

## The Possible and Impossible in the Political Constructivism of John Rawls

---

Nathanael V. Navarro

Independent Researcher | [nathannavarronvn@gmail.com](mailto:nathannavarronvn@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Laying bare that an idealized form of social regulation is at the core of John Rawls' theorizing is as crucial as knowing the limited role that the idea of truth plays in his brand of political constructivism. However, to clinch political matters without upholding a conception of the person and society is incongruous with Rawls' project. It is highlighted in this essay that the pre-theoretical commitments in Rawls' constructivism must not evaporate into thin air, that is, the fabric of this political process is threaded by interspersed recognition of fundamental yet reductive premises. I will argue that principles and theorizing flouted without the process of recalibration and a more inclusive deliberation is no less a gawking at our own errors any more than misconstruing the overlapping consensus as rinsed of all blunders and biases. This puzzlement is not diametrical to the issues of inconclusiveness in weighing the human values that are presented in the table of political settlement. Such arbitrariness only feeds the tendency to create a political stand-off, for it deliberately fails to resolve, and even recognize, the root causes of the problem and background assumptions. While Rawls undoubtedly places great faith in conjectural accounts of the background social condition under which the ideal of public reason can be determined as ineffectual or fruitful, there is an enormous possibility of a backfire on justification if Rawls fails to question how truth affects the prioritization of some human values over the others. Without this clarification, Rawls has placed most of his philosophical lines into the clutches of a delusory understanding of social and economic equality.

**Keywords:** *Political Constructivism, public reason, inclusive deliberation, conjectural accounts, human values*

---

### Introduction

When one thinks of the great divide between the possible and the impossible, one cannot but also think of rules that dictate what things one is permitted to do, and the ways recognized as out of bounds. Whenever one's freedom is being framed – in whatever way, shape, or form – one must demand public justification. Our political ground is not merely a platform dedicated exclusively to a few people who can unleash social machinations to manipulate the public in accordance with their whimsical tendencies and sporadic wishes. Such a problematization of power-sharing behooves every person to struggle to comprehend the participatory nature of political control in defeating the abusive operationalization of coercive mechanisms.

Contra Thomas Hobbes' theoretical architecture, John Rawls believes that reducing the choice of the political situation into two extreme cases leads to a grave misunderstanding of what political theory is all about. When the justification of social cohesion becomes entangled between the

vindication of absolutism and the reasons to eschew anarchy<sup>1</sup> – a situation that aggrandizes the role that apparent goods play in political affairs – eradicates the bearing of moral evaluation in political arrangements. According to Rawls, inserting psychological assumptions as the fundamental interests of individuals in joining a political contract can be so maddening to the point that the support for political institutions becomes limited to things close to their existential peculiarities.<sup>2</sup> While individuals have object-dependent desires that point to the personal states of affairs – as the reality of a self-focused account of human nature found in Hobbes’ theory – Rawls asserts that what makes reciprocal ties in political order possible are the principle-dependent desires. That is, despite the variation in how people assess the things that they recognize as good, the key to escaping arbitrariness in the various notions of what counts as good is an adjudicator whose decisions are not devoid of (and are aligned with) moral commitments to democratic values of fairness and reciprocity.<sup>3</sup> It is not enough that Hobbes recognized a stabilizing instrument to handily prevent seemingly endless warfare of every man, as Rawls asserted, because there is a need for the moral substance of political commitments to completely overcome mutual distrust<sup>4</sup> – still having a common moral compass to shape reasoning and decision-making, for it is not a result alone of misfortune in informational constraints that people make political mistakes.<sup>5</sup> This makes the idea of compliance possible beyond sheer changes in the configuration of political power, power bargaining, and the narrow concern to preserve one’s life as the ultimatum to tolerate the injustices made by a sovereign power.

If we have recognized that there is an avalanche of doubts that comes our way when the political domain tries to build a characterization of objectivity in the demands of the private sphere, how can we hope that enforcement of constraints in the limitation of freedom can be acceptable to everyone? To be sure, far from expecting plenitude to fulfill everyone’s wishes, the assurance of compliance from the citizenry is brought about by the observation of the coercive powers of the government. However, political management might still be under the guise of mutually beneficial norms to propel one’s self-interested ambition. This sends us to the depths and roundabout direction of our dilemma in escaping the topsy-turvy “state of anticipation” that pushes everyone to “*attack others first whenever circumstances seem propitious.*”<sup>6</sup> This speaks of the general truth about genuine social cohesion: “[p]olitical principles of justice are not then reduced to only nonmoral interests and principles of rational choice but instead incorporate some prior idea of what is right and reasonable.”<sup>7</sup> This points to a political

---

<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap University Press of the Harvard University Press, 2007), 84.

<sup>2</sup> According to Rawls, Thomas Hobbes layed down three fundamental interests in his philosophy that became the cornerstone of the unity of civil society: “*our interest first in preserving our life, then our interest in securing the good of those who are close to us (what Hobbes called ‘conjugal affection’), and finally, our interest in acquiring the means of a commodious life[.]*” See Rawls, *History of Political Philosophy*, 46

<sup>3</sup> Rawls, *History of Political Philosophy*, 87.

<sup>4</sup> Rawls, *History of Political Philosophy*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Rawls, *History of Political Philosophy*, 62.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Freeman, “Social Contract Approaches,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, ed. David Estlund (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 138.

<sup>7</sup> See Rawls, *History of Political Philosophy*, 136. According to Rawls, in order to make political society within the art of the possible, a social theory must set forth a “thin sense” of the conception of human rationality in practical affairs. It is in this general sense that one can determine the rationality of the parties in the original position argument devoid of their particularities and contingent descriptions that are unnecessary in choosing a political conception of justice. There are three counting principles that constitute the practical accounts of rationality – principles that escape controversial claims in the other domains of philosophizing and chosen under what Rawls would call “deliberative rationality.” First, Rawls claims that every person wants to take effective means for the realization of their consistent scheme of ends. Second, alternatives in a certain course of action are to be viewed in their likelihood. Lastly, as part of the counting principles,

conceptualization to avoid normativizing deeply embedded social predicaments and discovering the vital force that capacitates citizens to fairly advance their claims – which boils down to a forum that naggingly asks whether participants themselves are conducting their protestations rightfully so. Rawls would enigmatically accentuate a sense of political hope to realize “*that the limits of the possible are not given by the actual, for we can to a greater or lesser extent change political and social institutions and much else. Hence[,] we have to rely on conjecture and speculation, arguing as best [as] we can that the social world we envision is feasible and might actually exist, if not now then at some future time under happier circumstances.*”<sup>8</sup> We are not merely under the mercy of circumstantial accidents in our lives, for not everything is beyond our control.

No matter how commendable this culture of free-wheeling inquiry, we must not exhaustively indulge ourselves in wishful thinking since we are constrained by the limitations of the material conditions that ascertain whether we can practically safeguard our freedom to fight for social justice and the very fact that our being conscious of political maladies is shaped by our realistic positionality, such as our educational status, biological development vis-à-vis our basic human needs, income-generating work, level of convenience to experience the fullness of recreation, social interaction, among others. Rawls explicitly admits that, for the most part, he is spelling out idealized solutions – whether concerning the priority problems about human freedom or basic distributive justice – based on the assumption that the citizens of a well-ordered democratic society have attained a favorable condition<sup>9</sup> to strictly comply with the rules.<sup>10</sup> It is no less true, however, that this idealized conception can be far removed from the unruly political reality that we are living in. If such is the case in Rawls’ theorizing, then, an objection can be cogently raised about its practical difficulty of assimilation.

