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JOHN RAWLS'S CONCEPTION OF THE SELF

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Abstract

Rawls establishes an individualistic conception of the self to obtain the principle of justice that is just and fair. He claims that all persons are inherently and morally equal, free and rational capable of realizing a conception of the good and justice. Based on these premises of the self which are metaphysical in nature, he argues that his conception of the self is therefore neutral, unsituated and mutually disinterested because the premises are weak, universal, autonomous and transcendental. Rawls in response to his critics claims that his conception of the self is purely political, and not metaphysical, only to justify his justice as fairness. Despite Rawls's acceptance of the communal values to balance the private self and the public self through an overlapping consensus, retention of the metaphysical aspect of the self is clearly identifiable when he insists on the primacy of the autonomous, universal and transcendental nature of the self over the situated or embodied nature of the self.

Keywords: Rawlsian Self, Justice, Equality, Metaphysical Self, Political Self.

1. Introduction

To determine the principle of justice that is fair, John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* explains a conception of the person. Rawls sees every person as inherently rational, free, equal and moral capable of realizing a conception of the good and a sense of justice. To make 'justice as fairness' universal, just and neutral, Rawls frames the principles of justice based on the weak and universal conception of man that all moral persons are entitled to equal right, justice and basic liberty, and that all must have an equal access to social, political and economic opportunity. Rawls' idea of the self as free and equal is a presumed to justify the principle of the right, not the principle of the good, to reaffirm the autonomy of the self and reduces the conception of the good to a subjective choice from the many competing goods available in the society. Rawls' approach to a social contract is not about how it evolved, but how it 'should' be evolved. Rawls, therefore, uses a hypothetical situation to ensure equality that, prior to participation in the social structures, every individual in the original position should be ignorant of any social elements which he terms as the 'veil of ignorance'. In the veil of ignorance, the party prior to his contract is assumed to have deprived of any information about the particular circumstances of that society. Rawls then argues that the principle chosen by the party prior to a contract will therefore be fair and free from bias because the choices made will be neutral, rational and autonomous. Rawls claims that his self in spite of its autonomous nature is associated only with the political realm and not the metaphysical realm because the idea of the self he uses is to justify only a certain principle of justice. He, therefore, employs an overlapping consensus which regards the communal values to balance the private self and the public self. However, the retention of the metaphysical aspect is also clearly identifiable as he insists on the absoluteness of the autonomous and universal nature of the self which in turn points to a transcendental nature of the self.

2. Rawls's Conception of the Liberal Self

To study the conception of justice and goods is to first study the conception of man. Rawls therefore has to first engage with the essences of man for conception of person to be a conception. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls presumes conception of the self-based on the weak and widely acceptable premises or concepts without making any specific concept of the self to maintain neutrality among the competing conceptions of the good because the good for the person is also inseparably found in the conception of person. He claims that not all conceptions of the good can coexist without first establishing a system of right in a just society. He, therefore, establishes neutrality between the rival goods in a just society by placing a principle of the right before a principle of the good (1971, p. 127). However, despite maintaining weak premises, Rawls describes the self in the original position to be rational and mutually disinterested. The persons in the original position are hypothetical representatives of the actual people who exist in the society. In the original position, he presumes all individuals to be equally possessed of a moral personality or attribute which enables the person to have a specific conception of the good and a sense of justice. These individuals are self-interested but mutually disinterested on one another's interest. Also, in the original position, they will be deprived of any specific information that will cause them to choose their own interest or the self-interested principles which is natural for everyman even though it is not fair (1971, p. 127). The moral principles realized in the original position are the product of a rational choice of the person based on the essential nature of man as free, autonomous and equally moral being. Rawls maintains that the parties in the original position are rational because the parties will carefully and safely choose the principles that will guarantee the highest minimum level of welfare to them due to the fact that they do not know what specific conception of the good will they choose outside of the original position. Despite asserting the strong



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individualistic aspects of the self which are metaphysical in nature in the justice as fairness, Rawls does not undermine the importance of the social values or goods (1971, p. 520). He, to a degree, shares the communitarian view that persons fully express their moral personality by participating into a social union of social unions.

