Flat and grey


From the mid-1960s until he retired in 1995, John Rawls regularly lectured on the history of political philosophy to his Harvard students in his course ‘Philosophy 171’. These lectures have been reconstructed from his notes and from some recordings and are now published in this volume. The style of the written version is flat and grey: one gets little sense of what Rawls was like as a lecturer. But they record the intense and sustained engagement of one of the most important modern political thinkers with some of the greatest philosophers of the past. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Mill and Marx were staples every year, occasionally supplemented by Sidgewick as an example of pure utilitarianism and/or Butler as a representative intuitionist. Given Rawls’s strong Kantianism, it may seem surprising that Kant is not included, but that is because Rawls also taught a course on the History of Moral Philosophy in which Kant was the main subject (Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 2000, reviewed in RP 110).

Rawls’s approach is outlined in a helpful brief Foreword by the editor, and by Rawls himself in an initial introductory lecture. Rawls claims that he is going to pose philosophical problems as the philosophers he is studying had themselves seen them. He is fond of quoting a dictum by Collingwood: ‘the history of political theory is not the history of different answers to one and the same question, but the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was constantly changing with it.’ In fact, Rawls is a lot less interested than this suggests in the historical specificity of the ideas he is considering. His account is unified by the concerns that he himself brings to it.

Rawls focuses particularly on the liberal tradition of political philosophy, and, indeed, on one strand of this tradition, the social contract theory. This is portrayed in a surprisingly Hegelian fashion as developing progressively, with the suggestion that it culminates in his own social contract account of justice. Rawls at first included his own theory as the conclusion of the lecture series, but later preferred to cover it in a separate course (published as *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 2001). However, it is frequently a point of reference in these lectures.

Rawls takes the social contract theory to be central to the liberal tradition as a whole. For fundamental to liberalism, he believes, is the idea that ‘a legitimate regime is such that its political and social institutions are justifiable to all citizens – to each and every one – by addressing their reason, theoretical and practical.’ All the philosophers included are considered for what they can be seen to contribute to this idea, whether they support it or not.

Unsurprisingly, this approach works best with those philosophers who do support it. There are meticulous and illuminating discussions of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau in which Rawls traces the progressive development of the central ideas of the social contract theory. The reading of Hobbes is particularly suggestive and sympathetic, stressing his adherence to the social contract approach and the idea of rational consensus. Above all, Rawls focuses on what he can salvage from Hobbes to develop his own account of rational agreement as the basis for political right. But Hobbes himself, of course, has other concerns as well. The result is a rather lopsided picture which downplays the less liberal aspects of Hobbes’s philosophy: including his materialism, his radical individualism, and his decidedly illiberal views on the nature and extent of sovereign power.

The results are less satisfactory when Rawls deals with opponents of social contract theory. He does not engage with their criticisms in so far as he can manage to avoid them, preferring instead to focus on what can be retained from them for the social contract theory. The charity of this approach is admirable but its results are not always productive. Criticisms of the social contract theory are all but ignored (whether they come from within or from outside the liberal tradition). Utilitarianism as an alternative philosophical foundation for liberal values gets short shrift.

Hume suffers particularly from this treatment since he is an out-and-out critic of the whole social contract idea. All that Rawls manages to salvage from Hume is his idea of the ‘impartial spectator’ – slim pickings indeed. Otherwise, Hume’s criticisms are rejected with uncharacteristic impatience. Hume attacks the social contract theory for attempting to base political authority on the palpable fiction of an ‘original contract’. This is not only false, it is dangerous, Hume believes, since it can all too easily lead to the ‘anarchical’ view that established governments are illegitimate and can rightly be overthrown and replaced by ones that have the support of the people.

