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Warding off the Evil Eye: Peer Envy in Rawls's Just Society

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Abstract: This article critically analyzes Rawls's attitude toward envy. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls is predominantly concerned with the threat that class envy poses to political stability. Yet he also briefly discusses the kind of envy that individuals experience toward their social peers, which he calls *particular* envy, and which I refer to as *peer* envy. He quickly concludes, however, that particular envy would not present a serious risk to the stability of his just society. In this article, I contest this claim by arguing that the principles that structure Rawls's ideal society are likely to exacerbate particular envy to a politically risky extent. Section 1 reconstructs his account of envy, giving special attention to his belief that competition kindles envy between peers. Section 2 then examines the way in which Rawls often endorses rivalry within the body politic. I argue that the society governed by justice as fairness is, on account of this rivalry, likely to generate a politically problematic degree of particular envy. In Section 3, I invoke ancient Greece as an example of a society that was, as a result of its intense competitiveness, often imperiled by dangerously elevated levels of peer envy. I then survey the key institutional mechanisms by which the ancient Greeks sought to manage this hazardous emotion. It turns out, however, that most of these mechanisms would be unavailable to Rawls insofar as they starkly contravene his principles of justice. I conclude that if Rawlsians wish to establish a society that fosters rivalry, they would do well to reflect on the means by which peer envy can be effectively harnessed.

Introduction

Envy is a potent emotion. It can drive a wedge between the closest friends and leave communities dangerously divided against themselves. Throughout history, envious political agents have time and again been tempted to forcefully seize power from their opponents by means of violence. For these reasons, it makes perfect sense that Rawls dedicates two entire sections of *A Theory of Justice* (hereafter *TJ*) to the problem

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of envy (*TJ*, §§ 80–81).¹ In these sections, Rawls predominantly focuses on the kind of envy that individuals feel toward those who belong to more affluent strata of society. This is what he calls *general* envy, but it might also be considered a type of class envy. Rawls grants general envy so much attention because he believes it constitutes a serious threat to social stability, and he wants to spell out how his principles of justice would neutralize this threat. Yet he also discusses the kind of envy that individuals experience toward their social peers, which he calls *particular* envy. He concludes, however, that particular envy is not usually politically destabilizing and would therefore not pose a serious threat to any society governed by his principles of justice. In this article, I contest this claim by arguing that the principles that structure Rawls's ideal society are likely to exacerbate particular envy to a politically risky degree.

One of the prime drivers of particular envy is competition. When individuals struggle against one another, they are liable to compare themselves with their rivals and to feel threatened by one another's achievements. Such feelings are apt to promote uncooperative behavior, mutual hostility, *Schadenfreude*, and other antisocial tendencies (see Crusius/Lange 2017). It follows that if we construct institutions that affirm and intensify social competition, we can expect a corresponding increase in the prevalence of particular envy, along with its anti-social consequences. Herein lies the crux of my argument. Since Rawls wishes to promote political and economic contest within his ideal society, there is good reason to believe that such a society would be afflicted by politically destabilizing degrees of particular envy. I should state at the outset, however, that my goal is not to deflate the Rawlsian project. Rather, my hope is to stimulate further inquiry into the institutional changes that can be made to manage envy more effectively within competitive, liberal democratic societies.

Numerous commentators have critically analyzed what Rawls has to say about envy.² What is conspicuous about these interpretations, however, is that they almost exclusively concentrate on Rawls's account of *general* envy. By shifting focus onto the topic of *particular* envy, then, I hope to correct this imbalance and to encourage a more holistic approach to the question of envy in contemporary political theory.

I begin by giving a brief account of how Rawls conceives envy and its various subspecies. In this first section, I unpack Rawls's reasons for thinking that particular envy would not be especially problematic in his ideal society. I also outline his account of how competition kindles particular envy. Section 2 then reconstructs

¹ Rawls also refers to envy multiple times in the earlier "Justice as Fairness" (Rawls 1958, 170), as well as in his final book, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Rawls 2001, see esp. § 25.3, § 54.4, § 60.4). Envy was therefore an enduring concern for him throughout his philosophical career.

² See e. g., Walsh 1992; Tomlin 2008; Green 2013; Frye 2016. For an overview of these interpretations, see Section 2 of this article.

the way in which Rawls hopes to foster rivalry within the body politic, particularly within the political and economic spheres. I argue that by Rawls's own logic, but contrary to what he himself claims, the society governed by justice as fairness is likely to generate a politically problematic degree of particular envy. In the final section (Section 3), I invoke ancient Greece, and especially ancient Athens, as an example of a society that was, as a result of its intense competitiveness, often imperiled by dangerously elevated levels of particular envy. I then survey the key institutional mechanisms by which the ancient Greeks sought to manage this hazardous emotion. It turns out that most of these mechanisms would be unavailable to Rawls insofar as they starkly contravene his principles of justice. I conclude that if Rawlsians wish to establish a society that encourages political and economic rivalry, they would do well to reflect on the means by which particular envy can be effectively harnessed.

