

John Rawls and the Task of Political Philosophy

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Abstract: In this article, I sketch a reading of Rawls's work that ties together many of the features that distinguish it from the work of other authors commemorated in this issue. On this reading, the two world wars and the Holocaust pressed the question of whether a just liberal democracy is possible. Seeking to defend reasonable faith in that possibility, Rawls developed a theory of justice for an ideally just liberal democracy. He argued that such a society is a "real possibility" because, given reasonable psychological assumptions, the basic institutions of a just society would engender the moral support of its citizens. In doing so, Rawls challenged alternative accounts of moral motivation that enjoyed some currency in the analytic philosophy of the time. The interpretation of Rawls's work defended here therefore locates him in the philosophical as well as the political history of the twentieth century.

John Rawls was born on February 21, 1921. This made him roughly a generation younger than Leo Strauss (b. 1899), Eric Voegelin and Michael Oakeshott (both b. 1901), Yves Simon (b. 1903), Raymond Aron (b. 1905), and Hannah Arendt (b. 1906). He was more than sixty years younger than John Dewey (b. 1859). The year Rawls was born, Isaiah Berlin turned 12 and fled Russia with his family to settle in England

Age is not the only thing that makes Rawls a relative outlier in this issue. But for Dewey, he is the only American by birth. With the qualified exception of Dewey, he is the only one whose thought emerged from a formation in liberal Protestantism.¹ Though Dewey wrote his dissertation on Kant, Rawls is the only Kantian in the issue. Berlin is the only other thinker discussed here whose intellectual roots run through the Oxford of midcentury (where Rawls spent a critical year with Berlin and H.L.A. Hart) rather than to the Continent or, as in the cases of Dewey and Oakeshott, through the Anglophone Hegelianism of an earlier philosophical era. Rawls was considerably more

I am grateful to Catherine Zuckert and Robert Adams for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

¹The qualification is that, while Dewey was raised in a liberal Protestant household, he does not seem to have made the study of Protestant theology that Rawls did nor does his work show the result of engagement with theological doctrines. On Dewey's religious upbringing, see Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Cornell University Press, 1991), 6, 22. For Rawls's study of Protestant theology, see Robert Adams, "The Theological Ethics of the Young Rawls and Its Background," forthcoming.

sympathetic to utopian political thinking than most others in the issue, asking what an ideally just liberal democracy would be like. He is the only one who addressed philosophical problems by developing a systematic theory, and he is the one who found the techniques, the rigor and the inherited problematics of analytic philosophy the most congenial. Consequently, he is the thinker celebrated in this issue whose influence within academic philosophy is the strongest.

I shall not say anything about the first of these distinguishing marks, Rawls's early formation in liberal Protestantism, though I do believe there are some interesting connections between this formation and views on which Rawls later relied in *Theory of Justice*. Some of the distinguishing features I have cited are obviously connected. Rawls's affinity for analytic philosophy is no doubt part of what led him to Berlin and to Oxford in the 1950s – where, Berlin later claimed, Oxford-style analytic philosophy began in his rooms.² Less obviously, Rawls's Kantianism is connected – in ways I shall explain below – to his modest utopianism, or his ideal theorizing.

The least important of the differences between Rawls and the other figures commemorated here may be the generational one. Though Strauss, Voegelin, Simon, and Arendt were all refugees – as was Berlin, albeit at an earlier time and from a different foe – Rawls, too, was profoundly affected by the rise of Nazism and the Second World War. Understanding how these events affected him is important to understanding how he saw his task as a philosopher.

This may be a surprising claim. Rawls spent his professional life developing and defending a conception of justice that, he maintained, was most suitable for regulating the basic institutions of a liberal democracy under modern conditions. Some of his own remarks suggest that he wrote out of profound dissatisfaction with utilitarianism³ and concern to overcome a deep tension within the democratic tradition.⁴ My own opinion is that this picture of Rawls's motivations ignores his long-running concern with intuitionism. While Rawls is often thought to have brought up intuitionism early in *Theory of Justice* only to put it aside, I read him as engaged in a two-front war – against utilitarianism and intuitionism – throughout the book. But this qualification does not fundamentally alter the view of Rawls's motivations that I have said his remarks suggest. That view might still be summarized by saying that Rawls tried to frame a conception of justice suitable for a modern liberal democracy, while addressing problems internal to democratic thought and avoiding the shortcomings of competing theories in analytic moral philosophy.

