Social Primary Goods


Rawls' theory of justice concerns the scope of required equalities and permitted inequalities engendered by the basic social structure (BS) of a society: the distributive justice of "the way in which the major social institutions fit together into one system, and how they assign fundamental rights and duties and shape the division of advantages that arises through social cooperation." (PL 258). Within this BS individuals act so as to secure an actual allocation of determinate goods to each participant. Arguments concerning this subject requires an index of benefits and burdens that allows publicly accessible interpersonal comparisons of citizens’ well-being, in the relevant sense, among representative members of various social groups: "the idea is to find a practicable public basis of interpersonal comparisons in terms of objective features of citizens' social circumstances open to view." ((Rawls), 257).

Rawls’ answer is to focus on how the basic structure of society distributes Social primary goods. These arise out of institutions – that is, legal powers and immunities:

(a) First, the basic liberties as given by a list, for example: freedom of thought and liberty of conscience; freedom of association; and the freedom defined by the liberty and integrity of the person, as well as by the rule of law; and finally the political liberties; (b) Second, freedom of movement and choice of occupation against a background of diverse opportunities; (c) Third, powers and prerogatives of offices and positions of responsibility, particularly those in the main political and economic institutions; (d) Fourth, income and wealth; and (e) Finally, the social bases of self-respect. (CP 362-363)

This list is not claimed to be exhaustive; Rawls was e.g. prepared to include such goods as leisure (C253).

Each of Rawls' two principles of justice regulate different SPG: The first principle of liberty regulates the first set of SPGs; the Principle of fair equality of opportunity the second and third; and the difference principle addresses the fourth. The fifth - ‘social bases of self-respect’ - merits separate attention below.

Why select these particular goods?

Why does Rawls identify these goods as the appropriate ‘metric’ for principles of distributive justice for the basic structure of society)? Social primary goods satisfy several demanding conditions imposed on the metric for interpersonal comparisons suitable for principles to assess this particular subject of TJ. A) The metric must allow for interval comparisons to compare departures from equality. B) The metric must be under societal control by the BS. C) The metric should be publicly observable, not least to avoid hazards of self reporting mental states. D) The metric must accommodate the social fact that the BS shapes citizens’ malleable preferences profoundly, thus rendering preference satisfaction simpliciter unsatisfactory as a metric. E) The principles of justice for this particular subject must be justifiable under pluralism, that is: to citizens who have drastically different substantive conceptions of the good. Any
such ‘thick’ theory of the good is therefore unsuitable as a basis for identifying the metric.

In response to these conditions, Rawls argues that SPG are rational to want on the basis of a ‘thin’ theory of the good. They are rational to desire regardless of what else one wants, in order to develop and promote three ‘higher-order interests’ that even under pluralism count as bases for individuals’ claims on social institutions: First, a (‘reasonable’) interest in developing their capacity to be reasonable in the sense of having a sense of justice. Second, a (‘rational’) interest in developing their capacity to form, revise and pursue a conception of their good; and thirdly, a (‘rational’) interest in advancing this conception – i.e. actually realizing one’s determinate conception of the good (TJ 19, 46).

The SPG are claimed to be background conditions and/or all-purpose social means that contribute to secure and promote these three interests. SPG answer the question: what would a citizen who is engaged in political cooperation rationally desire from that cooperation – simply as such a cooperating citizen? For purposes of arguments about principles of distributive justice, individuals are thus assumed to prefer more social primary goods rather than less (TJ, 142). They are rights and benefits which the BS regulates; and they allow inter-personal comparison at least of an ordinal kind (person A has more of SPG 1 than does person B), and allows some interval comparisons (the gain in income and wealth for person A between distribution 1 and 2 is larger than the loss in this SPG for person B). Moreover, SPG satisfy important publicity concerns, since they provide a transparent way to identify the distributive pattern engendered by a basic social structure without creating moral costs eg in the form of incentives to misrepresent shares of such goods.

