

Politics, Anyone?

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Good liberals take politics seriously. That's why good liberals are not Rawlsian liberals.

Imagine someone told you that politics is a “great game,” that when citizens respect just principles, they do so “in much the same way that players have the shared end to execute a good and fair play of the game.” You would probably wonder if they meant it, if they really believed that civic duties resemble those acquired when “we join a game, namely, the obligations to play by the rules and to be a good sport.” Since for most people, politics is a serious business.

No doubt, this is because the stakes are so high: political decisions can affect how millions live or die. That is also why we take war so seriously. Today, it seems incredible that nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz felt it necessary to insist, in his canonical work *On War* (1832), that “war is no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts. It is a serious means to a serious end.” Especially since the devastations of the twentieth century, we have had no need of such an admonition.

But then why has there been virtually no objection to John Rawls' statements above? Rawls (1921–2002) was the most important political philosopher of the previous century, and perhaps even of this one. Yet he was also someone for whom the good of justice was “no more mysterious than that members of an orchestra, or players on a team, or even both teams in a game, should take pleasure and a certain (proper) pride in a good performance, or in a good play of the game, one that they will want to remember.” How can this be?

Rawls believed that we ought to respect citizens' basic liberties, ensure equal opportunity among them, and accept inequality in the distribution of wealth only when it benefits the least fortunate. These are the principles advanced in his 1971 classic, *A Theory of Justice*. In a subsequent book, *Political Liberalism* (1993), he identified as “political liberals” all those who would endorse at least the first principle, respect for basic liberties, and do so in a way independent of any nonpolitical beliefs they may have. To be sure, these works and the discussions based on

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them have given rise to some very interesting ideas. Yet they have also often amounted to little more than tinkering with the rules of a game that nobody – one hopes – will ever play.

“Who can be gotten to play unfair games?” Rawls once asked, expressing a concern reflected in his vision of just politics as fair politics. The question, however, neglects the fact that, to put it bluntly, politics is no game. Yes, it has seen many “players.” To pick just one example, critics often (rightly) compare the previous US president to a professional wrestler. Rawls’ followers would doubtless think it self-evident that we need fewer politicians like Donald Trump. Yet certain forms of liberal politics make way for exactly such individuals. Ironically, it took an admirer of authoritarianism, indeed a Nazi jurist, to make this connection clear. Carl Schmitt criticized a conception of liberalism akin to Rawls’ for supporting the kind of constitution that “may dissipate into mere rules of the game and its ethics into a mere ethic of fair play.” And as political philosopher and classicist Leo Strauss aptly described Schmitt’s critique, this kind of liberalism leads to “the establishment of a world of entertainment, a world of amusement, a world without seriousness.” Ultimately, that can become very serious indeed.

The fact that Strauss was a Platonist adds even further irony, since Plato is the thinker most responsible for the idea that, if not politics, then political philosophy is a kind of game. That’s why he has Socrates apologize in *The Republic* for having “forgot that we were playing,” and so having taken the project of constructing an ideal “city in speech” too seriously. Of course, Rawls proposed his own famous thought experiment: taking a step behind a “veil of ignorance” in order to reason from the perspective of “the original position” and thereby arrive at the principles of justice. It’s worth noting that he once called this “the reasoning game.”

By all accounts, however, Rawls took political philosophy seriously. But when communitarians such as Michael Sandel complained that his approach implied a particular conception of the self, Rawls demurred: “When... we simulate being in this [original] position, our reasoning no more commits us to a metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self than our playing a game like Monopoly commits us to thinking that we are landlords engaged in a desperate rivalry, winner take all.”

Rawls tried to avoid metaphysics because he felt it interfered with his great game. People will probably always disagree fundamentally about religion, philosophy, and morals, and it is no coincidence that these topics are also bound up with metaphysics in various ways. Rawls nevertheless thought that, despite holding very different fundamental beliefs, people can still come

together by adopting systematically unified rules for politics. After all, don't such rules already regulate other shared activities, not least that of playing games?

It takes more than a set of systematically unified rules to constitute a game, however. To qualify as such, the rules must be adopted, first and foremost, for their own sake. It is for this reason that the answer to any question about *why* people should respect them – no touching the ball with your hand, say, or kicking the puck into the net with your skate – is ultimately always “just because.” That's how the game is played, nothing more. It must be so, since it is only when we accept the rules as ends in themselves that we can treat them in a disinterested, playful way. True, people sometimes also attach serious, external goods to games: professional athletes, for instance, earn a living from them, just as fans sometimes take great pride in those athletes' exploits. Still, we know these goods are situated outside the game because one can always play for free or without spectators.

So we can understand why Rawls himself tells us – repeatedly – that we should adopt his theory of justice “for its own sake.” Because justice, he believes, cannot come from following some self-interested *modus vivendi*. If anything, he sees it as based on a form of love. Which form? I can't help but think that he wants us to love justice just as the amateur (a term derived from the Latin *amare*, “to love”) differs from the professional in playing mainly for the love of the game. In fact, Rawls once even claimed that the hazards arising from “our sentiment of justice” are “on a par with the hazards of love.”

But so what? Rawls may have been overly fond of an inappropriate metaphor. What harm is there in that? My answer is that the more people adopt a vision of politics like his, the more damage it will do.

Consider elected officials, or anyone else participating directly. It seems obvious that likening politics to a game will encourage them to behave adversarially, just like competitive players. Yet this rules out forms of conflict resolution aimed at serving the citizenry's common good. Conversation must clearly be set aside, since conversation requires earnest interlocutors, the kind who take their exchanges seriously. Moreover, who can listen with an open mind to someone seen as not merely an opponent but an adversary – that is, a person who gains only if, and to the degree that, one loses?

An even deeper challenge arises when we are faced with conflicts over what Rawls refers to as “the basic structure of society.” On such occasions, he would have citizens engage in what he

calls “public reason,” which effectively means that they should stop competing and become their own referees. We rarely expect competitors in a game to be capable of such neutrality, however. That’s why I think the legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin had a slightly more realistic sense of what can and should take place. Dworkin was in his own way enamoured of the idea of politics as a game or sport, but he thought that Supreme Court justices should settle societal disagreements over the application of basic rules, assessing arguments advanced by lawyers much as referees hear pleas from rival team captains.

Rawls’ vision of justice as fairness also affects those who do no more than follow politics. Echoing Strauss now, I’m led to ask: If citizens conceive of politics as a game, why should we expect them to approach it as anything other than entertainment? Political journalism that emphasizes scandal, infotainment, and a horse-race approach to elections already encourages this tendency far too much. Surely, given today’s looming threats to liberal democratic values, we need less rather than more of it.

Finally, making politics into a kind of game undermines what Rawls himself called the strength of the citizenry’s sense of justice. While it’s true that games can elicit passion, normally this is only of a rather superficial sort, and so not the kind that can support real-world commitments. Yet those are precisely what we need to make towards the things we care about – not for their own sake, but for our own. Surely justice is one of those things.