

Life Value and Social Justice

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Since its publication in 1971, John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* has defined the terrain of political philosophical debate concerning the principles, scope, and material implications of social justice. Social justice for Rawls concerns the principles that govern the operation of major social institutions. Major social institutions structure the lives of citizens by regulating access to the resources and opportunities that the formulation and realization of human projects require. Rawls' theory of social justice regards major institutions as just when they distribute what he calls "primary goods" in a manner that he regards as egalitarian. Hence, the subsequent social justice debate has been shaped by and large as a debate about the meaning and implications of egalitarianism. While on the surface a debate about egalitarianism as a distributional principle seems to uncover the core problem of social justice—how much of what everyone should get as a matter of right—the entire history of the debate has been conducted in abstraction from what matters most to people's lives. It is as a corrective to such abstractions that the life-value approach to social justice has been developed.

In this introduction I have three aims. First, I will substantiate the claim that the debate over social justice that has dominated political philosophy from Rawls until the present is abstracted from what ultimately matters. Second, I will provide a concise conceptual history of the development of life-value onto-axiology, defining its key terms and providing an overview of its importance for social justice. Finally, I will provide a brief discussion of the unifying principle of this special issue and each of the four papers that make it up.

Primary Goods, Equality, and Life-Value

I claimed above that the mainstream philosophical debate concerning social justice initiated by Rawls is abstracted from what matters most to humanity. In order to substantiate this claim it is necessary to begin with a discussion of Rawls' theory itself. For Rawls social justice concerns the principles that regulate the way in which major social institutions distribute what he calls "primary goods." Primary goods are "things that every rational man is presumed to want. These goods normally have a

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use whatever a person's plan of life. For simplicity's sake, assume that the chief primary goods at the disposition of society are rights, liberties and opportunities, and wealth and income" (Rawls, 1999, p. 54). These are to be distributed according to two principles of social justice, and the principles interpreted according to the "difference principle." The two principles of justice are: "Each person is to have equal rights to the most extensive share of equal liberties compatible with a similar scheme for others. Second, social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and b) attached to positions and offices open to all" (Rawls, 1999, p. 53). The difference principle decisively affects the concrete application of these principles to the distributions of primary goods. It maintains that inequalities are permissible as incentives to the wealthy to act so as to ensure that the "economic process is more efficient, [and] innovation proceeds at a faster pace," and, in general, becomes more productive, creating more wealth overall, and therefore a larger pool of resources for the poorer members of society (Rawls, 1999, p. 68).

Widely assumed to be a depth critique of American capitalist society upon its publication, with some going so far as to believe it socialist, Rawls argument is still a touchstone of egalitarian critiques of the prevailing socio-economic system (Gutman, 1999, p. 17). Nevertheless, a close investigation of its key terms reveals that it is neither critical nor egalitarian in a way that would make a material difference to the goodness of the lives of the least well off members of society. The crucial problem is that neither Rawls nor his most famous interlocutors in the debate ever question, or even define, the ruling money-value system of the global capitalist market. Instead, the legitimacy of this value system is presupposed, and debate confined to arguments over what amount of money should be redistributed from rich to poor, while the deeper problem of control over and use of life-sustaining and life-developing resources is never even broached.

In illustration of this problem consider Rawls' definition of primary goods. The problem with this definition encapsulates the problem of the subsequent debate. Quite simply, the problem with the definition is that it confuses goods that are primary values within the capitalist market system with goods that are primary values to human life. In liberal-capitalist society rights, liberties, and income *appear* primary, because they are the means by which the system reproduces and legitimates itself. Human life, by contrast, reproduces itself through collective labour in the natural field of life-support through which the resources our lives require are appropriated or produced. Different systems of collective labour are legitimate or not according to whether they enable everyone to satisfy their life requirements. Real primary goods are the resources, practices, institutions, and relationships that support and enable life-activity. Contra Rawls, therefore, primary goods are not relative to particular social systems, and it is not rational to want them in unlimited amounts, but only in those amounts sufficient for purposes of life-maintenance and development. Unlimited demand for life-requirements is materially irrational because appropriation of scarce life-goods at unsustainable levels undermines the very possibility of on-going life.