2.1. Original Position

Rawls expresses his conception of the self through the original position. And to provide a prerequisite condition for his theory of justice to be fair, Rawls revives a social contract theory. He proposes that by virtue of human beings morally free and equal, we can start at a point where and when we, though having a general conception of the good (1971, p. 137), do not have any attachment or enchantment with any social elements. He calls this state the original position of man. At this state, the parties have not involved into the contract and they are therefore neutral and mutually disinterested towards any external elements. Rawls insists that the original position of the self in which every moral person is equal and free is neither meant to claim for a particular or strong conception of a person, nor an “actual historical state of affairs” but purely taken to be a hypothetical situation to justify a certain principle of justice (1971, 12). Nagel makes some similar comments that Rawls’ original position needs not to even have ever in reality existed but necessary to be considered as the best representation of a situation that would make justice fair. Because of the fact that we can at any time get into this position to make justice fair for all with all certainty that any principle chosen under this position is fair by the very fact of imposing a condition to the situation (1973, p. 6). Rawls makes the premises (all are equal, free and moral beings) of the original position of man weak and universal so as to make his concept of justice fair. He maintains that the original situation will prevent the participants from the tendencies of exploiting the “social and natural circumstances” to their own advantage without providing an equal situation to the other party involved (1971, p. 136). What Rawls proposes in the original position is a hypothetical one, that, with those qualities of man, the parties prior to social contract are ignorant, neutral and mutually disinterested to any social structure. Starting from that disinterested situation, one has to frame a social system which seems fair and just for every party before he enters into that system. He views that the original position is one of the starting points of distributing justice where everyone in the contract has to set off, and no one deserves his place more than this initial place in the society (1971, p. 104). Ignorance and disinterestedness of the self are the preconditions to install justice into the social structures or institutions. A mutual disinterest amongst the individuals in the original position is presupposed by the free and equal nature of the self. Party prior to contract being mutually disinterested, neutral and ignorant is therefore political, whereas person being inherently free, equal, moral and rational is metaphysical and a priori in nature.

2.2. Equality

Rawls claims that all persons are morally equal and possess two qualities that “they are capable of having a conception of their good” and that “they are capable of having a sense of justice” (1971, p. 505). According to him, everyone has a moral personality (1971, p. 506) or consciousness to a reasonable level with the exception of those naturally or contingently disadvantaged. Therefore, we should not apply our situation (unequal situation) against the contingently disadvantaged in the distribution of justice. Rawls’s moral or deontological conception of equality of the self has therefore justified his political conception of equality that every moral person is entitled to equal justice. He uses veil of ignorance as the primary device for ensuring equality to every moral person in the original position. Equality as the starting position in distributing justice that is fair for all the parties involved in the social contract calls for veil of ignorance in the original position so that the situation treats the participants as equals. Rawls argues that the inequalities of naturally and socially (contingent) givens or attributes which include even the talents, intelligence, abilities, social luck and particular conception of the good of a person are neither fair nor unfair but morally arbitrary, and therefore cannot be used to determine the principle of justice. The persons in the contract should therefore be unaware of their social and natural endowments in the original position to avoid them from choosing the system or principle of justice that is more suitable to themselves and those who share a similar endowment (1971, p. 137). This shows that Rawls’s deontological ethics leads to his conception of the self and political egalitarianism. Rawls does not claim any qualitative superiority between the right and good. However, to hold equality in the justice as fairness, he claims that the conception of right should be placed before the conception of the good for a practical reason so that every moral and equal person is entitled the right to pursue his individual goods. Rawls’s veil of ignorance by virtue of its nature or condition provides certain principles that justify his justice as fairness. These principles are that each moral person has equal right and the basic and compatible liberty with others (1971, p. 60); economic and social inequalities should be arranged accordingly so that it benefits the least advantaged, and equal opportunities should be given to all concerning social and political institutions and positions (1971, p. 83). These principles form an underlying structure in Rawls’ theory of justice.

