a few times, in her career? Can a person be said to have the OMW if the only meaningful

¹³ One might wonder how stringent Rawls wants this priority to be. Is he willing to accept *huge* sacrifices in the worst-off group's economic position to ensure that everyone has the OMW? Should he be? These questions admit of no easy answers. To make progress on them, it is instructive to consider the critical discussion of Rawls's support for fair equality of opportunity (FEO), another basis of self-respect (see PL, 82 and PL, 318), over the difference principle. Richard J. Arneson and Larry A. Alexander argue that securing FEO – if that is even possible – is not worth the huge sacrifices in economic well-being that it is likely to require. See Richard J. Arneson, "Against Rawlsian Equality of Opportunity," *Philosophical Studies* 93 (1999): 77-112, pp. 81-82 and 99; and Larry A. Alexander, "Fair Equality of Opportunity: John Rawls' (Best) Forgotten Principle," *Philosophy Research Archives* 11 (1985): 197-208, pp. 202-203, 205-206. For a defense of Rawls which emphasizes that the lexical priority of FEO is activated only under certain conditions, see Robert S. Taylor, "Self-Realization and the Priority of Fair Equality of Opportunity," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1 (2004): 333-347, pp. 341-342. Van Parijs, "Difference Principles," pp. 224-226, argues, similarly, that Rawls assumes that achieving FEO will not require huge sacrifices in economic well-being, and that if it did, then he would relax his support for its priority. I find the Van Parijs/Taylor line compelling, and think it can be fruitfully applied to our case. Thus, my sense is that Rawls assumes that securing the OMW will not require huge sacrifices, and that if it did, then he would relax his support for it to some extent. This, of course, is merely a statement of what I think Rawls's view is; a defense of it is outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁴ See, for example, Richard J. Arneson, "Meaningful Work and Market Socialism," *Ethics* 97 (1987): 517-545, pp. 521-524; and Adina Schwartz, "Meaningful Work," *Ethics* 92 (1982): 634-646, pp. 634 and 641. Several of the questions I raise in this paragraph are inspired by Arneson, "Meaningful Work," p. 524.

job available to her is in another town or state, or if it pays significantly less than her present job? Rawls does not address these questions, and it is difficult to see what answers he would give.

A fourth question, which Rawls addresses briefly, is how the state should provide its citizens with the OMW. The only explicit option he gives is “society as an employer of last resort through general or local government” (PLP, lix; LP, 50). In other words, the state itself might employ people in meaningful jobs, as in the case of the depression-era Public Works Administration in the U.S. Rawls also says the OMW may be provided through “other social and economic policies” (PLP, lix; LP, 50), but does not describe any. An obvious option, however, is for the state to require or subsidize private employers to offer meaningful work. To determine which approach, or combination of approaches, is best we would need more information about the details of possible policies. Rawls is not concerned with these matters.

4. Rawls’s reasons

Rawls’s commitment to an OMW provision follows from his (new) belief that the OMW is a social basis of self-respect. In this section I consider why he comes to hold this belief. Rawls offers no explicit explanation, so let us see whether there are any resources in his theory out of which we might construct one. We find a partial explanation, I suggest, in his remarks on self-respect and complexity.

According to Rawls, to have self-respect, one must think that one’s “conception of the good . . . is worth carrying out,” (TJ, 440). To think this, one’s conception must satisfy the Aristotelian Principle: it must “call upon [one’s] natural capacities in an

interesting fashion” (TJ, 440). Work is a part of many people’s conceptions of the good, in the sense that work-related activities are some of the “interests and preferences or the system of ends which they wish to advance” (CP, 178). Because it requires little intelligence and few skills, meaningless work does not satisfy the Aristotelian Principle, and so does not, on Rawls’s view, seem worth doing. It follows that meaningless work cannot support a person’s self-respect.

The reason this is only a partial explanation of why Rawls thinks the OMW is a social basis of self-respect is that work is not usually the only project a person has. A worker might also be a chess player and a member of a softball team. Indeed, Rawls relies on this fact in *Theory*. To have self-respect, he says there, we need not believe that every project we have is worth pursuing, or that we can capably pursue all of them. Rather, he says, invoking the connection between self-respect and associational life, “what is necessary is that there should be for each person at least one community of shared interests to which he belongs and where he finds his endeavors confirmed by his associates” (TJ, 442). If a person performs meaningless work, then he will not have self-respect as a result his activity in his work association. But, Rawls assumes in *Theory*, provided the members of at least one of the other associations to which he belongs value and support his activity, he will have self-respect. And in a liberal society, there is likely to be at least one other such association.