Rather than capture that which is fundamental to social justice, Rawls confuses the system-values of a liberal-capitalist society with primary life-values, and normalizes the pathological demand for endless accumulation as "rational" regardless of the

actual extent of one's own or others' need. Instead of defining and explicating what is actually primary to embodied rational life—the resources, relationships, institutions, and practices which support life and enable the development of its vital capacities—Rawls assumes as primary the prevailing system-values, even though these are demonstrably destructive of the natural system of life-support and billions of peoples' lives within different human societies. People's lives are destroyed because the ecosystems they depend upon are destroyed or because they cannot afford to pay the money-price attached to commodified life-requirements. Yet, as his invocation of the difference principle proves, Rawls premises the possibility of social justice not on the spread of a commitment to egalitarianism in society, but to the unfettered growth of money-value—precisely the *cause* of the problem his theory is supposed to address.

As I have noted, Rawls' theory has not been uncontroversial and it has given rise to a host of sympathetic critiques. The best of those critiques, by Sen, Pogge, and Cohen focus on the ways in which Rawls ignores the question of what people are actually able to do and achieve, his failure to consider the problems of the global distribution of wealth, and the contradiction between his professed egalitarianism and the difference principle (Cohen, 1989, 2008; Pogge, 1989, 2008; Sen, 1992, 1999, 2009). As important as these arguments have been in exposing the complexity of the philosophical and political problems posed by the goal of equality, they too all fail to supply the key principle missing from the entire debate: precise specification of a criterion by which to distinguish the resources, relationships, institutions, and practices that justice demands people have access to, from the values that liberal-capitalist society depends upon for its reproduction. This criterion can only be discovered if philosophy understands people not as atomic, self-maximizing consumers, as in classical liberalism and neo-classical economics, but as organically and socially interdependent members of natural fields of life-support and social fields of life-development.

All are silent on this key issue because all begin from unquestioned acceptance of the prevailing value system as ultimate rather than the universal value system grounded in the natural and social systems of life-support and development. Life-value onto-axiology, in contrast, distinguishes itself from existing value theories and social and political philosophies by uncovering and systematically explicating this real *life-ground of value*. It is from this life-ground of value, that the life-value theory of social justice derives, and its systematic explanation and application is the focus of this special issue of the journal.

The life-ground of value, in the most general terms, is everything that is required for the survival and development of human and ecological life and their life-support systems. Subjectively, it is “the connection of life to life's requirements as a felt bond of being” (McMurtry, 1998, p. 23). As is evident, the life-ground of value is deeper than the ruling value system of any society since it underlies the possibility and value of all life, not just human. It becomes relevant for theories of social justice as the objective basis by which goods which are of ultimate value because they are required for the maintenance and development of this life—as distinguished from system-values which allow a given social system to replicate and grow at the cumulative cost of human and planetary existence. That which the life-ground of value distinguishes as of ultimate value are life-requirements, or needs. Life-requirements may be distinguished from consumer demands according to what

McMurtry has called the N-criterion: those resources, relationships, practices and institutions whose deprivation causes harm in the form of loss of organic life-capacity. (McMurtry, 1998, p. 164). From this life-grounded standpoint social justice requires that the ruling value system of any society ensure the universal life-necessities for all.

While other attempts have been made to define needs and posit their satisfaction as the basis of social justice, none of them have formulated a precise criterion of need, nor, in the case of human needs, successfully integrated the natural and social dimensions of human existence, nor, most importantly, uncovered the deeper life-ground within which human needs are anchored (See for example, Braybrooke, 1987; Doyal & Gough, 1991; Hamilton, 2006; Lebowitz, 2010). The exemplary significance of life-value onto-axiology is thus not just that it supplies a criterion of need missing in other theories of social justice, but that it grounds social justice in universal life-needs and the capacities that they and only they enable. The comprehensive value theory undergirding the life-value understanding of social justice further supersedes the antitheses of nature and society, individual and community, life-requirements and life-capacities.

This comprehensive value theory attains its fullest explication and defence in McMurtry's "What is Good, What is Evil: The Value of all Values Across Times, Places, and Theories" in the Encyclopaedia of Life-Support Systems. (EOLSS) (McMurtry, 2010). The EOLSS is the world's most comprehensive encyclopaedia of disciplinary and technical knowledges and has evolved to provide all that is required for the maintenance and development of life across divisions. What McMurtry's far-reaching work shows *inter alia* is a blindness within philosophy to what is self-evident once it has been uncovered: that life is both a presupposition of value (in the sense that creatures must be alive to experience or accomplish anything) and valuable in itself in the ranges of life enjoyed which can be more or less comprehensive. There are two essential forms of *life-value*: the *instrumental or ultimate* value of that which sustains and enables life, and the *intrinsic value* of the enjoyed expressions of the life-capacities of feeling, thought, and action (McMurtry, 2010, p.74). Both are comprehended under the *primary value axiom: X is of value if and only if and to the extent that x consists in or enables a more coherently inclusive range of thought/experience/action* (2010, p.73). The qualifier "more coherently inclusive range" is essential to the success of life-value onto-axiology in overcoming the antitheses into which other theories fall.