1 Rawls on Envy

Like any emotion, envy takes a multitude of forms. Whereas some of these may be considered socially innocuous or even beneficial, others are more obviously deleterious for the commonweal. Throughout the history of philosophy, many thinkers have considered the various different types of envy that exist. Here is not the place for a comparison of these analyses, but it is worth noting that Rawls's taxonomy of envy is idiosyncratic and does not merely rehearse the views of his predecessors.³

In mapping the concept of envy, Rawls follows Kant by pointing out that not all species of envy are socially detrimental. For instance, we might tell a friend that their professional successes are the envy of us all. Since this kind of envy expresses admiration, free of any underlying rancor, Rawls dubs it "benign envy." He distinguishes this quasi-disinterested approbation from what he calls "emulative envy," "which leads us to try to achieve what others have. The sight of their greater good moves us to strive in socially beneficial ways for similar things for ourselves" (*TJ*, 467). Unlike straightforwardly benign envy, then, emulative envy spurs us to seek those goods that we admire in others.⁴

In Rawls's eyes, however, benign and emulative envy are something of an exception, and he unequivocally judges what he calls "envy proper" to be a vice (*TJ*, 466). In the following quotation he both defines this primary conception of envy and expands upon its antisocial qualities:

³ For an historical overview of the philosophy of envy, see Little 2000, 61–75.

⁴ By my lights, Rawls's strict distinction between benign and emulative envy is doubtful given that *all* genuine expressions of approbation are arguably accompanied by an imitative impulse.

we may think of envy as the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we does not detract from our advantages. We envy persons whose situation is superior to ours [...] and we are willing to deprive them of their greater benefits even if it is necessary to give up something ourselves. When others are aware of our envy, they may become jealous of their better circumstances and anxious to take precautions against the hostile acts to which our envy makes us prone. (*TJ*, 466)

Envy proper is therefore socially harmful, according to Rawls, because it impels individuals to sacrifice their own good in order to undermine their superiors, even where this superiority does no material harm to the envious party (though we should note that it does do them psychological harm insofar as it elicits unpleasurable resentment). The envious individual or group might, for example, sacrifice their time, effort, or primary goods such as wealth, liberty, opportunity, and self-respect, just to take their perceived superior down a peg, so to speak. If the envious party gets their way, the result is a net loss since both the envier and the envied will on average end up worse off. The only gain yielded by interactions of this sort is the purging of the inferior party's envy. While we should perhaps not underestimate the extent to which this result constitutes a very real good for the inferior party, this can hardly be considered a *social* good.

According to Rawls, the pernicious effects of envy are aggravated by the fact that it evokes fear in those who feel themselves superior. This fear of envious attack in turn fills these superiors with a spitefully jealous desire to fortify their position of dominance. Anticipating the harm they suspect their inferiors wish to cause them, the jealous end up preemptively striving to keep the boot firmly applied to the necks of these inferiors. This entrenches oppressive social relations in a manner sharply at odds with the Rawlsian idea of society as a fair system of cooperation.

Given the mutually detrimental nature of envious relations, widespread envy is likely to weaken a body politic. As Rawls puts it, “envy tends to make everyone worse off. In this sense it is collectively disadvantageous” (*TJ*, 124). Yet, in his view, not all forms of “envy proper” are equally disadvantageous, and this brings us to the significant distinction that he draws between general and particular envy:

The envy experienced by the least advantaged towards those better situated is normally general envy in the sense that they envy the more favored for the kinds of goods and not for the particular objects they possess. The upper classes say are envied for their greater wealth and opportunity; those envying them want similar advantages for themselves. By contrast, particular envy is typical of rivalry and competition. Those who lose out in the quest for office and honor, or for the affections of another, are liable to envy the success of their rivals and to covet the very same thing that they have won. (*TJ*, 466)

This distinction is not particularly clear, and it is telling that Rawls drops it from his later discussion of envy in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (hereafter *JF*).

Even so, reading him charitably, we can gloss the two types of envy as follows. General envy is envy that one feels toward the advantages of another in a non-specific manner. In such cases, the envier tends not to know their superior personally and does not want the exact goods which that person enjoys. As Rawls indicates, this is exemplified in class envy. When a pauper experiences envy at the sight of a prince being chauffeured in a Rolls Royce, they are not envious on account of wanting that particular Rolls Royce, nor because they yearn to be a prince, but rather, because they yearn for the advantages of that individual's position in a vaguer sense. They merely wish for similar degrees of wealth, power, opportunity, respect and luxury.

By contrast, particular envy refers to the envy individuals experience in heated personal contest for particular desiderata. This would apply, for example, to instances of politicians competing for office (*TJ*, 471), rival suitors vying for the affections of a single beloved, or business owners contending for a particular government contract. These are zero-sum contests for specific objects, which means that someone is going to have to lose out.

The distinction that Rawls draws between general and particular envy broadly maps onto the distinction between class and peer envy. Thus, general envy is, like class envy, the politically dangerous form of envy that arises between people belonging to different socio-economic demographics, people who usually do not know each other, and who are not in real competition over the same specific objects. When Rawls discusses particular envy, though, it is clear that he has *peer* envy in mind – that is, the species of envy that arises between rivals of approximately equal ability (i. e., *pares*), who usually personally know one another, and who tend to be competing for the same objects. For the remainder of this article I will therefore often use the more common term *peer* envy to refer to what Rawls calls *particular* envy.