In identifying the OMW as a social basis of self-respect in PLP, Rawls abandons this *laissez-faire* approach. His new view seems to be: we cannot merely hope that, if people cannot find meaningful work, they can get self-respect from other activities, such as chess or softball. We must make sure that they have access to meaningful work. This

has the effect of *privileging* the work association over other associations as a source of self-respect. To be clear, Rawls supports providing people with an *opportunity* for meaningful work; he does not demand that all jobs *actually be* meaningful. But he does not support providing people with similar opportunities to engage in other activities, e.g., chess or softball. A full explanation of why Rawls identifies the OMW as a social basis of self-respect must account for this privileging.

Before engaging this issue, let me draw attention to an implication of the account given so far. On it, Rawls cannot think people's self-respect will be secured by providing them *merely* with an opportunity for meaningful work, understood as work that is varied and complex, and that gives the worker considerable decision-making power. According to him, there are "essentially two" factors that support our sense of worth (TJ, 440). In addition to being complex relative to our abilities, our activities must be valued by our associates (TJ, 440). Their support is also the source of the second aspect of self-respect, viz., confidence in one's abilities (TJ, 441). So, Rawls must think the opportunity to perform "valued" work is a social basis of self-respect as well, or he must understand "meaningful" work broadly so as to include work that, in addition to being varied and complex and conferring decision-making power, gives rise to valuing responses in co-workers. For convenience, I put this complication aside.

It might be thought that an explanation for Rawls's privileging the work association over others as a source of self-respect can be found in his suggestive remarks about self-respect and contribution. In *Political Liberalism*, he says that "[s]elf-respect is rooted in our self-confidence as a fully cooperating member of society" (PL, 318). Similarly, in *Justice as Fairness*, he supposes 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” (JF, 139). Hinted at in these passages is the familiar idea that contribution to society is a necessary condition of self-respect.¹⁵ The case for privileging the work association might then go: to have self-respect, people must contribute to society. People contribute through work. So, if people lack access to meaningful work, then they may fail to contribute, and their self-respect may be damaged. The same is not true if people lack access to activities through which they do not contribute, such as chess or softball.

It might be objected that work – in the sense Rawls appears to be using this term, meaning “paid labor” – is not the only way people contribute to society. They raise children and care for parents, hold unpaid public office, and volunteer in fire departments, among other things.

This is true, but it does not defeat the above argument. If work is *a way* people contribute to society, then providing them the opportunity for meaningful work is *a way* to secure their self-respect. Moreover, this fact accounts nicely for Rawls’s support for an *opportunity* for meaningful work, as opposed to the total elimination of meaningless work. Limiting people who do not contribute to society through paid labor, but who want to work, to meaningful work would be costly and unnecessary.

While initially promising, this argument fails. Work that makes a contribution to society need not be meaningful in Rawls’s sense, i.e., it need not be “complex” or “call

¹⁵ See, for example, Donald J. Moon, “The Moral Basis of the Democratic Welfare State,” in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Democracy and the Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 27-52, pp. 32-36. Jonathan Wolff comes close to this conclusion in his “Fairness, Respect, and the Egalitarian Ethos,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27 (1998): 97-122. He says that, because the social product depends on work, those who are unable to contribute through work “may feel at least somewhat ashamed of this fact” (p. 115). If they are forced to reveal this publicly by asking for unemployment benefits, their self-respect will be damaged.

upon [one's] natural capacities in an interesting fashion" (TJ, 440). It is easy to imagine non-complex jobs through which people make important contributions, e.g., painting lane markers on highways, collecting tolls, or bolting wheels onto cars. I doubt Rawls would have failed to notice this. So, while Rawls's (apparent) view that contribution to society is a condition of self-respect may provide a reason why he should support giving people access to work (through which they can contribute to society), it cannot explain why he thinks that work must be meaningful.

I see no other resources in Rawls's writings to explain this. We can only speculate. Below I present the explanation that seems to me most natural, given Rawls's other claims about self-respect. While my account provides (what I think are) intuitively plausible reasons to believe that the OMW *is* a social basis of self-respect, given the truth of Rawls's other claims about self-respect, I do not claim that it *justifies* this belief. I address this issue in the next section.

