

Book Review

John Rawls- Debating Major Questions

Jon Mandle & Sarah Roberts-Cady (ed) 2020

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John Rawls–Debating Major Questions is an edited book by Jon Mandle and Sarah Roberts-Cady on Rawls’ ideas about justice and how these ideas can aid us to answer critical contemporary political and philosophical questions. Rawls has always occupied a position of providence among the galaxy of philosophers of the twentieth century. He reinvigorated the social contract traditions to defend the moral and normative foundations of the idea of justice. He attempted to offer an ideal, anti-utilitarian and liberal understanding of justice premised on the idea of mutual social –cooperation among rational individuals. Rawls effectively also managed to address the concerns of distributive justice by juxtaposing the liberty principle and the difference principle in his paradigm of justice as fairness. His influence is so far reaching that if we are to meditate on some of the contemporary questions concerning humanity, ignoring him is a philosophical loss and should be entertained at our own peril.

The book under review is an argumentatively rich compendium of engaging essays (spread over ten parts) contemplating on key pressing issues and questions of our contemporary political philosophy using Rawls’ ideation of justice as a launching pad. The book has an interesting structure in which each section begins with a lucid introduction and is followed by discussion by the two sides of the spectrum on a particular aspect of Rawls’ contemplations on justice. The book engages at different places to uncover the defects, weaknesses as well as strengths of Rawls’ imaginary ideas such as the original position and the veil of

ignorance. It is pertinent to ask if the parties to a social contract are unaware of their particular context (blinded by the veil of ignorance) then how the principles that they choose at hypothetical original position can be applied to an actual context. What is the real basis of their choices? The book is a serious mediation on such and many other aspects of Rawls' thinking. Among many other ideas that are discussed in the book are- the idea of public reason or relevance of Rawls' proclivity for ideal theory of justice, place of economic liberties within a distributive/egalitarian exemplar of justice and what exactly is to be distributed under Rawls' difference principle or whether Rawls' theory can address the issues of dependent people such as disabled or children in our society. The book validly also questions Rawls' two principles of justice and asks whether it can address significant feminist concerns. It also ponders on whether his ideas have enough material to address justice for non-humans. These are only some of the indicative questions in the contemporary political philosophy that book effectively brings to the fore ensuing its critical examination.

In the part one of the book Rawls' idea of public reason is discussed at length. Is public reason as an idea exclusive and unfairly leaves out ideas from the dialogue that emanate from deeply held religious convictions? David Reidy rightly doubts the idea of public reason connecting its discussion to the concept of citizenship and pointing out two important reasons to show its incompleteness. He maintains that public reason lacks the resources needed to settle some constitutional essentials or matters of basic justice regarding eligibility for citizenship and inclusion within the domain of the political. On the other hand James Boettcher attempts to defend public reason by explaining his principle of Wide Public Reason which according to him is consistent with political autonomy and liberal legitimacy.

Rawls' penchant for approaching philosophical questions of justice through ideal theory is at the core of discussions in the article of the part two of the book. Identifying ideal standards of justice was of importance for Rawls and his critics like Amartya Sen argue that such transcendental conceptualizations offer scanty solutions to the actual contexts/non ideal world riddled with problems like racism, sexism, ablesim or various forms of dominations and discriminations. Colin Farrelly challenges Rawls ideal assumptions and subscribes to Mills' argument on any

ideal theory. The argument states that it distorts our values and understanding of manifest injustices in the world. Matthew Adams in his response to Farrelly's standpoint argues that ideal theory is valuable for multiple reasons and most importantly it provides evaluative criteria that highlight the wrongness of actual injustice.

The other essays in the book are persuasive and rich in arguments and offer a compelling discussion on some significant aspects of Rawls ideas on justice. The libertarians' questioning of place of economic liberty within paradigm of justice is interesting to read but is easily countered by Alan Thomas' proposition that right is best protected by property- owning democracy, an economic structure that Rawls describes as an alternative to both socialism and welfare- state capitalism. One major criticism that Rawls' justice faces is its inadequacy to provide answers to questions of gender inequality or sexual and reproductive rights of women. Essay by Victoria Costa effectively brings out this indeterminacy of Rawls' model of justice while Christie Hartley and Lori Watson intelligibly defend it by stating that political liberalism has space for reciprocity which provides enough ground for feminist critique of social conditions.

Rawls' contribution to the philosophical foundations of justice is seminal and the book under review brilliantly brings to the fore his strengths and weakness by connecting it with contemporary quandary within political philosophy. It is a must read for those who wish to revisit Rawls for fresh perspectives.

