Rawlsian paths to justice: promise and limits in the quest towards justice in a diverse and complex world

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Abstract

This essay explores the philosophical ideas of John Rawls and two of his key contributions: the two principles of justice, and the notion of overlapping consensus as paths towards solutions to the issue of antagonism in modern society. The text begins by emphasizing the antagonistic nature of social groups and how this is constitutive of the human condition. In this regard, any assessment of the political realm must be viewed through this essential lens since the question of coexistence is key to wielding power within a domain of fairness, equality, and freedom. The text reviews key concepts examined by Rawls to appreciate his theoretical contribution and establish a dialogue with other philosophical traditions addressing the subject, including the critiques offered by skeptics of the public reason approach and the critique raised by non-ideal political theorists.

Keywords: John Rawls; deliberative rationality; antagonism; political theory; social justice; justice as fairness; public reason liberalism; non-ideal theory

Introduction

The challenge of human coexistence has always held a foundational role in political theory, and it now undoubtedly takes a central position. This prominence stems from the rise of globalization and market-opening processes in societies once termed "*traditional*" but now referred to as "*third world*". In this context, culture, society and politics transform into a veritable battleground of conflicts, conquests, and compromises. Amid this transformative whirlwind, cultural critique and political theory have directed their efforts toward forging new solutions oscillating between two distinct poles: on the one hand cultural particularism or relativism, and on the other liberal and plural contractualism[1].

Against this backdrop, in what follows we will examine the profound philosophical contributions of John Rawls in "*A Theory of Justice*" (1999) and "*Political Liberalism*" (1993)[2], focusing on the concepts of deliberative rationality and rational life plans, congruence, and later on the notion of overlapping consensus. In each case, the article will stress the practical and philosophical implications of these ideas and how they address the problem of ongoing plurality and antagonism, fundamental to human society.

The paper begins with a discussion of the notions of deliberative rationality, rational plans of life and congruence, and how they serve as foundations for what Rawls calls justice as fairness in a well-ordered society. We show that, profound and promising as they are, these concepts face some limitations in terms of providing an account of the stability of the moral and political social edifice. Thus, next we discuss the character and purpose of the Rawlsian notion of overlapping consensus, as a further way to propose a strictly political vision that contributes to the justification and stability of the social order. Lastly, we conclude by briefly discussing two types of contemporary critiques of the Rawlsian project, namely the critique of public reason liberalism, and the critique of the "*ideal-theory*" approach to political philosophy. We will thus show that, while there is

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[1] F. DANIEL & P. MUSGRAVE, "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations", *International Studies Quarterly*, 2017, vol. 61, n° 3, p. 503-516, doi: 10.1093/isq/sqx053; G. GAUS, *The tyranny of the ideal: Justice in a diverse society*, Princeton University Press, 2016; ID., *Public reason and diversity*, Routledge, 2022; R. MULDOON, *Social contract theory for a diverse world: Beyond tolerance,* Routledge, 2016.

[2] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised,* Harvard University Press, 1999; ID., *Political liberalism: Expanded edition,* Columbia University Press, 2005.

merit to these critiques, they ultimately fail to derail the value and promise of Rawls' contribution and political theorizing.

Justice and Its Principles

For Rawls, assessing the social—seen as a reasonable and contractual space—begins with the concept of justice and specifically the justice of social institutions[3]. Its principles and public acceptance determine what he terms a well-ordered society, one that is structured according to the principle of justice as fairness. The nature of the relationship between justice and the social system where it operates should be established through the use of reason and contract[4]. Accordingly, the Rawlsian view is that a social system is just if it ensures effective terms for mutually beneficial social cooperation, that is, through the fair distribution among its members of key social goods such as opportunities, economic resources, liberties, rights and duties[5].

The moral root of what would become such fair distribution lies in our personal capacity to transcend explicit rational choice methods that show us connections between means and aims. Thus, a richer method, a rationality of introspective nature, deliberative rationality, comes into play once we have reached the limits of simple rational choice[6]. Through it, we can formulate a proper rational plan of life, which is our personal vision of a good life, one that includes our preferences and desires, as well as existing constraints, knowledge and other relevant considerations. Importantly, this deliberative rationality opens the path to two key capabilities. First, it allows us to assess the deeper intensity of our own desires[7]. Second, it allows us to analyze and sift through our aims, leading us to a clearer and well established version or even set of them. In fact, it is deliberative rationality that aids us to choose in the face of a host of aims and once simple

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[3] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised*; S. ORR & J. JOHNSON, "What's a Political Theorist to Do? Rawls, the Fair Value of the Basic Political Liberties, and the Collapse of the Distinction Between 'Ideal' and 'Nonideal' Theory", *Theoria*, 2018, vol. 65, n° 154, p. 1-23, doi: 10.3167/th.2018.6515401.

