

RAWLS BEFORE RAWLS: THE CENTRALITY OF THE PERSON WITHIN
LIBERALISM

David Walsh
Catholic University of America

Remarks Prepared for Presentation at the American Political Science Association
meeting, Washington, DC, September 2010

The discovery and publication of John Rawls's senior thesis can be likened to the impact of the early writings of Karl Marx. It was only with the publication of the latter that readers could gain an appreciation of the sources of Marxian thought that, in its mature formulations, was more narrowly centered on economic theory. A similar pattern applies to the ever more rigorous elaborations of Rawls's theory of justice which, despite their prolixity, never quite capture the inspiration from which they spring. The publication of *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* enables us to glimpse the long submerged source in one of its most touchingly unguarded moments. We are led into the inner, the hidden Rawls, and begin to see that there is a whole new way of perceiving this emblematic figure of contemporary liberal political thought. Of course this is not to suggest that the "discoverer", Eric Gregory, or the editors, Nagel and Cohen, have let us in on a secret that ought not to have seen the light of day. A senior thesis resting within the publicly accessible space of a library is hardly a private document, even though many Rawlsians might well have preferred it to remain within the vast unread darkness libraries embrace. It certainly complicates the notion of a secular public reason to be reminded of its genesis within Christian theology, although that is equally a complication from the perspective of Christian theology. Yet it is not as if the affinity of Rawls's philosophy with a deep spiritual strain was utterly unknown. That was visible to any careful reader of the texts. What is new in the *Brief Inquiry* is the revelation of just how many of the main parameters of his philosophical thought were worked out within a theological medium.

This was something of which Rawls himself remained aware and in which he remained deeply interested. The accompanying document, "On My Religion," a private

reflection on his own religious convictions from 1997 (at the latest), makes clear his continuing deep engagement with the Christian beginnings from which his odyssey had emanated. This too provides a fascinating perspective comparable only to what we might have learned if the older Marx had penned a reflection “On My Judaism.” Here Rawls shows that even what is left behind is never really left behind for, even when he concedes that he is no longer a Christian in any conventional sense, the question of his relationship to faith remains ineluctable. The invocation of Bodin’s, also unpublished (until the nineteenth century), *Colloquium of the Seven about the Secrets of the Sublime* (1588), adds only a further layer of fascination to the unfolding mystery. Rawls singles out this conversation between representatives of different religions and none as most closely resembling his political liberalism. The first aspect he notes is that Bodin arrived at toleration, not on the basis of skepticism, but on the basis of faith. “Although he recognized the political importance of toleration, and held that the state should always uphold it, his belief in toleration was religious and not only political (266).” This observation leads Rawls to question the extent to which liberal politics still requires a foundation in faith. Not surprisingly, he concedes that even faith in the existence of God is no longer necessary for us to sustain the principles of mutual respect toward fellow creatures made in the divine image. “For my part,” Rawls concludes, “I don’t see how it is possible that the content and validity of reason should be affected by whether God exists or not, thinking of God as a being with will (268).” Quite apart from the touching naiveté of this formulation (“whether God exists or not”), what is most striking is that Rawls is determined to hold onto the reasonableness of God even if he no longer holds

onto God. It is a poignant faith in God when there is no “God” that attests to the remarkable spiritual journey Rawls navigated over a philosophic lifetime.

Beginning with a rather conventionally Christian upbringing, it was only in his last two years at Princeton that he “became deeply concerned about theology and its doctrines (261).” This was the time when he considered going into the seminary but decided to wait until the war was over, characteristically, out of a sense of duty toward friends and classmates who had signed up to serve and because “I could not convince myself that my motives were sincere.” It was only at the end of the war that his faith underwent a shattering change that marked not so much a loss as the realization that he was “no longer orthodox.” Rawls recounts three incidents that precipitated this crisis, the Lutheran pastor who declared that God aimed American bullets at the Japanese but protected the former from the latter, the incident in which another man named Deacon had been killed in his place merely because Rawls had the fortune to be selected as a blood donor, and the larger questioning of divine justice prompted by the widespread realization of the scale of the Holocaust. Cumulatively they amounted to an assault on the very idea of divine justice. “To interpret history as expressing God’s will, God’s will must accord with the most basic ideas of justice as we know them. For what else can the most basic justice be? Thus, I soon came to reject the idea of the supremacy of the divine will as also hideous and evil (263).” It is not difficult to discern the unity of these incidents as defining the core preoccupation of Rawls’s professional life: justice as fairness. There is more than a hint of revolt against the divine injustice that now must be surpassed by a more humane dispensation of justice. That might well have been the route of Karl Marx but it was not to be that of John Rawls or, by extension, the liberal

constructions that take their lead from him. Instead Rawls and liberal polities return, like him, to the question of their relationship to religion.

