

SYMPOSIUM
LIBERAL LEGITIMACY, PUBLIC REASON AND
CITIZENS OF FAITH



RAWLS, POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND
REASONABLE FAITH

A PRÉCIS

BY
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*A Précis**

Paul Weithman

The essays in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* were all born of my long-standing desire to deepen my understanding of liberal democracy. Among the things I have most wanted to understand about it are the conditions under which it might gain principled acceptance – especially principled acceptance by those who adhere to various religious views, including my own Roman Catholicism. The possibility of such acceptance is puzzling and raises many deep questions, and the road to it has often seemed to be blocked by formidable intellectual obstacles. Catholicism's relationship with liberalism, for example, has often been uneasy and sometimes antagonistic. Its acceptance of the right of free faith at the second Vatican Council was a landmark in the development of doctrine. It was also the conclusion of a remarkable chapter in intellectual history, for the way to it was paved by philosophical and theological work that is now largely forgotten. That is a situation I hope some day to rectify, though I discuss some of that work in the fourth essay of this volume. Unfortunately, liberalism is still thought by some to

* This is a significantly expanded and redeveloped version of the introduction to my book *Rawls, Political Liberalism, and Reasonable Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and appears by the Press's permission.

incompatible with faith, with consequences for politics that are all too evident in our world.

By the time I began graduate studies at Harvard in 1981, it had long been apparent that John Rawls's justice as fairness was the most philosophically powerful account of liberalism on offer. That account was, of course, laid out in his monumental 1971 book *A Theory of Justice*. There Rawls promised to "generalize and carry to a higher order of abstraction the traditional theory of the social contract as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant" and to draw out its implications for the distribution of rights, liberties, income, wealth and opportunity. Within a few years of the book's publication, it was widely recognized that *A Theory of Justice* would take its place among the classics of political philosophy.

Rawls began recasting his great theory as what he called a "political liberalism" during the time that I was working with him. Some readers were disappointed at what seemed a scaling back of Rawls's philosophical ambitions. But my initial reaction – or perhaps I should say: my initial reaction as I recall it many years after the fact – was that the view he was then developing was a liberalism that not only merited the sort of acceptance that interested me, but was also one that could overcome the obstacles which seemed to stand in the way of securing it. For it held out the possibility of accepting some of liberalism's most powerful and attractive claims without committing to foundations that have struck critics as overly secular, agnostic or individualist. The essays in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* are some of my best attempts to gain a clearer understanding of political liberalism and to show that my initial reaction to it was right.

The essays also stem from my belief that if religious faith does not seek philosophical understanding, it risks becoming complacent, superficial or unreasoned. Conversely, the search for such understanding can lead to a faith that is deepened by a more

satisfying grasp of the metaphysical, theological and moral concepts in which its core doctrines are expressed and its implications drawn out. For example, the concepts of human dignity, solidarity and the common good are central to some strains of religious social ethics, but it is not at all obvious how they are to be understood or what their normative implications are. I therefore think that those who profess a religious faith should try to examine it using the sharpest philosophical tools available. I think it is especially important that they do so if they hope to draw out the political implications of their faith and address them to a broader public.

As I have already intimated, I believe that Rawls's justice as fairness is the best political philosophy for our time and place. I also believe that it promises the deeper understanding of our common life that religious faith should seek.

I do not claim it holds out this promise because I think that probing Rawls's theory of justice reveals unspoken convictions or suppressed premises of a religious character. This claim was advanced, incorrectly I believe, by a couple of readers of Rawls's undergraduate thesis when it was first published – a work of his discussed in the first essay of *Rawls, Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*. Rather, I think Rawls's view holds out that promise for other reasons. One, of course, is its careful and systematic treatment of the core ideas of liberal democratic thought. Another is its development of an ideal of public reason to govern relations among fellow citizens. Finally, I think that a careful reading of Rawls's work shows his deep engagement with, and illuminating responses to, many of the political and existential concerns that ought to trouble those whom he called "citizens of faith". Prominent among these questions are questions about whether it is reasonable to have faith in the possibility of justice and in the natural goodness of humanity. Citizens of faith will come to a

better understanding of their own moral and political views, and of their answers to these questions, as a result of coming to grips with Rawls's.

The order of the essays collected in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* mirrors the development of Rawls's thought. The divisions among the parts of the volume reflect divisions in Rawls's career.

