Political Stability and the Necessity of Modest Comprehensive Liberal Civic Education

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I. INTRODUCTION

The *problem of political stability* is the problem of how a society can justly sustain a common set of institutions and policies although its populace holds many fundamental beliefs that are incompatible with one another. One solution to this problem might be to utilize education to transmit liberal norms (such as moral autonomy, equality, respect, and individuality) to younger generations of citizens. John Rawls objects to this idea, arguing that such education would necessarily alienate citizens, and their children, who hold reasonable illiberal moral beliefs. Instead, Rawls advocates for the adoption of a civic educational system that solely endorses morally neutral political virtues, combined with a contention that, given sufficient time, individuals with divergent personal commitments will come to form an *overlapping consensus*, freely choosing to participate in, and abide by, the policies of the state. Rawls' answer to the problem of stability, however, is mistaken. Political stability is unlikely to be obtained solely via reliance on the emergence of an overlapping consensus of reasonable citizens, but rather requires the adoption of precisely the type of educational system that Rawls objects to, one which publicly enables, and advocates for, the cultivation of morally liberal values among its citizenry.

II. Two Modes of Justification, Two Varieties of Liberalism, and Reasonable Pluralism

Rawls believes that there are two modes of normative justification: *non-public justification* and *public justification* (*Political Liberalism* xxi). Non-public justifications are those based on moral, religious, or philosophical commitments which are *comprehensive* (i.e. which pertain to the meaning and purpose, or *good*, of human life). Such commitments, Rawls argues, while highly significant for the citizens who possess them, are only capable of being fully understood by those with similar comprehensive beliefs. Consequently, they cannot provide a reasonable grounding for political discourse between individuals possessing incompatible comprehensive doctrines. Public justifications (also referred to as *public reason*), on the other hand, are reasons that are capable of being appreciated and endorsed by all reasonable citizens, regardless of their antecedent comprehensive commitments. It is the later form of justification, public reason, which Rawls thinks determines the boundaries of the purely political by demarcating which types of rationales can be permissibly be offered within it (*Political Liberalism* 10).[1]

Related to these two modes of justification are two distinct varieties of liberalism: *comprehensive liberalism* and *political liberalism*. Comprehensive liberalism is wide in scope, in that it can employ both modes of justification, while political liberalism is narrow in scope, meaning it can only employ public justification. In attempting to legitimize the state and its policies, comprehensive liberalisms will often employ *thick* moral concepts such as *person* and *moral autonomy*.[2] Political liberalisms, meanwhile, restrict themselves to only employing *thin* notions of ordinary moral concepts in the hopes that the resulting justifications will be neutral and capable of being accepted by all reasonable citizens.[3] For example, the political corollary of persons are *citizens*, the bearers of rights and duties who stand in purely political relations to other political agents, while the political corollary of moral autonomy is *political autonomy*, involving the ability of citizens to be legally independent but share in the exercise of political power. Similarly, while our private, ethical lives as persons are often concerned with the cultivation of *moral virtues*, Rawls thinks that in our public, political lives as citizens, we should strive to cultivate *civic virtues*, those psychological and behavioral dispositions which help facilitate a functioning liberal state such as tolerance, civility in political discourse, and a sense of fairness (*Political Liberalism* 157).

One of the core challenges for either liberalism is how to manage disagreements among a plurality of incompatible comprehensive doctrines held by citizens. Rawls believes that political consensus will most likely be achieved if adherents of comprehensive doctrines are willing to abide by the commitments of a liberal state. *Reasonable* citizens are seen as those who are willing to affirm the

essentials of a liberal state (i.e., basic institutions and policies), while those who are unwilling to do so are deemed by Rawls to be *unreasonable*.[4] Moreover, the former group, taken together, constitute what Rawls calls a *reasonable pluralism*.[5] The overall hope of both liberalisms is that members of a reasonable pluralism (i.e. the adherents of reasonable, yet incompatible, comprehensive doctrines) can come together and within the constraints of public reason, establish and maintain a just liberal society.

