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Reinterpreting Reasonable Pluralism: How Can Rawlsian Political Liberalism Overcome the Dilemma of Cultural Inclusion?

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Abstract: Liberalism is an ideal model of cultural inclusion. For all its attractiveness, attention remains drawn to social injustice, especially in the so-called private sphere. John Rawls's theory of political liberalism has been a central target of feminist criticism over the past several decades, the most prominent critic being Susan Mollar Okin. Rawls's “political turn” and explicit ambition to include non-liberal cultures in his vision apparently exacerbate such implicit problems of liberalism. Rawls does not necessarily provide enough material to defend himself against these criticisms. This said, I argue that Rawlsian political liberalism can be made more viable by reinterpreting his important concept of reasonable pluralism. We should situate ourselves firmly in its scheme of individual agency so as to act on our social environment, supported by our political ties with others as citizens. If we give individuals a more central role, to create and sustain reasonable pluralism, it can become a valuable tool with which to overcome the dilemma of liberal inclusion.

Keywords: Rawls’s political liberalism, public-private distinction, Okin

1. The Dilemma of Liberal Inclusion

While the liberal ideal of living with diverse others is attractive in many ways, if we take this ideal further, it comes to a point where we face a dilemma. Those of us who have formed some attachment to liberal society want to enlarge the social space of freedom as much as possible, where each of us is allowed to pursue his or her life plan, either as an individual or with others. This cannot be an “anything goes” situation, since in these diverse ways of life, there may be some features that we do not wish to accommodate as liberal citizens. Certainly gender inequality in family practices, for example, has been an object of social concern.

Concerns for social injustice have led many theorists to argue that it is necessary for a society to limit the social space of freedom with law and other state devices. The problem is that the scope of such state control can so easily be expanded far beyond its original intention, betraying our profound commitment to a free society. We have to be cautious, as well-meaning liberal arguments concerning social injustice may end up recommending liberal policing of

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some sort, gravely contradicting the liberal premise. Even seemingly unobtrusive measures, such as liberal education, may unwittingly diminish the social space where diverse ways of life can flourish, by encouraging people who cherish traditional or religious values, for example, to interpret their social environment through a liberal lens.

We need to find a way to address social injustice effectively, while being true to our commitment to the freedom to live with others in diverse ways. How is it possible to conceive a society that provides ample social space so that people can freely pursue their own ends and life projects with others while properly identifying and addressing unjust inequality or practices? This paper aimed to show that John Rawls’s concept of “reasonable pluralism” offers insights for answering this question. It is not utterly utopian, according to Rawls, to envision the liberal society we truly want to be, in which diverse ways of life can flourish, without truly unjust social and structural features passing unquestioned as mere cultural differences or matters of faith.

Rawls is usually regarded as a moral or political philosopher, not a sociologist, and his theory is considered a theory of the principles of justice, rather than a theory of society. But his theory of liberalism is notably sociological in its aspirations and scheme, since his ultimate concern has always been with the quality of our mutual ties. He attempts to demonstrate this by presenting us with a realistic vision of liberal society in which, despite being profoundly divided in terms of the more comprehensive ways of life, everyone forms and enjoys “ties of friendship” with others as liberal citizens. He hopes his vision will motivate us to be willing members of a collective enterprise and to move our society forward in realizing it. Rawls believes that the construction of the social world hinges on our imagination of what it is possible for us to achieve at our best and that, if a theory cannot tap into the values essential in such normative self-understanding, it will never be able to help realize our potential as social beings (Konno 2016). Rawls’s theory is a normative theory not only of society but also in society. In this sense, he is of interest and importance for sociological theorizing.

Rawls stresses the importance of distinguishing “the political (public)” from “the non-political (non-public)” and argues that by observing this distinction carefully, we are able to envision a society where people enjoy social unity while pursuing diverse life plans according to their conscience. To some liberals, a good society will be realized only when everyone adopts some kind of liberal outlook and lives according to liberal values; indoctrination with, and discipline by, these values are precursors of any good liberal society. However, Rawls considers this approach problematic, mainly because it contradicts the profound diversity in our worldviews about what our world is and should be. Not everyone agrees, for instance, that liberal individualism is the right way to comprehend our relationship with others.

