Liberalism and the Political Character of Political Philosophy

Paul Weithman

John Rawls's insistence in recent years that justice as fairness is political and not metaphysical has attracted a great deal of attention. It is by now commonplace to note how many of Rawls's readers see in this insistence a retreat from what seemed the much more ambitious project of *A Theory of Justice.* In that book, readers found a theory that was "part, perhaps the most significant part, of the theory of rational choice." As such, it seemed to articulate principles that could, in the spirit of Kant, be justified to all rational agents who entered the original position. Those principles were, moreover, thought universal in their application, applicable to the basic structure of societies regardless of their time or place.

By contrast, Rawls now tells us that justice as fairness is developed from the "basic intuitive ideas" of fairness, freedom, and equality latent in the public culture of democratic societies. These ideas provide what Joseph Raz has called "shallow foundations," for no attempt is made to ground the basic ideas on anything deeper. Explicitly disavowed is any attempt to show that the foundations of justice as fairness are true to an "independent metaphysical and moral order" like God's law or moral facts implicit in the nature of rationality; indeed Rawls refrains from speaking of justice as fairness or of his principles of justice as true at all.

Political philosophy, Rawls now says, proceeds by "the method of avoidance": it leaves aside controversial topics in theology, philoso-
of mind, epistemology, and moral philosophy. Instead, the ideas from which justice as fairness are worked up are regarded as widely shared by those who live in a democratic culture. And political philosophy begins from widely shared ideas because this procedure affords the greatest chance of consensus on the conception of justice that results. The justification of justice as fairness is complete, it seems, with the achievement of what Rawls calls an "overlapping consensus." Such a consensus obtains when adherents of diverse religious and moral conceptions accept justice as fairness on moral grounds, even if their moral grounds for consent are very different. And justice as fairness is, Rawls now says, a conception appropriate to the basic structures of only a limited range of societies, those with a culture and tradition in which the basic intuitive ideas are found.

Some see a thinly veiled moral skepticism in Rawls's refusal to assert the truth of justice as fairness. Most see in his recent essays a de-emphasis of the Kantian elements so prominent in A Theory of Justice and a move toward the realpolitik of Hobbes or the pragmatism of Dewey. But what elicits the strongest reaction from both those who applaud and those who criticize Rawls's recent work is what seems to be his politicization of political philosophy. The importance Rawls attaches to the achievement of an overlapping consensus and the foundation of his theory in widely shared ideas have suggested to some that what Rawls really values are political and not philosophical results—in Jean Hampton's words, "peace and stability at the lowest political cost." Moreover, Rawls seems uninterested in precisely the sort of justification philosophers have traditionally sought. His claim that ideas implicit in democratic culture are the appropriate starting point for political philosophy and his refusal to justify them by digging deeper strike some as inconsistent with the claim that Rawls is engaged in philosophy rather than practical politics.

Rawls seems, in a slight paraphrase of Richard Rorty's description, to have accorded democracy priority over philosophy. Rorty argues that Rawls takes the moral worth of liberal democratic politics for granted. He then, Rorty says, develops a theory that "comports with the institutions he admires. . . . He is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit." Rorty himself looks with favor on what he takes to be Rawls's moves away from the justificatory aspirations of traditional political philosophy. He sees in them vindication of his own animus towards metaphysics. Critics, on the other hand, argue that Rawls's current conception of political philosophy is untenable, inconsistent, or unable to meet its stated aims. They claim that political philosophy ought to be more metaphysical and far less political than Rawls's later essays suggest. Both Rorty and the critics operate with a sharp distinction between metaphysics and politics. And all employ it to locate in Rawls's recent essays a fundamental challenge to traditional conceptions of political philosophy.

I want to use and interpret Rawls's recent work to consider the political character of political philosophy. I shall argue that Rawls is best read as dividing the labor of political philosophy into two tasks: (1) that of developing a theory of justice and (2) that of building an overlapping consensus on the conception of justice the theory presents. I shall reserve the term "political philosophy" for the enterprise that includes both of these tasks. For reasons that will become clear as we proceed, I shall call the former of the two tasks "political theory"; the latter I shall call "comprehensive public philosophy."

