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Neither history nor praxis

RAYMOND GEUSS

Department of Philosophy, University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK.

John Rawls construed the Theory of Justice as central to political philosophy, and defended a series of purportedly egalitarian versions of such a theory. This essay points out that Rawls' philosophy became increasingly influential during precisely that period in recent history – the last quarter of the 20th century – in which global inequality increased most dramatically, and explores some possible explanations of this peculiar fact. It concludes by arguing that methodological defects make his approach fundamentally misguided: early versions of his theory are too abstract to be of relevance to understanding politics or as guides to action, and later ones too parochial.

The recent death of the philosopher John Rawls makes it especially appropriate, but also particularly difficult, to reflect on the peculiarity of his life, work and influence, and try to assess what long-lasting contribution he might have made to our understanding of politics and society. Rawls by all accounts was a remarkably saintly man, a devoted teacher of many highly successful students, and a concerned citizen. Under these circumstances any discussion of him and his work, especially at this time, is likely to take place in an atmosphere of mild hagiography. The body of work he left behind is large and intricate, and has been the object of literally thousands of pages of exegesis, criticism, and further elaboration, some of it highly technical in character. Many academics have sunk large amounts of intellectual capital in mastery of the details of his position, and the 'correct' reading of it. However, precisely because Rawls was a public philosopher of unrivalled influence, natural piety should not take priority over the demands of the piety due a philosopher: uninhibited discussion of his work and approach, and the attempt to give a global account of status of his theory, its overall structure and historical location without getting lost in details.

Between 1988 and 1992 Steve Pyke photographed several dozen philosophers and asked each to write a brief statement describing his or her 'philosophy' to accompany the respective photo. Most of the entries are the sort of thing one would expect to find – philosophy is a form of self-knowledge, a way of asking certain

basic questions, an attempt at systematic exercise of human reason, etc. Rawls' response takes the form of an autobiographical sketch:

> From the beginning of my study of philosophy in my late teens I have been concerned with moral questions and the religious and philosophical basis on which they might be answered. Three years spent in the US army in World War II led me to be also concerned with political questions. Around 1950 I started to write a book on justice, which I eventually completed.'[1]

The book Rawls started in 1950 appeared in 1971 as *A Theory of Justice*. It is a densely argued treatise of over 500 pages dealing with institutional structure and the principles of distribution that ought to hold in a what Rawls calls a 'well-ordered society'. Conceivably, the autobiographical statement to Steve Pyke is simply a way of elegantly evading the question 'what is your conception of philosophy?', but it is just possible that Rawls thought that this description of the development of his interests threw some light on the nature of his philosophy. After all, there is a tradition going back to the ancient world which insists that philosophy and life are connected and are to be integrated in various distinctive ways. It is not just that Stoics and cynics hold and try to defend different theories or propositions, but the life of a stoic has a different shape from that of a cynic.[2] This tradition is not as strong now as it once was, and in the contemporary world conceptions of philosophy modelled on mathematics, natural science, or some form of social problem-solving are more common, but the older view retains what force it has – understandably – in areas in which ethics, politics, and philosophy touch or overlap.[3]

Perhaps Rawls did have the modern, scientific model of philosophy in mind. For whatever reason, on this model, one picks a topic to work on, and tries to do one's best with it. There will probably be specific biographical reasons for the choice of topic, but they will be of no relevance, provided the topic itself is of inherent interest.

No one can object to this free choice of topic for investigation or to the simple activation of theoretical curiosity that is not motivated by any compelling personal or social experience. It is, however, at least possible to read Rawls' statement as trying to connect a certain characteristic set of human experiences in the 20th century and a set of topics and ways of going about philosophy, which he presents as attempts at finding appropriate responses to those experiences.

How one reacts to Rawls' presentation of this possible shape of a philosophical life is a good indication of one's own sensibilities. Some philosophers, apparently most philosophers in the English-speaking world, see it as a perfectly comprehensible moral and intellectual *cursus vitae*, and an instance of the philosopher being socially responsible in a particularly laudable way. There is, however, a small group of people, of whom I am one, who find this

autobiographical statement odd in a way that is revealing about what we experience as the eccentricity of Rawls' work. To people like me, a philosophical life like the one Rawls outlines simply doesn't make sense, so we do not find it surprising that Rawls' philosophy doesn't make much sense as a contribution to understanding or dealing with the social and political world either.

