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RIGHT, GOOD AND THE PROBLEM OF CONGRUENCE IN THE RAWLS'S *THEORY OF JUSTICE*

Abstract

This paper examines John Rawls's congruence argument—the claim that it is good for individuals to act justly—as developed in A Theory of Justice. Rawls later abandoned this argument in Political Liberalism. He sought to show that a well-ordered society is stable when citizens affirm the principles of justice as part of their own good. The paper reconstructs the congruence argument. The paper argues that the congruence argument fails to reconcile the priority of the right with the rational pursuit of the good. This results in both a circular and a comprehensive conception of motivation, which undermines pluralism. In response to this tension, the analysis addresses Rawls's later shift from congruence to overlapping consensus. This shift is seen as an attempt to privatise the connection between justice and individual good. However, this transition diffuses rather than resolves the motivational problem. While it preserves political neutrality, it weakens the rational foundation for allegiance to justice. The paper concludes by

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considering recent proposals, such as Mihaela Georgieva's idea of civic friendship. These may offer a way to restore congruence within a pluralist framework.

Key words: John Rawls, congruence, right, good, overlapping consensus.

JEL classification: A13, B31, B40, D60

Introduction

One of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, John Rawls, revitalised social contract theory. He suggested that principles of justice should be those that free and equal persons would choose behind a veil of ignorance. He also claimed that citizens must be motivated to honour these principles. In his seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argued that just institutions are stable when citizens affirm their sense of justice and find it rational to comply [9, p. 455]. The stability argument, therefore, hinges on a claim of congruence: that it is good for individuals to act justly. Rawls writes, "In a well-ordered society, citizens hold the same principles of right and they try to reach the same judgement in particular cases...On the other hand, individuals find good in different ways, and many things that are good for one person may not be good for another. Moreover, there is no urgency to reach a publicly accepted judgement as to what is the good of particular individuals... In a well-ordered society, then, the plans of life of individuals are different in the sense that these plans give prominence to different aims, and persons are left free to determine their good." [9, p. 448].

Yet Rawls's congruence argument has been controversial. Critics argue that the priority of right in his theory undercuts the possibility of congruence [4, p. 272], or that any attempt to impose congruence intrudes into comprehensive doctrines and threatens freedom [6, p. 562]. Recognizing these concerns,

Rawls himself later acknowledged that his congruence argument relied upon a Kantian conception of moral autonomy. Reflecting this shift, in *Political Liberalism*, he abandons the argument in favour of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines [3, p. 481]. But let's see what Rawls wanted to address in the first place.

1. The Congruence Argument in *A Theory of Justice*: What was the problem Rawls sought to solve?

Rawls noted that a well-ordered society is one in which citizens (1) accept the same public conception of justice (the right), (2) that conception is institutionally realised and publicly known, and (3) citizens have an effective sense of justice leading them to maintain these arrangements. Samuel Freeman summarises that Rawls's stability requirement is not about peace at any cost but the stability of a just society, and that a conception of justice is stable only if citizens acquire a corresponding sense of justice and desire to do their part [2, p. 278]. Rawls recognized a "gap" between accepting principles of justice and being motivated to act on them. Even in a well-ordered society, "congruence is not a foregone conclusion" [9, p. 567]; citizens might affirm the principles yet find their sense of justice burdensome when pursuing their own good. Here, "congruence" refers to whether citizens' motivation to act justly aligns with their pursuit of their own good. The stability problem, therefore, requires showing why citizens should regard compliance with principles of justice as part of their good. Rawls rejects the idea that recognition of right is in itself sufficient motivation, criticising the "doctrine of the purely conscientious act" as irrational [9, p. 477]. Instead, he insists that "no act can be regarded as rational unless it is for the good of the agent" [1, p. 885]. The task, then, is to prove that acting justly is good for individuals.

Rawls's congruence argument unfolds in Part III of *A Theory of Justice*. The basic strategy is to show that a person

who possesses a sense of justice will, under conditions of complete knowledge and rational deliberation, recognise that affirming this sense is part of their good. Barry summarises Rawls's point: individuals "have a 'sense of justice', yet it still has to be shown that this disposition accords with the individual's good" [1, p. 884]. Rawls defines primary goods and claims that rational agents under the veil of ignorance will want an all-purpose means (liberties, opportunities, income, and self-respect). Rational agents will thus choose the two principles of justice as the means to secure these goods. Next, Rawls offers a moral psychology in which individuals raised under just institutions develop a sense of justice through three psychological laws: attachment, trust, and reciprocity. An effective sense of justice becomes part of their character. Rawls then argues that it is rational for citizens to affirm their sense of justice because doing so promotes their good. He cites several reasons. These include the benefits of cooperative institutions, the strains of commitment under alternative arrangements, the psychological cost of dissimulation in a well ordered society, and the enrichment of social life when all share just principles [1, p. 880]. The argument concludes that acting justly allows individuals to express their nature as free and equal rational beings [9, p. 557]. Rawls supplements these considerations with a Kantian interpretation. He asserts that "acting justly is something we want to do as free and equal rational beings" [9, p. 572]. On this view, moral autonomy is an intrinsic good. The desire to realise it is a highest order regulative sentiment that takes unconditional priority over other ends. The congruence argument thus ties justice to an Aristotelian principle of moral development and to Kantian moral autonomy.

