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JOHN RAWLS ON MORAL EMOTIONS: GUILT AND SHAME

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this work is to examine John Rawls' views on guilt and shame, as well as briefly review the relationship between his theory of moral development and the problem of stability. First of all, in order to fully reveal the subject, it is important to outline the central views on moral emotions developed in Ethics. So, in the first part of the work, four families of moral emotions developed by Jonathan Haidt and the principal differences between shame and guilt will be studied. The second part will examine John Rawls' theory of the development of the moral sense of guilt, as well as his reflections on shame. In the final part of the work, Rawls' theory of the moral development of individuals and the prerequisites for acquiring a sense of justice in conjunction with the problem of stability will be studied in main terms.

Keywords: John Rawls, moral emotions, guilt, shame, moral development, the sense of justice, the problem of stability.

JOHN RAWLS AHLAKİ DUYGULAR ÜZERINE: SUÇLULUK VE UTANÇ

ÖZ.

Bu çalışmanın temel amacı, John Rawls'un suçluluk ve utanç hakkındaki görüşlerini incelemek ve ahlaki gelişim teorisi ile istikrar sorunu arasındaki ilişkiyi kısaca gözden geçirmektir. Öncelikle konunun tam olarak ortaya konabilmesi için Etik'te ahlaki duygular üzerine geliştirilen temel görüşlerin ana hatlarıyla ortaya konması önemlidir. Bu nedenle, çalışmanın ilk bölümünde Jonathan Haidt tarafından geliştirilen dört ahlaki duygu ailesi ve utanç ile suçluluk arasındaki temel farklılıklar incelenecektir. İkinci bölümde John Rawls'un ahlaki suçluluk duygusunun gelişimine ilişkin teorisi ve utanç üzerine düşünceleri incelenecektir. Çalışmanın son bölümünde ise Rawls'un bireylerin ahlaki gelişimine ilişkin teorisi ve istikrar sorunuyla bağlantılı olarak adalet duygusu edinmenin önkoşulları ana hatlarıyla incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: John Rawls, ahlaki duygular, suçluluk, utanç, ahlaki gelişim, adalet duygusu, istikrar sorunu.

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Introduction

In the history of philosophy, there are three approaches to the question of the relation of emotions to ethics. The first approach, rooted in the Stoic tradition, fundamentally denies that emotions have any moral value and advocates the importance of impartiality in ethics. The second approach maintains that some emotions, such as sympathy and compassion, are moral by virtue of their favorable impacts on moral consciousness and behavior. The third one goes back to Aristotle with his idea that all emotions are related to ethics. This approach does not consider emotions in terms of their potential contribution to moral behavior but regards them as a necessary component of the good life. ¹

Ronald De Sousa explores the naturalness of emotions and identifies four different views on the relationship between emotions and nature. According to the first view, emotions are exclusively biological phenomena without any intrinsic moral weights. Therefore, like other physiological functions, they are amoral and arational. Consequently, no one can be judged or praised for having emotions. The second view states that emotions are socially constructed and learned on the basis of our ability to experience pleasure and pain. In this sense, emotions can relate to morality solely as an instrument of conventional morality. On the third view, the capability for emotions and their available repertoire depend on both nature and society, but at the same time, individual expression also remains an important component. According to the last point of view, emotions are completely chosen, and there is no determining factor either at the level of nature or in society. Hence, they are only an expression of our individual free will.²

Moral Emotions

Moral emotions have been defined as sentiments that serve social well-being, i.e. they promote pro-social behaviour that fosters cooperative interaction between group members. These emotions enable people to recognize whether they or others meet moral standards.³ In this regard, Jonathan Haidt identifies four families of moral emotions with distinct characteristics, where each family

 $^{^{1}}$ Ronald De Sousa, "Moral Emotions," *Springer. Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Cultivating Emotions, (2001): 109-110.

² Ibid., 111-112.

