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# Recognition VS Redistribution: the Case of Self-Respect

Caroline GUBET LAFAYE<sup>1</sup>

The starting point of my reflection is Rawls' description of self-respect as "the most important primary good" (Rawls 1987: 577), that is, the first good necessary for the exercise and development of the two specific powers of moral personality: the capacity for a conception of the good and the capacity for justice as well<sup>2</sup>. Universal rights declarations on which our democracies stand, and many international declarations as well, state and aim to guarantee basic liberties for all, along with equal treatment, access to primary goods, capabilities and basic functionings<sup>3</sup>, but also equal dignity. These principles involve the public protection of dignity and people's self-respect, especially in situations of social vulnerability.

Turning now from political declarations to moral and political philosophy, the debate over redistribution tends to give way to reflections on recognition, namely its means and conditions. However the interest for recognition cannot dismiss redistributive concerns, since "reforms concerning recognition cannot succeed unless they are associated to struggles for redistribution" (Fraser 2005: 68). Rather, the main political issue of our times should be that of knowing "how to develop a consistent program capable of integrating redistribution and recognition" (Fraser 2005: 69). In particular, the issue of self-respect reflects the interdependence between recognition and redistribution in the field of social justice. For example, the lack of self-worth and of one's capacity to do something worthwhile is exacerbated by the experience of a contrast between oneself and others (i.e. between social

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<sup>2</sup> See Rawls, 1987: 93, 122 or Rawls, 1982.

<sup>3</sup> See the article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948: "Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality". See also the "Human Development Report 2003" and "Millennium Goals" of the UN or the OMS' "International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health".

and economic positions) which is perceived as humiliating, especially when this disparity is made visible by the social structure and by societies' life standards. In this sense, self-respect raises distributive questions as well.

My contribution to the philosophical debate, which tends to represent redistributive (Rawls, Dworkin, Sen) and recognition approaches (Renault, Fraser) in a conflicting way, will be to show that a theory of social justice which refers to well chosen "achievements" opens the way to a conciliation of redistribution and recognition perspectives. The need for this conciliation is even more evident as we deal with self-respect, which social bases are the most important primary good according to Rawls. For this purpose, I will proceed, first, to highlight the social relevance of the notion of self-respect or self-esteem; then, I will address the role of social institutions in the construction and preservation of self-respect; finally, I'll identify the most suitable redistributive procedures and measures to ensure the consolidation of self-respect.

## 1. What is self-esteem or self-respect?

Unlike other goods such as income and leisure self-respect presents a specific problem of definition. When can one say that self-esteem has been acquired? Is it a contribution to society? Does it have something to do with the satisfaction of specific needs or with the worth of individuals as such? Although Rawls points out the importance of self-respect, considered "perhaps" (as he frequently says in *A Theory of Justice*) as the most important primary good, he suggests a relatively rough definition of it. As a first step, I will devote my attention to a preliminary definition.

### 1.1. SELF-CONFIDENCE, SELF-RESPECT AND SELF-ESTEEM

#### a) Self-respect involves a number of interactions

*"To a certain extent, self-respect acquires a perceptible mass only in a negative form – specifically, only when subjects visibly suffer from a lack of it"* (Honneth 2000: 146). In this

sense, self-respect, like recognition, may be difficult to define in positive terms<sup>4</sup>. However, and in order to precise its content, it is useful to refer to the works of Axel Honneth on recognition. Honneth identifies three essential strands of integrity corresponding to three actually identifiable forms of recognition, providing a first content to the notions of self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth 2000: 114). They are:

- the ability to meet one's own physical and psychological basic needs by means of *self-confidence* provided by the affection of relatives and friends;
- the ability to develop oneself as a subject capable of judgement by means of *self-respect* provided by the guarantee of fundamental rights;
- the ability to contribute to social life by means of *self-esteem* provided by social esteem, that is, the social confirmation of our skills and good capacities by others<sup>5</sup>.

The *identity-formation as positive relation-to-self* thus implies self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.

## **b) Self-respect requires self-confidence**

( $\alpha$ ) Self-confidence – identified by Rawls as a specific dimension of self-respect – can be described as the sense of one's self-worth; it translates into the deep belief that one's own conception of the good and plan of life are worth carrying out (see Rawls 1987: § 29).

( $\beta$ ) Broadening its meaning beyond the legal sense, self-respect requires self-confidence (i.e. the belief of one's self-worth) as well as the confidence in one's ability to achieve his/her intentions, within the limited means at disposal (Rawls 1987: 479-480)<sup>6</sup>.

( $\gamma$ ) Finally, self-esteem in Rawls' terminology translates the fact and the feeling of being sure of the worth of one's plan of life as well as the capability to carry it out. It adds a condition to "self-respect" which, in Rawls' account, basically represents a condition of meaningful perseverance in life. Instead, I'll point out that the lack of self-esteem would follow (i) a lack of self-confidence or self-worth; (ii) a lack of confidence in one's capability to do something worthwhile; (iii) a sense of impotence associated to these two elements

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<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Nancy Fraser suggests a definition of recognition based on the lack of it, namely through humiliation, discrimination, contempt, disqualification and the constitution of a distorted self, which prevent the individual from acquiring the capacity to live and act autonomously (see Fraser 2005: 159).

<sup>5</sup> Honneth is largely inspired here by elements of Rawls' theory of justice.

<sup>6</sup> However, I would point out that what Rawls describes as "self-respect" would fit more adequately what Honneth calls "self-confidence".

