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A Theoretical Analysis of Justice and Democracy in a Plural Society: Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls on Justification and Pluralism

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Abstract

This article examines John Rawls's understanding of liberty and justice concepts and considers its significance for democratic life in pluralistic societies, placing it in critical dialogue with Jürgen Habermas's theory of justification and discourse ethics. In *A Theory of Justice* and later in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls develops the idea of "justice as fairness," presenting society as a fair system of cooperation among free and equal citizens. Through the device of the original position, he articulates principles designed to secure basic liberties while ensuring social equality under conditions of reasonable pluralism. Habermas, however, challenges aspects of Rawls's framework while simultaneously extending it. In *Between Facts and Norms*, he shifts the focus from hypothetical agreement to the procedural foundations of democratic legitimacy, arguing that valid norms emerge through processes of rational deliberation and communicative action. For Habermas, legitimacy depends less on a prior consensus and more on ongoing public justification within inclusive deliberative institutions. Both theorists seek to explain how democratic norms can be justified in societies shaped by deep moral and cultural diversity. Whereas Rawls emphasizes political consensus grounded in public reason, Habermas locates legitimacy in intersubjective communication and discursive will-formation. Their comparison highlights complementary yet distinct pathways for sustaining justice, stability, and democratic legitimacy without resorting to a comprehensive moral doctrine, demonstrating their continued importance for contemporary political theory.

Keywords: John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, Pluralism, Justice, Democracy

1. Introduction

John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas stand among the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, both seeking to provide a normative foundation for justice and democracy in pluralistic societies. Despite their shared commitment to reason, freedom, and equality, they diverge in their conceptions of justification and the role of public discourse in achieving a legitimate democratic order.

John Rawls was a central figure in twentieth-century moral and political philosophy and a major representative of the liberal tradition. His most influential contribution, developed in *A Theory of Justice*, is the account of a just liberal society known as "justice as fairness." Drawing on the social contract tradition, Rawls argues that justice—

particularly distributive justice—should be understood as fairness, meaning that social goods are distributed according to principles that free and equal persons would choose under impartial conditions.

Rawls's project seeks to reconcile the competing claims of liberty and equality by identifying principles capable of structuring a well-ordered society. To do so, he introduces the thought experiment of the original position, in which individuals deliberate behind a "veil of ignorance" that prevents them from knowing their social status, talents, or personal advantages. Under these fair conditions, Rawls contends, rational agents would endorse two principles of justice: first, the principle of equal basic liberties for all citizens; and second, the difference principle, which permits social and economic inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged members of society. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls further develops his theory in response to the fact of reasonable pluralism in modern democratic societies. Recognizing enduring moral and cultural diversity, he introduces the idea of public reason, arguing that political principles must be justified in terms accessible and acceptable to citizens who hold diverse comprehensive doctrines. Through this shift, Rawls aims to secure the stability and legitimacy of liberal democracy without appealing to any single moral or religious worldview.

Jürgen Habermas is widely regarded as one of the most influential contemporary philosophers and social theorists. For Habermas, moral principles are fundamentally principles of justice, but unlike John Rawls, he grounds justice and political legitimacy in communicative rationality and discourse ethics. Rather than deriving principles from a hypothetical contract, Habermas argues that democratic legitimacy arises from intersubjective processes of public deliberation in which norms acquire validity through the rational agreement of free and equal participants.

At the core of Habermas's theory is the idea that law and political authority are legitimate only when they can be justified within inclusive and undistorted communicative practices. The central question, therefore, is how a free and autonomous political order can be realized under conditions of coercive law, and how reason can be employed to justify the exercise of political power.

The dialogue between Rawls and Habermas reveals a key philosophical tension within pluralistic democracies: the tension between consensus and communication as sources of legitimacy. While Rawls emphasizes overlapping consensus and public reason as the basis of stability, Habermas locates legitimacy in ongoing deliberative processes. Despite their differences, both thinkers seek to reconcile freedom, equality, and democratic legitimacy without appealing to a single comprehensive moral doctrine. Their complementary perspectives offer enduring insights into how modern democratic societies can sustain justice, stability, and mutual respect amid deep moral and cultural diversity. In pluralistic modern democracies, citizens cannot be expected to agree about social norms based on common allegiance to religious doctrines concerning persons or society, and both philosophers thus engage fundamental questions about how a binding framework for the public use of reason might be possible and justifiable. (Hedrick,2010,1).