³ Fabrice Teroni and Otto Bruun, "Shame, Guilt and Morality," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 8, Koninklijke Brill NV. (2011): 225.

differs in whether a particular behaviour violates moral norms and whether attention is focused on the person who committed the violation or on the victim.⁴

The first family of moral emotions is called the Other-Condemning Emotions, which comprise contempt, anger, and disgust. In essence, these are negative feelings that people have towards others for violating moral norms. Correspondingly, Haidt regards them as guardians of the moral norms and writes that "all three emotions motivate people to change their relationships with moral violators. But only anger motivates direct action to repair the moral order and to make violators mend their ways". Therefore, he argues that anger should be viewed as the most prototypical emotion of the three. 6

The second family is the Self-Conscious Emotions, which include guilt, embarrassment and shame. In concise, these are negative feelings that people feel towards themselves for violating moral norms. According to Haidt, these emotions were developed in order to help people establish healthy interactions with others in complex social groups without causing them anger, contempt or disgust. Thereby, he writes that "all three emotions are important moral emotions, because their action tendencies generally make people conform to rules and uphold the social order".⁷

Haidt calls the third group of emotions the Other-Suffering Family, which comprises sympathy and compassion. Basically, these emotions arise when someone sees another person becoming a victim of moral violations. Accordingly, he writes that "compassion makes people want to help, comfort, or otherwise alleviate the suffering of the other" (Haidt, p. 862).8 In addition to this, he argues that there is a conceptual as well as an empirical connection between compassion and guilt, and argues that those people who tend to feel someone else's pain tend to feel guilt. 9

The last family of moral emotions is the Other-Praising Family: Gratitude and Elevation. These emotions arise when another person exhibits praising behavior that positively exceeds moral standards. In this regard, Haidt says that "It is a remarkable and encouraging fact about human beings that simply hearing about a good deed, done by a stranger for another stranger, can

⁴ Jonathan Haidt, "The Moral Emotions." R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.) Handbook of affective sciences. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003, 853-855.

⁵ Ibid., 859.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 861.

⁸ Ibid., 862.

⁹ Ibid.

profoundly affect us". ¹⁰ Therefore, he argues that the sense of elevation can be regarded as the most prototypical moral emotion of all.

As it has been already mentioned, guilt and shame are regarded as self-conscious emotions since there is an assessment of oneself. As a result of such an assessment, if we feel responsible for any situation that causes us sadness, together with sadness we feel guilt or shame. Guilt and shame are painful emotions that arise as a result of personal mistakes, failures or antisocial behavior. Therefore, it could be said that moral emotions play a central role in managing our social behavior in daily life and provide motivation and energy for doing morally right things and avoiding wrong actions.

Nowadays, the distinction between shame and guilt is mostly based on the notions of self-esteem and behavior, that is, in the case of shame, one focuses on self-conception, and in guilt - on behavior. Correspondingly, when we feel guilty, we are tormented by the thought "I have done something bad" and feel "lost, isolated, and out of place". We experience "a tension between ourselves and others; we look around and avoid eye contact. We are not at home in the present, since we are stuck in going over and over our role in some past event. There is no peace". 11 Thereby, guilt can be associated with the fear of losing trust. Loss of trust is a kind of exile to an imaginary no-man's-land, which scares a person as dangerous without posing any specific danger, and this status, accordingly, leads to anxiety, which is a constitutive of guilt. 12 Whereas, when we are ashamed, we perceive ourselves as bad people and are depressed by the thought "I am a bad person". Thus, in cases of guilt, self-esteem is not damaged, while in shame, selfesteem feels low, worthless and flawed, and such an experience makes us "shrink and feel small. We feel worthless and may even feel physically smaller. We lack power and are left with little control".13

In addition to this, the overwhelming feeling of our worthlessness, caused by shame in our own and others' eyes, makes us want to run away and hide. Thereby, in some cases, "the desire to hide and get out of the interpersonal realm can rule one's life when ashamed". ¹⁴ While in the case of guilt, people focus on certain behaviour. There is a thought that you have done something wrong,

¹⁰ Ibid., 864.