III. The Problem of Stability and Civic Education

The problem of stability is the problem of how a state can permissibly sustain its institutions and policies.[6] What *effective* and *just* mechanisms can the state implement to ensure (or at least make more likely) that reasonable citizens will come to support a conception of justice over time, and continue to support that conception even if it occasionally conflicts with some of their personal commitments that are underwritten by their non-public conceptions of the good? *Civic education* and *free endorsement* are answers to the problem of stability, both of which are aimed at securing the consent of reasonable citizens. Civic education attempts to maintain political stability by perpetuating liberal values, in particular by teaching them to younger generations of citizens, while free endorsement attempts to maintain stability by adopting a policy of non-interference, gradually allowing citizens to approve of the state by realizing the benefits gained from having an impartial, public political space. As we will see below, comprehensive liberalism traditionally seeks to solve the problem through civic education, while Rawls' political liberalism de-emphasizes the role of education in favor of a particular variety of free endorsement.

IV. How Comprehensive Liberalism Attempts to Secure Political Stability

There are two distinct varieties of civic education which correspond to the two previously mentioned varieties of liberalism: *comprehensively liberal civic education* and *politically liberal civic education*. Comprehensively liberal civic education (CLCE) is education the content of which is intended to foster the moral development of students by teaching them the comprehensive versions of liberal values. Prior to his advocacy for the purely political variety of liberalism, Rawls was a proponent of CLCE. He argued that such education was necessary given that a sense of justice is required in order to appreciate the importance of liberal political values, and that it is likely that such a sense can only be obtained through moral learning during formative developmental years (*Theory of Justice* 467-72). For the early Rawls, there was an intimate conceptual connection between being a *good person* and being a *good citizen* because moral growth is the means by which

one learns the concepts of cooperation, justice, fairness, and liberty, which are necessary prerequisites for both private and public life. On the comprehensive liberal view, it is believed that the state can legitimately educate its citizenry about the ethical content and importance of such concepts because public and private virtues are seen inextricably linked. In short, the traditional solution to the problem of stability offered by advocates of comprehensive liberalism is to attempt to replicate comprehensive liberal norms within future generations via the mechanism of CLCE.

V. Why Rawls Believes Comprehensive Liberalism Cannot Secure Political Stability

Rawls argues that, given that CLCE would employ controversial moral or philosophical values, to utilize it as a means of sustaining a liberal state would privilege the views of liberal comprehensive groups already subscribing to egalitarian, individualistic ideals, thereby robbing the state of its neutral moral status. State endorsement of comprehensive values will not only fail to have a stabilizing effect on a society composed of incompatible comprehensive doctrines, but may actually have the pernicious effect of actively destabilizing the culture. In other words, employing CLCE might actually increase political instability because citizens (both parents and children) are unlikely to continually endorse a curriculum that is at odds with their own privately held beliefs. Given the diversity present within the reasonable pluralism (which includes many reasonable illiberal comprehensive doctrines), Rawls argues that implementing CLCE would not be an effective method for securing political stability.

VI. How Rawls Believes Political Liberalism Can Secure Political Stability

Rawls believes that the primary mistake of CLCE is that it contaminates the neutrality of the state. As a solution, he proposes a version of civic education that attempts to assert no comprehensive values within the public sphere: *politically liberal civic education* (PLCE). Since civic education is an extension of the state, Rawls argues that its sole purpose should be to foster civic virtues among future citizens, preparing children to become cooperating members of society but, as broadly as possible, not to interfere with their personal commitments. Unlike its comprehensive counterpart, PLCE avoids addressing the moral virtues of students, since the existence of such virtues is not deemed essential for civic life under the rubric of public reason.

In such a manner, Rawls believes, private citizens will come to free endorsement of the state by reasonable citizens, in which citizens endorse the state and its policies because of the content of their own comprehensive doctrines.[7]

Rawls maintains that given enough time, increasingly large numbers of reasonable citizens will morally endorse the state, thereby forming an *overlapping consensus* which can effectively preserve political stability into the future.

