John Rawls

What is a just political order? What does justice require of us? These are perennial questions of political philosophy. John Rawls, generally acknowledged to be one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century, answered them in a way that has drawn widespread attention, not only from political philosophers, but from political scientists, economists, those in the field of public policy, and experts in jurisprudence. It is not only academics who have been inspired by Rawls' ideas; they have also influenced the theory of government and continue to play a role in actual public political debates. This introduction outlines Rawls' work on the theory of justice. Focusing on Rawls' own writings, from his first publication in 1951 to his final ones some fifty years later, Percy B. Lehning demonstrates how and why they can be considered as one consistent and coherent body of work.

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An Introduction

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For Jack, in cherished memory

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Preface

John Rawls (1921–2002) is considered one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century. His main work, *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971, is recognized as one of the all-time great works in moral and political philosophy.

Rawls formulates in new ways answers to age-old, perennial questions of political philosophy: "What is a just political order?" and "What does justice require of us?" In working out his ideas on justice, Rawls is inspired by the traditional idea of the social contract, as represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. But in Rawls' theory, the social contract is not used to set up a particular form of government. Rather, the guiding idea is that the object of the social contract is the principles of justice for a society.

In formulating his ideas on justice, Rawls at the same time takes a position against rival ethical conceptions, especially against the utilitarianism that has been the predominant theory for much of modern moral philosophy, represented by a long line of writers such as David Hume and Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, F. Y. Edgeworth and Henry Sidgwick.

The ways Rawls has worked out his ideas on justice have drawn widespread attention, not only from (political) philosophers, but also from philosophers of law, political scientists, economists, those in the field of public policy, and experts in jurisprudence. But not only academics have been inspired by Rawls' ideas. His ideas on "what justice requires" have influenced the theory of government and play a role in public political debates between, and within, political parties on policies to be pursued in so-called welfare states. It should be noted, however, that Rawls himself very seldom took a direct stand in debates on political topics. In addition, he was never a "party-political philosopher" and – even more important – neither is his work directly focused on daily political debates, or on the whim of political hype.

All of this brings two questions to the fore: Why is it that Rawls' work is considered to belong to the category of the all-time most important works of moral and political philosophy? And, second, how is it, and in what ways, that political movements, political parties, or for that matter "you and I" in our role as citizens, can be inspired by Rawls' ideas on justice? What can these ideas contribute today to public political debates that turn on the issue of how liberal democratic societies, that are characterized by a plurality of religious, philosophical, and moral beliefs and opinions, can be organized in such a way that they are at the same time stable and peaceful, as well as just?

This introduction to Rawls' theory of justice tries to answer these questions. In so doing it takes "the whole" of Rawls' work, which has now been published in its entirety, into account. It elaborates how Rawls' works hangs together, from his first publication in 1951 up to his very final ones, some fifty years later, and how and why it can be considered to be one consistent and coherent body of work. We will follow the developments in Rawls' theorizing on justice and will explain, if there are any, recasting and adaptations.

Let us be clear, then, about what this introduction is, and what it is not. It is not an overview of the literature on Rawls' theory. The motto of this introduction is rather "back to basics." The aim is to keep the focus on Rawls' own writings: it is his ideas, his arguments, and his texts on "justice" that take center stage. For one thing, it will help to clear up existing misunderstandings and misinterpretations of Rawls' theory, and to dismiss criticism of Rawls' failing to address problems not within his intended purview. This is not, of course, to say that Rawls' theory should be uncritically accepted. His theory is not immune to criticism, but it seeks fair criticism.

In a note on "My Teaching," Rawls once remarked: "When lecturing, say, on Locke, Rousseau, Kant, or J. S. Mill, I always tried to do two things especially. One was to pose their problems as they themselves saw them, given what their understanding of these problems was in their own time. … The second thing I tried to do was to present each writer's thought in what I took to be its strongest form. I took to heart Mill's remark in his review of Sidgwick: 'A doctrine is not judged at all until it is judged in its best form'. I didn't say, not intentionally anyway, what I myself thought a writer should have said, but rather what the writer did say, supported by what I viewed as the most reasonable interpretation on the text. The text had to be known and respected,

and its doctrine presented in its best form. Leaving aside the text seemed offensive, a kind of pretending."[1]

Following Rawls' lead on how to understand and appreciate the thought of important moral and political philosophers, we are not, in this introduction, concerned with "what I myself think Rawls should have said, but rather what Rawls did say, supported by what I view as the most reasonable interpretation of his texts." The effort in this introduction to Rawls' work is to lay bare what are the leading ideas in his theory of justice, a theory on which he had been working without interruption for over fifty years.

Rawls once thanked the author of this introduction "for correcting several of my false starts."[2] However, rather the opposite holds. Over many years, in innumerable and illuminating conversations, Rawls taught me how to improve my understanding of his theory. This introduction to his work is the fall-out thereof. It is dedicated to his memory.

List of abbreviations

The following abbreviations for Rawls' work appear throughout the text.

CP	*Collected Papers*, 1999, edited by Samuel Freeman, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
JaF	*Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 2001, edited by Erin Kelly, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
LHMP	*Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 2000, edited by Barbara Herman, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
LHPP	*Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, 2007, edited by Samuel Freeman, Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
LoP	*The Law of Peoples*, 1999, including the paper "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
PL	*Political Liberalism*, 1996, New York: Columbia University Press.
TJ	*A Theory of Justice*, 1971, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
TJR	*A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition*, 1999, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

"The Idea of Public Reason Revisited" is quoted in this introduction as published in *The Law of Peoples*, 129–180. Thus LoP: 129 refers to "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." The article was originally published in 1997 in the *University of Chicago Law Review*, 64, 765–807. It has been included in the *Collected Papers* from 1999 (pp. 573–615), as well as in the newly expanded edition of *Political Liberalism* from 2005 (pp. 440–490).