In defense of Rawls, Matthew Adams believes that “[t]he fact that such an assumption is not realistic is unproblematic: justice[,] after all[,] need not reflect how actual people will[,] in fact[,] behave – rather it is a normative standard that identifies how they should behave and that allows us to judge appropriately actual people’s noncompliance with the demands of justice.”<sup>11</sup> Such requirements can become evaluative criteria to assess the social injustices that people hardly realize. This evaluative tool can be a smack in the face of those who guard the status quo as a subterfuge so that citizens remain on the surface of the problem. To analogize, the

---

Rawls believes that people, in general, are rationalizing their limited means to reach as many as possible of what they find to be significant purposes – a consideration of feasibility under the inclusiveness of choices. Thus, this establishes the crucial bedrock of the original position argument since it reveals that while people have relative commitments and beliefs in their lives, a rational plan of life bespeaks the fact that people will constantly be equally interested in what they find as valuable in each period of their lives; that is, in sketching rational plans, prudence is always there to guide people to be concerned with future good that cannot be discounted by the intensity of desires at present. Thus, even in the multitudinous motivations, ambitions, careers, and values in the society, Rawls is of the opinion that the fundamental elements of the rational plan of life will always remain to be of paramount importance in the pursuit of an appropriate political conception of justice in the original position argument. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 5<sup>th</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 407-424.

<sup>8</sup> John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>9</sup> In defending the unity of material sufficiency in economizing necessary resources of the society, and the values pertaining to human freedom, Rawls once pointed out: “*I have supposed that if the persons in the original position know that their basic liberties can be effectively exercised, they will not exchange a lesser liberty for greater economic advantages. It is only when social conditions do not allow the full establishment of these rights that one can acknowledge their restriction. The equal liberties can be denied only when it is necessary to change the quality of civilization so that[,] in due course[,] everyone can enjoy these freedoms. The effective realization of all these liberties in a well-ordered society is the long-run tendency of the two principles and rules of priority when they are consistently followed under reasonably favorable conditions.*” See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999), 475.

<sup>10</sup> Rawls, *Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, 474-475.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Adams, “The Value of Ideal Theory,” in *John Rawls: Debating the Major Questions*, eds. Jon Mandle and Sarah Roberts-Cady (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 79.

dancer is not simply concerned as to whether people will give a standing ovation and glaring accolade from the huge crowd, the dancer is primarily attentive to one's every step being exactly right as shaped during rehearsals and training by following the model/s. Perhaps, the audience was not simply in the condition to give a generous amount of clapping (e.g., being hungry, drowsy, or suffering from eyestrain). Rawls himself highlighted that political theory must set itself apart from the empirical conditioning of ordinary politics that mainly follows the current configuration of power-sharing and the formation of intense desires without any moral qualification.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Rawls' project being clear about its point of departure found in ideal circumstances of political justice – that makes it a critical instrument to combat the manipulative arsenal of political leaders in advancing their self-interested ambitions and to escape the contingencies in addressing social injustices – Rawls also believes that Political Philosophy must be left alone from other controversial branches of Philosophy itself. Not only that Rawls claims that it is epistemologically difficult to rely on comprehensive outlooks to give birth to a political criterion of justice, but he also claims that the democratic spirit of social participation must be clear about its commitment to uphold the duty of civility – that which makes the comprehensiveness of any outlook unbridled in sallying forth ideas which are detrimental to private lifeways.<sup>13</sup> What Rawls has in mind in placing the idea of political correctness is the right amount of latitude for the more private sphere to decide independently, even if the political domain recognizes that there are incommensurable claims about human values and other moral issues. To riddle this point, one may refer to this passage regarding how Rawls described a practical necessity in the value of political toleration:

Some may think that to secure stable social unity in a constitutional regime by looking for an overlapping consensus detaches political philosophy from philosophy and makes it into politics. Yes and no: ***the politician, we say, looks to the next election, the statesman to the next generation, and philosophy to the indefinite future. Philosophy sees the political world as an ongoing system of cooperation over time, in perpetuity practically speaking. Political philosophy is related to politics because it must be concerned, as moral philosophy need not be, with practical political possibilities.*** This has led us to outline, for example, how it is possible for the deep divisions present in a pluralistic society to be reconciled through a political conception of justice that gradually[,] over generations[,] becomes the focus of an overlapping consensus. ***Moreover, this concern with practical possibility compels political philosophy to consider fundamental institutional questions and the assumptions of a reasonable moral psychology.***<sup>14</sup>

Driven by this context, it is not to be considered counterfactual to ask the question: “If there is a limitation on how we identify who are we up against, how do we decide who will be excluded politically?” But all our examinations are unavailing if we do not let it sink into our minds that there is a need for a political understanding at which the authority must also be referencing one's decision-making process. Even the declaration of comprehensiveness in one's ideas and beliefs forwarded in a public political forum can be a relentless garbage-in-garbage-out scenario have we not acknowledged the fact that a reason for a common good is not to devolve into a sobriquet of “public reason” whereby it is easily distorted by the prevalent perception of the public. Rawls is of the opinion that a bothersome weighing of all the observable facts in a social dilemma will not make us off the hook; according to Rawls, “[w]hat is wanted is a framework of reasoning within which to identify the facts that are relevant

<sup>12</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 22-33.

<sup>13</sup> John Rawls, “Commonweal Interview with John Rawls,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4th Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 617-618.

<sup>14</sup> John Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4th Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 447. Emphasis added.

*from the appropriate point of view and to determine their weight as reasons.*"<sup>15</sup> Such a determination of relevance, however, heightens the possibility of simplifying the all-too-disarrayed evaluation of social problems which only perpetuates value-infested deliberation to determine which is which.

Rawls argued that the litmus test in knowing whether the public reason has reached its practical political purpose is to look at the indicators that "*have cleared our view and made our considered convictions more coherent; if [those have] narrowed the gap between the conscientious convictions of those who accept the basic ideas of a constitutional regime[.]*"<sup>16</sup> A political justification entails a political conception in which political authority is also subsumed and whose analysis of social problems must be coherently shaped by the relevant facts as identified by the political conception of justice. Generating an independent basis for public reason is to be recognized as at odds with other comprehensive views within a liberal pluralistic society. This has been the first working assumption in Micah Schwartzman's defense of Rawls' ideal of public reason under conjectural accounts.<sup>17</sup> However, the hopes of finding conjectural support for a political conception of justice can be seen as entirely contingent on political arrangements; and it bears the burden of circularity in precluding the right influence of the state to shape doctrines and being complacent towards social injustices under the artifice of respect. Admittedly, Schwartzman believes that the issues of indeterminacy and inconclusiveness inevitably lead to arbitrariness – it endangers the value of having a benchmark to gauge the attainment of social justice in all comprehensive outlooks in a society. Magnifying the vacillation of Micah Schwartzman amidst his support of Rawls' theorizing can catapult us to more thought-provoking questions:

One might object that if we do not engage [in] racist doctrines, or doctrines otherwise bent on domination, there is no purpose in reasoning from conjecture. After all, the need for conjecture arises because some citizens believe that they are justified in coercing others to act according to values that cannot be publicly justified. What else can this be but an attempt to dominate others through the illegitimate imposition of a particular comprehensive doctrine? We may decide not to engage such doctrines, but then what is there to conjecture about? ***To answer this question, it may help to draw a distinction between doctrines that are completely or fundamentally unreasonable and doctrines that contain unreasonable elements.***<sup>18</sup>

Unsurprisingly, one might be incommoded to simply analogize (as was mentioned elsewhere in this article) the dilemma at hand to the issues concerning a dancer following a model proper to its artful compliance to rules. Such a reduction in cases is by no means totally realistic nor completely useful in explaining the existence of social injustices. What is instructive, however, is that political understanding does not come solely by sitting on a throne overlooking the hardships of the subjects. Social transformation is, indeed, beset by the problems of the truthfulness of a political conception and its efficacy in resolving the practical concerns of bringing unification despite the diversity of the citizens. Schwartzman reminds us that it is "*better to acknowledge that some doctrines cannot justify the values of public reason than to cast aspersion on the larger project of justifying a commitment to liberal principles.*"<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it is our hope to answer if Rawls inserted contradictory elements in his project, or whether he managed to strike a balance between the idealization of a political conception of justice to unify a pluralistic society and a subsidiary step in making sure that all comprehensive viewpoints are deeply connected in a political conception of justice in their own ways. If we find out that the answer is the former,

<sup>15</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Printing (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 156.

<sup>17</sup> Micah Schwartzman, "The Ethics of Reasoning from Conjecture," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 9 (2012): 522, doi:10.1163/174552412x628931.

<sup>18</sup> Schwartzman, "Reasoning from Conjecture," 543.

