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## Book Review

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*Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. John Rawls. edited by Barbara Herman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

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Readers of John Rawls's magisterial *A Theory of Justice* (1971) will have noted the massive historical learning that underlay Rawls's construction of a theoretical model of justice. Even though it offered a contemporary reworking of the social contract tradition, it was clear that Rawls had immersed himself in the entire range of western moral reflection from the Greeks to the present. This fact may have been obscured for a while by the response to his use of the techniques of modern rational choice theory and of welfare economics, a response that gave the impression as if Rawls was seeking to derive a set of principles for the distribution of rights and of goods as a case of rational choice maximization. But that is a very one-sided and misleading reading of *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls' invocation of the "original position," in which rational agents are engaged in pursuing their own interests behind the "veil of ignorance" was meant to reflect and to buttress the basic principle of impartial deliberation, i.e., that each person should take into account the dignity and needs of others as free and equal human beings. Since no one knows what position they will end up occupying in society, asking people to efficiently pursue their self-interest has the same consequence as asking them to decide what is best for everyone considered impartially. The basis of Rawls' political philosophy is not economics, but rather modern moral theory and specifically his interpretation of Kant.

This becomes amply clear in the recently published *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. Edited by Barbara Herman, a former student of his and a significant moral philosopher in her own right, the lectures represent Rawls's instruction to his Harvard students in his introductory undergraduate course on ethics. Over the course of his almost thirty years as a Harvard professor (1962-1991), these lectures ranged widely from the Greeks to Sidgwick, but around the mid-1970's the course began to focus on Kant's ethical theory. This shift reflected Rawls' interests at the time and the theme of his 1980 Dewey Lectures given at Columbia University entitled "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory" designed to "set out more clearly the Kantian roots of *A Theory of Justice*." It was characteristic of Rawls that he kept on revising and updating the lectures until the end of his teaching career. In fact, the lectures in this volume are taken from the last course offering in 1991. They are structured around four figures: Hume (given four chapters), Leibniz (two chapters), Kant (ten chapters), and Hegel (two chapters); and around four distinct types of moral reasoning—perfectionism, represented by Leibniz; intuitionism, represented here by Samuel Clarke, who served as a foil for Hume; utilitarianism, partially portrayed by Hume; and Kantian constructivism, the course's ultimate focus. The lectures on the four figures are framed by some introductory remarks on the features of modern moral theory and its contrast to classical moral philosophy, the movement away from a more general preoccupation with the Good in ancient times

to a more specific focus on the Right in modern thought.

Two strong impressions strike the reader. First, Rawls's deep commitment as a teacher and as a philosopher to the history of moral philosophy is evident. In the great texts of our moral tradition, we encounter the efforts of deep thinkers wrestling with the most difficult and important questions about how we are to live our lives. As Rawls put it in a reminiscence of Burton Dreben, his long-time friend and colleague (and the sounding board for many of his ideas): "I always took for granted that the writers we were studying were much smarter than I was. If they were not, why was I wasting my time and the students' time by studying them? If I saw a mistake in their arguments, I supposed those writers saw it too and must have dealt with it. But where? I looked for their way out, not mine" (p. xvi). Rawls seems acutely aware that ethical thinking not only has a history, but also to some extent is constituted by that history. The values, ideals, and principles we hold today are part of what Hans-Georg Gadamer in another context describes as the *Wirkungsgeschichte* (the still present and effective history) of past ones.

The second impression that stands out is Rawls's method, which is best described as hermeneutic. On the one hand, he is at pains to present moral problems as the thinkers themselves perceived them in their own context. On the other hand, Rawls is not content with such an archaeological excavation of their understanding, but is prepared to pose contemporary questions that reflect our own self-understanding. The method is thus a dialogical one that serves not only to broaden our knowledge of the past, but also in the process to deepen our understanding of the present. Original thinkers, like Bertrand Russell for example, usually do not make good historians of philosophy because their own preoccupations dominate and often distort their interpretation of figures of the past. By contrast, a good historian of philosophy, like Frederick Coplestone, while historically sound is not always philosophically very insightful. As the old joke goes, "Russell was wrong, but wromantic; Coplestone was right, but repulsive." These lectures make immensely stimulating reading because of the productive balance that Rawls is able to maintain between historical and philosophical concerns.