Corresponding to these two tasks are two very different sorts of justification. The political theorist justifies his or her conception of justice by showing that it is a reasonable conception for the society he or she addresses. The comprehensive public philosopher, on the other hand, argues not just that that conception is a reasonable one, but that those whom he or she addresses ought to accept it. He or she justifies the conception by working within one or another moral or philosophical tradition, availing himself or herself of the full range of its moral and metaphysical resources to help build consensus on the conception of justice in question.

Rawls, I shall argue, is engaged only in political theory as I have characterized it. His appeal to the shallow foundations provided by the basic intuitive ideas is meant only to provide the limited justification associated with political theory. It is meant only to show that justice as fairness is a reasonable conception of justice for the democratic and pluralistic societies to which Rawls's arguments are directed. The further arguments that Kantians, utilitarian, intuitionists, moral realists, Catholics, and Jews in those societies should accept justice as fairness all await the efforts of comprehensive public philosophy. But that is not an enterprise in which Rawls is engaged; we should not expect to find him presenting these further arguments.

Political theory and comprehensive public philosophy are tasks both political and traditionally philosophical. Distinguishing the two enterprises and analyzing the political and philosophical character of each refines our view of the relationship between politics and political philosophy generally. It also shows that Rawls's challenge to the traditional character of political philosophy has been exaggerated. Friends like Rorty and foes like Jean Hampton have overestimated the distance Rawls puts between metaphysics and political philosophy.
developed a theory not premised on conditions, like limitless plenty, that do not obtain, but one that is premised on salient facts, like religious and moral pluralism, that do.

Moreover, the practical task demands that Rawls show that his conception would, if realized, be a stable one. It must be capable of generating its own moral support among citizens who live in a society well ordered by it. The political theorist, like the moral theorist, must therefore examine how his or her moral structure would influence the development of the virtues and would be related to natural human interests and motives. That is why the political theorist, like the moral theorist of Rawl's description, tries "to characterize the way in which [the moral structures he develops] are related to our moral sensibilities and natural attitudes." Rawls devotes much of the third part of A Theory of Justice to this task.

If Rawl's political theory is to realize the practical aims he entertains, he must develop a conception of justice that is not only a workable one but also a reasonable one for the society he addresses. That is, he must develop one that members of the society he addresses have prima facie moral reasons to adopt. That justice as fairness is reasonable in this sense is guaranteed by its foundation in basic intuitive ideas that are drawn from democratic culture and that members of democratic culture can be presumed to share. Let me elaborate.

The basic intuitive ideas of moral personality and society as a fair system of cooperation express values like freedom, equality, and fairness. These are values to which all who participate in the democratic culture from which the basic ideas are drawn are presumed to attach great importance. Freedom, equality, and fairness are, of course, moral values, which can be realized in many areas of human life. They can be taken as family values when aspired to or realized at home, or they can be taken as values aspired to and realized in a friendship. Freedom, equality, and fairness are political values when they are realized or promoted by basic social and political institutions or when citizens aspire so to order their political society that these moral values are realized by those institutions. These values are not as important in some spheres of life as in others. Freedom or autonomy might be valued far more highly in the arrangement of political institutions than in the arrangement of ecclesiastical ones, for example. It is only as political values that freedom, equality, and fairness can be presumed to be of such great importance to participants in democratic culture. It is as political values that they are expressed by the basic intuitive ideas with which Rawls begins.

But these political values and the basic intuitive ideas that express
them, however important, are too abstract to provide political guidance. We cannot attempt to realize fair cooperation, for example, without knowing a great deal about fairness and how its demands are to be reconciled with those of liberty. Rawls therefore frames a conception of justice that further specifies those basic intuitive ideas and values to provide, in his words, “guidance where guidance is needed.” The idea of moral personality is specified to yield a conception of a citizen acting autonomously and possessing a sense of justice the content of which is given by Rawls’s two principles. The idea of society as a fair cooperative scheme is specified to yield a conception of society the basic structure of which conforms to those two principles. So specified, the ideas are sufficiently concrete to serve as ideals, as objects of human aspiration. The basic intuitive ideas are thus shared resources from which Rawls develops his ideals of citizenship and of the well-ordered society. The specification of basic intuitive ideas into these ideals provides the political guidance that neither the basic intuitive ideas nor the values they express could furnish, for the ideals Rawls specifies provide detailed conceptions of a just society and of such a society’s citizens.