Theories of social justice which are not anchored in consciousness of the life-ground of value tend to set the natural and social dimensions of human being at odds with each other, or see the relationship between human individuals and social organization as one of opposition and threat, or fail to properly explicate the organic relationship between life-requirement satisfaction and life-capacity development. Productivist interpretations of Marxism which link the achievement of social justice to the creation of a socialist society, and understand socialist society as removing the "fetters" on the growth of the productive forces are paradigm examples of the first problem. All social life depends upon the natural field of life-support, a fact ignored by Marxist theory to the extent that it treats nature and other life as *nothing but raw material for the satisfaction of human needs understood as culturally appropriate levels of demand satisfaction*. This problem has its roots in Marx's own inability to

rigorously distinguish life-requirements from ever-growing consumer demands (Marx, 1973, p. 163). In life-value axiology, by contrast, life-valuable levels of social productivity are determined by the concrete principle of life-sufficiency: a just society does not seek unlimited material abundance but sufficiency of resources to the purpose of universal and comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements.

The second problem is exemplified in liberal theories of social justice which, because they assume individuals are atomic abstractions arrayed in competitive relations with others, cannot coherently reconcile individual goals and social institutions and regulating principles. Nussbaum's version of the "capabilities approach" to social justice is a paradigm case. Nussbaum correctly understands human beings as both "capable and needy" and understands need satisfaction as instrumental to the expression and enjoyment of human capacities in a "flourishing life." (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 75). She nevertheless maintains that human beings are essentially separate from each other such that their primary concern is maintaining their "liberty." From this doctrine of the separateness of persons she infers the practical conclusion that "economic needs should not be met by denying liberty" (2000, p. 12). For life-value onto-axiology the opposition between satisfying economic needs and denying liberties does not arise, because human beings are not considered as essentially separate from each other, but interrelated and interdependent within the natural and social fields of life-support and life-development. Socially produced wealth is a collective creation of human beings labouring in a natural world they did not create. As a collective product, social wealth is properly understood as *common* wealth to be used for the sake of universal and comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements. Individuality is enabled by each persons access to the universal life means and goods. In this view life-valuable liberty grows out of or emerges from this shared commitment to universal and comprehensive need-satisfaction. Liberty of a life-valuable form is thus never threatened by collective efforts to ensure life-requirements are satisfied, because liberty in any meaningful sense presupposes such satisfaction. The real threat to liberty in the life-valuable sense comes from the opposite direction: the private accumulation of money-wealth not serving anyone's life-need and attained through life-blind economic processes.

The final opposition which life-value onto-axiology resolves is between life-requirement satisfaction and life-capacity development. Both liberal and socialist theories of social justice which concern themselves with life-requirement satisfaction do so in the name of some undefined conception of human flourishing or the realization of human potential. But neither liberal nor socialist theories have any means coherent with their premises of specifying limits to capacity realization. Liberals, fearful of charges of tyrannical limits to individual liberty, leave the direction of capacity realization entirely up to the arbitrary preferences of private individuals, or more deeply, the life-value indifferent system which leaves little choice for most people.

Sen for example thus feels that social justice is an institutional arrangement which enables people to live in the ways they have "reason to value" without saying anything further about what those reasons are or the content of the values those reasons support (Sen, 1999, p. 87). His position is thus left open to the objection that not all lives that people have reason to value are good lives, either because the life contributes nothing good to the world or because it actively makes things worse for

others. Marxists too fall into a similar trap with loose and ungrounded talk about unlimited realization of potential. Michael Lebowitz, who has done much to defend a non-dogmatic humanist Marxism defends socialism on the basis of the claim that it enables the all-round development of human capacities, without noting that the *all-round* development of human capacities does not coherently exclude their development in life-destructive ways (Lebowitz, 2010, p. 43). While it might seem obvious once disclosed, the point must nevertheless be explicitly made, that life-valuable modes of capacity expression and enjoyment is distinct from *full* capacity realization, because the life-valuable forms are limited by considerations of the life-interests of other creatures and human beings. Individual modes of capacity expression which worsen the natural and social fields without which no capacities at all can be expressed are objectively self-undermining. Life-grounded social justice therefore requires what McMurtry calls the *life-coherence principle* to establish the materially rational limits to individual and system demands. Hence social justice does not create the conditions for unlimited capacity expression, but capacity expression which enables planetary and human life as a whole (McMurtry, 2010, p. 97).