Given stable facts of economic life, many people must hold full-time jobs for many years. That is, people's participation in work associations – i.e., some work association or other – is often *mandatory* and *extensive*. Moreover, work can be monotonous, routine, and “deadening to human thought and sensibility” (TJ, 546). By contrast, people's participation in non-work associations is usually *optional* and *limited*. The activities of some non-work associations will be boring to some, but they can be avoided, often entirely. When a person does participate extensively in a non-work association, it is usually by choice. We have little reason to worry that activities people freely choose to engage in will be “deadening to human thought and sensibility.” For these reasons, Rawls might have thought that providing people with the OMW is

important, whereas providing them with an opportunity for meaningful non-work activity is not.¹⁶ Given that self-respect is tied to the pursuit of complex activities, the explanation goes, if the activities that dominate one's conception of the good are monotonous and routine, one's self-respect is likely to be damaged. The stimulation one gets from non-work activities is unlikely to be a satisfactory replacement.¹⁷

Note two features of this explanation. First, it is contingent on facts about work: many people's participation in work associations is mandatory and extensive, work can be monotonous and routine, and work of this nature negatively affects self-respect. If any of these facts did not obtain, the above case for privileging the work association over others as a source of self-respect would collapse. Second, this explanation makes sense of Rawls's support for an *opportunity* for meaningful work, as opposed to the total elimination of meaningless work. If a person's conception of the good is not dominated by work, it is not important for his self-respect that he perform meaningful work. What about persons whose conceptions of the good are dominated by meaningless work (and whose self-respect is damaged as a result), but who do not *take* the opportunity to perform meaningful work? Their self-respect will not be repaired. Nevertheless, in

¹⁶ This explanation parallels, and thereby derives support from, Taylor's ("Self-Realization") explanation of why Rawls gives fair equality of opportunity (FEO) lexical priority over the difference principle. According to Taylor, Rawls thinks FEO is vital for self-realization, a condition which is achieved "through a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties" (TJ, 84). Taylor says FEO and its priority "can be seen as creating and protecting institutional space for the use of our skills and guaranteeing resources . . . to make their utilization effective" ("Self-Realization," p. 339). Here it might be objected that people can skillfully exercise social duties in informal settings, such as chess clubs and churches. But, Taylor replies, the offices and positions within institutional contexts, including work associations, require "a major and usually dominant commitment of time and energy" from them ("Self-Realization," p. 341). The idea is that, because of this commitment, institutional contexts are more important for self-realization than informal contexts. In the same way, I have claimed, Rawls thinks self-respect is more importantly affected by one's work activities, as opposed to one's non-work activities, because people spend a great deal of time at work.

¹⁷ I say "likely" and "unlikely" because the social bases of self-respect for Rawls are only "normally essential" for people to have self-respect (CP, 366; see also CP, 314 and TJ, 256). They are not necessary conditions of their having it.

having the OMW, they have what is necessary for self-respect, whether or not they take advantage of it. This is enough for Rawls.

A final note. It might be thought that Rawls's support for the OMW is inconsistent with his neutralism, as it favors the pursuit of conceptions of the good that include meaningful work. This is not so. For Rawls, the hallmark of neutrality is not that the state's institutions and policies lack the *effect* of favoring some conceptions of the good over others, but that they are not *intended* to do so (PL, 193). While the OMW arguably has the effect of favoring conceptions of the good that include meaningful work,¹⁸ its *purpose* is to promote self-respect. Some claim that the hallmark of neutrality is that a state's institutions and policies can be given a neutral *justification*, i.e., one that does not claim or entail that one conception of the good is better than others.¹⁹ Rawls's endorsement of the OMW passes this test too, at least on the justification given above. According to it, a life with meaningless work is not worse than other lives. It is just that, as a matter of fact, it can damage self-respect.

5. Is Rawls right?

Having considered why Rawls might think the OMW is a social basis of self-respect, let us consider whether he is right to think so. Here our inquiry hits a snag. What we have called Rawls's account of self-respect is in fact offered by him in *Theory* as an account of "self-respect (or self-esteem)" (TJ, 440). While these terms are sometimes

¹⁸ I say "arguably" because it might be claimed that, instead of positively favoring conceptions of the good that include meaningful work, the OMW simply corrects for a market-driven "favoring" of conceptions of the good that include routine, boring work. On this point, see Nien-hê Hsieh, "Survey Article: Justice in Production," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 16 (2008): 72-100, pp. 76-77.