Much of the theory in which justice as fairness is located is designed to show that the well-ordered society is one in which our deeply held political values are realized. It is thus that our aspirations and desires to live in a society well ordered by justice as fairness are elicited. Consider, in this connection, the following passage from section 72 of *A Theory of Justice*:

Best of all, a theory should present a description of an ideally just state of affairs, a conception of a well-ordered society such that the aspiration to realize this state of affairs, and to maintain it in being, answers to our good and is continuous with our natural sentiments. A perfectly just society should be part of an ideal that rational human beings could desire more than anything else once they had full knowledge and experience of what it was.

Rawls's theory presents such a description of an ideally just society and elaborates it to provide us with full knowledge and experience—at least in thought—of how that well-ordered society realizes political values like freedom and equality. Rawls thinks that this knowledge will elicit in us “the aspiration to realize this state of affairs, and to maintain it in being” because we already have a strong moral interest in these political values. Description of an ideally just society, which realizes these values, therefore heightens and focuses our moral interest. Thus, arguments that show that the well-ordered society of justice as fairness realizes deeply held political values provide us with moral reasons to desire that justice as fairness regulate political society. They thereby show that justice as fairness is a reasonable conception for us.

That justice is fairness is rooted in the basic intuitive ideas of freedom, equality, and fairness found in the public culture of a democratic society is therefore crucial to its being a reasonable conception. It is the depth and prevalence of these basic ideas and the wide acceptance within democratic societies of the political values they express that gives us some reason to think that a conception of justice that specifies and combines them could gain acceptance.

How, then, do the basic ideas justify justice as fairness to Rawls's readers? Perfecting the moral structure found in the contract tradition of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant is an act of faith in the practical import of one’s efforts, for it is an act of faith that members of democratic society will accept a contractarian moral structure once it is developed. It can be shown an act of reasonable faith if it can be shown that the structure itself is a reasonable one, that members of democratic society have prima facie moral reason to adopt. Rawls's founding his conception on widely shared ideas and political values makes that faith in eventual consensus on justice as fairness a reasonable faith. Rawls's appeal to the basic intuitive ideas thus justifies or shows reasonable the act of faith in which his political theory consists. And Rawls says explicitly, in a paraphrase of Kant, that his philosophical task is that of defending reasonable faith in the possibility of a just democratic regime like the one he sketches.

Once justice as fairness has been shown a reasonable conception of justice, one that members of a democratic society have prima facie moral reason to adopt, the question of what further justification it requires naturally suggests itself. For the reasonability of justice as fairness depends upon its foundation in the basic intuitive ideas and the political values they express. Acceptance of these political values gives citizens some reasons, prima facie reasons, for accepting justice as fairness. But citizens may hold other moral values and principles than those on which justice as fairness is founded, values and principles that may conflict or seem to conflict with the conception of justice Rawls outlines. To have ultima facie and not just prima facie reasons to accept that conception, citizens need to be assured that they hold no other moral values or principles that defeat it. Rawls's answer to this problem of ultima facie justification seems to challenge the traditional character of political philosophy.

Rawls explicitly denies, as I have already noted, that he tries to
demonstrate the truth of justice as fairness. Rorty infers from this
denial that Rawls thinks no further justification of the conception is
required. The priority Rorty thinks Rawls assigns to democracy im-
plies, Rorty thinks, that showing justice as fairness a reasonable con-
ception is showing enough. In this, Rorty sees the politicization of
political philosophy and the denial of political philosophy’s tradition-
al ambitions.

But Rawls’s refusal to consider the question of truth does not have
the strong implications Rorty believes. Rawls is engaged in what I
have called “political theory,” which is a part of moral theory. And it
is characteristic of moral theory generally, Rawls says, to postpone
questions about the truth of a moral structure.28 Political theory thus
takes from moral theory the more limited ambition of laying out and
studying workable and reasonable conceptions. It does not limit its
aims because there is no moral truth or because, as Rorty believes,
“truth . . . is simply not relevant to democratic politics.”229 It does so
because the tasks of political theory are difficult enough and because
determining which conception of justice is true first requires deter-
mining which conceptions are workable and reasonable.230 Metaphys-
ical questions are not dismissed. They are, I will argue, left to those
working within religious and philosophical traditions.