This paper examines John Rawls's conception of liberty and explains how it is justified within his broader framework of justice as fairness. It analyzes the structure and normative grounding of his two principles of justice, clarifying how they aim to secure equal basic liberties while regulating social and economic inequalities. Particular attention is given to the relationship between justice and democracy in pluralistic liberal societies, assessing the conditions under which political liberalism can achieve stability in a Rawlsian framework. A central concern of the paper is how consensus is possible in a multicultural society marked by diverse and often conflicting comprehensive doctrines. By examining Rawls's ideas of public reason and overlapping consensus, the study explores how citizens can endorse shared political principles without abandoning their moral or cultural commitments. Finally, the paper turns to Jürgen Habermas to provide a comparative perspective. Through this comparison, it seeks to deepen the analysis of the public sphere, multiculturalism, and the role of public reason and communicative justification in democratic legitimacy. This dialogue highlights both convergences and tensions between Rawls's political liberalism and Habermas's discourse-theoretical approach.

2. Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative methodology to examine the political philosophies of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Its primary method consists of close textual analysis of their major works, including *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, as well as Habermas's writings on discourse ethics and communicative rationality, particularly *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. In addition, relevant secondary sources—such as peer-reviewed journal articles, encyclopedia entries, and critical commentaries—are examined to situate the analysis within broader scholarly debates.

The research is structured around a comparative framework organized along four principal dimensions: (1) conceptions of justice and liberty; (2) the role of reason in democratic justification; (3) approaches to legitimacy under conditions of pluralism; and (4) the substantive versus procedural foundations of political morality. Through systematic comparison, the study identifies both convergences and divergences between Rawls and Habermas, clarifying their distinct yet overlapping contributions to contemporary democratic theory. This study employs conceptual analysis to elucidate key notions such as the original position, justice as fairness, public reason, and discourse ethics. This methodological approach enables a careful evaluation of the normative implications of each framework and assesses their practical relevance for sustaining justice, legitimacy, and stability in pluralistic democratic societies.

3. John Rawls: A Theory of Justice

3.1. John Rawls: *Basic Structure of Society*

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1971) introduces the idea of justice as fairness, grounded in the hypothetical “original position” and the “veil of ignorance.” This construct allows rational individuals to choose principles of justice without knowledge of their social status, ensuring impartiality and fairness. Rawls sought to provide a moral foundation for a liberal democratic system where individual freedom and social equality coexist. He proposed that a just society is one whose principles would be chosen by rational individuals under fair conditions, rather than determined by social status, wealth, or power. The two principles derived from this position—the equal basic liberties principle and the difference principle seek to reconcile liberty with equality. Justice as fairness is Rawls's theory of justice for a liberal society. He holds that justice as fairness is the most egalitarian and the most plausible interpretation of liberalism's fundamental concepts. Rawls continued to rework justice as fairness throughout his life, restating the theory in *Political Liberalism* (1993), *The Law of Peoples* (1999), and *Justice as Fairness* (2001). In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls (1993) responds to the problem of moral pluralism, arguing that the legitimacy of political institutions in a democratic society depends on citizens' adherence to public reason, which provides a shared framework for justifying political decisions without relying on any comprehensive moral doctrine. Rawls sees justice as fair as answering to the demands of both freedom and equality. (Rawls,1993)