There is another old tradition, which holds that philosophy is characterized more by the questions it asks than by the answers it gives to those questions. One can easily imagine a person confronted with the events of the Second World War being motivated to ask various questions, for instance about European history, about the dynamics of political systems under stress, about the economics of competitive international markets, about human social psychology and the structure of collective action. What, however, would one have to believe about the world to think that 'What is the correct conception of justice?' is the appropriate question to ask in the face of concentration camps, secret police, and the fire-bombing of cities? Are reflections about the correct distribution of goods and service in a 'well-ordered society' the right *kind* of intellectual response to slavery, torture, and mass murder? Was the problem in the Third Reich that people in extermination camps didn't get the slice of the economic pie that they ought to have had, if everyone had discussed the matter freely and under the right conditions? Should political philosophy really be essentially about questions of fairness of distribution of resources? Aren't security and the control of violence far more important? How about the coordination of action, the sharing of information, the cultivation of trust, the development and deployment of human individual and social capacities, the management of relations of power and authority, the balancing of the demands of stability and reform, the provision for a viable social future?

A Theory of Justice introduces Rawls' major intellectual innovation. This is the device of trying to understand 'justice' as the content of possible agreement reached by all the members of a society in a discussion conducted under certain idealized circumstances. Rawls introduces two technical terms to refer to these idealized circumstances: the discussion is said to be conducted 'in the original position' under a 'veil of ignorance'. Suppose, as a thought-experiment, that all the members of a society freely discuss the social arrangements which will regulate their mode of living together as if it were simply up to them to decide what institutions to create. That is discussion 'in the original position'. The people in this position are said to conduct their discussion 'under a veil of ignorance' because we imagine them to be specifically deprived of empirical information about the society in question and their own place in it. In particular, they are not to know 'its economic or political situation or the level of civilization and culture it has been able to achieve'.[4] They are also supposed not to know their own situation in the society, what generation they belong to, what assets, abilities, and

general conception of the good they have; they have no knowledge of their concrete identity, save as purely rational deliberators. The participants in the discussion are like Platonic administrators who imagine they have a whole society at their disposal, and must decide how best to structure it. They themselves and the conditions under which they conduct the discussion have also been specifically idealized in such a way as to nullify any political relations that might be thought to exist between them, and thus to render these relations irrelevant and without influence on the final outcome. Justice is what such agents would freely agree to under such conditions. Rawls' book first tries to argue that the construction of such a discussion in the 'original position' is the proper way to approach justice, and then to determine what agents in the original position would agree to. Although there is no politics in the original position, agents in that position in deciding how they will live together must, of course, agree on a political structure for the society they will inhabit. Rawls' conclusion is that in the original position the idealized free and rational agents he describes would agree on a set of constitutional arrangements very much like those now current in the USA as the basic political framework for their society plus a set of fairly abstract principles to govern the distribution of liberties, opportunities, and goods and services in the society.

One main question is why we would have any reason to suppose that agents in such a situation would *agree* on anything at all. No matter how long they discussed matters, there might remain at the end different groups with different views.[5] A second question is why, even if they did agree, this decision should have any relevance whatever to us, who do have concrete 'identities', parts of which sometimes can be of importance to us, and who live in a concrete situation in a complex real world, *not* in the idealized world of the original position. This type of theory appeals to traditional prejudice among philosophers in favour of purity, autonomy, formalism, and abstractness. The theory certainly purports to be pure of contamination by the facts of history, psychology, economics, sociology, and political science, but it is highly questionable whether *this* type of abstractness is conducive to real understanding of the world we live in, and at least equally questionable whether we can have a useful practical philosophy, or even a useful set of 'normative' rules, without such grounded understanding.

Rawls' theory presents itself as egalitarian, although – at any rate in the original form – it comes equipped with a catch so large it seems unsurprising that the real political effect of the theory has been close to zero. The catch is called the 'difference principle', which specifically allows departure from equality if the resulting inequality is one that improves the state of the least advantaged members of the society. It turns out to be extremely difficult to assess in practice whether or not a certain existing inequality is or is not allowed by the difference principle. Furthermore, one might wonder whether accepting the difference principles

would not, in practice, lead to much more significant concessions to inequality than Rawls seems to expect.