So why is general envy such a pressing issue for Rawls? There are two reasons, though one is far more significant than the other. First, Rawls wants to deflect the objection that the egalitarian elements of his political theory are in any way motivated by general envy, because if they were, then this would undercut his claim that justice as fairness is what rationally-minded individuals would choose if they were genuinely committed to the fundamental values of equality, impartiality and stability. Indeed, his ideal society would arguably be one founded on invidious bias and the spirit of revenge. Accordingly, Rawls considers envy something “to be avoided and feared,” and states that if possible, we should develop our concept of justice without being “influenced by this trait” (*TJ*, 465). This means that individuals in the original position should not, in his view, be motivated by envy when selecting their principles of justice (see also *TJ*, 124). What is more, in sketching constitutional blueprints for the ideal society, these individuals should, Rawls thinks, “reason as

if there is no problem of envy” (*TJ*, 465). Put differently, in the first stage of the original position the issue of envy should be hidden behind the veil of ignorance.

Rawls believes that this move is justified by the fact that envy is a contingent deformation of our moral psychology, and – as we will presently see – one that would be negligibly rare once just institutions were put in place. Since politically troublesome eruptions of envy would in his view disappear under conditions of justice, we should be careful not to let our ideal vision of society be shaped by this contingent vice.

The second (more trenchant) problem is that one might expect Rawls’s difference principle to generate politically problematic levels of general envy, which would threaten the kind of stability that Rawls wishes to establish. Before examining this problem, a few words are in order regarding the specific type of stability that Rawls is seeking to instate. It should be underscored that he is not only concerned with what we might call *political* stability, that is, with keeping civil unrest at bay. In addition to this, he aspires to found a deeper form of stability, namely, a condition in which the constitutive principles of society internally generate their own support. This occurs when citizens who are subject to a particular conception of justice become increasingly inclined to support that conception. They might do so, for instance, because that conception benefits them in a salient manner. This positive feedback loop generates ever greater degrees of compliance and gives society what we might call *psychological* stability. Whereas political stability can be imposed externally by coercive institutions such as a police force, psychological stability can only be achieved internally, by winning the voluntary support of the citizenry.⁵

How does envy threaten these two forms of stability? Recall that the difference principle allows for potentially infinite disparities of wealth, so long as these disparities benefit the least advantaged above all others (*TJ*, 470). At first blow, this seems likely to arouse the envious indignation of those worse off – potentially boiling over into revolutionary action. In promoting discontent and seditious tumult, the difference principle would drive citizens to reject Rawls’s broader conception of justice as fairness. To the extent, then, that the difference principle would undermine political stability, it would *a fortiori* negate psychological stability. As Rawls puts it, “Our problem then is whether the principles of justice, and especially the difference principle with fair equality of opportunity, is likely to engender in practice too much destructive general envy” (*TJ*, 466). Rawls therefore needs to demon-

⁵ For more on the distinction between these two types of stability, see Klosko 2015 and Weithman 2010, chap. 2; and Weithman 2015. Like George Klosko (and in contrast to Weithman), I take Rawls to be concerned with *both* political *and* psychological stability. Klosko refers to what I have called psychological stability as “conception stability.”

strate that his principles of justice would in fact *mitigate* general envy to such an extent that it would in no way threaten either political or psychological stability. This would further justify those principles and warrant the exclusion of all consideration of envy from the first stage of the original position.

To be sure, Rawls does not believe that general envy would be politically problematic in his ideal society. In order to understand why he thinks this would be the case, we should examine Rawls's account of the principal causes of such envy. In the first place, in his view, people experience general envy when they "lack a sure confidence in their own value and ability to do anything worthwhile"; second, people are prone to this emotion when "the discrepancy between [themselves] and others is made visible by the social structure and style of [their] society"; and third, general envy arises when people feel "impotent" and unable to ameliorate their downtrodden condition (*TJ*, 469).

However, Rawls is confident that his principles of justice, if properly implemented, would neutralize these causes. Just institutions are, he tells us, designed to ensure and promote self-respect, specifically by treating each person as a "sovereign equal" within the public sphere. Regarding the vast inequalities potentially engendered by the difference principle, Rawls stipulates that although the fair society in *theory* allows for infinite disparities, in practice "absolute and relative differences are probably less than those that have often prevailed" (*TJ*, 470). He seems to assume that excessive disparities would in all likelihood work against the fair value of political liberties as well as the fair equality of opportunity. Otherwise put, those with a relative superabundance of wealth would have an unfair advantage in the political domain, and hence their political liberty would be worth more to them than it would be to the worst-off – a situation which is proscribed by the liberty principle (see e. g., *TJ*, 245 f.).

Finally, Rawls claims that citizens of the ideal society would form relatively segregated associations in which their unique sets of interests and talents would be recognized and cultivated, which would minimize humiliating social comparisons between those belonging to different economic strata of society (*TJ*, 470 f.; see also § 67). In this way, according to Rawls, neither political nor psychological stability would be endangered by general envy in the well-ordered society.

This view is at best sanguine, and at worst, contrived. For one, Rawls's hope for a society composed of relatively isolated, non-comparative associations is highly unrealistic. What is more, as I will suggest below, the claim that reducing wealth disparities would sufficiently quell envy is optimistic to say the least. In addition to these objections, there have been a number of other convincing critical attacks on Rawls's treatment of general envy. George Walsh, for instance, contends that Rawls's principles of justice are in fact motivated by envy, in spite of Rawls's claims to the contrary (Walsh 1992). In a similar vein, Patrick Tomlin argues that general envy is both

socially ineradicable and politically destabilizing, and as such *should* be taken into consideration by those in the original position (Tomlin 2008). Joshua Green maintains that general envy ought to be cultivated (within certain limits) by the just society since it incentivizes the worst-off to prevent the best-off from becoming superdominant (Green 2013). Harrison Frye then offers a variation on this argument (Frye 2016). He rejects Green's proposal to incorporate envy into the just society, but accepts that under certain non-ideal conditions, envy might offer a serviceable means of fostering justice, that is, insofar as it drives people to correct excessive wealth disparities. In the long-term, however, Frye maintains that we must nonetheless keep our sights firmly set on the complete eradication of this politically dangerous emotion.