John Rawls was deeply influenced by Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, which played a central role in both his teaching and theoretical work. Drawing on Kantian ideas of autonomy and moral equality, Rawls sought to provide citizens with a framework through which they could understand themselves as free and equal participants in a fair democratic order. His project envisions a stable and just constitutional democracy that not only secures domestic justice but also contributes responsibly to a peaceful international community. Justice as fairness is intended to articulate the proper organization of the major political and social institutions of a liberal society—its political constitution, legal system, economic arrangements, and family structure. Together, these institutions constitute what Rawls calls the “basic structure” of society, since they fundamentally shape individuals' life prospects and opportunities. For the sake of theoretical clarity, Rawls assumes a self-sufficient and closed society, in which individuals enter only by birth and exit only at death. Within such a society, citizens inevitably hold diverse moral, religious, and philosophical commitments, leading to differing views about how institutions should be designed and reformed. To secure their support, Rawls must therefore provide a justification that they can reasonably accept despite their differences. As Thomas Pogge (2007, p. 43) notes, Rawls's task is to offer a public and political justification capable of persuading citizens who affirm competing conceptions of the good, thereby grounding social cooperation on principles they can endorse as fair.

3.2. John Rawls: *The original position*

The original position aims to move from these abstract conceptions to determinate principles of social justice. The original position is a hypothetical situation in which free, rational, and equal individuals come together to decide on the fundamental principles of social cooperation. It serves as a modern reinterpretation of the social contract tradition, drawing inspiration from thinkers such as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant, but formulated within the framework of moral and political constructivism rather than natural law.

In the original position, Rawls employs the famous “veil of ignorance” to ensure impartiality and fairness in the decision-making process. Behind this veil, individuals are deprived of all knowledge of their personal characteristics and social positions—such as class, race, gender, talents, or conception of the good (Rawls, 1971). Rawls develops what he claims are principles of justice through the use of an artificial device he calls the original position, in which everyone decides principles of justice from behind a veil of ignorance. The original position is an imaginary situation in which each real citizen has a representative, and all these representatives come to an agreement on which principles of justice should order the political institutions of the real citizens. No one knows his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like. Besides that, the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities.

The principles of justice are chosen behind a veil of ignorance. If an individual does not know how he will end up in his own conceived society, he is likely not going to privilege any one class of people. No one is advantaged or disadvantaged over the other. In conditions of scarcity, people with similar interests and needs have competing interests regarding the distribution of goods that many want. It regards people as both free and equal and as capable of acting both reasonably and rationally (Paul, 1985, p.379). The original position thus serves not as a historical event, but as a theoretical model of justification. It provides a framework through which citizens can reason about justice in a pluralistic democracy, offering an objective standpoint for evaluating the fairness of social institutions.

In justice as fairness, Rawls calls this reasonableness the capacity for a *sense of justice*. The conditions assuring such fairness include the equal right of the participants to determine the principles of justice as well as their freedom both to design the institutions that will govern them and to select a determined conception of the good for themselves. In the original position, parties are deprived of any bargaining advantage due to natural contingency (Paul, 1985, p.381). As a result, under equal conditions, decisions of the people will serve the interests of everyone, and justice will be explained as fairness.

Rawls aims to propose a public criterion of justice that citizens can understand and apply together in a transparent way to all questions concerning the basic structure of society. The primary goods are certain basic rights and liberties such as freedom of thought, speech, assembly, movement, conscience, free choice of occupations, powers and prerogatives of offices, income and wealth, and self-respect. Access to as many of these primary goods as possible is supposed to be advantageous to all citizens, important for the development and exercise of their two moral powers as well as for the realization of whatever lower-order interests each may have (Pogge, 2007, p.73). Primary goods are related to the concept of justice. Rawls derives his account of *primary goods* from the conception of the citizen as free and equal, reasonable, and rational. Primary goods are essential for developing and exercising the two moral powers (Leif, 2012, p.1). People will choose a principle that regulates that all primary social goods be distributed equally unless distribution would be to everyone's advantage (Paul, 1985, p.382). People in an original position would decide justice as fairness so that all primary goods will be distributed equally and basic liberties will be secured. Rawls only attempts to show that his two principles of justice would be favored over utilitarian principles, since he sees utilitarianism as the main competing tradition of reasoning about justice.