¹¹ Janice Lindsay-Hartz, "Contrasting Experiences of Shame and Guilt," *1984 American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 27 No. 6, Sage Publications, Inc. (1984): 695.

¹² J. David Velleman, "Don't Worry, Feel Guilty", in *Philosophy and the Emotions*. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, 52, ed. Anthony Hatzimoysis. Cambridge University Press. (2003): 238.

 ¹³ Janice Lindsay-Hartz, "Contrasting Experiences of Shame and Guilt," 1984 American Behavioral Scientist, Vol. 27 No. 6, Sage Publications, Inc. (1984): 694.
 ¹⁴ Ibid., 693.

and feelings of stress, remorse and regret occur for the bad deeds that have been committed. Thus, when guilty, "many people want to confess and atone. The desire to confess was one manifestation of a more general desire – the desire to set things right. ... We may try to set things right by confessing and making reparation, carrying out symbolic atonements, wishing to undo the wrong, setting things right elsewhere, or seeking punishment".¹⁵

In legal cases, the logic of guilt presupposes the notions of violation of the law, the relevant authorities and subsequent liability to punishment. However, despite the resemblance between moral and legal guilt, there is a substantial difference in the relationship between the authority and the subject, that is, in the case of moral guilt, the authority knows everything about the subjects and their intentions. Consequently, what matters is the judgment made *in foro interno*. Thus, the internalized concepts of authority and his judgments naturally led to the fact that people began to regard guilt feeling as an emotion. ¹⁶

Rawls on Guilt and Shame

The modern political philosopher John Rawls revived not only the contractual tradition and Kantian ethics but also the theories of moral development of Hume and Rousseau and returned interest in the history of ethics. ¹⁷ John Rawls, in his earlier work "The Sense of Justice", seeks to illustrate the development of a truly moral sense of guilt and identifies its three stages. The first one is called authority guilt, which is occurred when children disobey the orders of their parents, that is, due to the lack of their own standards and love for their parents, children accept the authority of their parents and feel guilty when they violate directives. On this account, Rawls writes that in case of violation of the directives established for them, their actions "will be recognized and experienced as a breach of the relation of love and trust with the authoritative person. An absence of guilt feelings would betray an absence of love and trust". ¹⁸ In this regard, there is a belief that all other later feelings of

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Anthony O'Hear, "Guilt and Shame as Moral Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 77, Oxford University Press on behalf of The Aristotelian Society. (1976 – 1977): 73.

¹⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Conversing with the Tradition: John Rawls and the History of Ethics," *Ethics*, The University of Chicago. (1999): 425.

¹⁸ John Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review. (1963): 287.

guilt are rooted in this early fear of violating parental prohibitions, with society and God playing parental roles.¹⁹

The second stage is what Rawls calls association guilt which occurs in the process of group participation in reciprocal actions, such as games or social institutions. So, one feels association guilt when one breaks mutual bonds, which, in turn, implies one's willingness to admit what he has done, accept reproaches and punishments and strive for reinstatement. Or, to put it in his own words, the feeling of association guilt "will show themselves in various ways: in the inclination to make good the loss to others (reparation) and to admit what one has done and to apologize; in the inclination to ask for reinstatement and to acknowledge and to accept reproofs and penalties; and in a diminished ability to be angry with others should they likewise fail to do their part".²⁰

The final stage is called the principle guilt, according to which people feel guilty not because they harm those with whom they are connected by special bonds, but because the love and trust of their parents and feelings of cooperation towards their surroundings extend to others in accordance with the principles of justice, so we feel guilty when we are acting against the spirit of the existing just institution, resisting the reforms necessary to create new institutions required by the principles of justice. Along with this, Rawls contends that someone who does not have such a sense of justice "lacks thereby certain fundamental attitudes and capacities included under the notion of humanity".²¹

Compared to guilt, shame has no immediate association with the notions of morality and legality. Although one may be ashamed of doing something immoral and illegal, one may be equally ashamed of saying something silly, looking strange, not knowing something, having an accent, or being poor. Accordingly, in cases of moral or legal guilt, one's intentions and volitions are important for determining the level of offence, whereas, in the case of shame, one's intentions are not so relevant. Moreover, one may also be ashamed of being associated with a particular group of people whom one condemns. For that matter, there is a view that shame, rather than guilt, is the distinctive feature of

¹⁹ Anthony O'Hear, "Guilt and Shame as Moral Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 77, Oxford University Press on behalf of The Aristotelian Society. (1976 – 1977): 74.

