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Some Main Points in Rawls' Theory of Justice¹

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Abstract

An examination of some of the main ideas of John Rawls first two books, *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism* and of the relations between these ideas. Particular attention is given to **the sense in which Rawls' theory is a liberal theory, and to the relation between the rationale for Rawls' two principles of justice and his later ideas of overlapping consensus and public reason.**

Keywords: Rawls, Theory of Justice, Political Liberalism.

Introduction

In this paper I will offer an interpretation of some central features of Rawls' theory of justice, features that are familiar but also subject to controversy. The question of **how they should be understood bears on the relevance of Rawls' theory** under current conditions not only in Iran but also in the United States, where views opposed to liberalism have gained support.

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1. A slightly revised version of a paper written for the Iranian Society of Political Sciences seminar on John Rawls: Social Justice, Development, Peace and Democracy, December 13, 2018.

1. Society as a Cooperative Venture for Mutual Advantage

In the opening section of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls says that he views a society as “a cooperative venture for mutual advantage,” the basic rules of which “specify a system of cooperation designed to advance the good of those taking part in it” (Rawls, 1999 a, rev. ed., p. 4). This is not, as it might first appear, a descriptive claim about what existing social institutions “are” or for what purpose they have been “designed”. Rawls’ claim is, rather, a normative thesis, about how the basic institutions of a society are to be justified: they are to be justified on the ground that they constitute a fair scheme for advancing the good of those taking part in them.

This way of putting the matter may suggest that Rawls’ view is “individualistic” in what may seem to be an objectionable sense, insofar as it involves seeing social institutions simply as instrumental to individuals’ private interests. But this is not an accurate description of Rawls’ view. When Rawls says that social institutions are to be justified on the ground that they are a fair system for advancing “the good” of the individuals taking part in them, the relevant idea of an individual’s “good” is a broad one, including all of the aims that an individual has reason to want to promote, whether or not these aims are “self-interested” ones that involve private benefits. An individual’s aims may include, for example, realizing some ideal of social life, or living up to the tenets of his or her religion and promoting its wider acceptance.

How does a system of cooperation advance the good of individuals, understood in this way? First and most obviously, it does so by making possible productive economic activity. Equally important, it provides a framework of rights and liberties that allows individuals to form and pursue their conceptions of the good, and to associate with others to promote their shared ends and produce a common life. Finally, Rawls believes that realizing their capacity for a sense of justice in cooperating with others on fair terms is itself an important good.

Social cooperation, Rawls writes, involves “an identity of interests” in the goods that it makes possible. But it also involves a conflict of interests, since persons are not indifferent as to “how the greater benefits produced by their collaboration are distributed ...” (Rawls, 1999, rev. ed., p. 4). Two kinds of conflict are at issue: conflict about how the goods of economic production are shared and conflict about the degree to which the rules of interaction favor the promotion of their differing

conceptions of the good. Institutions may do the latter by, for example, allowing individuals to learn about differing views through forms of education and individual advocacy.

One way in which Rawls' theory is a *liberal* view is its acceptance of conflicts of these two kinds as inevitable features of the modern societies he is discussing. Non-liberal views of either the left or the right may hold that such conflicts are a kind of social pathology, which truly desirable social institutions would eliminate. But Rawls holds that they cannot be avoided. A second way **in which Rawls' theory is a liberal view** lies in the fact that he sees conflicts of values in particular as ineliminable because the only way to avoid them would involve unacceptable interference with the liberty of individuals to adopt and pursue their own conceptions of the good.

2. The Role of Principles of Justice

Rawls' view is that social institutions must manage conflicts of these two kinds—economic conflicts and conflicts of values—in a way that is fair to the participants. Principles of justice are standards of fairness that say how this is to be done (hence the name for his view: “justice as fairness”). What Rawls calls a “well-ordered society” is one in which certain principles of justice are publicly recognized as the basis for assessing complaints against its basic structure and demands for change, and in which these basic institutions are, and are understood to be, in conformity with these principles.

Rawls' idea of justice is thus a distinctively *political* conception, in two senses. First, the principles of justice he develops apply directly only to the basic institutions of a society, not, for example, to the conduct of individuals. As he puts it, the basic structure is the subject of justice (See: Rawls, 1993, Lecture VII). Principles of justice are not derived from a more general moral theory, such as utilitarianism, that also applies to individual conduct. Rather, they have this distinctively political subject matter.

