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Weithman, WHY POLITICAL LIBERALISM? ON JOHN RAWL'S POLITICAL TURN

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In order for us to believe these doctrines, however, it is not sufficient (though it is necessary) to refute the charge that they are contradictory. We must also have a grasp of the meaning of the formulas we endorse—but how is this possible, given that the mysteries exceed the power of human reason to comprehend? Leibniz's answer is that "although one cannot arrive at an adequate comprehension of the mysteries, in order for these to be justifiably placed in the cognitive sphere it is sufficient to have a confused knowledge of their meaning. . . . Leibniz readily acknowledges that we do not have a clear and distinct knowledge of the concepts of 'nature,' 'substance,' and 'person' when they are used with reference to the divine sphere. Yet our use of them, even when it is extended to the explanation of the mystery of the Trinity, is nevertheless justified precisely because knowledge is not limited to what is clear and distinct. However imperfect and inadequate the resulting explanations may be, one should not forgo them" (xix).

We are all indebted to Professor Antognazza for her lovingly crafted monograph. It should prove to be indispensable for students of Leibniz, and a valuable resource for all those who consider the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation as well as the relationship between faith and reason.

Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn, by Paul Weithman. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 379pp. \$65.00 cloth.

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John Rawls is famous for having formulated the most influential account of justice in contemporary philosophy and then, shortly thereafter, having backed away from it. Why did Rawls change his mind about justice? In the Introduction to *Political Liberalism* (*PL*), Rawls offers an explanation. Rawls writes that we must see the changes he made to the position defended in *A Theory of Justice* "as arising from trying to resolve a serious problem internal to justice as fairness, namely from the fact that the account of stability in part III of *Theory* is not consistent with the view as a whole. I believe all the differences are consequences of removing that inconsistency" (*PL*, xv–xvi).

According to the dominant reading of Rawls, the "inconsistency" to which Rawls refers is this. An overarching aim in *Theory* is to present an account of justice that could form the basis for a stable liberal democracy. However, the account he offers—justice as fairness—is broadly Kantian. But in a well-ordered liberal democracy, there is reasonable pluralism regarding comprehensive perspectives. Because of this pluralism, justice as fairness is much too controversial to serve as the shared basis of the principles of justice in a liberal democracy; it is, after all, the expression of yet another comprehensive perspective. Rawls's solution to this

“inconsistency” is to re-present justice as fairness as a “political” conception of justice, one that could be endorsed by an overlapping consensus of different, incompatible comprehensive perspectives. In doing so, Rawls says that he wishes to do for justice what Kant thought he could do for religion, namely, show that we can have reasonable faith in it (*PL*, 172).

The project of Paul Weithman’s *Why Political Liberalism?* is to contest this reading of Rawls, offering an alternative interpretation according to which Rawls is primarily concerned to establish that, in a well-ordered society, the principles of justice are congruent with an agent’s good (as in *Theory*) or comprehensive perspective (as in *Political Liberalism*). Because of its narrow focus, Weithman’s book has limited ambitions. It is intended to be not a general introduction to Rawls’s thought, but an exploration of a single line of argument that Rawls advances. Still, if Weithman is right, focusing on why Rawls changed his mind about justice has a significant payoff: it takes us straight to the heart of what animates both *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*.

Weithman’s discussion falls into three unequal parts. In the first, Weithman articulates what he believes is mistaken about the dominant reading of Rawls. The basic problem is twofold. First, it fails to take Rawls at his word, since it does not take into account part III of *A Theory of Justice*, which concerns itself with how to achieve stability for the right reasons in a well-ordered society. Second, the dominant reading fails to appreciate that the “fact of pluralism” is, for Rawls, not simply a sociological datum. Rather, it is something to be explained by certain features of liberal democracy itself.

