

# John Rawls: A Remembrance

John Bordley Rawls, who passed away at his home in Lexington, Massachusetts on 24 November 2002, was born 21 February 1921 in Baltimore, Maryland. He did his undergraduate work at Princeton University, after which he served as an infantryman in the Pacific theater during World War II. After the war, he returned to Princeton where he completed his Ph.D. in 1950. Rawls taught at Princeton for two years. He spent 1952-53 as a Fulbright Fellow at Oxford, where he was deeply influenced by Isaiah Berlin and H. L. A. Hart. When he returned to the United States, Rawls accepted a position as an assistant professor of philosophy at Cornell. He moved to MIT in 1960 and to Harvard in 1962. He remained a member of the Harvard Philosophy Department until his retirement in 1992.

The influence of Rawls's work on academic political and moral theorizing, especially on the academic disciplines of political and moral philosophy, would be difficult to overstate. The agenda of contemporary political philosophy, and much of the agenda of moral philosophy, has been set by Rawls's work in at least this sense: even those who disagree with him are bound to respond to him. He is unarguably the greatest political philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century and is arguably the greatest of the whole of it.

It would not, however, be *impossible* to overstate Rawls's importance. Some people have overstated it, saying that political philosophy began in 1971 with the publication of Rawls's magisterial *A Theory of Justice*. In fact, as those who know the history of this journal need no reminding, political theorizing was not dead in the English-speaking world at the middle of the twentieth century. But the horror of two world wars had chastened the hopes of many constructive political theorists in the west, particularly those on the left. The influence of positivism on Anglophone philosophy had shifted the concerns of moral philosophers to linguistic and metaethical questions. Rawls therefore began his work at a time when political philosophers pursued a modest and a somewhat arid and technical agenda. While the publication of *Theory of Justice* did not mark the renaissance of a moribund discipline, it did bring a change

that was bracing, powerful, and impossible to ignore. The theoretical ambitions and the clear normative implications of the book showed the academy how much could still be accomplished in political philosophy. The book's systematicity and clarity showed that these accomplishments could be won without loss of rigor. Its obvious connections to Kant and the social contract tradition did much to revive philosophers' interest in the history of liberal thought.

The professionalization of academic philosophy and the abstract quality of philosophical discussion can suggest that doing work which is reckoned important in philosophy is a matter of solving conceptual puzzles which are far removed from the real problems of human life. This is a great mistake. We do political philosophy to guide and to help us to understand our collective life. Doing valuable work in the subject requires an ability to read the politics of one's age and to articulate the deep philosophical problems that that politics raises. It also requires the ability to defend answers to those problems which go some way to meeting the needs of one's time and which shed some light on the human condition. Truly valuable work in political philosophy therefore demands a quality that has some claim to be called political wisdom. This is a quality I believe Rawls had in ample measure. It is a quality which helps to account for his greatness as a political philosopher.

Rawls argued that the most urgent task of political philosophy in our time was that of framing a public conception of justice—roughly what Walter Lippmann and John Courtney Murray had called a “public philosophy”—the acceptance of which could safeguard citizens' dignity in the face of the power exercised by the modern state. Rawls saw clearly that the utilitarianism which dominated moral, judicial, economic, and political reasoning when he began to write posed a threat to the dignity of the individual. That threat, he thought, could only be countered by a form of autonomy-based liberalism that was capable of attracting widespread support.

Rawls turned away from utilitarianism and toward the contract tradition to develop just such a liberalism. His work is most obviously informed by Kant, but I would argue that it was also informed by American political thinking. Though it would take a great deal of exegesis to show it, I believe Rawls was exquis-

itely sensitive to the diversity of American liberalism and progressivism in the middle and late twentieth century. He developed a theory of justice which privileged autonomy while drawing strength from many of liberalism's and progressivism's most promising strands. This is why his work has been able to attract support from so many thinkers in the center and on the moderate left: from participatory democrats who consider themselves the heirs of the New Left, through those concerned with the undemocratic concentration of power in the hands of political and corporate elites, to the egalitarian heirs of the New Deal and the Great Society, and finally to those who are concerned less with equality than with the primacy and seriousness of individual rights. If it is less clear how well Rawls's theory speaks to the aspirations of multiculturalists, cosmopolitans and feminists, it can at least be said that Rawls recognized the urgency of their claims in the last decade of his working life and tried to accommodate them.