VII. Evaluating Rawls' Proposal

Rawls' reliance on the emergence of overlapping consensus as a mechanism for effectively ensuring political stability, and his related claims regarding the likely behavior of individuals in a liberal state, raise some problems for the viability of his political theory. In particular, the claim that citizens will freely come to accept a conception of public reason and regulate their behavior in light of this conception is problematic on two fronts. First, it is at odds with the available empirical data about how citizens in liberal democracies actually behave, and second, Rawls' strict bifurcation between public and non-public values is untenable, resulting in excessive optimism concerning the likelihood of the emergence of an overlapping consensus.

VII: A. How Rawls' Proposal is Susceptible to Empirical Critique

When pressed for justification for their position, comprehensive liberals will regularly appeal to the truth of comprehensive beliefs relating to the good for human beings. Political liberals, on the other hand, regularly appeal to an *ideal theory* which attempts to discern "the principles that characterize a well-ordered society under favorable circumstances" (*Theory of Justice* 216). *Ideal theory* endeavors to describe what justice requires when citizens can be expected to behave in accordance with the requirements of the political conception and its laws, whereas *nonideal theory* makes no such assumption, concerning itself instead with political conditions that are not ideal (such as those within particular historical, or current, economic and social circumstances). Stated bluntly, the difference between ideal and nonideal theory is the difference between viewing citizens as they could be versus viewing them how they actually are. Rawls' political theorizing has been traditionally seen as consisting of ideal theory, and, consequently some theorists have claimed that his views are not susceptible to empirical critique. While it is true that the majority of Rawls' work is ideal, there are still some aspects of his political framework which presuppose certain empirical truths, and hence are capable of re-evaluation in light of empirical findings.

One objective of Rawls is to try to provide a plausible account of why ordinary persons assent to principles of justice. Given this, Rawls' political theory is constrained by facts about human psychological motivation and behavior. In order to make his theoretical political claims plausible, Rawls' picture of human psychology needs to be largely accurate, and it needs to be shown that it is likely

that citizens will actually behave in the manner he describes, growing fonder of the political conception over time within a context of a morally neutral state and educational system. For Rawls' political liberalism to have theoretical appeal, it must show that it can contend with the psychological limitations of human beings. If, however, it cannot, then the supposition that political stability can be secured via an overlapping consensus of free endorsement is unrealistic, and his theory of political liberalism will require either abandonment or substantive readjustment.

VII: B. Rawls Makes Unjustified Psychological Presuppositions

The viability of the politically liberal conception, as Rawls lays it out, largely depends on citizens' ability to behave in accordance with, and with deference to, public reason. This is not a problem, Rawls argues, since citizens socialized within liberal democracies are likely to act reasonably towards one another because they share many basic political ideals in common (*Political Liberalism* 14). Rawls maintains that it is likely that reasonable citizens will freely recognize that adherents of other reasonable comprehensive doctrines are guaranteed certain basic rights and liberties as citizens of a liberal democracy. Yet when removed from the sanction of ideal theory and subjected to empirical confirmation, support for these claims is difficult to find. George Klosko, for instance, argues that polling data suggests that the willingness of citizens in liberal societies to voluntarily abide by public reason is, if not entirely suspect, at least uncertain. In particular, Klosko claims that many citizens appear unable to identify reasonable comprehensive doctrines other than their own. For example, Klosko cites one study that documents that only about half of United States citizens would allow members of "especially disliked groups" (e.g., communists, socialists, atheists, etc.) to make public speeches, and only a third would allow members of such groups to hold a public rally (Klosko 352).[8] In summary, contrary to the claims of Rawls, it would appear that citizens of liberal democracies are surprisingly willing to abridge the rights of different, and disliked, groups, thereby displaying a gross inability to be bound by the strictures of public reason. The granting of basic rights to all citizens is a fundamental principle of political liberalism, yet decades of empirical studies demonstrate that sizable majorities of citizens within liberal cultures do not uphold basic liberties in the strong sense required by Rawls (*Political Liberalism* 353).