Hampton reads Rawls’s politicization of political philosophy differ-
ently than does Rorty. She focuses on the arguments she thinks the
Rawlsian political philosopher must offer to adherents of various reli-
gious and moral views if an overlapping consensus on justice as fair-
ness is to be secured. And she focuses on the philosopher’s motives
for offering those arguments. The arguments must, she says, be poli-
tical and not philosophical arguments. They must be political, she
thinks, because the Rawlsian political philosopher builds consensus by
appealing only to what Rawls calls “public reason,” by appealing only
to political values and principles without trying to find them on
anything deeper.231 They will be politically motivated, since the Rawl-
sian political philosopher must, she thinks, give publicly acceptable
reasons for securing a consensus. The only such reason he can give,
Hampton argues, is his interest in social stability.232

I believe both Rorty and Hampton are mistaken in their interpreta-
tions. Rorty, as I have indicated, is mistaken in thinking that Rawls
claims no further justification is necessary beyond showing that jus-
tice as fairness is reasonable. Hampton is mistaken about the sort of
justification she thinks is available to Rawlsian political philosophers.
To show this, it is necessary to turn to the way in which Rawls thinks
an overlapping consensus on justice as fairness would be secured. The

munity of securing consensus is, I suggested, a task that falls not to
political theory, but to what I called “comprehensive public philos-

III

In an overlapping consensus, adherents of diverse philosophical and
religious traditions accept justice as fairness, but for different moral
reasons; each supports the conception for reasons drawn from his or
her own more comprehensive moral views.232 Thus, in an overlapping
consensus, Kantians affirm justice as fairness for one set of reasons,
utilitarians accept it for another, and Christians accept it for still
another. Such an overlapping consensus is, of course, a political ideal.
Even in societies where justice as fairness is accepted as the public
conception of justice, an overlapping consensus may not obtain since
some may accept it on purely prudential grounds. Even so, we can
ask how an overlapping consensus could come about since it is the
ideal case, Rorty and Hampton think, that reveals most about Rawls’s
conception of political philosophy’s task.

Rawls uses consensus on the principle of toleration to illustrate the
development of an overlapping consensus over time.24 Catholics and
Protestants overlap in their consensus on the principle since both ac-
cept it; their views of toleration are not congruent, however, since their
moral and religious reasons for accepting the principle differ. The
principle of religious tolerance, which was initially accepted to put
an end to religious strife, gradually came to be accepted by Protes-
tants and Catholics for moral reasons. An overlapping consensus on
justice as fairness could, Rawls argues, develop similarly.

Rawls provides little historical detail about how consensus on the
principle of toleration developed. It is, however, a history that I be-
lieve he intends us to take seriously. That history is, of course, long
and complicated; I will focus only on a couple of its features that
will prove useful for highlighting philosophy’s role in building a con-
sensus on justice as fairness. Careful attention to these features, which
follow, shows that both Rorty and Hampton are mistaken about the way
in which such a consensus is achieved.

1. The principle of toleration was known from experience to be
workable even before it was accepted on moral grounds.

2. Theologians who developed, for example, Catholic arguments
for the principle of toleration worked within the Catholic tradition to
do so. In this, John Courtney Murray, who was largely responsible for
the Catholic church’s principled acceptance of toleration, was exemplar-
y. He drew upon all the moral and theological resources within
his tradition to frame the arguments he addressed to other Catholics.
Those he addressed to Protestants drew on premises he thought
that Catholics and Protestants shared. In neither case did he feel compelled to restrict himself to those premises that he thought would be accept-
ed by political society at large.

3. While many Catholics may long have accepted the principle on
prudential grounds, Murray himself had already accepted it for moral
and religious reasons when he framed his arguments. If asked by oth-
er Catholics to justify the project of constructing moral arguments for
the principle he could reply that he was not simply trying to build a
firmer peace with Protestants, but that he was also trying to convince
his fellow Catholics of a moral principle in which he already believed.