¹⁹ See, for example, Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 44; and Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice and the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 10-11.

used interchangeably, self-respect and self-esteem are different, as Rawls later acknowledges (CP, 260). However, Rawls never says which concept the account in *Theory* is an account of. It now seems important that we know. The OMW may be a social basis of self-respect but not of self-esteem, and vice-versa. To determine whether, or in what sense, Rawls is right, we must consider how his account of self-respect should be categorized.

5.1. What is Rawls's account an account of?

According to most writers, having self-respect is a matter of recognizing and living appropriately in the light of standards one identifies with and regards as important.²⁰ The most common standard is personhood. Persons are widely thought to have a certain dignity or status with which certain kinds of treatment (e.g., degrading treatment) are incompatible. Thus Laurence Thomas says that self-respect “is grounded in the conviction that one deserves to be treated fairly in virtue of the fact that one is a person.”²¹ Thomas Hill says that the person who acts “as if his rights were nonexistent or insignificant” lacks self-respect.²² A person's self-respect might be defined partly by standards other than personhood. For example, it would be incompatible with a vegetarian's self-respect to gorge himself on hamburgers.

Having self-esteem, by contrast, is a matter of thinking positively of oneself. In a classic treatment, Stanley Coopersmith describes self-esteem as a self-evaluation which

²⁰ For an illuminating critical survey of the literature, see Robin S. Dillon, “Respect,” in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2007 Edition), URL=<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2007/entries/respect/>>. A common question is whether the standards one *regards* as important must *be* important. On this point see Massey, “Is Self-Respect?” pp. 248-252.

²¹ Laurence L. Thomas, “Morality and our Self-Concept,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 12 (1978): 258-268, p. 265.

²² Thomas E. Hill, “Servility and Self-Respect,” *The Monist* 57 (1973): 87-104, p. 97.

“expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which the individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy.”²³ In a recent account, Alicia Cast and Peter Burke say that self-esteem “is composed of two distinct dimensions, *competence* and *worth*.”²⁴ People with high self-esteem see themselves as “capable and efficacious,” as well as “persons of value.”²⁵ Unlike self-respect, which is based on character and action, self-esteem can be based on native traits, such as physical appearance and athletic ability.²⁶

Where does this leave Rawls’s theory? Most commentators think that what Rawls gives is an account of self-esteem.²⁷ As with most accounts of this notion, Rawls’s emphasizes people’s evaluations of themselves. What is essential on his account is that people think positively of their projects and their abilities to pursue them. Note especially Rawls’s claim that shame, which he says is the result of a loss of self-respect, arises from “our not having or failing to exercise . . . excellences” that are relevant to our conceptions of the good (TJ, 444). His account makes no mention of the standards people identify with and value, or relatedly, the ideas of dignity or status.

Yet it seems clear that Rawls *meant* to offer an account of self-respect, for it seems clear that he meant to make this notion, not self-esteem, a central part of his theory of justice. Intuitively, self-respect is more important than self-esteem. It is easy to see why a state should seek, as a Rawlsian state would, to ensure that people think of

²³ Stanley Coopersmith, *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1967), pp. 4-5. See also Morris Rosenberg, *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 30.

²⁴ Alicia D. Cast and Peter J. Burke, “A Theory of Self-Esteem,” *Social Forces* 80 (2002): 1041-1068, p. 1042 (emphasis in original).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1042.

²⁶ See, for example, Dillon, “Respect”; and Darwall, “Two Kinds,” p. 48.

²⁷ See, for example, Richard J. Arneson, “Is Work Special? Justice and the Distribution of Employment,” *American Political Science Review* 84 (1990): 1127-1147, p. 1146, n. 8; Deigh, “Shame and Self-Esteem,” p. 229; and Thomas, “Morality,” p. 259.

themselves as having full moral status. It is less easy to see why a state should seek to ensure that people think positively of themselves. Charity requires that we see whether Rawls's account can be construed as an account of self-respect.

Looking closer, it resembles one in two ways. First, in *Theory*, Rawls identifies equal liberty as a social basis of self-respect. This ensures, he says, that "everyone has a similar and secure *status* when they meet to conduct the common affairs of the wider society" (TJ, 544, my emphasis). Thus, while the idea of status is missing from Rawls's definition of self-respect, it is present in his account of its social bases. Where Rawls's account of self-respect is thought to diverge from standard accounts is in its evaluative aspect. But – and here is my second point – while many writers stress the non-evaluative, or "recognitionial," aspects of self-respect, self-respect is also thought to have an evaluative component.²⁸ One's recognitionial self-respect depends on whether or not one lives up to standards that one identifies with and regards as important. One's evaluative self-respect depends on how confident one is in one's ability to live up to those standards. Rawls says, similarly, that self-respect depends on being confident in one's ability to pursue projects one regards as valuable. So, the person who values his vegetarian identity, but who doubts his ability to resist hamburger cravings, will have low evaluative self-respect and low self-respect on Rawls's account.