While there is much to be said about these critical perspectives, they all center on *general* envy, which is not our current focus. The flipside of this is that these commentators consistently follow Rawls in dismissing the issue of peer envy as an insignificant political problem. My contention, however, is that theorists wishing to model a society guided by Rawls's principles of justice ought to pay close attention to the question of peer envy.

With this said, let us now hone in on what Rawls has to say about peer envy, or as he calls it, particular envy. Why is he so convinced that his ideal citizens need not consider this type of envy when formulating their principles of justice in the original position? He provides a clear answer to this question in the following passage:

As for particular envy, to a certain extent it is endemic to human life; being associated with rivalry, it may exist in any society. The more specific problem for political justice is how pervasive are the rancor and jealousy aroused by the quest for office and position, and whether it is likely to distort the justice of institutions. It is difficult to settle this matter in the absence of the more detailed knowledge of social forms available at the legislative stage. But there seems to be no reason why the hazards of particular envy should be worse in a society regulated by justice as fairness than by any other conception. (*TJ*, 471)

Rawls appears to conceive peer envy as a relatively innocuous fact of political life. Although ineradicable, and potentially disruptive, it remains fairly manageable at an institutional level. Containing this minor nuisance does not require any alteration of the founding principles or institutional structure of society. Rawls is also confident that his ideal principles of justice would not generate any more peer envy than is typically present in other, non-ideal societies. If we need consider such envy at all in the original position, it will be at the stage at which the veil of ignorance is partially lifted such that legislators can work out how to institute laws that concretely realize the abstract ideals of justice formulated earlier in the original position. But as we will now see, *pace* Rawls, there is in fact good reason to believe that “the hazards of particular envy should be worse in a society regulated by justice as fairness than by any other conception.”

2 Rivalry in the Just Society

Rawls assumes that the kind of envy associated with rivalry – i. e., peer envy – is unlikely to pose a greater threat in his ideal society than it generally does in non-ideal societies. However, what I now intend to show is that we can reasonably expect peer envy to be more prevalent in his ideal society than is typically the case in societies guided by other conceptions of justice.

Interpreting Rawls as a pro-conflict thinker is by no means uncontroversial. Agonistic democrats, for instance, usually take Rawls to be a consummately *anti*-conflict philosopher. As the name suggests, this group of political theorists – which includes William Connolly, Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, and James Tully – seeks to render liberal democracy more agonistic in nature. They tend to set themselves up in direct opposition to Rawls, whom they accuse of fetishizing consensus and harmony at the expense of contest. For example, Bonnie Honig argues that “Rawls imagines a private realm in which different forms of life coexist as lifestyles; there is no contest among them. None feels threatened by the existence of the other” (Honig 1993, 130). Honig’s complaint is that while Rawls hopes to protect different conceptions of the good life (i. e., reasonable comprehensive doctrines), his brand of liberalism pacifies the interaction of these conceptions, thereby stifling the kinds of debate and contestation that constitute the very lifeblood of a thriving democratic community. In line with Honig, Chantal Mouffe similarly protests that

What Rawls’s view of the well-ordered society eliminates is the democratic struggle among ‘adversaries,’ that is, those who share the allegiance to the liberal-democratic principles, but while defending different interpretations of what liberty and equality should mean and to which kind of social relations and institutions they should apply. This is why in his ‘liberal utopia’ legitimate dissent would have been eradicated from the public sphere. (Mouffe 2000, 30)⁶

In this section, I will argue that this charge does not hold water, since Rawls is not in point of fact hostile to contest in either the private or the public sphere. Although his vision of segregated associations (as described in the previous section) does seem to vindicate Honig’s objection, elsewhere in his oeuvre he is in many respects committed to promoting competitive social relations.⁷

⁶ We might also group Jeremy Waldron with the agonistic democrats given that he criticizes Rawls for not sufficiently acknowledging and affirming the unavoidability of deep disagreements within the public sphere. See Waldron 1999, chap. 7.

⁷ See Selg 2012 for a convincing rebuttal of the agonistic critique of Rawls, one to which my own reading is indebted.

Let us begin with Rawls's attitude toward *political* contest. In *TJ*, he asserts that “democratic political process is at best regulated rivalry” (*TJ*, 199). While this statement may strike some as a reluctant acceptance of contest as an undesirable, but nonetheless ineluctable fact of political life, my claim is that Rawls actively *affirms* contest as a socially beneficial mode of activity.

Already in *TJ* he insists that he is seeking “overlapping rather than strict consensus” (*TJ*, 340) and he openly rejects the idea that the correct interpretation of the principles of justice can ever be *conclusively* established. How these principles are to be concretely realized must always be kept open to debate, and, where necessary, be challenged by means of civil disobedience (*TJ*, 341 f.). In later texts, and especially in *Political Liberalism* (hereafter *PL*), the pro-conflict dimension of Rawls's political philosophy comes to the fore. Indeed, he opens *PL* with a confession that *TJ* is compromised by its failure to sufficiently accommodate what he calls “the fact of reasonable pluralism” (*PL*, xvii). In *PL* he duly overhauls his vision of the ideal overlapping consensus, adapting it to fit with his belief that within any truly liberal community there will always be an irreducible plurality of ways in which people conceive the good life.