In this sense only the opening statement of this remarkable final testament fails to hit the mark. “My religion,” Rawls declares, “is of interest only to me,” although he left his thoughts about it in a way that was accessible to family and friends. Could it be that he suspected that his religion was of interest and of relevance to a far wider circle for whom he functioned as their preeminent theoretical voice? The very exercise of this autobiographical stock-taking seems to suggest a lacuna within the publicly elaborated accounts of justice. Perhaps there lay an injustice at the heart of a theory of justice? A debt that had not quite been repaid, a settling of scores that remained unsettled? Five years before his death we encounter Rawls asking himself whether he has given God all that is his due. Such a meditation could only assume the form of a letter to himself. Or perhaps it is a letter to God? At any rate it was not written for publication, even though it was left available for publication. The delete button could have been pressed at any time. Perhaps it is evidence of Rawls’s own remarkable sense of justice that he never sought to suppress what could not be transacted within the parameters of the public discourse he had elaborated. How could the thinker who had explained so convincingly why no appeal to metaphysical or religious worldviews was permissible within the public square deal with his own lingering entanglement with such “worldviews”? It is not of course that the theological resonances of *A Theory of Justice* were ever disguised. No Heideggerian attempts at erasure were employed to smooth over the inconsistencies of liberal philosophical thought. Complications were allowed to stand, and nowhere more poignantly than in the author who must write privately to himself about a “religion” for

which he can no longer find a place within his public discourse. A consistent liberal would have no need to write about his or her religion, having firmly closed the door on all its confounding perplexities. But Rawls himself was no Rawlsian. He could not let go of what had after all been the well-spring from which his thought had flowed. This is the significance of the publication of the unknown thesis by a brilliant deeply sensitive Princeton undergrad.

Without the simultaneous appearance of “On My Religion” the thesis could be given far less weight in an overall assessment of Rawls. We might well have been able to regard it as a closed chapter to which he never looked back. But the later reflection demonstrates that the older Rawls did look back prompted, not by nostalgia, but by a profound philosophical need to become clear about the character of his own thought. In undertaking our own review of that pathway we are perhaps best guided by one of the most striking cautions that Rawls issues to himself in the self-reflection. After noting that his religious views changed in 1945 he concedes his incapacity to comprehend the shift in any definitive way. “I don’t profess to understand at all why my beliefs changed, or believe it is possible fully to comprehend such changes. We can record what happened, tell stories and make guesses, but they must be taken as such. There may be something in them, but probably not (261).” Rawls was sufficiently self-perceptive to recognize that there were real limits to self-perception. Yet those limits were never absolute; their boundaries could be pushed back a little more to catch a glimpse of what had not been glimpsed before. In this sense Rawls’s exercise in self-interpretation is no different from the task of interpretation in general. We are continually on the track of the inspiration from which the text arose, a source that precisely because it lies beyond the

text can never be included within it no matter how extensive the latter becomes. Try as he might, the author can never include the point of view from which his work has arisen. Somehow its definitive formulation, its living drive for self-expression, identical with the author him or herself, ever escapes the attempt at containment. This is not to suggest that we get the real Rawls in the undergraduate thesis, but only that we catch something of the personal dynamic far less visible in the writings of the professional philosopher. The philosophical work, despite the rigor of its elaboration, can never express the convictions that launch it on its course. They are there beforehand, perhaps even unknown to the author, as a silent undertow that works inexorably toward an articulation that aims at a comprehensive expression. Yet even that very extensiveness results in a marked diminution in the vitality of its inspiration. This is what makes the summative undergraduate formulation so invaluable. It brings us close to the motivating experience, even if such a core permanently eludes us, of the theory of justice. The literary unfolding can attain the impressive reach and nuance exemplified in *A Theory of Justice*, but it can never be penetrated until we have somehow sensed the innermost source from which it erupts. Here in the senior thesis the person of John Rawls discloses a first fleeting self-revelation.

Of course it is the genius of the philosophic elaboration that ultimately makes the inspiration of interest to us. The inspiration cannot stand apart from what it brings forth or, if it can, it amounts to no more than a summary of the commonplace aspiration for justice. But what makes the deconstruction of John Rawls worthy of interest is that he is more than John Rawls, for Rawls is the voice of contemporary liberal political thought. What is hidden within him is, by extension, also hidden within contemporary liberalism,