Classical utilitarianism, the nineteenth-century theory of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds the philosophy of “the greatest good of the greatest number.” Rawls focuses on the benefits of the individuals, while the utilitarian view focuses on the benefits of society. Rawls's view of “justice as fairness” remains central to contemporary political philosophy. Justice as fairness applies only to the basic structure of society and is not dependent upon any sectarian assumption (Olsaretti, 2004, p.12). ‘Justice as fairness’ also implies that the principles

of justice apply equally to all individuals (Rawls, 1971, p. 11). These principles must be decided upon in such a way as to benefit all individuals and not be merely designed to favor the interests of a particular group of individuals over another group of individuals.

3.3. The Two Principles of Justice as Fairness

3.3.1 The First Principle of Justice

In John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness, the first principle regulates basic rights and liberties, the principle of fair equality of opportunity governs access to social positions, and the difference principle addresses the distribution of income and wealth. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls formulates the first principle as follows: *"Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all"* (1971, p. 53). The basic liberties include political liberty (such as the right to vote and run for office), freedom of speech and assembly, liberty of conscience and freedom of thought, the right to hold personal property, and freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention. These liberties define the status of citizens as free and equal participants in democratic life. Although basic liberties may sometimes appear to conflict, Rawls maintains that any adjustment among them must aim at securing the most extensive and coherent system of equal liberties for everyone. Importantly, while private property is protected as a basic liberty, ownership of the means of production is not guaranteed in the same way.

Rawls also emphasizes that these rights must be effectively secured in practice. A society that fails to protect the equal liberties of disadvantaged groups—whether defined by gender, minority status, or socioeconomic marginalization—does not satisfy the first principle of justice. Furthermore, Rawls introduces a "priority rule," according to which the principles of justice are lexically ordered. This means that the first principle has priority over the second: basic liberties cannot be compromised for the sake of economic advantages or greater aggregate welfare. Liberty may be limited only for the sake of protecting liberty itself, thereby ensuring that fundamental rights are not subordinated to considerations of efficiency or social gain.

3.3.2. The Second Principle of Justice

In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), John Rawls sets out two fundamental principles intended to regulate the basic structure of a just society. While the first principle secures equal basic liberties, the Second Principle of Justice governs the distribution of social and economic inequalities and specifies the conditions under which such inequalities can be morally justified. Rawls formulates the second principle as follows: *"Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle, and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity"* (1971, p. 83).

This principle contains two distinct but complementary components. The first is the difference principle, which permits inequalities in income and wealth only if they improve the situation of the least advantaged members of society. Inequalities are not rejected outright; rather, they are justified only when they work to the benefit of those worst off. The second component requires fair equality of opportunity, meaning that social positions and offices must be genuinely accessible to all, not merely formally open. Individuals with similar talents and motivation should have equal prospects of success, regardless of their social background. Together, these conditions aim to ensure that economic structures do not merely preserve formal equality but actively promote substantive fairness within a constitutional democratic framework.

The Second Principle implies that a just society must structure its institutions—economic, educational, and political—in ways that promote genuine equality of opportunity and protect the least advantaged. Therefore, while Rawls accepts that inequalities are inevitable, he insists that they must be organized to contribute positively to the well-being of all, particularly those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Social and economic inequalities are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society. Each may be equally free to speak his mind, but the materially advantaged may pursue greater influence on their ideas than the disadvantaged. Rawls argued

that whatever economic inequalities prevail in a society are minimized by the difference principles, which maximize the value of liberty to the least advantaged. (Paul, 1985,p.386)

On the other hand, according to Robert Nozick, who is an American philosopher, stress on that it is an unfair principle for people who make rational decisions and work hard to deserve welfare and property legitimately. Robert Nozick, one of the most prominent critics of Rawls, challenges the moral legitimacy of the difference principle from a libertarian standpoint. In his influential work *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), Nozick argues that Rawls's redistributive approach to justice is unfair to individuals who acquire their holdings legitimately through rational decisions, effort, and voluntary exchange. For Nozick, people who have natural talents coming from birth can aim to improve their abilities to take advantage of them, and they cannot be compared with others (Nozick,1974).