(Rawls 1987: 577). We will see further that these elements justify the possibility that the lack of self-esteem could lead to a social claim.

### **c) Self-respect requires respect by others**

Self-respect is also based on a certain relation with others in a wide range of spheres. Three essential relational dimensions of recognition are at stake: the dimension of primary relations, especially concerning the family (where the individual experiences love and friendship); the dimension of legal relations which determines the individual's status and recognizes his/her capability as a subject of law as well as a person; finally, the social community and its role in recognizing the worth of one's participation to the group and the related skills.

In this way, instead of thinking quite naively that self-respect and self-esteem would merely refer to a relation-to-self – unlike the notion of recognition, which directly refers to otherness – it seems that these two notions equally rely on respect by others. Insofar as self-esteem needs recognition by the other, it requires intersubjectivity and presents an important social dimension. Thus, for example, if we feel that our actions don't inspire respect by others, it would be difficult, and indeed impossible, to maintain that our purposes are worth pursuing (see Rawls 1987: § 67).

The dimension of otherness, which is a component of self-respect and self-esteem, justifies their social consideration. Nevertheless the nature and the limits of social claims immediately present in a problematic way: when does a subject really esteem oneself, when does one feel really respected? We face here a difficulty that P. Ricœur describes as the temptation of “a new form of ‘unhappy consciousness’, under the species of an incurable feeling of victimization and of a relentless representation of ideals out of reach” (Ricœur 2005: 316). However, this is not to justify that a painful state of mind would motivate a legitimate social claim. Instead, my aim will be to identify the *social conditions necessary to the constitution (to the formation) of self-respect and self-esteem*.

## **1.2 SOCIAL PERTINENCE OF THE NOTION OF SELF-ESTEEM**

### **a) The lack of self-esteem: a matter of justice rather than psychology**

In order to understand the social relevance of self-esteem, we must first justify that respect and self-esteem have a meaning which is not merely psychological but also social. This shift (from a psychological meaning to a social one) entails a normative concern insofar as we are

to justify it. In short, we must determine that self-respect or self-esteem are not only a matter of self-realization, but rather a matter of justice.

#### α.1) The essential individual value of self-respect

The essential conveyor of this interpretation is given by Rawls who sees in the social bases of self-respect *the most important primary good*. Indeed, self-respect is what provides the individual with the feeling of self-worth. Self-respect allows one to find value and confers it on one's own existence as well as on one's own plans. From its value for the individual, Rawls is able to conclude that "the parties would wish to avoid at almost any cost the social conditions that undermine self-respect" (Rawls 1987: 480) and that "they would not agree to count this sort of subjective loss as irrelevant" (Rawls 1987: 577).

As we have seen above, the lack of self-esteem is attributable to a lack of self-worth along with a lack of self-confidence in one's capacity to do anything worthwhile, or also to a sense of impotence associated with these two elements (see Rawls 1987: 577). Compared to this lack of self-esteem, many conditions will enable the feeling of self-worth, which is to say the first element of self-respect. In particular, I consider (a) *having a rational plan of life* and, more precisely, a plan that meets the Aristotelian Principle, that is, a plan where the agent is able to develop his/her talents in a challenging way<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the more one's skills are fully attained and organized in a complex and refined way, the more one's confidence in one's self-worth. (b) The second condition is that *our person and our acts are appreciated and valued by the others* that we equally esteem. The question then becomes that of knowing how a society can guarantee the "social bases of self-respect" to everyone. We will see that these two dimensions can legitimately be taken into account by society in order to ensure their fulfilment for everyone.

#### α.2) The intersubjective dimension of self-respect

Moreover, the dimension of intersubjectivity, which is essential for self-respect, justifies the social relevance of the latter. This dimension is crucial since without the appreciation of

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<sup>7</sup> "The Aristotelian Principle states that, other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and that this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity" (Rawls 1987: 566). Rawls reminds us that, according to Aristotle, the exercise of natural capacities is an essential good for human beings; that the most enjoyable activities and pleasures are linked to the exercise of their greatest talents, involving the most complex judgments (see Aristotle, *Ethics to Nicomache*, VII, chap. ii-xiv, et livre X, chap. i-v). Thus a plan that an individual might pursue will lack of interest for him/her if s/he is not able to express his/her natural gifts in an interesting way.

our peers, it would be impossible for us to maintain that the things we do are worthwhile. Since self-respect rests in part upon recognition by the ones we recognize, it requires otherness and intersubjectivity: that's why it can be legitimately considered as a matter of social concern<sup>8</sup>. Intersubjectivity turns recognition into a *reciprocal need* and inscribes this issue in the context of face-to-face relations: the universal need of seeing one's own existence and uniqueness confirmed by another is fed by a principle of reciprocity. This requires the creation of intersubjective conditions conducive to personal integrity, respect and self-esteem<sup>9</sup>. Let's clarify this.

### **b) The lack of self-esteem as a matter for social claims**

The loss of self-esteem can thus become a matter for social claims. Indeed, as soon as the question of self-esteem can be interpreted in terms of justice, we are able to ( $\alpha$ ) take into account the social conditions needed for a positive relation-to-self – as we shall see, through the universal guarantee of a list of primary goods; ( $\beta$ ) to consider the question of self-esteem in terms of rights, namely legal status; ( $\gamma$ ) to finally consider the question of self-respect with reference to the denial of recognition based on *status*, that is, on the field of social relations and not of psychology. Let's analyse more in detail these elements.