Finally, it is perfectly possible to find the basic idea behind the difference principle – that increases in the absolute standard of living of the poor can, in principle, justify great inequalities – morally very repellent.[6]

Rawls' later work moves away from the Never-never land of this early model with its glorification of the ignorance of agents in the original position, but it never gets very far, and pays for its minimally increased connection to the real world of American politics with a significant loss of scope and theoretical power. Thus his last systematic work, *The Law of Peoples*, is a treatment of international relations.[7] He distinguishes five kinds of society: (a) liberal, (b) decent,[8] (c) outlaw states, (d) societies burdened by unfavourable conditions, and (e) benevolent absolutisms.[9] Outlaw states are those that 'refuse to comply with a reasonable Law of Peoples'.[10] Examples of 'outlaw states' include, in the early modern period, 'France, Spain, and the Hapsburgs' and 'more recently, Germany'.[11] 'Outlaw state' is clearly Rawls' theoretical equivalent of a concept that has become one of the cornerstones of US foreign policy during the past 20 years, and has appeared in a variety of guises, from Reagan's proclamation that the Soviet Union was an 'evil empire' to the very emphatic use of the term 'rogue state' by the current Bush-administration. Rawls' claim that certain non-liberal societies (decent and 'benevolent' ones) deserve some recognition and ought to be 'tolerated' by liberal societies[12] is a significant and welcome advance over the strict dichotomization that seems to dominate much thinking in US-government circles today. It strongly suggests disagreement with the position of US President George W. Bush, that those who are not 'with' the US, belong to an 'axis of evil'. Still, Rawls does not think that liberal societies should extend their tolerance to outlaw states. Outlaw states may not be exterminated *ad libitum*, but 'liberal' states have a right to keep and deploy nuclear weapons for deterrent purposes, and may attack outlaw states with military force under certain circumstances if that is necessary to prevent violation of human rights.[13] This does not even purport to be a view from an anonymous universal 'original position', but is, even on the most superficial inspection, a specifically American political position – more enlightened, perhaps, than that of George W. Bush or Condoleeza Rice, but generically the same kind of thing. Of course, no one can object *in principle* to citizens helping to elaborate the national ideology (provided it is not actively vicious), but philosophy has in the past often aspired to something more than this.

Rawls' influence in the US academy grew most rapidly in the late 1970s and 1980s, during a period that saw the start of a major and lasting downturn in the world economy,[14] a significant increase in inequality in the world, and a distinct turn to the political right in most advanced Western countries. This conjunction is an extremely striking phenomenon, but one that has failed to attract the attention

it deserves: as Rawls' purportedly egalitarian theory became more entrenched and more highly elaborated, social inequalities in fact increased drastically in virtually all industrialized countries.

Four lines of hypothesis suggest themselves to explain why Rawls' stock rose as the world moved firmly and distinctly in the direction precisely opposite to the one apparently indicated by the theory. The first is that Rawls' theory gained in attractiveness as a compensatory fantasy.[15] The mechanism would be like that analysed by Feuerbach for the origin and development of religion.[16] Weak humans cannot easily tolerate clear recognition of their deficiencies and so invent an imaginary agent – God – whom they endow with the powers they lack. In just the same way, fantasies about the original position become more plausible to agents the more the world demonstrates to them their inability to understand or exercise any control over its movements. This would be comprehensible and unobjectionable enough, if, unlike the fiction of a God, the theory of the original position actually directed us toward learning to deal with our weakness, but the continuing redistribution of resources from the poor to the rich indicates that it hasn't. Does one perhaps need to adopt a more long-term perspective, that of 400 or 500 years? Do we then have to adopt a similarly long time-frame for evaluating claims about a possible 'pure' Islamic Republic, Marxism, or the situationist international?

The second line of hypothesis starts from a sharp distinction between the basic properties of scientific theories and those of a political philosophy. Scientific theories can be understood as abstract entities with relatively transparent internal structures; they use clear, well-defined concepts and it is often relatively easy to specify what assumptions they make, and under what conditions they can be applied.

Thus, a certain theory might be true of absolutely pure gases, and might apply in a real industrial situation to the extent to which some gas could reasonably be treated as if it were pure. A political philosophy, in contrast, is not really an exclusively theoretical construction, but it must also be seen as an attempt to intervene in the world of politics; the consequences of acting on it ought thus never to be considered matters of complete indifference in evaluating it. Since, under modern conditions, proponents of a certain political theory must be in a position to argue for it in a plausible way, they will have a strong interest in presenting it to its best advantage. The image of the theory and its virtues that is projected in public debate will be unlikely to be complete in all details and may well be seriously misleading or even completely inaccurate. Since a political theory is also only in the rarest of cases the sort of thing that can be fully formalized, its advocates may in all innocence be very imperfectly aware of some of its basic structural features or their implications. In the long run, though, when a theory is widely believed and has come to inform the way large groups of people act,

deeply hidden structural features of it can suddenly come to have a tremendous political impact. Thus, in the middle years of the 20th century, a series of liberal thinkers, including I. Berlin, J. L. Talmon, K. Popper and F. Hayek, developed an influential account of Jacobinism and Marxism–Leninism. On the surface, these political doctrines presented themselves with a certain prima facie plausibility as theories committed to promoting human freedom, and many Jacobins and Marxists were subjectively keen and genuine partisans of human liberation in all its forms.