One might attempt to defend Rawls from this style of criticism by arguing that Rawls is not concerned with the ability of his conception to provide solutions to the current problems of existing liberal democracies; therefore the inability of his conception to address or solve problems under nonideal circumstances is of questionable merit. Perhaps political liberalism is reliant on the presence of ideal background conditions to which non-ideal cultures do not yet have access. If it is merely an idealized sketch of how a just society is possible, political liberalism need not contend with the ordinary troubles of existing liberal democracies, and so

is immune to empirical critiques such as the one leveled above.

However, even if it is true that Rawls did not take his theory to be concerned with problems of stability in existing, non-ideal liberal societies, merely disavowing the intention to address the problems of contemporary political states does not recuse Rawls from the worry that available empirical evidence undermines his view of how moral actors actually do, and will, perform.[9] One might think that if political theory is to be practically useful at all, it will need to draw some conclusions that address how nonideal political states can *transition* into (if only approximately) an ideally just state. Moreover, for such progress to be possible, it will require that the political theories utilized accurately represent the psychological capacities of citizens, something which, as we've seen, Rawls' political liberalism appears to have not done.

VII. C. Many Illiberal Groups Will be Unable to Endorse Political Liberalism

Even if the above empirical critique is misguided, there is an additional conceptual difficulty with Rawls' political theory. Rawls seems to suggest that, insofar as possible, reasonable citizens should not be asked to give up their comprehensive doctrines because they are believed to be what make life worth living (*Political Liberalism* 19). However, should a conflict arise, Rawls believes that public political values should be seen as having primacy over comprehensive values (*Political Liberalism* 160). Many illiberal comprehensive doctrines, however, have internal commitments that are at odds with the foundational values of political liberalism, especially values relating to commitments to political equality, diversity, and tolerance. Thus the only way for holders of such illiberal doctrines to morally endorse such a political conception would be for them to revise, or abandon, their prior commitments.

For illustration, the political version of person, the *citizen*, is conceptualized as free and equal from the outset, and while this is an easily acceptable concept for many, it is less obviously acceptable to any number of illiberal comprehensive doctrines. Religious fundamentalists among others find deep conflict with even the civic virtues embedded within the concept of citizen, particularly with claims of political equality (which can conflict with proscribed gender roles or proscriptions against some sexual orientations), civic friendship (when that friendship is extended to the LGBT community), or even the background condition of reasonable pluralism itself, which Rawls claims is the very basis of liberalism. Additionally, concerns about illiberal opposition to political liberalism need not be cast in terms of religious doctrine: Rawls' second principle of justice, for instance, is committed to an economic distribution in line with the difference principle, which opponents of social welfare programs and those who hold contending moral or economic views find objectionable. Rawls appears to underestimate the degree

to which public values can intrude on private life and overestimates the noncontroversial character of his political and economic theory.

One might attempt to defend Rawls' here by reiterating the division between civic virtue and personal virtue, arguing that civic virtues are so thin that they are unlikely to threaten any illiberal comprehensive doctrines because the public and private realms are distinct within the lives of reasonable citizens. Such a defense, however, is problematic. Rawls himself contends that the political rights of citizens extend beyond the limited domain of the political realm and into individuals' private lives. In answering a critique of Susan Okin, who contends that Rawls fails to explain how his principles of justice apply to the internal justice of the family, Rawls argues that political principles of justice:

> …do impose essential constraints on the family as an institution and guarantee the basic rights and liberties and fair opportunities of all its members… [Political liberalism] does not regard the political and the nonpolitical domains as two separate, disconnected spaces… each governed solely by its own distinct principles (*Justice as Fairness* 164-66).

In other words, Rawls does not view the principles of justice that structure public and private realms as distinct, since no domain is entirely apart from the domain of the political; persons who have status as citizens have it as a primary commitment that protects them in all aspects of their lives. Moreover, if the boundary between public and private realms is permeable, distinguished only by different modes of justification, it is entirely likely that the contents of political discourse, and the values of political liberalism itself, can threaten holders of illiberal comprehensive doctrines and other competing theories.