Concerning the intersubjective constitution of the self, the formation of the practical Self depends on the reciprocal recognition between the subjects (see Fischbach 1999). Being confirmed by the other in one's activity, an individual comes to understand oneself as a practical Self, i.e. as an individualized and autonomous subject. In this sense, there is a morally constraining dimension of claims in terms of self-respect. The struggle for recognition and self-respect involves normative expectations. More precisely, the disillusionment of normative expectations, whose fulfilment is considered essential for one's identity or group (that is, the *moral* experience of contempt), leads to claims – by individuals or groups – aimed at achieving the social conditions for a positive self-relation. These social struggles are motivated by the intersubjective nature of practical subjectivity and self-respect: they feed on the relation – of recognition – to others.

Likewise, self-esteem is very frequently undermined by the social status of people and their situation, namely by their relative social positions, particularly when they assumed

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<sup>8</sup> Stressing that a condition of self-respect is “finding our person and deeds appreciated and confirmed by others who are likewise esteemed and their association enjoyed”, Rawls considers recognition to be a necessary condition for self-esteem (Rawls 1987: 480).

<sup>9</sup> See Honneth 2000: 197. Honneth points out that, to the extent that recognition is the fact of the one who gives recognition, in this act there is an exercise of power, even if the one who recognizes simply recognizes the claim to uniqueness which is addressed to him/her.

subordinated status. This is the case when people are not considered as fully-fledged partners of social interaction and consequently suffer from a denial of recognition and of status subordination. They don't take part to this interaction as equals. Yet, when an individual is affected by the "lack of social esteem", he/she's negatively affected in his/her chance to develop a positive relation-to-self, due to the absence of recognition. Involving both individuals and groups, the correction of this subordinate status hindering self-esteem consists in ensuring an equal political status and a "participatory parity to social life" (Fraser 2005: 82)<sup>10</sup>.

### c) Self-esteem as a "primary outcome"

The consideration of self-esteem as a matter of social claims expressed in terms of *rights* gives me an opportunity to mark my difference of opinion with Nancy Fraser. According to Fraser, "approaching the problem of recognition from the perspective of justice prevents from supposing a right to social esteem for all" (Fraser 2005: 51)<sup>11</sup>. In her view, this position is indefensible as it could undermine the meaning of esteem. Fraser embraces a minimalist position, maintaining that "everyone has a right to pursue social esteem under fair conditions of equal opportunity" (Fraser 2005: 51). Yet it seems to me that we cannot merely provide individuals with "opportunities" of social achievement or self-esteem without taking into account their situation "at the end" of distribution of opportunities, or the outcome they achieve by means of the opportunities initially allocated.

Indeed, the exclusive focus on resources or opportunities in spite of achievements, of the "fundamental social achievements" (Fleurbaey), is not justified. For what counts is not so much what people have, but what they can achieve with their resources<sup>12</sup>. For this reason, self-esteem cannot be merely considered as a primary good or an initial resource, but rather as a fundamental achievement, a "primary outcome" enjoyable by everyone. It is a "primary functioning"<sup>13</sup>, meaning a state achieved by the individual. In this sense, respect and self-

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<sup>10</sup> According to this principle of parity of participation, a measure or a society is fair to the extent that it makes participation possible for all members, that it ensures a parity of participation in the construction of institutionalized value patterns, in processes of deliberation about the rules of redistribution; and more generally, in all forms of social interaction.

<sup>11</sup> My perspective is more congruent with that of Axel Honneth (2000) who considers social esteem to be an intersubjective condition for undistorted identity-formation, that morality is meant to protect. Indeed, in this case, everyone has a legitimate right to social esteem.

<sup>12</sup> A. Sen has well shown that the advantage that is taken from a good isn't mainly a matter of pleasure but rather the chance of realizing one's potentialities (Sen 1985: chap. III).

<sup>13</sup> A. Sen defines the functionings as follows: "what the person succeeds in *doing* with the commodities and characteristics at his or her command. [...] A functioning is an achievement of a person : what he or she manages



esteem not only take part in (being also a condition of) *the accomplishment of normal human functions*, but they also result from it.

As basic dimensions of human flourishing, respect and self-esteem don't rest merely on subjective well-being: rather, they justify a social attention. Some objective fulfilments – i.e. in the field of education – are equally important. This attention is justified also by their relation to essential outcomes in terms of *social, rather than merely individual, conditions* (see Fleurbaey 1995). The social consideration of the “fundamental social achievements” seems to respond to the need of contemporary moral philosophers to reconcile the concern for redistribution with that for recognition. Indeed, theories of recognition have drawn attention to the fact that some aspects of social life – related to issues of social justice – cannot be fully understood when considered as things. This awareness has entailed, for some authors like A. Honneth, a break with the distributive paradigm, giving priority to the intersubjective dimension of recognition. In the following, my aim will be that of showing that the distributive approach is in a position to meet the concerns for self-respect, provided that it takes into account not merely the distribution of *initial opportunities* but the distribution of “primary outcomes”.

## 2. Social institutions and self-respect

### 2.1 (OBJECTIVE) SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF SELF-RESPECT

Concerning the determination of self-esteem suggested above, it is by no means clear that it requires, either negatively or not, some social conditions. For this reason, social institutions have a role to play in respect and self-esteem. In particular, participation to social life as a fully-fledged member of the community – what Fraser refers to as “participatory parity” – requires specific economic and institutional conditions. In the first case, the *distribution of material resources* should be such that participants are able to enjoy independence as well as the opportunity to express themselves.

