

# The Audacious Humility Of John Rawls

**David Estlund**

**H**ARVARD PHILOSOPHER John Rawls's name is not a household word, but it is unusually well-known around universities. Students often assume he must have been dead for many years, like the other great philosophers. A student told me that he and some Harvard friends once looked up the name in the phone book, and called to ask Mrs. Rawls about her great deceased (so they assumed) husband. Mard Rawls simply put John Rawls on the line. In truth, John Rawls died just a few months ago, November 24, 2002.

Rawls is being remembered as the greatest political philosopher of the twentieth century. This might be surprising if one thought only about the conventional politics that he defended. In his most famous book, *A Theory of Justice*, he attempted to find a widely acceptable moral basis for two broad kinds of social and political institutions. First, he argued for the non-negotiable importance of a familiar list of equal basic liberties. These include freedom of expression, religion, conscience, property, and political participation. In our political culture, this is a standard list of valuable liberties, even across party lines. Second, he argued that justice requires arranging society so that the poorest citizens will be kept as well-off as possible. This approach to justice is certainly controversial, but, apart from some innovative details in Rawls's version, it is not a new idea. It resembles the traditional views of many liberal Democrats.

So why did *A Theory of Justice* turn the world of moral and political philosophy on its ear? In one common explanation, the book appeared in 1971, when college life was feeling, well, academic—disconnected from urgent matters of gender, race, and war. Rawls's ap-

proach to political philosophy turned away from the academically fashionable view that philosophy was limited to logical and conceptual clarification. He confronted the great question of social justice head-on, striking a chord with activists who were fighting against the sterility of academe.

But there is a puzzle about this story, this emphasis on Rawls's direct engagement with moral issues. When the book came out students and faculty were clamoring for "relevance" in their studies. It is true that *A Theory of Justice* was less sterile than most philosophy (written in English) of the preceding decades. On the other hand, Rawls himself studiously avoided joining the controversies that rocked American society in the 1960s. His defense of civil disobedience and conscientious refusal to obey certain laws was an exception; even there, he never said how these principles applied to current events. The book (unlike the man, I'm told) said nothing directly about the current civil rights controversies, or about the Vietnam War (the book was mostly finished by the time Vietnam sent students into the streets), or about feminism. And yet intellectuals moved by those events were galvanized by the idea that questions of social justice might be situated in such a broad and deep philosophical account, supported by powerful arguments drawing on the whole Western philosophical tradition from Socrates through Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Mill. The puzzle is this: how did such an abstract and learned treatment of the idea of social justice meet the needs of that turbulent and impatient time? I think the answer takes us to the heart of Rawls's approach to philosophy, an approach that informs his work from beginning to end.

From his very earliest writing, Rawls wondered whether the contenders in certain reasonable but intractable controversies could be brought to see that they shared many impor-

tant assumptions. If they could, then they might pursue their differences more productively on that common basis. At the beginning, the controversies he tried to steer around were esoteric philosophical disputes about the nature and knowability of moral claims in general. (Are all moral claims merely subjective in some way? Is there a moral reality independent of our moral thoughts? Can moral claims be logically derived from non-moral ones?) In his later writing, the contentious disputes he sought to circumvent were those that arise when political actions are defended on the basis of sectarian religious principles, or other deep convictions about the meaning of life.

**I**N HIS OTHER major book, *Political Liberalism* (1993), Rawls came to speak of philosophy's potential for reconciliation, though this can easily be misunderstood. Reconciliation can be a tepid shameful stance when some of the contenders in the conflict are contemptible. Rawls loved the example of Lincoln's decision to go to war as the only way to prevent the spread of slavery and the splitting of the nation. But—and here is the familiar moral fact at the very center of Rawls's thought over the years—controversies arise even among reasonable, informed, morally decent people. In that case, Rawls thought, there are probably important things that all sides agree on, important commitments on which their shared decency and reasonableness depend. The identification of that common ground, if it is possible, would promote a kind of reconciliation. It is still not as if we could retreat to our shared assumptions and avoid the need to make the difficult decisions about which we initially disagreed. The goal is not to banish conflict. But, Rawls thought, if we can find and articulate our shared principles and convictions, adjusting them when necessary to accommodate more specific convictions, at least we might narrow the range of disagreement. Some of the original contending views might turn out to be indefensible; new views might emerge that make better sense of the basic principles. Disagreement might then be pursued more productively.