Will Kymlicka (2002) is a Canadian political philosopher best known for his work on multiculturalism. He states that the difference principle causes inequality in a society. While Rawls rules out inequalities determined by both social circumstance and talents and abilities, he appears to allow inequalities based on choices and efforts.(Kymlicka, 2002). According to Kymlicka, while Rawls intends to create a fair distribution of social and economic goods, the difference principle may, in practice, reinforce inequality within a society. Rawls appears to permit inequalities that arise from individual choices and efforts (Kymlicka, 2002). This introduces a potential inconsistency within Rawls's framework: although he rejects inequalities based on factors beyond one's control, he accepts those derived from personal decision-making, which may still be shaped by social context and opportunity structures.

According to the Cosmopolitan view, people in different underdeveloped nations should get some assistance from the developed nations to sustain justice on a global level. Cosmopolitan theorists argue that individuals, regardless of their nationality or place of birth, deserve equal moral consideration and should have access to basic opportunities for a decent life. Therefore, people in underdeveloped nations should receive assistance from developed countries to promote fairness and sustain justice globally (Beitz, 1999; Pogge, 2002). This view challenges the Rawlsian framework, which primarily limits principles of justice to the basic structure of a single society. For example, there are big differences between the people in Mexico and America in their opportunities and expectations for life. People do not have a chance to choose their own country from birth. For Rawls, one of the biggest differences between societies in terms of distribution of resources, not their natural resources, is their own culture, religion, traditions, and working skills.

4. Jurgen Habermas: Theory of Communicative Action and Deliberative Democracy

Jürgen Habermas is a German philosopher and sociologist and one of the most prominent representatives of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. A central concept in his work is communicative rationality, the idea that individuals coordinate their actions and resolve conflicts through dialogue aimed at mutual understanding rather than through strategic calculation or coercion. In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), Habermas distinguishes between communicative action and strategic (or instrumental) action. Strategic action is oriented toward success and the achievement of individual goals, often treating others as means. Communicative action, by contrast, is oriented toward reaching understanding (*Verständigung*), where participants offer reasons and seek agreement based on the force of the better argument. For Habermas, social cooperation becomes legitimate when it emerges from such reasoned consensus rather than from power or manipulation. Connected to this framework is Habermas's theory of discourse ethics, which holds that moral norms are valid only if they could receive the acceptance of all affected participants in a rational and inclusive dialogue. Normative validity, therefore, depends on the possibility of justification under conditions of free and equal participation. This approach embeds ethical reasoning within democratic deliberation and contrasts with models that attempt to separate moral considerations from political decision-making.

In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990), Habermas elaborates the concept of communicative action, arguing that legitimacy and social coordination emerge through intersubjective processes where individuals engage as equals in rational discourse. Similarly, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

(1962/1991), he analyzes the conditions under which a public sphere can function as a site for critical-rational debate, thereby sustaining democratic accountability and political legitimacy. By integrating ethical discourse into the deliberative process, Habermas offers a framework for pluralistic societies in which consensus is achieved not through coercion or imposition, but through reasoned and inclusive dialogue (Habermas, 1991).

Habermas's focus on democratization was linked with emphasis on political participation as the core of a democratic society and as an essential element in individual self-development. Habermas' concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. (Kellner, 2000) He moves Kant's categorical imperative beyond its 'monological' reflection by demanding that we emphatically take into consideration the viewpoints of all who would be affected by the adoption of a certain moral action or normative claim. Douglas Kellner challenges and extends Jürgen Habermas's conception of the public sphere. While acknowledging the profound influence of Habermas's Structural Transformation, Kellner argues that Habermas unduly idealizes the bourgeois public sphere and overly dichotomizes the communicative "lifeworld" from the systemic realms of economy and state. Kellner contends that Habermas fails to theorize adequately the dramatic influence of mass media, digital communication, and globalization on public discourse and citizen participation (Kellner, 2000).