even one that embraces the full logic of a public reason without theological adumbrations. This is surely intuited by the editors, both former students of Rawls, who bear no brief for suggesting a religious penumbra to his thought. Rather it is the case that admirers and critics of Rawls must now grapple with the deeper question of what it means for liberal politics that its most successful contemporary theorist drew the structure of his thought from neo-orthodox Christianity. Is there any longer a secular public reason when its genealogy is tinged with such profound religiosity? Certainly we cannot simply accede to the conventional reading, facilitated by Rawls himself, that public reason eschews a theology. Nor can we simply accept the opposing nostrum that liberal polities depend on transcendent foundations they are no longer able to acknowledge or sustain.¹ We seem to be closer to Jürgen Habermas's pronouncement that we live in a post-secular age, one in which the prevailing secularism is now incapable of identifying the source of its own self-understanding.² Rawls's *Brief Inquiry* bursts upon a scene to which it itself gave rise without any possibility of foreseeing what it would bring forth. The questions it prompts include, not only an assessment of the departure Rawls himself undertook in his shift away from orthodoxy toward secular liberalism, but more importantly, of the extent to which secular orthodoxy can sustain its disavowance from sources of which it had not counted upon of being reminded. The evolution from theology to rationalism is well known historically, but what are we to make of its compressed development within the brief career of one man? Perhaps it is here that we can see most clearly the impossibility of effecting a radical break from the religious origins of liberalism.

¹ See Berkowitz, Meilander

² Jürgen Habermas *et al.*, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (trans.) Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

The fervor with which liberal principles are enunciated, the certainty of tone that will brook no exceptions to its mandate, has always seemed to echo the style of the dogmatic affirmations that liberalism never ceased to insist it had left behind. The incontrovertibility of liberal faith had merely substituted for the certitudes of theological faith. But why this must be so has not been well understood. Its explanation turns on the realization that every principle, no matter how authoritative, cannot furnish the grounds of its own authority. Ultimate principles are never more than penultimate. It is faith that holds them as ultimate for that is what it means to be persons who bind themselves in relation to principles. This is an insight of Kant with which Rawls had more than passing familiarity for it was Kant who emphasized that it was the capacity to be bound by duty for its own sake that marked the highest dignity of human beings. They are the ones who respond to that transcendent call and therefore give constant attestation to their own transcendent existence. Only persons can live in relation to what is not because it depends on their fidelity for its actualization. Obligations can hold them because they are obliged to obligation itself. There is no stepping outside of the grounds of obligation to interrogate its imperative, for any such maneuver already presupposes a sense of obligation that makes it possible. Moreover, this is not the same as the logic of requiring a starting point for every chain of argument. It is much more like the possibility of argumentation as such, prior to all contemplation of axioms. Argument too is sustained by faith in its possibility. But where that faith is located or whence it is derived remain inaccessible. We can only say that faith too is held by faith. As such it is the certainty that nothing is more certain than what lies on the far side of all possibility of doubt. Faith has already reached the goal of what it seeks through faith. It is thus not surprising that

Rawls's own trajectory exemplifies the impossibility of jettisoning faith even as it moves from a theological to a non-theological mode.

To persuade readers of this somewhat unorthodox thesis what is needed is a case study. A number of other commentators have searched the *Brief Inquiry* for prefigurations of the conceptual apparatus elaborated by the mature Rawls. They have found in the emphasis on community, of equal respect for persons, the rejection of merit, and the notion of justice as fairness, striking anticipations of what is eloquently developed in the later writings. There have even been attempts to link the hallmark principle of the later Rawls, the priority of the right over the good, to the respect for persons as ends in themselves that we find in the *Inquiry*. Robert Merrihew Adams has singled out the distinct personalism of the early Rawls, his explication of the difference between personal and natural relations, as “a point of originality” (38), in the early work. Indeed the *Inquiry* has consistently impressed readers with the theoretical penetration already evident in its youthful presentation. But what has not been attempted is any sustained examination of the inner continuity that extends to the mature philosophical work. In part this is due to Rawls's own disavowal, a disavowal that remained strangely incomplete, of his religious convictions. A greater part of the reason must, however, lie with the difficulty of tracing the continuity of an explicitly theological discourse into its strictly philosophical parallels. That is the challenge I assume here, fully aware that it can only be persuasive if it can be demonstrated in relation to the central line of Rawls's thought. What then is the status of the priority of the right over the good? Is it a thread that can be found in the very earliest attempt at a comprehensive formulation of his thought? And if it is, is it inexorably tied to its theological context there? Or does it

constitute a bridge to the overtly and exclusively secular discourse Rawls embraces as public reason?

The priority of the right over the good has been widely regarded as the overarching premise of his whole philosophical project. It simultaneously defines his approach and articulates the self-understanding of contemporary liberal political thought. Even when he modulates away from insistence on a theory of justice, with its twin invocations of equal rights to liberty and the difference principle, or concedes that it is grounded in no more than overlapping political consensus, there is no retreat from the priority of right. This is because insistence on the priority of right is tantamount to what it means to constitute a liberal political order. Government guarantees the right to pursue different and competing accounts of the good. It is the liberty to pursue irreducibly plural understandings of the good that is the distinguishing mark of liberal polities. In this sense, Rawls's principle is merely a variant of core invocations of the liberal political tradition. Yet its formulation strikes Anglophone ears as strange. They have heard of rights but what of "the right?" The latter notion is one that emerges in the German and particularly the Kantian tradition where *das Recht* cannot readily be translated as either the legal or the just, because it encompasses both. We often forget how thoroughly Rawls was steeped in that continental mode of discourse. As a consequence this pivotal notion of his thought has been taken in a far more limited sense than when it functions as the linchpin of his entire theoretical approach. Usually it is treated merely as the assertion of liberal neutrality within a context of rival versions of the good. A liberal public order is one that maintains strict indifference over such divergent worldviews in order to maintain the peace within which individuals are free to pursue their respective

