

Mutual Respect and Neutrality

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Abstract: In this article, I revisit the idea of mutual respect and show that it does not run afoul of Rawls's commitment to neutrality. By neutrality, Rawls means neutrality of aim; neutrality is achieved if the aims promoted are acceptable to people regardless of their conception of the good. If this is the case, mutual respect, a value acceptable to all reasonable people, is compatible with neutrality. Meanwhile, as an appropriate reaction to the ineradicable fact of reasonable pluralism, mutual respect expresses the idea that people can understand each other and narrow their division through effective communication, which indicates that reasonable people can absorb ideas from others and revisit their own conception of the good. So mutual respect implies revisability. All in all, if we accept the fact of pluralism and hold hopes that we can reach an understanding through communication and compromise, we should accept mutual respect as a basis of political liberalism.

Introduction

In the midst of pluralism, respect for difference seemingly descends into indifference or confrontation. People insist on their own doctrine and show less interest in those of other people. In this circumstance, people are akin to islands, and each island has no connection. However, difference should not be barriers to understanding. The more differences people present, the more necessary it is for people to justify their positions to others. By doing so, they can find a common perspective or ground upon which to resolve moral disagreement. Reasonable people accept others' views, even at the cost of their own, which indicates that people are able to revise their conception of the good. In this article, I shall show that mutual respect is a neutral idea and can serve as a basis of political liberalism.

1 Mutual Respect and Reasonable Pluralism

1.1 The Fact of Pluralism and Mutual Respect

According to Rawls, moral disagreement is ineradicable. It is the result of people exercising their reason and freedom and also the background against which we begin our political thinking. If so, the subsequent question is as follows: how do we respond to moral disagreement? Different from indifferent attitude toward differences or moral skepticism, which are either arrogant or pessimistic, mutual respect stands in between as both optimistic and modest.[1] It does not guarantee that people can reach a consensus on moral issues or commit itself on objectivity. It only emphasizes that people can understand each other, narrow their disagreement, and reach a consensus to some extent through communication.

1.2 Mutual Respect and Revisability

To practice mutual respect, people should act on the principle of respecting themselves and others as beings capable of thinking. Because we are beings capable of thinking, we can understand others' views, recognize their reasonableness, and accept them at the cost of our own opinions. In this sense, mutual respect implies revisability—people have the ability to absorb ideas from others' views or doctrines and revise their own after deliberation.

Respecting others as beings capable of thinking implies that we should persuade other people through methods different from power, threat, and violence. By combining these two principles—respecting ourselves and others as beings capable of thinking—we conclude that we should persuade others through reason, remain open to different views, and be ready to revisit our own doctrines. Mutual respect functions as a

mechanism of communication and explanation, requiring us to explain our position to others when we debate.

1.3 Mutual Respect and Neutrality

Moreover, the institutionalization of mutual respect—that is, enacting measures guaranteeing that people can practice mutual respect—is in harmony with Rawls’s commitment to neutrality. Note that Rawls identifies three conceptions of neutrality: neutrality of procedure, neutrality of effect, and neutrality of aim. When he contends that states should operate on the principle of neutrality, he is referring to neutrality of aim—the requirement that “the state is not to do anything to favor any particular comprehensive doctrine rather than another or to give greater assistance to those who pursue it.”[2] All doctrines should be given equal opportunity to present themselves and attract adherents. If this requirement is met, the flourishing of some doctrines while others decline is acceptable. In short, if a background of justice is secured, we should not overreact to the spillover effect. [3]

However, Rawls is unclear on the meaning of neutrality of aim. In what sense can we say that a background of justice has been secured and that different doctrines or conceptions of the good have equal opportunity to flourish? Marneffe’s conception of neutrality of ground sheds light on this question. In his account, neutrality of ground is not violated if states promote aims or values that are acceptable to all of their people, regardless of their conceptions of the good.[4]

Considered in this light, the institutionalization of mutual respect is compatible with neutrality of ground because no reasonable objections can be raised against the value of mutual respect.

2 Mutual Respect and an Exclusive Device

2.1 Objection

Critics argue that as a method of inquiry, mutual respect is rational and reflective and excludes irrational, introspective, and religious ways of understanding the world. In other words, mutual respect has a bias toward paradigms of thinking that feature subjectiveness and introspectiveness and people who have this mindset.

This critique seems compelling. As I have shown, mutual respect implies that reasonable people can accept others’ positions and modify their own after deliberation. The institutionalization of mutual respect means that institutions are enacted to ensure that people can revise their life plans. Thus, mutual respect has a moral requirement: that people should be secured basic liberties, equal opportunities, and minimal provisions. With these basic goods, people can revise their conception of the good and implement the revised good.

Given this moral requirement, mutual respect is incompatible with doctrines that devalue or disregard basic liberties or have no ground for liberties. For example, Rawls removes several fundamentalist religious doctrines from the catalog of reasonable pluralism and counts them as unreasonable because “their principles and ideas do not satisfy the criterion of reciprocity, and in various ways they fail to establish the equal liberties.”[5]

Mutual respect as a method of inquiry and mechanism of explanation aims to guide people to seek common ground on which they can debate their differences and then reach a consensus.[6] To this aim, people should explain their positions in such a way that outsiders can understand and evaluate. Mutual respect thus includes an empirical requirement: the claims people make should be verifiable.[7] If so, mutual respect excludes doctrines that lack verifiable accounts.[8] For example, some doctrines explain the world in an irrational or introspective way, and outsiders cannot verify them through reliable methods of inquiry. Under the principle of verifiability, these doctrines and their way of thinking are regarded as worthless and excluded from public discourse.