In contrast to John Rawls's device of the veil of ignorance, Jürgen Habermas proposes a model of justification in which participants do not abstract from their identities and perspectives. Rather than bracketing differences, Habermas "lifts" the veil and requires that citizens engage in open discourse where they are fully aware of one another's social positions, experiences, and interpretations. Legitimacy, for Habermas, arises not from hypothetical agreement under conditions of ignorance, but from actual processes of communication among concrete individuals. Habermas's sensitivity to the dangers of authoritarianism is shaped by his historical experience; as a young man in Germany, he witnessed the brutality of the Nazi regime. The catastrophic collapse of democratic institutions under fascism deeply influenced his philosophical project. In response, Habermas seeks to defend human autonomy and modern democracy by reconstructing the Enlightenment commitment to reason and universalism on intersubjective foundations. Rather than abandoning reason after its historical misuse, he reformulates it as communicative rationality grounded in dialogue and mutual recognition.

According to Habermas, genuine consensus can emerge only under conditions of free and equal participation. Norms are valid only if all those affected can accept their consequences without coercion. As he states in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, agreement cannot be expected "unless all affected can freely accept the consequences and the side effects that the general observance of a controversial norm can be expected to have for the satisfaction of the interests of each individual" (Habermas, 1990, p. 93). Thus, democratic legitimacy depends on inclusive deliberation in which participants assess the validity of norms through reasoned argument and reciprocal justification.

According to Habermas, everyone should express their own desires and needs. Everyone should also take the perspective of others. For Habermas, the general conditions of the ideal speech situation and the rules of reason, especially as coupled with this sense of solidarity, describe the necessary conditions of democratic policy. In Habermas' conception, the media and public sphere function outside of the actual political-institutional system, mainly as a site of discussion and not as a locus of political organization, struggle, and transformation. Today, first broadcast media like radio and television, and now computers, have produced new public spheres and spaces for information, debate, and participation that contain both the potential to invigorate democracy and to increase the dissemination of critical and progressive ideas, as well as new possibilities for manipulation, social control, and the promotion of conservative positions.

For Habermas, "public reason" includes the "unofficial arenas of the political public sphere." Indeed, these unofficial arenas, independent public forums, distinct from both the economic system and the state administration, having their locus rather in voluntary associations, social movements, and other networks and processes of communication in civil society, including the mass media, are the basis of popular sovereignty (McCarthy, 1994, 49) Public autonomy and popular sovereignty can survive only if the right relation obtains between the decision-making bodies and the forms of association in which they are embedded between 'strong

publics and what Habermas calls 'weak publics' or 'civil society'. In the public spheres, communication and discourse can circulate freely, untouched by governments and administration, and regulated only by the rules of the practice.

5. Comparative Analysis of Rawls and Habermas: Justice, Legitimacy, and Democracy

John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas represent two of the most influential contemporary theorists of justice and democratic legitimacy, yet their approaches are grounded in fundamentally different methods of moral and political reasoning. Rawls and Habermas converge in several respects. Both theorists stress the protection of basic rights and liberties and the importance of ensuring that political institutions respect the equality and dignity of all citizens. Both also prioritize structures—whether principles or communicative procedures—that aim to prevent domination and arbitrary disadvantages, ensuring that social cooperation is fair and legitimate.

Rawls develops his notion of public reason in the light of what he calls the "fact of reasonable pluralism" about the good, which he claims is the characteristic feature of modern political and social life. He argues that "Since there is no reasonable religious, philosophical, or moral doctrine affirmed by all citizens, the conception of justice will be the backbone of a well-ordered democratic society and will be the domain of the political compromises that can form part of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 2005,p.38).