This does not settle the issue. To do so, we need more detailed accounts of self-respect and self-esteem. These cannot be supplied here. So we cannot say what Rawls's account is an account of. But while this complicates our inquiry, it need not end it. We can ask whether the OMW is a social basis of *what Rawls calls self-respect*, i.e., whether it is "normally essential" for people to think that their conceptions of the good are worth

²⁸ See, for example, Dillon, "Respect"; and Darwall, "Two Kinds," pp. 37-39.

pursuing and that they can capably pursue them. Although a full treatment of this issue is, as we will see, impossible at present, some progress can be made.

5.2. Is the OMW a social basis of Rawlsian self-respect?

Philosophers, including Rawls, often suppose that the social bases, or determinants, of self-respect and self-esteem can be identified through a priori reflection.²⁹ This approach is appropriate for identifying the boundaries of the associated concepts. Yet it seems clear that, once we know their boundaries, identifying these states' determinants is an empirical inquiry. As seen, self-esteem is fundamentally a type of attitude that one has toward oneself. Self-respect is also a type of attitude, combined with a set of actions consistent with it. To determine whether X is a determinant of one of these states, we need empirical evidence demonstrating causation – or, minimally, correlation – between X and it. In the absence of such evidence, a priori reflection about the state's determinants, even when intuitively plausible, can only serve as a guide for where we might focus an empirical inquiry.

The same is true, I suggest, of Rawlsian self-respect, which is “an attitude toward oneself” (JF, 60), consisting in a “sense” of one's value and a “confidence” in one's abilities (TJ, 440). To determine whether the OMW is a determinant of this state, we must establish an empirical connection between the OMW and it. A priori argumentation

²⁹ For a priori, but not implausible, arguments about the sources of self-esteem, see Arneson, “Is Work Special?” pp. 1140-1144 and “Meaningful Work,” pp. 529-530; and Jon Elster “Is There (or Should There Be) a Right to Work?” in Amy Gutmann (ed.), *Democracy and the Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 53-78, pp. 62-67 and 73-77. For a priori arguments about the sources of self-respect, see Wolff, “Fairness, Respect,” pp. 113-115; Moon, “The Moral Basis,” pp. 32-36 and 48; and, of course, Rawls's various works.

– of the kind I offered on Rawls’s behalf in section 4 – is a useful starting point, but not an adequate substitute.

It might be objected that empirical evidence is relevant only for those who assume background conditions similar to the background conditions under which it was gathered. But Rawls assumes that society is well-ordered. That is, it is stable, has a public conception of justice, and in it persons view themselves as free and equal (see, e.g., CP, 232-236). Our society – the one in which the empirical evidence was gathered – lacks these features. So, on this objection, while the available empirical evidence is relevant to identifying the determinants of Rawlsian self-respect *in our society*, it is irrelevant to identifying them *in a well-ordered society*.

I doubt Rawls would endorse this objection, and for the same reason it fails. The circumstances of a well-ordered society are not *that* different from our own. Moreover, it is hard to see how the differences would give rise to different determinants for Rawlsian self-respect in the two contexts. The burden of proof is on the objector. Until it is met, it is reasonable to assume that the available empirical evidence is relevant to determining whether the OMW (or any other condition) is a social basis of Rawlsian self-respect – in our society or a well-ordered one.

So, is there any empirical evidence that the OMW is a determinant of Rawlsian self-respect? I am aware of no studies of these particular phenomena. Until such studies become available, we cannot settle the issue. However, there is at least some reason to believe that it is. As seen, Rawls’s account of self-respect is similar to standard accounts of self-esteem. Indeed, many writers think it *is* an account of self-esteem. Because this concept is of interest to psychologists, there is a great deal of empirical work on it.

(Because self-respect is of less interests to psychologists, there is less empirical work on it.) There is a great deal of evidence, in particular, that meaningful work, understood as complex and varied work that allows for autonomous action, is positively correlated with self-esteem, while meaningless work, understood as work lacking these features, is negatively correlated with self-esteem.³⁰

This is not a proof that the *opportunity* for meaningful work is a determinant of *Rawlsian self-respect*. Self-esteem – or more precisely, what is called “self-esteem” by psychologists – may differ to some extent from Rawlsian self-respect. And having or lacking the *opportunity* for meaningful work differs from having or lacking meaningful work *itself*. But while these results are not exactly what Rawls needs, they are promising. If there were no connection between the meaningfulness of work and self-esteem, then we might doubt that the OMW is a determinant of Rawlsian self-respect. Since a connection exists, this conclusion gains plausibility.

