

PLURALISM REVISITED: A VIEW FROM THE NEW WORLD

“Critical Reflections on Alternative Paths to Modernity”

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My goal this afternoon is to reflect in a different way, and in a different context, on questions that animated Rivka’s book on Galileo and the Church, which is the question of how systems of belief relate to, and often clash with, everything else we know. I will locate this question within the American experience, where the attempt to keep the public square free of religion has proven especially problematic and, I will suggest, rightly so. After outlining the founding conventions on this matter in the United States, I will set out a revision proposed by John Rawls, before turning to a more promising approach based on ideas initially formulated by Alfred North Whitehead.

The framers of the U.S. Constitution declared that each citizen of the newly forming republic had been divinely endowed with an inalienable right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In making this declaration, the founders followed Aristotle, who contended some two millennia before the founding of the United States, that the character of authentic human life is such that happiness stands as its chief end. The founders did not choose a substantive approach to happiness, in part because of their historically-justifiable determination to keep the domains of church and state separate. The First Amendment to the constitution makes clear that the basic concern of James Madison, the Amendment’s chief architect, was the protection of the right of freedom of conscience. The Virginia Declaration of Rights, on which Madison based his assertion in the First Amendment, declares that all persons have “an equal right to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of conscience,” a notion given theological ground in the duty of every person towards the creator. Since this duty precedes in both time and degree the obligation to the state, the inalienable and equal right to the free exercise of religion necessarily follows.

The ideal of religious liberty entails not only being able to hold religious beliefs and engage in worship freely, but also to act on one’s beliefs, in both individual as well as common domains of life. This is to say that religious convictions are all-encompassing; they cannot be limited to one’s private life alone, and indeed can

legitimately be limited only by the proviso that the actions of one individual based on his or her beliefs do not impede the ability of other people to exercise their own beliefs. This limitation, in other words, does not exclude, from the political or public realm, actions based on religious conviction. As Columbia Law School professor Kent Greenawalt has pointed out in his volume, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*, “the claim that citizens and legislators should rely exclusively on secular grounds is not only wrong but absurd. It invites religious persons to displace their most firmly rooted convictions about values, the nature of humanity, and the universe in a quest for a common basis of judgment that is inevitably unavailing when virtually everyone must rely on personal perspectives.”

If personal perspectives and religious convictions cannot, in fact, be banned from the public realm, the resulting problem, as the late Harvard political philosopher John Rawls says in his book, *Political Liberalism*, is to discover how it is “possible that there exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines.” The answer that Rawls asserts includes an ideal of public reason centered on what he calls the “criterion of reciprocity,” which states that in the public realm only those reasons for action are legitimate if we can reasonably think that others might also reasonably accept them. However, citizens of a given community do not all engage in the common life of the community for the same reasons; the ground may be common, but the reasons for standing on it are diverse, even incompatible.

In making this claim, Rawls stands firmly in the liberal tradition of political philosophy, a tradition committed to the essential understanding of human beings as free to choose their own individual conceptions of the good, and a tradition thus often confounded (and at times stymied) by the challenge, within a radically pluralist political context, of describing both an arena and a set of rules for achieving moral consensus. Rawls seeks to formulate principles of justice acceptable to all who affirm that a pluralism of comprehensive views should be legitimate. For the individual citizens themselves, then, a theory of justice will be acceptable only if it satisfies their moral interest in pursuing their individual good as they understand it, and in being reasonable, which given Rawls’s analysis, means seeking to cooperate with the adherents of other comprehensive views. The challenge for such a theory is to win an overlapping consensus—not to show all citizens involved that any idea they all share is true, but only that they have reason to accept it.

Unlike comprehensive theories, Rawls’s theory does not state what justice requires in all situations, or how all of society’s institutions could be organized to achieve justice. Moreover, overlapping consensus may be achieved based on an individual’s moral or religious reasons that, from a philosophical point of view, are inadequate or have been discredited. The goal is not for individuals in their roles as

human beings to accept principles of justice as true, but only for them, in their roles as citizens within the political system, to accept these principles as reasonable. According to Rawls, these principles about justice can be worked out by appeal to ideas about justice that are latent within the basic political, social and economic institutions of democratic societies and stand independent of any particular comprehensive understanding of moral, religious, or philosophical values or ideals. As Rawls puts it, they are “intuitive ideas that, because they are imbedded in our society’s main institutions and the historical traditions of their interpretation, can be regarded as implicitly shared.”