I do not say that this summary is wrong, but I do believe it leaves something important out of account, the addition of which would fundamentally

²Isaiah Berlin, *The First and the Last* (New York: NYRB Books, 1998), 28.

³John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), xvii–xviii.

⁴John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) [ed. Freeman], 305.

alter the picture. What it leaves out is hinted at in the closing lines of “Idea of an Overlapping Consensus”:

political philosophy assumes the role Kant gave to philosophy generally: the defense of reasonable faith. In our case this becomes the defense of reasonable faith in the real possibility of a just constitutional regime.⁵

The essay does not explain why the possibility of a just constitutional regime was ever in doubt, why it is important to show that such a regime is possible, or why – having shown that it is – Rawls thinks our attitude toward the possibility of such a regime should be described as “reasonable faith” rather than as, say, “justified belief.” The closing pages of the “Preface to the Paperback Edition” of *Political Liberalism* suggest some answers. I want to follow up these hints and suggestions to sketch a fuller and more accurate picture of Rawls’s motivations, drawing on *Theory of Justice* and on Rawls’s recently published *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* for occasional support.

I

In *Theory of Justice*, Rawls remarks:

Historically one of the main defects of constitutional government has been the failure to insure the fair value of political liberty. The necessary corrective steps have not been taken, indeed, they never seem to have been seriously entertained. . . . Essentially the fault lies in the fact that the democratic political process is at best regulated rivalry.⁶

Thus Rawls thinks that the ordinary conduct of politics, even in societies that purport to be liberal and democratic, raises the question of whether political outcomes really depend upon exercises of power, regulated by constraints that fall short of what justice requires. Whether remedies are possible, and whether just constitutional government is sustainable, depend upon why corrective steps “never seem to have been seriously entertained” and why actual “democratic process is at best regulated rivalry.”

In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls intimates that the events of the twentieth century suggest troubling answers to these questions:

The wars of this century with their extreme violence and increasing destructiveness, culminating in the manic evil of the Holocaust, raise in an acute way the question whether political relations must be governed by power and coercion alone.⁷

⁵Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 448; see also John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 172.

⁶Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 198–99.

⁷Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lxii (emphases added).

I think what Rawls has in mind is this. In light of the “extreme violence and increasing destructiveness” of the twentieth century, and the “manic evil of the Holocaust,” we have to take seriously the possibility that human beings are not the kind of creatures who can create and sustain a just constitutional regime. We have to take seriously the possibility that “political relations must be governed by power and coercion alone” and that “democratic process [can be] at best regulated rivalry” because – given the inner dynamics that move us – members of the human species can do no better. In this way, by raising doubts about our nature, the events of the twentieth century raise the doubts – about the very possibility of a just liberal democracy – that the Rawls of “Overlapping Consensus” says political philosophy has to address.

Why should political philosophy address them? Why should political philosophy try to show that a just constitutional regime is a “real possibility”? The story of Hitler’s ascendancy in Weimar shows what can happen, Rawls thinks, when a society “no longer believe[s] that a decent liberal parliamentary regime [is] possible.”⁸ That in itself shows why faith in the real possibility of such a regime is important. Furthermore, if we cease to believe such a regime is possible because we come to believe others are incapable of a sustained commitment to justice, then we will become self-serving and cynical ourselves, prone to act unjustly in order to preempt the unjust actions we anticipate from others.⁹ I believe Rawls thinks it is a basic fact about our motivational structure that considerations of justice are less likely to move us if we think our efforts will be in vain or if we think others will return evil for good. And so if we do not believe that a just regime is possible – and possible because our nature is such that we could sustain it – then we are unlikely to make individual and collective commitments to justice.

I believe Rawls found a similar line of thought in Kant. Speaking of Kant in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, Rawls says:

he believes that we cannot sustain our devotion to the moral law, or commit ourselves to the advancement of its a priori object, the realm of ends or the highest good as the case may be, unless we firmly believe that its object is possible.

This firm belief requires the “practical faith” that it is possible to realize these objects in the world.