choices among them. Frequently it is characterized as the tension between public indifference, which seems to suggest equal lack of merit within such private choices, and the maintenance of respect, which would seem to assert their worthiness of such inexhaustible respect. Critics have cited the impossibility of maintaining a neutral view of the good without presupposing neutrality as a good.

Rawls's own heroic effort to respond to this challenge in *A Theory of Justice*, by articulating an unobjectionable account of the just, and his subsequent concession that he had elaborated no more than a convergent consensus concerning the just, did not materially affect the core principle he thereby sought to defend. The priority of the right to the good endured despite the vicissitudes of its Rawlsian defense. As a consequence we might suspect that there is more to it than either Rawls and his defenders or his critics had quite comprehended. Perhaps it is bigger even than the liberal self-conception it seems to define. Certainly it is more than a principle of neutrality for despite the ease with which it is touted as the default conception of a liberal polity, it has always been evident that such regimes are far more than a house of cards utterly without substantive convictions. They have rather demonstrated a remarkable capacity to rise in defense of the defenseless and often at considerable cost to their own tranquility. The civic generosity of the young Rawls in uniform was notable principally for its commonality, as was his resolve to hold liberal political society to a higher moral standard than it seemed to profess. But what was that standard if not the priority of the right above all other considerations of ideology, morality, or religion? Before the principle had been formulated it had been discovered by him as the imperative of life. This is the inestimable value of the early thesis for in its pages we see Rawls elaborating its central

impulse outside of the interest in carving political consensus that later came to occupy him. To some extent his focus on the strictly moral, as opposed to the political, elevates his thought here to a spiritual purity not so easily discerned in the later work.

In the *Brief Inquiry* we see the priority of right over the good in a context far removed from disputes about liberal neutrality within which it is later ensnared. Here it is simply a fundamental principle of morality, rather than a principle about morality. Perhaps it is because of the great difference in context that commentators have failed to note its emergence here, despite the fact that Rawls virtually declares it as the main point of his little work. In the Preface he announces two aims, the first and most prominent of which is “To enter a strong protest against a certain scheme of thought which I have called naturalism.” The second is to address specific problems of Christianity by avoiding the naturalistic terminology that has crept into it from Greek sources. Rawls acknowledges that what he advocates is “more or less of a ‘revolution’ by repudiating this traditional line of thought (107).” In place of the Greek appeal to nature and a natural good, Rawls proposes to make the categories of community and personality central. It is very much a strain of thought emanating from the neoorthodoxy of Karl Barth, Anders Nygren, Emil Brunner and others who, earlier in the century, had set out to retrieve the radical difference of Christianity from the naturalistic compromise of liberal Protestant theology. Despite this theological lineage and the prevalence of its influence within the thesis, what is most remarkable is that Rawls’s interest flows in a far more philosophical direction. He is adamantly opposed to “natural ethics” and deeply committed to an account anchored in the centrality of personal relations and community. “Proper ethics is not the relating of a person to some objective ‘good’ for which he

should strive, but is the relating of person to person and finally to God (114).” The theological terminology is only incidental to what is essentially a personalist philosophy worked out without benefit of any personalist philosophies. Yet like the personalism announced by Max Scheler, Rawls was very much aware of the deep departure it entailed with the entire philosophic tradition that appealed to an order of nature.

It required no great leap to assert the priority of the right to the good when one had already discarded the whole notion of an orientation toward the highest good. This had nothing to do with the Hobbesian absence of agreement on the *summum bonum*, but arose from a far deeper realization that any account of the good has failed to take account of the person through whom it is apprehended as good. Apart from the person whose free acknowledgment is the turning point, the highest good is a mere externality indifferent to the persons without whom it is scarcely of any value. Rejecting the whole language of the good as anything outside of persons, Rawls boldly declares his position. “(a) We do not believe that the so-called ‘good life’ (detestable phrase) consists in seeking any object, but that it is rather something totally different, a matter of personal relations; and (b) we deny that men seek the ‘good’ so named (161).” There is no doubt that Rawls’s neo-orthodox influences definitively turned him away from classical and scholastic thought, to such an extent that he seems not to have ever entertained a serious reexamination of them. As a consequence it seems to have been impossible for him to consider that his own prioritization of the person only became possible through the Greek discovery of nous, and through the Christian enlargement of the language of interiority as well as the definitional requirements of Christian theology. Modern personalism rests on an account of the person made possible by the encounter with the personal God. At best

Rawls evinces only a dim awareness of this in the thesis and it scarcely surfaces in his later lectures. He is we might say so gripped by the novelty of his own discovery of the person, especially of personal relations as defining the very meaning of community, that he brusquely declares that “all natural systems lose communality, personality, and the true nature of God, and are therefore not really Christian but individualistic (178).”