<sup>19</sup> Schwartzman, "Reasoning from Conjecture," 542.

then, Rawls' theory borders on the ideological landscape in favoring the present structure that sways political struggles – which profoundly militates against his ideal of political fairness. But if Rawls has been successful in making possible what seems to be impossible through his own political constructivism, he is still answerable to the details of his own account, that is, argumentatively ruling out the expostulations that his own agenda is made out of philosophical quirks. If Rawls categorically claims that his theory is not concretized out of vacuous thinking, how did he justify the moral substance of *Justice as Fairness* that can be juiced out to energize the political praxis of engaging decision-making worked out for social justice? What are the contradictions that slipped off from Rawls' political ambition with which he contrasted and constructed his chosen demands for the possibility of political justice?

### The Nature of Political Justification According to Rawls

It is not simply a put-down assertion to question the deep assumptions that a certain theory holds. Onora O'Neill sharply reminds us that the construction of ethical principles is not to be considered absolutely detached from the complexity of contexts. As O'Neill puts it: "*Ways of reasoning that assume that 'the facts' of human situations can be uncontroversially stated are likely to be dominated by established and often by establishment views. Without a critical account of the selection of minor premises, ethical reasoning may avoid formalism only to become hostage to local ideology.*"<sup>20</sup> Formulating principles is not simply placing all categories of thought in the phenomena themselves, which are to embellish too repugnant an ingredient to make psychological strains too repulsive to social transformation – as a capacity to highlight human rationality that entails deliberative exercises.<sup>21</sup> A cut-and-dried political equation must give way to the assessment of principles that go beyond the simplistic enumeration of facts – it creates judgments that appeal not merely to algorithmic pretenses of comprehensive decision-making, but to understand the selection of one's context over another description of events. In this vein of thought, Schwartzman also warned that even if conjectures can be used to bring about the close ties between comprehensive doctrines and a political conception of justice, the otherwise political arrangement that might be chosen under another set of values is not dispelled in a principled form of objection.<sup>22</sup>

The impasse about the correctness or acceptability of authoritative judgment in the selection of relevant facts for the whole shebang of political constructivism can be mollified by pointing out that we are on the offensive side of a certain set of values. Thus, the compunction is to be located in knowing whether Rawls takes truth to be the basis of public reason or simply calls for a clarification of consensus-generating instruments – in this case, the conjectures. While Schwartzman asserts the need to buttress the leverages of conjectures to ensure the relatability of thriving comprehensive doctrines to a chosen political conception of justice,<sup>23</sup> he also commented that what will make or break an overlapping consensus, traced from Rawls' demands, is in recognizing that the citizens "*reasoning from conjectures is sincere and non-manipulative if, and only if, conjectures (i) disclose that they do not believe the premises from which they argue, and (ii) disclose whether they believe their arguments are justifiable from within the comprehensive views of their intended audience.*"<sup>24</sup> Schwartzman argued that setting out the adhesion of comprehensive views to a political conception of justice is fundamental to promoting the ideal of public reason as

---

<sup>20</sup> Onora O'Neill, "Abstraction, Idealization, and Ideology in Ethics," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Series 22* (September 1987): 65. doi:10.1017/s1358246100003660.

<sup>21</sup> O'Neill, "Ideology in Ethics", 62.

<sup>22</sup> Schwartzman, "Reasoning from Conjecture," 539.

<sup>23</sup> Schwartzman, "Reasoning from Conjecture," 540.

<sup>24</sup> Schwartzman, "Reasoning from Conjecture," 531.

Rawls did. The ideal of public reason, according to Rawls, is based on a moral duty of articulating one's "*fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable.*"<sup>25</sup> However, it only announces a wide array of political reasonableness from which one can choose. It seems that this suggestion from Rawls is, to a massive degree, circling back to conceding generously that even public reason itself cannot resolve its own political stand-off in foreclosing the public deliberation to a given ring of public values. Textual support for this particular interpretation of Rawls can be drawn:

Whether public reason can settle all, or almost all, political questions by a reasonable ordering of political values cannot be decided in the abstract independent of actual cases. We need such cases carefully spelled out to clarify how we should view them. For how to think about a kind of case depends not on general considerations alone but on our formulating relevant political values we may not have imagined before we reflect about particular instances. Public reason may also seem too restrictive because it might seem to settle questions in advance. However, it does not, as such, determine or settle particular questions of law or policy. Rather, it specifies the public reasons in terms of which such questions are to be politically decided.<sup>26</sup>

Such a crux of public reason carried by the citizens while engaging in the deliberative praxis of democracy can bring ennui to every deliberator who might regard one another as sanctimoniously defending the abstract values of freedom and equality. What is worth reminding ourselves of is the importance that principles contribute to uncovering the shared fund of understanding in making the action-guiding elements across the board fathomable. This is a potential to counter absolute relativism that encloses society in tight bubbles of beliefs, if not in engaging in a warlike form of triumphalistic imposition of value-laden political positions.<sup>27</sup> The assumptive roots in Rawls' justification of the elements which he surrounds himself with in advancing the ideal-based conception of political justice are nothing new. Consider, for example, how social primary goods<sup>28</sup> have been established as all-purpose means of safeguarding political autonomy and other things that people may want in a more private sense. Two conjectures have been raised by Rawls to defend the possibility and effectiveness of social primary goods in maintaining freedom and equality: first, it is sociologically beneficial since these kinds of goods occupy a higher level of significance in effectively and meekly resolving institutional forms of injustice; second, these goods are assumed to be psychologically operative in shaping the content and intensity of human motivations that spring from insecurity and anxiety that make people tendentious to the unconscionable acquisition of wealth and power.<sup>29</sup>

In admitting that moral elements and other political resources appear to be ever-changing in their acceptability, one may ask if this is not a slippery slope to the helter-skelter of absolute cultural relativism. This approach is in contradistinction to how the causal connectives interpreted by human

---

<sup>25</sup> John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4<sup>th</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 547. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, liii.

<sup>27</sup> O'Neill, "Abstraction, Idealization, and Ideology in Ethics," 67.

<sup>28</sup> Rawls believes that social primary goods are formed under a so-called ideal condition to help navigate political arrangement in a non-arbitrary way. This set of goods include basic rights and liberties, opportunities, freedom of movement and choice of occupation, positions of office, equality of opportunities to politically participate, a sufficient amount of wealth to practice and realize a particular end, and social bases of self-respect. The reasonable (the more public) and rational (the more private) interests of the people, according to Rawls, fundamentally necessitate sufficient government support of the primary goods. See John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2001), 57-58.

<sup>29</sup> John Rawls, "Fairness to Goodness," in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4<sup>th</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 276-277.

perception can be directly used as epistemic buttressing in the expansion of knowledge frontiers in the observable ground of physical sciences.<sup>30</sup> This avoids conflating the meaning of facts found in concrete judgments in the physical sciences, and what are normatively or philosophically selected as relevant facts in ethical disquisitions. Idealization in political justification does not fully spring from the empirical ordering of generalization and systemic treatment of observable data as human beings are, by nature, complex and are not simply objects that can be manipulated to arrive at the truth of the matter or to be experimented by.<sup>31</sup> Of capital importance, nevertheless, is to take a closer look at how Rawls defined political justification:

[J]ustification is [an] argument addressed to those who disagree with us, or to ourselves when we are of two minds. It presumes a clash of views between persons or within one person, and seeks to convince others, or ourselves, of the reasonableness of the principles upon which our claims and judgments are founded. Being designed to reconcile by reason, justification proceeds from what all parties to the discussion hold in common. Ideally, to justify a conception of justice to someone is to give him a proof of its principles from premises that we both accept, these principles having in turn consequences that match our considered judgments. Thus[,] mere proof is not justification. A proof simply displays logical relations between propositions. But proofs become justification once the starting points are mutually recognized, or the conclusions so comprehensive and compelling as to persuade us of the soundness of the conception expressed by their premises. It is perfectly proper, then, that the argument for the principles of justice should proceed from some consensus. This is the nature of justification.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding, if one assumes an unbridgeable rift between the perceptive faculties of citizens and the elements selected as relevant facts for politico-ethical deliberations, one ignores the progress of concretizing the values of equality and liberty. For instance, it is not only because the construction of schools made a furor that one takes a stand to establish educational centers to support the love for learning and inquiry of children in a democratic country. We know for a fact that our abstract cause to champion educational development must be coupled with an environment conducive to learning. In the same way, the debilitating health of the poor can be an obstacle to how they can be empowered to work – just as we realized that from whatever class we belong, hunger, poor eyesight, depression, and physical fatigue could hardly give us the confidence that we worked in the most optimal sense that we could have been. It is to be expected that budgetary allocation can be a tremendous and sophisticated job that the government cannot elide as it endeavors to be the most economical and resourceful power despite the many factors it has to consider. But to be on the goldilocks of extravagance and penny-pinching can only take its form when we notice the problems and we do what we must as a good and responsible citizenry. One should not be desensitized, so to speak, to the forces that block social progress.