Part I is comprised of just one paper. As I indicated just above, that paper is on the thesis Rawls wrote as a senior at Princeton. The thesis has not been as intensively studied as Rawls's mature work, in part because many of those who read it in the immediate aftermath of its publication concluded that it is of little scholarly significance. This is a natural conclusion to draw about a young philosopher's immature work. I argue, on the contrary, that the thesis reveals an unnoticed continuity in Rawls's thought. For the thesis targets a form of Christianity which locates the highest human good in a mental state consequent on the satisfaction of desire. In doing so, I claim, it anticipates the critiques of teleology that Rawls mounts in *A Theory of Justice*, §§ 83-85. The thesis therefore shows that views of human nature and the human good which Rawls critiques in those sections was of concern to him, in one form or another, for much of his working life. Seeing that Rawls wrestled with those views for so long should prompt us to think more deeply about why they are of such enduring appeal. Moreover, §§ 83-85 and § 86 of *A Theory of Justice*, though much neglected and little read, are crucial for understanding Rawls's transition to political liberalism. By anticipating the arguments Rawls makes there, the thesis draws our attention to those crucial, fascinating but neglected sections.

Part II begins with an essay that sets the stage for much of what follows. The essay locates Rawls among the great political thinkers of the 20th century and recovers questions that were debated in

moral philosophy at the time he began writing *A Theory of Justice*. Some of those questions concerned the nature of moral motivation. The Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* thought a Kantian version of contract theory provided the most compelling answers to those questions because it supplied a variety of descriptions of what the desire to be just is a desire for. Though I do not say so in the essay, I believe the connections Rawls draws among those descriptions lay the basis for rebutting a charge lodged against Kantian ethics in the recent philosophical literature: the charge that a concern with doing the right thing constitutes moral fetishism. That is a charge Rawls laid against certain intuitionists and that he was concerned to avoid himself. What the essay does do is connect Rawls's answers to questions about moral motivation with one of the central themes of this volume. For Rawls thought that once we understand the desire to be just, we will be able to see how members of well-ordered society could be moved by that desire to uphold the agreement reached in the original position. Seeing that, Rawls thought, grounds reasonable faith in the natural goodness of humanity.

Essays 3 and 4 respond to some of the critical literature on Rawls that appeared between the publications of *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. They are reprinted here because they take up two perennially tempting and complementary responses to Rawls's work. One of those responses criticizes Rawls for unduly "privatizing" religion. Essay 3 tries to rebut three especially clear formulations of that criticism found in the religious ethics literature. Another response also reads Rawls as privatizing religion, but it celebrates rather than criticizes him for doing so. Essay 4 tries to rebut the version of this response propounded by Richard Rorty in his reading of Rawls's "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical".

Rorty famously distilled his interpretation of "Political not Metaphysical" into an aphorism, saying that the later Rawls gives democracy priority over philosophy. In Essay 4, I try to show what is and is not political about Rawlsian political philosophy by showing how Rawls divides the labor of justifying a political conception of justice. The essay was written before the very important analysis of justification that Rawls offered in his famous exchange with Jürgen Habermas, published in the *Journal of Philosophy* published in 1995. Were I to rewrite the essay now, I would try to reconcile my reading of Rawls on justification with Rawls's own analysis. I believe that reconciliation could be effected, but I have not tried to show that in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith*.

The last essay in Part II takes up the concept of political legitimacy, which some readers think replaced justice as the central concept in Rawls's later work. I argue that that reading is mistaken. I argue instead that Rawls introduced the concept in part to show how citizens who believe some of the political outcomes reached by a well-ordered society are gravely unjust – his own examples are citizens of faith – can nonetheless be among that society's "wholehearted members". The concept of legitimacy therefore plays an important but unappreciated role in Rawls's argument that a society well-ordered by justice as fairness would be stable. Since Rawls thought the stability argument was crucial to the vindication of his conception of justice, legitimacy complements and supports, rather than supplants, justice in Rawls's later work.

Part III consists of three essays on public reason.

Essay 6 is an attempt to work out, in more painstaking detail than Rawls himself ever did, exactly how his argument for the requirements of public reason is supposed to go. It then asks whether those requirements are appropriate for a society in which there is shared background knowledge of the comprehensive

doctrines to which citizens are wont to appeal in their political arguments. The argument of essay 6 was worked out before I arrived at the interpretation of public reason developed in essay 7. It is included in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* because careful readers have assured me that they found the details of the exposition valuable.

Essay 7 fits Rawls's account of public reason into the interpretation of his work that I developed in my earlier book *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn*. There I argued that Rawls's treatments of stability, both early and late, were intended to show that the agreement reached in the original position would not be undone by a generalized prisoner's dilemma. Showing this required him to show that citizens in a well-ordered society would have a well-founded assurance of one another's commitment to a public conception of justice. Rawls's account of public reason is itself of considerable interest and has taken on a life of its own in the philosophical literature. But in essay 7, I argue that Rawls developed his account of public reason to overcome that assurance problem. The upshot of this argument is that Rawls's account of public reason is of a piece with his ideal theorizing. This interpretation of the account raises anew the question of how a Rawlsian account of public reason might be applied to non-ideal conditions. The conclusion of Essay 7 gestures toward an answer.