Long before Rawls became a liberal he had ceased to be a Lockean. No account of individuals in a state of nature, arranging their mutual relations by way of a contract (126), could be adequate to one who understood that true community only exists within the inwardness of the person. *A Theory of Justice* and its later incarnation, *Justice as Fairness*, look very different when seen, not as an effort to negotiate differences, but to bring about an interior state within the persons who bear liberal communities within them. Angelo Valente has shown how the famous “veil of ignorance” can be seen as a meditative exercise in bringing about an awareness of another person’s social point of view. The community at which Rawls aims throughout his work is one in which the mutuality of persons in relation to one another exists nowhere than within each of them as persons. A community of persons is one in which the right of the other has assumed the same primacy as my own. It is a community of right above all. Some commentators have pointed out how the essentially communitarian character of Rawls’s vision only becomes clear in the *Brief Inquiry*. Standard objections to the unencumbered, punctuated, or isolated self of the Rawlsian calculations will no longer be possible. Now it is clear that even the thin community of the overlapping consensus is still a genuine community in which each has taken on board the perspective of the other. Despite the externality of an order of right, the adjustment of mutual freedoms it entails, its most

crucial feature is the inwardness by which every person is held by every other. Persons who are not mutually present are nevertheless present to one another within the order of right. That narrower, political, conception still lay further down the road but it was continuous with the early discovery that “a person is not a person apart from community and also that true community does not absorb the individual but rather makes his personality possible (127).” A liberal community is one in which persons always take precedence over their convictions and commitments.

The priority of right is really the priority of persons to the good. What appears as indifference is really an affirmation of a far deeper bond that unites human beings beyond everything that divides them. The reason for the notorious difficulty in finding a language that can explicate that commonality is that any language already takes its stand within a realm of objectivity. An appeal to nature or to nature’s God already raises the questions of meaning around which the divisions turn. Yet the question of foundations cannot simply be ignored without suggesting the vacuity of an order of right. The mature Rawls certainly understood this and sought, through the various revisions through which his thought moved, to infuse the notion of right with a moral primacy that could withstand the solvent of doubt continually lapping against it. The priority of the right was for him a moral priority. This was what imbued it with a moral authority that could not be doubted for no account of the good that failed to meet the test of the inviolability of persons could be regarded as legitimate. It is of course that heightened certainty of the principle of individual dignity and worth that has long functioned as the central axis of the liberal political tradition. But there is a big difference between a principle whose implementation demonstrates its validity and the elaboration of a theoretical account

adequate to it. The latter was Rawls's project and his enunciation of the priority of the right to the good is as successful a thematization as we have reached. Its durability, however, does not imply that the author had plumbed the depth of his own statement. The reason for this, as it is for the broader liberal self-understanding, is that the principle represents the limit of the horizon within which we must contemplate it. We are persons and we must think within the awareness of what it means to be a person in relationship to other persons.

It is only if we see the inescapably meditative character of his unfolding that we can follow the trajectory of Rawls's thought. Persons mark the boundary of that meditation because we know persons even before we raise questions about the true or the good. The person precedes the thinker. For Rawls there are none of the solipsistic questions about how we know other minds, the kind of intellectual isolationism from which there is no exit, since no proof can definitively put the uncertainties to rest. From the beginning he is a moral philosopher for whom obligation is the given within which he thinks. But it is only in the *Brief Inquiry*, so far as I know, that he explains why knowledge of other persons does not depend on me. The young Rawls brilliantly perceives that persons cannot be known at all except through their self-disclosure and that that, when it occurs, is irrefutable. "Natural objects immediately reveal their nature as being colored in such a way, as such and such a shape, and so forth. But personal relations are different; what the person feels cannot be seen as a sense-datum, but that person must reveal his feelings to us by means of sense-data, using those which have been determined by convention as representing the feeling and state of mind in question

(153).”³ This may not have the full force of the Levinasian insistence on the primacy of the face of the other, but it is impressively convergent with it. “We have bodies, then, as signs which make community possible.” Individualism is never seriously entertained by Rawls because his thought moves entirely within the priority of community.

