

## Rawls and the Reasonable

In Lecture VI § 2 of *Political Liberalism* (1993), John Rawls presents his concept of public reason. In doing so he writes of the paradoxical relationship between the public conception of justice being explained and an appeal to ‘the whole truth,’ those ideas and morals which are informed by the most personal (and, therefore, most important) aspects of one’s own comprehensive moral doctrine. Playing devil’s advocate, Rawls asks, “why should citizens in discussing and voting on the most fundamental political questions honor the limits of public reason?” (Rawls, 216). This is, of course, a misleading question for it assumes that there is a *choice* he is providing us. Being thus far situated in his explication of public reason, we are not yet fully aware of the scope of the concept, which is not so much a judgment of whether we are to use Public Reason vs. individual moral doctrine as much as it is a development of a system in which we ought not to use the latter within a system erected by the former. One plausible criticism of Rawls’s account of public reason might be directed to how he dissolves this paradox, specifically by the condition wherein “the political conception is supported by an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines” (Rawls, 218). One may question Public Reason’s conception of what is and is not a *reasonable* comprehensive doctrine.

Rawls’s Public Reason develops from the same basis out of which his young ideas were presented in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Just as individuals in the original position had to formulate principles of justice for the basic structure of society, they must also have had to develop the guidelines necessary in determining those principles.<sup>1</sup> Rawls says these guidelines

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<sup>1</sup> Rawls explains “the original position” in *PL* as that which “connects the conception of the person and its companion conception of social cooperation with certain specific principles of justice” (Rawls, 304). Those in the original position “are described as rationally autonomous representatives of citizens in society” (Rawls, 305). Otherwise put: this is the theoretical state in

are “much the same as, and as strong as, the argument for the principles of justice themselves” and that both these principles and public reason have “essentially the same grounds...they are companion parts of one agreement” (Rawls 225-226). This reasoning comes from the same essential conception of the original position and that quality of the veil of ignorance. Much like this device in justice as fairness disables a rational deliberator to act according to one or another position in society, the concept of public reason is a similar system for setting up a roadblock to reason via one’s own comprehensive moral doctrine. In *Political Liberalism* we see Rawls moving into what we may call, for a lack of a better term, the real world. Having devised of a system to determine the principles of justice within the scheme of justice as fairness, Rawls now moves us into how one might establish from this starting position a reasonable and rational conception of justice through the use of public reason.

Reasonable and rational are key aspects to Rawls, and in moving from *A Theory of Justice* to *Political Liberalism* he pays special emphasis to distinguishing between the two (Lecture II, §1, 1.). Why he does this may seem obvious as many of the ideas proposed are built on individuals already presupposed with these qualities, but it is also a way Rawls strengthens his argument for Public Reason. Namely by defining and then appealing to *both* reason and rationality he is able to establish a commitment between people which becomes more secure over time, based on the understanding of others needs and self-respect as well as one’s own. This, as Rawls would tell us, is a more sustainable system than that of the *modus Vivendi* compact.<sup>2</sup> Understanding the

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which Rawls envisions a rational deliberator to be under while making decisions. These deliberators are “rationally autonomous,” or as Rawls posits, judging from behind another concept from *A Theory of Justice*, the veil of ignorance. This forces a perspective in which no single position in society may be valued over another. From the original position, Rawls develops two his two principles of justice.

<sup>2</sup> Rawls characterizes the “modus vivendi” as “a treaty between two states whose national aims and interests put them at odds. In negotiating a treaty each state would be wise and prudent to

two virtues of persons which Rawls establishes in explaining the reasonable, we may better get at a definition of ‘reasonable’ within the scheme of distinguishing between different comprehensive moral doctrines in Rawls’s public reason.

The reasonable for Rawls exists somewhere beyond the conditions of reciprocity and the general good (terms he outlines in earlier chapters), though both these qualities are contained within it. He uses the word “desire” in explaining the reasonable. Those who are reasonable *desire* “for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept” (Rawls, 50). Accordingly, the unreasonable are those for whom are able to readily commit to a series of agreements or cooperative scheme, but who do so out of something other than desire to see a just social world for its own sake. The unreasonable are “ready to violate such terms as suits their interests when circumstances allow” (Rawls, 50). This explanation of the reasonable in *Political Liberalism* perhaps projects the notion of public reason beyond the first two formulations I presented at the outset: it is not a choice because it is a system and it is not a system because it is a way of being. To become reasonable one must attain public for it gives the *desire* to provide reciprocity and tolerance to political situations.

