Book Review

Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy (ed.), *A Companion to Rawls*, (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 587 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4443-3710-5 (cloth)

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There are several anthologies that have commonly been regarded as indispensable reference works for Rawls scholars. Samuel Freeman’s *Cambridge Companion to Rawls* is one of them, as is Normal Daniel’s *Reading Rawls*. I believe that, from now on, *A Companion to Rawls* should be included in this list. This volume brings together 31 essays that comprehensively discuss three major works by Rawls (*A Theory of Justice, Political Liberalism*,and *The Law of Peoples*) and various aspects of his theory, including his philosophical ambitions, his methodology, and his conversations with those holding other philosophical views. Compared with existing collections in Rawls scholarship, this book has two strengths. First, the collection contains many recent studies based on new materials about Rawls. Some essays include extensive discussions on Rawls’s posthumously published works, such as *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* and *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. One of them (David A. Reidy’s essay) even makes use of unpublished papers in the Rawls archive at Harvard library, which are valuable resources in understanding the early intellectual development of Rawls. This level of comprehensiveness cannot be found in previously published collections.

Second, although all of the essays are about Rawls, they take a variety of approaches. Some scrutinize the basic texts of Rawls without referring to any secondary literature (such as Colin Macleod’s essay on the applications of justice as fairness). Some take justice as fairness as an ongoing project, identify debates about Rawls’s ideas, and show the possible direction of revisions (such as Stuart White’s essay on democratic equality). Some discuss Rawls’s contribution to political philosophy and the interactions between Rawls and other contemporary philosophers (such as the essay by Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift on Rawls on ideal and non-ideal theory). Some challenge Rawls’s interpretation of key thinkers in the history of thought (such as Jonathan Riley’s critique of Rawls’s interpretation of Mill). Its great diversity makes this an intellectually stimulating and intriguing collection, and also indicates the massive potential for the development of Rawls scholarship.

It is impossible to discuss every essay in this short book review. Thus, I shall briefly examine two essays. The first is Paul Weithman’s “Does Justice as Fairness have a Religious Aspect?”. Weithman’s answer to this question is positive. He believes that this religious aspect has long been overlooked by many people. Weithman first states Rawls’s definition of religious aspect. “What gives a view a religious aspect, I think, is that it has a conception of the world as a whole that presents it as in certain respects holy, or else as worthy of devotion and reverence” (p. 32). Traditional monotheist religions, such as Christianity, hold a conception of the world from the standpoint of the divine, as something that is worthy of devotion and reverence. God wants the world to be run in an ideal and harmonious way, and the duty of believers is to realize this ideal in the real world. Although Rawls’s theory is non-theistic, this aspect can also be found in Rawls’s theory because it involves an all-embracing, harmonious, ordered conception of the world—the well-ordered society, a modern nation-state which has a basic structure publicly regulated by principles of justice. Similar to Kant, Rawls believed that this conception of an ideal world is “worthy of devotion and reverence to which pursuit of the everyday values of secular life should be subordinate” (p. 45). The priority of justice as fairness is thus explained by the worth of this conception of the world.

Weithman’s interpretation is insightful in showing that Rawls’s theory, despite its secular appearance, has a significant similarity to traditional religions. Although I agree with most of his interpretations, my suspicion is that the definition is too broad. If we accept Weithman’s definition, many moral and political theories can also be said to have a religious aspect. For example, utilitarians have a conception of an ideal world in which the aggregate utility is maximized. Some utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham, can be described as having a religious temperament in that they feel called upon to realize this ideal that is worthy of devotion. Indeed, most moral and political theories have a conception of an ideal world and evaluate the imperfect real world in light of this conception. Without this ideal, normative evaluation would become difficult, if not impossible. Yet describing all of these moral and political theories as having a religious aspect would risk of cheapening the word “religious.” Hence, more passages from Rawls are needed to illustrate how his theory differs from other moral and political theories by having a distinctive religious aspect.