Put another way, “participatory parity” in interaction is equally jeopardized when some actors lack the minimal economic resources for interacting with others as peers. As a consequence, forms of material inequality and economic dependence impeding this participatory parity must be revised. This should also be the case of social dispositions contributing to the persistence of deprivation, exploitation and great disparity of

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to do or to be. It reflects, as it were, a part of the ‘state’ of that person. It has to be distinguished from the commodities which are used to achieve those functionings ” (Sen 1985: 6-7).

opportunities, along with income, leisure time and in the distribution of primary goods, resulting in depriving people of the means and opportunities necessary to interact as peers with others<sup>14</sup>.

Similarly, it is questionable that there is such a thing as a real “independence” between social positions and self-esteem<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, the social inferiority of a person, measured in terms of the *index of primary goods*, can be so overwhelming that it would undermine one’s self-respect (Guibet Lafaye 2006: 178). Likewise, esteem and self-respect are harmed when the social position of the most disadvantaged doesn’t seem to be able to provide a constructive opportunity to address the favorable situation of the most advantaged. Finally, the lack of self-esteem, especially the lack of confidence in one’s self-worth and capacity to do something worthwhile, is strengthened when the contrast between oneself and others is made (too) visible by social structures. The situation of the less advantaged is frequently recalled, which may lead to even less esteem for themselves and their own way of life.

Furthermore, participatory parity isn’t merely guaranteed by objective or distributive conditions but also by institutional and social obligations, in that institutionalized models of interpretation and evaluation structuring social action must express equal respect for all participants and ensure at least equality of opportunities in the search for social esteem. In what follows I shall focus on the economic conditions of respect and self-esteem and on the fact that an unfair distribution of resources and “primary outcomes” is a key impediment to participatory parity to social life, bringing about social subordination and injustice.

## 2.2 SOCIAL STIGMATIZATION AND “TRANSFORMATIVE REMEDIES”

My first challenge is that very often the existing redistributive practices entail institutionalized models of interpretation and evaluation that diminish people’s self-respect. Indeed, the distributive means provided to guarantee individuals with access to self-respect frequently entail a social stigmatization, preventing the possibility itself of self-respect. That is the case, for example, of all means-testing social assistance, which provides targeted support to the unemployed and underemployed. Likewise, many welfare policies stigmatize single mothers as sexually irresponsible parasites. In these examples, interaction is mediated

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<sup>14</sup> Thus recognizing that economic inequality is mainly inevitable, Nancy Fraser emphasizes that a threshold is needed, beyond which the distance that separates the most disadvantaged to the wealthy is such that all practical ends are impossible – the problem being of course that of determining this threshold (Fraser 2005: 54).

<sup>15</sup> As suggested by the question of envy in Rawls’ *Theory of justice*.

by institutionalized models of cultural values, which forge some social categories as normative models, while representing others as inferior or deficient. Providing material assistance, these welfare programs maintain social inequalities and strengthen high economic and social differences – in short, they leave untouched the socio-economic structure, creating the kind of inequality they claim to repair. They contribute, in particular, to representing the least advantaged as a defective and needy class. In this way, these social measures, even though they aim at providing people with primary goods, end up preventing the minimal conditions for self-esteem.

These measures of corrective justice, which generally rest upon a universalistic account of equal moral worth, thereby meeting one of the vital requirements of self-respect, end up contradicting this principle of equal moral worth in the very *practice* itself of corrective redistribution, especially when controlling recipients' lives. These tests thrive a stigmatizing dynamics which is at odds with the official engagement in the respect of equal moral worth of people. Therefore the focus should be on identifying the redistributive measures that don't undermine either recognition nor self-esteem of the recipients, thereby providing an answer in terms of corrective justice to Fraser's claim that "justice today requires both redistribution and recognition, none of them being sufficient alone" (Fraser 2005: 94).

So how can redistributive measures, meeting the (negative) condition of self-respect of non-stigmatization of recipients, be implemented? With reference to the previous examples, the first avenue would be that of removing conditionality from social welfare. Likewise, the guarantee of a "basket" of minimal social goods or fundamental social achievements may take another path. This sort of measures would fall within what Fraser refers to as "transformative remedies" as distinguished from the "affirmative remedies" (Fraser 2005: 31). These "transformative remedies" generally combine universal welfare systems, progressive taxation, wide public sector, considerable public or collective property and a process of democratic decision-making over the priorities of development. They try to ensure access to employment for all, having the effect of reducing social inequality without creating stigmatized classes of vulnerable people, guilty of free-riding on public charity. In other words, these measures allow to repair distributive injustices without undermining recipients' self-esteem. And even better, they contribute to redressing certain injustices of recognition: in so doing, they are conducive to generating self-respect for those who were previously deprived of it. These measures don't rest only upon the *principle* of equal moral worth of people: unlike conditional remedies of justice, in addition, their *implementation* doesn't comply with self-respect.

Therefore, in my view, this measure is crucially important as it tends to *guarantee self-respect, fostering solidarity and reciprocity* in social relations and social justice. It avoids undesirable forms of stigmatization, and prevents a doubling of the injury of deprivation suffered by the most disadvantaged because of misrecognition. “Transformative remedies” foster solidarity and contribute to guarantee the conditions of self-respect for all, avoiding stigmatization on the one hand, and answering to some forms of misrecognition on the other. Thus the next step is to identify a number of “transformative remedies” (Fraser), namely distributive justice measures that are likely to meet the conditions of self-respect, as well as contributing to the deployment of strong solidarity among the members of society.