What, Rawls asks, is the content of practical faith that has the realm of ends as its object? He replies that “we can believe that a realm of ends is possible in the world only if the order of nature and social necessities are not unfriendly

⁸Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lxi.

⁹Here I rely on *Political Liberalism*, lxii. I also rely on Rawls’s revealing but neglected remark in *Theory of Justice* that citizens’ mutual knowledge that they possess a sense of justice is the preferred way to avert the hazards of a generalized prisoner’s dilemma; see *Theory of Justice*, 238 note 8.

to that ideal."¹⁰ That the "order of nature" includes human nature is clear from Rawls's remark that practical faith "require[s] certain beliefs about our nature and the social world."¹¹ So according to Rawls, Kant thinks that we can sustain our commitment to the moral law only if we believe that human nature is not unfriendly to the realization of a realm of ends in the world. Similarly, I believe, Rawls thinks that we – and I take the "we" to refer to both members of the well-ordered society and Rawls's readers – can sustain our commitment to the principles of justice and to bringing about a just society only if we think human nature is not unfriendly to the realization of that society in the world.¹²

Human nature can be shown to be "not unfriendly" to the realization of a just society by showing that, at least under reasonably favorable conditions of a just society, human nature is such that we can develop the sentiments needed to maintain it. As Kant thought, this needed to be shown because history can "arouse loathing for our species,"¹³ so Rawls thought it needed to be shown because of the more horrific events of recent history that Kant did not live to see. And I think Rawls describes belief in the possibility of a just democratic regime as "faith" – as in "practical faith" – in part to underline the similarity between his own line of thought and Kant's.

To show that a just society is possible, Rawls needed to say what a just society would be like. Working out a conception of a just society required a theory of justice, with principles of justice as its centerpiece. But while saying what principles of justice would regulate a just society and what its institutions would be like is necessary for showing that a just society is possible, it is not sufficient.

It may be thought that at this point, Rawls needs to show that we can make the transition to a just society from the unjust societies in which we live. This is not, however, a matter Rawls ever takes up in any detail.¹⁴ One reason he does not, I think, is that transition will differ from society to society. Saying very much about how those transitions would or could be made would require knowing and saying a good deal about political conditions in the societies to which his work is addressed. Spelling out those conditions in detail is not, Rawls may think, a task philosophers are equipped to handle.

The reading of Rawls that I have sketched here suggests two further reasons why Rawls does not discuss questions of transition. First, on my reading, Rawls does not merely want to show that a just society is possible. He wants to show that what makes it possible is that human beings have a

¹⁰John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 319.

¹¹Rawls, *History of Moral Philosophy*, 319 (emphasis added).

¹²See Robert M. Adams, "Moral Faith," *The Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1995): 75–95, 80.

¹³Rawls, *History of Moral Philosophy*, 320; cf. Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 236–42.

¹⁴See the schematic remarks at *Political Liberalism*, 164–68.

“moral nature.” By that he means “not . . . a perfect such nature, yet one that can understand, act on and be sufficiently moved by a reasonable political conception of right and justice.”¹⁵ And by that, I think he means a capacity reliably to “understand, act on and be sufficiently moved by a reasonable political conception of right and justice.” Rawls may think that some forms of moral motivation – associated with heroism, with episodically mustering the political will to make our world more just or with the readiness to do good to those who hate us – are or entail the capacity to be moved by moral considerations under non-ideal circumstances. But the capacity for a settled disposition to act justly is a capacity for reciprocity. Showing that we have this capacity requires showing that we would regularly be moved by considerations of justice when we believe that others are similarly moved. And so, it does not require showing that we are “moved by a reasonable political conception of right and justice” under the imperfect conditions of an unjust society in transition. It requires showing that we would be so moved in the conditions of a well-ordered society. Furthermore, if it cannot be shown that we would develop a settled disposition to be just even under just institutions with perfect compliance, then it is surely questionable whether we do have a moral nature. On the other hand, if we would develop that disposition in a well-ordered society, then questions about transition can be confronted later. Thus the well-ordered society serves as a minimal – and hence a first – test that humanity must pass.

If the conjectures of the previous paragraph are right, then the Kantian problem I have said Rawls set for himself accounts for two things that I said distinguish Rawls from others discussed in this issue: his development of a philosophical theory and his amenability to utopian thinking.