Rawls's congruence argument faces several significant challenges. Critics argue that his reliance on the thin theory of the good and on moral autonomy is inconsistent with his claim that the right is prior to the good. John McNaughton

notes that, although Rawls purports to offer 'the best of both worlds,' his persistent emphasis on the priority of the right undermines the claim of congruence [4, p. 275]. If the right is absolute, the good becomes secondary and cannot serve as an independent source of motivation. Furthermore, Rawls's argument is criticized as circular: the sense of justice is valued because it expresses rational nature, yet rational nature is defined by commitment to justice. We can see that this critique highlights the need to examine the broader assumptions underlying Rawls's position.

Second, the argument depends on the assumption that there is a single rational good for all persons. Rawls uses a "thin" theory to avoid controversial ethical commitments, yet he also appeals to the Aristotelian principle that human beings characteristically enjoy the exercise of their capacities, especially when those capacities are realised in cooperation with others [5, p. 48]. Building on this, Barry points out that Rawls's reliance on the thin theory under full information collapses into means end rationality and cannot account for the diversity of individual conceptions of the good [1, p. 903]. Rawls later concedes that even in a well-ordered society, there may be people for whom affirming their sense of justice is not rational [1, p. 889]. These issues are compounded by concerns over the inclusiveness of Rawls's conception of moral autonomy.

Additionally, the congruence argument links the good to moral autonomy, thereby presupposing a specific comprehensive doctrine. Rawls concedes that the Kantian interpretation constitutes a 'comprehensive view' of a sort [1, p. 887]. A theory that obliges citizens to regard moral autonomy as their highest good risks imposing contentious metaphysical commitments and threatening pluralism. This issue foreshadows Rawls's subsequent move to reject the congruence argument in favour of a political, freestanding conception of justice.

The most common objection is that the right and the good are conceptually distinct and cannot be fused. McNaughton argues that once the element of right is allowed into an ethical theory, it must, by definition, take precedence over the good. Conversely, if right is relative to the good, it becomes a good itself [4, p. 277]. Under this dualism, the notions of right and good cannot coexist on equal terms. This makes genuine congruence impossible. The congruence argument thus oscillates between deontology and teleology. It fails to provide a proper synthesis. Another criticism targets Rawls's motivational psychology. Critics such as Brian Barry and Joseph Grcic argue that Rawls underestimates the possibility that a desire to act rightly can be autonomous and not reducible to pursuing one's good. Barry suggests that Rawls caricatures the traditional view that duty can motivate action, and that there is nothing irrational in acting from a sense of duty [1, p. 884]. If individuals can be directly motivated by moral reasons, the search for a congruence with individual good may be unnecessary. Critiques of Rawls's congruence argument also come from the politics of pluralism and religion. Jeff Spinner Halev argues that Rawls's desire for congruence between public justice and private values leads to excessive intrusion into religious life. Pushing for too much congruence "between public forms of justice or equality and private rules devoted to some other good" is dangerous. It pushes liberalism in intolerant directions [6, p. 555]. Rawls's theory imagines that citizens should align their private values with public justice. But in pluralist societies, many people do not wish to reorder their private lives in accordance with liberal values. Spinner Halev contends that stability often coexists with profound disagreement. He argues that agreement on procedures may suffice [6, p. 570].

Similarly, Kenneth Strike critiques what he calls the congruence argument in contemporary liberal education. The normative premise of this argument is that liberal societies

have a legitimate interest in regulating public and private associations to produce liberal citizens; the factual premise is that liberal citizens are more likely to be produced by associations that practice liberal principles [7, p. 346]. Strike notes that this expansive interpretation justifies intrusive regulation of religious schools and associations. He highlights Rawls's later claim in *Political Liberalism* that children should simply know their rights to guarantee the freedom to exit, suggesting that political liberalism seeks to reduce the demands of liberal socialisation [7, p. 346; 8, p. 199]. For Strike, the congruence argument demonstrates the tension between liberal citizenship and freedom of conscience.