According to Rawls, when people freely exercise their reason under the aegis of liberal institutions, they will *inevitably* arrive at different general conceptions of the good, or what Rawls call “comprehensive doctrines.” But why does he maintain that in forming their personal conceptions of the good, any two individuals are unlikely to converge? In short, because of what he refers to as the “burdens of judgement.” These burdens take a number of different forms, which he enumerates in *PL* (54–58). One key burden, for instance, is that the empirical data pertaining to ethical questions is often ambiguous. He also mentions the inherent vagueness of many relevant ethical concepts; and furthermore, he claims that even when we endorse the same ethical values, we tend to give them different weightings depending on our unique set of life experiences.

But Rawls does not see these burdens as in any way negating the possibility of forging a broad consensus vis-à-vis the core principles of liberalism. So long as individuals' divergent conceptions of the good are *reasonable*, they can all similarly commit to a shared conception of political justice. For example, people who hold different, but nonetheless reasonable, conceptions of the good – such as Catholics and Protestants – can respect one another and justify their political proposals with arguments that their counterparts could reasonably be expected to accept.⁸

⁸ For criticisms of Rawls's notion of reasonableness, see e. g., Skorupski 2017, 178–81; or Waldron 1999, chap. 7.

While Rawls thus pushes for an overlapping consensus between the bearers of divergent ethical views, he nonetheless wishes to maintain a certain degree of political rivalry:

It is inevitable and often desirable that citizens have different views as to the most appropriate political conception; for the public political culture is bound to contain different fundamental ideas that can be developed in different ways. An orderly contest between them over time is a reliable way to find which one, if any, is most reasonable. (*PL*, 227)

Regulated rivalry between those who hold different political conceptions is socially beneficial because it subjects those conceptions to selective pressure. Through political contest, such as parliamentary debate for example, the best (or we might say *fittest*) political conceptions are selected and implemented in constitutional law. Thus, Rawls envisages the principles of justice as a thin framework that enables contest to proceed in a respectful and equitable manner. In this way, “[t]he principles guarantee certain basic political rights and liberties and establish democratic procedures for moderating the political rivalry” (*PL*, 163).

In addition to political rivalry, Rawls also endorses rivalry of an economic sort. There has been much debate regarding Rawls's preferred economic system, with some reading him as an apologist for market capitalism, while others present him as a *critic* of capitalism, one better characterized as favoring more socialist political arrangements, particularly in his later writings.⁹ Here is not the place for a detailed comparison of these competing views. What I want to bring out here is that whichever economic arrangement he ultimately endorses, he nonetheless aims to safeguard economic rivalry.

Rawls's support for competitive property-owning democracy is arguably most prominent in *TJ*. In his own words, “[c]ompetitive markets properly regulated secure free choice of occupation and lead to an efficient use of resources and allocation of commodities to households” (*TJ*, 244). Within competitive market economies, private companies are, in Rawls's view, compelled to tailor production to the needs of consumers, otherwise they risk being outcompeted and going bust. By contrast, in a command economy, where governments control production, manufacturers and service providers do not have competitors. Thus, if they fail to properly satisfy their consumers' needs, their existence is not immediately jeopardized – their consumers will simply have to make do. As in the case of political rivalry, then, Rawls chiefly values competition on account of its selective properties.

9 For an overview of this controversy, see Edmundson 2017, 1–16.

As we move forward to *JF*, however, Rawls becomes increasingly critical of welfare-state capitalism, and correspondingly more open to liberal socialism. The kind of socialism that he has in mind, though, is one in which competitive markets are preserved. Although “[u]nder liberal socialism” firms are owned by workers, these firms “carry on their activities within a system of free and workably competitive markets” (*JF*, § 42.1). The point is that while Rawls may waver regarding the economic system that best coheres with his principles of justice, he remains squarely set on maintaining competitive relations between business owners (be these owners private individuals or worker cooperatives).

It is hard to imagine a regime that promotes political and economic rivalry without correspondingly fostering personal rivalry. It seems unlikely that individuals could compete for political or economic success without entering into personal rivalries with their peers – be these opposed political agents or business owners. What is more, these rivalrous sentiments do not appear to be aberrant or pathological – i. e., they are not the eliminable by-product of subpar, non-ideal educational institutions. If the ideal Rawlsian society is one that encourages peer rivalry, then it stands to reason that it would be subject to greater levels of peer envy than, say, a despotic state in which political contest is stifled and a command economy forecloses business competition. We therefore have strong grounds to doubt Rawls’s claim that “there seems to be no reason why the hazards of particular envy should be worse in a society regulated by justice as fairness than by any other conception” (*TJ*, 471).

There is a further reason why we might suspect the ideal Rawlsian society of exacerbating peer envy. While Rawls argues that the causes of general envy will be significantly mitigated by reducing wealth disparities, many have remarked that approximate equality is often a *condition* of envy, since we principally envy those we deem to be of comparable standing to ourselves.¹⁰ This observation was first made by Aristotle, who writes that we only envy

those whose possession of, or success in, a thing is a reproach to us: *these are our neighbors and equals*; for it is clear that it is our own fault we have missed the good thing in question; this annoys us, and excites envy in us (Aristotle 1991b, 74; emphasis mine)

¹⁰ Rawls himself acknowledges that we tend to experience envy in relation to “others in the same or in a similar group as ourselves” (*TJ*, 470). He fails to extrapolate, however, that his difference principle, by promoting equality, may very well end up exacerbating peer envy instead of mitigating it (see *TJ*, 470). Numerous interpreters of Rawls have remarked on this causal relation between equality and envy (e. g., Frye 2016; Walsh 1992). Yet commentators have tended to focus on how equality elevates levels of *general* envy. What I wish to suggest is that such equality can likewise foment *peer* envy. An exception to this interpretive trend is Tomlin, who – like myself – emphasizes how equality provokes particular as opposed to general envy (see Tomlin 2008).