What Rawls does need to show is that members of a just society could sustain it or, as Rawls puts it, he needs to show that a just society would be stable. The argument for stability proceeds in two stages in *Theory of Justice*. In the first, executed in chapter 8, Rawls shows that members of a just society would acquire a sense of justice as a normal part of their moral and psychological development. The sense of justice is, in effect, a disposition to cooperate. To show that society would be stable, and stable for what Rawls later calls “the right reasons,”¹⁶ he needed to show that each member would voluntarily maintain and act from – and would know that others would voluntarily maintain and act from – their disposition to cooperate. The alternatives are social breakdown, or a heavy reliance on penal devices.¹⁷ In the second stage of the argument, executed in chapter 9,

¹⁵Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lxii.

¹⁶See, for example, Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 589.

¹⁷Misunderstanding what the second stage of the stability argument is meant to show, some readers have questioned whether it is necessary. For an example, see Brian Barry, “John Rawls and the Search for Stability,” *Ethics* 105 (1995): 874–915.

Rawls completes the argument by demonstrating that members of a just society would affirm that their disposition to cooperate is good for them. It follows that a stable, just society is possible, and that political philosophy has vindicated “reasonable faith in the real possibility of a just constitutional regime.”

Why does the stability argument show that a just society is a “real possibility” rather than a merely logical one, coherent but remote and unlikely? The argument does not appeal to highly improbable claims about human motivation, nor is stability said to depend upon heroic or supererogatory action. Rather, both stages of the stability argument draw on what Rawls thought are plausible and reasonable psychological claims, together with claims about the educative effects of just institutions. It is therefore reasonable to suppose that creatures with our nature who grow up in a just society could sustain it. Because the argument draws on relatively weak psychological assumptions, it shows that such society is a “real possibility” for us and that we have a “moral nature” rather than a nature that is “unfriendly” to justice. The argument therefore vindicates reasonable faith in the goodness of humanity,¹⁸ or vindicates it sufficiently to answer our need for “practical faith.”¹⁹

¹⁸In his characteristically deep and acute essay “The Problem of Evil, the Social Contract, and the History of Ethics,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 82 (2001): 11–25, 13, Peter de Marneffe says, “It is this thought . . . that humanity is redeemed by its capacity for social relations of mutual respect – that animates Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*.” Read in context, it is clear that by “redeemed” de Marneffe means something like “redeemed in our own eyes.” Thus I read him as arguing that Rawls’s later work is animated by a concern to vindicate our belief in the goodness of humanity. As my own remarks suggest, I believe this concern animates Rawls’s earlier work as well.

¹⁹In his lectures on Rousseau, published in *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), Rawls says: “Rousseau’s belief that human nature is good, and that it is through institutions that we become bad, comes to these two propositions: (a) Social institutions and the conditions of social life exercise a predominant influence over which human propensities will develop and express themselves over time. When realized, some of these propensities are good and some bad; (b) There exists at least one possible and reasonably workable scheme of legitimate political institutions that both satisfies the principles of political right and meets the requirements for institutional stability and human happiness.” The quoted passage is from page 206. Rawls does not say he agrees with Rousseau’s belief that human nature is good or that his own belief “comes to [the same] two propositions.” But if we suppose so, then we can read his work as, among other things, a sustained attempt to argue for the goodness of humanity. Many of us may think that the conception of goodness Rawls finds in Rousseau is too weak. We may also think that human nature is not good, or is only qualifiedly good, according to a stronger and more plausible conception. Even if we think Rawls has not shown, and cannot show, that human nature is good properly speaking, the conclusion he *does* defend is certainly significant.

II

I have tried to bring to light a task that Rawls assigns to political philosophy, to show how that task reflects both the impact of twentieth-century history and the influence of Kant, and to tie the execution of that task to Rawls's theoretical ambitions and his amenability to realistic utopianism. Another of the features of Rawls's work that I cited at the outset as distinguishing him from other thinkers recognized in this issue is his work in the analytic tradition of moral philosophy.