---

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Little, “Reflective Equilibrium and Justification,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 378-379, doi:10.1111/j.2041-6962.1984.tb00354.x.

<sup>31</sup> This is similar to how Frederic G. Reamer argued that the discovery of knowledge in the human sciences has to be given ample space for ethical intervention. There are good reasons, however speculative these may appear, not to carry out experimental practices in order to give normative value to the context of research itself and not to dehumanize an inquiry and various scholarly approaches with the aim to understand – albeit not completely – the complexity of humanity. In this sense, the puzzlement amidst the scholarly rigor must be accompanied by the understanding that human values cannot be simply reduced to the objectification of smaller units in a completely tangible reality. As Reamer gave a convincing example: “No one would ever propose that we randomly assign children to abusive and nonabusive settings to investigate the causal effect of abuse.” See Frederic G. Reamer, *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 128.

<sup>32</sup> Rawls, *Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, 508-509.

By letting the controversial energies in political affairs subside and simply assuming an easy-way-out tunnel to all the disagreements, Rawls gestures on the relevance of homogeneity in the political identity of the citizens.<sup>33</sup> Fuelled by much frustration, Brendan Sweetman astutely assessed Rawls' project as being torn by its contradictory routes to progressive social inclusion. While Rawls firmly believes that there is a need for a space to respect basic human liberties and that it is politically impossible to obtain a one-size-fits-all category of social evaluation to test various conceptions of the good life in which we only have to rely on "*fundamental political ideas viewed as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society*["<sup>34</sup> Rawls is not bothered at all that the network of values that was constrained to what was believed to be politically reasonable has made citizens think that they are simply spiders trapped in the very cobweb of their social judgment without having the capacity to use their political autonomy and directly engage in the deep sources of questions that, at first glance, can be seen to be disentangled in the tightrope of political arrangement. "[T]here is no agreement on what these ideas are," as Sweetman critically noted in order not to sidestep the paradoxical nub of the dilemma, "*so any proposed set of them will always remain controversial and will have to be dogmatically imposed on those who do not accept them. Even if there [was an] agreement, there would still be no agreement about the particular understanding, range, and application of a value.*"<sup>35</sup>

It may be considered that Rawls imbibed a developmental fulcrum to counter the threats of societal lethargy to widen the horizons of understanding. To hold this in mind, as Alexander Kaufman pointed out, is to see that "*while deliberations begin with a set of fundamental ideas, the members are not limited to arguments grounded in this set, nor are they limited to appeals to any canonical account of the core ideas of the political culture.*"<sup>36</sup> A strong case that can explain how Kaufman has ineptly shielded Rawls from critics is the contradiction when Rawls asserted the priority of the first principle of justice pertaining to basic liberties in the constitutional essentials by saying "*that whether the aims of the principles covering social and economic inequalities are realized is far more difficult to ascertain. These matters are nearly always open to wide differences of reasonable opinion; they rest on complicated inferences and intuitive judgments that require us to assess complex social and economic information about topics poorly understood*["<sup>37</sup> despite the fact that Rawls himself strongly suggested that understanding the needs of the citizens cannot in any time be taken for granted to institute a social order of inherent stability and not only led by vicious coercion.<sup>38</sup> Are we, in this case, not falling victim to the stringent compartmentalization of issues and allowing ourselves to be pawns jockeyed by a social power beyond our deciphering? To take this crucial dilemma out of sight is no less an abetting of the sheer formality of basic human liberties and fooling ourselves that society is not deficient in vital materials "[b]y including the guarantee of fair value for the political liberties in the first principle of justice [since] one makes sure that the fair political process is open to everyone on the basis of rough equality."<sup>39</sup>

Can we simply accept this "rough idea of political equality" without necessarily holding the view that discussions on economic safety nets, from whatever range of intensity in dissension, is a steppingstone that cannot be sidetracked to optimize the equality of opportunity in political

<sup>33</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 152.

<sup>34</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 223.

<sup>35</sup> Brendan Sweetman, *Why Politics Needs Religion: The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Square* (United States of America: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 172

<sup>36</sup> Alexander Kaufman, "Rawls's Practical Conception of Justice: Opinion, Tradition, and Objectivity in Political Liberalism," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 3 (2006): 34, doi:10.1177/1740468106063281.

<sup>37</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 229.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 179.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Percy B. Lehning, "The Ideas of Public Reason: Can It Fulfill Its Task? A Reply to Catherine Audard," *Ratio Juris* 8 (March 1995): 36.

discussions? When Rawls stresses the idea that we are completely responsible in our decision-making, he assumes that political assistance is limited to circumstances in which the citizens improve themselves because of their normal functioning bodies that alleviate the effects of inequalities in social stratification, natural endowments, and other accidental events.<sup>40</sup> Rawls does not primarily recognize (or at least he does not want to be involved with it) that life is loaded with elements beyond our own making as we are also shaped by various external factors. As Norman Daniels hypothetically claimed, “*we might reduce the burden for bad health on those whose ethnic backgrounds led to tastes for fatty food, or might find biopsychological markers for [‘risk takers’] who thus form a type that should not be held as responsible for their high-risk behavior.*”<sup>41</sup> If the world is to be serious about issues of mental health, the right move is for the scientific community to study the complexity and not to wear another form of uniformitarianism by assuming that the political culture of liberal democracies is not interested in these endeavors. Rawls reduced this difficulty in a facile idea of the fair value of political liberties based on an application of rules in a debate not to restrict everyone but to regulate the flow of the discussion because freedom of speech becomes futile whenever we try to put the essential part of it as simply having the unlimited right to utter words; this highlights the fact of limitation in which not everyone can speak at the same time and place for conflicting ends.<sup>42</sup> While Rawls seems commendable in this respect, he would acknowledge the inevitability of equally strong forces of several human values that eventually result in refractory conflicts. At best, Rawls encourages the citizens to guarantee that “*the danger to liberty from the marginal loss in control over those holding political power just balances the security of liberty gained by the greater use of constitutional devices. [...] Ideally[,] these conflicts will not occur and it should be possible, **under favorable conditions anyway**, to find a constitutional procedure that allows a sufficient scope for the value of participation without jeopardizing the other liberties.*”<sup>43</sup> But does the determination of “favorable conditions” necessarily point to a political situation of economic sufficiency where political freedoms can effectively bear the fruits of equal footing in political participation?

### Socio-Economic Predicaments Facing the Possible and Impossible

In Rawls’ project, burdensome political unfairness legitimizes exclusion from governmental support. For example, one may ask, “*Are the least advantaged, then, those who live on welfare and surf all day off Malibu?*” – to which Rawls would reply: “*Those who do no work have eight extra hours of leisure and we count those eight extra hours as equivalent to the index of the least advantaged who do work a standard day.*”<sup>44</sup> While citizens may vary on what benchmark can be used to ensure their basic needs, Rawls reminded us that citizens “*must look to the society in question. But that does not mean that the constitutional essential itself is not perfectly clear: it is what is required to give due weight to the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation between free and equal citizens.*”<sup>45</sup> These issues, therefore, fascinate a critical reader about the contradictory elements that oscillate in Rawls’ project. Even if citizens find some issues too controversial, this cannot be a fundamental ground to exclude them from political deliberation. Why is the social minimum included in constitutional essentials while the difference principle is not – yet these are both bound to create extensive political disagreements?<sup>46</sup> This can be juxtaposed to Rawls’ later project in which the abstract

<sup>40</sup> Rawls, *Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Norman Daniels, “Rawls’s Complex Egalitarianism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 354.

