Whatever disagreements philosophers might have about Rawls’s work on justice, no one disputes its complexity and sophistication. The Cambridge Companion to Rawls (2003) lives up to these virtues. It is a tour de force of measured, insightful commentary on various aspects of Rawls’s work. The volume contains fourteen essays, a long introduction by its editor, Samuel Freeman, and a comprehensive bibliography. The essays cover Rawls’s most famous book A Theory of Justice (1972) as well as Political Liberalism (1992). Unfortunately, all essays were commissioned before Rawls completed his Law of the Peoples (1999), so there is no essay that discusses his views on global justice.

In A Theory of Justice (henceforth, Theory) Rawls defends ‘justice as fairness’ (henceforth, JAF). JAF consists of two principles. The first guarantees individuals equal basic liberty, which includes political liberties, such as the right to vote, and personal liberties, such as freedom of conscience. The second principle has two parts, the fair equality of opportunity principle, which requires that the benefits of social cooperation be open to all, and the difference principle, which restricts permissible inequalities to those that benefit the worst off in society. JAF strongly prioritizes the implementation of the first principle over that of the second, and the implementation of the first over the second part of the second principle. Political Liberalism (henceforth, Liberalism) recasts JAF significantly. All of the Companion’s essays are unfailingly instructive in presenting Rawls’s justification of JAF as a whole, the ground and scope of its various principles, as well as the transition from Theory to Liberalism. Here I can only comment on a few of the essays, which cast new light on some recurring themes in Rawls scholarship.

The first theme is the relationship between liberalism and democracy in Rawls’s thought. Essays by Joshua Cohen and Amy Gutmann give insightful explanations of how Rawls—unlike more single-minded liberals, such as, for example, Isaiah Berlin and Judith Shklar—refuses to subordinate democracy to liberalism. Rawls does not, in other words, advocate democratic rights and institutions, solely on the grounds that these are instrumental towards the achievement of a liberal society. On the contrary, he regards democracy as independently valuable, and accords political liberties the same moral weight as personal liberties in his first equal liberty principle. In elucidating Rawls’s complex understanding of the equal standing between liberalism and democracy, Cohen and Gutmann put to rest the misconceived criticism that Rawls’s theory of justice somehow ‘denigrates’ democracy.
Cohen’s discussion is particularly instructive on Rawls’s reason for regarding democracy as independently valuable. This, fundamentally, has to do with democracy’s role in ensuring the self-respect of all citizens: ‘being assured a right to the political liberties’, Cohen explains, ‘affirms our equal standing as sovereign judges and thereby promotes the fundamental good of self-respect’ (p. 111). However, in according equal weight to democratic political liberties and personal liberties, rather than subordinating the former to the latter, Rawls’s theory of justice faces a difficult question: how should these liberties be balanced against each other in cases where they conflict? The question may seem to force Rawls to take sides between democracy and liberalism. Either he must believe that the full exercise of political liberties has priority, and that citizens may legitimately exercise their collective authority to restrict certain basic liberties such as freedom of speech; or he must believe that personal liberties have priority, and that they set limits to the collective authority of citizens.

Gutmann’s piece shows how Rawls’s theory of justice is sufficiently complex to escape this dilemma. Gutmann explains how Rawls refuses to choose between the whole set of democratic political liberties, on the one hand, and the whole set of personal liberties, on the other. Rather, Rawls insists that one can coherently pick and mix liberties from the two sets. As Gutmann puts it: ‘when any two liberties conflict—whether they be political or personal—the method of deciding which should give way to the other depends on an assessment of the relative importance for representative persons of the particular liberties in the overall scheme of equal liberties’ (p. 183). Rawls’s theory thus shows how the political liberties of citizens might allow them to restrict libelous and defamatory speech, for example, but not freedom of conscience. This position would not prioritize democracy over liberalism, or vice versa, and yet would be perfectly coherent when understood as an ‘overall scheme of equal liberty’ that is to the greatest equal advantage of all.

A second recurring theme in Rawls scholarship, and which the collection casts new light on, is the nature of Rawls’s egalitarianism. In a masterful discussion of Rawls’s difference principle, Philippe Van Parijs shows how there are many variants of that principle. For example, the principle may rule out any inequality that does not improve the position of the worst off, or, less demandingly, it may rule out any inequality that worsens it. Again, it may require that either outcomes or opportunities for the worst off be maximized (as Van Parijs explains in detail, Rawls is committed to the latter option). The essay also contains some critical remarks and suggestions for Rawlsians. For instance, strongly prioritizing the other principles in Rawls’s theory of justice over the difference principle may leave too few resources available for implementing the difference principle, as ‘the opportunity cost of these resources, in terms of what could be done to better realize the first two principles, is never zero’ (p. 233). Finally, Van Parijs provides an insightful commentary on whether the difference principle should regulate only institutions, or, as G.A. Cohen has suggested, personal conduct as well.

Norman Daniels provides a nuanced interpretation of Rawls’s egalitarianism that allows it to withstand several objections. One such objection targets the responsibility-sensitive character of Rawls’s egalitarianism. Rawls holds famously that inequalities should not reflect morally arbitrary social and natural contingencies, but instead ought to reflect the responsible choices of individuals. Taken on its own, this responsibility-sensitive strand may lead to morally questionable results, however. It