CHAPTER 11

The Choice of the Principles of Justice in the Political Philosophy of John Rawls: An Idealizational Interpretation

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Abstract

In this paper I propose a methodological interpretation of John Rawls' theory of justice. According to this proposal Rawls' theory can be better understood if we view it in terms of the method of idealization and concretization proposed by Leszek Nowak. My aim is to interpret Rawlsian original position, i.e. situation of choice of the principles of justice, as idealizational model of social situation construed on the basis of a limited number of idealizing and realistic assumptions. I present a discussion of some methodological and theoretical consequences of this theory building method.

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to propose a methodological interpretation of John Rawls' theory of justice presented in A Theory of Justice (1971; 1999). Scholars usually consider Rawls' theory as an interpretation of the ethical and anthropological foundations of a modern democratic liberalism. Firstly, Rawls introduced into modern political philosophy a vast array of new concepts such as the original position, the veil of ignorance, reflective equilibrium, justice between generations and the like. Secondly, he revived in liberalism a mode of thinking that refers to notions of the state of nature, social contract and the person's rights. As a result, the liberal philosophy which “under the reign of” utilitarianism in a form of legal positivism represented by Jeremy Bentham, John Austin and Wesley Hohfeld was an institutional and legalistic doctrine received moral justification. Thirdly, thanks to Rawls, the role of theoretical “constructivism” as a valuable research method in political philosophy was appreciated (e.g. Daniels ed. 1975; Pogge 2007; Young ed. 2009).

The main goal of this reconstruction is not, however, to discuss Rawls' theses. It rather refers to the methodological interpretation of Rawls' theory of justice so as to demonstrate that it was decisively affected by the research
method used to establish this theory.\textsuperscript{1} I will argue that Rawls’ theory described in \textit{A Theory of Justice} can be understood better if viewed in terms of the method of idealization and concretization as proposed by Leszek Nowak (Nowak 1980; Nowak 1992; Nowakowa, Nowak 2000).

According to this proposal, idealization is one of the crucial procedures used to construct scientific theories. The idealizational theory of science (henceforth ITS) involves an assertion that numerous notions and theoretical constructs are, as a matter of fact, idealizational constructs that result from the adoption of relevant simplifying, abstracting and idealizing assumptions. For example, it refers to notions of a material point or perfect gas (natural sciences) and notions of a free market or an ideal employer (social sciences) (Nowak 1992, pp. 19–29).

Many of those idealizational constructs are applied for theoretical purposes through the use of them in scientific theories. According to the ITS a scientific theory comprises a sequence of models (theorems) arranged according to the number of adopted idealizing assumptions:

\[ M^k, M^{k-1}, \ldots, M^i, AM^i \]

where: \( k, k-1, \ldots, i \) is the number of adopted idealizing assumptions. A sequence of models begins with the most general and most idealized model \( M^k \) that describes dependencies between the main factors, i.e. those that affect a given phenomenon to the greatest extent, and omits secondary factors (listed as \( k – \) assumptions). According to the ITS – the idealization procedure needs to be supplemented by a procedure of concretization that explains how the fundamental law formulated in the initial idealizational theory \( M^k \) is affected by secondary factors. This is done through the introduction of some corrections into the initial formula of the idealizational statement: the previously adopted idealizing assumptions are removed step by step, whereas the consequent is corrected accordingly. Therefore, the fundamental idealizational model is gradually concretized: The \( M^{k-i} \) model is the concretization of the \( M^k \) model and describes how a given phenomenon is affected by secondary factors omitted in. The concretization is continued until the model \( M^i \) is reached (together with \( i – \) idealizing assumptions) that can be approximated into reality. The last model of this sequence (\( AM^i \)) delineates how dependencies described in the model \( M^i \) are approximated to the empirical reality (Nowak 1992, p. 13).

\textsuperscript{1} Methodological, theoretical and ideological layers almost never occur in Rawls’ work separately. It is rather dominated by mixing theoretical and methodological issues with ideological ones.