John Rawls, "The Sense of Justice," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Duke University Press on behalf of Philosophical Review. (1963): 289.
 Ibid., 300.

a social person, we can think of people with high standards of their own, feeling shame when they let themselves down.²²

In this respect, Gerhart Pierce's distinction between shame and guilt probably remains the most influential and popular, which basically states that shame arises when an individual fails to achieve a goal or ideal that is a critical part of his self-conception. While guilt occurs when an individual does not comply with the boundaries and constraints in his behavior, established by the authority under which he lives. Thus, shame is associated with failure, and guilt is related to transgressions, or, in other words, shame is felt because of deficiencies, and guilt is felt because of wrong actions.²³

Articulating the difference between shame and guilt, John Rawls described shame as an emotion that a person experiences when he loses his sense of self-esteem. In this respect, Pierce's influence on him is easily recognizable. Rawls defines self-esteem in terms of goals and ideals that a person includes in his life plan, and also makes this explanation central to his description of a moral personality. According to him, it is our life plan that "determines what we feel ashamed of, and so feelings of shame are relative to our aspirations, to what we try to do and with whom we wish to associate".²⁴

On top of that, Rawls regards self-esteem as the most important primary good. Primary social goods is a concept developed by Rawls within his theory of justice as fairness. Rawls seeks to develop a deontological understanding of justice and prioritizes right over good. Thus, any action, behavior or rule is not good unless it is right. For Rawls, justice is of paramount importance and all social and political decisions must conform to the principles of justice. He writes: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust". 25

In placing justice at the basis of all social institutions, Rawls seeks to develop universally recognized principles of justice, which he calls "justice as fairness". In order to identify these principles, he says that we need to proceed

²² Anthony O'Hear, "Guilt and Shame as Moral Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 77, Oxford University Press on behalf of The Aristotelian Society. (1976 – 1977): 76-77.

²³ John Deigh, "Shame and Self-Esteem: A Critique," *Ethics,* Vol. 93, No. 2, The University of Chicago Press. (1983): 225.

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Belknap press of Harvard University Press. 1999, 390.
 Ibid., 3.

from a hypothetical situation, that is, from the original position. So Rawls asks us to imagine a setting in which a group of people come together to discuss these principles, in other words, an initial situation in which fundamental principles of justice are chosen, which he calls the "original position". Thus, Rawls argues that for an objective discussion of what institutions are just, people must be deprived of any information about their own and others' individual interests. To this end, Rawls introduces the special concept of the "veil of ignorance." The veil creates a state in which individuals do not know what social status their individual characteristics will secure for them. In such a situation, people will be forced to consider the future society and their place in it from the most general point of view.²⁶

Thus, it can be said that the veil of ignorance was introduced to address the dichotomy between the selfish motives of the individual and the necessary principle of impartiality, since it deprives people of all knowledge about themselves and society that might enable them to adapt the principles to their own interests. Thus, given these constrains on choice, Rawls argues that individuals will choose justice as fairness and would agree to the following two principles of justice: (1) "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others", and (2) "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions open to all".²⁷

However, this raises the question of the motivations for choosing the principles of justice, that is, what are the primary rationales of individuals that will motivate them in this process of choice? In this regard, Rawls puts forward two concepts, such as a "sense of justice" and "primary social goods". In his view, all people, because of their sense of justice, are capable of intuitively choosing what is fair. A sense of justice is an innate ability, and people understand that they benefit from acting in accordance with justice. Another motivation for people to choose the principles of justice is "primary social goods", that is, social goods any reasonable person would like to have in any situation. Thus, Rawls believes that the principle of justice as fairness would be chosen because they would provide the "primary goods", such as "rights and liberties, opportunities and powers, income and wealth". Accordingly, people will strive to have as many of these values as possible, regardless of their life plans, since this is a requirement of being rational.