What counts – and does not count – as analytic philosophy has by now become so unclear that it is easy to forget what analytic moral philosophy was during the time Rawls worked on *Theory of Justice*. It is therefore easy to miss the dispatch with which Rawls departed from it. Early in *Theory of Justice*, Rawls says rather peremptorily that “definitions and analyses of meaning do not have a special place” in the theory.²⁰ This methodological remark, his distinction between the concept and the conception of justice,²¹ his later equation of concept with meaning,²² and his insistence that substantive conceptions are what is really of interest, quickly placed Rawls's work at some distance from the defining techniques of classical analytic philosophy.

Of course, in the broader sense of the phrase “analytic philosophy” and its cognates, Rawls may seem so obviously to be an analytic philosopher that the fact does not call for comment. What does call for comment, in light of the contents of this issue, is why Rawls alone among the thinkers commemorated here should have thought that analytic philosophy could contribute to the understanding of politics.

I cannot give the complete answer to this question here. To see part of the answer, and a part that contemporary analytic philosophers may overlook, we need to return to the task I have said Rawls set himself. To show that a just society is possible, I said, Rawls needed to show that a just society would be stable for the right reasons. To show that, he needed to show that members of a just society would develop a sense of justice. And to show that, Rawls needed to say something about what a sense of justice is.

One of the central questions of analytic moral philosophy at midcentury was the nature of moral motivation. Is moral action motivated by a desire and, if so, what is that desire a desire for? How is the desire connected with moral knowledge? How is it connected with feelings of approval or disapproval for morally good or right acts? Is what makes an act good or right the fact that it is approved of? If so, whose approval matters? Can that approval attach to anything whatever, or does the nature of morality somehow impose limits on moral approval and disapproval? Does it

²⁰Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 44.

²¹Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 5.

²²Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 14 note 15.

thereby impose limits on what we can desire to do – and what we can in fact do – under color of morality?

Rawls's task demanded that he consider the answers to these questions that were offered by the best of contemporaneous moral theory. He argued that the answers offered by both utilitarians and intuitionists were badly flawed. Rawls's criticisms of utilitarianism are too widely known to be belabored here. His critique of intuitionism has received far less attention. The most forceful part of that critique is found in his trenchant discussion of the intuitionist doctrine of the "purely conscientious act." According to that doctrine, "the highest moral motive is the desire to do what is right and just simply because it is right and just, no other description being appropriate."²³ Rawls does think that members of the well-ordered society normally have a desire to do what is just for its own sake. But he also argues that if the doctrine of the purely conscientious act were right, then the desire to do what is right would be what we might call – in deference to a phrase he uses elsewhere – a "pure preference," a preference Rawls likens to "a preference for tea rather than coffee."

Rawls does not say that pure preferences are irrational. But someone who has a pure preference cannot cite reasons for trying to satisfy it that suffice to justify her action to others. If the doctrine of the purely conscientious act is right, this is just the predicament of someone who has a preference for acting justly. She cannot cite sufficient reasons for her preference because "no other description" of what she desires is appropriate; the object of her desire is "a distinct (and unanalyzable) object." If asked why she desires to do what is right, she has nothing to say beyond that it is right. Her desire may not lack any reasons at all, but it "lacks any apparent reason."²⁴ And if her sense of justice "lacks *apparent* reason" – if she lacks reasons for being just that are *apparent* to others – then others cannot have any assurance that she will voluntarily maintain and act from it. Mutual assurance of voluntary compliance is necessary if a just society is to be stable for the right reasons. If Rawls was to show that members of the well-ordered society have that assurance, then he had to find some alternative to the intuitionist account of moral motivation.

He found that account in social contract theory. Intuitionists like Ross and Prichard held that "the highest moral motive is the desire to do what is right and just simply because it is right and just, no other description being appropriate."²⁵ They thought no other description was appropriate because they thought the object of the desire to do what is right is "distinct and unanalyzable." Rawls argued that it is not simple and unanalyzable, and so can be described in a variety of ways, saying that "the [social contract] theory of justice supplies [a variety of] descriptions of what the sense of justice is a desire for."²⁶ In *Theory*

²³Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 418.

²⁴Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 418.

²⁵Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 418.