### 3. The social bases of self-respect

What role should social institutions play in order to *positively* contribute and ensure at least the access for all to conditions of respect and self-esteem? The answer to this question will lead to the distributive configuration and to the allocation of available resources ensuring equal self-respect for all. From this perspective, should we favour Rawls’ theory of primary goods? Thus what role would remain for “opportunities” (i.e. of initial resources) in building self-respect? Is universal basic income the best answer that can be given for equal self-respect? I can already say that I agree with Rawls and Fraser in that social institutions are to ensure access to conditions of self-respect for all. Nevertheless, my purpose is to determine that they are to provide not only the *conditions* of self-respect – comprising, on the one hand, the condition of non-stigmatization and, on the other hand, the resources needed in order to make the enjoyment of self-respect possible –, but also self-respect as such, as well as a sense of self-worth for all. In fact, self-respect is a primary good and we cannot accept that some are deprived of it.

#### 3.1 INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS FOR SELF-ESTEEM

Measures of Rawls’ theory justice may be considered as “transformative remedies” to the extent that they have an effect on the “basic structure of society”. Given that “self-respect is the most important primary good”, Rawls points out that “the parties [in an ordinary equal position] would not agree to count this sort of subjective loss [that of self-respect] as

irrelevant” (Rawls 1987: 577). Consequently, the social structure and its principles of justice are to be in such a way that they don’t lead to a loss of self-esteem – if so, they need to be revised.

A society based on the principles of justice as fairness<sup>16</sup>, namely a “well-ordered society”, provides its members with the conditions of equal self-respect. It answers to the causes of loss of self-esteem that I have previously underlined. (i) With reference to the first condition of self-esteem (i.e. the sense of one’s own self-worth), the concept of justice as fairness requires that everyone have equal basic rights. Accordingly, Rawls concludes that “for all these reasons the less fortunate have no cause to consider themselves inferior [...]. The disparities between themselves and others, whether absolute or relative, should be easier for them to accept than in other forms of polity” (Rawls 1987: 579). In addition, he suggests the need for measures enabling the least fortunate not to feel themselves inherently inferiors to others. Finally, in a well-ordered society, members of the community have a common sense of justice and they are bound by ties of civic friendship, contributing to self-respect for all in a positive way (see Rawls 1987: § 75-76).

(ii) Turning now to the second condition and to the relation between self-esteem and social positions, according to Rawls *the income and wealth gap* shouldn’t be too large in a well-ordered society; in other words, in the application of the difference principle – although the latter allows, in theory, inequalities and gaps of individual situations as wide as you like (see Rawls 1987: § 26). Here the measure provides that a well-ordered society should limit the occasions in which the least advantaged may feel their condition as impoverished and humiliating (see Rawls 1987: 580).

In addition, “the plurality of associations in a well-ordered society, each with its secure internal life, tends to reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility, of variations in men’s prospects” (Rawls 1987: 579). In this sense, a well-ordered society fosters a certain degree of ignorance about the differences of wealth and individual situation. This ignorance is facilitated by the general recognition of the principles of justice by all citizens, at least when they meet each other for public affairs. Everyone in the public arena is seen as a sovereign and equal person being treated with equal respect. Thus “the public recognition of the two principles gives greater support to men’s self-respect” (Rawls 1987: 208-209) in the context described by Rawls. Therefore, his conception of justice as fairness would publicly state people’s reciprocal respect and thereby guarantee their sense of self-worth.

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<sup>16</sup> In other words, the principle of equal freedom for all and the difference principle.

### 3.2 POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM

#### a) Public affirmation of fundamental rights and liberties

What can be retained of Rawls' theory is that the affirmation of equal political rights for all citizens is crucial for protecting and perhaps enforcing one's self-respect. Equality of rights and public attitudes of mutual respect have a major place in enhancing the sense of citizen's self-worth, for a subordinate status would actually be humiliating and damaging of self-respect. Self-respect thus requires the recognition of the equal *status* as peers in the political community. In a society grounded on the principles of justice as fairness, the need for status is met by the public recognition of fair institutions, along with "the full and diverse internal life of the many free communities of interests that the equal liberties allow" (Rawls 1987: 587). Rawls concludes that the base of self-respect in a fair society wouldn't be the share of income, but the publicly recognized distribution of rights and fundamental liberties.

Dividing the social order into two parts (political and not political), Rawls considers the equal political status of citizens to be the main source of self-respect. For example, he shows that the priority of liberty leads to the equality of social bases of self-respect<sup>17</sup>. However, I argue that the equal distribution of rights and fundamental liberties isn't sufficient to guarantee self-respect for all, as the material and moral situation of homeless people in our liberal societies can easily show. Political status alone isn't able either to "insure the least fortunate the sense of their own value" (Rawls 1987: 137) nor to limit the hierarchies that place some at the bottom, into indecent life conditions. Equal liberty and the commonality of political status are certainly a necessary condition (a "base") of self-respect, but yet not a sufficient one.

