Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy (ed.)


There are several anthologies that have commonly been regarded as indispensable reference works for Rawls scholars. Samuel Freeman’s *Cambridge Companion to Rawls* is one of them, as is Normal Daniel’s *Reading Rawls*. I believe that, from now on, *A Companion to Rawls* should be included in this list. This volume brings together 31 essays that comprehensively discuss three major works by Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, *Political Liberalism*, and *The Law of Peoples*) and various aspects of his theory, including his philosophical ambitions, his methodology, and his conversations with those holding other philosophical views. Compared with existing collections in Rawls scholarship, this book has two strengths. First, the collection contains many recent studies based on new materials about Rawls. Some essays include extensive discussions on Rawls’s posthumously published works, such as *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* and *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. One of them (David A. Reidy’s essay) even makes use of unpublished papers in the Rawls archive at Harvard library, which are valuable resources in understanding the early intellectual development of Rawls. This level of comprehensiveness cannot be found in previously published collections.

Second, although all of the essays are about Rawls, they take a variety of approaches. Some scrutinize the basic texts of Rawls without referring to any secondary literature (such as Colin Macleod’s essay on the applications of justice as fairness). Some take justice as fairness as an ongoing project, identify debates about Rawls’s ideas, and show the possible direction of revisions (such as Stuart White’s essay on democratic equality). Some discuss Rawls’s contribution to political philosophy and the interactions between Rawls and other contemporary philosophers (such as the essay by Zofia Stemplowska and Adam Swift on Rawls on ideal and non-ideal theory). Some challenge Rawls’s interpretation of key thinkers in the history of thought (such as Jonathan Riley’s critique of Rawls’s interpretation of Mill). Its great diversity makes this an intellectually stimulating and intriguing collection, and also indicates the massive potential for the development of Rawls scholarship.

It is impossible to discuss every essay in this short book review. Thus, I shall briefly examine two essays. The first is Paul Weithman’s “Does Justice as Fairness have a Religious Aspect?”. Weithman’s answer to this question is positive. He believes that this religious aspect has long been overlooked by many people. Weithman first states Rawls’s definition of religious aspect. “What gives a view a religious aspect, I think, is that it has a conception of the world as a whole
that presents it as in certain respects holy, or else as worthy of devotion and reverence” (p. 32). Traditional monotheist religions, such as Christianity, hold a conception of the world from the standpoint of the divine, as something that is worthy of devotion and reverence. God wants the world to be run in an ideal and harmonious way, and the duty of believers is to realize this ideal in the real world. Although Rawls’s theory is non-theistic, this aspect can also be found in Rawls’s theory because it involves an all-embracing, harmonious, ordered conception of the world—the well-ordered society, a modern nation-state which has a basic structure publicly regulated by principles of justice. Similar to Kant, Rawls believed that this conception of an ideal world is “worthy of devotion and reverence to which pursuit of the everyday values of secular life should be subordinate” (p. 45). The priority of justice as fairness is thus explained by the worth of this conception of the world.

Weithman’s interpretation is insightful in showing that Rawls’s theory, despite its secular appearance, has a significant similarity to traditional religions. Although I agree with most of his interpretations, my suspicion is that the definition is too broad. If we accept Weithman’s definition, many moral and political theories can also be said to have a religious aspect. For example, utilitarians have a conception of an ideal world in which the aggregate utility is maximized. Some utilitarians, such as Jeremy Bentham, can be described as having a religious temperament in that they feel called upon to realize this ideal that is worthy of devotion. Indeed, most moral and political theories have a conception of an ideal world and evaluate the imperfect real world in light of this conception. Without this ideal, normative evaluation would become difficult, if not impossible. Yet describing all of these moral and political theories as having a religious aspect would risk of cheapening the word “religious.” Hence, more passages from Rawls are needed to illustrate how his theory differs from other moral and political theories by having a distinctive religious aspect.

The second essay I shall discuss is Steven Wall’s “Perfectionist Justice and Rawlsian Legitimacy.” Wall argues that Rawls unnecessarily rejected perfectionist policies and attempted to reconstruct justice as fairness as a perfectionist theory. His essay consists of two theses: a negative thesis that attempts to show that there is no compelling ground in Rawls’s theory to reject perfectionist policies, and a constructive thesis that there are theoretical resources within justice as fairness for vindicating state perfectionism. Due to space limitations, I will focus only on the negative thesis. Rawls’s theory assumes a liberal principle of legitimacy, namely, that political power should be exercised in a way that may reasonably be expected to be endorsed by free and equal citizens. Suppose that there is a sound perfectionist conception of