I intimated a moment ago that one of the tasks of political philosophy is to help us understand our politics and ourselves. Politics is an ineliminable and a crucially important part of human life. By studying what we can realistically hope for in politics, we can learn a great deal about the possibilities and limitations of humanity. Some years ago, Rawls told a scholar and friend who was visiting from Germany that the question with which he was most deeply concerned was the question of whether human beings can be good. Rawls's philosophical work sprang from this deeply felt existential question about our limitations. It was a question he bent all his energies to answering.

The answer to the question may seem obviously to be yes. Even those of us who are sufficiently troubled by the question that we do not think the answer is obvious may wonder what it has to do with political philosophy. For human goodness seems evident in the love we show for our families and friends, in our ability to create and appreciate works of high culture, in daily works of sacrifice and devotion, and in extraordinary acts of heroism and saintliness. By taking seriously the question of whether human beings can be good and by connecting it with political philosophy, Rawls did not mean to deny any of this. He recognized that people are capable of love and generosity, that we invest our intimate relationships with great significance,

and that these relationships call forth what seem to be our finest qualities. But he was firmly committed to a principle that is the hallmark of his philosophical work: for him, the right really was prior to the good. And so he believed that many of the things which seem to be valuable in human life, including the things we think best about our lives and ourselves, are not truly good unless they are part of a plan of life which is “congruent” with the demands of justice.

Rawls knew the Pauline epistles well. Though he never put it this way, the requirement of congruence may be what he made of St. Paul’s famous love requirement in Corinthians. Be that as it may, because Rawls thought that what is truly good must be part of a life that is congruent with the demands of justice, the question with which Rawls said he was most deeply concerned—the question of whether human beings can be good—cannot be answered simply by showing what we do for those we love or for the ends we value. Rather, Rawls thought, showing that human beings can be good requires showing that we are capable of constraining our pursuits of the good by the demands of justice. It also requires showing that we can act from, and not merely in accordance with, those demands. Showing that we are capable of shaping our lives in this way requires showing that we can support just institutions for the right reasons. It requires, that is, showing how a just society is possible. Showing how a just society is possible was the defining task of *A Theory of Justice* and, later, of *Political Liberalism*. Answering the question of whether human beings can be good—by showing that we can be just—was thus the defining task of Rawls’s working life.

The philosophical power and depth of Rawls’s theory account for his place in philosophy. Only his character, however, can account for his place in the affections of those who knew him, especially those of us who were privileged to work with him. Rawls was devoted to his students. His lectures to undergraduate classes were painstakingly prepared. He never missed appointments or canceled office hours. He was in some ways a simple man. He dressed plainly and ate frugally. He had a warm sense of humor and took pleasure in simple jokes. His great curiosity was unsatisfied until he felt he really understood something. He knew a great deal of history and art history, and

was a lover of baseball. He was an unfailingly modest man, quick to acknowledge what he learned from others but reluctant in the extreme to draw attention to his own accomplishments. He frequently declined invitations to speak on the grounds that he didn't believe he had anything to say. He honestly confronted problems that he believed had been brought to light in his own work. He forthrightly acknowledged what needed to be rethought.

Rawls's readiness to rethink central elements of his own view was especially evident in his treatment of what I have referred to as the congruence requirement. The congruence requirement says that our conceptions of what is good in life must be congruent with demands of justice which we acknowledge and from which we act. By trying to show that it is rational for us to satisfy this requirement by conforming our views of what is valuable in life to the requirements of justice, Rawls took on the most difficult question in moral philosophy: the question of why it is good to be just. This is a question Rawls first took up in part III of *A Theory of Justice*, where he laid down the congruence requirement. There he argued that a just society is possible because people living under just institutions would accept a liberal conception of the good. That conception, he continued, conforms to the demands of the liberal conception of justice elaborated in part I of the book.

Though Rawls recognized that the arguments of part III are highly compressed, it was—he once told a student—his favorite part of *Theory of Justice*. Yet, for reasons that are well known, Rawls came to believe that this part of his theory needed to be substantially reworked. The result was the political turn in his work that eventually resulted in his second book, *Political Liberalism*. That book brought a new and very different account of how a just society is possible. A just society is possible, Rawls argued there, because it is possible for adherents of quite different views of the good life to converge on and support a family of reasonable conceptions of justice. The political turn in Rawls's work was an important methodological innovation in political philosophy. Because of its connection with the congruence requirement, it also constituted a new approach to one of the fundamental questions of Rawls's life. It was a mark of his intellectual honesty that Rawls was able to take that turn.

A verse from the book of Micah tells us that three things are required of us: that we love tenderly, walk humbly and live justly. I have not been able to hear that verse in recent years without thinking of Jack Rawls, for whom justice was a passion and humility second nature. He was a great philosopher and an exemplary teacher. Even better, he was a splendid human being in whom the right and the good came together.

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