2. From congruence to overlapping consensus

Confronted with the fact of reasonable pluralism and the difficulty of providing a public justification of congruence, Rawls revises his theory in *Political Liberalism*. Mihaela Georgieva explains that Rawls abandons the congruence argument because the assumption of a shared conception of the good is unsustainable in societies marked by reasonable disagreement [3, p. 483]. He introduces the idea of an overlapping consensus, whereby citizens with diverse comprehensive doctrines support the same political conception for different reasons. The whole justification of justice as fairness, therefore, takes place in two stages: 1. a freestanding political argument accessible to all reasonable citizens and 2. a private justification within each comprehensive doctrine [3, p. 483]. In this new framework, congruence becomes privatised; the motivations that connect individuals' goods to justice are relegated to their comprehensive doctrines [3, p. 484]. However, this shift leaves unresolved questions. Georgieva observes that once congruence is privatised, the explanation for allegiance to justice becomes unavailable for public scrutiny, leading to justificatory instability—citizens may accept justice as

fairness pro tanto yet not find it fully justified given their entire set of reasons [3, p. 484]. The overlapping consensus may therefore fail to motivate citizens to prioritise political values when they conflict with personal ends. Rawls's later theory thus diffuses the congruence problem rather than solving it. To address the motivational deficit in Rawls's later theory, Mihaela Georgieva proposes reviving congruence through the idea of civic friendship. She defines congruence as establishing that it is rational for a person to develop a sense of justice in view of the ends that make up their conception of the good, and that there is a fit between justice and the kind of person they want to be [3, p. 486]. Georgieva analyses congruence into three components: 1. a special good component—seeing a sense of justice as a special good; 2. a scope component—the good is assessed over the whole plan of life, not individual acts; and 3. a regulative conception component—a higher order desire to live as a particular kind of person [3, p. 486]. She argues that reasonable pluralism undermines the shared rationale for the special good and regulative conception, but that a public motivation can still be supplied by civic friendship [3, p. 486]. Georgieva contends that friendship is a value sought across cultures and that individuals have a fundamental interest in caring and being cared for [3, p. 487]. Friendship is premised on equality and voluntariness, has a strong motivational pull, creates a shared good transcending individual goods, and can reveal social needs and perspectives [3, p. 484]. Extending these features to the political realm, civic friendship denotes a shared commitment among citizens to regard one another as partners in a fair cooperative scheme. Such an ideal can supplement the idea of free and equal citizenship by motivating citizens to prioritize political values when they conflict with private ends [3, p. 491].

Conclusion

Rawls sought to demonstrate that justice is both rational and moral by developing the congruence argument, which holds that acting justly forms part of an individual's good. Although this argument was intended to ensure the stability of a just society, it depended on controversial assumptions regarding the thin theory of the good and Kantian moral autonomy, and it faced substantial criticism. In response to the reality of reasonable pluralism, Rawls shifted from the congruence argument to the concept of overlapping consensus, thereby privatizing the relationship between justice and individual good. While this transition addressed specific conflicts, it left the motivational foundation for justice insufficiently theorized.

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**ISPRAVNO, DOBRO I PROBLEM
KONGRUENCIJE U ROLSOVOJ TEORIJ
PRAVDE**

Apstrakt

Ovaj rad razmatra Rolsov argument kongruencije — tvrdnju da je za pojedinca dobro da postupa ispravno — kako je razvijen u delu Teorija pravde i kasnije napušten u Političkom liberalizmu. Rawls je nastojao da pokaže da je društvo dobro uređenog tipa stabilno kada građani potvrđuju principe pravde kao deo sopstvenog dobra. Rad rekonstruiše argument kongruencije. Pokazuje se da Rolsov argument ne uspeva da pomiri prvenstvo ispravnog sa racionalnim težnjama ka dobru, jer dovodi do cirkularne i sveobuhvatne koncepcije moralne motivacije koja potkopava pluralizam. Kao odgovor na ovaj problem, analizira se Rolsovo kasnije napuštanje argumenta kongruencije u korist pojma preklapajućeg konsenzusa, kao pokušaj da se privatizuje odnos između pravde i individualnog dobra. Međutim, ovaj prelaz ne rešava već razvodnjava problem motivacije: iako čuva političku neutralnost, on slabi racionalne osnove za odanost principima pravde. Rad zaključuje razmatranjem novijih ideja, poput ideje građanskog prijateljstva, kao mogućeg načina da se kongruencija obnovi u pluralističkom okviru.

Ključne reči: *Džon Rols, kongruencija, ispravno, dobro, stabilnost.*

JEL klasifikacija: A13, B31, B40, D60