Clearly, Aristotle is referring to peer envy. Our envious sentiments are directed toward particular individuals whom we know personally. When we perceive ourselves as being on a par with someone else, we feel that we could have, and indeed should have, attained the specific goods which that peer has managed to acquire, which gives rise to a sense of being hard done by. But when confronted by superiors whom we deem to belong to a completely different league to ourselves, we are not inclined to feel that we even stood a chance, and as such do not perceive their success as an invidious affront.¹¹

It is therefore reasonable to suspect that Rawls's ideal society would be marked by elevated levels of peer envy, contrary to what he himself claims. For this reason, it is imperative that we acknowledge the stubborn presence of peer envy when we attempt to formulate the core principles of social organization. At the very least, peer envy ought to be considered in addition to general envy in the second stage of the original position. As we will see in the following section, history offers further warning that peer envy can be socially destabilizing and needs to be carefully considered when we try to establish principles and institutions that are able to generate political and psychological stability.

3 The Problem of Moderating Envy

When Rawls claims that within his ideal society peer envy wouldn't be more problematic than in any other type of society, he seems to assume that peer envy has not posed a serious threat to social order in other regimes. I want to briefly turn to the example of the ancient Greeks in order to rebut this supposition. The ancient Greeks of the 5th and 6th centuries BC are relevant to our current line of inquiry because in addition to being intimately familiar with the problem of envy, they were fiercely competitive. Indeed, Burckhardt refers to this period of Greek history as the "agonal age" (Burckhardt 1999, chap. 3). The ancient Greeks' culture of contest was exemplified in the official games, or *agones*, that took place at Olympia and Delphi. But this love of competition was by no means confined to the sporting and dramaturgical contests that were the focus of these official games. As Burckhardt points out, the ancient Greeks competed wherever the opportunity arose: shepherds vied with one another in flute playing contests, there were gargantuan eating competitions, heated juridical debates, and contests for political office (Burckhardt 1999, 166).¹² The orthodox view, in many ways pioneered by Burckhardt, is that this ago-

11 For empirical evidence that equality provokes envy, see McClendon 2018, 34–42; Ben Ze'ev 1990.

12 Burckhardt follows Ernst Curtius (see 1864) in this respect.

nistic disposition was the fountainhead of ancient Greek cultural flourishing. On this account, the struggle of artists, athletes, politicians and philosophers to better themselves and outdo their rivals issued in a collective form of enhancement.¹³

Classical historians have tried to explain why this culture of contest burgeoned at this particular juncture in ancient Greek history. Burckhardt theorizes that greater socio-political equality was instrumental in this regard, since it allowed individuals from different social strata to enter into competition with one another (excluding slaves, of course) (Burckhardt 1999, 162). In Burckhardt's view, this kind of social mixing was simply not possible in tyrannies or highly-stratified societies such as that of the ancient Egyptians.¹⁴

From the passage of Aristotle quoted in the previous section, we can also infer another reason as to why equitable relations might foster a widespread culture of contest: the perception of equality between oneself and another is liable to elicit *envy*, which is an affect that contemporary psychologists have shown to play an important motivating role in competition (see e. g., Parrott and Rodriguez Mosquera 2010, 125).

In terms of the rough schema we sketched in Section 1, the type of envy that agonal competition aroused in ancient Greece was chiefly *peer* envy, as competitors burnt to supersede their rivals. This envy would often provoke competitors to cheat, even to the point of directly sabotaging their opponents. Within the political arena, such envy understandably had a socially destabilizing effect.¹⁵

This point is neatly illustrated by Plutarch's portrait of the Athenian general Alcibiades. Prior to becoming a general, Alcibiades was famed as a champion

¹³ In many ways, this recalls Rousseau's account of how *amour propre* fuelled the advancement of culture and civilization. But unlike Rousseau, who largely frames this as a process of corruption, Burckhardt conceives it as a beneficent development. It is worth noting that Rawls reads Rousseau as arguing that *amour-propre*, in spite of its legacy of corruption, *can* be harnessed and even transformed – that is, from envious rivalry into “a need which directs us to secure for ourselves equal standing” (Rawls 2007, 198–200). Since achieving such equality requires that we recognize the equal standing of others, *amour propre* can, according to Rawls, motivate widespread mutual recognition. So, on Rawls's reading, *amour propre* can be put to socially constructive ends given the right institutional conditions (an exegesis that borrows heavily from Neuhauser 2008). This intimates that Rawls may have harboured hopes of *sublimating* the impulses that drive peer envy.

¹⁴ Burckhardt is not alone in suggesting that greater social equality facilitated ancient Greek agonism (see e. g., Kalyvas 2016, 24).