Second, principles of justice are political in that they do not merely answer an abstract question in political philosophy, about which institutions are just. In addition, they are designed to play a particular political role in an actual society, as publicly recognized standards that serve as a basis for debating and resolving actual

disagreements. In order for principles of justice to play this role, most members of the society must see themselves as having reason to accept these principles as a basis for settling these disagreements, and they must have common ways of reasoning about what these principles in fact require. I will return below to both of these practical conditions that principles of justice must satisfy in order to play their role in a society.

How are principles that are to play this role themselves to be justified? Two questions of justification need to be considered. The first is how a set of principles **can be shown to be an appropriate standard of fairness. Rawls's answer is that** principles would be such a standard if they would be chosen for this role by individuals who had no reason to favor either side of the primary conflicts that a society involves. This is the rationale for his Original Position, in which individuals are supposed to choose principles to play this role in their society from behind a **“veil of ignorance” that prevents them from knowing their economic position or the** conception of the good¹ that they want to advance. Parties in the Original Position do not engage in moral argument. Rather, they select principles simply with the aim of securing for themselves, insofar as they can, a larger rather than a smaller share of the goods and opportunities that social institutions deliver. (Desire for these goods and opportunities is, after all, what conflicts over the design of basic social institutions are about).

But even if Rawls is correct that the fact that certain principles would be chosen in his Original Position shows that they are an appropriate standard for assessing the fairness of the basic institutions of a society, there is a further question of justification. This is the question of why an individual should take the fact that the basic institutions of his or her society are fair (in this sense) as a conclusive reason for accepting those institutions. This question **“Why be just?” or “Why be fair?”—is what Rawls called the question of “the good of the sense of justice”** (Rawls, 1999 a, Section 86). It is a question about what an individual has sufficient reason to do, all things considered—that is to say, taking into account not only the reasons that animate the choices of parties in the Original Position, but all the reasons that the

1. A person's 'conception of the good' is the term Rawls uses in *A Theory of Justice* to refer to the particular aims that a person takes him or herself to have reason to pursue in life. Later, in *Political Liberalism* he uses the terms 'comprehensive doctrine' or 'comprehensive doctrine.' I will discuss the difference between these later in this paper.

person has, whatever these may be.

As political philosophers, we are interested in answering the question of the good of justice as a general question of moral and normative truth. The answer that any one of us will arrive at will of course depend on our beliefs about the reasons that we have. These will include reasons depending on what Rawls calls our conception of the good, including beliefs about the religion, if any, that we have reason to follow. Some of these beliefs may of course be mistaken. (We are all mistaken about some things!) But the *correct* answer to the question of the good of the sense of justice, as I am understanding it, and as I think Rawls understood it (although I am not certain about that¹), depends on what the truth is about the reasons individuals have, not on what individuals perhaps mistakenly believe this truth to be. The question we are all asking is whether having a sense of justice really is a good, not just whether any particular person believes it to be one.

3. The Question of Stability and the Idea of Comprehensive Doctrines

There is, however, a further question to be addressed that takes into account **individuals' beliefs about the reasons** they have, whether or not these beliefs are correct. This is what Rawls called the question of stability, which is the question of whether, in a society governed by his two principles of justice, the number of citizens in each generation who continue to accept these principles would be **sufficient to render the society stable over time. This is the first of the two “practical conditions” I mentioned above that principles of justice must satisfy in order to play their intended role in an actual society.**² In Chapter VIII of *A Theory of Justice* Rawls argued, citing psychological principles of moral development, that individuals growing up in a well-ordered society in which his principles were accepted and the basic institutions satisfied these principles, would come to have a sense of justice based on those principles. But unless more can be said, they might

1. As normative realist, I believe that there is in many cases a fact of the matter about the reasons individuals have. For an elaboration and defense of this view see my book, *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Rawls was less committal about this question. Whatever his own views of the matter may have been, normative realism – the view that there are facts about the reasons for action that individuals have – is a metaphysical view of the kind that he did not want his political theory to depend on.