Indeed, to the eyes of some, this seems to make matters worse. Liberalism has been criticized for its classical public-private distinction and for its inability to handle social injustices in so-called private spheres. Feminists have been especially adamant critics, as they have typically identified and pointed to gender injustice in the family in this regard. It may be considered
that political liberalism only exacerbates the problem, as it claims, even more clearly than conventional liberalism, that liberalism is only for the political-public domain. I will argue that this is not the case, although Rawls himself comes short of defending his theory. To see that the concept of reasonable pluralism, a central concept of Rawlsian political liberalism, points us in a promising direction, we need to clarify how Rawls himself construes the distinction between the public and non-public. This leads to a re-interpretation of the concept of reasonable pluralism as more dynamic and individual-centered than previously regarded. Only then will we be able to understand the truly transformative potential of Rawls's social vision.

2. Okin's Critique of Rawlsian Political Liberalism

2.1 Justice in the Family

Societies aiming to be truly liberal may unwittingly accommodate what we do not want to accommodate, under the name of diversity. For example, in heralding liberal inclusion, liberal society may harbor sexist ways of life, in which women are unjustly relegated to a secondary status, or their social role is limited, compared to men. The ideal of liberal inclusion may also deprive us of means to criticize ways of life, especially in the so-called private sphere, since the ideal can easily be tied to cultural or value pluralism, which regards diversity itself as good, or understands culture as something that is immune to outside criticisms.

The section titled “On the Family as Part of the Basic Structure” in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” (Rawls 1999) exhibits Rawls’s most mature view of political liberalism, and we can identify Rawls’s sincere response to feminist criticism against the “liberal public-private distinction”. His response, with his characteristic modesty, however, was something of a disappointment for feminists such as Susan Mollar Okin, who had been one of the most potent defenders of his theory’s potential as elaborated in Rawls’s “A Theory of Justice.”

After the publication of Political Liberalism, Okin immediately voiced strong concerns about it. In her view, it continues to “give us mixed signals about Rawls’s views on the application of his principles of justice to issues of gender” (Okin 1994: 24). She is particularly troubled by Rawls’s treatment of the family. In Political Liberalism, he states clearly that the political is distinct from the personal and the familial, as the personal and the familial are “affectional” in ways different from the political (Rawls 1993: 137). Yet Okin sees a grave inconsistency here because Rawls claims, as the section title makes clear, that the family is part of the basic structure of society, which is supposed to be governed by political principles of justice. Okin (1994: 26) asks, “How can families be both part of the basic structure and not political?”

Okin repeatedly claims that just political principles should be applied to the family, and this is even more needed within the framework of political liberalism because political liberalism is built on the core assumption of reasonable pluralism. Reasonably plural society is a highly inclusive ideal, where a wide variety of comprehensive worldviews (“comprehensive doctrines” in
Rawls’s terminology), including traditional or conservative ones that heavily restrict women’s place within society, for example, can be included as reasonable, on the condition that they are somehow able to support a liberal political conception of justice. Okin is concerned that the comprehensive life of a woman who follows such doctrine may severely interfere with her ability to think and act as a free and equal member of liberal political society, even when it is expected of her to do so. If the family is one of the spheres where these doctrines may be lived out more fully, we would like to be assured that our political society has the means to prevent her familial relationship from negatively affecting her. Okin argues that the political principles of justice should be directly applied to the family.

Okin was "gratified" that Rawls finally responded to feminist criticisms of his political liberalism, the most prominent of which were hers, by including the section specifically on the family in his important paper. She praised him for stating, even more clearly than before, that the family is part of the basic structure because “one of [the family’s] main roles is to be the basis of the orderly production and reproduction of society and its culture from one generation to the next” (Rawls 1999: 157). He thus acknowledged that reproductive labor is indispensable for political society.

For Okin, however, Rawls’s response was far from satisfactory. Rawls asserts that it is a “misconception” to think “that the principles of justice do not apply to the family and hence those principles do not secure equal justice for women and their children” (Rawls 1999: 158). But he states on the next page,

> Political principles do not apply directly to [the family’s] internal life, but they do impose essential constraints on the family as an institution and so guarantee the basic rights and liberties, and the freedom and opportunities, of all its members... The family as part of the basic structure cannot violate these freedoms. Since wives are equally citizens with their husbands, they have all the same basic rights, liberties, and opportunities as their husbands; and this, together with the correct application of the other principles of justice, suffices to secure their equality and independence. (1999: 159)

Okin finds this "more than a little puzzling" (Okin 2004: 1563). To be sure, she acknowledges (correctly) that Rawls understands the basic rights and liberties of citizens not merely in formal terms, but in a more substantial sense as well, citing Rawls’s proposal for alleviating or compensating for the negative consequences of divorce for the women who have practiced a traditional division of family roles. Still, she was not convinced.