[4] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised*; P. VANDERSCHRAAF, "Justice as mutual advantage and the vulnerable", *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, 2011, p. 119-147.

[5] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised*; M. MOEHLER, *Minimal Morality: A Multilevel Social Contract Theory*, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[6] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised,* p. 483.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 365.

rational choice and its concomitant counting principles are no longer able to discern the right choice for us.

The importance of the rational plan of life lies in that it reveals our own conception of the good life, since the plan is filled according to our criteria of the good. Thus, having a defined version of the good life, and understanding that other people have their own as well, constitutes what Rawls calls one of the subjective conditions for justice. This means that it forms the context of plurality (and potential conflict) in which there is a real need for settling an adequately just social order. Secondly, but no less importantly, it becomes a motivating force to seek out principles of justice: we realize that, as members of a broader society, we need fair principles that would allow us to effectively pursue our own aims and plan of life. In this way, deliberative rationality and rational life plans become key structuring elements of a well-ordered society.

A moral and political social order holds insofar as its rules and dynamics prove effective and accepted by society in practice. This entails that there needs to be an authority impartially and equally enforcing the law; Rawls terms this formal justice. The principles administered through it are called substantive justice, encompassing the core principles of justice, to be discussed shortly. It is worth noting that in principle substantive justice could be inherently unjust. However, impartial application can prevent even greater injustices than in a system where formal justice, being partial and unequal, doesn't exist[8]. Thus, formal justice stalls other justice forms, which, due to their impartial application, are unreliable for those most vulnerable. Rawls emphasizes the importance of disseminating justice rules. Nevertheless, no matter how just a justice system's substantive concepts are, if applied partially, it becomes unjust.

In light of this, it becomes clear that a key issue in defining a well-ordered society lies in the impartiality of its core authority. Is this something that is ultimately assured in formal justice? According to Rawls, this rather depends on society's basic structure since it shapes systems of thought and behavior[9]. Put simply: formal justice, characterized by impartiality, depends on substantive justice. Rawls argues that the force of demands for formal justice clearly depends on the substantive justice of institutions and their reform

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[8] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised.*

[9] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised;* D. COITINHO,"Rawls and the justification of punishment", *Trans-Form-Acao,* 2017, vol. 40, n° 3, p. 67-92, doi: 10.1590/S0101-31732017000300005.

potential[10]. A society has formal justice only as a result of the social group reaching a sufficiently developed degree of substantive justice[11].

This is crucial given Rawls' emphasis on the basic structure as preformative: formal justice will be impartial only if the people support and aim for it. Here, it would be valuable to examine what Jameson termed the political unconscious, understanding it as the space where dominant cultural values are determined[12]. Under this framework, formal justice is merely the consequence of a deeper system of identification with cultural ideals and ideological domination systems. Still, in Rawls's framework, there isn't a coercive centralized political power led by a human group invested with legitimate authority[13]. This observation contains an interesting logical truth. The entire political system, rooted in the rationality—and goodness—of the concept of substantive justice, operates coherently from fundamental principles to the outermost parts. Thus, political action would emanate from an original position (which Rawls sees as the contractual formative instance of the social) where the principles of substantive justice are accepted[14].

Rawls considers a well ordered and just society as one that manages to align both formal and substantive justice according to his key two principles of justice: 1) everyone must have access to basic freedoms, compatible with group freedom; and 2) social inequalities should: (a) benefit everyone and (b) be associated with roles accessible to all. Thus, wealth distribution doesn't have to be equal as long as the differences exist to the benefit of all, the same goes for access to leadership positions. For Rawls, the first principle is paramount and shouldn't be compromised for the second; indeed, the second must be entirely consistent with the first[15].

In summary, Rawls emphasizes the centrality of justice principles for achieving a well-ordered society. The system's framework is supported from the base to the summit, and its components have a symbiotic relationship. However, the delineation of each

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[10] J. RAWLS, *Political liberalism: Expanded edition*, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 67.