Nevertheless, these liberals argued, a deeper account of their political views would reveal hidden authoritarian elements, such as commitment to a 'positive' rather than a negative notion of freedom. It was eventually this hidden structural kernel of the theory, not the private motives of its supporters, that had the last word in the real world of politics. Marxists did not get the world they consciously pursued and longed for as an ideal, but rather the one that was fated to arise under the given historical, economic and political conditions when Marxism took hold of a whole society and succeeded in transforming it. The Soviet Union as it actually was, was the real content of Marx's 'positive liberty'.

The second kind of hypothesis applies this general schema of interpretation to Rawls' theory. It is not enough to look at the forms of self-advertisement of the theory, its superficial claims, or the intentions, motives and personal character traits of its advocates. The best way to see what the theory is really about is to study the systematic, long-term effects of applying it. At some level, a widely accepted theory gets the world it really wants or, at any rate, the only world that is realistically possible if people hold the theory in question and act on it. The surface appearance of Rawls' theory – its apparent egalitarian content, standing, and implications – is deceptive, because the world that has arisen as the theory has established itself more and more firmly is one of increasing inequality.

The liberal thinkers like Berlin who gave their penetrating historical and conceptual analysis of Marxism in the middle of the last century realized that understanding a political philosophy involves taking account of a wide variety of factors that have no parallel in the case of strictly empirical theories. These include hidden structural features of the theory, various assumptions the people who are going to act on the theory make, and the actual institutional, economic, and political reality of the world into which the theory is trying to allow us to intervene (even if that intervention is at the level of a mere normative assessment).[17] Liberalism ought to have applied the theoretical sophistication which it had acquired in its critical struggle against Marxism to the task of understanding itself better in terms of these factors. The Rawlsian approach itself, of course, particularly in its 'veil of ignorance' version, discourages the development of such theoretical self-consciousness, and that is perhaps its most basic deficiency.

A third possible hypothesis starts by denying that there is any important

connection between social and economic movements in the wider world and the increasing intellectual hegemony of Rawls-style political philosophy. Rawls' system, after all, is intricately elaborated and self-contained, and it also claims to embody a particularly well-grounded moral view on the world. Perhaps the pleasure in discussing such an aesthetically attractive, and purportedly morally serious construction, and the associated sense of being part of an elite group of people who are both very clever and highly righteous is a sufficient explanation of the omnipresence of the theory. Explanations of the first or second type would be much too optimistic because they assume that Rawlsianism is potentially a genuinely activist theory, but actually it is a mere object of academic exercises. The advocates of the theory do not need compensation because they have no abiding interest in the state of the world outside universities and similar agencies anyway, and hardly notice it. They may in fact not even be aware that the world is moving ever further away from egalitarianism. Since whatever minimal political activity they may engage in is of no significance, the second kind of explanatory hypothesis – that in acting they are allowing a hidden 'deep-structure' of the theory to realize itself – is otiose.

The final possibility is that Rawls' theory is supposed to be a strictly normative theory, and thus only a tool for honing individuals' moral sense and judgement. They may (or may not) then use it as a guide to their action, and may be more or less successful. Perhaps those who believe in the theory do not really feel the need to act in a way it seems to recommend, or perhaps they have simply been failures for completely contingent reasons. The fault is not with the theory, but with its supporters or the 'others' in a world that is too powerful to be changed by well-meaning academics. None of this, one might argue, reflects badly on the theory, which is supposed to tell us only what 'ought' to be the case. Nothing that (merely) happens to be the case is at all relevant to the validity of a strictly normative theory.

