November 2009

Review of “Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy”

Eric Rovie
Georgia State University

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Recommended Citation
Essays in Philosophy
A Biannual Journal
Vol. 9, No. 1, January 2008

Book Review


According to the editor’s notes, the late John Rawls only reluctantly agreed to let his lecture notes on moral and political philosophy be published. Rawls was quite concerned that his written lectures didn’t really do justice to the figures, books, and topics that he was addressing. In a quite self-effacing quote from his autobiographical considerations on his own teaching ability, Rawls worried that his lectures and understanding of Kant “never did get it right.” The idea of publishing straight from one’s teaching notes is, at the very least, a little daunting. Some are just sketches, left deliberately wide open to accommodate the inspiration of the moment and the input of one’s students. Other lectures may be much closer to a ‘script,’ where the formality and structure of an essay is prominent but where, in many cases, improvisation may be more limited. I never had the privilege of taking a class with Rawls, but if his published notes are any indication, Rawls was a fan of the latter style. His lectures read like a formalized essay or talk: detailed and well-constructed discussions that are book-like in their form and structure. These lectures serve as an interesting set of historical analyses on key figures in political philosophy, and are written in such a way as to leave no doubt as to what Rawls actually thought about these figures and their political views (and he notes that he is presenting the material with his commentary and criticism in his introduction, xviii). It seems we are quite fortunate to have these lectures, preserved by Rawls’s graduate assistants and advisees, from his courses on Modern Political Philosophy over thirty-five years at Harvard.

This is the second volume of Rawls’s lectures to published, the first (*Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, edited by Barbara Herman) published in 2000. This volume is shaped, roughly, by his interest in the development of the social contract theory (represented by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau), the liberal utilitarian theory (represented by Hume and J.S. Mill) and the socialist critique of liberalism (represented by Marx). As an appendix, editor Samuel Freeman includes several unfinished lectures, including Henry Sidgwick (as an additional utilitarian theorist) and Bishop Joseph Butler (as a non-utilitarian critic of Hobbes) found in Rawls’s papers, but not explicitly prepared by Rawls himself for publication in this volume. Rawls also notes that his own theory of justice, Justice as Fairness, would fit into his class discussions of this material, but is left out of the book because of its inclusions in his other published works.

Given the author’s reluctance to publish these lectures, it would be quite unfair to try to vivisect them for argumentative clarity, style, or function. Instead, I want to provide a few thoughts on their
value and use, and to try to examine several important strands of argument that run through the text. But first, let me begin with a few general comments on the text itself.

Aesthetically, this is one of the loveliest philosophical books I’ve seen in some time. The hardbound cloth edition features a dark cover, with script from Rawls’s own handwritten notes (a script which is extremely hard to read: kudos to those who had to decipher his handwritten notes!) in gold on the front and back covers. There is also a clear dust sleeve that covers the book, which allows the title (which is not on the book’s cover itself) to be visible. The text is well organized, featuring footnotes (rather than clumsy endnotes), a list of works cited at the beginning of the book, a copy of the syllabus for one of the sections of the Political and Social Philosophy course, transcripts of some of his typed handouts from various courses, and a useful and intricately detailed index. There are also introductory notes from Rawls himself about the material, and from the editor, Samuel Freeman.

The lectures are nicely divided, and feature sub-sections within the lectures, usually referencing topic changes and the ending of a particular lecture period. In this way, the sub-sections within lectures make reading the text in bite-sized chunks quite possible, which would be appealing to the casual reader, as well as for those professionals who wish to structure their own courses in a Rawlsian fashion. Those who are interested in the pedagogical approaches Rawls might have taken to teaching this material might also want to consult the previous volume on moral philosophy, as well as his comments on Burton Dreben (Rawls, 2000b) for more insight into his philosophy of teaching philosophy. All in all, it is a very attractive and pleasing book, both to put on the shelf and to glance through.

Leaving aside the aesthetic and pedagogical values of the book, the questions that might be asked (for any published set of teaching lectures, really) could include ‘what is the philosophical importance of this work’? Is there some new or exciting philosophical argument here? Does it provide more or better insight into the mind of the author? Is there anything of real philosophical import here, or are we just falling victim to the cult of personality that makes us want to read whatever is still left unpublished by famous philosophers?

