

# Policy & precarity – what are people able to do and be?

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# Introduction

- This presentation will outline a small part of my wider PhD work looking at John Rawls' Difference Principle and how it can be used as a test for social justice in social policy
- The specific mechanism that will be addressed is the metric that is used to test for social justice
- The work in general piece of applied philosophy which looks at using broad philosophical conceptual frameworks to create new understandings of concrete matters, such as specific pieces of legislation and policy



# Argument & Structure

Social justice should be measured on what individuals are able to do and be, rather than process or resources of redistribution

**Problematisation** – how do we measure social justice?

**Philosophical framework** – individuals have two moral powers; rationality & reasonableness

**Modified metric** – self-command; what people are able to do & be

**Concluding comments** – so what?



# Social policy and social justice

- Theme of this conference: financialisation, inequality, precarity
- This leads to questions around the legitimacy of social policy
- There needs to be a way in which to scrutinise policy according to its impact on individuals



# Rawls' theory of justice

- Scheme of social cooperation between mutually disinterested individuals
- Within the 'basic structure' – the institutions, policies and practices which support this scheme
- Rawls' account does not focus on interpersonal relations but where claims of political obligation can be made
- Social policy as a site of social justice



# Rawls' theory of justice

- First principle of justice:
- Second principle of justice:

*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*

(Rawls, 1971)

*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 principles***

*Attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity*

(Rawls, 1999)



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# Reasonableness

On Rawls' account individuals have two moral powers:

*Rationality* - individuals have the inclination to pursue a conception of the good for themselves.

*Reasonableness* - individuals are part of the social world and have to adapt their behaviour as such



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# Two Moral Powers

## Rationality

I have a conception of the good life

*I have particular things that I want to do and be that motivates me to behave in certain ways*



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## Reasonableness

Other people also have conceptions of the good life that might be different to mine but are equally important

*I need to behave in a certain way that enables me to pursue my conception of the good life, but equally lets others pursue theirs*



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# Primary Goods

Rawls defines the appropriate redistribution of resources as those which regard what he calls Primary Goods – those things that all men are assumed to want and need.

If the institutions in society – including legislation and policy – enable the redistribution of Primary Goods to individuals, then society is socially just.

Rawls includes in this list of Primary Goods rights, liberties, opportunities, income and wealth

Interestingly, however, he states that the most important PG is self-respect. It is this mechanism that underpins my modification of his metric.



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# Modified metric

- I argue that social justice and the justification of social policy should be focussed not on the redistribution of hard goods but the ability of individuals to act in self-determined ways.
- Draws on Capabilities Approach – Martha Nussbaum (2006), Amartya Sen (1979)
- **Key question:** What are people able to do with the goods that they have been given?
- Focus of redistribution is often the process by which it occurs and the goods it involves



# Self-command

Instead of looking at process or goods, we should focus on how it impacts on individuals' ability to act

This idea of self-command can be linked to the idea of the moral power of rationality.

For individuals to have self-command, they must be in a position to choose and pursue their conception of the good.



# Link between moral powers and social policy

A) Rawls asserts that intrinsic to humans are these two moral powers

- And that on top of this individuals should have access to primary goods through redistribution.

B) I argue that individuals all have the capacity for these powers

- But that sometimes structural impacts (such as policy) can undermine the ability of individuals to exercise these powers.



# Maslow (1943)

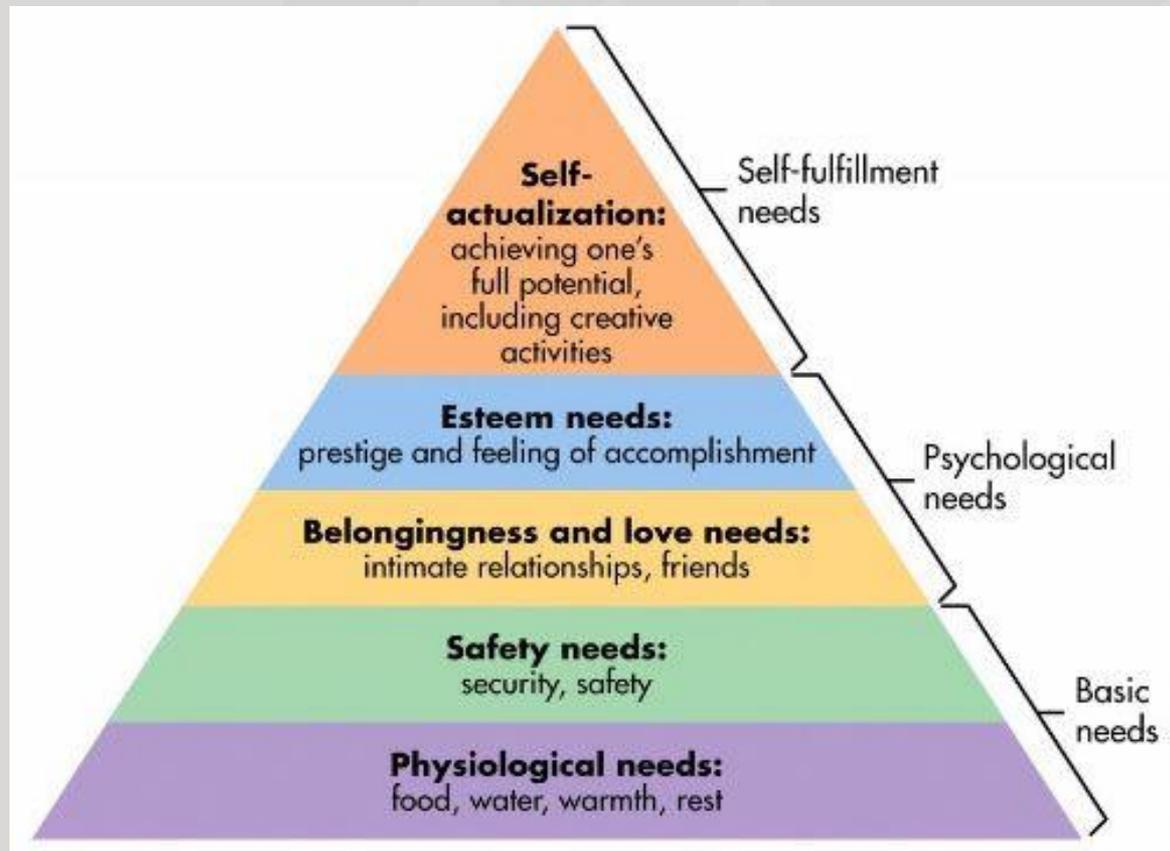
We can see this idea of self-command as linked to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, and this might give us greater understanding as to how this can be used in the policy context.

In Maslow's hierarchy, basic needs must be met first before more complex needs can be considered or met.

Maslow discusses the concept of individuals having an view of the future and this concept of self-actualization. These are aspects at the top of the hierarchy.



# Maslow's hierarchy



# Homelessness

- Waldron (1991) – homelessness is an issue of social freedom; what space we have access to defines what we are able to do
- Individuals in this situation, I suggest, do not always have self-command – they are not necessarily able to create and pursue a conception of the good for themselves



# So what?

- I would suggest that this understanding of testing social policy for social justice through the concept of self-command is useful, and creates new understandings of policy.
- As individuals fundamental needs are not necessarily met through the situation of homelessness, we can see that this impacts on individuals' ability to create and pursue a conception of the good for themselves.
- We can use this as a tool by which to measure policy for legitimacy – does it enable individuals to create and pursue a conception of the good?
- Rawls states that the moral power of rationality is a fundamental part of being a human – what does that mean for policy that undermines this?



# References

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