The problem with this realization is that there can never be an account of the obligation that has been imposed on us before we have even begun to contemplate it. On the contrary, it is our notion of obligation that must withstand the severe judgment under which it is unfolded. Right, in the schema of Rawls, is an inexorability before which our account of the good must answer. Far from being an evasion of responsibility, it is a heightening of it to such an extent that we stand utterly naked before its imperative. In the early work Rawls had no hesitation in acknowledging that this is tantamount to the inescapability of divine judgment. This is why he emphasized there is no separation between religion and ethics. But this is not a God located far from the center of action. Rather he is thoroughly disclosed within the personalist horizon within which he unfolds. It is because God is a person and therefore intimately related to all other persons that he is implicated in our mutual relations with one another. What we do to one person affects all others to whom that person is connected. “Ultimately all personal relations are so connected for the reason that we all exist before God, and by being related to Him we are all related to each other although we may never have met one another. That personal relations form such a nexus leads to the conclusion that religion and ethics cannot be separated (116; also 204-5).” It might not be too much of a stretch to conclude that even after Rawls could no longer regard his religion as orthodox, he nevertheless understood

³ “Personal knowledge is revealed knowledge. It comes about through communication in community. Natural objects immediately disclose their nature; but persons must consent to communicate knowledge of themselves. Therefore by reason man can know very little about God.” *Inquiry*, 224.

ethics as replete with attenuations into a religious sphere. The God of the *Brief Inquiry* was so thoroughly manifest within a personal universe that it would be virtually impossible to eject him from it. Without God the voice of God is still heard within, as the one who insists on the right treatment of persons above all other natural or social goods. Even the break with religious language that is announced in the embrace of public reason as the only authoritative discourse is one that can be viewed as the final logic of the transcendent imperative. The God who respects persons in their irrefragable autonomy cannot impose himself upon them. He is the seal of their inviolability.

It is possible that that is too smooth a construction to place on Rawls's more fitfully transacted odyssey, an odyssey that for all is formidable philosophical power, was neither in touch with the full reach of the Greek and Christian tradition, nor with the full range of philosophic developments in the contemporary period. Yet it was not entirely parochial either for, unlike many of his admirers, Rawls was deeply immersed in the history of modern moral philosophy. It is particularly in the lectures on Kant, which take up almost half of the published version, that we see him working out the wider parameters of his own thought. In this he attests to the impossibility of doing philosophy except in relation to the greatest philosophic minds of the past. Even if, as Rawls concedes, "I never felt satisfied with the understanding I achieved of Kant's doctrine as a whole (xvii)," he nevertheless managed to work out how the famous postulates of God, freedom, and immortality could be understood in a way that was unobjectionable to his own evolving public reason. The focus on Kant is not surprising for a thinker whose core convictions center on the person. Kant is not only the one who elevates the dignity of the person to its modern philosophic prominence, but he is virtually the origin of a

personalist turn that recognizes consciousness in its theoretical and practical enactments as the horizon from which philosophic reflection unfolds. But what particularly absorbs the interest of Rawls is the thorny issue of how the postulates of practical reason are to be understood. It is here that Kant who “limited reason in order to make room for faith” discloses the kind of faith that endures beyond dogma and metaphysics. For the author of a *Brief Inquiry* this was the path that drew him irresistibly.

Rawls refers to it as “reasonable faith” which he wishes to distinguish from *Vernunftglaube*, a terminological difference that he introduces to Kant rather than finds within him. This is done because Rawls wants to differentiate between Kant’s faith in a highest good and in the postulates proper. The result is a subtle and useful delineation of what are probably tensions within Kant’s treatment, although we do not need to examine the merits of the interpretation here. We need only note its convergence with Rawls’s overarching conceptualization in which the good, and accounts of the highest good, are severely dismissed in favor of the recognition of the priority of right. He finds the grounds of this understanding in the Kantian “paradox of method” which is formulated in the *Critique of Practical Reason*’s insistence that good and evil do not define the moral law but are rather defined by it. “Kant believed,” Rawls explains, “that once we start from the good as a prior and independently given object, the moral conception must be heteronomous.”⁴ Whatever is presented to practical reason as good, even God, must first be assessed in light of the imperative of goodness within us that is the autonomous enactment of the moral law. “Even the Holy One of the Gospel,” Kant explains in the *Groundwork*, “must be compared with our idea of moral perfection before he can be

⁴ Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, (ed.) Barbara Herman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 227.

recognized as such.”⁵ It is because of Rawls’s more consistent commitment to the primacy of autonomy that he is sensitized to Kant’s own occasional slippages into the older formulations of nature and the highest good. Rawls is, in other words, still on the determinedly personalist path he had first embraced in the *Brief Inquiry* and he finds in Kant the indispensable means for its sustained elaboration. But that does not mean that Rawls opts for a purely secular rationalist account of Kant, for he takes *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* very seriously and mounts a considerable effort to include the famous postulates of God, immortality and freedom as a whole. While willing to discard the *Vernunftglaube* that looks toward a highest good, Rawls seeks to sketch a reasonable faith in the postulates that will still not overstep the secular boundaries.