[11] J. FOSS, "Rawls's Political Liberalism", *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy*, 2017, vol. 43, n° 3, p. 467-473; C. GAMEL, "John Rawls: The path of an American liberal towards social equality", *Oeconomia-History Methodology Philosophy*, 2017, vol. 7, n° 1, p. 149-157.

[12] F. JAMESON, *Documentos de cultura, documentos de barbarie*, Madrid, Visor, 1989, p. 11-14.

[13] J. MANDLE, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice: An Introduction*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[14] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised*.

[15] *Ibid*., p. 69.

justice principle's jurisdiction is problematic since Rawls doesn't specify which institutions would uphold the principles corresponding to them. This could be also viewed as a political/economic divide. Rawls notably breaks with conventional liberal proposals that prioritize the economic vector in the social order. Rawls's take on the free market is one where it is subordinate to a political structure that guarantees the priority and observance of the principles of justice[16].

To begin connecting both principles of justice (with one serving as the "*pathway*" to the other), it's essential to clarify Rawls' understanding of congruence. Initially, the principles of justice stemmed from a primary, foundational notion of the good, referred to as the "*thin theory*", which "*sets out the premises about the primary goods needed to arrive at principles of justice[17]*". Hence, congruence refers to this link between the good and the principles of justice, which enter into a relationship where the good shapes justice logically[18]. In short, the primary theory of the good deserves a brief review, as goodness gains significance in a context of otherness. From an ethical standpoint, goodness always contemplates "*someone*" to whom a specific action or thought will be "*good*" or "*desirable*". So, in an original position, where would this thin idea of the good be rooted? It's a question Rawls doesn't resolve[19]. Rather, the thin theory of good is a logical and hypothetical principle for him, given that the principles of justice assume the precedence of principles of the good, which will guide and enable the principles of justice[20].

A second theory of the good begins with this congruence, emphasizing a broader moral conception of what is good, distinct from the initial notion prior to establishing the principles of justice. This will serve as the foundation for defining moral virtues, leading us to broader aspects based on fundamental psychological principles (e.g., loving those who wish us well). We must be cautious about defining goodness. Therefore, Rawls'

[16] J. MANDLE, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice: An Introduction*; G. SUNAJKO, "Rawls and Piketty: the philosophical aspects of economic inequality", *Journal of Philosophical Economics*, 2016, vol. 9, n° 2, p. 71-84.

[17] J. RAWLS, *Political liberalism: Expanded edition*, p. 360.

[18] F. P. BAPTISTA, "Legal reason, human rights and ideology: relations among logic, science, law and justice", *Quaestio Iuris*, 2015, vol. 8, n° 3, p. 1509-1533.

[19] A. LISTER, "The 'mirage' of social justice: Hayek against (and for) Rawls", *Critical Review*, 2013, vol. 25, n° 3-4, p. 409-444, doi: 10.1080/08913811.2013.853859; G. BORRADORI, "Perfecting Justice in Rawls, Habermas, and Honneth: A Deconstructive Perspective", *Philosophy Today*, 2014, vol. 58, n° 3, p. 477-486, doi: 10.5840/philtoday201458322.

[20] S. ORR & J. JOHNSON, "What's a Political Theorist to Do?".

proposal emphasizes the moral neutrality of the definition of good; that is, judging it from a rational perspective (as objects and pursuits are defined through it) is not enough[21]. It's also crucial to introduce a theory on moral virtues that presuppose the principles of justice, which in turn presuppose the thin theory of the good[22]. For instance, Rawls mentions that a "*good*" murderer would still be invested with goodness for merely doing his job optimally, an error that can occur if only moral neutrality is used to define the good[23].

Returning to the connection between deliberative rationality and goodness, Rawls indicates that an individual will have reached happiness (the ultimate good) when they choose a rational life project[24]. As discussed above, this choice is made consciously (though Rawls acknowledges one might stumble upon a good life project without seeking it) through deliberative rationality. This is the activity by which the individual imaginatively explores possible projects, their circumstances, and consequences, to choose the one that best meets their primary objectives. This doesn't mean the individual must fully understand all aspects of the project; the choice under deliberative rationality emphasizes making the best decision with the knowledge available at the moment[25]. Rawls assumes, as a key characteristic for good rational choice through deliberative rationality, that the individual is competent, meaning they understand their desires (both present and future), either intensifying or suppressing them. Yet, some aspects of desire can jeopardize a good choice, like when a conviction (born from a desire) is false but still pursued due to the desire's driving force[26]. Desires can also arise from excessive generalization[27], or from more or less accidental associations[28]. Others may be extreme,

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[21] M. JAKIC, "The problem of intuition of morality in John Rawl's philosophy", *Nova Prisutnost*, 2018, vol. 16, n° 1, p. 5-20.