<sup>42</sup> Rawls, *Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Rawls, *Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, 202. Emphasis applied.

<sup>44</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 179. Also see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 182.

<sup>45</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 166.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 229-230. If the first principle of justice is in place, Rawls believes that the difference principle shall be the next political move of the government. The difference principle is divided into two

idea of equality in social relations can be favored at the highest level depending on the interpretation of the public political culture itself, which, in turn, extracts “[t]he concept of the appropriate minimum [as] not given by the basic needs of human nature taken psychologically (or biologically) apart from any particular social world.”<sup>47</sup> This contradicts Rawls’ early declarations that in harmonizing social interests by the determination of a social minimum, one cannot intuitionistically put forward its adjustment as it catches the volatility of social circumstances.<sup>48</sup> Rawls fears that this leads to the intractable social calculation of utilitarian arguments that puts in a precarious situation the least-advantaged members of the society who cannot join the intellectual discourse. However, a stark contradiction arises when one critically juxtaposes the assumption of Rawls that socioeconomic inequalities may not disrupt the preservation of self-respect with what he said that a conception of justice “*should publicly express men’s respect for one another.*”<sup>49</sup> This guarantees a sense of their own worth, as the establishment of equal liberty and the application of the difference principle are destined to achieve. Indeed, Rawls himself admitted that there is a connection between self-respect and the problems brought about by the variance in socioeconomic standing. But how come Rawls acknowledged the circumstances of justice that give rise to political questions but seems to present political and economic discourse as something outside the disagreeable edges?

In establishing deep commitments in a liberal society, Rawls categorically permits in the wide view of the public reason the appeal to non-public reasons, with a proviso that, in due course, public reasons will be offered for the political judgment raised as regards the matters of basic distributive justice and constitutional essentials.<sup>50</sup> This wide view of public reason, however, can be abused by a majority to appear with the intention to defend political positions anchored on public reason, yet they are like pirates hijacking the ship to take it all the way to their very particularistic intentions. One may well argue that to allay these worries, it is cogent to create a counterfactual motivational requirement in presenting a political stance solely by invoking political values as the content of public reason itself. In this fashion, the assumed wide view of public reason will not dissipate to the hypocrisy of citizens whose articulation has a hidden pernicious agenda – as easily inserted due to the complexity of abstract and fluid weighing of human values. The pivotal point, as David Reidy asserted, is not whether this can build the duplicitous political character of citizens, but “*were liberal public reason not autonomous and complete with respect to most, if not all, fundamental political issues, neither the ideal of public reason nor its sincerity [...] would figure so prominently in the liberal democratic ideal of citizenship, and there would be little need to worry about hypocrisy in the voting booth or about citizens or officials otherwise acting in bad faith in the political domain.*”<sup>51</sup> In the first place, what is the real score of being inclusive of non-political values and non-public reasons when, in the end, public reason will prevail in assessing contending political claims? But, as Rawls admitted, political values might only answer “*nearly all*”<sup>52</sup> political cases that call for public

---

sections. The first part should be prioritized to the second part – as the former refers to the equality of opportunity that should be strictly maintained in all offices; while the latter pertains to the most optimal share and use of resources that the least-advantaged members of the society (lowest-paid and/or most unskilled workers) should have compared to any political arrangement. Also see Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 42-48.

<sup>47</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 316-320. Rawls strongly believes that “[t]he fact that we have a compelling desire in such cases [of fundamental political questions] does not argue for the propriety of its satisfaction **any more than the strength of a conviction argues for its truth.**” Also see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 190. Emphasis applied.

<sup>49</sup> See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 179. Also see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 318; 326.

<sup>50</sup> Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” 591-594.

<sup>51</sup> David Reidy, “Rawls’s Wide View of Public Reason: Not Wide Enough,” *Res Publica* 6 (2000): 63, doi:10.1023/a:1009628330727.

<sup>52</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 225.

deliberation. It is a matter of avoiding inconclusiveness as well in which public reason alone lacks a rational instrument to formulate an ordering of values. It is not far-fetched to think that if there is no common currency in the modes of reasoning, justification of political position comes from non-public criteria.<sup>53</sup> But this only creates a circuitous trajectory in avoiding intuitionistic judgments that give a prominent place to “*capacities unguided by constructive and recognizably ethical criteria*” because, as Rawls himself admitted, “[i]f we cannot explain how these weights are to be determined by reasonable ethical criteria, the means of rational discussion have come to an end.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Michael Baur traced this problem as the actualization of Rawls’ idea of public reason has been torn apart by the subjective and objective sense of defining reasonableness. The only way that Baur sees Rawls withstand these objections is to emphasize that public reason pertains not to a particular stock of opinion but to an imperative that provides a generic ingredient to make mutual suspicion thriving in which “*there is something self-confirming or self-validating about any accusation, within the context of actual disagreement about public reason itself that some other citizen has violated the requirements*” which, as Baur writes, “*can be grounded in the simple fact of disagreement between citizens about the nature and requirements of public reason itself.*”<sup>55</sup> This is a great misunderstanding since Rawls is deeply banking on the public political culture of democratic societies and their widely held political values. It only underlines the question of who gets to decide when a stand-off arises, for even if no one bothers to be suspicious or apprehensive about the protestations in favor of bringing back slavery,<sup>56</sup> for instance, it is not to be regarded as unsound to object to it as a coincidental moment of commonality in accepting immoral political recommendations – highlighting that Rawls’ project is a victim of self-referentiality which is afraid to face and embrace truth from controversial political issues.

Thomas Nagel once posited that it is needed to set out a political arrangement that can be justified inherently as citizens can psychologically abide by the terms of human affairs without sacrificing moral quality and practical sustainability. “*We should regard,*” Nagel explains, “*both of the elements that create the dilemma as morally valid and take this as a call for the exercise of political, social, and*

---

<sup>53</sup> However, one must also note that despite the fact that both the constitutional essentials and matters of basic distributive justice is under the ambit of political values, Rawls allowed the legislative bodies “[t]o resolve these more particular and detailed issues [on economic predicaments because] *it is often more reasonable to go beyond the political conception and the values its principles express, and to invoke nonpolitical values that such a view does not include.*” See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 230. Emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 40-41.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Baur, “On Actualization of Public Reason,” *Fordham Law Review* 72 (2004): 2173, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol72/iss5/33/>. At some point, Rawls would seem to push for the more subjective criterion in realizing the institutionalization of public reason when he said that “*public reason does not ask us to accept the very same principles of justice, but rather to conduct our fundamental discussions in terms of what we regard as a political conception. We should sincerely think that our view of the matter is based on political values everyone can reasonably be expected to endorse [...]. A vote can be held on a fundamental question as on any other; and if the question is debated by appeal to political values and citizens vote their sincere opinion, the ideal is sustained.*” See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 241. Emphasis applied.

On the other hand, Rawls would seem to expand political understanding by relying on a more objective and external referencing to the whole citizenry: “*The criterion of reciprocity requires that when those terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated and manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position.*” See Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” 578.

<sup>56</sup> Rawls stated that “[t]here are facts about justice that may be discovered, as there are possibilities before anyone goes through a construction, say the possibilities that certain principles would be agreed to in the original position. Similarly, there are no possibilities in other cases; for example, there is no possibility that a principle allowing slavery would be agreed to. That is a fact related to the injustice of slavery.” Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 125.

*psychological imagination.*”<sup>57</sup> But, once more, we have crossed paths with the worry that this would be impossible without having been perturbed to know the truth of the matter. If expectations and proposals for declaring communal ambition must not be accepted far from the suspecting minds of the citizens – to ensure the right amount of human motivation and not to eradicate the moral value of the rule itself – how can we simply surrender all our hesitations to an economic framework that Rawls believes should be laid down to realistically resolve problems on justice without expecting such a public firestorm to be located in the very place of controversial ideas?