But what exactly does Rawls have in mind when he speaks of a well-ordered society being stable for the right reasons? And how does Rawls think it can be achieved? The second and most substantial part of Weithman’s book addresses these questions. On Weithman’s reading, stability requires avoiding a generalized prisoner’s dilemma in which citizens defect from justice as fairness for broadly self-interested reasons. In *Theory*, achieving stability for the right reasons, requires that, in a well-ordered society, each agent’s commitment to justice and to his own good be congruent. Rawls, according to Weithman, offers an elaborate and ingenious argument for congruence between the right and the good. Still, Rawls eventually concluded that his argument failed. The account of stability offered in *Theory*, says Rawls, is “unrealistic” (*PL*, xviii). The fundamental problem is that the institutions of a well-ordered society would be at cross-purposes. On the one hand, these institutions would encourage both a sense of and commitment to justice by shaping their character traits. On the other hand, these institutions would encourage reasonable pluralism in which different agents commit themselves to incompatible comprehensive perspectives. Under conditions of pluralism, however, citizens in a well-ordered democracy would be unlikely to converge on how to achieve goods such as personal autonomy and unity, the pursuit of which is constitutive of a commitment to justice as fairness. For example, traditional theists might

hold that the best way to regulate their lives is by committing themselves to not justice as fairness but divine commands, where the content of these demands deviates from justice as fairness. This, says Weithman, is the “inconsistency” that caused Rawls to change his mind about justice.

Rawls’s solution to this problem was to revise his understanding of what is required for a well-ordered society to be stable for the right reasons. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls contends that the sort of congruence that is required is not (as *Theory* supposed) between a person’s *good* and the *principles of justice as fairness*. Rather, it is between a citizen’s own *comprehensive perspective* and a family of views that approximate justice as fairness. Were such a congruence to obtain, then “each person would develop and maintain a desire to treat the principles and values of justice as fairness as regulative of political life” (281). Achieving congruence of this sort via an overlapping consensus, says Rawls, is not unrealistic. We could reasonably expect that, in a well-ordered society, each “reasonable” citizen would endorse the principles of justice (or something close thereto) for reasons intrinsic to her own comprehensive perspective. Interestingly, under Weithman’s reading, Rawls insists that citizens be prepared to appeal to public reason when publically debating matters of basic justice and constitutional essentials not because appeal to reasons constitutive of one or another comprehensive perspective is inherently destabilizing. Rather, it is because Rawls thinks that stability requires that citizens be mutually assured of each other’s commitment to the principles of justice. And the best way to achieve that is for every citizen (under certain conditions) to be prepared to appeal to public reason.

In the third and shortest section of his book, Weithman offers a brief defense of Rawls’s political turn. In Weithman’s estimation, Rawls made exactly the sort of move he should have. Moreover, if Rawls’s political turn is feasible in a well-ordered society—and Weithman indicates that he believes it is—he will have established what the “dark minds of Western thought” such as Augustine, Dostoevsky, and Hobbes thought impossible: that there could be a political arrangement that is both pluralistic and stable for the right reasons.

This summary of Weithman’s book fails to do justice to its virtues. *Why Political Liberalism?* offers an extraordinarily close and perceptive reading of Rawls, one strikingly different from those currently on offer. It is, for this last reason, likely to be controversial. Some will suspect that Weithman’s focus on generalized prisoner dilemmas makes too much of a remark or two in *Theory*. Others will worry that there is more going for the dominant reading of Rawls than Weithman claims. It must also be said that Weithman’s book is not for the philosophically faint of heart. It is a very demanding read. Even those with an appetite for all things Rawlsian should prepare themselves for a meticulously presented three hundred and seventy page reconstruction of Rawls’s argument for why he took his political turn. Having noted both the virtues and the difficulty of Weithman’s book, let me close by voicing a reservation about it.

Rawls's project, under Weithman's reading, is to articulate an account of liberal democracy that can be stable for the right reasons (342). However, Rawls does not articulate the conditions under which liberal democracy can be stable for the right reasons in the world as we know it. Rather, he articulates the conditions under which liberal democracy can be stable for the right reasons under highly idealized conditions. These conditions are ones in which agents are members of a well-ordered society. A well-ordered society is such that it contains no egoists (65), everyone complies with the principles of justice (162), everyone wants to participate in forms of social life that call forth their own and others' natural talents (162), treachery and betrayal are absent (169), and its members want to cooperate with others on terms that are mutually justifiable and affirm only reasonable comprehensive doctrines (310). In short, a well-ordered society is nothing like the actual world. It is something approximating Utopia.

