

john rawls

political  
liberalism

expanded edition

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John  
Rawls



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POLITICAL  
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Columbia Classics  
in Philosophy

## Columbia Classics in Philosophy

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Liz

## Introduction

The contents of this work are as follows. The first three lectures more or less cover the ground of three lectures I gave at Columbia University in April of 1980 and which appeared considerably revised in the *Journal of Philosophy* in September of that year under the title "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory." In the more than ten years since they have again been recast and further revised. I think they are much clearer than before, which is not to say they are now clear. I continue to call lectures what might be called chapters, since they were all given as lectures and I try to preserve, perhaps unsuccessfully, a certain conversational style.

When the original lectures were given I planned to publish them with three additional lectures. One, "Basic Structure as Subject" (1978), was already given and in print, the other

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two, “Basic Liberties and Their Priority” (1982) and “Social Unity and Primary Goods” (1982), were either drafted or near completion. But when these three additional lectures were finally done, they lacked the kind of unity I wanted, either with themselves or with the three preceding lectures.<sup>1</sup> I then wrote three further lectures on political liberalism,<sup>2</sup> as I now refer to it, beginning with “Political not Metaphysical” (1985), much of which is included in the first lecture, followed by “Overlapping Consensus” (1987), “Ideas of the Good” (1988), and “Domain of the Political” (1989). The last three, considerably redone and combined, together with “Public Reason,” which appears here for the first time, make up the second three lectures.

The first six lectures are related this way: the first three set out the general philosophical background of political liberalism in practical reason, especially §§1, 3, 7, 8 of II and all of III, while the second three lay out in more detail several of its main ideas: the idea of an overlapping consensus, the idea of the priority of right and its relation to ideas of the good, and the idea of public reason. The lectures now have the desired unity both among themselves and with the spirit and content of *A Theory of Justice*,<sup>3</sup> a unity given by their topic: the idea of political liberalism.

To explain this last remark: the aims of *A Theory of Justice* were outlined in its preface (paragraphs 2–3). To paraphrase, I began by noting that during much of the modern period of moral philosophy the predominant systematic view in the English-speaking world had been some form of utilitarianism. One reason for this was that it had been represented by a long line of brilliant writers, from Hume and Adam Smith to Edgeworth and Sidgwick, who built up a body of thought truly impressive in its scope and depth. Those who criticized it often did so on a narrow

1. The first two of these additional lectures are now reprinted here unchanged as Lectures VII and VIII.

2. This term is used in “Overlapping Consensus,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 7 (February 1987):23f., and “The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 17 (Summer 1988):271, 273, 275.

3. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971.)



front. They noted difficulties with the principle of utility and pointed out serious apparent discrepancies between its implications and our ordinary moral convictions. Yet I thought these critics failed to elaborate a workable and systematic moral conception that could successfully oppose it. The outcome was that we were often forced to choose between utilitarianism and rational intuitionism and were likely to settle for a variant of the principle of utility circumscribed and restricted by seemingly ad hoc intuitionistic constraints.

The aims of *Theory* (still to paraphrase) were to generalize and carry to a higher order of abstraction the traditional doctrine of the social contract. I wanted to show that this doctrine was not open to the more obvious objections often thought fatal to it. I hoped to work out more clearly the chief structural features of this conception—which I called “justice as fairness”—and to develop it as an alternative systematic account of justice that is superior to utilitarianism. I thought this alternative conception was, of the traditional moral conceptions, the best approximation to our considered convictions of justice and constituted the most appropriate basis for the institutions of a democratic society.

The aims of these lectures are quite different. Note that in my summary of the aims of *Theory*, the social contract tradition is seen as part of moral philosophy and no distinction is drawn between moral and political philosophy. In *Theory* a moral doctrine of justice general in scope is not distinguished from a strictly political conception of justice. Nothing is made of the contrast between comprehensive philosophical and moral doctrines and conceptions limited to the domain of the political. In the lectures in this volume, however, these distinctions and related ideas are fundamental.