However, for these doctrines, an absence of empirical accounts and emphasis on personal experience are essential features of the way that their adherents conduct discourse. The more unbelievable and unverifiable a proposition, the more convincing and valuable it is. As Fish says, “If you tell a serious Christian that no one can walk on water or rise from dead or feed 5,000 people with two fishes and five loaves, he or she will tell you that the impossibility of those actions for mere men is what makes their performance so powerful a sign of divinity.”[9]

According to Fish, the principle of verifiability, that people must make their accounts verifiable, is inapplicable to these doctrines. Mutual respect thus disadvantages doctrines that explain themselves in an irrational, subjective, or introspective way.

2.2 Rejoinder

However, viewing mutual respect as an exclusive device is unpersuasive. Because mutual respect is premised on the idea of respecting people as beings capable of thinking, it does not deny people's rights to express or share their personal experiences or stop people from presenting their religious or possibly mysterious experiences to outsiders. Mutual respect denies the logic that "it is rooted in my personal experience, thus it is justifiable" (alternatively, the logic can be expressed as "it is mine, thus it is good"). The rhetoric of personal experiences thus cannot exempt people from explaining their experiences to outsiders. The fact that a person's stance is rooted in his personal experience cannot excuse him from justifying his stance to outsiders. By following the logic "it is mine, thus it is justifiable," we are led to a situation in which people insist on their own position, and this makes narrowing differences and reaching consensus impossible.

The phrase "personal experience" is attractive because it suggests that people (and their experiences) are unique. However, it is so vague that we ignore its problem. In some cases of people mentioning "personal experience," their true intention is to state that their stance cannot be challenged. By stating that their stance derives from personal experiences that cannot be shared with outsiders, they justify their silence on how these experiences were obtained. Outsiders cannot enter these experiences and assess their plausibility. When outsiders cast doubt on a person's stance, the person says "you do not know what I have experienced." However, the paradox is that he obstructs outsiders from understanding his experience. In this situation, "personal experience" shields people from critique that might result from detailing their experience and making it evaluable. The appeal to private experience is a strategy designed to eschew demonstration and critique.

In fact, the meaning conveyed by "personal experience" is not that experiences cannot be shared but that "I have experiences that are different from yours." Thus, the subsequent task is to detail these experiences and demonstrate how they are unique. In this sense, even if experiences are personal, unique, or unusual, they should be accessible to outsiders, who can then evaluate whether they have had or could have similar experiences. Collin Bird says, "the grounds for disputing these claims about the bases for people's beliefs are transparent." [10] In short, although personal experiences are opaque so that outsiders—that is, those holding a different structure of beliefs—have difficulty understanding them, people should demonstrate to outsiders how exactly their experience is opaque. The rhetoric of "personal experience" cannot exempt people from explanation.

Furthermore, if people sincerely believe that "unbelievable" or "unverifiable" experiences can corroborate their faith—that is, "Since no man can do it, he who did it is more than man"—we can infer that people are willing to practice their faith. For example, if people firmly believe that two fishes and five loaves can feed 5,000 people, they would want to share scarce food with others in reality. However, few people prefer to act that way. Their unwillingness to act on what they believe indicates that they are skeptical of their belief.

However, some people may argue that my inference is too cursory. People's refusal to share two fishes and five loaves with 5,000 people is not indicative of their disbelief but their belief in that story. It is only He who can do so, and for ordinary people, His power is inaccessible. This is why ordinary people cannot act on the belief that "less food can feed more people." If this is the case, they actually admit that their belief and experiences on their own cannot require outsiders to believe. The principle of verifiability is still required when people impose their positions on others.

References

- [1] Larmore also mentions the importance of respect in liberalism. Refer to his "The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 96, No. 12 (Dec., 1999): 599-625. I use the phrase "mutual respect" herein to emphasize that respect has two dimensions: respect for oneself and respect for others. "Mutual" sends a message that "respect" is a mechanism of communication and interaction. Despite using different phrases, I agree with Larmore that respect serves the role of seeking a common ground on which people can debate and narrow their differences.
- [2] Rawls, "The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Autumn, 1988): 262.
- [3] In Tomasi's account, the spillover effect refers to "homogenizing effects of liberal doctrine and practice from the public to no public spheres." See Tomasi, "Political Liberalism." in *Liberalism beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 16.

- [4] Please refer to Peter De Marneffe, "Liberalism, Liberty, and Neutrality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1990): 253.
- [5] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 172-3. These doctrine include "the doctrine of the divine right of monarchs and the various forms of aristocracy... and many instances of autocracy and dictatorship" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 172-3).
- [6] Thompson and Gutmann also understand mutual respect as a method of inquiry, that is, a method for carrying out our discussion on mutually acceptable terms. Mutual respect is critical because it establishes a framework in which people can communicate effectively and reach a minimal consensus on highly controversial topics. See "The Persistence of Moral Disagreement," in *Democracy and Disagreement*. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 11-51.
- [7] This does not mean that any claim people make should be verifiable, which goes too far and unduly places a burden on discourse. I mean that if we want to persuade others on issues that divide us, we should provide arguments that they can evaluate.
- [8] Fish reminds us that for some doctrines, "the absence of a plausible empirical account is the point, one that does not challenge the faith but confirms it." Please refer to his "Mutual Respect as a Device of Exclusion," In Macedo (ed.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 94. However, this type of reasoning is incompatible with mutual respect that features empirical verifiability.
- [9] Fish, "Mutual Respect as a Device of Exclusion," p. 94.
- [10] Collin Bird, "Mutual Respect and Neutral Justification," *Ethics*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (Oct., 1996): 75.