

# John Rawls

By Ronald Dworkin

*These remarks were made at a memorial service for John Rawls, held at Harvard University on February 27, 2003.*

JOHN RAWLS WAS, WE KNOW, THE MOST INFLUENTIAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER OF his time. I want to talk about the influence of his ideas not just in philosophy but in the broader theory of government, and in political and intellectual life more generally. Though he never aimed at this—indeed he held out against it—he was one of the very few preeminent intellectuals whose work, like Freud's and Darwin's, quickly crossed from a single academic field into the academy generally and then into general culture.

*A Theory of Justice* joined the canon of works that any properly educated person was expected at least to recognize; it appeared straightaway on the reading lists of law, economics, history, and social theory as well as philosophy, and three decades later Rawls's key ideas—the original position with its veil of ignorance as a strategy for thinking about justice and the aim of making the worst off among us as well off as they can be—are even more common currency: they are now the shared intellectual property of many millions of people.

Dozens of social democratic politicians in Europe, including at least three senior cabinet ministers in Britain, have said that he provided what their movements had otherwise lacked, a distinct philosophical basis to rival conservative pragmatism and Marxist ideology. Chinese students held up copies of his book for the television cameras in Tiananmen Square, and Indian writers quote him daily now to warn against the dangers of Hindu nationalism. The other day I saw him cited twice in the British press, once in an argument calling for more far-reaching thought about Iraq, and once, at what you might think the opposite level of importance, in a sports-page argument about the realignment of teams in the British Rugby League.

The breadth and speed of Rawls's penetration into the general culture must signal something of enduring importance and finally of political consequence, and this might well be, in the end, the triumph not of his detailed doctrines of justice, or even his more general egalitarianism, but a fundamental shift in the perspectives of political morality: a shift from made-

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for-politics collectivism to a distinctly moral individualism.

Thousands of obituaries say that Rawls brought substantive political goals and ideals back to political philosophy, that he made philosophers think again about real issues, about what really is just or unjust. But the broader fields of social thought—law, economics, and social theory—were all already drenched in substantive policy when Rawls began, and the difference he made in those fields was different and perhaps even more important.

For the theory of government was much more dominated then by aggregative and collectivist goals and policies. Lawyers, economists, and policy scientists were either instinctive majoritarians or utilitarians, who aimed at overall measures of satisfaction or efficiency, or instinctive socialists who aimed at class realignment or classless solidarity.

These collective goals take an external perspective: they look down on society from above. Rawls's instantly memorable thought experiment, about what people would decide for themselves in fair conditions, which looks out at society from the inside, from the point of view of individual people one by one. That reversal gave his ideas the instant penetration I described. It gave them the strongest force a philosophical argument can have: the grip of pertinence and the shock of recognition.

And now the broad theory of government is changing, not just in the Anglophone world but across the democratic world. Economists still study efficiency, of course, but they worry more about the fairness of efficiency, and want fairness to be decisive among efficient results. Lawyers still talk about fidelity to legislatures, but they care more about the individual rights that are also part of democracy. Social theorists still hope for community and solidarity, but they are more likely now to insist that solidarity must be among free and equal people. Rawls is everywhere in this story: in the foundations of economics, in constitutional and international law, and in the normative theories of society and sociology. It is early days, but the transformation he started may one day seem, in retrospect, a crucial stage in a slow progress toward real justice.

May I add a personal note? Unlike most of the others on this platform, and unlike many of you, I was never either Rawls's student or his colleague. I was not in that small, happy band of my own generation who worked with him while he honed his theories and who finally pushed him into publishing them. But after I read *A Theory of Justice*, all those decades ago, I never wrote anything without a mountainous sense of debt to him, and without wondering whether he might happen to read it and what he would think if he did. We can't wonder about that any more, and that is a cause for great sadness. But we can still work, as we must work, gratefully and as hard as we can, in the intellectual world that Jack built. φ