I think, in part, the answer to that question is framed by considering the people who have been instrumental in getting these lectures published, despite Rawls’s objections. Samuel Freeman and Barbara Herman, both notable figures in moral and political philosophy, seem to be as qualified to judge as any the importance of these lectures. Freeman, who served as one of Rawls’ graduate teaching assistants in 1983, should have a firsthand knowledge of the impact of Rawls’ teachings on his students and graduate assistants. Herman notes in the introduction to the 2000 volume that the ‘dittos’ of Rawls’s handwritten notes (available at the bargain price of forty cents!), which had begun circulating in 1977 “acquired something of a life of their own, passed on from one generation of Rawls’s students to their own students elsewhere” (Rawls 2000a, xiii). It’s pretty remarkable to find notes from lectures being passed down, from generation to generation, merely for their intellectual value, and these sorts of philosophical holy grails don’t often find their way to publication (Kant’s Lectures on Ethics comes to mind as an example). In this way, these lectures seem to merit our attention. Adding credibility to this argument is the pretty incredible list of Rawls’s graduate advisees who have gone on to become some of the central figures in 20th and 21st century moral and political philosophy: a casual glance at Josh Dever’s Philosophy Family Tree
shows Rawls to have had at least 39 dissertation-level advisees, including, but not limited to Elizabeth Anderson, Allan Gibbard, Onora O'Neill, Jean Hampton, Thomas Hill Jr., Christine Korsgaard, Thomas Nagel, Tom Pogge, Michael Stocker, David Lyons, and, of course, Samuel Freeman and Barbara Herman. When you consider that all of these influential philosophers may have been themselves influenced by his lectures on moral and political philosophy, it certainly stands to reason that these lectures have an important place in the development of 20th century American moral and political philosophy.

If there is a central theme that underlies the lectures found in this book, beyond just a survey of major figures in Western political theory, it would probably be the birth and evolution of the social contract theory (found in Hobbes, Hume, Locke, and Rousseau) and the development of the social utilitarian political theory (found in Mill and Sidgwick) as the major contenders in political philosophy in the modern era. Closely tied to this theme, one might consider how these theorists could be challenged, in their own lights, by the development of the theory that Rawls puts forth in *A Theory of Justice* and then in *Justice As Fairness: A Restatement*.

Given a short look at the figures who are covered in this book (and in the previous volume), one might be curious about the distinctions Rawls makes between moral and political philosophy as distinct fields of inquiry. His lectures on moral philosophy cover (after a survey of pre-1600 work) only Hume, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel, with detours into critics and commentators on those figures along the way. The moral philosophy volume has only five references to John Stuart Mill, one to utilitarianism, and two to Jeremy Bentham, leaving one of the most frequently referenced moral philosophies out of the picture almost entirely. Utilitarianism, then, seems to be viewed by Rawls as a social or political theory rather than a moral theory, and that secures its place in this volume rather than in the previous one. But the appendices on Henry Sidgwick’s utilitarianism and Joseph Butler’s non-utilitarian reply to Hobbes, while both quite useful and interesting, seem to fit strangely in a volume about political philosophy, although it should be noted that the editor, and probably not Rawls, chose to include them in the volume. While Rawls claimed that Butler was one of the major figures in modern moral philosophy (ix) but it’s not clear that his presence here, even as an interlocutor for Hobbes, is entirely warranted, although, to be fair, his appearance is in an Appendix to the main set of lectures. In the same vein, there are figures who are left out of the discussion altogether, or are mentioned only briefly in the volume. Alexis de Tocqueville, Baron de Montesquieu, the authors of the *Federalist* papers, the major figures in the development of economics (Malthus, Ricardo, Adam Smith) and John Dewey might all have been fruitfully included in the discussion. The most glaring omission, however, seems to be Immanuel Kant, whose moral theory is discussed in the prior volume, but whose contributions to political theory frame Rawls’s own political philosophy (most notably in *The Law of Peoples*) and who seems to be rather conspicuously absent here. These are mere quibbles, however, and unfair quibbles at that. Criticizing what Rawls did cover, or lamenting what he might have covered, isn’t much more than criticizing a conductor for not playing ALL of the Beethoven’s works in one concert.

This is, in the final assessment, a wonderful historical document, a glimpse into the mind of the greatest political philosopher of the 20th Century, and a fitting tribute to the generations of students inspired by John Rawls. Not very many philosophers (or teachers of any sort) get to continue to teach after their deaths, but Rawls succeeds in doing just that with this volume. It would be useful for advanced undergraduate students who want to learn more about political philosophy, for
graduate students and those who want to see the historical figures that Rawls’s own Justice as Fairness theory are pitted against, and for philosophers and other academics who want to see how someone like Rawls, who taught literally dozens of the most important moral and political thinkers still working today, structured his courses. In an oft-cited quote from his *Autobiography*, R.G. Collingwood said that “the history of political theory is not the history of different answers to one and the same question, but the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was changing with it.” Rawls acknowledges these changing questions in his discussions of seminal figures, and then, for good measure, changes the questions himself, making what was widely thought to be a moribund field into a vibrant and active one once again.

Eric Rovie
Georgia State University

**Works Cited**