These three features of the development of consensus on religious
tolerance would be mirrored in the development of an overlapping
consensus on justice as fairness.

1. In the case of the principle of toleration, experience proved the
principle workable. In the case of conceptions of justice, the political
thorin—Rawls—argues that the conception proposed is both work-
able and reasonable for the society he addresses. He does so by show-
ing that the conception would be stable, would generate its own moral
support, and is founded on that society’s fundamental political ideas
and values.

2. The process of building an overlapping consensus will be a long
and complicated one, as was the process of building moral consensus
on religious toleration. Those working to build a consensus need not
address only members of their own tradition or school of thought. And
arguments addressed to those outside one’s own tradition need not, as
Hampton claims, appeal only to a common desire for peace and sta-
bility. Instead, the basic intuitive ideas and political values on which
justice as fairness is built provide moral common ground for these
arguments. All in a democratic culture are presumed to share these
ideas and to have at least some interest in realizing the values they
express. In relying on moral common ground, these arguments will
resemble those arguments for religious tolerance that Murray addressed
to Protestants.

Philosophers and theologians will also address some arguments to
members of the moral communities to which they belong. They will
attempt to show how justice as fairness can be endorsed from within
the comprehensive views of those communities, just as Murray did
when he urged that Catholics should accept religious toleration on
moral grounds. Like those who forged a consensus on the principle of
tolerations, those who argue for the moral acceptability of justice as
fairness need not restrict themselves to arguments that rely on pre-
mises that would be acceptable to all. Hampton is mistaken in her
suggestion that they must do so.

When Kantians, utilitarians, and moral theologians from various
religions address members of their own traditions, they work within
the tradition they are addressing. In doing so, they are free to draw
on all its conceptual and historical resources. Thus, Kantians can, if
they like, appeal to all of Kant’s moral thought to show why justice
as fairness should be accepted. They could do so by arguing, for in-
stance, that Rawls’s two principles really are instances of the categori-
ical imperative and are binding on all rational beings. Catholic
theologians could argue that Rawls’s two principles guarantee that each
individual will have the social bases of the dignity to which he or she
is entitled as a creature made in God’s image and likeness. Religious
and philosophical arguments in favor of justice as fairness need not
be deductive; indeed, it should not be expected that many moral and
religious views entail justice as fairness. Instead, these arguments may
show that justice as fairness would realize the political values of a
given religious or philosophical tradition better than any other con-
ceptions of justice so far developed. This might require interpreting
the history of a religious tradition to show that the basic intuitive ideas
or the values they express have played a hitherto unappreciated role
in that tradition. Or it might require, to take a different example,
connecting the interpretation of political freedom provided by a philo-
sophical view with the interpretation implicit in the ideal of the well-
ordered society. These tasks will be undertaken by moral philosophers
who endorse Kantianism or utilitarianism as comprehensive moral
doctines, as well as by theologians who are trying to work out the
political implications of their religious views.

There is no guarantee that an overlapping consensus on justice as
fairness can be achieved. That is why Rawls’s political theory is, as I
said earlier, an act of faith. Some religions might well be without a
developed tradition of political thought; it may seem unlikely, there-
fore that grounds for justice as fairness can be found within them. In
that case, faith that adherents can participate in an overlapping con-
sensus rests on the hope that they can accept justice as fairness be-
cause of what political beliefs they hold independent of their religion.

Other religions may initially seem hostile to liberal democracy.
Rawls conjectured that long experience of social cooperation with those
of other religions eroded hostility between Catholics and Protestants
and removed the barriers to moral acceptance of the principle of toleration. Similarly, we might conjecture that religious and philosophical traditions that have long persisted and flourished in a democratic culture will come to incorporate the basic intuitive ideas and political values on which justice as fairness is founded. These basic ideas and values might not be prominent in the traditions in question. But presentation of justice as fairness can draw attention to neglected values like equality and fairness latent in a body of religious or philosophical thought. And it can elicit moral interest in building a liberal democracy by showing how liberal theory specifies and combines those values in the way I discussed earlier. Political theory can therefore be educative, teaching us about new political possibilities and about neglected aspects of our own comprehensive views.