Suppose, for argument's sake, that Rawls has succeeded in establishing that, in a well-ordered society, liberal democracy can be stable for the right reasons. Why would that matter, given the vast differences between actual societies and a well-ordered society? What bearing would Rawls's success have on the project of identifying just arrangements for societies in the world as we know it? The answer, Weithman suggests, is that Rawls will have shown not only "how a just society is possible" (368) but also that "political relations need not be 'governed by power and coercion alone,' nor stabilized in the ways that Augustine, Hobbes, and Dostoevsky thought they must be" (365).

I find this answer on Rawls's behalf puzzling. We want to know whether liberal democracy could be stable for the right reasons given the conditions that hold in the actual world—conditions in which egoists abound and people do not all embrace "reasonable comprehensive doctrines." Granted, establishing that liberal democracy can be stable for the right reasons in idealized conditions might show that we ought not to give up on the project of implementing such a political arrangement because its implementation is, strictly speaking, impossible. But, as best I can tell, it establishes little more than this.

Establishing that such an arrangement can be stable for the right reasons in idealized conditions does not, for example, imply that such an arrangement can be stable for the right reasons in the circumstances in which we actually find ourselves. And, so, it does not imply that liberal democracy is a minimally satisfactory political arrangement in a world such as ours, which deserves our trust and allegiance. Nor, for that matter, does establishing that such an arrangement can be stable for the right reasons in idealized conditions imply that such an arrangement should function as a regulatory ideal in our political thinking. Not all ideals, after all, are worth pursuing. It might be, for example, that pursuing the Rawlsian ideal would make it impossible for us to implement other more feasible liberal democratic arrangements that would be sufficiently stable for the right reasons. (Rawls, I should note, addresses the charge that his view

is utopian in Lecture IV, section 6 of *Political Liberalism*. But, if I understand him correctly, his concern is different from the one I raise. Rawls is worried that even in a partly well-ordered society, we could not achieve stability for the right reasons.) If this is right, then Rawls's project has very modest implications, delivering much less than nearly all of us have supposed. It appears to leave the questions that political philosophers care about unanswered.¹

Creation and the Sovereignty of God, by Hugh J. McCann. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012. 280pp. \$39.95.

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Rarely do we find a work in philosophical theology that is novel yet firmly entrenched within the theistic tradition. Hugh McCann's majestic treatment of God's absolute sovereignty as creator is such a work. God is a perfect, simple, timelessly eternal being who, by virtue of his creative activity, is solely responsible for the world and its entire history. McCann conceives of his project as "a study of God as creator and of problems that attend that concept" (1). And problems lurk around every corner, problems McCann adroitly solves as he defends his favored conception of God.

In chapter 1, McCann presents an inductive version of the cosmological argument to show that the existence of the everyday world is best explained by the activity of a creator. The most important property the creator must have, says McCann, is aseity: "if the creator is to ground the existence of contingent beings, he himself must exist of his own nature; there can be no distinction in him between essence and existence" (12). But here, McCann moves too fast. All aseity asserts is that there is no external explanation for a thing's existence. It is a further *substantial* metaphysical claim to say that aseity entails that essence and existence are indistinguishable. Many will balk at such a claim, for it seems obvious that the two concepts *are* distinguishable, even for a being that exists *a se*.

If the creative activity of God is alone responsible for the existence of the world and its entire history, then God is the ultimate micromanager. No detail is too small that it is left to chance or delegated to any subordinate agency or intervening mechanism. Questions quickly arise. What space is there for the operation of secondary causes? Is God blameworthy for sin and suffering? Call the problem raised by these questions (and more like them) the Problem of the Divine Micromanager.

¹I thank Chris Eberle, Arthur Kuflik, and Nick Wolterstorff for a lively correspondence about Rawls's own views.