In closing, let me return to the question of Rawls’s reasons for thinking that the OMW is a social basis of self-respect. It might be asked: why not suppose that it is the same as the reason we just gave for thinking that this claim is true, viz., that Rawlsian self-respect is similar to self-esteem, and that empirical studies indicate that self-esteem is adversely affected by meaningless work?

³⁰ See, for example, Jon L. Pierce and Donald G. Gardner, “Self-Esteem Within the Work and Organizational Context: A Review of the Organization-Based Self-Esteem Literature,” *Journal of Management* 30 (2004): 591-622; Scott Schieman, “Socioeconomic Status, Job Conditions, and Well-Being: Self-Concept Explanations for Gender-Contingent Effects,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 43 (2002): 627-646; Edwin A. Locke, Kyle McClellan, and Don Knight, “Self esteem and work,” in Cary L. Cooper and Ivan T. Robertson (eds.), *International review of industrial & organizational psychology* 11 (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1996), pp. 1-32; Joel Brockner, *Self-Esteem at Work: Research, Theory, and Practice* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988); Michael Schwalbe, “Autonomy in Work and Self-Esteem,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 26 (1985): 519-535; and Phyllis Tharenou, “Employee Self-Esteem: A Review of the Literature,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 15 (1979): 316-346.

This possibility cannot be ruled out. Early on, Marxians criticized Rawls's "hands-off" approach to the labor process. They argued that, in a free market, some workers will be forced to perform psychologically harmful work, often supporting their claims with appeals to empirical evidence of the kind I cited.³¹ But while Rawls's endorsement of the OMW answers his Marxian critics' concerns, it is unlikely that he did so because he was persuaded by the evidence they appealed to. First, by PLP, where Rawls first identifies the OMW as a social basis of self-respect, he has said that self-respect and self-esteem are different, and he gives no indication that they have similar social bases. So, it would be surprising for him to infer that meaningful work is a determinant of self-respect from evidence that it is a determinant of self-esteem. Second, the arguments Rawls typically gives for thinking that a certain factor (e.g., equal liberty) is a social basis of self-respect are similar to the intuitive argument we gave in section 4, not the one we gave here. In any case, the latter is compatible with, and strengthens, the former. It supports the claim that, if one's conception of the good is dominated by meaningless work, one's self-respect may be damaged. Ascribing this new rationale to Rawls is consistent with ascribing the above rationale to him.

6. Conclusion

Rawls's claim in PLP that the OMW is a social basis of self-respect is a significant development in his account of self-respect. After examining its implications, I considered how Rawls might have come to hold this view. Then I considered whether he is right to hold it. Whether the OMW is a social basis of Rawlsian self-respect is, I

³¹ See, for example, Adina Schwartz, "Meaningful Work," pp. 635-639; and Doppelt, "Rawls' System," pp. 266-269.

claimed, an empirical issue. Although it cannot be settled at present, I gave some reason to believe that Rawls is right.

My primary goal in this paper has been to work out some details of Rawls's account of self-respect, but my conclusions are of wider interest. I have shown how, late in his career, Rawls warmed to the idea that a theory of justice should say something substantive about the labor process. As seen, this vindicates in part certain Marxian criticisms of Rawls. In addition, it should command the attention of contemporary liberal egalitarians. Their theories tend to say little about work, but to the extent that they are inspired by Rawls, perhaps they should. Finally, the claim that the just state is one in which citizens respect themselves is plausible. And preliminary empirical research suggests that work, including meaningful work, is a key determinant of people's self-concept. So, the connection between self-respect and work is worthy of further examination by political philosophers generally.³²

³² Versions of this paper were read at the Southern California Philosophy Conference, the University of Redlands, and the Young Scholar Weekend, sponsored by Cornell University's Program on Ethics & Public Life. Thanks to members of those audiences, and especially to my commentator at Cornell, Michelle Moody-Adams, for many valuable suggestions. Thanks also to M. Victoria Costa, Steven Wall, Nien-hê Hsieh, and two anonymous reviewers for *Social Theory and Practice* for detailed comments on earlier drafts of this paper.