Rawls's concept of "public reason" is more narrowly defined, to exclude such unofficial forums -the unofficial arenas of public discourse which, for Habermas, are the source of democratic self-rule and political autonomy. Rawls seems committed to a more restricted notion of public reason - one which, for the sake of achieving agreement in a pluralistic society, apparently restricts the critical function of reason in public venues. Habermas's conception of public reason not only includes the unofficial venues excluded by Rawls - for Habermas, these unofficial domains of rational discourse in fact ground democratic self-government and political autonomy (McCarthy,1994,p.51)

Comparative analysis reveals that while Rawls focuses on institutional design and procedural fairness, Habermas emphasizes deliberation and communicative legitimacy. Both frameworks address the problem of autonomy under coercive law and the justification of political power in pluralistic contexts (Pogge, 2007; Wenar, 2008). Together, they provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how modern democracies can uphold justice, stability, and inclusivity without imposing a single moral doctrine. Rawls ensures that democratic institutions remain fair and impartial, whereas Habermas emphasizes the importance of ongoing dialogue and citizen participation in sustaining legitimacy. This dual perspective underscores the relevance of both thinkers for contemporary political theory, particularly in navigating the challenges of diversity, pluralism, and public justification.

Nevertheless, the distinction remains crucial: Rawls offers a principle-based, idealized conception of justice, while Habermas advances a procedural, discourse-oriented model of democratic legitimacy, emphasizing the ways in which justice is realized through collective communication and participation rather than through abstract reasoning alone. Habermas's approach differs from that of John Rawls, who emphasizes hypothetical fairness through the original position and the veil of ignorance. Unlike Rawls, who filters ethical and religious considerations from public decision-making, Habermas incorporates these considerations into deliberation, emphasizing the intersubjective nature of legitimacy and the ongoing participatory processes required to sustain democracy. While Rawls derives principles of justice from idealized rational choice, Habermas stresses the procedural and communicative conditions under which legitimate norms can be created and sustained in actual societies.

For Rawls, justice is a basis of universalism. Habermas's argument for international justice focuses on a global constitution. The primacy of the participant's perspective in Habermas, over against the observer's perspective in Rawls, thus coheres with Habermas's more robust notion of public reason, one which apparently makes more room for critique than does Rawls, and which is grounded in the unofficial venues of rational discourse (McCarthy, 1994, p. 60). Rawls ensures that democratic institutions remain fair and impartial, whereas Habermas emphasizes the importance of ongoing dialogue and citizen participation in sustaining legitimacy. This dual perspective

underscores the relevance of both thinkers for contemporary political theory, particularly in navigating the challenges of diversity, pluralism, and public justification.

6. Conclusion

John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are two of the most influential contemporary Western political philosophers. In Political Liberalism, Rawls moves away from presenting justice as fairness as a comprehensive doctrine and instead frames it as a political conception of justice—understood as a modular framework that can fit within any reasonable comprehensive doctrine. Against value skepticism and utilitarianism, Rawls follows Kant’s maxim that we ought to act in ways that are good for all people, extending this principle to formulate his vision of a just society. According to Rawls, a just society is one in which every citizen is treated equally and freely. Kant’s principle of autonomy is interpreted intersubjectively: “we act autonomously when we obey those laws which could be accepted by all concerned based on a public use of reason.

In contrast, Habermas’s discourse ethics is a broader moral theory, concerned with right conduct in general. While Rawls explicitly denies that his theory of justice is a moral theory in this comprehensive sense, Habermas presents discourse ethics as a general theory of morality. For Rawls, under conditions of pluralism, justifying the basic structure and constitutional essentials of society based on any single comprehensive doctrine would inevitably provoke controversy and conflict, undermining stability. Rawls interprets “comprehensive doctrine” broadly, encompassing religions, worldviews, and moral systems. In his framework, good democratic citizens achieve public justification by filtering ethical reasons out of political deliberation, focusing instead on reasons that all reasonable citizens can accept.

By contrast, Habermas views democratic institutions as aiming to secure political justification by incorporating as many ethical reasons as possible into the deliberative process. Despite these methodological differences, both philosophers are concerned with similar foundational questions: how citizens can remain free and autonomous under coercive law, and how collective reason can justify the exercise of political power.

In pluralistic modern democracies, where citizens cannot be expected to agree on social norms based on shared metaphysical or religious doctrines, both Rawls and Habermas grapple with the problem of how a normatively binding framework for the public use of reason can be both possible and justifiable.

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