2.2 Concerns for Liberal Inclusion

A simple response to Okin would be that she fails to understand that Rawls distinguishes the “internal life” of the family from “the family as an institution” here. As an institution composing part of the basic structure of society, the institutional shape of the family must subject to public reason, which is the reason sharable by free and equal liberal citizens, so that it constitutes an accurate expression of our political self-understanding as such. Rawls makes
this clear when he says, “Clearly the prohibition of abuse and neglect of children, and much else, will, as constraints, be a vital part of family law” (Rawls 1999: 160). Similarly, domestic violence against adult women (and men), for example, would also have to be constrained.

This response, however, is not enough, as Okin’s concern is deeper. It largely arises from the fact that Rawls gives central importance in his theory to the concept of reasonable pluralism. Reasonable pluralism is an ideal form of social unity in conditioned diversity, whereby society contains a plurality of comprehensive doctrines that support a family of political conceptions of justice from their own (comprehensive) point of view. In the society Rawls envisions, the plurality of comprehensive worldviews is understood by people as both an empirical given, resulting from the limitation in our judgmental capacity as human beings, and a desideratum, to encourage individuals to freely pursue their “chosen” life plans. Even a traditional comprehensive doctrine, in which women and men are situated differently, can be reasonable in the sense that they, for political purposes, are willing to uphold a liberal political conception of justice for their own reasons. With regard to public reason, an essential element of a political conception of justice, he says,

Central to the idea of public reason is that it neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity. (Rawls 1999: 132)

Yet these doctrines may, nonetheless, negatively affect women in that those whose lives are guided by these doctrines can experience difficulties when it comes to regarding themselves as citizens, i.e., as free and equal members of the social cooperative enterprise. This is problematic because regarding oneself as a free and equal citizen in one’s political life, while living the other aspects of one’s life from a certain comprehensive viewpoint, is one of the most important sources of viability for Rawlsian politically-liberal society.

Rawls’s apparent insistence that families are voluntary associations exacerbates the problem. A political conception of justice, Rawls argues, cannot and should not internally govern a social sphere lived from within a certain comprehensive worldview because we need to carefully observe the distinction “between the point of view of people as citizens and their point of view as members of families and of other associations” (Rawls 1999: 159). If we consider families as “voluntary” associations, this voluntary nature, in itself, would make it more difficult to apply a political conception of justice to the internal life of the family.

3. Re-examining Rawls

3.1 Citizen First?

Those who try to defend Rawls from Okin’s critique seem to be able to rely on the following Rawls text.
The adult members of families and other associations are equal citizens first; that is their basic position. No institution or association in which they are involved can violate their rights as citizens. (Rawls 1999: 160-1)

This is, indeed, a cogent statement. What should be noted, however, is that here he speaks from a political citizen’s perspective. In other words, this is a description of how the social world is seen by someone assuming a citizen’s point of view, although Rawls himself does not make it very clear.

At the same time, Rawlsian political liberalism is willing to welcome those comprehensive doctrines that do not regard citizen status very highly (Rawls 1999: 173). This is precisely what Okin is so concerned about it. If these doctrines contain the elements of women’s subordination, she argues, we have reasons to worry that women’s very constrained day-to-day lives affect their thoughts and actions in a way that interferes with their self-understanding as free and equal liberal citizens from the political point of view and, hence, their ability to take part in the activities of public reason.

We have to note that Okin’s concern taps into the very characteristic that makes Rawls’s theory unique in the liberal tradition, in that mainstream liberalism has often argued that all must regard the political as the most important. Those who follow the doctrines that reluctantly support a political conception of justice most likely do not view themselves as “citizens first”. They may think that political matters are rather marginal, or that being a citizen is just an appendage to their more comprehensive existence. Rawls even depicted the two viewpoints, the liberal citizen’s and the comprehensive person’s viewpoint, as being opposed to each other, each trying to limit invasion from the other, although both viewpoints are held by the same individuals. As he puts it,

As Citizens we have reasons to impose the constraints specified by the political conception of justice on associations; while as members of associations we have reasons for limiting those constraints so that they leave room for a free and flourishing internal life appropriate to the association in question. (Rawls 1999: 159)

It may not be very reassuring, then, when Rawls says that, “at some point society has to rely on the natural affection and goodwill of the mature family members” (1999: 160). This exemplifies, to Okin, Rawls’s indifference toward women and family justice.