2. Rawls addressed this question in *A Theory of Justice*, Section 76, and later in a different way and at greater length in *Political Liberalism*.

see this psychological tendency simply as a form of social conditioning. What we need to be able to say in addition is that a sufficient number of these individuals would see themselves as having sufficient reason to endorse the sense of justice that they tend to acquire. In Section 86 of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argued that they would see themselves as having sufficient reason to do this, based in part on the fact that they would see that in doing this they would be endorsing their nature **as autonomous beings in Kant's sense. Rawls later came to reject this argument,** because it relied on the unrealistic assumption that all, or even most, individuals in such a society would come to hold what Rawls calls a liberal “comprehensive doctrine” of the Kantian sort.

The term, ‘comprehensive doctrine,’ requires some explanation. What Rawls calls comprehensive doctrines are views that include ideas about the meaning and value of human life and ideals of personal virtue and character (See: Rawls, 1993, pp. xviii, 13, 175; Rawls, 2001, pp. 14, 19). So understood, a comprehensive doctrine will include claims about the aims individuals have reason to pursue in life—what Rawls called in *A Theory of Justice* a “conception of the good”. What makes a doctrine “comprehensive,” however is that it goes beyond this and includes also more abstract ideas, often metaphysical, about the nature and value of human life.¹ Kant's idea that humans are distinctively valuable because of their capacity for rational autonomy, which Rawls appealed to in his argument for stability in *A Theory of Justice*, is a comprehensive doctrine in this sense. It has implications for how one should live, but it also makes claims that go beyond this. Religious doctrines also have implications for the aims we should pursue, but they ground these claims in accounts of the nature and value of human life, such as that humans are made in the image of God. Rational intuitionism about morality, the view that there are facts about moral right and wrong that we should be guided by, and that

1. Rawls' use of the veil of ignorance in his Original Position to exclude consideration of conceptions of the good, and his later strategy of avoiding appeal to comprehensive doctrines in answering the question of stability, might both be seen as forms of neutrality, that are generalized versions of a doctrine of religious tolerance (generalized because they aspire to neutrality among a wider range of views, not only religious ones.) But these ideas aspire to forms of neutrality for quite different reasons. The Veil of Ignorance excludes conceptions of the good as a way of ensuring that the *content* of the principles chosen is not biased in favor of those who hold a particular view of this kind. The problem with appeals to comprehensive doctrines in answering the question of stability, however, has to do not with the particular conclusions that they would support but with the fact that they base these conclusions on premises about which there is bound to be reasonable disagreement.

we have access to by means of a faculty of rational intuition, also counts as a comprehensive doctrine according to Rawls (Rawls, 2001, p. 28).

The crucial fact about comprehensive doctrines, for Rawls, is that they involve matters about which there is bound to be disagreement between rational, **conscientious people. This is what he called “the fact of reasonable pluralism”**: the fact that individuals in a free modern society would, reasonably, come to hold a variety of comprehensive doctrines. He believed that the answer to the problem of stability that he gave in *A Theory of Justice*, because of its reliance on wide acceptance of a Kantian comprehensive doctrine, was incompatible with this fact. So in *Political Liberalism* and other later writings he offered a different answer to the question of stability. This relied on the idea that many different religions and other comprehensive doctrines can provide sufficient reasons for endorsing a liberal sense of justice based on principles of the kind that Rawls defends. Any view **that is what he called (perhaps tententiously) a “reasonable” one will provide such** reasons. A comprehensive doctrine is reasonable in the sense Rawls has in mind if, **first, it recognizes that as a result of the limitations of our nature that he called “the burdens of judgment,” rational conscientious individuals will arrive at differing** comprehensive doctrines about the nature and value of human life. Second, a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not endorse a policy of using political power to prevent others from affirming their own comprehensive doctrines, as long as these views are also reasonable (i.e. tolerant) ones.