My own view is that Rawls’s insistence that his principles of justice are freestanding, that is, independent of the comprehensive claims that constitute the overlapping consensus, cannot be supported. Even if a group of citizens reaches an overlapping consensus about justice based on their own comprehensive commitments, they would surely not agree that the principles of justice thus derived are wholly independent of their commitments. The claim that justice is independent of any conception of the good implies a conception of the good that no theory of justice could support. A theory of justice established independent of an ontological basis ultimately involves the denial of comprehensive claims.

It’s true that in a modern democratic society in which citizens hold divergent and often incompatible views about what constitutes the good life, it is sometimes necessary to bracket moral and religious convictions in order to secure social cooperation based on mutual respect. But, as Michael Sandel asks in his book, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, “what is to ensure that this interest is always so important as to outweigh any competing interest that could arise from within a comprehensive moral or religious view?” Rawls does not claim that the moral or religious views held by citizens are untrue, which would be one possible justification for excluding them, only that the views cannot be considered in any public deliberation. Nor does he claim that moral or religious views address different issues from those taken up in public discourse; if the subject matter were discrete, as Sandel points out, there would be no reason to exclude them. Yet Rawls insists that political values normally outweigh whatever nonpolitical values that conflict with them.

Sandel cites one obvious example in which what he calls grave moral and religious questions bear heavily on a political controversy: the debate between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas over popular sovereignty and the morality of slavery. Douglas argued that the national policy of the U.S. should be neutral on the issue, since people were bound to disagree. The only hope of holding the country together was to bracket the moral controversy over slavery and respect the right of each state and territory to decide these questions for themselves. The real issue in this controversy, Lincoln responded, is between those who view slavery as a wrong and those who do not

view it as a wrong. And, he went on to insist, it is reasonable to bracket the question of slavery only if slavery is not the moral evil he considered it to be. In other words, the debate between Lincoln and Douglas was centered around whether to bracket a moral controversy for the sake of political agreement, not about the morality of slavery. Lincoln put the matter of bracketing succinctly. “Is it not false statesmanship that undertakes to build up a system of policy upon the basis of caring nothing about the very thing that everybody cares the most about?”

In an effort to find a way around this impasse, we turn to Alfred North Whitehead, the early 20th century Trinity College mathematician turned Harvard philosopher. In 1927 and 1928, Whitehead delivered the Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen and Edinburgh, surely one of the pivotal moments in human intellectual history. The following year, in 1929, the lectures were published as *Process and Reality*, in which Whitehead famously describes the work of philosophy as “the endeavor to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted.”

One of these general ideas is that every element of existence is what it is by virtue of its relationships to everything else. Whitehead calls this the “principle of relativity”. Because we are constituted by our experience, Whitehead says, the relationships that constitute our experience create value — value for us, and value for others. Conversely, if there are no relationships, then there is no existence, and thus no value. In summary form, Whitehead says, “We are, each of us, one among others; and all are embraced in the unity of the whole.”

Whitehead applies this experience of value to democracy in the following passage from his book, *Modes of Thought*, published in 1938.

The basis of democracy is the common fact of value experience, as constituting the essential nature of each pulse of actuality. Everything has some value for itself, for others, for the whole. This characterizes the meaning of actuality. By reason of this character, constituting reality, the conception of morals arises. We have no right to deface the value experience which is the very essence of the universe. Existence, in its own nature, is the upholding of value intensity. Also no unit can separate itself from the others, and from the whole. And yet each unit exists in its own right. It upholds value intensity for itself, and this involves sharing value intensity with the universe.

While the world necessarily provides for individuals the constituent elements of their experiences of value, in so doing it enables diverse ways of understanding the experience of value itself. These diverse understandings of the value of the public world,

in turn, form the basis of an individual's comprehensive commitments, which, because they are commitments, have a private origin, but because they are comprehensive, have a public trajectory. Comprehensive commitments are the motive force behind an individual's engagement in the public world.

Given this interplay of value between the individual and the public world, what does justice require? That is, what principles adequately enable yet appropriately limit the interplay of often incompatible comprehensive commitments in the public world? I will mention three things that justice requires in contexts of persistent pluralism.

First, justice requires freedom, so that the political context in which comprehensive commitments attempt to fulfill themselves is an extension of the ontological reality that enabled them to form in the first place. Justice also requires faith—both a faith that affirms the reality and trustworthiness of our experience, and a faith that articulates our comprehensive commitments and thereby expresses our political purpose. Finally, justice requires that persuasion be the principal means of adjudicating the interplay of incompatible comprehensive commitments in the public world. Religion, in order to fulfill this mandate, must be rational, not in the sense that it can or should explain the ground of its comprehensive commitments on the basis of ordinary knowledge, but in the sense that it can, in publicly accessible terms, justify its political purposes.