In building a psychological yet political touchstone, Rawls believes that valuing self-respect can dissolve extreme apathy and divisive cynicism.<sup>58</sup> This sense of fulfillment in the political sphere gives harmony to the larger union of smaller social unions (to use Rawlsian parlance). Rawls would claim that because the priority of liberty is secured, citizens need not be perturbed by the inequalities in social arrangements since due to so-called political fairness, “*social and economic differences between the various sectors of society, the non-comparing groups as we may think of them, are not likely to generate animosity, the hardships arising from political and civic inequality, and from cultural and ethnic discrimination, cannot be easily accepted.*”<sup>59</sup> In fairness to Rawls, it is rather politically welcome to say that there is no need to coerce everyone to uphold a one-size-fits-all standard for wealth since some people want to live in austerity and some to more profitable activities. Secured in this social condition is the freedom to choose an occupation and to let society grow in their more private dealings that, in turn, builds confidence in sociality and helps to boost social production without upsetting social harmony. Despite this, the so-called “self-respect” gives a map of the problematic route, especially in connection to social stability. It is truly difficult to delineate the issues of socio-economic inequalities with the issues of self-respect and even with the material means to safeguard the liberty of conscience. This has been problematic in neglecting the cause of poverty for the sake of the priority of basic liberties, which only reveals that “*the appropriate expectation in applying the difference principle is that of the [long-term] prospects of the least favored extending over future generations.*”<sup>60</sup> It is as if the least advantaged is to be mercifully grateful for simply being inserted into a well-ordered society to thrive. This interpretation also imposes a speculative account of what the prospects of the least advantaged should be without paying attention to circumstantial details. While some may sympathize with Rawls and argue that this kind of political constructivism is brought about not simply by relying on customary measures of social expectations,<sup>61</sup> it must be analytically punctuated by doubt if this critical projection is possible in Rawls’ enterprise since he aims for a criterion that “*appeals to what everyone can accept*” because it must be noted that “*a departure from generally recognized ways of reasoning would involve a privileged place for the views of some over others.*”<sup>62</sup> It is, indeed, doubtful if economic arrangements can be accepted without going through controversial platforms to effectively clarify vital issues the answers to which are not readily available to everyone divided by social status and other social contingencies. To analogize, it is one thing to say that it is challenging to teach some children with learning difficulties to correctly understand mathematical operations that need further psychological and educational intervention, but it is radically different to say that no one can possibly perform correct mathematical operations since it is beyond human intellectual capacities. For instance, in the case of the Philippines, one may become more careful not

---

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Nagel, “What Makes a Political Theory Utopian?,” *Social Research* 56 (Winter 1989): 915, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970571>.

<sup>58</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 440.

<sup>59</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 545.

<sup>60</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 285.

<sup>61</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 251.

<sup>62</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 187.

to deride some destitute people if they find affordable yet unhealthy packaged foods as their “staple and safer” supply in contrast with the pervasive recycling of leftover foods (known as “*pagpag*”).<sup>63</sup> But this “prospect for mere survival” does not hinder us from claiming that sustainable agricultural practices must be supported with sufficient nutrition and health awareness.

Rawls simplified the serious issues of social injustices in the mechanism of political constructivism by contrasting his notion of pure procedural justice to the idea of perfect procedural justice: in which the former is concerned with the modeling of a hypothetical device to exclude social contingencies so that there will be a fair outcome of a political conception of justice, whereas the latter pertains to procedures like assigning the one who will cut the whole cake to also get the last piece from the same divided whole.<sup>64</sup> The trouble with this vision is that by assuming that there is no identifiable and feasible criterion whereby the epistemic validity of political deliberation should be comported, Rawls instantly romanticized the procedural terms of democracy<sup>65</sup> that contradictorily becomes intermeshed with his idea of inherent stability in *Justice as Fairness*. Marianna Papastephanou examines that anthropological assumptions had been prioritized over others, and Rawls employed these collectively as a springboard to condescendingly state that his commonsensical justification can be insulated from socio-historical metanarratives fashioned under the guise of neutrality. By divesting theoretical assumptions, Papastephanou exposed the ethnocentric blindness behind such a brand of political liberalism that is not unadulterated with comprehensive ideas concerning human nature. For instance, Rawls warns “*that persons are mutually self-interested in certain situations and for certain purposes is what gives rise to the question of justice in practices covering those circumstances[,]*” which is the complete opposite of “*an association of saints, if such a community could really exist, [where] the disputes about justice could hardly occur; for they would all work selflessly together for one end, the glory of God as defined by their common religion, and reference to this end would settle every question of right.*”<sup>66</sup> However, if the rational aspect of the political conception of the person in Rawls’ project has a logical priority in pushing for various demands in social life, then, the egoistic tendencies being held as constants in every actual situation of contesting political justice cannot be taken to mean as devoid of applying a general theory on human motivation. On the contrary, Papastephanou believes that teaching that egoism is ever-present in justice-related situations reinforces conditioning in children toward tacitly liberalist, individualistic views.<sup>67</sup> While this critical observation can arguably be received as disputable as it might have placed a false notion of geographical and cultural categorizations in philosophizing, the truth of the matter is that Rawls relied on a certain theory of human motivation to advance his claims on distributive justice and public reason.

It becomes ironic that while Rawls frames the problem in an individualistic tone of firm resolve, he does not bother to be meticulous about the issues of social diversity in the economic sphere. Is it not the case that distributive justice should be aware of the reasonable distinction of the persons<sup>68</sup> and not impose a great weight on economic acceptability that hinders human freedom and

---

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Heriberto Ruiz Tafoya, “Packaged Food, Packaged Life: Corporate Food in Metro Manila Slums” (Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2023), 98-100.

<sup>64</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 72.

<sup>65</sup> As Rawls once quipped: “*To check whether we are following public reason we might ask: how would our argument strike us presented in the form of a supreme court opinion? Reasonable? Outrageous?*” See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 254. Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 394.

<sup>66</sup> John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4<sup>th</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 56-57.

<sup>67</sup> Marianna Papastephanou, “The Implicit Assumptions of Dividing a Cake,” *Human Studies* 27 (2004): 317, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20010377>.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 22-24.

reasonable self-fulfillment? “[T]he second principle lumps the worse-off together as recipients of public benefits and determines what they need to obtain the greatest benefits that Rawlsian justice calls for[.]” which tellingly ignores, as Roberto Alejandro emphasized, how individuals fulfill plans and maximize benefits based on their own assessment of well-being, including both physical and psychological states.<sup>69</sup> Rawls would accept that the issue of economic reform in which a casted shadow of philosophic doubts would preclude people from seeing changes eye to eye, but to say that it is all that there is in considering the issue of morality can be a betrayal to ourselves from what our political autonomy can do to initiate transformative political practices. This takes for granted that it is a moral responsibility of the citizenry to know what we can do and what we should prevent during discourses on socio-economic dilemmas. Given this impasse, how do we break its hold? Perhaps we should not be afraid to assess the suggestions of Rawls: “[J]ust institutions would have no point unless citizens had conceptions of the good they strove to realize and these conceptions defined ways of life fully worthy of human endeavor.”<sup>70</sup> But to completely define the lifeways “fully worthy of human endeavor” will only be jangling alarm bells in our head as this is not uncontroversial either as the political commitment must not be subsumed under the construction of a particular conception of the good – Rawls seems to be inescapable when running away from a monster in a labyrinth that he himself designed to lure it as Rawls should be held accountable in saying that “the total of public expenditures and the necessary sources of revenue is well defined, and **the distribution of income and wealth that results is just whatever it is.**”<sup>71</sup> This is only uncontestable unless Rawls already presupposes an inextricable link between the government and the visions of the good life without the need for various research endeavors and other political discourses. The embedded assumptions of *Justice as Fairness* bedevil the idea of political theory in the very workings of democratic practices to peacefully thrive with healthy political confrontations and tensions to address the often neglected predicaments creating a pretentious idea of social unity. As Rawls himself submitted, “When we enter an agreement[.] we must be able to honor it even should the worst possibilities prove to be the case [...] Thus[.] the parties must weigh with care whether they will be able to stick by their commitment **in all circumstances.**”<sup>72</sup> One may well argue that material insufficiency is just a natural fact of social reality and that no amount of political intervention can redress what is at the core of human nature. One might say that negligence, mismanagement, and government corruption are not the culprits of escalating impacts of economic poverty, but the inadaptability to emerging social circumstances, lack of perseverance, having no well-planned scheme to manage limited resources, and so on. But if we are truly determined to address the problem, are we not moved to find its underlying causes instead of simply describing its symptoms?<sup>73</sup> To be sure, complexity and indeterminacy may give hiccups to our philosophical undertaking of resolving social pathologies, but one must not be resigned to simply accepting that everything falls into place because of chance – that sooner or later, we will just wake up with the answers in our head. We must carry the moral responsibility to be effortful and meticulous when dealing with socio-economic inequalities.