These are important arguments, both historically and philosophically; but Rawls has little time for them.
He rejects the idea that social contract theorists are talking of an ‘original contract’ as a misunderstanding. Be that as it may, it is a misunderstanding that is widely shared, even by some of the authors of these theories themselves. The argument that the social contract theory can lead in dangerously radical directions was widespread in the eighteenth century, in the shadow of the English Civil War and of the American and French Revolutions. But Rawls’s determination to see these ideas in their historical context deserted him when he gets to Hume. For all Hume’s worries, Rawls argues that Hume agrees with the social contract theorists when it came to practical politics – they are all good liberals at the end of the day, no matter how much they may disagree about philosophical foundations. There is some truth in this, but that hardly discounts the point that thinkers like Hume were making. In the eighteenth century, the social contract was indeed a revolutionary doctrine – see the US ‘Declaration of Independence’, for example.

With Mill, Rawls takes a different approach. On Rawls’s reading he is quite simply ‘not a utilitarian’. This is not as strange as it may sound. Rawls is right to stress that Mill tries to move away from the narrow and doctrinaire utilitarianism of Bentham and of his father, James Mill. Yet this reading ignores the undoubted utilitarian commitments in his thought. A fuller discussion of utilitarianism comes with the lectures on Sidgwick in an Appendix, but even here there is little engagement with utilitarianism as a critique of the social contract approach. Again Rawls stresses that the utilitarians and the social contract theorists are broadly within the same liberal political tradition and pretty well agree on substantive political matters. The implication would seem to be that philosophical foundations don’t much matter in practice, an uncomfortable position for Rawls to take since most of his work concerns the philosophical foundations of the idea of justice.

A noteworthy feature of the lectures is their sustained and sympathetic account of Marx. Rawls says that he is going to treat Marx as a critic of liberalism, but this is not how things work out. Most of the lectures on Marx are taken up with the controversy about whether or not Marx criticizes capitalism for its injustice. This debate has unduly dominated analytical Marxism for the last two decades. A naturalistic and utilitarian reading of Marx has been pitted against accounts which claim that his critique of capitalism relies on the concept of justice. The argument between utilitarianism and justice is thus played out yet again. In the process Marx is assimilated to familiar liberal positions and his criticisms of liberalism are ignored.

Rawls provides a useful summary of the arguments on each side. Not surprisingly, he then comes down with those who maintain that Marx appeals to universal principles of justice, even while admitting that Marx himself explicitly repudiates them. Marx is thus incorporated into the social contract tradition and Rawls misses the opportunity to engage with the one philosopher he discusses who not only rejects the social contract idea but the liberal tradition more generally.

For example, there is no mention of Marx’s criticisms of the individualist assumptions of traditional liberalism as developed in the critique of ‘natural rights’ in ‘On the Jewish Question’ (1843) and elsewhere. Moreover, saddling Marx with the notion of universal justice obscures the fact that Marx questions the idea of ‘rational agreement’ upon which, as Rawls insists, this notion is based. ‘The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle’ say the well-known opening words of The Communist Manifesto. Conflicting classes have different and conflicting notions of justice. When those conflicts become intense, out goes rational consensus. In short, the rational agreement of ‘all and every citizen’ is not the reality of liberal society but only an ideal, an imaginary construct of liberal theory. Moreover, Marx maintains, it cannot be achieved within liberal society because the economic system of private ownership on which liberal society is based itself generates fundamental conflicts.

Though Rawls does not engage with Marx’s criticisms of liberalism, he is sympathetic with much of Marx’s critique of capitalism and with the aims of socialism. Even so, he cannot go all the way with Marx in envisaging a ‘full communist’ society in which the market is eliminated and which is ‘beyond justice’. There will always be a need for the idea of justice, Rawls argues: ‘The absence of concern with justice is undesirable as such, because having a sense of justice is . . . part of understanding other people and of recognizing their claims.’

In these lectures we see how Rawls’s reading of the history of political philosophy has contributed to this conclusion. This reading is most valuable when it is showing the development of the social contract account of justice. In other respects it is limited: the history of political philosophy becomes a mirror in which only Rawls’s own ideas are reflected. For a more balanced and critical approach one will need to look elsewhere.

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