This “life-coherence principle” as the ultimate ruling value of a socially just society has not been easily won. It is the outcome of a philosophical struggle that McMurtry began 40 years ago through overland travels across over 80 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. He was progressively moved to understand the depth reasons behind the impoverishment and deprivation of people’s lives that he observed in his journey. Initially, McMurtry sought for an understanding of those causes in Marxism. Yet, as he systematically worked through Marx’s texts, he became struck by the way in which considerations of life-need and life-capacity were increasingly displaced in favour of so-called “laws of motion” of capitalist society and the growth of the forces of production as the mechanical, and morally meaningless, driving force of historical development (McMurtry, 1978). The limitations of Marxism prompted McMurtry to reflect upon the broader history of philosophy, a history which he discovered was marked by silence about the ultimate problem of human life-organization: what serves life, what destroys life, and what the systemic social blockages to understanding this difference are (McMurtry, 1979, 1981, 1988, 1989). The actual turn towards an explicit theorization of the life-ground of value, the real origin of life-value onto-axiology, did not occur until 1998 and the publication of *Unequal Freedoms*. From that point on he has elaborated it in two subsequent books, numerous journal articles, and, most comprehensively and importantly, in the Theme Essay for UNESCO’s *Encyclopaedia of Life-Support Systems*, “What is Good: What is Evil: The Value of all Values Across Times, Places, and Theories” (McMurtry, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2010). The articles collected in this special issue of *Studies in Social Justice*, including McMurtry’s comprehensive contribution, continue the process of elaborating and spelling out life-value onto-axiology’s central importance to the solution of the most pressing theoretical and practical social and political problems in the contemporary world.

The Papers

The collection begins with the lead essay by McMurtry. This lead essay provides a brief historical account of the development of life-value onto-axiology for readers unfamiliar with it, develops clear explanations of its core concepts, and, most importantly, extends his previous work on human rights into constructing a systematic life-value understanding of social justice (McMurtry, 2011). Unlike the competing theories discussed above, the life-value theory of social justice begins from that which truly is primary: the natural and social requirements without which human life can neither survive nor develop. McMurtry's article patiently works through the limitations of so-called "pro-life" advocacy both liberal theory and classical Marxism, but it reserves its most formidable critical energies to expose and combat the real enemy of social justice: the underlying money-value regime of the "global corporate rights system." Internalized as the unquestioned and unquestionable value paradigm governing public and private behaviour, it mandates as "good" the instrumentalization of all that exists as means for the maximal production and accumulation of money-value for corporate entities (with a definitive criterial account of what a "corporation" exactly is in law and practice). Richly illustrated with real-world examples, McMurtry's contribution lays bare the systematic threat absolutist corporate rights pose to the world, but also, and more importantly, the underlying life-value alternative of society's organizing rights. This alternative is not based on theoretical abstraction but on our real life-ground that includes the air we breathe, the water and land we live from and the public, civil commons institutions we have built.

The subsequent three essays apply the key concepts of life-value onto-axiology to important practical dimensions of social justice—the food system, education, and human rights in international law. Three of the authors: Jennifer Sumner, Howard Woodhouse, and Giorgio Baruchello, are leading figures in the development and explication of the theory and practice of life-grounded social justice. The fourth author, Rachael Lorna Johnstone lends her expertise in international law in a collaborative effort to bring life-value onto-axiology to bear on the legal side of human rights theory and practice. All, with the exception of Johnstone, have published widely on core aspects of life-value philosophy previously (Baruchello, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Sumner, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Woodhouse, 2001, 2001a, 2003, 2003a, 2005, 2009, forthcoming). The first two papers argue that advancing the cause of social justice requires that the food system and the educational system become civil commons institutions. As civil commons institutions they would be governed by the goal of universal provision and protection of life-requirements and life-standards. In each case their life-value as civil commons institutions is threatened by privatization and instrumentalization by the ruling money-value system. In the third paper, Baruchello works for the first time with international human rights expert Rachael Lorna Johnstone in a first foray to link together the concepts of (life) value and (human) rights, demonstrating that international law already has a language for life-value and that a nuanced appreciation of the latter concept amongst human rights specialists can bring about a more effective interpretation and implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