Palpably, Rawls is in denial of the close link between socio-economic status and reciprocally self-supporting affirmation of everyone’s advancement of non-political commitments<sup>74</sup> in which the first principle of justice cannot diminish social instability even if he argued that if “[t]he less fortunate

<sup>69</sup> Roberto Alejandro, *The Limits of Rawlsian Justice* (London: The John Hopkins University Press: 1998), 56-57.

<sup>70</sup> John Rawls, “Social Unity and Primary Goods,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4<sup>th</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 386.

<sup>71</sup> Rawls, *Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*, 249. Emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 153. Emphasis applied.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 117-118.

<sup>74</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 178-179.

are [...] forcibly reminded of their situation,” this may eventually slide “to an even lower estimation of themselves and their mode of living.”<sup>75</sup> Such a suspicion is acknowledged by Rawls in grounding the priority of liberty with self-respect which confirms that “men’s sense of their own worth may hinge on their institutional position and their income share.”<sup>76</sup> This endangers political participation since it becomes clear that disparities in socioeconomic positionalities become the basis of self-respect – which runs afoul of the priority of basic liberties. Fragmented social engineering is in the mind of Rawls when defending self-respect and associational ties; because beyond its face, Rawls uses an invisibility argument to bury the very neglect of the loss of self-respect due in large measure to the diverse social associations that reduce the “painful visibility” of variations in people’s prospects.<sup>77</sup> Aside from these fissures in the associational boundaries, Rawls himself even provided a specific order to suppress the negative repercussion by directing the well-off not to “make an ostentatious display of their higher estate [...] [as] the less favored are likely to experience their situation as impoverished and humiliating.”<sup>78</sup> Jeanne Zaino accentuates a similar concern that found the need for Rawls not to be apologetic towards “a bourgeois, inegalitarian class order.”<sup>79</sup> This carries a considerable weight to be suspicious of a doctrine that Rawls injected into his theorizing, that is, the principle that prioritizes liberty – or individualism, if you may – did not recognize that it can greatly diminish freedom itself without urgently addressing poverty. Even in democratic countries, where poverty is too rampant to be neglected, vote buying can easily truncate effective political participation since some of the poor voters tend to sell their votes in exchange for very particularistic goods from manipulative candidates.<sup>80</sup> While some people experiencing poverty must be understood and not taunted for having been tempted to selling their votes during elections due to very attractive offers that immediately address their basic needs, especially food supplies, it must be clear that policy positions of electoral candidates are usually disregarded as a major factor in selecting political leaders in these situations of vote buying. This also reduces an effective assessment of the long-term impacts on sustainable development of previous government officials since vote buying can be hidden under

<sup>75</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 92.

<sup>76</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 546.

<sup>77</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 536.

<sup>78</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 537.

<sup>79</sup> Jeanne Zaino, “Self-Respect and Rawlsian Justice,” *The Journal of Politics* 4 (Aug. 1998): 750, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1345537>.

<sup>80</sup> Susan Stokes, “Is Vote Buying Undemocratic?,” in *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, ed. Frederic Charles Schaffer (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), 81-91. This critical observation was not incorporated into this article to simply assert that economically marginalized voters cannot vote wisely, nor is this to be considered the end-all and be-all of philosophizing. Rather, the issue is whether or not the complexity that the situation poses can outweigh the impractical side in Rawls’ argument that human liberty can override the concerns of economic conditions, especially with the use of public reason. Such a situation also magnifies how social stratification, in its considerable subtlety, can be a riveting force to shock the foundation of a democratic society. The antagonism that this situation brings forth can be considered a shackle to freely imagine a society that is equally prosperous for all to meet the demands of basic human needs and goods. Poverty, with all its economic burdens and societal exclusion, can all the more drive the people to collectively vote to assert their peculiar call for social change. Such a mob energy of voters to show how big and influential their circle is manifest in the contending economic interests in a democratic society that remains to be weighed down by economic adversities and other social inequalities. One of the causal explanations pointed out in the study is that political affairs beyond the sway of the ordinary masses, when taken under the formalities of conventional institutional measures, can be dismissed as negligent and austere enough not to be blended with the flavors of realistic contestation, perspectives, and inclusive transmission of possible solutions to economic predicaments. This complexity demands the call to involve various studies in social sciences in order to also understand, instead of ostracizing, the yearnings and distinct expressions of marginalized citizens. What this political sensitivity and sensibility requires of us is the avoidance of exaggerating and explaining so-called “blameworthiness” without delving into socioeconomic entangles. What is more, this also prevents us from engaging with voters’ education that does not realistically picture the choice situations of all voters from different economic and social backgrounds.

the mask of generosity as its value. Because of being materially insufficient, poverty can be blamed for making the impoverished not exercise their freedom in its fullness – indeed, this definitely takes a toll on how they introduce and express their view, hence a violation of the liberty of conscience. Situations like these are difficult to escape from, especially if competent and sincere people do not have the financial capacity to make their campaign more media-friendly and strategically captivating. The whole business, therefore, of hiding the symptoms of social instability is not immediately evaporated, and it only goes contrary to the moral force that Rawls often argues about the inherent stability of *Justice as Fairness*: a penultimate manipulation of legitimate expectations that becomes a shenanigan to the publicity condition of a political conception of justice.<sup>81</sup>

Simon Caney believes that it boils down to the attempt to predicate social stability on anti-perfectionist grounds in Rawls' well-ordered society.<sup>82</sup> My personal take is that Rawls assumed that the state must primarily be dedicated to protecting political fairness against unreasonable doctrines<sup>83</sup> without seeing that there are conceptions of the good that have no doctrine, say, those enthusiasts “*who want to surf all day off Malibu.*”<sup>84</sup> Having this limited understanding, Rawls bracketed the objects of critique that also inappropriately limited the scope of the influential powers of the state. Recall that Rawls recognizes that shared forms of political reasoning must be based on “*procedures and conclusions of science and social thought, when these are well-established and not controversial,*”<sup>85</sup> yet when considering the expanded clarification of the index of primary goods, Rawls suddenly considered that a standard working day must be assumed to sustain economic development and cooperative work.<sup>86</sup> Rawls even deemed it possible to include considerations about physical pain and realized native endowments, but Rawls opted to rule out so-called incomprehensible qualifications beyond objective measures. However, this unrealistically excluded solo parents managing single-handedly the upbringing of their dependent children, persons with disabilities, and students undertaking an income-generating job for their educational attainment, among others. Guided by a “non-comparing” purview, as Rawls puts it, an individualistic mindset created a Rawlsian world that presupposes that a certain population does not care about material insufficiency at the societal level, physical and psychological limitations of persons, and the manipulative view of politics placed under the guise of compartmentalizing rules on political discourses themselves. How is this explication of economic management not controversial that Rawls himself wishes to prevent as much as possible when tackling fundamental political questions? It seems that Rawls is the only game in town. It is truly a challenge how thorough public reason is in the balkanization of human values – from political and otherwise – to assert why a commitment (not only doctrinal ones) does not deserve public assistance. By sticking to so-called

---

<sup>81</sup> Cf. John Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” in *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 4<sup>th</sup> Printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 326.

<sup>82</sup> Simon Caney, “Anti-perfectionism and Rawlsian Liberalism,” *Political Studies* 43 (1995): 248-264. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.1995.tb01710.x. Cf. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 141-144; 179-180; 192-192.

<sup>83</sup> See the three features of reasonable doctrines as defined by Rawls himself. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 59. Rawls believes that, by and large, comprehensive doctrines exhibit an exercise of theoretical reason that is applied in many aspects of human existence with a relative degree of consistency and coherence to create an intelligible worldview. A comprehensive doctrine is also a manifestation of practical reason, according to Rawls, because it singles out values, among other things, that have specific weight and importance compared to the rest. Lastly, a comprehensive doctrine is flexible even in sticking to a certain doctrine and rooted in a particular tradition.