Secular comprehensive doctrines can be reasonable or unreasonable, and Rawls recognized that versions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam can, similarly, be reasonable (i.e. tolerant) doctrines in his sense. It can, however, be unclear whether a given doctrine is in fact reasonable in Rawls sense, since such doctrines involve a complex of elements, some of which may be in conflict with each other, and the relative priority given to these elements may change over time. Rawls observes, for example, that the Second Vatican Conference resolved what had been an ambiguity in Roman Catholic doctrine by confirming the commitment of Roman Catholicism to the idea of religious freedom based on the dignity of the human person, thereby confirming that this doctrine is a reasonable one.¹ Among factors moving religious views toward becoming reasonable doctrines in his sense, Rawls

1. “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in John Rawls, 1999b, p. 603, n75.

mentions the widely recognized idea of the importance of sincere affirmation of faith, which entails the illegitimacy of forced observance or conversion (See, for example, Rawls, 1993, p. 28, pp. 58-62, 145). But refraining from the use of force to prevent others from affirming their own comprehensive doctrines requires a further form of tolerance: not only recognizing, as it were, the sovereignty of each individual over his or her beliefs but also recognizing the importance for individuals of being able act in public in ways that exhibit their beliefs. The French ban on the wearing of headscarves by school girls, for example, counts as an intolerant use of political power in this further sense.¹

No mere philosophical argument could establish that liberal social institutions of the kind Rawls is defending will actually be stable over time. Whether any such institutions are stable in this way is a difficult empirical matter depending on good luck, as on many other factors. What Rawls tries to establish in *Political Liberalism* is the more limited claim that the stability of liberal institutions does not depend on the unrealistic assumption that all of the members of that society will come to hold the same liberal comprehensive doctrine. It would be sufficient for the stability of liberal institutions over time if a sufficient number of members of a society come to hold reasonable comprehensive doctrines, because any such view will entail that individuals have good reasons to affirm liberal principles of justice as the basis for assessing their political institutions.

The reasons for affirming this will be different depending on the comprehensive doctrine in question. Among secular views, Kant's view and the utilitarian view espoused by John Stuart Mill will offer different reasons for supporting liberal institutions, and different reasons for tolerance will be provided by different reasonable religious views. (In other words, holders of these different views will arrive at positive answers to the question of "the good of justice" in different ways.) The result, Rawls claims, is that a liberal conception of justice will be supported by what he calls an "overlapping consensus" among these differing views of the value of human life and the best life for humans.

1. I discuss tolerance in this further sense in "The Difficulty of Tolerance," in *The Difficulty of Tolerance: Essays in Political Philosophy*, pp. 187-202.

4. The Idea of Public Reason

If Rawls is correct, the existence of such an overlapping consensus fulfills the first of the two practical conditions on a conception of justice that I mentioned above. But the second condition remains: that holders of differing comprehensive doctrines should have a common way of reasoning about what the principles of justice require.¹ **Rawls' answer to this problem lies in what he called "public reason," an idea that is related to the idea of "overlapping consensus" and often conflated with it, but which should be seen as distinct, because it is a solution to a different problem.**

That problem follows from the fact that principles of justice are very abstract. **Rawls' first principle of justice, for example, gives priority to the protection of certain equal basic liberties.** It specifies these liberties only in very general terms, by means of a list, and says little about their content. He says, for example, **"Important among these are political liberty (the right to vote and to hold public office) and freedom of speech and assembly; liberty of conscience and freedom of thought; freedom of the person, which includes freedom from psychological oppression and physical assault and dismemberment (integrity of the person); the right to hold personal property and freedom from arbitrary arrest and seizure as defined by the concept of the rule of law"** (Rawls, 1999 a, rev. ed., p. 53).

In order to make these liberties specific in a constitution and laws, and in order to resolve controversies about the interpretation of these rights and liberties, it is necessary to appeal to many judgments of relative value. In order, for example, to defend a particular interpretation of freedom of speech it is necessary to assign a value to having the opportunity to engage in certain forms of expression as compared, for example, with the value of being free from certain kinds of disturbance and offense. If different religions and different secular views of the good life entail different answers to these questions of value, then adherents of these views, if they rely on these differing answers, will not arrive at the same conclusions about what the basic liberties require, even if they have an

1. As Rawls puts it, "For an agreement on the principles of justice to be effective, and to support a public basis of justification, there must be a companion agreement on the guidelines for public inquiry and on the criteria as to what kind of information and knowledge is relevant in discussing political questions, at least when these involve the constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice" (Rawls, 2001, p. 89).

“overlapping consensus” on the importance of those liberties abstractly conceived.