VIII. A Potential Solution: *Political Stability Through (Modest) CLCE*

As we have seen, Rawls' assertion that it is likely that overlapping consensus will emerge and will reliably secure political stability appears mistaken. With that said, political stability remains a primary requirement for any liberal society, and so if a liberal state is to remain viable, it will require an alternative mechanism to ensure it. One such alternative would be to employ a modest version of CLCE that attempts to foster new generations of reasonable, liberal citizens: for instance, a version that solely teaches the value of personal autonomy and critical reflection on personal commitments.[10] Such a curriculum would not employ a singular, comprehensive conception of the good, and so could act as a stabilizing factor that nonetheless remains just.

It is likely that political liberals would object to even this modest variety of

CLCE, arguing that state endorsement of any form of personal autonomy would be exclusionary to many reasonable illiberal doctrines, and hence detrimental to obtaining political stability.[11] By instructing children that individuality and personal autonomy are a sound basis for decision-making and belief formation, such an education would imply to students that these ideals should govern more of human life than the purely political. Such instruction thus risks alienating competing systems of values among the citizenry, thereby making the free endorsement of the state less likely, and hence (to political liberals like Rawls) making the securing of political stability much less probable.

However, it seems possible that the opposite might actually hold true. Far from intruding into the lives of citizens, if current and future citizens are afforded educational opportunities which provide them with the *capabilities* necessary to rationally revise their personal and political commitments, rather than merely maintain those of their families or communities, it is likely that such individual's employment of public reason will be more effective, and that they will be more willing to adhere to its dictates. Moreover, if the liberal state, with an attendant emphasis on personal choice, affirms itself as the background condition for developing the ability to make informed decisions that bear on personal meaning, there is reason to think that citizens are more likely to endorse the state in the manner Rawls desires (i.e., on the basis of their personal comprehensive commitments). Insofar as students and citizens come to value free choice-making, it seems likely that they will also come to value the culture and state that enables and encourages it.

To this, the political liberal might object yet again, suggesting that such a variety of CLCE amounts to state advocacy for the inherent superiority of some epistemological methods and values over others within the private lives of citizens. Such an aim would straightforwardly threaten the beliefs of many citizens who are holders of otherwise reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Martha Nussbaum, for example, argues in this vein when she writes:

> To [comprehensive liberals] it just seems unacceptable that the state should limit itself to saying that rational argument is central in political life… Can it really be the case, for example, that teachers in public schools… can recommend argument over faith only for the purposes of citizenship, and not as the best way to approach life's problems in general?... I think that the reply to the outraged question is 'yes': teachers in public schools should not say that argument is better than faith as a general way of solving all problems in life. (Nussbaum 39).

However, such a contention is somewhat of a misrepresentation; the modest variety of CLCE under consideration here need not have teachers instruct students that they *ought* to use reason, arguments, and evidence in all aspects of their lives;

rather it would merely show them *how* they could go about doing so. The value of modest CLCE is in developing students' capacities for critical appraisal; upon completion of such a curriculum, it need not be that case that students come to know *that* rational reflection is the optimal belief forming strategy, but rather to know *how* to engage in it if they choose to do so. Put simply, modest CLCE need not necessarily come into conflict with private commitments of individuals because ultimately it would remain up to the students to decide which epistemological approach they value.[12] Moderate CLCE can refrain from putting forward a strong version of autonomy whereby only personal liberty, and moral theories that accord with it, is seen as the primary moral good.

IX. Conclusion

Political stability is unlikely to be secured by means of purely voluntary free endorsement of citizens. On this point, Rawls' account is inadequate: it is at odds with available empirical data concerning the manner in which people actually reason, and it requires an overly optimistic assessment of the likelihood that holders of diverse comprehensive doctrines will come to morally endorse the liberal state. A more reliable mechanism for securing political stability is to employ a modest variety of CLCE which enables students to foster the capacity to reason critically and teaches a related version of personal autonomy. It seems likely that such a modest CLCE could perpetuate the liberal values necessary to sustain the liberal society into subsequent generations, and also to provide citizens with the deliberative skills necessary to more effectively, and rationally, make decisions concerning their own moral and political lives.