Essay 8 contrasts Rawls's treatment of public reason with the convergence view developed in recent years by Gerald Gaus and his students. Very roughly, Gaus and his students agree with Rawls that coercive laws and policies must be justifiable to those who live under them. They differ from Rawls in contending that justification of such measures requires showing that they can be supported by appeal to reasons citizens actually recognize as good ones, perhaps on the basis of their comprehensive doctrine, rather than to the reasons that would be recognized as good ones in

Rawls's original position. A successful justification therefore brings about citizens' convergence on laws and policies from a variety of perspectives. It does not depend upon their consensus on justifying reasons. But justifications that are successful on the convergence view may be much harder to come by, since measures that citizens have reasons to reject on the basis of their comprehensive doctrines are unjustifiable. Essay 8 argues that the surface difference between Rawls's view and the convergence view, important as it is, is underlain by a deeper and more interesting difference about the nature of political freedom. I contend that even the Rawls of *Political Liberalism* has a deeper and more robust understanding of autonomy than do adherents of the convergence view. Like the previous two essays in Part III, Essay 8 concludes with some brief reflections on non-ideal theory.

Part IV consists of two essays which treat of questions raised by two of Rawls's last works, *Law of Peoples* and *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*.

Essay 9 is new to this collection and concerns Rawls's claim that parties charged with adopting a Law of Peoples would agree on what he called "the duty of assistance". That duty requires, roughly, that burdened peoples receive material assistance from peoples who are better off, but receive it just until they are able to sustain decent political institutions. Many readers have thought that Rawls's defense of this duty of global economic justice is in tension with his defense of the more demanding difference principle as a requirement of domestic justice. Others have tried to absolve Rawls of inconsistency, but at the price of imputing to him an unacknowledged political realism about justice among peoples. This would be a very high price for Rawls to pay, since realism is at odds with the view about natural human goodness that is at the heart of his view. "*Law of Peoples* and Christian Realism" draws on

Rawls's analysis of stability to chart a navigable route Rawls between inconsistency and realism.

The final essay in the volume unpacks Rawls's argument for the conclusion that Kant's moral philosophy has a religious aspect. It then contends that by parity of reasoning, justice as fairness has a religious aspect as well. Part of what gives it a religious aspect is its engagement with profound existential questions about the goodness of humanity and the world. Those questions concern whether we can be reconciled to our life in the world as it is, whether human beings can be good despite what history shows about us and whether the world as a whole can be good. That Rawls was moved by them shows his religious temperament. His sustained attempts to answer them give justice as fairness a religious aspect that survives his political turn. The answers Rawls gives to those questions show just how far his views are from the political realism attributed to him by readers whose interpretation of *Law of Peoples* I took up in Essay 9.

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This volume takes part of its title from Rawls's remark that political philosophy can assume the task of grounding reasonable faith. By that he meant that it can assume the task of grounding our confidence in the real possibility of a just liberal democracy. But the phrase 'reasonable faith' has a lovely ambiguity. While it can refer to well-grounded confidence, it can also refer to a faith which is reasonable in the implications it draws for moral and political life. I believe Rawlsian political philosophy can help ground reasonable faith understood in the second way as well as the first.

To review the hallmarks of a faith which is reasonable is to see how the study of philosophy can lead us to it. One is the

recognition that life offers diverse and irreconcilable goods which are choice-worthy as ends in themselves, and not just as means to a transcendent good. Another is the acceptance of disagreement about moral and religious ends as endemic to the human condition. Still another is the acknowledgement that those with whom we disagree most fundamentally about the ends of life can still be worthy of respect as our moral and political equals. Perhaps the most important are the denial that injustices are to be discounted because this world is a mere prelude to whatever follows, and the recognition that a liberal democratic life which satisfies the demands of distributive justice is an end eminently worth seeking. A reasonable faith, so understood, is itself a very great good.

As Rawls himself stressed, the experience of living under liberal democratic institutions can stimulate the doctrinal development that makes a faith more reasonable in this sense. The development by which Catholicism came to recognize of the right of free faith, to which I alluded at the outset, is a shining example. My own view that reasonable faiths should endorse the essentials of justice as fairness: its two principles of justice, its account of political legitimacy and its guidelines of public reason. I have not tried to show the grounds on which it should do so. That is the task for another occasion. What I have tried to show in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* is that justice as fairness is far more congenial to the deepest concerns of faith than liberalism is often thought to be.

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