2.3. Individual, Rational and Autonomous Self

Unlike the collective individualism of utilitarianism, Rawls gives a primacy to the individual self-interest over the social or collective interest. Individuality is the primary essence of the Rawlsian self. He insists that the social goods or the idea of social welfare cannot override the inalienable rights of the person. In a well-ordered society, the advantages of the many cannot outweigh the



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advantages or rights of the individual person. The rights of equal citizenship for each person in a just a just society should be taken as a non-negotiable right (1971, p. 3-4). Another character of the self in the original position is a mutual disinterest in the interest of one another. Considering the parties being rational and mutually disinterested in the initial situation prior to a contract is an important feature in the justice as fairness. Rawls, however, does not insist on rationality and mutual disinterest for the very limitation that the parties are naturally egoistic, but the parties are just conceived to be disinterested in the interest of one another (1971, p. 13). He then claims that a mutually disinterested self is a weaker and widely accepted concept or premise of the self than an opposing view in which persons are collectively interested. Rawls also claims that the parties in the original position are rational, equal, autonomous and moral beings who will have some rational choice and goal in life without having a full a priori knowledge of the plan, ends and interest (1971, p. 142). These characteristics of the self-Rawls describes will be expressed by acting or choosing on the two principles of justice as fairness through exercising their own autonomy that will guarantee one the highest welfare possible (1971, p. 152). The choice is calculated based on what seems best to further their interest and, in this way, they can exploit their intuitive rationality. Therefore, the principles of justice as fairness are the result of rational and autonomous choice. In other word, rationality is the result of the autonomous nature of the self. Rawls however has to deal as well with the communal values obtained from an overlapping consensus.

2.4. An Overlapping Consensus

On the one hand, Rawls holds the primacy of the individual premises in his justice as fairness. On the other hand, he is also concerned of the social values. He views that there are two ways to realize justice as fairness. One is through a private society which each party in a well-ordered society considers the social institution and arrangement as a means to serve the self-interest or private aims (1971, p. 521). Another is through the idea of social union (1971, p. 79). Idea of the social union is but derived from the idea of the self in community. The political self or social self is a product of the collective participation from the members of the community that each individual is able to pursue their plans with the given abilities and potentials one possesses which is not realizable if one pursues the plan alone. Rawls argues that, to realize the given nature or attributes which are common amongst the certain individuals in the community, those certain individuals should come together and work out together in their own term that would benefit all the parties of the group. It is through the social union that enables the individuals to cooperate, act and actualize their natural endowments which are also the correct representation of the political self (1971, p. 523). In this case, Rawls accepts the Kantian conception of human flourishing through a social union without considering the social institutions and arrangement in a well-ordered society as means to private ends like in the private society (1971, p. 527- 529). He even goes further by saying that a social union justifies his justice as fairness more than a private society as it holds the values of community.

3. Political Self not Metaphysical

Rawls claims that his conception of the self is purely political and not metaphysical which therefore does not presume any private or ontological idea of the self in his conception of the political justice. Though the conception of the self is a moral concept, it is only limited to the political sphere. Rawls uses the Kantian self in his original position in order to import freedom and equality of the moral persons so that there is a public and weaker conception of the self and a sense of justice to everyone in the pluralistic society and political institutions despite each individual is allowed to hold a different set of values, conceptions of the self, religious and philosophical commitments in a well-ordered society (1980, p. 520). Rawls uses the Kantian self in order to construct and justify the principles of justice for a liberal society. He therefore separates the public self and the private self to only apply the public conception of the self-represented by the Kantian self in his justice as fairness. And this is set as the framework or common objective, not in the universal sense, but to establish the principle of right in a well-ordered society (1980, p. 570).