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<sup>17</sup> However, Rawls mentions the possibility that the feeling of one's self-worth may depend to some extent on one's place within the institutions and relative income. Faced with this difficulty, he suggests as a theoretical solution to include self-respect on the list of primary goods, the index of which defines expectations (Rawls 1987: 588). This concern would result in the index' consideration of the effects of agents' excusable envy in the application of the difference principle (see Rawls 1987: § 80), and in this sense, that the expectations of the most disadvantaged "are lower the more severe these effects". Thus we should introduce at the legislative level some adjustment for self-respect of the most disadvantaged.

## **b) The principle of participation**

Self-esteem equally rests upon political participation, that is, the possibility of attaining the subject's "excellences" – namely, individual qualities and talents that it is rational for everyone to aim (Rawls 1987: 483). Thus both equal political liberties and participation to political life enhance people's sense of self-worth. This participation contributes to the political competence of each citizen, increases his/her moral and intellectual sensitivity and provides the base of his/her conscience of duties and obligations, on which the stability of fair institutions relies.

If the recognition of a political status is a primary good and a resource to be ensured to everyone in order for them to get self-respect, political participation is by contrast a fundamental achievement that does not end in the possible (guaranteed by constitutional rights) access to the public arena. Likewise, the participation to "communities of interests" (especially the economic ones as emphasized by Rawls), while necessary, does not in itself support that the economic difference of positions might be neglected<sup>18</sup>. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls certainly underestimates the role of economic and social differences among the sectors of society. I believe by contrast that this shouldn't be the case. Participatory parity isn't ensured by equality of political rights alone. Political participation is a fundamental social achievement requiring that the conditions of *actual* (real) political participatory parity are guaranteed. Yet, the nature of these conditions is not merely legal, institutional or formal. It is not sufficient that people *formally* have the same basic rights in terms of basic political liberties.

Whether political, economic or cultural, participatory parity depends on material and social conditions, which are conditions of self-esteem as well. Rawls points it out in his work of 1993, highlighting that "below a certain level of material and social well-being, formation and education as well, it is out of question that people can participate to society as citizens, and as equal citizens" (Rawls 2001: 208) – but he deals with these elements only in terms of constitutional claims (Rawls 2001: 208). My focus here will be on some economic and social

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<sup>18</sup> Rawls would answer to this objection showing that the basic principles of justice as fairness tend less to inspire excusable envy than other principles of justice and that, in a just society, economic differences are set for the benefit of the least favored. Rawls himself emphasizes the interest and the "several advantages" of considering political status as fitting the social need of self-esteem (see Rawls 1987: 588). Nonetheless, I don't believe that the theoretical efficiency of the solution suggested by Rawls justifies its moral validity. From providing everyone with the same political status, through the institution of basic equal liberties for all, one cannot so easily conclude (or deduct) that the distribution of material means deserves a lower place, when questions of self-respect are involved (Rawls 1987: 588).

conditions (i.e. not exclusively political or constitutional<sup>19</sup>) drawing “a conception of justice that seeks to eliminate the significance of relative economic and social advantages as supports for men’s self-confidence” (Rawls 1987: 587).

### 3.3 ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM

#### a) Guaranteeing a “basket” of primary goods

As I have pointed out, a loss of self-esteem is possible when society allows great discrepancies in the allocation of primary goods. Rawls’ difference principle recommends – provided respect of fundamental liberties and fair equality of opportunities<sup>20</sup> – to ensure everyone a basic “basket” of goods in terms of wealth, power and self-respect. The difference principle comprises a *maximin* criterion concerning some basic goods, namely liberties and individual rights, some conditions of security, self-esteem and the satisfaction of basic material needs equally guaranteed for all. As it is well known, the principle of a guaranteed minimum doesn’t end in giving priority to the most deprived but, essentially, to the extremely poor whose basic needs for food, shelter, health and self-esteem are not met. Such a principle stems from the idea that everyone owes a decent treatment to others as well as *a limited care for the basic conditions of a decent existence*.

Nonetheless, such a *maximin* shouldn’t end in merely guaranteeing this “basket” of primary goods to the least fortunate, stigmatizing them as such (cf. supra 2.2), but rather to *all* members of society. Beyond policies of public health-care, education, etc., one way to ensure the satisfaction of basic material needs would be that of attributing a universal basic income to all, a citizenship or subsistence income. This has the advantage of offering to all some of the material means essential to the formation of a rational plan of life and to ensure the greatest real freedom to all. That is already expressed by the consideration of social primary goods, on which the social bases of self-respect rely.

#### b) Universal income, real freedom and self-esteem

Admitted that self-respect means that individuals have a solid sense of self-worth and self-confidence, which is essential to the pursuit of their goals, an unconditionally guaranteed basic income to all (which would contribute to the maximization of real freedom for all,

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<sup>19</sup> For example, I won’t deal neither with cultural nor with gender problems.

<sup>20</sup> This condition seems to me controversial in itself.



especially in terms of income) is conducive to self-respect. The principle of maximization of real freedom for all suggests that we legitimately expect that society provides, to the greatest possible extent, the objective means for happiness<sup>21</sup>. It takes into account self-respect as it meets the need for unconditionality, it dismisses means-test procedures and control of personal life<sup>22</sup>, it avoids all sense of stigmatization and humiliation to its recipients. To that extent, the principle of maximization of real freedom for all, based on the universal income that ensures a certain standard of living to all, would be preferable not only to the difference principle, but also to the whole hierarchy stemmed from it, i.e. the principle of equal liberty and the principle of equality of opportunities (see Van Parijs 1991: 188).