Certainly he is scrupulous to avoid giving the impression that he is smuggling in religion or metaphysics by the back door of practical reason once the front door of theoretical reason has been closed against them. Even when Rawls finds himself in the minority position of rejecting the metaphysical construction of Kant’s assertions that the origin of action must be located outside of time, he simply concedes that he does not regard such implications as necessary to render Kant consistent with himself. “I believe the he is describing beliefs and attitudes that we are to adopt and cultivate so as to act from the practical point of view (301).”⁶ Rawls is, in other words, unusual among Kant interpreters in taking the postulates and the metaphysical adumbrations seriously yet not in a metaphysical way. We might also add that, like most Kant specialists, he does not look to Hegel or Kant’s other successors for a solution to these problems. He continues to take “metaphysics” in a conventionally Kantian sense that suggests it is a supersensible

⁵ Quoted by Rawls in *ibid.*, 230.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 301.

realm no longer accessible through sense intuitions. The question begging response as to what we might do with such a parallel universe simply does not seem to occur. Yet despite this lack of sophistication there is something quite impressive about Rawls's determination to live with the manifest tensions of Kant that sustain a reasonable faith in the face of its rational demolition. It is as a result of that perseverance that Rawls arrives at a kind of metaphysical or religious openness that can find no justification within the strict secular limits of his thought. A metaphysics of practice has replaced a metaphysics of theory. It cannot be rendered intellectually coherent without taking stock of why such a logic is unavoidable, namely because the horizon within which we live cannot be comprehended from within it. But that does not render the context within which we exist unreal. It is on the contrary the most real reality there is.

In many respects the early Rawls seemed to be more sure of the status of the reality within which human beings live. He had named it as the personal that he distinguished sharply from the natural, a division that gave him a rather firm grasp of the priority that must be maintained between them. The problem was that the later Rawls focused more narrowly on the autonomy of the person without much reference to the contrast with the non-autonomous surrounding reality and certainly without any extended effort to unravel the relationship between them. As a consequence the best he can do is concede the inconclusiveness of his own intellectual position. This is the conception of a reasonable faith that he carves out by way of his reading of Kant. Far more is involved, Rawls explains, than the Tocquevillian notion that religion is an indispensable foundation of morality for otherwise we would be inclined toward cynicism or despair. Rawls is willing to concede "that it would be better to maintain our religious faith, for then we

would preserve our allegiance to justice and virtue.”⁷ But then he goes on to explain that such “religious beliefs would not be postulates in Kant’s sense, since for him, postulates specify conditions necessary for us to conceive how the a priori object of the moral law is possible; religious beliefs are not needed for this when that object is the realm of ends.” This is because a “realm of ends” is not a good or a goal at which our actions aim but the very source from which they spring. In regarding every other as ends-in-themselves we act as if we are bringing about a realm of ends-in-themselves. This is not an event that lies in the future, for which we must hope and therefore require some grounds for hoping for it, but the reality within which we exist. The realm of ends is already accomplished within our action. This is why Rawls concludes by insisting that “Kant’s reasonable faith is more than simply belief necessary for us to uphold our moral integrity.” Reasonable faith thus turns out to be eschatological faith, a faith that is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb 11:1).” It is a faith that cannot be dislodged because it is impervious to refutation. In the instant of action it has been fully realized and does not await any consequence beyond itself.

Now it is not clear that Rawls realized the eschatological character of this faith, that as the well-spring of the moral law it evinces its definitive consummation. Certainly he seems to have thought that he was hoeing more narrowly to the expectations of a secular discourse.⁸ Yet it is hard to resist the sense that he follows that line also in part from a desire to preserve the conviction of right from the uncertainties to which any transcendent appeal would subject it. The right that is prior to the good is such as the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁸ “What makes an intelligible world is not our being in another world ontologically distinct from this world, one not in space and time, but all of us, here and now, acting from the moral law under the idea of freedom. The realm of ends is a secular ideal.” *Ibid.*, 312.

surest safeguard against the divisions that confront any specification of the good. Right as the a priori is unassailable. Beyond that it is probably not possible to go in Rawls's deliberately minimalist reading of the postulates of God, freedom, and immortality. In the end it is only freedom and its role in enacting a realm of ends that he seeks to defend along Kantian lines, a defense that he readily admits many will find unsatisfactory. Given the inability to mount a theoretical account of freedom, since all theoretical accounts touch only upon chains of phenomena susceptible to the categories of causation, the most that can be done is to indemnify moral action against the collapse that the denial of freedom would bring about. This is the role of reasonable faith that accepts our inability to bring theoretical and practical reason into a unified point of view. "While we cannot give a theoretical proof of the possibility of freedom, it suffices to assure ourselves that there is no such proof of its impossibility; and the fact of reason then allows us to assume it."⁹ In the language of the young Rawls, there is no naturalistic demonstration of the freedom upon which alone personal existence depends. What it means to be a person, a self-enacting source of our own existence, can only be held by faith. Given the degree of self-identification with Kant we are inclined to conclude that this declaration of reasonable faith also represents the limits of Rawls's own thought. Even the concession that "many will find this view unsatisfactory" in its inability to resolve the tensions must be taken as an acknowledgment of his own limits. Yet even such disarming frankness need not be taken as the last word.