Rawls claims that justice as fairness is political and not metaphysical because the public conception of justice should be independent of any philosophical and religious claim or doctrine so that justice as fairness maintains universal truth or universal qualities of the persons (1985, p. 223). He therefore separates political morality from the private morality so that political conception of justice is mutually acceptable to all the parties and applicable to social, political and economic institutions (1985, p. 224). He tries to dissociate justice as fairness from the other liberal theory such as utilitarianism and perfectionism by avoiding commitment to any particular comprehensive moral doctrine. Pursuing a private moral doctrine or comprehensive ideal in a liberal society would result to incompatibility with the other conceptions of the good and reduce liberalism to another sectarian doctrine (1985, p. 245- 246). However, Rawls talks of the socio-political overlapping consensus or the intuitive shared ideas in order to realize a political conception of justice, but this public consensus is not referring or similar to a private or comprehensive moral doctrine or concept. The shared ideas or overlapping consensus are purely referred to social and political structure to establish a just constitutional regime in a just society, and not related to religious or philosophical or metaphysical or teleological idea. However, the person can still retain his private moral values or concept without getting into a clash with the overlapping consensus. The shared ideas or public moral concept in the social and political institutions are therefore the concept that all persons are free and morally equal beings. These essential



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attributes of man are inherent, universal and acceptable by all in order to live in the just society. Rawls claims that no particular or comprehensive ideal can meet the requirements of the pluralistic society where diversity is not simply one historical epoch but a permanent feature of the social and political culture unless we resort to oppressive use of state power which is not possible in the modern democracies (1987, p. 4).

4. Retention of the Metaphysical Self

Rawls explains his conception of the self from the political sense without abandoning certain aspects of the metaphysical self. Rawls sees his principles of justice incompatible with perfectionism and utilitarianism because the moral personality of the individual in his principles cannot be sacrificed for a greater good like in the utilitarianism (1985, p. 245- 246). To achieve particular good from the competing goods, he adopts the Kantian self that is inherently and morally free, equal and rational capable of choosing the two principles of justice that justify justice as fairness. This is how Rawls distances his theory from the social narrative, even when his self is taken from a political sense and not metaphysical, because person’s morality is prior and more important than the contingent attributes which can choose the system of justice to their advantage. Rawls also claims that a completely situated political conception of the self or choosing a single comprehensive moral conception even when accepted by a majority would not make right prior to the good which would therefore violate justice as fairness in the pluralistic society. Since implementing any comprehensive moral idea would cause an oppressive action of the state which is not democratic, the absence of commitment to any particular comprehensive idea is essential to liberalism as a political doctrine.

5. Conclusion

Rawls’s liberal idea of the self is explicated in his theory of justice as fairness. In response to his communitarian critics, Rawls claims that his conception of the self in A Theory of Justice is purely political and not metaphysical. He therefore tries to establish a political theory that encourages communal values from the individual standpoint to still retain his liberal belongingness. But in this approach, he encounters an ideological crossroad between the metaphysical and political conception of the self. Metaphysical conception of the self-advantages his theory of justice fairness and neutrality. Political conception of the self-advantages his theory of justice a situated value. What comes as a challenge to Rawls himself is his realization that a metaphysical idea of the self is too abstract to serve his theory of justice as fairness. Another challenge is when he tries to adopt a situated principle or political conception of the self, he has to sacrifice his principle of neutrality offered by the metaphysical conception. Rawls insists his theory of justice on the political aspect by reiterating that the intuitive ideas of morality of the self (Rawls’s metaphysical aspect) is also found in the western modern democratic culture. With this notion, he establishes an overlapping consensus by preserving the communal values while simultaneously retains his liberal values by allowing the individuals to have a private conception of the good. In this way, Rawls balances the private self and the public self or political self.

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