"... an explanation of why it is rational for the parties to assess principles of justice in terms of primary goods is needed: (i) The basic liberties (freedom of thought and liberty of conscience, etc.) are the background institutions necessary for the development and exercise of the capacity to decide upon and revise, and rationally to pursue, a conception of the good. Similarly, these liberties allow for the development and exercise of the sense of right and justice under political and social conditions that are free. (ii) Freedom of movement and free choice of occupation against a background of diverse opportunities are required for the pursuit of final ends as well as to give effect to a decision to revise and change them, if one so desires. (iii) Powers and prerogatives of offices of responsibility are needed to give scope to various self-governing and social capacities of the self. (iv) Income and wealth, understood broadly as they must be, are all-purpose means (having an exchange value) for achieving directly or indirectly a wide range of ends, whatever they happen to be. (v) The 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 and to be able to realize their highest-order interests and advance their ends with self-confidence." (CP 366)

Objections

Many critics have questioned Rawls’ focus on SPG, arguing instead for another ‘currency’ ((G. A. Cohen “On the currency of egalitarian justice”) or ‘metric.’ Why limit the SPG in this way? For instance, why not include more specifics about each
person’s conception of the good – and thus details about a wider range of requisite goods under societal control? Why not include ‘natural primary goods’ such as health, intelligence and imagination (TJ 54)? Three reasons follow from the specific features of the BS: Pluralism about conceptions of the good; the need for a publicly accessible metric, and the malleability of SPG by the BS that is the subject of TJ.

Some criticize Rawls for ‘fetishising’ goods, instead of selecting an index or space that focuses directly on what goods do for people ((Sen), 366). The claimed flaws of SPG are illustrated by individuals with handicaps, who are less efficient in converting such goods to well-being or quality of life e.g. in the form of capabilities ((Sen)), or a ‘basic minimum of truly human functioning’ ((Nussbaum)), or ‘midfare’ - what the goods do for people ((G. A. Cohen "Equality of what? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities").

Responses might pursue several strands: a) SPG are not meant to approximate what most individuals value, but are especially constructed for arguments about principles of distributive justice for the basic structure of a society characterized by pluralism about conceptions of the good. For instance, the SPG and the interests they further are specified not on the basis of any comprehensive conception of the good, (CP 456). b) Basic capabilities e.g. to nutrition and basic health care may be recognized even under pluralism (PL 183), and may take priority under circumstances of extreme scarcity. But SPG are intended as an index for the distribution of the remaining benefits and burdens in societies characterized by moderate affluence. c) SPGs, more so than alternatives such as capabilities (E.g. as acknowledged by (Nussbaum), 75), allow for interpersonal comparability, and even determination of equal levels, which is required for the subject matter of TJ concerning the distributive justice of the basic social structure ((Freeman), 220pp).

Social bases of self respect
Among the most perplexing issues concerning SPGs is the ‘most important primary good’ (TJ 440) ‘social bases of self respect’. Rawls explains this “in institutional terms supplemented by features of the public political culture such as the public recognition and acceptance of the principles of justice.” (CP 454). Some critics (eg (Young), (G.A. Cohen)) have been concerned that liberal theories of distributive justice cannot provide such social bases of self respect, insofar as such theories cannot secure that background cultures, institutional structures and individuals’ motivations are sufficiently free of racism, gendered injustice and other forms of domination.

In response, Rawls’ theory might firstly seem to avoid such charges insofar as its subject matter is precisely the institutions of the BS of society. However, critics have rebutted that important aspects, such as family roles and responsibilities are excluded ((Okin), (Bojer)). Secondly, TJ may be explicated to mean that this SPG is largely supervenient on the satisfaction of the other SPGs: this good is secured by a BS that publicly satisfies the two principles of justice.

What more might be required? One interpretation may draw on Rawls’ claim that “respect for persons is shown by treating them in ways that they can see to be justified.” (TJ 513) The social bases of self respect may thus consist in the existence of a public justification of the BS, in terms that express equal respect for all citizens. On
this view, Rawls’ Theory of Justice as Fairness sought to help provide precisely this primary social good.
Young, Iris Marion. *Intersecting voices: dilemmas of gender, political philosophy, and policy.* (Princeton, 1997).