

Book Review

Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn, by Paul Weithman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xii + 379. H/b £40.00.

From the 1980s on, as John Rawls began and fully made what is described as his 'political turn', a more or less standard story of that turn took hold. According to that story, Rawls began to see that the conception of the person at the root of his justification of his two principles of justice could not be given an adequate foundation. Rawls replaced an unsuccessful attempt to ground justice in a universally true conception of persons with a less ambitious project of tying the principles to a conception of the citizen to be found in modern liberal constitutional democracies.

As Paul Weithman painstakingly and convincingly demonstrates in his new book, however, that story is not only wrong, but hides from view some of the most interesting features of Rawls's work, both early and late. In his introduction, Weithman quotes with approval John Chapman's comment in his review of *A Theory of Justice* that 'Rawls's theory has both the simplicity and the complexity of a Gothic cathedral' (p. 5). Weithman's book is a sort of stone-by-stone tour of that cathedral, with special attention paid to the too often overlooked nooks and crannies and underlying architectural structures that rarely make it into the postcards. The result is not only a convincing rebuttal of the standard story (what Weithman calls 'The Public Basis View'), but more importantly, a detailed reconstruction of the parts of the argument Rawls ultimately found to be wanting, the flaws Rawls discovered there, and the ways that the pieces of the later work serve to fix those problems.

In the oft-neglected third part of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues, in two stages, that a society well-ordered by justice as fairness would be stable. First, he argues that the institutions of a well-ordered society would foster a sense of justice in its members, a disposition to uphold just institutions by, for instance, not free-riding or otherwise acting in self-interested ways that would erode those institutions. Second, he argues that members of a well-ordered society possessed of a sense of justice would affirm this disposition. Rawls calls this argument the argument for congruence. Weithman demonstrates that it was the argument for congruence that ran into the problems that ultimately led Rawls to his political turn.

Unlike the basic argument for the choice of the two principles from within the original position, the argument for congruence begins from the assumption that the two principles are provisionally justified and that they generate a sense of justice in the members of a well-ordered society. It moves from these conclusions to the further conclusion that members of a well-ordered society will endorse their sense of justice from the position of what Rawls calls the 'thin theory of the good'. This is, very roughly, the point of view of rational self-interest. The argument thus shows that citizens, who are moved by a sense of justice as a result of having grown up under just institutions will find that acting on this sense promotes their individual good, and this will further incline them to take the steps necessary to preserve and foster the institutions of a just society. What appears to be the main temptation to override a sense of justice is thus undermined, and thus we have good reason to believe that a well-ordered society would be stable. So understood, the argument has a kind of game-theoretic structure, because part of the argument that acting from a sense of justice is congruent with acting to further one's good is that justice as fairness represents a kind of Nash equilibrium, everyone's best reply to a situation in which others are acting to support a just basic structure.

According to Weithman, Rawls came to realize that in a liberal democratic state, the greatest threat to citizens' endorsement of their sense of justice does not come from self-interest narrowly construed, but from what Rawls came to call 'comprehensive doctrines'. The argument for congruence in *A Theory of Justice* is designed to reassure the citizen of a well-ordered society who is moved by her sense of justice to pay her taxes, that in being so moved, she is not acting irrationally or otherwise sacrificing what is of fundamental value to her. It does this by showing how living justly in a just society answers more fully to her deepest and most fundamental interests than accruing greater wealth through unjust means does. But this same argument is not up to the task of convincing the religious citizen who regards well-justified liberal policies as violations of his religiously-based moral commitments to endorse those policies out of his sense of justice. Rawls's response to the would-be tax dodger points out that she can only pursue her deepest interests by pursuing them in ways constrained by her sense of justice, because only in that way can she unify her self and her practical reason. Unlike the would-be tax-dodger, the religious believer finds himself with two conflicting accounts of what his deepest and most fundamental interests are, two possibly incompatible ways to unify himself, so cannot be convinced by an appeal to only one of them. Moreover, the presence in liberal democratic societies of people with such comprehensive doctrines is, if anything, encouraged by the very institutions of such societies. Rather than generating the psychic forces of its own support, it turns out that justice as fairness is in danger of generating the seeds of its own unraveling.