Let me say more about what I mean by freedom, faith, and persuasion in this context by reflecting on Whitehead's insights. In a democracy characterized by persistent pluralism, justice requires freedom. For his part, Whitehead affirms freedom's central role when he observes that every final actuality (or final real thing) is an instance of self-creative process. This means that nothing can wholly determine the being of something else; thus, freedom is a strictly universal principle. Whitehead goes on to classify both historic and contemporary forms of government in terms of how each conceives of freedom as related to relevant opportunities for individuals within the society. The decisive shift from political barbarism to civilized political governance came in the transition from societies based on the presupposition of slavery to societies based on the presupposition of individual freedom.

In theoretical terms, this shift was marked by the acceptance of the dignity of human nature as a premise of political interpretation. This dignity was articulated in terms of essential human rights, conceived as arising from sheer humanity, secured by laws applying equally to both rulers and governed, and achieved by the people freely organizing themselves.

Justice in a pluralist democracy also requires faith. Whitehead's endeavor to set forth a system of speculative philosophy is based upon his faith that there is an ultimate nature of things, and that this nature of things can be known and described by human reason. More precisely, Whitehead believes that the nature of things will reveal an

ultimate unity such that all elements of reality are part of that unity. As Whitehead puts it, the hope is that “we fail to find in experience any element intrinsically incapable of exhibition as examples of general theory.” This hope, he adds, is not “a metaphysical premise,” but rather “the faith which forms the motive for the pursuit of all sciences alike, including metaphysics.” The basis of this hope is faith in what Whitehead calls “the rationality of things” and the “ultimate moral intuition into the nature of intellectual action.”

In a context where individuals disagree profoundly about fundamental issues, justice requires faith that each individual’s experience of the world be trustworthy. Based on these experiences, each person develops certain beliefs about the nature and meaning of our existence. These comprehensive commitments constitute a particular way of interpreting the telos of life, and our lives, albeit private, become the source of the purpose in terms of which we engage other human beings in the public world. Our comprehensive commitments, in other words, become our political purpose.

And finally, in a political system characterized by religious pluralism, justice requires that persuasion, and not coercion or other forms of violence, be the principle form of adjudicating competing political claims. As Rawls and other have noted at length, the interplay of incompatible comprehensive commitments is a signal feature of the modern world. For all who are actors on the political stage, therefore, their political purposes are driven by their ultimate concerns. Since, presumably, these differing views can be articulated by the use of reason and modified through the use of persuasion, persuasion can help adjudicate among competing claims. The goal is to provide a means by which democracy can accommodate religious plurality. The presence of a plurality of religions, in other words, is the result of the presence of various ways of expressing what people take to be adequate general ideas. Since persuasion can operate in such a society, it can provide the means whereby incompatible comprehensive commitments can interrelate.

For his part, Whitehead suggests that civilization involves both the triumph of persuasion over force and the extension of liberty in the realms of human thought and action. Persuasion and liberty, however, are contingent on what Whitehead calls the “fortunate adjustment” of the human character in society. Whitehead believes, as did Plato, that “there can be no successful democratic society till general education conveys a philosophic outlook,” as he states in his 1933 volume, *Adventures of Ideas*. Philosophy, in this context, is not “a ferocious debate between irritable professors.” Rather, it is a survey of possibilities and their comparison with actualities. “In philosophy, the fact, the theory, the alternatives, and the ideal, are weighed together. Its gifts are insight and foresight, and a sense of the worth of life, in short, that sense of importance which nerves all civilized effort.” In this sense, philosophy is the duty not just of a few specialists, but also of all citizens. “It is our business—philosophers,

students, and practical men—to recreate and reenact a vision of the world, including those elements of reverence and order without which society lapses into riot, and penetrated through and through with unflinching rationality.” This vision, Whitehead believes, will provide a “properly concrete philosophy in guiding the purposes of humankind.”

Whitehead expresses much the same conviction when he described the way in which human activities extend beyond themselves into ever greater bonds of sympathy as “the growth of reverence for that power in virtue of which nature harbours ideal ends, and produces individuals capable of conscious discrimination of such ends.” This reverence, which is the foundation of the respect for human beings as human, secures the liberty of thought and action that is “required for the upward adventure of life on this Earth.”