²⁶ Ibid., 137.

²⁷ Ibid., 60.

²⁸ Ibid., 92.

Thus, Rawls argues that the notion of self-esteem requires the fulfilment of two conditions: first, an individual considers his goals and ideals worthy and, secondly, believes that he is suited to meet them. Accordingly, he contends that when we think our plan has little value, "we cannot pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution. Nor plagued by failure and self-doubt can we continue in our endeavors. It is clear then why self-respect is a primary good. Without it nothing may seem worth doing, or if some things have value for us, we lack the will to strive for them".²⁹

Hence, an individual loses self-esteem, either because of a change in his view of the importance of his goals and ideals, or his belief in his capability to accomplish them. Thus, according to Rawls, shame arises from a sudden loss of self-esteem, or to put it another way, shame signifies such a loss. Moreover, shame is a shock to our sense of worth, or, in his words, "the emotion evoked by shocks to our self-respect", which stems from the realization that our values are base, or from the discovery of our incapacity to fulfill them.³⁰

Thus, it is safe to say that John Rawls sought to portray in his three-stage theory of the development of the moral sense of guilt how a person acquires a sense of justice that encourages him to maintain the basic structure of a well-ordered society. He contends that the origin of moral emotions goes back to natural love in childhood, and natural feelings of love and friendship are a prerequisite for acquiring a sense of justice. Hence, individuals, acquiring a sense of justice in the process of developing moral emotions, make possible Rawls' political theory of justice.³¹ Thereby, this conclusion gives the formulation of Rawls' theory of moral psychology, which describes the evolution of moral feelings and contends that our psychology is intrinsically moral. In this regard, it can be said that Rawls' moral psychology coincides with Rousseau's position that moral emotions stem from natural feelings, and, in particular, a sense of justice stems from love and friendship.³²

Moral Development and The Problem of Stability

According to John Rawls, there are three fundamental laws of moral psychology that regulate the three stages of moral development that have already been discussed in connection with the concept of guilt, that is, the

²⁹ Ibid., 386.

³⁰ Ibid., 388.

³¹ Xinghua Wang, "Rousseauian Heritage of Rawls's Moral Psychology," *Synthesis Philosophica*, 67. (2019): 219.

³² Ibid., 214.

morality of authority, association and principles. So, the first law states that the family takes care of the child for his own sake and shows its love for him, and then the child expresses this love shown to the family. Accordingly, Rawls identifies this stage with the childhood period and argues that the sense of justice is acquired "gradually by the younger members of society as they grow up". At this stage, the only legitimate authority for children is their parents. Therefore, parental love supports a child's rational self-love, a sense of completeness and self-esteem. As an unconditionally loved one, a child gradually acquires various skills and develops a sense of competence that confirms his self-esteem. Thus, the beloved child develops a sense of love and trust for his parents and successfully blends with his own world. 34

Besides that, a child at this stage is not able to comprehend the correctness of the rules and complex schemes of justice. Therefore, Rawls writes that the child's morality of authority is "temporary, a necessity arising from his peculiar situation and limited understanding". Thus, the morality of authority "has but a restricted role in fundamental social arrangements and can be justified only when the unusual demands of the practice in question make it essential to give certain individuals the prerogatives of leadership and command". 36

The second law says that individual feelings developed at the first stage allow a child to establish special bonds with others based on friendship and trust, in accordance with certain social norms. At this stage, moral life covers a wide range of social phenomena and even may "include the national community as a whole".³⁷ Consequently, the child first realizes the family as the smallest social association in which each family member has certain rights and responsibilities within a certain hierarchical structure. So, as the child grows up, he learns the behavioral standards of his position, and as a member of other communities besides the family, he enters into different social relationships at school and in the neighborhood. In this sense, Rawls writes that the morality of association "includes a large number of ideals each defined in ways suitable for the respective status or role".³⁸

Children at this stage also recognize "moral exemplars", that is, "persons who are in various ways admired and who exhibit to a high degree the ideal corresponding to their position". Moral exemplars personify all the desired skills,

³³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 405.