3. When philosophers and theologians working for consensus are called upon to justify their work, they need not appeal only to their interest in securing peace and stability as Hampton suggests. These may well be among their motives. But they can also claim that the moral ideals of persons with the two moral powers and of a Rawlsian well-ordered society realize the political values implicit in their tradition. They can number among their motives the belief that their society is an unjust one that would be made far more just by its adoption of justice as fairness. They are, they might conclude, trying to persuade other utilitarians, Kantians, or Christians of what they themselves are already convinced is right. Their position will therefore be much like that of the theologians who built a religious consensus on the principle of toleration because they thought intolerance morally wrong.

To understand how an overlapping consensus on justice as fairness or some other political conception is secured, then, it is important to appreciate the division of labor I mentioned earlier. One task is that of articulating a reasonable and workable conception of justice on which members of political society will overlap in their consent. The other task in the establishment of an overlapping consensus is that of convincing adherents of diverse religious and philosophical views that they should consent to justice as fairness as the appropriate moral basis for a democratic society. I have used the term “political theory” for the first of these tasks and “comprehensive public philosophy” to designate the second.

Political theory is a limited enterprise but it is to this enterprise that Rawls restricts himself. What further justification can be provided for justice as fairness, what further work must be done to secure an overlapping consensus, is the task of comprehensive public philosophy. The work falls here because the strong moral interest Rawls supposes we can take in the ideals of citizenship and the well-ordered society is either derivative from or must be reconciled with our interest in our comprehensive moral views. Displaying the derivation or effecting the reconciliation is the task of comprehensive public philosophy, for it requires taking as premises substantive moral claims drawn from those views. This is an important point about the development of an overlapping consensus that both Rorty and Hampton miss.

IV

I have discussed how an overlapping consensus on justice as fairness might be secured. But what will be the character of a society in which such a consensus obtains?

Philosophy and theology will not, to be sure, have a place in the public justification of the Rawlsian society’s public policies—in the justification offered by judges in their opinions or by other occupants of public office in their official capacities. Policies and judicial decisions will be justified by pointing to their promotion of the political values justice as fairness articulates, including the value of conformity with Rawls’s two principles. Justice as fairness itself will be publicly justified only by pointing to its reasonableness for a society that is heir to the democratic tradition and accepts its fundamental political values. Public reliance on any further philosophical or religious justification would be divisive.

Rorty thinks that the prevalence of this public conception of justification will lead citizens to forswear the need for any deeper foundations, that philosophy and religion will wither under pressure from the public culture of a liberal society. A liberal society will, he says, be one that “encourages the ‘end of ideology,’” one “accustomed to the thought that social policy needs no more authority than successful accommodation among individuals” and one in which “the need for [more] legitimation may gradually cease to be felt.” Its citizens will inhabit what he calls a “disenchanted” world.

These are sociological forecasts that resist a priori refutation. But Rawls’s well-ordered society need not provide the encouragement or apply the pressure that Rorty thinks it will. To see this, consider first how the transition to a society well ordered by justice as fairness might be effected in the United States. Religion obviously looms large in American national politics. This suggests that adherents of various religious positions would demand religious or philosophical arguments
for the acceptability of justice as fairness before agreeing to it as the public conception of justice for the United States. Arguments drawn from comprehensive public philosophy therefore would be necessary to move this country toward the ideal Rawlsian society. Comprehensive public philosophy would not, of course, be sufficient to effect the transition to a well-ordered society; but it would be necessary in the United States under current political conditions.

The habits of religious and philosophical thought about politics—vital and necessary during the transitional stages to a well-ordered society—could continue even after an overlapping consensus on justice as fairness has been attained. Acceptance of Rawls's principles of justice leaves open questions about what policies best implement them. And while religion and philosophy would play no role in the public justification of policies, policy questions could provide the subject matter for religious and philosophical debate even in a society well ordered by justice as fairness. The situation would then be analogous to that which now obtains with respect to religious tolerance: Catholics and Protestants overlap on the principle, but Catholic and Protestant groups engage in vigorous internal debate about what tolerance requires.