Indeed, it may seem that the aim and content of these lectures mark a major change from those of *Theory*. Certainly, as I have indicated, there are important differences. But to understand the nature and extent of the differences, one must see them as arising from trying to resolve a serious problem internal to justice as fairness, namely from the fact that the account of stability

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in part III of *Theory* is not consistent with the view as a whole. I believe all differences are consequences of removing that inconsistency. Otherwise these lectures take the structure and content of *Theory* to remain substantially the same.<sup>4</sup>

To explain: the serious problem I have in mind concerns the unrealistic idea of a well-ordered society as it appears in *Theory*. An essential feature of a well-ordered society associated with justice as fairness is that all its citizens endorse this conception on the basis of what I now call a comprehensive philosophical doctrine. They accept, as rooted in this doctrine, its two principles of justice. Similarly, in the well-ordered society associated with utilitarianism citizens generally endorse that view as a comprehensive philosophical doctrine and they accept the principle of utility on that basis. Although the distinction between a political conception of justice and a comprehensive philosophical doctrine is not discussed in *Theory*, once the question is raised, it is clear, I think, that the text regards justice as fairness and utilitarianism as comprehensive, or partially comprehensive, doctrines.

Now the serious problem is this. A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. No one of these doctrines is affirmed by citizens generally. Nor should one expect that in the foreseeable future one of them, or some other reasonable doctrine, will ever be affirmed by all, or nearly all, citizens. Political liberalism assumes that, for political purposes, a plurality of reasonable yet incompatible comprehensive doctrines is the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime. Political liberalism also supposes that a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not reject the essentials of a democratic regime. Of course, a society may also contain unrea-

4. Of course, a number of errors and revisions need to be made in the way the structure and content of justice as fairness was presented in *Theory*. Some of these are discussed herein but to rectify these matters is not my concern in these lectures.

sonable and irrational, and even mad, comprehensive doctrines. In their case the problem is to contain them so that they do not undermine the unity and justice of society.

The fact of a plurality of reasonable but incompatible comprehensive doctrines—the fact of reasonable pluralism—shows that, as used in *Theory*, the idea of a well-ordered society of justice as fairness is unrealistic. This is because it is inconsistent with realizing its own principles under the best of foreseeable conditions. The account of the stability of a well-ordered society in part III is therefore also unrealistic and must be recast. This problem sets the stage for the later essays beginning in 1980. The ambiguity of *Theory* is now removed and justice as fairness is presented from the outset as a political conception of justice (I:2).

Surprisingly, this change in turn forces many other changes and calls for a family of ideas not needed before.<sup>5</sup> I say surprisingly because the problem of stability has played very little role in the history of moral philosophy, so it may seem odd that an inconsistency of this kind should turn out to force such extensive revisions. Yet the problem of stability is fundamental to political philosophy and an inconsistency there is bound to require basic readjustments. So perhaps it is not surprising after all that besides the ideas already mentioned—the ideas of a political conception of justice as opposed to a comprehensive doctrine, and of an overlapping consensus and of public reason—others are also needed. Here I mention that of a political conception of the person (I:5) and of reasonable as opposed to simple pluralism. Further, the idea of political constructivism is connected with these matters and raises questions about the truth of moral judgments, commented on below.<sup>6</sup>

The main conclusion to draw from these remarks—a conclu-

5. One apparent exception is the idea of an overlapping consensus. Yet its meaning in *Theory*, pp. 387f., is quite different.

6. The changes in the later essays are sometimes said to be replies to criticisms raised by communitarians and others. I don't believe there is a basis for saying this. Of course, whether I am correct in this belief depends on whether the changes can be satisfactorily explained by an analytic view of how they fit into the revised account of stability. It is certainly not settled by my say so.

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sion to which I return in a moment—is that the problem of political liberalism is: How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? Put another way: How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable comprehensive doctrines may live together and all affirm the political conception of a constitutional regime? What is the structure and content of a political conception that can gain the support of such an overlapping consensus? These are among the questions that political liberalism tries to answer.

For orientation, a few comments about political liberalism. Sometimes one hears reference made to the so-called Enlightenment project of finding a philosophical secular doctrine, one founded on reason and yet comprehensive. It would then be suitable to the modern world, so it was thought, now that the religious authority and the faith of Christian ages was alleged to be no longer dominant.