³⁴ Ibid., 406-407.

³⁵ Ibid., 409.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 410.

characters, and virtues that others would like to embody. Along with it, Rawls illustrates the content of the morality of association by separating the cooperative virtues from the vices, that is, justice and fairness, fidelity and trust, integrity and impartiality are regarded as virtues, whereas graspingness and unfairness, dishonesty and deceit, prejudice and bias are considered as vices. Thus, while public virtues strengthen friendship and trust, adherence to public standards and ideals, as well as a sense of fair cooperation, public vices lead to "feelings of (association) guilt on the one side and resentment and indignation on the other".³⁹

According to the third law, a person who has emotionally developed in accordance with the two previous laws, if society is fair, also develops a sense of justice and thus defends not only personal rights but also the rights of other people. Rawls asserts that at the third stage, a child begins to respect the tenets of justice not only as a consequence of social bonds or the approval of society as such, but also because of the principles themselves. Thus, the third law says that "once attitudes of love and trust, friendly feelings and mutual confidence, have been generated in accordance with the two preceding psychological laws, then the recognition that we and those for whom we care are the beneficiaries of an established and enduring just institution tends to endanger in us the corresponding sense of justice".⁴⁰ Thus, it follows that genuine moral development occurs at the stage of the morality of principles, when people begin to appreciate "the ideal of just human cooperation".⁴¹

So, moral emotions, particularly the sense of justice that arises within the framework of the principles of justice as fairness, play a regulatory role in our lives. This implies that we want to be guided by the principles of justice as fairness, that is to say, "being governed by these principles means that we want to live with others on terms that everyone would recognize as fair from a perspective that all would accept as reasonable".⁴²

As mentioned above, the theory of moral psychology makes possible Rawls' theory of justice, in particular, contributing to solving the problem of stability. This problem mainly lies in the fact that those states whose institutions are fair do not need to rely on means of coercion to force citizens to obey laws and regulations, since the corresponding fair institutions and laws are already supported by citizens. Accordingly, the contribution of moral psychology to solving the problem lies in the fact that it assumes that the requirements of

³⁹ Ibid., 413.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 414.

⁴¹ Ibid., 415.

⁴² Ibid., 418.

justice greatly coincide with the personal interests of citizens. Rawls writes that "a society regulated by a public sense of justice is inherently stable: other things equal, the forces making for stability increase (up to some limit) as time passes. This inherent stability is a consequence of the reciprocal relation between the three psychological laws".⁴³

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has become clear that moral emotions are crucial for social well-being since they help individuals identify moral norms, as well as build healthy relationships with other members of society. Further, we found out that moral emotions differ depending on whether moral norms have been violated or not. Moreover, self-conscious emotions such as guilt and shame were considered important emotions that play a central role in our day-to-day lives, providing incentives to act in accordance with moral standards.

Further, John Rawls depicted the development of guilt in his three-stage theory, where he argues that the origin of moral emotions goes back to natural love in childhood. According to him, this love and friendship are necessary elements for a person to cultivate a sense of justice. Besides that, he considered self-esteem to be the most important primary good and argued that shame arises from a sudden loss of self-esteem.

Moreover, the fundamental laws of Rawls' moral psychology were examined, where he argues that actual moral development occurs at the stage of the morality of principles when people begin to value the ideal of just human association. In addition to this, Rawls believes that his theory of moral psychology contributes to solving the problem of stability since the provisions of justice largely overlap with the individual interests of citizens. Thus, Rawls argues that moral emotions in general and the sense of justice in particular, arising from the principles of justice as fairness, fulfil a regulative role in human society.

⁴³ Ibid., 436.

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