Sumner's essay continues her important work on the global food system. Her paper asks what a socially just food system would look like. As she demonstrates, the present global food system treats food as a commodity and its value as the money-profit returns it generates, primarily for large corporate agribusinesses. This corporate food system is indifferent to the nutritional value of the food it produces, to whether people can afford to pay for its food-commodities, and the life-conditions of farmers and farm workers which produce for it. Since all who require nutritious food cannot access it under the ruling corporate food-commodity system, it cannot be socially just. Social justice from the life-value perspective demands the comprehensive satisfaction of universal life-requirements for the sake of people's wider and deeper expression and enjoyment of their life-capacities. Hence, a socially just food system, Sumner concludes, must be grounded in local control over arable lands, crops, and distribution systems and be governed by the overriding goal of sustainable provision of nutritious and healthy food as what each and all of their lives require. In other words, social justice demands that the food system function as a civil commons institution in which people are brought together in a spirit of cooperation and organized, shared commitment to the goal of ensuring the universal satisfaction of our basic need for healthy food.

As essential as our need for healthy food is, our human nature is not realized by its provision alone. Human nature is integrally natural and social. As food and water are to our body, so is education to our mind: the fundamental condition of its health and development. Education is the most fundamental socio-cultural institutional requirement for the development of the cognitive and imaginative capacities that are the foundation for all humanly creative activity. In his paper Woodhouse defends the life-value of education as a civil commons institution, exposing the threat posed to it by the subjugation of higher education to corporate-market values. Woodhouse does not simply defend philosophical claims in the abstract, but makes his case through a discussion of an attempt to realize life-value principles of social justice by higher education outside of administration control. Woodhouse's essay examines the efforts of academics and community members to build the "People's Free University of Saskatchewan" as an alternative to the increasingly corporatized agenda of the University of Saskatchewan. His paper illustrates the ways in which civil commons institutions bind people together in pursuit of their shared life-interests, but also the difficulties the attempt to extend the logic of the civil commons—unpriced provision of necessary life-goods and services—faces in the concrete social conditions which currently prevail.

One fundamental reason why it is so difficult to extend the logic of civil commons provision, even when it is clear to everyone that this logic is not only morally sound, but practically superior to market models of production and distribution, is because the typical interpretation of rights upon which the public morality of liberal-capitalism rests assumes that all collective action, from above or below, compromises individual freedom. Nevertheless, picking up on a theme from McMurtry, Baruchello and Johnstone examine the nature and implications of international human rights law, in particular the ICESCR and interpret it from a life-value perspective. This binding treaty includes, amongst others, clearly defined rights to "adequate food" (substantively more than a right "not to be hungry") and "education... directed to the full development of the human personality" (ICESCR,

articles 11 and 13), the themes addressed by Sumner and Woodhouse. What the authors find is a comprehensive set of life-necessities recognized in international law and endorsed by no less than 160 of 192 United Nations member states, including the liberal economies of the entire European area and Canada. Nonetheless, the authors recognize that these rights are not universally enjoyed in practice and examine the competing conceptions of value that hinder their fulfilment, not least the political ambivalence towards any substantial redistribution of resources, which shields itself behind a competing “right” to private property, a right that is not itself protected in either of the principal international human rights treaties, the ICECSR or the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The paper, written in light of the austerity packages sweeping the developed world, thus emphasizes the potential for protection of the life-ground that is offered by international human rights law, even as conceived of as consisting of individual entitlements. Moreover, they argue that McMurtry’s life-value framework provides a coherent model to evaluate state performance under the treaty.

Together these four papers provide a systematic account of social justice from the life-grounded standpoint. The importance of the life-value perspective grows in proportion to the severity of life-crises our world faces. These life-crises affect the natural conditions of planetary life in general, and the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of good human lives in particular. The papers printed herein provide the theoretical and conceptual resources needed to understand the depth causes of these crises, and the practical tools which any efficacious solutions will require.

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