Notes

1. More specifically, Rawls believes that public justification requires that citizens consider one another "as having reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endorse the political conception" (*Political Liberalism* 387), and hence that each citizen knows that other citizens will not hold beliefs that give them reasons to violate the laws of the state. Although Rawls attempts to avoid contentious epistemic issues, Gerald Gaus argues that political liberals "rely on a theory of justification that is far from uncontroversial" (Gaus 5). In particular, Gaus argues that "commonsense reasoning is deviant from the justified perspectives of many" and are "inconsistent with what Rawls himself describes as reasonable" (133-34). Such concerns, while important, are both beyond the limited scope of this paper.

2. The liberalisms of Kant, Mill, and the early Rawls are versions of comprehensive liberalism. Also it should be noted here that often the precise definitions of comprehensive terms (such as "person" and "autonomy") are controversial among different ethical theories, a fact which might appear to give further credence to Rawls's contention that comprehensive liberalism cannot be neutral with regards to comprehensive doctrines, and hence, cannot provide an impartial grounding for political discourse.

3. In what follows, we will be specifically concerned with Rawls' general formulation of political liberalism. However, it should be noted that Rawls argues that political liberalism is not singular, but instead is "a family of reasonable liberal political conceptions of justice" (*Political Liberalism* xlviii).

4. It should be noted that for Rawls, "reasonable" is not the same as "liberal," and "unreasonable" is not the same as "illiberal." This is because it is possible for there to be illiberal doctrines that support the fundamentals of democratic government, counting as reasonable. Similarly, it is possible that there may be unreasonable liberal doctrines (such as some forms of comprehensive liberalism). Given this usage, however, "reasonable" does closely accord with "politically liberal."

5. There is also a danger of confusion here, since it might appear that "reasonable" can equally refer to citizens themselves or to the content of their individual compressive doctrines. Rawls believes the term can apply to either, but that the latter is conceptually derivative from the former, stating that "reasonable comprehensive doctrines are the doctrines that reasonable citizens affirm" (*Political Liberalism* 36).

6. Rawls' concern for stability here is not just practical, but theoretical; he views stability as one demarcation of the feasibility of a conception of justice (*Theory of Justice* 6).

7. Given Rawls' framework, a set of political principles may be supported by a diverse array of comprehensive doctrines that, taken together, would be incompatible. Each comprehensive doctrine independently incorporates and justifies the principles of the liberal state. From the perspective of the citizen, the state becomes justified regardless of which particular reasonable doctrine one happens to accept as true.

8. These numbers seem to accord well with some more current poll numbers. For example, a 2007 poll finding that only 45 percent of United States citizens would support an otherwise qualified candidate who is an atheist (Gallup).

9. It should be noted that Rawlsian political liberals may often be inconsistent with relegating their view to the purely ideal realm. Marc Stears and Mathew Humphrey, for instance, point out that political liberals often wish to "draw lessons for contemporary political action from their underlying theory," while at other times argue that it is a mistake to draw normative lessons for nonideal politics from ideal theory (Stears and Humphrey 289).

10. It should be noted that what is meant here by "personal autonomy" need not be any elaborate metaphysical variety found in the full-fledged comprehensive liberalisms previously discussed, but rather simply one that provides an individual that possesses the notion with the necessary conceptual grounding for the ability to understand, critique, and develop their own views in aid of making rational choices.

11. Rawls, for instance, explicitly argues that political liberalism does not require an ideal of personal autonomy, but rather simply political autonomy (*Political Liberalism* 98).

12. For comparison, unlike the modest version of CLCE currently under discussion, a strong version of CLCE would likely commit to the stance that one set of epistemic values and the resulting set of commitments is better than utilizing faith to solve life's problems.

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