For one thing there is the question of how Kant and Rawls could reach a position they discerned to be unsatisfactory and thereby hold the irreconcilables simultaneously apart and together. How could he know about the antinomy without in some sense

⁹ *Ibid.*, 324, where Rawls references the *Critique of Practical Reason* on this point.

existing beyond it? One does not have to be an Hegelian to hold that an antinomy one beholds has in some sense been transcended. The question is, what is that sense? Fundamentally this is the limit to which Rawls admits, a limit that refuses to reflect on itself. It simply takes note of the momentous historical significance of this bifurcation of theoretical and practical reason that Kant accomplishes. Acknowledgement of our inability to bring them together into “one unified theoretical account of the world,” is the point at which “Kant breaks with the long tradition of Western metaphysics and theology.”¹⁰ The equivalent formulation in Rawls is surely his principle of the priority of the right over the good, for the entire tradition is premised on the capacity of theoretical reason to give authoritative direction to the moral life. Now the good cannot be demonstrated but must rather be discovered, or “constructed”, in Rawls’s terminology, within the implementation of the right. The primacy of practical reason that includes the subsumption of theoretical reason under its guidance is indeed the revolution in thought signaled by Kant. It marks a break with the prevailing tradition as it has been conventionally understood, although a deeper examination would discover that it is more in the nature of an explication of what had remained implicit in the Greek beginning. Rawls is certainly a partner within this development yet a partner with distinct limitations in his own self-awareness. It is not clear, for example, that he saw his own central principle in terms of the shift from theoretical to practical reason. But what secures his position within the historical unfolding is that he may well be the first thinker since Kant to concede the core implication of the prioritization of practical reason. That is, that without its theoretical underpinning, practical reason can only sustain its rationality by means of a faith that is more than it can justify. This is the significance of the trajectory

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

we have sketched from the Christian personalism of the thesis to the reasonable faith of the lectures on Kant. Even as Rawls narrows the application of that faith, over the course of his elaboration he seeks to secure it ever more impregnably from the objections of reason. Like Kant, he too has placed limits on the reach of reason in order to more thoroughly confirm faith. And like Kant one wonders whether the narrowly tailored faith he has embraced is up to the formidable responsibility he has placed upon it. Is a reasonable faith faith at all? Or does faith not necessarily entail a move beyond reason?

The questions accumulate rapidly but this is not the place to address them. Here we may only insert a coda that may be of relevance to those further considerations. It is an afterthought that is suggested by the continuity of Rawls's early thesis on faith to his late thesis on reasonable faith. Continuity always raises the question of discontinuity. What is the promise that has not been delivered upon? Over and above the departure from orthodox Christianity, the major discontinuity is in Rawls's relinquishment of the language of personalism. That may be of a piece with his theological rupture but it is not necessarily implied in it. What makes it of relevance here is that the question of the viability of Rawls's reasonable faith is surely connected with the question of whether faith can be viewed apart from faith in a person. Given that only persons have faith, is it not also inevitable that faith is centered on persons as well? What does it mean to have faith if faith does not open us to the community of persons? This is close to the position of the Rawls of the *Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* for whom faith is an openness to the self-revelation of others that can be grasped only as faith. As such persons are untroubled by an inability to bring their theoretical apprehensions of the sense data of others into coincidence with the practical faith by which they hold the

others in inwardness. For them there is no question of the viability of their faith since it forms the axis on which their existence turns. Persons live by faith. Otherness is already present to them in the Thou they hear before they even know themselves. It is only when they must exist within the narrower attenuations of a reasonable faith that the uncertainties loom. Then the inability to defend themselves before the scrutiny of theoretical reason, even before public reason, weighs more heavily upon them. The thread of faith is strained by an answering response from the other who lies beyond confirmation of the sensible. The poignancy of a faith that rests on nothing but faith has its own nobility but it is tenuous nevertheless. One wonders whether the burden of excessive narrowness that Rawls imposes on a liberal polity is one it is capable of sustaining. Yet the concern is one that virtually answers itself, for to become the kind of person who requires no more justification than public reason supplies, who has accepted the impossibility of rendering its practical convictions theoretically coherent, is to have demonstrated the transcendence that marks the fullest meaning of what it is to be a person. When one lives by the conviction of the priority of the right to the good one has actualized a faith that affirms the person as more than he or she can say. The poignancy of Rawls is that his humanity exceeded the capacity of his thought. He could affirm that the imprescriptibility of right surpasses all capacity to justify it, but he could not explicate the source of his insight. This is not necessarily to claim that philosophy has elsewhere accomplished as much. It is simply to take note of the possibility of greater recognition of its possibility.