[22] C.-H. LEUNG, "Cultivating Political Morality for Deliberative Citizens: Rawls and Callan Revisited", *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 2016, vol. 48, n° 14, p. 1426-1441, doi: 10.1080/00131857.2016.1138393.

[23] C.-H. LEUNG, "Cultivating Political Morality for Deliberative Citizens: Rawls and Callan Revisited"; M. JAKIC, "The problem of intuition of morality in John Rawl's philosophy".

[24] M. GAINER, "Assessing Happiness Inequality in the Welfare State: Self-Reported Happiness and the Rawlsian Difference Principle", *Social Indicators Research*, 2013, vol. 114, n° 2, p. 453-464, doi: 10.1007/s11205-012-0155-0.

[25] *Ibid*.

[26] L. CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES, "Is Rawls' liberal justice gendered?", *Revista de letras*, 2016, vol. 56, n° 1, p. 121-133.

[27] I. HUNT, "How Egalitarian is Rawls's Theory of Justice?", *Philosophical Papers*, 2010, vol. 39, n° 2, p. 155-181, doi: 10.1080/05568641.2010.503444.

[28] S. LYNCH, "The Fact of Diversity and Reasonable Pluralism", *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 2009, vol. 6, n° 1, p. 70-93, doi: 10.1163/174552409X365937.

influenced by liberation from prior deprivation[29]. Ultimately, Rawls suggests it might be useful to discern a desire's origin by recognizing a person's foundational desires, enabling us to determine what we desire more than other things. A key outcome of deliberative rationality is thus that after making a choice through it, the individual won't feel regret if that choice later proves wrong. Thus, someone doing what they believe is best and most rational at the moment won't succumb to self-blame, as their undertaken project was subjectively rational[30]. A project can only be deemed absolutely good when our information about it is complete and correct.

These elements of Rawlsian thought have been subject to sharp criticism. To begin with, the belief in human rationality is a robust notion in Rawls's political thought; however, what are the boundaries of our "*rationality*"? Within political theory, it would be vital to address that which is incalculable, such as human irrationality, which has shown to play a central role within the political phenomenon. Rawls's rationalism even implies the rationalization of desires, a highly volatile and problematic assertion[31]. Thus, most humans might be deemed incompetent in Rawls's eyes and could be doomed to fail when seeking a rational life project leading to the good and amenable to structure the well ordered society. Other scholars suggest even more problematic implications. Chantal Mouffe, in "*The Democratic Paradox*", argues that Rawls's rationalist stance on democracy is essentially an attempt to cover antagonism with "*reasonable*" measures. Meaning, anyone who disagrees with this moral consensus, who is not "*reasonable*", becomes an outright antiliberal[32]. Appealing to rationality, according to Mouffe, creates a dominance of the one over the many, guiding political discussions under non-inclusive terms (the Western rationality being advocated, keeping those who don't meet the dialogue's criteria excluded), ultimately diminishing antagonisms but concealing them under exclusive universalist stances[33]. As noted, for Mouffe, Rawls is not entirely

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[29] I. CARTER, "Basic equality and the site of egalitarian justice", *Economics and Philosophy*, 2013, vol. 29, n° 1, p. 21-41, doi: 10.1017/S0266267113000060.

[30] N. VASILIAUSKAITE, "The problem to combine rationality with justice in John Rawls' 'political liberalism'", *Problemos*, 2012, vol. 82, p. 126-138; B. PURI, "Finding Reasons for being Reasonable: Interrogating Rawls", *Sophia*, 2015, vol. 54, n° 2, p. 117-141, doi: 10.1007/s11841-014-0428-y.

[31] I. CARTER, "Basic equality and the site of egalitarian justice"; L. CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES, "Is Rawls' liberal justice gendered?".

[32] C. MOUFFE, *La paradoja democrática*, Madrid, Punto Crítico, 2004, p. 97-118.

[33] A. MORRISON, "Rescuing politics from liberalism: Butler and Mouffe on affectivity and the place of ethics", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 2018, vol. 44, n° 5, p. 528-549, doi: 10.1177/0191453717730875.

inclusive, but rather engages in a discourse already defined by Habermas, where the political virtuosity of bourgeois argumentative discussion is the precondition for dialogue[34]. As Mouffe points out, a democratic political system should allow for the institutionalization of conflict, not hide or forbid it. In this sense, difference should be a reason for encounter and negotiation, not division and exclusion. Thus, Mouffe sees in antagonism a space of symbolic richness, from which multiple alternatives arise, even if the problem is never fully resolved[35].