3.2 No Exemption?

Another passage that seems to set out a defense for political liberalism against Okin’s criticism is as follows:

A domain so-called, or a sphere of life, is not…something already given apart from political conceptions of justice. A domain is not a kind of space, or place, but rather is simply the result, or upshot, of how the principles of political justice are applied, directly to the basic structure and indirectly to the association within it. The principles defining the equal basic liberties and opportunities of citizens always hold in and through all so-called domains. The equal rights of
women and the basic rights of their children as future citizens are inalienable and protect them wherever they are…If the so-called private sphere is alleged to be a space exempt from justice, then there is no such thing. (Rawls 1999: 161)

Here Rawls clearly states that no social sphere, including the “private” one, is exempt from liberal political justice, even though the application of a political conception of justice to the family as individual associations is “indirect”.

As mentioned above, this “indirect application” means that the institution of the family (family law, pertinent tax system, social welfare scheme for supporting families, etc.) should be informed by public reason so that it properly respects women’s free and equal status as liberal citizens along with men. The problem is that such institutional “application” does not seem to reach the ways women live their comprehensive lives on a day-to-day basis within families as associations. If so, is it really sensible to say, as Rawls does, that, “the equal rights of women and the basic rights of their children as future citizens…protect them wherever they are”? Doesn’t this remark sound a little hollow?

Some interpret the first part of the above passage more radically and argue that Rawls not only blurred the public-private distinction but understood the non-public itself as the creation of the political. But this interpretation has the same problem we have already identified. Certainly, from the perspective of a citizen who upholds some political conception of justice, the non-public sphere is one in which that conception does not apply directly, but indirectly. In this regard, a so-called “private” sphere, which is lived under some comprehensive worldview, is indeed not “something already given apart from political conceptions of justice”. But this is true only when we assume a political citizen’s point of view. From the viewpoint of a comprehensive person, on the other hand, a comprehensive sphere of life is already lived, apart from any political conception of justice. If we attempt to defend Rawlsian political liberalism, we need to show how we can be assured that women’s equality and freedom are protected “wherever they are”.

Although Rawls was modest about the scope of his theory, the framework of his political liberalism makes it necessary to examine more closely the interface between the public and non-public. We cannot get away with this simply by noting it is beyond political liberalism’s intended scope. Rawls does seem to have been aware of the limitation of his reply. Near the end of the section about the family in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”, he says,

If we say the gender system includes whatever social arrangements adversely affect the equal basic liberties and opportunities of women, as well as those of their children as future citizens, then surely that system is subject to critique by the principles of justice. The question then becomes whether the fulfillment of these principles suffices to remedy the gender system’s faults. The remedy depends in part on social theory and human psychology, and much else. It cannot be settled by a political conception of justice alone. (Rawls 1999: 163)

Here, Rawls clearly refers to a territory uncharted by his theory: “whatever social arrangements adversely affect the equal basic liberties and opportunities of women,” which I interpret as
including the nature of the non-political (comprehensive) lives women lead.
In the next section, I will argue that the “social theory” that Rawls’s believed was needed, can be
developed, in part, by reconstructing the concept of reasonable pluralism. A more individual-
centered and dynamic interpretation of the concept will help us fill an important theoretical gap
in Rawlsian political liberalism.

4. Individual-Centered Interpretation of Reasonable Pluralism

4.1 The Meaning of Overlapping Consensus for the Individual

Reasonable pluralism is a state in which diverse reasonable, comprehensive doctrines
coexist in society. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine supports a liberal political conception
of justice from within its worldview. There can be various ways to support a political conception
of justice. Some doctrines support it as congruent with themselves, others as a module to be
fitted within them, and yet others only indirectly, supposing that their interest is effectively
met by supporting it (Rawls 1993: 168-71). An overlapping consensus is obtained when a
wide range of reasonable comprehensive doctrines, liberal and non-liberal, manage to support
a political conception of justice (or a family of political conceptions of justice) for their own
reasons. Overlapping consensus is a crucial part of the second stage of Rawls’s vision8), where
the stability of a politically just society is at stake.