Considering unconditionality, universal income falls within the scope of transformative redistributions – as in Fraser’s distinction – that give priority to the universal right to social benefits specifically targeted to the poor. For this reason, universal income is more conducive to guarantee self-respect. Insofar as it avoids the stigmatization of the needy, it fosters social solidarity, which also contributes to self-respect providing recognition and social values to all. “Non-reformist reforms” (see Gorz 1964) like that of universal income (in the midway between affirmative and transformative strategies) can have cumulative effects over time that will allow not only to repair the unjust distribution of goods, but also to create real social conditions of self-respect. This would be true both individually (by avoiding stigmatization of the least fortunate) and intersubjectively or socially (by developing social solidarity).

### 3.4 SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF SELF-ESTEEM

#### **a) Rejection of the principle of perfection and participation to associations**

From a social point of view, several dimensions are to be considered in order to guarantee the social bases of self-respect. The participation of people to various associations or activities they deem rational and which are publicly appreciated by others can be regarded as a measure allowing the most disadvantaged not to feel themselves as inherently inferior to others (Rawls 1987: 481)<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> See Van Parijs 1995. This position is that of the real-libertarian theory and, more generally, that of liberalism.

<sup>22</sup> François Ost, for example, points out the expectations of dignity generated by a system of guaranteed basic income that rely on such controls. He stresses that only anchoring social provision in the unconditional affirmation of human dignity will allow to preserve their value (see Ost 1988: 246; see also 259 and 269).

<sup>23</sup> In social terms, the fact of participating to association fits the principle of political participation.

Indeed, this participation contributes to individuals' sense of self-worth and to the valorisation of these daily activities. In addition, these associative bonds enhance the second aspect of self-esteem, as they tend to lower the risk of failure by providing a response over doubts about oneself in case of difficulties. Where the internal life of these associations suitably fits its members' talents and desires, it provides a solid base to the feeling of self-worth. In fact, our plan of life determines what we are ashamed of<sup>24</sup>. The feeling of shame is *related to our aspirations*, to what we try to do, to those we wish to be associated with (see James 1890: 309 *sq.*). Consequently, it is essential to create adequate associations on the grounds of a multiplicity of interests, in order for them to fit the ideals linked to the aspirations and talents of everyone.

Thus the rejection of the principle of perfection by the parties involved in the interaction, makes possible the recognition of a variety of conceptions of the good in all activities that comply with the Aristotelian principle (and that are, of course, compatible with the principles of justice). All meritocratic bias would be avoided as well. Thus *this democratic way of reciprocally learning and assessing purposes is the foundation of self-esteem*. In public life, this allows citizens to mutually respect their purposes as well as arbitrating their political claims in such a way that doesn't destroy their self-esteem. Therefore the guarantee of the social bases of self-respect entails that everyone is able to take part to at least one community sharing his/her interests, where his/her undertakings can be appreciated by others.

#### **b) Guaranteeing primary social outcomes, “fundamental social achievements”**

Regardless of whether the approach is inspired by Rawls or Philippe van Parijs (through real freedom), the effective protection of equal liberties is expected to guarantee self-respect. Nonetheless, the approaches involving a concern over resources or opportunities for all are insufficient, especially if we aim to establish a lasting basis for self-respect. Thus for example it is not sufficient to assure everyone the “chances to acquire cultural knowledge and skills” (Rawls 1987: 104), equal opportunities of “education and cultural knowledge” (Rawls 1987: 315) or access to political life as well as various forms of social interaction (i.e. associations), as it is necessary to take into account the outcome and the situations resulted from opportunities.

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<sup>24</sup> Rawls highlights the connection between shame and self-respect (Rawls 1987: 483). Regardless of its natural or moral nature, shame comes from a feeling of a diminishment of the self. In moral shame, one is harmed by the loss of self-esteem and capacity to pursue one's goals.

Thus an approach that gives priority to “fundamental achievements” has the advantage of taking into account the possibility of individuals’ misuse of resources or opportunities of which they previously benefited. In fact, caring only about opportunities may lead to the idea that individuals with low fulfilment who benefited from equal opportunities are to be deemed responsible for their own situation. Theories of equality of resources<sup>25</sup> as well as theories of equality of opportunities<sup>26</sup> don’t exclude – neither they suggest a remedy to – the possibility of misuse of resources or opportunities by recipients. By assessing individual situation in terms of resources or opportunities, these theories don’t provide any safety net in terms of individual fulfilment.

It seems therefore necessary to identify some achievements, some “social outcomes” (Fleurbaey) or essential “primary *functionings*” that should be socially guaranteed to all and that contribute to the real conditions of self-respect<sup>27</sup>. These fundamental achievements are defined with reference to the basic dimensions of human flourishing. As Rawls suggests, “excellences”<sup>28</sup> represent the conditions of human flourishing and self-respect. The fact of holding them feeds the confidence on our self-worth<sup>29</sup>. These achievements involve in particular the main outcomes relevant to the individual’s social status and relations. Suggested by the works of M. Fleurbaey, this approach creates a sphere of responsibility still respecting agents’ freedom<sup>30</sup>, their preferences and life choices – within a pluralistic democracy –, yet without compromising their fundamental interests nor strengthening the questionable principle of meritocratic inequalities (Fleurbaey 2004: 16-17).