But if transition to a Rawlsian well-ordered society requires comprehensive public philosophy and if policy questions would provide comprehensive public philosophy its subject matter even in a well-ordered society, what reasons does Rorty have for thinking that it would gradually disappear? What reasons has he for thinking that the sort of justification available in the public culture would gradually come to seem justification enough?

Perhaps Rorty thinks that the felt need for the philosophical justification of public policy would be extinguished in a Rawlsian society much as he thinks the need for religious justification has already disappeared in extant liberal democracies. Indeed, there are places where he suggests as much. But Rorty's empirical claims about the demise of religious belief and about religion's political marginalization are demonstrably false, at least of the United States. His conjecture that the public culture of a liberal society would extinguish the metaphysical urge therefore cannot be supported by appealing to the observed impact of liberal institutions on religious belief or political vitality.

Alternatively, Rorty might suppose that religion and philosophy would die out in a truly liberal society because, good Deweyan that he is, he believes that a well-ordered society would educate its children in public schools whose curricula encouraged pragmatism and discouraged religion and metaphysics. But surely, whether schools in

a well-ordered society would be public and not, for example, sectarian with the support of a voucher system, is a question of public policy. It may be that a system of secular public education would win out in policy debates. Rorty cannot assume, however, that it would and hence cannot assume that a Deweyan education would lead to "the end of ideology" in a liberal society. Of course, Rorty could assume that secular public education would win out if he could safely assume that no citizens of the well-ordered society had sufficient religious interest to care whether their children had a religious education. But since the question at issue is whether citizens of the well-ordered society would retain their philosophical and religious interests, the latter assumption is one Rorty cannot make without begging the question.

The alleged decline and political marginalization of religion do not support Rorty's claim that the public culture of Rawlsian society would eliminate comprehensive public philosophy and the metaphysical impulses that give rise to it. Neither do claims about the character of such a society's educational system. Rorty has therefore provided us no reason to think that a liberal political culture would have the impact he suggests it would.

A society in which an overlapping consensus on justice as fairness has been achieved is one in which religious and philosophical views converge on and support the conception of justice that well orders that society. Its public culture can therefore encourage citizens who want assurance that the principles by which the basic structure of their society is assessed are true to "an independent metaphysical and moral order." Instead of encouraging the end of ideology, it can encourage them to seek such assurance from the comprehensive public philosophers of their tradition.

Those who retain the need for such assurance will not privately "despise most of their fellow citizens" for not sharing their moral views, as Rorty intimates. Nor will they cooperate with them only "for pragmatic, rather than moral reasons." In a Rawlsian liberal society, religion and philosophy give their adherents moral and not just pragmatic reasons to be good citizens. Moreover, comprehensive moral views in a Rawlsian liberal society will overlap on basic political values and ideals. This overlap provides citizens some moral common ground, and thus some reason not to "despise" one another. The citizens of such a society will not share all moral views, but they can regard one another as cooperating in the pursuit of the same basic political values.

Rorty professes a concern with the "sort of culture [that] might lie
at the end of the road we liberal intellectuals have been travelling since the Enlightenment.48 That culture, he thinks, would be one publicly disenchanted with religion, metaphysics, and ideology. It would also be one in which the few citizens who retain the metaphysical urge suffer a powerful tension between their public and their private lives,49 between publicly cooperating with and privately despising their fellow citizens. Rorty hails Rawls’s recent work because he thinks he finds there a sketch of the largely disenchanted culture that lies at the journey’s end. But Rorty’s interpretation is, I believe, mistaken. Rawls would lead us down another fork to a another destination. He would have us part company with Rorty, for he holds out the possibility of ending our journey at a very different liberal culture than Rorty envisions.

V

What, then, are we to make of Hampton’s charge that Rawls has made political philosophy into practical politics? And what are we to make of Rorty’s hope that Rawls has accorded democracy priority over philosophy? To make anything at all of them, we must appreciate the division of political philosophy into political theory and comprehensive public philosophy.50

Comprehensive public philosophy may be political in some respects. Those who engage in it may do so for political reasons, trying to build an overlapping consensus on justice as fairness because they think it will make society more peaceful and stable. But the motives for engaging in comprehensive public philosophy need not be entirely political, as I have argued. A philosopher or theologian may try to convince others in his or her tradition to accept justice as fairness because she or he is convinced that Rawls’s principles are just, given his or her own commitment to democratic values and ideals. He or she might believe that the society in which he or she lives would be more just were justice as fairness widely accepted.