²⁶Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 499.

of Justice, it is not just a desire to do what is right for its own sake. It is also a desire to act from the commonly acknowledged moral beliefs of a just society, a desire to act from principles that are supremely regulative of a social union or social unions, and a desire to act from principles that would be chosen in the original position. Rawls argues that members of a just society would all have – and all know that all others have – desires they can satisfy only by attaining these objects. So all have – and know that all others have – desires that they can satisfy only by being just. Rawls thus exploits this variety of descriptions to argue that his version of social contract theory can solve the assurance problem on which intuitionism founders.²⁷

It is sometimes said that twentieth-century political philosophy began in 1971, with the publication of *Theory of Justice*. That claim is, of course, unfair to other great political thinkers of the last century, including the other great thinkers whose work is discussed in this issue. Because Rawls produced a work of power and scope within the analytic tradition, and because he identified and addressed so many of the central problems of political philosophy, his work is recognized as being of continuing philosophical interest by those who work in analytic philosophy as it is now practiced. But it is easy for contemporary moral and political philosophers to forget the extent to which Rawls altered the landscape of their fields, so that other problems which once bulked large are now submerged. We will miss something important about Rawls's contribution, and about what Rawls was trying to do, if those problems slip out of collective memory. For recovering his critique of a view that was prominent when he began his work goes some way toward confirming the reading of Rawls's project that I have sketched here.

III

I have argued that Rawls took up the problem of showing a just society is possible in part because of the impact of twentieth-century history upon him. I have not yet maintained that he looked to the historical events of the twentieth century for solutions, or that he thought the failures of the twentieth century provided clues to what a just society must be like if it is to be possible. Let me now offer a tentative and highly speculative suggestion.

A just, liberal society will be stable only if the forces that would undermine it are absent or peripheral. Having noted that the elites of Weimar Germany "no longer believed a decent liberal parliamentary regime was possible,"²⁸ Rawls may have identified some of those forces, at least, by asking why they no longer thought such a regime was possible. He may have thought

²⁷The arguments to which I refer here are found in section 86 of *Theory of Justice*. I lay out these arguments in my *Why Political Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

²⁸Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lxi.

they blamed the forces of democracy for the political and economic humiliation that Germany suffered at Versailles and in the 1920s.²⁹ And Rawls may have concluded, for this reason among others, that a just constitutional regime is a “real possibility” if – but only if – it provides the political and economic bases for individual and collective self-respect.

Rawls describes the social bases of self-respect as the most important of the primary goods.³⁰ Its importance is clear from an especially interesting – and, I would say, an especially contentious – set of claims on which he relies heavily. He states one element of that set most clearly in an essay called “Fairness to Goodness.” Rawls says there that:

Strong or inordinate desires for primary goods on the part of individuals and groups, particularly a desire for greater income and wealth and prerogatives of position, spring from insecurity and anxiety.³¹

The anxiety Rawls has in mind is status anxiety. Clearly such anxiety, if widespread, could destabilize a just society by moving people to seek more than their fair share under principles of justice. It might not move them to cheat on their taxes or otherwise break the law, but it might move them to try to change the law so that greater economic inequalities were allowed, and political power was, in effect, available for purchase.

But Rawls argues in *Theory of Justice* that the need for status is answered by public recognition as a free and equal citizen. This public recognition is manifest in a just constitution, in the justification of laws and policies bearing on constitutional essentials, and in the respect citizens show one another in the public forum. This recognition removes the source of status anxiety. Secure in their status as free and equal, Rawls thinks citizens do not destabilize their society’s just distribution of wealth or power: “No one,” Rawls says rather optimistically, “is inclined to look beyond the constitutional affirmation of equality for further political ways of securing his status.”³² In *Law of Peoples*, he draws on Aron to argue that a liberal people that is composed of citizens who are satisfied – in part because they are satisfied with their status as free and equal – will have no reason to undertake aggressive war.³³ The traditional causes of aggressive war, such as national ambition, the lust for national glory, the desire to secure access to resources or to enlarge their territory or their markets, will not get a sufficiently strong grip on them.

²⁹On the need for terms of peace which do not humiliate, see Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 569; cf. also principle 5 on 567.

³⁰Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 486.

³¹Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 277.

³²Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 477.

³³John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 47. Rawls discusses the conditions of defensive war at 89ff.