These four groups refer only to families or types of hypothesis, and the types are specified in such general terms that they allow a wide variety of actual theoretical accounts. A real analysis might well be a complex story embodying compatible elements of more than one of them for different parts of the account, but then the relation of a theory to its world is at least as complex as any of the other things history tries to enlighten us about.[18]

Despite the conscientious angst of Rawls the man, and his openness to well-focused criticism of individual sections of his work, the structure and ethos of this theory as a whole is deeply complacent, not to say smug. We who have the great good fortune to live in countries that are sufficiently like the USA in structure have got our politics basically right; all we really need to do is fine-tune our economies in various ways, particularly so as to maximize equality (while respecting the principle of difference) and struggle against any existing 'outlaw states'.

Rawls' students and followers incline to the fourth kind of hypothesis, and would presumably think that anyone who asks the questions I have been asking in this essay has lost the plot completely. Is it, though, or should it be, of any significance that the 'normative' moral and political theory of the Rawlsian type has nothing, literally nothing, to say about the real increase in inequality, except perhaps 'so much the worse for the facts'? This is not a criticism to the effect that theoreticians should *act* rather than merely thinking, but a criticism to the effect that they are not thinking about relevant issues in a serious way.

If casual reports by some of his former students are correct, toward the end of his life Rawls had a vague awareness of the gross discrepancy between the aspirations and self-conception of his theory and the way the world was going, and was disturbed by it. This does him credit. He did not, however, seem to have the conceptual tools to be able to make any real sense of it. He seems, that is, to have interpreted it in a characteristically displaced and distorted way as a problem about the lack of influence of his theory: his views were not taken with sufficient seriousness or were resisted, they were not acted on, his students were not adequately appreciated and promoted, etc. That such an exceptionally honest, personally modest, scrupulous, and self-critical man could have suffered from such a complete misapprehension of the situation makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that Rawls was up against the inherent limitations of his basic approach to the world and of the kind of theory he was trying to develop. After all, the problem cannot really have been lack of influence, because it is hard to imagine *any* philosophical theory that has had as much influence as Rawls' had in the second half of the 20th century, at any rate in the Western capitalist world.

For a small number of English-speaking philosophers, then, the only way to make discernible progress in political philosophy is by studying history, social and economic institutions, and the real world of politics in a reflective way. This is not incompatible with 'doing philosophy'; rather, in this area, it is the only sensible way to proceed. After all, a major danger in using highly abstractive methods in political philosophy is that one will succeed merely in generalizing one's own local prejudices and repackaging them as demands of reason. The study of history can help to counteract this natural human bias. Politics depends, to a great extent, on judging what is actual relative to what is possible.[19] Is the actual regime of penal servitude, the family structure, or the system of compulsory school a good thing or a bad thing?

Answering these questions responsibly means thinking about them in a space organized around possible alternatives to the present existing state of affairs.[20] However, we have an inherently weak grasp on what is 'possible' and most societies are not set up so as naturally to improve this, or actively to make us aware of possibilities we may have ignored or taken with insufficient seriousness. One of the great uses of history is to show us what, because it has in the past been real,

is a fortiori possible. This can give rise to various illusions. Something can be thought to be politically possible now because it actually existed in the past, but it may have been possible in the past because of circumstances that have meanwhile changed.[21] This is a case in which further development of the very historical consciousness that gave rise to the problem will contribute to clearing it away.

For those of us with views like these, Rawls is not a major moral and political theorist, whose work self-evidently deserves and repays the most careful scrutiny. Rather he was a parochial figure who not only failed to advance the subject but also pointed political philosophy firmly in the wrong direction.

A perhaps apocryphal story has it that Rawls once gave to a visiting European historian the draft of a paper about modern politics 'since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1548'. When the historian mentioned that the accepted date was 1648, Rawls replied mildly 'Oh, really?' and changed the offending digit with a single stroke of the pen. Despite myself, I cannot help finding this rather sublime. From the point of view of the original position, the difference between the 16th and the 17th century is completely insignificant, actually invisible. Of course, one tries to get things right, if one can, but nothing else in the work at all depends on this kind of correctness. No further part of the paper needed to be changed apart from that one digit. We should, however, resist the temptations of this kind of sublime in politics and morality.[23]