Nevertheless, Mouffe seems to be ultimately mistaken when criticizing Rawls's stance, as he doesn't hide antagonisms but rather aims to channel them into a rationality that can serve as a universal foundation in democratic societies (though this idea requires a more in-depth analysis). Consequently, the rationality Rawls proposes is notably challenging due to its inaccessibility and its pronounced pragmatism[36]. Labeling the framework for negotiations —Western rationality— as a "*questionable*" approach by Rawls brings up the following question: what should be the consensus language between the various "rationalities"?

While these charges against Rawls' argument are worthy of interest, it is also important to notice that in his "*Political Liberalism*" (1993) Rawls himself offered a substantial revision of some of his ideas. Specifically, in Political Liberalism he introduced the notion of "*overlapping consensus*", as a way to account for a different way of securing both the justification of the social order and its stability through time even in the face of the irreducible pluralism of broad religious, moral, and politico-philosophical approaches and doctrines. Such pluralism is inevitable in any long-standing free, open and modern society, and the principles of justice per se don't offer sufficient political support for the social order, as Rawls himself realized (2005[37]). Beyond the fair distribution of basic public goods, opportunities, right and duties, and while this is still a key goal, people would eventually come to disagree on substantial ideas and aims derived

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[34] A. de A. MENEZES & V. A. NETO, "Communicative reason and public sphere: philosophical and educational aspects in the optics of Jurgen Habermas", *Argumentos - Revista de Filosofia*, 2018, vol. 19, p. 139-150

[35] C. MOUFFE, *La paradoja democrática* ; A. YAMAMOTO, "Why agonistic planning? Questioning Chantal Mouffe's thesis of the ontological primacy of the political", *Planning Theory*, 2017, vol. 16, n° 4, p. 384-403, doi: 10.1177/1473095216654941.

[36] A. MORRISON, "Rescuing politics from liberalism: Butler and Mouffe on affectivity and the place of ethics".

[37] J. RAWLS, *Political liberalism: Expanded edition.*

from broad worldviews, religious or secular. In fact, Rawls notes that what tends to occur in contemporary societies is that differing groups reach what he terms a "*modus vivendi*[38]". This means that some kind of "*political settlement*" obtains, but only as a second-best option or compromise to open and ongoing conflict. This means that the agreement to get along is superficial, fragile, narrow, and not grounded in any substantial way. If a given group were to gain sufficient power and leverage, it would use it to take hostile action toward the other ones or at least to renegotiate the terms of the settlement[39]. Thus, this *modus vivendi* is not desirable beyond the practical need for some kind of practical order, and it does not allow for a truly *political* common ground upon which to build principles of lasting justice and societal cooperation.

To address the potentially conflicting or even destructive effects of such pluralism, and seeking to transcend traditional "*tolerance*" views, Rawls envisages the political phenomenon of overlapping consensus. Such consensus could be obtained when people committed to differing doctrines manage to agree on a general political conception of justice to inform the basic structure of society's institutions. This means that a large majority of people, in light of their experiences and reasoning, realize that their comprehensive ethical or religious doctrines can become compatible with the core institutional tenets and ruling principles of a shared public order[40]. Granted, the whole project rests on the premise of a democratic political culture, yet it still offers some profound philosophical leverage. Put simply, beyond society agreeing on the most essential values and ideals of a liberal democracy (the moral and political foundation), key democratic values and principles of justice applicable to institutions are supported from the various points of view of those diverse and broad ethical doctrines. As Rawls puts it, such consensus is "…*a module...that fits into and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it*[41]". The presence of diverse views could be then seen, rather as simply competing ones, as the crest of source material from which the moral and institutional essentials of a basic structure of society can be derived (even if at a relatively general level, leaving room for specifics in

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[38] *Ibid.*

[39] J. RAWLS, *Political liberalism: Expanded edition,* p. 148.

[40] J. RAWLS, *A theory of justice, Revised,* p. 210.

[41] *Ibid.*

policy). Each doctrine provides then both justification and stability "*for the right reasons*", being authentically invested in the core institutional order.