The comprehensive public philosopher’s motives, therefore, need not be entirely or at all political.

Neither need his or her arguments be political. The philosopher can work within moral and religious traditions, appealing to their views of human nature, the value of human life, human equality, the nature of moral obligation, and the importance of justice. She or he can appeal to them by trying to find a moral basis for justice as fairness within a tradition or by trying to bring the two into reflective equilib-
locating itself in that intellectual and political tradition. Practicing political theory demands recognition of the myriad ways in which these ideas and texts have shaped liberal political culture, the self-conceptions of citizens in liberal democracies, and the terms of political debate. Historical and sociological sensitivity is needed to isolate the basic ideas and values around which consensus can coalesce once they are further specified and combined.

Finally, Rawls says that what he calls "philosophical inclination" is an "essential" motive for doing moral theory. If moral theory is left to social theorists or psychologists, who are "not prompted by philosophical inclination to pursue moral theory," then, he says, "the inquiry will have the wrong focus." 56 What holds of moral theory generally presumably holds of political theory: political theory would have the wrong focus if not motivated in part by philosophical inclination. Political theory is, therefore, a properly philosophical task, for it requires an inclination to pursue traditionally philosophical questions. To see this, recall that one of the questions definitive of political philosophy, at least since Rousseau, is that of what a democratic regime would be like under realistically favorable circumstances. 57 Rawls, in specifying a conception of justice for such a society, provides part of the answer to Rousseau's question. His interest in providing such a conception is therefore itself a philosophical inclination.

Moreover, Rawls's attempt is focused differently than would be a social theorist's or a psychologist's attempt to provide a conception of justice. Rawls's attempt is not focused, for example, on providing a conception that would be judged most stable in light of the findings of psychology, equilibrium theory, or theories of social choice. He is interested, rather, in the question: what conception of justice is the most appropriate moral conception for a liberal democracy? Questions of psychology and social theory are taken up, but only insofar as they help to answer that question. And while the decision to develop a moral conception of justice may have been in large part a political one, that decision, once made, required Rawls to address fundamental philosophical problems about the relationship between the right and the good and about the reconciliation of liberty and equality.

Politics thus stands in a quite complicated relationship to political theory. It stands in a similarly complicated relationship to comprehensive public philosophy. The relationship between politics and political philosophy as Rawls conceives it is even more complex, for political philosophy includes both political theory and comprehensive public philosophy. The complicated nature of these relationships leads me to suggest that the question of whether Rawls has unduly politi-

cized political philosophy is wrongly posed and should be rejected. It is a question premised on sharp but misbegotten distinctions between politics and philosophy, and between political argument and philosophical argument.

In the past two decades, historians of political thought have become increasingly suspicious of these sharp distinctions, arguing that an attempt to impose them on great political philosophers of the past is systematically misleading. Richard Ashcraft, for example, has shown how much we can learn about John Locke's political philosophy by studying its actual and foreseen political impact and by examining the political decisions Locke made in resolving to write and publish the Treatises. Detailed study of this kind shows how difficult it is to distinguish the political from the philosophical in his work. It also shows how much of Locke's thought we would misunderstand if our primary interest were in sorting his works into preconceived categories. 58

It is similarly misleading to approach Rawls's work with such interests and categories in mind. Surely he is not just engaged in practical politics. But neither is it helpful to read him as attempting to answer timeless questions about the nature of justice. He is a philosopher whose philosophical project was shaped by political, historical, and sociological judgments about the society he addresses. His own work in political theory leaves ample room, and, indeed, assumes the subsequent metaphysical and theological arguments of others. Political theory as Rawls practices it may be done without metaphysics, but political philosophy as he conceives it need not be.

I have tried to show that Rawls has not unduly politicized political philosophy, any more than did Hobbes, Locke, and Mill; he has merely divided its labor. I have tried to show, too, that we understand better the work of individual thinkers such as Rawls and the enterprise of political philosophy generally if we attend to the intellectual and political tasks that political philosophers set for themselves.

Notes

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