But this picture is incomplete in an important way, in that it is difficult to identify what
role individuals actually play. Rawls almost always talks about the compatibility of a political
conception of justice and a comprehensive doctrine, but what does this mean? How do
individuals fit into his picture? The answer to this question is suggested by the passage quoted
above. To quote only the most relevant part again,

A domain is not a kind of space, or place, but rather is simply the result, or upshot, of how the
principles of political justice are applied…The principles defining the equal basic liberties and
opportunities of citizens always hold in and through all so-called domains. (Rawls 1999: 161)

Rawls stresses that, central to his political liberalism, is the distinction between “the political”
and “non-political”. The first part of the above quote concerns what this distinction means. The
political sphere and the non-political sphere are not like two countries, adjacent to each other
on a map. Rather, they are two aspects, or modes of the same world, each presenting itself as
we shift our point of view between that of a comprehensive person and that of a citizen acting
in and perceiving the social world. Our social world will be “political” when we see and live it
from a citizen’s point of view, where self and others are understood as citizens, and we interact
as such; it will be “non-political” when we see and live it from a comprehensive person’s point of
view, where self and others are understood as comprehensive persons, and we interact as such.

A relationship between individuals can be seen as belonging to the non-political domain
when each member, as a comprehensive person, regards self and others as members of the
same family, for example, where they live their common life following some comprehensive doctrine. The relationship of the same individuals can also be seen as belonging to the political domain, when each views self and others as citizens of a political society, along with other individual citizens.

Individuals are not expected to assume a citizen’s viewpoint all the time. This perspective only applies when they should act as citizens, such as when they engage in a public discussion about the form of public institutions in an assembly, as a political representative, for example. Additionally, as an ordinary person, individuals are expected to assume a citizen’s viewpoint when they determine their stance toward fundamental political issues (Rawls 1999: 133-6). Still, if they are to fulfill this civic duty, they need to retain their ability to understand themselves as free and equal citizens, whenever so required. They need to make sure that their ability to regard themselves as citizens, supporting a political conception of justice and being able to act accordingly, is not undermined by their comprehensive way of life, which may make it impossible for them to regard themselves as citizens. In this way, “principles defining the equal basic liberties and opportunities of citizens” included in a political conception of justice, “always hold in and through all so-called domains”.

4.2 Lived Compatibility

It is actually a compatibility issue, then, for an individual who, in a well-ordered society, is expected to live a “double life”(9), the life as a political citizen and the life as a comprehensive person. Individuals are responsible for making sure their day-to-day comprehensive life is compatible with their political self-understanding as a free and equal citizen, a core ability of Rawlsian citizens who affirm a political conception and abide by it.

When a woman finds that her political self-understanding as a free and equal citizen is being threatened by the way she lives her comprehensive life, she is encouraged to act on her situation so that her comprehensive life mode becomes compatible, for herself, with her political life as a citizen, centered on her self-understanding as a free and equal member of a social cooperative enterprise. Often, she will have to negotiate with others, with whom she shares her comprehensive life, to bring about changes. Of course, when she lives her life from within a particular comprehensive worldview, she affirms, probably all we can say in many cases, that her self-understanding as a political citizen should only be secured as a potential. But what is needed here is only that she has the capacity to take on a citizen’s perspective when necessary, not that she always looks at the social world from that point of view.

Compatibility in this sense is lived, rather than logical, although logical compatibility may be an important part of it for many. Lived compatibility may be more demanding, as it may require more than logical compatibility. Rawls postulates that, in the state of reasonable pluralism, a sufficient number of comprehensive doctrines appropriately accommodate a conception of justice somewhere within their worldview and, thus, are compatible with a conception of justice.
If so, following a comprehensive doctrine of this sort may, nonetheless, affect the political self-understanding of an individual who follows it, jeopardizing her own understanding of her political self as a free and equal citizen. An example may be when the comprehensive doctrine in question regards women as inferior beings, or less human, as compared to men.

On the other hand, lived compatibility can be less demanding than logical compatibility when, for example, apparently incompatible public and non-public (comprehensive) worldviews in a logical sense may, however, be lived as compatible, by someone who can live in these two worlds, that is, lived from two different and separate viewpoints (citizen’s viewpoint and comprehensive person’s viewpoint), experiencing absolutely no interaction between the two. For someone who believes women are spiritually inferior from a certain religious point of view, for instance, her non-public life, governed by this religious view, would not undermine her public life and self-understanding as a free and equal member of liberal citizenry, when her two lives, or two modes of her life lived from within two different worldviews, are simply on two different planes.

