Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy (eds.)


Leaving a session on political philosophy at a conference, a colleague specializing in ancient Greek metaphysics and epistemology turned to me with a puzzled look on her face and remarked, “It’s like you political philosophers are speaking your own language.” And that’s a fairly accurate description of academic political philosophy thanks to the pioneering work of John Rawls, which Ronald Dworkin once described as setting the terms of the debate. When Rawls began to revitalize contemporary political philosophy in the 1970s, he left us with a complex edifice of terms and concepts that continues to shape our discourse and theorizing about justice, and political philosophy more generally. This collection of short essays consists of 225 entries covering a dazzling array of topics from “Abortion” to “Wittgenstein” that speak to the “terminologically and often technically rich and distinctive body of work” (p. xxi) that Rawls left us with, and which continues to be elaborated on, and expanded upon, by generations of scholars past, present, and future.

The collection is edited by Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy, both of whom have published extensively on Rawls, and with the compilation of their recent _A Companion to Rawls_, have certainly solidified their place among the definitive Rawls scholars. The editors’ introduction serves a dual purpose: it offers a brief biographical sketch of Rawls’s personal and professional life, in addition to offering insights into Rawls’s methodological rigor and the development of his unified philosophical vision, which the editors aptly describe as a “single painting ... worked out over the course of his life” (p. xxii). Rawls’s published works are notorious for being bereft of citations and acknowledgments in the body of the text, which makes the editor’s introduction especially insightful for signaling the tremendous intellectual debt that Rawls owed his wife Mardy, his early mentors, and his many friends, colleagues, and students. In light of his declining health, there is no doubt that Rawls would have been unable to complete his last published works (some of which were published posthumously) without such a generous and loving support system.

The entries are written in a way that attempt to be faithful to Rawls’s text by elucidating what Rawls had thought about a certain concept or topic, while taking great pains to avoid getting embroiled in an attempt to resolve genuine interpretive and substantive debates. And with this task in mind, the project is an overwhelming success. While the majority of the entries are written by scholars who themselves have published extensively on these topics, every effort is made to explicate Rawls’s position on the matter in a clear and unbiased...
fashion. On this score, a particularly notable entry is Krasnoff’s piece on “sta-

bility,” in which Krasnoff sets aside his own interpretive bent on the problem
of stability in order to provide a clear and concise articulation of how concept
of stability operates and evolves throughout Rawls’s philosophical framework.

With literally thousands of books and articles that engage with Rawls’s
work, it is impossible – and perhaps undesirable – to remain completely im-
partial when it comes to Rawls exegesis. One of the collection’s many virtues
is that it enables students and scholars to better distinguish what is, and what
is not debatable, because as Mandle and Reidy rightfully point out, “not ev-
erything is debatable” (p. xxii). For instance, a recurring debate is whether the
family belongs as part of a society’s basic structure’ however Reidy’s entry on
the “Basic Structure of Society” and Lloyd’s entry on the “Family” conclusively
state that the family itself is part of the basic structure because of its role in the
formation of citizens, while correctly denying that the principles of justice ap-
ply to the inter-workings of the family itself. An even more disputed aspect of
Rawls scholarship concerns the central notion of the overlapping consensus,
and whether it is related to stability, or part of Rawls’s justificatory project.
Martin is able to resolve the debate by concluding that while it possible to dis-
tinguish between the two, it is more accurate to conceive of the two roles as
complementary and mutually supportive.

Rawls’s work is usually divided between early and late periods, correspond-
ing roughly to the publications of A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism
respectively, and the contributors do well to chart how the usage or employ-
ment of certain terms or concepts shifts between the two periods. At times
this is accomplished within a single entry, such as Lister’s entry on “Congru-
ence,” or when there is a substantive terminological and conceptual change,
across multiple entries, such as Audurd’s entries on “Autonomy, moral” and
“Autonomy, political.” Despite the changes and shifts, the contributors are still
able to consolidate the various strands of the arguments in an effort to present
Rawls’s work as a unified whole.

In addition to entries on terms, concepts, or methodological devices that
Rawls introduces or employs, the collection includes entries on Rawls’s his-
torical influences, some of his major interlocutors, and Rawls’s reflections on
general topics in political philosophy. Rawls was always considered to be a
keen reader of the history of philosophy, and the entries on his historical influ-
ences help to portray how Rawls’s work is a continuation of a long history of
philosophical thought. The list of historical influences range from the familiar,
such as Kant, to those that may seem alien to Rawls, such as Hegel, with whom
Rawls shared the project of reconciliation, and an understanding of persons in
political society as fundamentally social beings.