Weithman then goes on to show how the shifts Rawls makes in the development of political liberalism—the idea of an overlapping consensus, a

free-standing political conception of justice, the newly important place for legitimacy, and the idea of public reason — provide the means for a different kind of congruence argument that appeals to the religious believer by offering her a way to combine or at least reconcile these two competing accounts of her good. The result here is less seamless than that which Rawls thought he had achieved in *Theory*, but it is no less impressive for that. Weithman sums up the result of this new reconciliation as follows:

In the actual world, citizens of faith who accept the liberal principle of legitimacy may still experience a sense of tension or loss. They may believe that there are very important goods their society could realize by violating the principle of legitimacy, and significant evils it could avoid by doing so. For many, the tension may not ever be finally resolved. And yet their experience of living in a pluralistic society, and abiding by the liberal principle of legitimacy, may make them aware of great social goods that are available only when the principle is widely honored. Their churches may flourish, people of their faith are trusted and recognized as full and equal participants in their societies, and all people are left free to search for God—or not—in their own ways. Their religions may acknowledge, and they may come to believe, that these goods outweigh what is lost. (p. 317-8)

Weithman's reconstruction of both the original argument in *A Theory of Justice* and the later, political, replacement, are masterpieces of close, almost scholastic, exegesis. Those who are drawn to the Public Basis View of Rawls's political turn and who take the time to follow Weithman on his tour of these arguments will not come away with their views intact. They are also unlikely to overlook the third part of *Theory* in the future. And those who, like me, come to this book already sympathetic to the general outlines of Weithman's interpretation will still find new details uncovered or put in a new light. I found particularly helpful the discussion of how the sense of justice shifts from a principle-dependent desire in *Theory* to an ideal-dependent desire in *Political Liberalism* (pp. 295–6), the role of considerations of legitimacy in securing stability in the later work (pp. 315–8), and the account of how a wide view of public reason that allows citizens of faith to invoke their comprehensive doctrines in political deliberations subject to the proviso that they offer public reasons for their positions if called on to do so helps to support the very attitudes that Rawls came to think help to secure stability in a society characterized by reasonable pluralism (331–2). Weithman also brings out some of the hidden depth and beauty of Rawls's work, the intricacy and care of his arguments, and his concern with some of the hardest and deepest questions of human social life. In fact, one of the richest payoffs of Weithman's reconstruction comes in the final chapter, where he suggests that Rawls's abiding interest throughout his career in the basically religious question of what could justify human life finds new expression and a surprising answer in *Political Liberalism*, which despite its defence of an idea of public reason that many religious readers have taken to be anti-religious,

turns out to be a deeply religious book, one aimed at defending a certain kind of reasonable faith.

But despite these many virtues, Weithman's book will not be, nor does he take it to be, of general philosophical interest. Not everyone who wishes to admire the beauty of Chartres or Notre Dame will want to be led stone by stone through their recesses or benefit from the experience. *Why Political Liberalism?* is very much written for other scholars of Rawls's work, employing a jargon and acronyms familiar from those interpretive discussions, but no doubt unappealing to those outside of them. It is very long, and perhaps unnecessarily so. It constantly retraces its steps and repeats at length arguments and positions it has established before. This makes reading it at one go somewhat tedious, but will be very helpful for those who wish to dip into it as a kind of reference work.

At several points, Weithman approvingly quotes a remark of Rawls that a reasonable political conception of justice may bend comprehensive doctrines towards it, and thereby solidify the stability of a plural society. Although this is very much a book for scholars and those interested in the minute details of discussions of Rawls's work, I imagine that Weithman hopes that the reasonable interpretation offered here will have an effect on those of us who regularly teach and otherwise engage with Rawls's work, bending the wide variety of interpretations of Rawls's political turn towards itself, and that this may have salutary effects on Rawls's more casual readers. It would be a welcome result.

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