The central questions of modern moral philosophy have to do not so much with the content of morality, which in the early modern period is widely accepted, but with its foundations. On what basis do we determine right and wrong and what is the source of our motivation to do the right thing? Both Kant and Hume, the two commanding moral theorists of the modern period, believed that our moral determinations arise from human nature itself and from the requirements of our common life in society, and not from some external source. Furthermore, such self-determination leads to the idea that moral demands possess an intrinsic validity, which provides an autonomous source of motivation for action. But even though Kant and Hume agree on the autonomous basis of our moral reflection and action, they disagree profoundly on what that basis is.

It is well known that Hume is an emotivist, opting to ground morality in our affective rather than our rational nature. Moral judgments cannot be judgments of reason because reason deals either with relations of idea as in logic and mathematics, or with matters of fact, and neither of these can move us either to moral valuation or to action. But the whole point of our moral judgment is to do precisely that, namely to reflect our status as doers and as actors, and we are moved to act by the prospect of pleasure and pain. It is our passionate nature and not our reason that best registers our sensitivity to pleasure and pain. Reason's role vis-à-vis the passions is an instrumental one: to inform the passions whether the object they pursue actually exists or not and to provide the best

means of seeking our ends. "Reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them (Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, II, 33). Kant by contrast grounds morality in our *a priori* practical reason without any regard to natural or empirical motives. Pure practical reason constructs out of itself the necessary and universally valid object of our rational will.

But while this comparison between the two thinkers is stark, it is also misleading. One of the many interests of these lectures is that Rawls is able to draw out of Hume's *Treatise*, especially Book II, a rich and nuanced account of deliberation and practical reasoning, (see Hume, II) , while he also provides a detailed treatment of Kant's moral psychology, especially in Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (see Kant, IX). Nevertheless, Rawls clarifies what he considers the limits of Hume's desire-based account of deliberation to be and why he opts for Kant's principle-based moral psychology.

As already mentioned, Kantian constructivism is the moral view that Rawls finds most compelling, capturing as it does the operation of our practical reason and the notion of persons as autonomous moral legislators. Unlike the intuitionists or the perfectionists, Rawls does not believe that morality is a form of theoretical reason. He agrees with Hume that there is no moral knowledge as such on a par with empirical knowledge, as though there were an independent realm of moral facts waiting to be discovered. However unlike Hume, Rawls, following Kant, does not think that our moral judgments merely express our "passions." Our dignity as moral agents is reflected most seriously in our practical deliberation in which we regard ourselves as free beings who are persuaded by reasons. Hume, Rawls shows, is unable to make the important distinction between the strength of desires and motives and their authority, an authority that can often make us act contrary to our passions.

While Kant's moral theory sketches an idea of practical reason that requires us not only to be impartial but to take the interests of others actively into account, it is Hegel in his notion of *Sittlichkeit* (ethical-social life) who elaborates the ideas of a wider social role for morality. As Barbara Herman perceptively remarks, "In a sense, the Hegel lectures sketch the bridge between Kantian moral thought and the liberalism of Rawls's own work: the view of persons as 'rooted in and fashioned by the system of political and social institutions under which they live' (Hegel I), the place of religion in secular society, and the role of philosophy in public ethical life. Unlike many, Rawls reads Hegel as part of the liberal tradition, and his reading of Hegel helps us to see what the full shape of that tradition is" (xv).

These lectures make it clear that it is a mistake to regard Rawls as just a political philosopher, because his political liberalism rests on a substantive and original moral theory. If the end of justice as the first virtue of social and political institutions is to look for the basis of a common life that people holding different views of the good life have reasons to accept, and if the means are the public reasons that they offer to their fellow citizens, it is clear that this rests on a conception of persons, who as practical deliberators embody a rational dignity and evoke mutual respect. In the concluding chapter of the *Lectures*, Rawls cites Hegel's view that "there are always only two possible viewpoints in the ethical realm: either one starts from substantiality, or one proceeds atomistically and moves upward from the basis of individuality" (p. 362). Rawls demurs and suggests that there is a third alternative to be found in Rousseau and Kant. In this alternative we opt

neither for the already given rules and norms of a community, nor for a moral life seen as a contract we forge in order to pursue our individual projects more efficiently, but rather for an intersubjective agreement—and disagreement—grounded in mutual respect. Reasonable people can and do disagree about religion, morality and comprehensive world-views. This is especially true of modern pluralistic democratic societies, which makes it especially difficult to arrive at shared ideas of justice. The challenge of pluralism has come to occupy center stage in Rawls's recent work. The concluding sections of these lectures provide us with vital clues to the ideas of "public reason" that Rawls sketches in his *Political Liberalism* (1993).

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