

The Audacious Humility Of John Rawls

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HARVARD PHILOSOPHER John Rawls's name is not a household word, but it is unusually well-known around universities. Students often assume he must have been dead for many years, like the other great philosophers. A student told me that he and some Harvard friends once looked up the name in the phone book, and called to ask Mrs. Rawls about her great deceased (so they assumed) husband. Mard Rawls simply put John Rawls on the line. In truth, John Rawls died just a few months ago, November 24, 2002.

Rawls is being remembered as the greatest political philosopher of the twentieth century. This might be surprising if one thought only about the conventional politics that he defended. In his most famous book, *A Theory of Justice*, he attempted to find a widely acceptable moral basis for two broad kinds of social and political institutions. First, he argued for the non-negotiable importance of a familiar list of equal basic liberties. These include freedom of expression, religion, conscience, property, and political participation. In our political culture, this is a standard list of valuable liberties, even across party lines. Second, he argued that justice requires arranging society so that the poorest citizens will be kept as well-off as possible. This approach to justice is certainly controversial, but, apart from some innovative details in Rawls's version, it is not a new idea. It resembles the traditional views of many liberal Democrats.

So why did *A Theory of Justice* turn the world of moral and political philosophy on its ear? In one common explanation, the book appeared in 1971, when college life was feeling, well, academic—disconnected from urgent matters of gender, race, and war. Rawls's ap-

proach to political philosophy turned away from the academically fashionable view that philosophy was limited to logical and conceptual clarification. He confronted the great question of social justice head-on, striking a chord with activists who were fighting against the sterility of academe.

But there is a puzzle about this story, this emphasis on Rawls's direct engagement with moral issues. When the book came out students and faculty were clamoring for "relevance" in their studies. It is true that *A Theory of Justice* was less sterile than most philosophy (written in English) of the preceding decades. On the other hand, Rawls himself studiously avoided joining the controversies that rocked American society in the 1960s. His defense of civil disobedience and conscientious refusal to obey certain laws was an exception; even there, he never said how these principles applied to current events. The book (unlike the man, I'm told) said nothing directly about the current civil rights controversies, or about the Vietnam War (the book was mostly finished by the time Vietnam sent students into the streets), or about feminism. And yet intellectuals moved by those events were galvanized by the idea that questions of social justice might be situated in such a broad and deep philosophical account, supported by powerful arguments drawing on the whole Western philosophical tradition from Socrates through Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Mill. The puzzle is this: how did such an abstract and learned treatment of the idea of social justice meet the needs of that turbulent and impatient time? I think the answer takes us to the heart of Rawls's approach to philosophy, an approach that informs his work from beginning to end.

From his very earliest writing, Rawls wondered whether the contenders in certain reasonable but intractable controversies could be brought to see that they shared many impor-