Individual outcomes which are deemed merely private – *i.e.* the feeling of subjective satisfaction – are neglected. By contrast, individuals are entitled to social benefits when they don’t succeed in the chosen dimensions of fulfilment. The concern for “social outcomes”

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<sup>25</sup> See Rawls (1971, 1982), Dworkin (2000), Van Parijs (1995).

<sup>26</sup> See Sen (1985a, 1987, 1992), Arneson (1989, 1990), Cohen (1989, 1990), Roemer (1996), Vallentyne (2000).

<sup>27</sup> Among the fundamental achievements to be taken into account, one might consider the possibility of developing a conception of the good and engaging oneself in a critical reflection on the planification of one’s own life; the possibility of living for and towards other human beings, expressing them one’s capacity to recognition and attention, devoting oneself to different forms of social and familial interaction; the possibility of living one’s life within an environment and a context that one has chosen (see Nussbaum 1990). As Nussbaum notes, in the short list of capabilities she proposes, a life that lacks some of these dimensions would see its human content seriously diminished, that’s why a public authority is expected to guarantee the minimal resources that will allow the citizens to satisfy their capabilities, as well as a concern for minimal achievements within these dimensions.

<sup>28</sup> That is to say, individual qualities and talents that is rational that everyone (including ourselves) wants us to have (Rawls 1987: 483). See footnote 59.

<sup>29</sup> Thus natural shame comes from an injury to our self-esteem, due to the fact that we don’t have some excellencies and that we have failed to exercise them.

<sup>30</sup> Capabilities express the dimension of freedom while present *functionings* witness the fulfilments reached by agents.

allows thereby that no one would ever be left at bay, respecting the principle of autonomy<sup>31</sup>. This approach is grounded on a certain definition of the extension of social responsibility, given that its limits are determined through duties and mutual rights of solidarity and autonomy. Principles of solidarity entail that it isn't decent to let others live in inferior (or mediocre) conditions, whether their moral responsibility may be, and they tend towards a sort of *basic social equality*. With time, social institutions will contribute to reduce high inequalities *with reference to these fulfilments* – thereby responding to the problem of disparity of relative and absolute social positions, which is a vector of self-esteem.

In the field of education, for example, it is then required not only to provide equal opportunities “of education and cultural knowledge” (Rawls) to all, but to ensure that everyone have a common culture, a basic education and culture. The idea is not to distribute educational resources by assessing the agents according to productivity criteria, but rather to take into account the *value of enrichment* of citizens' personal and social life, especially that of the most disadvantaged (Rawls 1987: 137). It would be appropriate for example to define what compulsory school should ensure to all students, to identify the basic capacities (reading, writing, counting, etc.), the general knowledge and the cognitive skills essential for living in our societies, as well as the practical skills that all students must have attained once they have finished school. Indeed, school plays a specific role in the formation of individuals as subjects capable of managing their life, building their capacities of self-confidence and trust in others (Dubet 2004: 74).

Of course, the “fundamental social achievements” approach rejects *meritocracy*, which is important to refuse in order to make possible the protection of self-respect and self-esteem. As argued by Rawls, this approach entails that we reject as citizens the criterion of perfection, that is, the reference to an absolute level of fulfilment as a political principle and that we avoid any estimation of the relative worth of others' ways of life in the name of justice (Rawls 1987: § 50). Finally, the approach based on “social outcomes” doesn't end in weaving a safety net in fundamental individual fulfilments, but it gives priority to individuals who have the lowest outcome in the dimensions considered, as high as these outcomes may be. At the end of the day, such an approach centred on “social outcomes” is more likely to respond to

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<sup>31</sup> However, it requires to limit the sphere of responsibility of people, so that agents are not necessarily able to use their autonomy the way that they might wish.

instances of solidarity and autonomy than an approach based on opportunities, capabilities or primary goods<sup>32</sup>.

## Conclusion

This analysis has shown that concerns over solidarity and related duties require self-respect to be socially considered in order to guarantee its foundations. Painful feelings and unhappiness resulting from the lack of self-esteem can therefore represent a legitimate matter for social concern. In some cases, it is clear that the fact of feeling unhappy legitimately arouses social concern, regardless of its origins (which explains the existence, in France for example, of the Centres de Clinique Psychothérapique). At the very least, it has seemed to me crucial to identify the measures and social dispositions contributing – in redistributive terms – to a minimum of individual and social fulfilments capable of positively feeding the self-respect owed to everyone. Concerns for fundamental social achievements outlined here require institutions and social policies to take directly into account the social fulfilments of agents and, indirectly, the fulfilment within private spheres of life.

These compensatory measures focus on fulfilments or individual outcomes considered in their social dimension, being recognized that individuals take responsibility for their private fulfilments (see Guibet Lafaye 2006: 143-153). Unlike that exclusively addressed to opportunities or capabilities, the approach based on fundamental social achievements takes into account the distribution of shares once everyone's fulfilments have been undertaken, in other words, at the end of distribution. That way, it rejects as an insufficient justification that provided by the notion of responsibility for the existing social inequalities or the situation of the deemed “undeserving poor” as well as the least fortunate<sup>33</sup>. It provides finally the means to reconcile the concern for redistribution with that for recognition.

## References

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the mistake of an approach centred on chances or capabilities is that of giving too much weight to past chances in spite of present chances and fulfilments. Likewise, the approach centred on resources neglects final endowments and their equal distribution.

<sup>33</sup> Highlighting the importance of responsibility in individual well-being, social institutions neglect losers.

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