Rawls' idea of public reason includes a set of political values and methods of reasoning that he believes all of these parties should accept as the proper basis for settling such questions. These methods include “forms of reasoning found in common sense and the methods and conclusions of science, when not controversial” (Rawls, 2001, pp. 95-96). Political values include such things as the conditions necessary to have a well-functioning political system including the kind of education required to function as citizens (including education of children); conditions necessary to have a well-functioning economy, including education and also various forms of infrastructure; and conditions necessary for the rule of law and the protection of individual security, such as an effective system of courts and police; and conditions that individuals require to make important choices about their own lives and to be prepared to participate in public life and in the economy on a basis of equal opportunity (**This is my list, not Rawls'**).

It would be unrealistic to think that there will not be disagreement about tradeoffs among these values. Rawls' point is just that these political values abstract from many sectarian differences in a way that makes agreement about individual rights and liberties possible. For example, those who hold different religions can agree on the importance, for every individual, of being able to choose and practice his or her own religion, even though they may disagree about which religion individuals should adopt.

This point can also be put in terms of Rawls' idea of “the concept of the person” that is appropriate for use in the justification of basic political institutions. Citizens should, he says, see themselves and each other as “free and equal” and as having certain fundamental interests, in developing a sense of justice and in being free to adopt and pursue their own conceptions of the good. This is not, as the term ‘concept of the person’ might suggest, a metaphysical view about the nature of persons. It is rather a normative view about the reasons that individuals are to be seen as having and are to be given equal status *in the justification of basic institutions*. Here Rawls is in agreement with Durkheim, who argued that the basis of unity in a society must lie in something that its members can see themselves as having in common. In a modern society, in which citizens hold and move between different religions and different social positions, Durkheim held that the only thing

that they have in common, and that can therefore serve as a basis of social unity, is “their humanity ... the constitutive attributes of the human person (*personne humaine*) in general” (Durkheim, 1973, p. 51).

I have so far been discussing the idea of public reason as the solution to a problem about how principles of justice can serve as public standards of justification in a pluralistic society. But Rawls also invokes this idea as a norm of public deliberation. Citizens have, he says, a duty of civility to engage in argument about constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice by appeal to political values and the standards of public reason rather than in terms peculiar to their own **sectarian viewpoint. Two points about Rawls’ idea of public reason should be noted.**

The first is that the limitation on political justification that I have just mentioned (the restriction to the values and methods of public reason) applies only **to deliberation about “constitutional essentials** and questions of basic justice” (Rawls, 1993, p. 214). It would be impractical to apply this limit to every legislative decision. Many questions that legislatures must decide depend on a broader range of values. A rational decision about whether to build a road or, instead, to preserve a wilderness area, or whether to fund museums or sports arenas, has to include debate about the merits of these projects, taking into account the full range of values involved. At the end of the debate, there is bound to be disagreement, and the question of what to do then has to be settled by a vote. The result of such a vote can be legitimate as long as the process involved is procedurally fair and no rights are abridged by the outcome. But the question of what these fair procedures must be, and the boundaries of the rights that place limits on majority rule, cannot themselves be set by voting. These standards and limits need to be publicly justified, and public reason is one constraint on the kind of justification that is required.¹

1. This seems to me to explain why the constraints of public reason apply only to arguments about “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice.” Rawls expresses this limit in many places. See, for example, *Political Liberalism* Lecture VI, esp. pp. 227-230, and “The Idea of Public Revisited,” in: John Rawls: *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman, 1999 b, pp. 573-615. I find this view of the scope of public reason the most defensible in itself and as an interpretation of Rawls. There are, however, some passages in which Rawls appears to support a wider view, which would require legislation to be supportable by public reason in order to be legitimate. See, for example, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, p. 90 where Rawls says, “The duty of civility requires us in due course to make our case for the legislation and public policies we support in terms of public reasons.”

A second point is that Rawls idea of public reason has been criticized by some as hostile to religion—as “unfairly excluding religion from any role in the public square”.¹ This criticism strikes me as unfounded, for three reasons. First, it is **unfounded as a description of the rationale for Rawls' view. Rawls' reason for shifting to the solution to the problem of stability that he gives in *Political Liberalism*, based on the ideas of overlapping consensus and public reason, was his belief that the answer he had given earlier, in *A Theory of Justice*, unjustifiably privileged his own, liberal and secular comprehensive doctrine, by assuming that the citizens of the well-ordered society he was imagining would all, or almost all, come to hold that view. He shifted to reliance on the ideas of overlapping consensus and public reason not in order to cordon off religious views but to avoid being objectionably sectarian himself.**