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

1. S. Pike (1993) *Philosophers* (Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications), no pagination in this volume, but the philosophers photographed are listed alphabetically and this autobiographical statement is on the page facing the photo of Rawls.
2. The ancients tended to focus on one side of this integration: from the theoretical beliefs held to the kind of life lived. The Stoic and cynic lives differ *because* of the difference in the beliefs the respective philosophers held. The 19th century added to this an increasing appreciation of the other direction in which the equation could be read. Thus, in 1797, Fichte announced that the philosophy one chose depended on what kind of person one was, and by the middle of the

century it was a commonplace idea among the Young Hegelians that a philosophy arose in part out of a reflection on the state of the world and the outstanding issues of the day (*sub specie universalitatis*). To identify what are the outstanding questions of the day is by no means a trivial task, but rather one that requires both a certain cognitive exertion and moral courage. Although this is to some extent the precondition of philosophy, the process of philosophizing itself does not merely give one answers to the questions with which one started, but can change one's understanding of what is questionable or problematic. A philosophical life is one in which this reflection and the results to which it leads informs the attitudes the philosopher takes toward this world, one in which an original, relatively naïve and immediate diagnosis of the times is transformed into a considered position.

3. No one much cares that the logician Frege was an early and ardent admirer of Hitler. After all, among other things, he died in 1925 and never took any public position on politics. Discussion of the philosopher Frege is discussion of his attempt to ground mathematics on logic, his definition of a number, his new notation for logic, or his philosophy of language. On the other hand, it seems wilfully blind to overlook Heidegger's National Socialism, given that his work is clearly, in some sense, intended not to provide a formal definition of some mathematical construction, but to tell us something about how to live. See Hans Sluga (1993) *Heidegger's crisis* (Harvard University Press), esp. chapter 4.
4. J. Rawls (1971) *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press) p. 137.
5. The variant of this that has been most widely discussed is the differences that might remain between people who were more risk-averse and those who were more willing to take risks. See R. Tuck (1997) The dangers of natural rights. *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, **20**(3), 690–693
6. J. Dunn (2000) *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London: Harper-Collins) pp. 279–280
7. J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press).
8. A 'decent society' for Rawls is one that is not liberal but still deserves to take its place as a member of a Society of Peoples under a reasonable Law of Peoples. See J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press) p. 4.
9. J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press) p. 4.
10. J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press) pp. 5, 90.
11. J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press) pp. 105–106.
12. J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press) Part II.
13. J. Rawls (1999) *The Law of Peoples* (Harvard University Press) pp. 9, 80–81.
14. See R. Brenner (2002) *The Boom and the Bubble: the US in the World Economy*(London: Verso).
15. For a general discussion of recent Rawls-style political philosophy along these lines see A. Badiou (2001) *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso), especially pp. liii–lvi, 90

16. L. Feuerbach (1957) *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row), translated by M. Evans (George Eliot).
17. See J. Dunn (2000) *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London: Harper-Collins)
18. Thus one important feature that would have to be kept in sight if one were trying to understand the prominence of Rawls' views at the end of the 20th century is the spectrum of what were thought to be the possible alternatives. This is, I think, a general characteristic of much of the history of ideas, and one that was recognised very clearly by Nietzsche (and also Max Weber). When Nietzsche says that humans would rather will nothing than not will at all (*Genealogy of Morality*, Third Essay, § 28) this implies that in a number of areas people would prefer to hold on to even self-evidently shoddy theories rather than have no view at all. Another way of putting this is that scepticism or suspension of belief (in these particular areas) is almost always an achievement. Another possible line or explanation, then, runs as follows. For a variety of reasons that had little or nothing to do with Rawls and his views, existing alternatives – Marxism, utilitarianism, psychoanalysis, Critical Theory, anarcho-syndicalism, and in fact virtually the whole of modernist higher culture – were taken, correctly or not, to have been refuted or rendered irrelevant (by events); this is possible because they were at least sufficiently connected with *some* kind of reality that changes in the world could be taken to bear on them. Rawls' combination of sundry Kantian leftovers, New England protestant ideals, and US folk-ways was then virtually the only thing left on the board. It survived partly because it was sufficiently detached from actual politics not to seem (at least to many American readers) tarnished by anything that actually happened in the world, and yet it seemed vaguely and comfortingly familiar, which of course it was, being simply a more coherent reformulation of some widely held North American views.
19. To have kept this point sharply in focus is one of the singular virtues of the Critical Theory. See H. Marcuse (1963) *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon).
20. See Max Weber's discussion of 'the ethics of responsibility' in M. Weber (1977) *Politik als Beruf* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot).
21. See B. Williams (1985) *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana), chapter 9.

About the Author

Raymond Geuss is Reader in Philosophy in the University of Cambridge. He was previously Professor of Philosophy at Princeton and of Political Science at Columbia University in New York. His books include *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton, 2000).