Most people’s experience of lived compatibility, if any, would be somewhere between these two extremes. But the point is that, as reasonable pluralism maintains, it is individual citizens who make this possible, by taking responsibility to make sure that their non-public life is compatible with their liberal self-understanding. Lived compatibility can only be judged from the viewpoint of the individual who actually lives that life. No other actors can judge this. Reasonable pluralism is possible when individual men and women are such responsible citizens.

Of course, this does not mean that each individual has to assume this responsibility in a solitary manner. When they are blind to themselves, as is often the case, others can advise them, try to persuade them, and may often open their eyes about their situation and change their view about it. Citizens support each other in being, and continuing to be, responsible liberal citizens. If “women...are protected anywhere they go” (and for that matter, men are as well, of course), it is because a majority of individual men and women, as free and equal citizens, protect themselves and others in this way. Without resorting to direct intervention from the state institution, Rawlsian political liberalism reaches out to the non-political sphere, indirectly but effectively, by trusting those citizens.

4.3 Cooperation for Responsible Citizenship

An important question, in this regard, would be: How are individuals encouraged to become responsible citizens? In the well-ordered society Rawls envisioned, this function is primarily performed by the basic structure of society, governed by a political conception of justice, which has educative effects on people’s political self-understanding and acts (Rawls 1993: 163). By growing up in a society where the shape of major social institutions is, and is publicly known to be, determined by public reason, people will understand what it means to be a free and equal citizen of a just liberal democracy. Rawls also highlights the role of formal, civic education for

These suggestions are certainly not objectionable, but they are not enough, in light of the level of difficulty that many men and women of faith, for instance, experience in making their public and non-public modes of life somehow compatible, in a society that is pluralist in a politically liberal way. Rawlsian political liberalism needs to support them more positively since Rawls hopes for a situation in which “a reasonable and effective political conception may bend comprehensive doctrines toward itself, shaping them if need be from unreasonable to reasonable” (Rawls 1993: 246). To interpret this remark in a more individual-centered way, individuals who support a reasonable and effective political conception, and that find their comprehensive mode of life is not compatible with affirming such conception, may be motivated, he hopes, to reconstruct the aspects of their life governed by such doctrine.

It is people’s attraction and attachment to a political conception of justice that may “bend comprehensive doctrines” to be compatible with the conception. For example, in the case of “justice as fairness” as an example of a political conception of justice, Rawls proposes ideals such as free and equal citizenship, political friendship among citizens despite irreconcilable differences in their comprehensive lives, and social cooperation for democratic self-governance. These ideals are expected to be the source of such attraction and attachment, providing the people of a well-ordered society with sufficient reason and motivation to be, and to continue to be, willing members of a political society whose basic structure is governed by that conception\(^\text{10}\). These ideals must not only be communicated and learned but also lived, so that lived compatibility can be attained between the two modes of an individual’s life.

Individuals need to be provided with ample opportunities not only to learn what it is to be a free and equal member of our political society but also to experience this, firsthand, in their ordinary lives, and to know what it is like to be and to act as such. Formal civic education would be an essential part of any school curriculum; but here, again, ultimate responsibility to provide these opportunities falls on citizens themselves. Rawls sees participation in public discussion as important in this regard. I agree. Yet, what also seems to be important is the way people deal with one another in their everyday life, in the space beyond formal public arenas and associations\(^\text{11}\).

This space can serve as an important school for individuals to learn the skills needed to be and act as free and equal citizens. There, people can make themselves free from the rules and constraints that membership of a particular association more or less entails. This does not necessarily mean that they should treat one another with “respect”. Rather, they can learn to interact as just plain individuals, disregarding differences in the associational contexts. In this way, they can more freely cultivate the basic ability required of them as free and equal citizens of a liberal democracy. Through equal and reciprocal treatment, an individual will be more ready to understand what it is like to be a free and equal member of his or her society. Citizens can also support each other by saying “no” when someone is being treated “undemocratically”.\[^\text{10}\]  

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Repeated experiences like these can make one's self-understanding as a citizen secure, providing her with a motivational basis to try to act on her comprehensive life to make and keep it compatible with her ability to view herself as a liberal citizen, whenever so expected. If sufficient numbers of individuals cooperate to support each other as citizens this way, then society could move toward being a society of responsible citizens, which is the prerequisite of reasonable pluralism.