Second, these ideas are not hostile to religion in their content. Public reason gives great importance to the value, for each individual, of being able to adopt his or her own religious (or non-religious) view about the basic values of human life, and to live in accord with the view he or she adopts. What public reason excludes is only the distinctive value of any particular such view, religious or otherwise. **Rawls' requirement of public reason thus involves a kind of division within the outlook of any person who accepts it. On the one hand, such a person accepts that, *in answering questions about the basic institutions of society*, no comprehensive doctrine, religious or otherwise, has greater standing than any other. What matters for settling *these* questions is just the reasons that individuals have for wanting to be able to adopt and live in accordance with their own particular view, whatever this view may be.** Third, as noted in the previous point, the restriction to public reason applies only to these particular questions. In making choices about how to live his or her own life, or even, I believe, in addressing questions about ordinary legislation, an individual is properly guided by his or her own comprehensive doctrine, and can properly see other doctrines as (in greater or lesser degrees) mistaken.

On the idea of the distinction between the view a person is to take when addressing questions of basic justice and the view he or she takes in ordinary life,

1. For sympathetic discussion of this objection see Philip L. Quinn, “Political Liberalisms and their Exclusion of the Religious”, pp. 35-56.

it is instructive to compare Rawls' position with the position Karl Marx takes in his 1843 essay, "On the Jewish Question" (Karl Marx, 1978, pp. 26-52). In that essay, Marx was responding to Bruno Bauer, who had claimed that it was incoherent for Jews to ask for religious toleration. Bauer held that because religious toleration involves seeing various religions as of equal standing, Jews could not demand, and accept, religious toleration without seeing Judaism as simply one religion among others, thereby, as he put it, "ceasing to be Jewish." The analogous thing could be said of Catholics, or adherents of any other religion or adherents of any particular secular view about the good life. But Bauer discussed the case of Jews because it was their claim to toleration that was in question at that time.

Marx said that Bauer was mistaken. He failed to see that accepting religious toleration did not involve equating different religions, but only accepting that the difference between them was *politically* and *legally* irrelevant. This did not involve abolishing religion any more than eliminating the property qualification for voting involves abolishing property. Religious toleration is thus a coherent view, Marx held. It involves distinguishing between two points of view, which Marx called "the point of view of a man" and "the point of view of a citizen." The point of view of a man is relevant for making decisions about one's own life. The point of view of citizen is the point of view one should adopt when making decisions in political life, such as, in Rawls' view, decisions about constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice.

Marx's position thus resembles Rawls' up to a point, but only up to a point. Marx criticized Bauer for failing to recognize the elimination of religious discrimination and the restriction of the franchise to property owners as important advances. But Marx went on to say that "political emancipation" of this kind was not enough, because it left individuals divided within themselves (between the outlook of citizens and the outlook of human beings) and left them separated from others by differences of religion and class. True human emancipation, Marx said, would involve the elimination of both of these forms of alienation. By contrast, Rawls, as a liberal, is prepared to accept conflicts of these kinds as unavoidable features of a modern society.

But Rawls also goes one step toward healing the first of these divides, the one within the self. By giving a positive answer to the question of "the good of the sense

of justice,” Rawls provides a reason, “from the point of view of a man,” for accepting the requirements of public reason (i.e. “the point of view of a citizen”) *for political purposes*, that is to say, for the purposes of thinking about the basic terms of cooperation with others. And he argues that each party to an “overlapping consensus” among reasonable comprehensive doctrines will also have achieved a reconciliation of these two points of view, for his or her own reasons. So according to Rawls the outlook of liberalism is one that we all have sufficient reason to adopt (because there is a valid positive answer to the question of the good of a sense of justice) and one that a wide range of people should (given their particular comprehensive doctrines) see themselves as having good reason to adopt for political purposes.

Conclusion

I have tried in this paper to present some of John Rawls' main points in *A Theory of Justice* and in *Political Liberalism* as a series of related ideas, extending from the idea of society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage and the idea of fair terms of cooperation, through the idea of the distinctive practical role of principles of justice, to the ideas of overlapping consensus and public reason. I hope to have clarified these ideas and the relations between them, and to have explained how Rawls' theory is a liberal view but not one that is hostile to religion.

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