Whether there is or ever was such an Enlightenment project we need not consider; for in any case political liberalism, as I think of it, and justice as fairness as a form thereof, has no such ambitions. As I have said, political liberalism takes for granted not simply pluralism but the fact of reasonable pluralism; and beyond this, it supposes that of the main existing reasonable comprehensive doctrines, some are religious. The conception of the reasonable (II:3) is characterized so as to allow this. The problem of political liberalism is to work out a conception of political justice for a constitutional democratic regime that the plurality of reasonable doctrines—always a feature of the culture of a free democratic regime—might endorse. The intention is not to replace those comprehensive views, nor to give them a true foundation. Indeed, that intention would be delusional, but that is not the point. Rather, doing that is not the business of political liberalism.

Part of the seeming complexity of political liberalism—shown, say, in its having to introduce a further family of ideas—arises

from accepting the fact of reasonable pluralism. For once we do this, then we assume that, in an ideal overlapping consensus, each citizen affirms both a comprehensive doctrine and the focal political conception, somehow related. In some cases the political conception is simply the consequence of, or continuous with, a citizen's comprehensive doctrine; in others it may be related as an acceptable approximation given the circumstances of the social world (IV:8). In any case, since the political conception is shared by everyone while the reasonable doctrines are not, we must distinguish between a public basis of justification generally acceptable to citizens on fundamental political questions and the many nonpublic bases of justification belonging to the many comprehensive doctrines and acceptable only to those who affirm them.

Similarly, there will be many parallel distinctions. For the elements of the political conception of justice must be separated from the analogous elements within comprehensive doctrines. We must keep track of where we are. Thus, ideas of the good in the political conception have to be appropriately political and distinct from those in more extensive views. The same holds for the political conception of persons as free and equal.

Given the fact of the reasonable pluralism of democratic culture, the aim of political liberalism is to uncover the conditions of the possibility of a reasonable public basis of justification on fundamental political questions. It should, if possible, set forth the content of such a basis and why it is acceptable. In doing this, it has to distinguish the public point of view from the many nonpublic (not private) points of view. Or, alternatively, it has to characterize the distinction between public reason and the many nonpublic reasons and to explain why public reason takes the form it does (VI). Moreover, it has to be impartial (in ways that need to be explained) between the points of view of reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

This impartiality is shown in various ways. For one thing, political liberalism does not attack or criticize any reasonable view. As part of this, it does not criticize, much less reject, any

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particular theory of the truth of moral judgments.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, it simply supposes that judgments of such truth are made from the point of view of some comprehensive moral doctrine. These doctrines render a judgment, all things considered: that is, taking into consideration what they see as all relevant moral and political values and all relevant facts (as each doctrine determines). Which moral judgments are true, all things considered, is not a matter for political liberalism, as it approaches all questions from within its own limited point of view. There are, however, occasions when it must say something here to strengthen its own case. This is attempted in III:8 and V:8.

Further, political liberalism, rather than referring to its political conception of justice as true, refers to it as reasonable instead. This is not merely a verbal matter but does two things. First, it indicates the more limited point of view of the political conception as articulating political and not all values, while providing at the same time a public basis of justification. Second, it indicates that the principles and ideals of the political conception are based on principles of practical reason in union with conceptions of society and person, themselves conceptions of practical reason. These conceptions specify the framework within which principles of practical reason are applied. The meaning of all this is given in the account of political (as opposed to moral) constructivism in III.

The idea of political constructivism will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the original position of justice as fairness, or with some similar framework. The principles of political justice are the result of a procedure of construction in which rational persons (or their representatives), subject to reasonable conditions, adopt the principles to regulate the basic structure of society. The principles that issue from a suitable procedure of construction, one that properly expresses the requisite principles and conceptions of practical reason, I think of as reasonable. The judgments those principles support are also reasonable. When

7. See IV:4.1, repeating verbatim the matching paragraph from "The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus."

citizens share a reasonable political conception of justice, they have a basis on which public discussion of fundamental political questions can proceed and be reasonably decided, not of course in all cases but we hope in most cases of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice.

The dualism in political liberalism between the point of view of the political conception and the many points of view of comprehensive doctrines is not a dualism originating in philosophy. Rather, it originates in the special nature of democratic political culture as marked by reasonable pluralism. This special nature accounts, I believe, at least in good part, for the different problems of political philosophy in the modern as compared with the ancient world. To explain this I state a conjecture—I shouldn't say it is more than that—about the historical contexts that accounts for characteristic problems of the ancients and the moderns respectively.