Now with a sense of the Rawlsian reasonable in mind we may turn to the original question of what for Rawls constitutes the reasonable moral doctrines which he spells out in his explication of public reason? This question is key in understanding the concept because in accepting the “inclusive” view of public reason, Rawls begins to establish a way in which comprehensive doctrines may affirm the values (or honor the ideal) of public reason.<sup>3</sup> Rawls posits that “this knowledge surely strengthens mutual trust and public confidence; it can be a vital part of the

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make sure that the agreement proposed represents an equilibrium point: that is, that the terms and conditions of the treaty are drawn up in such a way that it is public knowledge that it is not advantageous for either state to violate it” (Rawls, 147).

<sup>3</sup> The ‘inclusive’ and ‘exclusive’ views of public reason are distinguished in Lecture VI. §8. 1-2.

sociological basis encouraging citizens to honor the ideal of public reason” (Rawls, 249). As he begins to *let in* comprehensive moral doctrines to public reason, it becomes more paramount to distinguish who would and would not be capable of presenting their moral doctrine in the public forum. If the judicial is the prime example of Rawls’s vision of public reason (as it is), then what are the comprehensive moral doctrines of which hearsay evidence and improper searches would be analogous to?<sup>4</sup>

Four years later Rawls would come back to the issue of reasonable comprehensive doctrines in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” now an appendage to *Political Liberalism*. Instead of grappling with an argument against public reason in terms of ‘the whole truth,’ this time around Rawls simply dismisses the notion altogether, writing “the zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reason that belongs with democratic citizenship” (Rawls, 442). He stresses in this article the notion that public reason is not a blanket structure for every issue of fundamental question, rather for just those within the public political forum.<sup>5</sup> Much like everything else, how these words are strung together must be made clear. The idea of the public forum introduced in an earlier section on public reason provides us with that much; however, what are we to make of the ‘political’ modifier?

In bracketing out that which does not fit into the public political forum, Rawls is giving us a more specific vision of what was eluded to by denoting only the *reasonable* comprehensive doctrine being allowed within public reason. He writes “...a value is properly political only when the social form is itself political: when it is realized, say, in parts of the basic structure and

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<sup>4</sup> By reference, Rawls makes his analogy in explaining the paradox of public reason to the court room Lecture VI. §2. 3. (218)

<sup>5</sup> This public political forum is divided into three parts as follows: 1. the discourse of judges in their decisions (emphasis on the supreme court) 2. the discourse of government officials (emphasis on chief executives and legislators) 3. the discourse of candidates for public office and their campaign managers (emphasis on oratory, platform, and political statement) (Rawls, 443).

its political and social institutions. It follows that many political conceptions are nonliberal, including those of aristocracy and corporate oligarchy, and of autocracy and dictatorship” (Rawls 454). In other words, an individual’s values may only be considered if they are within the guise of a constitutional democratic regime. Public reason then, it stands to say, is only concerned with the “ideals and principles expressed by reasonable liberal political conceptions” (Rawls 454).

Perhaps here both myself and Rawls are guilty of using the very word in question in order to define it. However, it may be important to remind ourselves that *defining* what is reasonable does not seem to be Rawls’s project in the end. After all, it is not a definition of the term he gives to begin with, but two virtues of persons by which reasonable citizens may agree share the characteristic of reason. However, as Rawls moves from the limits of public reason (Lecture VI. §8. 1.) to the introduction of his *proviso* concept in “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” it becomes more and more appropriate to try to define this word.

Though at times it seems as if Rawls leaves certain ambiguities a stray in *Political Liberalism* (here I am picking out ‘reasonable’ which is just one of possibly several words one could struggle with), the crux of his writing on public reason stems from a desire to form a structure of cooperation among reasonable and rational individuals in which one’s own comprehensive moral doctrine may not be capable of determining state and constitutional power, and where the citizen (ideal legislators as Rawls distinguishes them) may recognize these certain doctrines as unreasonable and thus unable to participate in the forum of public reason.