¹⁵ Stevens writes of how Xenophon's Socrates was, like Aristotle, also concerned with the socially destabilizing effects of *peer* (as opposed to *class*) envy – the “grudging emotion that mars the relations of friends and associates” (Stevens 1948, 173). Stevens also notes how Zeno, in his *Republic* – which laid out plans for how to achieve social concord (*homónoia*) – banned law-courts and gymnasia (Stevens 1948, 175). Zeno thus draws a strong link between social disintegration and both the contest and peer envy that was fuelled by these institutions.

chariot racer, and Plutarch recounts the various underhanded tactics that he employed to exclude his rivals from the equestrian contest (Plutarch 1959, 27). But it was only when Alcibiades brought this envious streak into the political arena that it began to have socio-politically destructive consequences. The clearest case of Alcibiades' peer envy undermining the Athenian commonweal is to be found in Plutarch's account of his struggle with Nicias, a rival Athenian politician and general. In 421 BC, Nicias negotiated a peace treaty with Sparta, which brought the first phase of the Peloponnesian War to a close. As Plutarch reports, Alcibiades was consumed with envy of Nicias' achievement, and did everything in his power to undermine his treaty:

Hellenes everywhere said that it was Pericles who had plunged them into war, but Nicias who had delivered them out of it, and most men called the peace the "Peace of Nicias." Alcibiades was therefore distressed beyond measure, and in his envy planned a violation of the solemn treaty. (Plutarch 1959, 33)

Alcibiades' disruptive efforts eventually resulted in the crushing defeat of Athens in the final phase of the Peloponnesian War, and – not long after – the violent demise of Alcibiades himself.¹⁶ What this implies is that in competitive societies such as ancient Greece, peer envy is prone to grow to excessive, and indeed harmful, degrees.

We should also consider the institutional mechanisms by which the Greeks sought to *moderate* this efflorescence of envy. The first point of note is that far from seeking to eradicate this affect, the Greeks sanctioned it as a useful means of provoking competition and self-improvement. Indeed, along with ambition, they sought to *stimulate* peer envy, just as much as they sought to hold it within socially beneficial limits. As Nietzsche states in an unpublished note from 1875 (when he was still working as a professor of classical philology),

The desire for intoxication, [...] for revenge, for envy [*Neid*] [...] – all of these were recognized by the Greeks as human, and consequently integrated into the edifice of society and its customs. (Nietzsche 1988, 78 f.; my translation)

Though it would divert us from our main purpose to perform a detailed analysis of how the ancient Greeks kept envy in check by means of their institutions, it is worth enumerating just a few of these institutional techniques. One method that Plutarch mentions is ostracism, the practice of exiling individuals perceived to be a threat to political stability. Aristotle (1991a, 64 f.) describes this practice as a means by which

¹⁶ See also Thucydides' account of the Corcyrean revolution, in which he describes how avaricious peer envy – between "neighbors" or "equals" – eventually erupted into full-blown revolution. See Thucydides 1958, Book III, § 82 and § 84. See also Stevens 1948, 171.

city-states excluded would-be tyrants.¹⁷ In reality, though, Plutarch complains that it merely functioned as a cathartic vent for ancient Greek peer envy – as a means “by which they cripple and banish whatever man from time to time may have too much reputation and influence in the city to please them, assuaging thus their envy rather than their fear” (Plutarch 1958, 31). Although Plutarch’s stance in this quote is *prima facie* entirely critical, he nonetheless represents ostracism as a serviceable outlet for excessive peer envy.

Nietzsche mentions two further means by which the Greeks institutionally bridled their overweening peer envy, namely, religion and the cultivation of civic allegiance. In the case of religion, he describes how the Greeks projected their envy onto their gods and then, out of fear of divine envy, checked their own envious impulses:

The Greek is envious and does not experience this characteristic as a blemish, but as the effect of a benevolent deity: what a gulf of ethical judgment between him and us! Because he is envious, he feels the envious eye of a god resting on him whenever he has an excessive amount of honor, wealth, fame and fortune, and he fears this envy. (Nietzsche 2006, 97)¹⁸

Fearing the envious wrath of their gods, the ancient Greeks kept their desire to depose their personal rivals within strict bounds.

Civic allegiance, on the other hand, is said to have instilled a deep affection for the state. In theory, the idea is that individuals would rein in their envy if they realized that it was going to jeopardize the common good. As Nietzsche puts it, “every Greek felt the burning desire within him to be an instrument of bringing salvation to his city in the contest between cities: in this, his selfishness was lit, as well as curbed and restricted” (Nietzsche 2006, 98). Aside from the fact that Nietzsche again emphasizes how the Greeks sought to provoke as well as restrain peer envy, it is worth observing that civic allegiance was in practice usually intertwined with religious piety, since most *poleis* were represented by a specific godhead. Piety toward the godhead therefore meant piety toward the state, and vice versa.¹⁹

This portrait of ancient Greek culture is by no means intended as a comprehensive or uncontroversial account of the Hellenic attitude toward envy. What I wish to illustrate with this brief overview is that for the ancient Greeks the peer envy generated by their culture of competition was a matter they took very seriously, one that in their view demanded radical institutional control mechanisms. Notably, two of the institutions used by the ancient Greeks for the purpose of con-

¹⁷ See Forsdyke 2009, 153 f., for a detailed analysis (and refutation) of this understanding of ostracism.

¹⁸ This view can be traced back to Herodotus. See Smolin 2018, 19.