This kind of philosophical reconciliation is morally required, according to Rawls. Each rea-

sonable citizen deserves an acceptable justification of existing or proposed political arrangements, quite apart from the value this might have for social peace. Still, the value of peace and stability is one part of the account, so it needs to be seen in its proper place. Disagreement and conflict would not and should not disappear, but if the contending parties recognized the common ground they shared, perhaps society would be less likely to fly apart. Of course, some grossly unjust societies may need to fly apart if justice is ever to arise. In bad times and places, justifications that are acceptable to all reasonable people might still not be acceptable to many people. The tragic consequences of social collapse are, Rawls plausibly believed, worth avoiding, even in a moderately unjust society, if (this is a big and non-complacent "if") we can still steadily approach justice in other ways. This is when reconciliation has great value. But these conditions are not always met, and they are constantly challenged in modern societies. If reconciliation and pursuit of justice were hopeless, other values would have to be our guide. (Which values is an important question, but not Rawls's.) Whether the contending views in our own time and place are susceptible to Rawlsian reconciliation is, as Rawls himself says, far from obvious. He tries to demonstrate that reconciliation is possible in principle.

By some accounts, American society nearly flew apart in the late 1960s and early 1970s over controversies about social justice. Rawls's book, in 1971, did not give intellectual activists the direct practical relevance they asked for. But it did give them something they needed: an intellectually accomplished argument purporting to show that certain left-liberal claims were appropriate conclusions to draw from deep moral and political convictions that must be admitted by liberals and conservatives alike. Obviously, any such view is bound to remain controversial. But it may in fact have narrowed the range of controversy. For example, the idea that traditional liberal convictions lead inexorably to laissez-faire or libertarian approaches to property and markets—a view that was discrediting liberalism itself at the time—is less commonly held (except among libertarians). And the idea that liberal

constitutional democracy must, inadvertently, but as a matter of principle, protect racism and sexism is also less common than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Rawls's work has contributed to these changes.

I don't mean that the importance of Rawls's work is as a decisive intervention in the course of political events. It has played some role, but only the modest one that philosophy properly should play in the short run. Rawls wisely doubted that philosophy should pronounce on the complex choices faced by actual political actors in highly specific historical moments. Tactics, causal processes, relative weights of countless values both personal and political—the confluence of all these matters in a political choice—goes beyond what philosophy can claim to settle. I don't believe this means that political philosophy's proper role is exclusively abstract or detached, even to Rawls's moderate extent. Nor is political philosophy the only kind of politically important intellectual work. But philosophy, by its nature, tends to abstraction, and that can be one of its practical virtues, even in urgent political contexts.

The greatness of John Rawls's work depends on its relevance for its time, but (again) *A Theory of Justice* did not say anything—not a word—about Jim Crow, women's liberation, or

the Vietnam War. Paradoxically, its relevance has consisted partly in its drawing attention away from fights over specific practical political goals. By steering clear of many of the particular issues of the day in their temporary contexts (without in any way deriding them), Rawls leaves us a model of political philosophy that will retain its value over time. Social progress toward justice remains urgent, and it never happens without activism, conflict, and contextually specific arguments very different from Rawls's work. But we will pursue the goal of social justice more clearly and effectively if, as just one stratagem in the struggle, we reflect on deeper principles that we share. The point is not to avoid or deny the disagreements, but to shed light on them. Rawls's work was hardly nonpartisan. He pursued a deeply egalitarian liberal political agenda, but in that patient and indirect way.

This remote or reticent approach to political philosophy can easily look like a symptom of Rawls's legendary personal humility. At other times, in its hope of philosophy's making any difference at all, it looks positively audacious. ●

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## Letter to a Former Subscriber

**Joanne Barkan**

DEAR \_\_\_\_\_,  
I knew something had gone wrong by the time the *Dissent* public forum called "Patriotism in a Time of War" ended that evening last October in New York City. Some people in the audience (although by no means everyone) seemed to have concluded that the three speakers—all of us *Dissent* edi-

torial board members—were arguing that leftists in the United States should be patriotic right now and that patriotism requires supporting the Bush administration's policies, including a war against Iraq. Since I despise the Bush administration and wholeheartedly oppose its policies, including the war, this was a jolt. A few days later, I heard that you had attended the forum and then canceled your subscription.

A canceled subscription isn't necessarily a grave problem for *Dissent*. Obviously we want