Thus the bases of self-respect do a great deal of work in arguments for domestic and international stability, and therefore do a great deal of work in the argument that a just society is possible. I have doubts about the crucial step in the argument, the premise I said is expressed in "Fairness to Goodness," since I am inclined to think that there are many causes of the "strong or inordinate desire for primary goods." Developing this doubt into an objection requires showing that these other causes would engender desires for income and wealth that would destabilize the justice of a well-ordered society. Since Rawls may have the resources to argue that they would not, and that a just society would also keep those causes in check, I do no more here than register a doubt. What matters for present purposes is this. If reflection on the collapse of Weimar was part of what led Rawls to appreciate the importance of this primary good, then the history of the twentieth century – which had such profound affects on other thinkers in this issue – had an even deeper affect on Rawls than I initially suggested. For it not only set the questions to which his theory of justice responded, it also had some effect on the content of the theory.

IV

I have sketched a reading of Rawls's work that ties together many of the features that distinguish it from the work of other authors commemorated in this issue. On this reading, the First World War, the humiliation of Germany, the fall of Weimar, the rise of Nazism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust, all pressed the question of whether a just liberal democracy is possible. Seeking to defend practical faith in that possibility, Rawls developed a theory of justice for an ideally just liberal democracy. He argued that such a society is a "real possibility" because, given reasonable psychological assumptions, the basic institutions of a just society would engender the moral support of its citizens – in part because it provided the bases of their self-respect. In doing so, he challenged alternative accounts of moral motivation that enjoyed some currency in the analytic philosophy of the time.

The influence of Rawls's theory on contemporary moral and political philosophy would be almost impossible to exaggerate. But despite the overwhelming success of *Theory of Justice*, in the middle 1980s Rawls famously began to re-present his view as what he called a "political liberalism." In describing his view as a "political liberalism," Rawls meant to distinguish it from other liberal political philosophies, like those of Kant and Mill. He thought that these two philosophers, like many before them, tried to derive political principles from claims about human nature or the good human life. While never denying that his theory was in some sense "Kantian," he insisted that his own view was founded, not on ambitious philosophical claims that purport to be true of human beings anywhere and everywhere, but on ideas about the nature of citizenship that are common coin in the

liberal democracies to which his work was addressed. Political philosophy must start modestly, Rawls maintained, if its conclusions are to be acceptable in diverse, liberal societies.

Rawls recast his view because there were clearly identifiable arguments in the original presentation of justice as fairness with which he later became dissatisfied. It is possible to explain the changes Rawls made in his theory only by locating those arguments, laying them out with care, supplying missing premises when necessary and asking where Rawls might have thought those arguments went wrong. By doing this, it is possible, I believe, to pinpoint key premises he came to reject as implausible, and others that he modified to facilitate his political turn.

I cannot undertake the work of explaining Rawls's transition to political liberalism here. For now, suffice it to say that the arguments in *Theory of Justice* with which Rawls became dissatisfied are found in his treatment of stability. I believe that his characterization of a sense of justice, and his account of how a sense of justice is acquired, underwent important but subtle changes between *Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. Rawls also came to believe that he had relied on unrealistic assumptions when he argued that members of a just society would judge their sense of justice to be part of their good. According to the treatment of stability in *Political Liberalism*, citizens' mutual knowledge that all would cooperate in sustaining just institutions depends upon "the existence and public knowledge of a reasonable overlapping consensus."³⁴ If Rawls's later work vindicates our practical faith in humanity, it does so by showing that under the influence of just institutions, we can live as free and equal citizens. Because the arguments for stability were so central to Rawls's project, the changes demanded a new family of concepts not used in his original presentation. The alterations triggered reverberations throughout his theory. It is a mark of Rawls's very great intellectual honesty that he acknowledged shortcomings in his earlier work, and took the steps he believed necessary to fix them.

After Rawls's death in 2002, I, like many other of Rawls's students, paid tribute to his life and character, trying to say why the man, and not just the work, so deeply influenced us. I shall not repeat the tribute here.³⁵ In conclusion, I shall say only that this issue may well commemorate other great political thinkers who were also great human beings. But as I find it hard to believe that any of them was a greater philosopher, so I find it hard to believe that any of them was a better person, than John Rawls.

³⁴Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 392.

³⁵My tribute was published as "John Rawls: A Remembrance," *The Review of Politics* 65 (2003): 5–10.

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