<sup>84</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 182.

<sup>85</sup> Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 67.

<sup>86</sup> Cf. Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 179.

uncontroversial claims – or being held captive to those so-called “political” constraints – Rawls gave a poor definition of political reasonableness.

## Conclusion

Rawls believes that we are still latched on the unstable ground on how when defining matters that can be compelling for others to maintain our stable grounds where our collective democratic spirit dwells– and this is where the liberal idea of public reason is supposed to rescue us. Rawls’ idea of public reason shortchanges the dynamism of politics to rectify its own mistakes by trying not to leave any stone left unturned that can potentially be a host to subtle forms of social injustice. Using the original position argument, Rawls was able to simplify political problems by threading arguments based on a rationality that is replete with political assumptions about human nature, moral psychology, and social stability. This study also shows that while Rawls realized that there are sections of his convoluted brackets of arguments for his idea of public reason that became devastated by non-ideal circumstances and the convoluted brackets of his arguments, he was still recalcitrant that his ideal need not face the two buffeting winds that seriously blow upon his own call for political participation: first, the path has been too narrow for some to influence the political process due to material issues, as well as matters concerning the filtration of value-laden arguments, and, secondly, that the overlapping consensus has drastically relaxed its protecting measures that militate against the initial stance of Rawls to give way to a meticulous route to maintain a considerable amount of conclusiveness between political claims, and to fight against the sheer formality of equality that can be a slippery slope to embedded social injustices using aggregative apparatuses. Rawls has to face, on the one hand, the problem of indeterminacy in marshaling political values that can serve as a political argument despite the various interpretations of the democratic political culture, but, on the other, Rawls also has to answer if his intention to make political praxis free of controversy is not at any rate enervating the vitality of democratic participation to condignly fight inconspicuous types of social injustices.

What can saturate the energy to boost the discursive praxis in a Rawlsian society is the fact that, after everything that has been said and done in so-called “non-political contexts,” the processed ideas and duly examined solutions cannot take effect in influencing political understanding. Even in the inclusive view of public reason, citizens may invoke everything that they have got, but they cannot bring it out to fully shape political discussion, for the end route of political deliberation would be to listen to political values alone – nothing more, nothing less. But without understanding the reality that we live in, which can be controversial in one way or another, we cannot realize the political vision of Rawls that inherent social stability is guided by the right reasons.

In speaking of social primary goods as the benchmark of social cohesion, Rawls relegated the non-ideal circumstances to the thin theory of the good. With the assumption that the bundles of distributive justice can be described in the most general sense, Rawls believes that social primary goods can address the problems of freedom and material support based on his notion of political fairness. Rawls’ unflinching insistence on prioritizing basic human liberties – even if he is fully cognizant of the dark repercussions – has been a guiding force in his theory. To institutionalize a decisive factor in governance, instead of including socio-economic difficulties as part of the discursive scope of his idea of public reason, Rawls transferred this type of political management to an unfair route. However, this seriously impairs political influencing and basic human liberties, for our expressive capacities need a material medium, and if socio-economic inequalities are neglected – as Rawls himself admitted, even with the provision of the social primary goods – it is not surprising that such can badly affect the engagement in political decision-making. One can postulate, then, that Rawls himself has become a

utilitarian in a way that “does not take seriously the differences of individuals.” In other words, it has been assumed that the basis of political neutrality has successfully lumped up all the primary social needs of every citizen from whatever background. It has been argued in this study that Rawls did not bother to heighten this urgent political concern. For one thing, the vindictive mode that pushes for a *modus vivendi* can only be effectively undermined by a public reason that is not reluctant to countenance the contestable sources of various demands and claims for well-being. This boils down once more to the underpinning of a political conception of the person. The question is, is the political conception of the person simply filled with conjectural accounts, or does it also attract rich discourses about the nature of reality and the human person to facilitate an ever-renewing standard for policymaking?

This only highlights the fact that a political conception of justice and the political theory itself need other areas of philosophizing. It is not to remain superficial when facing indeterminate issues fundamental to political stability. Indeed, this is the authentic way to listen and appreciate the dialogical path of praxis itself. We learn to listen not simply because we want sounds to pass our ears and take the pretentiousness of the so-called democratic spirit on the pedestal – we listen because we want to know and understand each other. To uphold equality and liberty is not simply a staging of the conjectural devices; it is, most importantly, giving breath to a life of compassion for others, giving direction to navigate appropriate and long-term solutions (if not for eternity) to fight against corruption and oppression of whatever form, and providing an assurance that everyone in society is equally protected and cared for. This is why we must bridge the gap between the ideal theory and the non-ideal circumstances.

## Bibliography

- Adams, Matthew. "The Value of Ideal Theory." In *John Rawls: Debating the Major Questions*, edited by Jon Mandle and Sarah Roberts-Cady, 73-85. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Alejandro, Roberto. *The Limits of Rawlsian Justice*. London: The John Hopkins University Press: 1998.
- Baur, Michael. "On Actualization of Public Reason." *Fordham Law Review* 72 (2004): 2153-2175, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol72/iss5/33/>.
- Daniels, Norman. "Rawls's Complex Egalitarianism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 241-276. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Freeman, Samuel. "Social Contract Approaches." In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*, edited by David Estlund, 133-151. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Kaufman, Alexander. "Rawls's Practical Conception of Justice: Opinion, Tradition, and Objectivity in Political Liberalism." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 3 (2006):23-43. doi:10.1177/1740468106063281.
- Lehning, Percy B. "The Ideas of Public Reason: Can It Fulfill Its Task? A Reply to Catherine Audard." *Ratio Juris* 8 (March 1995): 30-39. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9337.1995.tb00195.x.
- Little, Daniel. "Reflective Equilibrium and Justification." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 373-387. doi:10.1111/j.2041-6962.1984.tb00354.x.
- Nagel, Thomas. "What Makes a Political Theory Utopian?." *Social Research* 56 (Winter 1989): 903-920, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970571>.
- O'Neill, Onora. "Abstraction, Idealization, and Ideology in Ethics." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Series* 22 (September 1987): 55-69. doi:10.1017/s1358246100003660.
- Papastephanou, Marianna. "The Implicit Assumptions of Dividing a Cake." *Human Studies* 27 (2004): 307-334, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20010377>.
- Reidy, David. "Rawls's Wide View of Public Reason: Not Wide Enough." *Res Publica* 6 (2000): 49-72. doi:10.1023/a:1009628330727.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Commonwealth Interview with John Rawls." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 616-622. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Fairness to Goodness." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 267-285. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

- \_\_\_\_\_. "Justice as Fairness." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 47-72. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 303-358. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap University Press of the Harvard University Press, 2007.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Social Unity and Primary Goods." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 359-367. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 421-448. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." In *Collected Papers*, edited by Samuel Freeman, 573-615. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Law of Peoples*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Reamer, Frederic G. *The Philosophical Foundations of Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Reidy, David. "Rawls's Wide View of Public Reason: Not Wide Enough." *Res Publica* 6 (2000): 49-72. doi:10.1023/a:1009628330727.
- Schwartzman, Micah. "The Ethics of Reasoning from Conjecture." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 9 (2012): 521-644. doi:10.1163/174552412x628931.
- Simon Caney, "Anti-perfectionism and Rawlsian Liberalism." *Political Studies* 43 (1995): 248-264. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.1995.tb01710.x.
- Stokes, Susan. "Is Vote Buying Undemocratic?." In *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, edited by Frederic Charles Schaffer, 81-91. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007.
- Sweetman, Brendan. *Why Politics Needs Religion: The Place of Religious Arguments in the Public Square*. United States of America: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Tafoya, Heriberto Ruiz. *Packaged Food, Packaged Life: Corporate Food in Metro Manila Slums*. Kyoto, Japan: Kyoto University Press, 2023.
- Zaino, Jeanne. "Self-Respect and Rawlsian Justice." *The Journal of Politics* 4 (Aug. 1998): 750, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i345537>.