Reasonable pluralism, then, is not a static state, but a dynamic process in which individuals, in their capacity as citizens, try to reconcile their two life modes, aiming to be part of a liberal political society that they wholeheartedly believe is worth their efforts to maintain. In this way, they act as the intermediary between the public and the non-public (comprehensive) social worlds, maintaining each as appropriately just in its own manner.

5. Conclusion

If understood in a more person-centered and dynamic way, the concept of reasonable pluralism can be valuable for our liberal living with others, a way of living that is true to its aspiration to secure individuals’ comprehensive freedom as much as possible, while nurturing and protecting their capacity to be able to act as liberal citizens through mutual cooperation.

This should answer Okin’s concerns to a considerable extent, while avoiding the patronizing tone of her (and Rawls’s) argument. She argued for the direct application of political principles of justice to the family as a political society’s important task. Her locution and argument tend to sound as if she views women, primarily, as individuals to be protected by political society, and that it is political society’s responsibility to protect women from any injustice they experience. Of course, as Okin argued, there are many ways that political society can and should support individuals by making its various institutions consistent with public reason for free and equal citizens. But this could inadvertently discourage women from taking initiatives to change their social world, effectively leading to their disempowerment.

In contrast, a more individual-centered and dynamic interpretation of reasonable pluralism encourages women to act, individually and collectively. A vision of a political society in which women are trusted as being able to become responsible citizens should attract wider support than one that views women simply as individuals to be protected by their society or by the state. If we give individuals a more central role to create and sustain this vision, reasonable pluralism could be a valuable concept to overcome the dilemma of liberal inclusion.

Notes

1) One of the numerous places Rawls makes this clear is the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, where he states, “[i]f men’s inclination to self-interest makes their vigilance against one another necessary, their public sense of justice makes their secure association possible. Among individuals
with disparate aims and purposes a shared conception of justice establishes the bonds of civic friendship…“One may think of a public conception of justice as constituting the fundamental charter of a well-ordered human association” (Rawls 1971: 5).

2) Rawls himself, however, is not clear enough on this point. He often refers to “the fact” of reasonable pluralism, but this is misleading. It should be understood, for his theory to be consistent, as a part of people’s worldviews in his well-ordered society.

3) It should be noted that Rawls does not regard as “voluntary” any association that is formed “voluntarily” from its internal point of view. His standard of voluntariness is whether individuals have adopted the form of their associational life under social and political circumstances that we as citizens can sincerely regard as just. An association can be voluntary in this sense, while being understood, from within, as part of a certain tradition to be followed on a non-voluntary basis, for example (Rawls 1999: 162, n.68). Still, the problems mentioned in the text may arise.

4) A similar argument was made by Andrew Smith (Smith 2004). Clare Chambers recently revisited Okin and picked up the issue of the family as part of the basic structure (Chambers 2013). Notable attempts to defend Rawlsian political liberalism in the present context include works by Sharon Lloyd (Lloyd 1994, 1995) and Stephen de Wijze (Wijze 2000). Ruth Abbey provided a useful overview of the Okin-Rawls debate (Abbey 2011: 61-82). For summaries of feminist responses to Rawls more generally, see those by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2003) and Abbey (Abbey 2013: 1-23).

5) For example, Corey Brettschneider subscribes to this argument (Brettschneider 2007).

6) Except, perhaps, for unlikely cases in which individuals adopt a citizen’s viewpoint at the start of their lives and, only after, live comprehensively within a sphere that a political conception of justice delineates.

7) John Tomasi cogently made this point, though, unlike mine, his argument is concerned mainly with the viability of diverse cultures, liberal and non-liberal, in a society of political liberalism (Tomasi 2001).

8) In the first stage, a political conception of justice is constructed by elaborating fundamental ideals of liberal political culture (Rawls 1993: 24-5, n.27). Rawls’s “justice as fairness” is one example, although he regards it among the most reasonable (Rawls 1993: 167:8).

9) This term is borrowed from Brettschneider (Brettschneider 2007: 27).

10) Paul Weithman examined this aspect of Rawls’s theory in detail (Weithman 2010: 270-343).

11) On this point, I drew insights from Nancy Rosenblum. She stressed the importance of “the democracy of everyday life”, cultivated in “the interstices of groups and attachments” (Rosenblum, 1998: 350-9).

References