Whether the idea of overlapping consensus effectively advances through the difficult and highly complex paths of political theorizing is of course open to debate. In fact, the kind of political theorizing that Rawls helped to advance so much has been praised as much as criticized. In this last section, we will briefly discuss two of such criticisms. Derived from Rawls' contributions to liberal and contractual political thought, the "*public reason liberalism*" approach has been criticized for not being practical enough[42]. For instance, Motchoulski[43] negates any practical relevance to the notion of public reasoning. To summarize, he argues that for an idea to count as publicly reasoned, it must not only be intelligible to the persons who propose or support it, but rather to everyone. The intelligibility view proposes that, for an idea to be justified, it must be so on the grounds of a person's commitment to certain evaluative standards[44]. But this criterion would thus be too lax as a standard for admissibility and would allow for many ideas and proposals to pass as part of public reasoning without sufficient public justification and legitimacy[45]. Alternatively, then, one may demand that public reasons be sufficiently shared with the public[46]. But if public reasons must, by definition, be shareable between all citizens of the polity and assessed through some common standard, then a rigorous consideration of the epistemic capabilities and limitations of citizens would be in order. He concludes that the shareability requisite becomes self-defeating, mainly because individuals have epistemic limitations and are likely to lack a common evaluative standard and enter into epistemic conflicts instead. This makes public reasoning too demanding and thus shared public deliberation a practical impossibility.

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[42] L. WATSON & Ch. HARTLEY, *Equal Citizenship and Public Reason: A Feminist Political Liberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2018; D. WIENS, "Against Ideal Guidance", *Journal of Politics*, 2015, p. 433-446; VALENTINI, L., "Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map", *Philosophy Compass*, 2012, p. 654-664.

[43] A. MOTCHOULSKI, "The epistemic limits of shared reasons", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 2019, p. 1-13.

[44] K. VALLIER, "Convergence and consensus in public reason", *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 2011, p. 261-280.

[45] A. LISTER, "Public justification of what? Coercion vs. decision as competing frames for the basic principle of justificatory liberalism", *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 2011, p. 349-367.

[46] J. QUONG, *Liberalism without perfection*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Alternatively, another kind of critique focuses on the notion that Rawlsian style theorizing leads to a kind of utopian and utterly impractical discussion of political morality and order[47]. For instance, in line with Wiens[48], Kogelmann[49] argues that the fundamental errors in Rawlsian thinking are that it takes a set of idealized views of humans and their morality as "*inputs*", and pursues utopian or perfectly harmonious results as outcomes. This double error leads to political ideas that take fact-insensitive or unrealistic notions as their starting point, and aim to reach the most perfectly desirable outcome instead of one that is realistic and feasible[50]. In brief, this line of criticism argues that it is not even intellectually productive to theorize a political order built upon ideal premises and seeking to reach ideal conclusions. Rather, these critics argue that the better path would be to theorize using realistic starting points and pursuing feasible ends[51].

In conclusion, despite the merits of both of these lines of criticism, the ideas of John Rawls continue to inspire and inform some of the most interesting and promising ideas in political philosophy to this day. Public reason liberalism continues to be a strong current, working out its various challenges and difficulties, as any other living and relevant body of ideas. Despite the analytic and technical philosophical conundrums, placing publicly shared and discussed ideas at the center of democracy and self-government is all but controversial. At the same time, the non-ideal approach to political thought may also risk becoming too complacent with things as they are, as much as risking losing the truly philosophical edge of political thinking: free and creative reasoning and analysis of ways to grasp and understand the world. The two principles of justice, derived from people's conception of the good and rational life plans, as much as the notion of overlapping consensus, continue to prove powerful analytical tools to explore and understand our possibilities of forging a more humane, peaceful, egalitarian, and mutually beneficial social order.

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[47] D. WIENS, "Political Ideals and the Feasibility Frontier", *Economics and Philosophy*, 2015, p. 447-477; K. VALIER & M. WEBER (Eds.), *Political Utopias*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

[48] D. WIENS, "Against Ideal Guidance"; ID., "Political Ideals and the Feasibility Frontier".

[49] B. KOGELMAN, "The future of political philosophy: Non-ideal and west of babel", *The Review of Austrian Economics,* vol. 33(1), p. 237-252.

[50] A. VOLACU, "Bridging Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory", *Political Studies*, 2018, 66 (4), p. 887-902.

[51] D. SCHMIDTZ, "Non-Ideal Theory: What It Is and What It Needs to Be", *Ethics*, 2011, p. 772-796.

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