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis of Nietzsche’s and Burckhardt’s conceptions of ancient Greek agognism, see Pearson 2022, chap. 2.

trolling envy – namely, ostracism and common religion – are obviously unavailable to Rawls given that they plainly contravene the liberty principle. Ostracism, which on Aristotle's reading constitutes a pre-emptive form of punishment, would be out of the question. For Rawls (*TJ*, 276 f.), within a just society, “those who are punished for violating just laws have normally done something wrong,” hence “a propensity to commit such acts is a mark of bad character, and in a just society legal punishments will only fall upon those who display these faults.” Ostracism, however, often punishes people whose only “fault” is that of excellence.

As for common religion, the society governed in accordance with the principles of justice could not institute the kind of religious cohesion that kept ancient Greek envy in check, since “[m]oral and religious freedom follows from the principle of equal liberty” (*TJ*, 188).

But perhaps most importantly, even if Rawls's principles did allow for these institutional control mechanisms, they would likely only yield *political* stability, whilst working against the deeper psychological stability that he deems so necessary. Ostracism is a manifestly coercive institution that ensures stability by means of external force. Likewise, religious unity can only be maintained in a society-wide manner by means of political coercion (the Inquisition would be a case in point). The reason for this is that the burdens of judgment continuously undermine any such unity by leading members of a polity into a plurality of divergent worldviews. Indeed, to the extent that these *politically* stabilizing institutions unjustly coerce citizens, we could expect them to arouse the indignation of those subject to this coercion and thereby to erode the psychological stability that Rawls takes to be so essential.

But what about civic allegiance? Perhaps Rawls could endorse some brand of patriotism – one free of the coercive religious elements that underpinned the ancient Greek variety. Though Rawls himself is famously reticent regarding the question of patriotism, some commentators have argued that his well-ordered society is only achievable where citizens are bound to one another by ties of patriotic allegiance. Eamonn Callan, for example, maintains that patriotic sentiments are essential to the process of moral development. According to Callan, patriotism creates “ties of friendship and trust [which] intensify the moral feelings that attend the virtue of justice” (Callan 1997, 93 f.). Whereas Rawls expects citizens to become attached to the “highest order principles [of justice] themselves” (*TJ*, 414; cited in Callan 1997, 93), Callan objects that absent patriotic feelings of fraternity between citizens, the ideal of justice is unlikely to garner widespread support. On this reading, *interpersonal* emotional bonds are an essential ingredient of justice.²⁰

²⁰ It is worth noting that Abraham Lincoln – whom Rawls esteems at various points in his corpus (see e. g., *PL*, 45, 232, 254) – hoped that the envy and instability stoked by political contest could be

In Callan's view, "Rawls shows a certain blindness to the importance of patriotic loyalty that his own argument discloses." Our study of peer envy lends further support to the idea that patriotism may be required to render Rawls's theory of justice feasible and coherent.

4 Conclusion

In this article I have tried to highlight why Rawls ought to have paid greater attention to the problem of peer envy instead of focusing his energies almost exclusively on general envy. Given that competition elicits peer envy, and that Rawls endorses competitive social relations, his just society is likely to be characterized by elevated levels of precisely this type of envy. This situation would then only be further compounded by the predominance of equality.

Since Rawls's ideal society is prone to be destabilized by exceptionally high degrees of peer envy (despite his assurances to the contrary), it follows that individuals placed in the original position ought to take this into account if they wish to institute a constitution that ensures liberal democratic stability.

The example of the ancient Greeks indicates that there could be a trade-off between egalitarian competition and liberty, namely, insofar as liberties may need to be curtailed in order to counteract the socially harmful emotional dispositions generated by equitable contest (i. e., between peers). For instance, it may turn out to be necessary to institute a single state religion in order to combat excessive peer envy – a possibility that would, as just mentioned, be deeply problematic for Rawls's commitment to freedom of conscience and worship.

Of course, peer envy and its socially harmful consequences can be counteracted by a host of other institutional means. As we saw, some breed of patriotism or civic allegiance could be up to the task. A Madisonian system of checks and balances, such as we find in the US, might also go some way toward mitigating the undesirable side-effects of envious political rivalries. For example, jealous executives who seek to exclude their envious rivals by means of illicit tactics such as gerrymandering can be prevented from doing so by the Supreme Court. Lastly, fixed-term

dampened by propagating rational reverence for constitutional morality: "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason, must furnish all the materials for our future support and defence. – Let those materials be moulded into *general intelligence, sound morality*, and in particular, *a reverence for the constitution and laws*" (Lincoln 1953, 115). In light of the persuasive case that Callan makes for considering interpersonal emotions an essential element of the well-ordered society, we ought to doubt the feasibility of Lincoln's proposals.

governments may serve to curb peer envy by functioning in a manner comparable to ostracism. I leave it an open question whether such mechanisms merely serve to ensure political stability – that is, by preserving the peace – or whether they meaningfully contribute to the deeper, psychological mode of stability sought by Rawls. But however we answer this question, the point remains that since peer envy is politically hazardous in rivalrous societies, theorists interested in furthering the Rawlsian project ought to examine such mechanisms in greater detail.

An alternative to developing such institutional mechanisms is simply to plump against competition. This would remove the primary driver of peer envy, which would likely keep such envy within safe limits without the need for additional institutional controls. But as this study has indicated, however, competition is a vital social good and should be duly fostered, as should peer envy, at least to the extent that it drives competitive agency. In thinking through how a just competitive society would function, then, we need to ascertain how we can kindle our peer envy while simultaneously holding it within healthy bounds.²¹

JF *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*
 PL *Political Liberalism*
 TJ *A Theory of Justice*

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