The second essay I shall discuss is Steven Wall’s “Perfectionist Justice and Rawlsian Legitimacy.” Wall argues that Rawls unnecessarily rejected perfectionist policies and attempted to reconstruct justice as fairness as a perfectionist theory. His essay consists of two theses: a negative thesis that attempts to show that there is no compelling ground in Rawls’s theory to reject perfectionist policies, and a constructive thesis that there are theoretical resources within justice as fairness for vindicating state perfectionism. Due to space limitations, I will focus only on the negative thesis. Rawls’s theory assumes a liberal principle of legitimacy, namely, that political power should be exercised in a way that may reasonably be expected to be endorsed by free and equal citizens. Suppose that there is a sound perfectionist conception of justice, though some reasonable citizens would still plainly reject it. Wall then presents a dilemma. If the liberal principle of legitimacy is understood as a necessary condition for the permissible exercise of political power, it would conflict with the perfectionist conception of justice. At that time, why must people choose legitimacy over justice? “Liberal legitimacy may be important, but so is justice; and sometimes the latter ought to win out over the former” (p. 418). If the liberal principle of legitimacy is not a necessary condition, but rather expressing a valuable ideal of antisubjugation, perfectionists could doubt the weight assigned to this ideal. They could argue that although there is a cost to subjugation when the perfectionist conception of justice is imposed, this cost should be balanced against the demands of the perfectionist conception. They could then appeal to a more comprehensive account of political morality to defend the perfectionist conception, which is a strategy that Rawls, who had to keep his theory “political,” could not use.

Wall’s dilemma is a critical challenge to Rawls’s rejection of the perfectionist conceptions of justice. I think that Wall is correct in arguing that an ideal of antisubjugation is implicit in the liberal principle of legitimacy, although the content of this ideal is unclear in his essay. I understand this ideal as Rawls’s conceptions of society as a fair system of social cooperation and persons as free and equal citizens. According to these conceptions, political power is a coercive power owned by free and equal citizens as a collective body. Thus, it should be exercised in a way that all citizens could reasonably accept. Wall’s dilemma assumes a scenario of reasonable citizens choosing among a number of ideals, and envisions that Rawls’s conceptions of society and persons, which form a certain contractualist ideal, might eventually be compromised by other ideals. Yet this picture overlooks a primary assumption in Rawls’s methodology. To Rawls, these conceptions are the fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture of a well-ordered society and constitute the political identity of reasonable citizens. Rawls begins with these conceptions and constructs his theory of justice as fairness. These conceptions should not be compromised by other ideals, for these conceptions are the *sole* starting points of political deliberation. As Burton Dreben argues, “[Rawls is] not arguing *for* [a constitutional liberal democracy]…. He lives in [America], which has many defects, but which has a certain ideal. We start with this ideal” (Samuel Freeman, *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 328). Rawls takes these conceptions for granted, and then discusses what principles would be appropriate to a society inhabited by citizens who conceive of themselves and others in this way. The perfectionist conception of justice would be rejected in a well-ordered society, not because it is less preferable, but rather because the conceptions of persons and society that are assumed in the perfectionist conception are not fundamental ideas in the public political culture of a well-ordered society. This does not mean that the value of Rawls’s conceptions is incontestable, but that defending them is beyond the central concern of Rawls.

Nevertheless, I find Wall’s attempt to “perfectionize” justice as fairness thought-provoking. As Wall describes, Rawls is famous for his antiperfectionist image, yet justice as fairness in fact leaves a great deal of space for perfectionist policies (pp. 426-427). Rawls merely insisted that an appeal to perfectionist values should not be made to settle constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. In matters of ordinary legislation, perfectionist values can be legitimately legislated in a democratic process. “Fundamental justice must be achieved first. After that a democratic electorate may devote large resources to grand projects in art and science if it so chooses” (John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2001), p. 152). Moreover, even in constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, perfectionist policies can be legitimate, provided that they can be publicly justified by reference to political values. Wall’s reconstruction discovers the “perfectionist” face of Rawls and shows the distance between Rawls and perfectionists is not as wide as many people think.

In conclusion, if you are a student who has studied Rawls’s theory but knows little about recent developments in Rawls scholarship, this volume is an excellent, indeed critical, introduction. If you are a scholar already well acquainted with Rawls’s work, this volume is still an indispensable handbook—well worth the hefty price. Given the growing body of literature, it seems impossible for most scholars to be well versed in every topic of Rawls scholarship. This handbook offers an effective way of understanding those topics and the recent discussions about them.

My only suggestion is that the scope of the collection could be extended to include a wider range of voices. This volume currently concentrates on discussions and debates about Rawls within the tradition of Anglo-American analytical philosophy. It contains an essay about Rawls and Habermas, but how about other thinkers in the tradition of continental philosophy, such as Arendt and Foucault? Furthermore, it makes no mention of non-Western theories of justice, such as those from the Confucian and Islamist traditions. It would have been interesting to include more cross-cultural comparisons and to place Rawls, arguably the greatest Anglo-American political philosopher, in fruitful conversations with great thinkers from other cultures. Through these dialogues, unrecognized areas of agreement between different traditions might be discovered. Given the limited ambition of justice as fairness, it would no doubt be difficult to demonstrate such conversations, yet they would be enormously helpful in illuminating the inspiration of justice as fairness to non-Western societies.

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