When moral philosophy began, say with Socrates, ancient religion was a civic religion of public social practice, of civic festivals and public celebrations. Moreover, this civic religious culture was not based on a sacred work like the Bible, or the Koran, or the Vedas of Hinduism. The Greeks celebrated Homer and the Homeric poems were a basic part of their education, but the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were never sacred texts. As long as one participated in the expected way and recognized the proprieties, the details of what one believed were not of great importance. It was a matter of doing the done thing and being a trustworthy member of society, always ready to carry out one's civic duties as a good citizen—to serve on juries or to row in the fleet in war—when called upon to do so. It was not a religion of salvation in the Christian sense and there was no class of priests who dispensed the necessary means of grace; indeed the ideas of immortality and eternal salvation did not have a central place in classical culture.<sup>8</sup>

Greek moral philosophy begins, then, within the historical

8. In this paragraph I follow Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 254–60, 273–75.

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and cultural context of a civic religion of a polis in which the Homeric epics, with their gods and heroes, play a central part. This religion contains no alternative idea of the highest good to set against that expressed by the Homeric gods and heroes. The heroes are of noble birth; they openly seek success and honor, power and wealth, social standing and prestige. They are not indifferent to the good of family, friends, and dependents, yet these claims have a lesser place. As for the gods, they are not, morally speaking, very different; though being immortal, their lives are relatively happy and secure.

So in rejecting the Homeric ideal characteristic of a way of life of the warrior class of a bygone age, Greek philosophy had to work out for itself ideas of the highest good for human life, ideas acceptable to the citizens of the different society of fifth century B.C. Athens. Moral philosophy was always the exercise of free, disciplined reason alone. It was not based on religion, much less on revelation, as civic religion was neither a guide nor a rival to it. Its focus was the idea of the highest good as an attractive ideal, as the reasonable pursuit of our true happiness, and addressed a question civic religion left largely unanswered.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the modern period, three historical developments deeply influenced the nature of its moral and political philosophy.

The first is the Reformation in the sixteenth century. It fragmented the religious unity of the Middle Ages and led to religious pluralism, with all its consequences for later centuries. This in turn fostered pluralisms of other kinds, which were a permanent feature of culture by the end of the eighteenth century.

The second is the the development of the modern state with its central administration, at first ruled by monarchs with enormous if not absolute powers. Or at least by monarchs who tried to be as absolute as they could, only granting a share in power to the aristocracy and the rising middle classes when they had to, or as suited their convenience.

9. In these last two paragraphs I follow Terence Irwin, *Classical Thought* (New York: Oxford University Prtess, 1989), esp. chap. 2.



The third is the development of modern science beginning in the seventeenth century. By modern science I mean the development of astronomy with Copernicus and Kepler and Newtonian physics; and also, it must be stressed, the development of mathematical analysis (calculus) by Newton and Leibniz. Without analysis, the development of physics would not have been possible.

I note first, the obvious contrast with the classical world in regard to religion. Medieval Christianity had five characteristic features that civic religion lacks:

It tended towards an authoritarian religion: its authority—the Church itself headed by the papacy—was institutional, central, and nearly absolute, although the supreme authority of the pope was sometimes challenged, as in the conciliar period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

It was a religion of salvation, a way to eternal life, and salvation required true belief as the Church taught it.

Hence, it was a doctrinal religion with a creed that was to be believed.

It was a religion of priests with the sole authority to dispense means of grace, means normally essential to salvation.

Finally, it was an expansionist religion of conversion that recognized no territorial limits to its authority short of the world as a whole.

The Reformation had enormous consequences. When an authoritative, salvationist, and expansionist religion like medieval Christianity divides, this inevitably means the appearance within the same society of a rival authoritative and salvationist religion, different in some ways from the original religion from which it split off, but having for a certain period of time many of the same features. Luther and Calvin were as dogmatic and intolerant as the Roman Church had been.

There is a second, if less obvious, contrast with the classical world, this time with regard to philosophy. During the wars of