

# John Rawls: For the Record

*Interview by Samuel R. Aybar, Joshua D. Harlan, and Won J. Lee*

*John Rawls is James Bryant Conant University Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University. Born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1921, Professor Rawls is perhaps best known for his landmark 1971 work of political philosophy, **A Theory of Justice**. He is currently at work on a reformulation of the Theory, tentatively entitled **Justice as Fairness: A Briefer Restatement**. This interview was conducted on March 20, 1991, in Professor Rawls' office in Emerson Hall on the Harvard campus.*

HRP: Tell us about yourself. How did you become interested in philosophy?

JOHN RAWLS: WELL, I DON'T THINK WE KNOW really how we become interested in something, or why. We can only say what happened when. I went to Princeton and eventually became a philosophy major. In September of my freshman year Hitler invaded Poland and the war in Europe overshadowed everything. I spent a great deal of time reading about the First World War and about the question of war itself. Of course, in that generation we all knew we were going to be in the war sooner or later. It made that generation, in terms of its experience of war, very different from recent generations. I was in the army for 3 years, from the beginning of '43 to the beginning of '46, spending some time in the Pacific, in New Guinea, the Philippines and Japan. I can't say how that affected me exactly, but it must have had an influence. When the war was over I went back to Princeton as a graduate student for the spring term of 1946.

HRP: Did you expect to be a philosophy student when you entered Princeton?

JR: I didn't know what I was going to do. I had gone to Kent School in Kent, Connecticut, a private school. But I had not yet developed any well-formed intellectual interest and I thought of several different majors, including chemistry and mathematics, but I soon found they were beyond me, and settled down finally in philosophy.

HRP: Tell us more about your formative experiences in the army. Were your later ideas about justice more influenced by your thoughts about the societies our nation was confronting, or by your feelings about the structure of military society?

JR: Well, as I have said, I think we don't know why we come to do things, or what exactly influences us this way or that. My being in the war for three years must have had some important affect, but I wouldn't say those years were particularly formative. When I think about the views in philosophy I

came to hold, I don't see that their content is traceable to my experiences in those years. I have often thought there must surely be some connection but I've not been able to pin it down. Perhaps that's a failure of reflection on my part. Of course, like a lot of people, I came out of the army firmly disliking it and thinking it is of first importance that the military be subordinate to civilian government. Nothing new in that.

**HRP:** Was it as a graduate student that you became interested in the area of philosophy in which you eventually became well known?

JR: Well, I was always interested in moral philosophy, from the beginning. I was also for a long time interested in religion. The Kent School was a church school. It was founded by Father Sill, who belonged to the Episcopal Order of the Holy Cross and there were usually several other members of the order at the school. We went to chapel every day and twice on Sunday. I wouldn't say it was an especially religious-minded student body. But you couldn't avoid religion altogether. You had to have some reaction to it.

**HRP:** Where are you originally from?

JR: I grew up in Baltimore and spent all my youth there, except for summers in Maine and of course much of the year at boarding school in my teens. My father was from North Carolina, my mother from an old Maryland family. Most of my family was there and so was my wife's mother's family. Many of my oldest friends are still there.

**HRP:** When did you start doing the actual thinking and writing that led to *A Theory of Justice*?

JR: I began to collect notes around the fall of 1950 after I had completed my thesis. By then I had been reading some economics on my own and that fall I attended a seminar given by W. J. Baumol — he's a well known economist now. I tried to do all the work. We read *Value and Capital* by J.R. Hicks, and I attempted to master that book, and also parts of Samuelson's *Foundations*, its chapter of welfare economics leading me to articles in the so-called new welfare economics. This was going on while I was a graduate student, and continued when I was an instructor at Princeton for two years, 1950-1952. I also read some of Walras's *Elements* and studied a little bit of game theory. Von Neumann's book with Morgenstern had just come out in 1944; that was the big work on game theory that founded the subject. Several essays by Frank Knight in his *Ethics of Competition* I found highly instructive; he was as much interested in social philosophy as economics. As a result of all these things, somehow — don't ask me how — plus the stuff on moral theory which I wrote my thesis on — it was out of that, in 1950-51, that I got the idea that eventually turned into the original position. The idea was to design a constitution of discussion out of which would come reasonable principles of justice. At that time I had a more complicated procedure than what I finally came up with. During this whole time I had to teach classes in philosophy, but I kept up my interest in economics as best I could. Then my wife and I went to England with our two year old daughter for a year on a Fulbright Fellowship.

**HRP:** Did you publish that original more complicated formula?

JR: No, I couldn't work it out. It's all in notes on old paper somewhere at home turning brown.



*'I didn't know what I was going to do {before entering Princeton}. I had not yet developed any well-formed intellectual interest and I thought of several different majors, including chemistry and mathematics, but I soon found they were beyond me, and settled down finally in philosophy.'*

---

*'It was in 1950-51 that I got the idea that eventually turned into the original position. At that time I had a more complicated procedure than what I finally came up with... I couldn't work it out. It's all in notes on old paper somewhere at home turning brown.'*

---

**HRP:** Could you tell us a little bit about that formula?

JR: As I mentioned, it was an attempt to formulate a constitution of discussion among people that would make them agree — given their circumstances — to what we would think of as reasonable principles of justice. They had to make proposals to a central referee in ignorance of what others were proposing, and there was a limit to the time in which argument could go on, so some kind of agreement would be reached. There were lots of other details. You can imagine. Eventually, I cut through all of that by imposing the veil of ignorance and greatly limited what people knew; I also made the agreement binding in perpetuity. All that was an enormous simplifying device. The original way was just too complicated. There were certain seemingly insoluble problems; for example, how great to make the pressure for people to agree — how much time do we allow, and things of that sort. Remember, we need some philosophical justification for any answer. The later formulation of the original position has the virtue of avoiding the issues that got me interested in the idea in the first place, [such as] game theory and general equilibrium as used by economists, things I never knew much about. It then occurred to me, "Well, I have to get rid of all this." I think it was, in retrospect, the thing to have done. Although I think there are other ways it might have been done, and indeed can be done. For example, Professor Scanlon [T.M. Scanlon, Harvard University] doesn't use anything like the veil of ignorance; there is some resemblance [in his argument] to the original position, but his idea is actually quite different. So his view is another possibility. Also, for all I know you might design a constitution of discussion which might be more realistic and succeed where I failed to see how to go. I wouldn't exclude other possibilities having done it as I did it.

**HRP:** What are some of the significant changes that have taken place between *A Theory of Justice* and *A Briefer Restatement*?

JR: I want the *Restatement* to be compact and to convey everything, even if in outline, in one place. Incidentally, I don't like that title but haven't a better one now, so in default I'll call it that. I want it to be more accessible and more readable than *Theory*. I'd like it to come out soon, but I have a few more parts to go. I try to do three things: one is to recast the argument from the original position and put in it a simpler form, improving faults in the book's exposition; another is to reply to various objections, explaining why I reject some but incorporating changes others seem to require; and finally, I try to combine the view of the book with what I have written in articles since.

**HRP:** Are most of those articles responses to criticism from other people?

JR: Well, I don't think so really. I have responded to people, certainly, so there are responses; but what I am mainly doing in these articles, as I now understand having written them — you don't always understand what you're doing until after it has happened — is to work out my view so that it is not longer internally inconsistent. To explain: to work out justice as fairness the book uses throughout an idea of a well ordered society which supposes that everybody in that society accepts the same comprehensive view, as I say now. I came to think that that simply can never be the case in a democratic society,

---

the kind of society the principles of the book itself require. That's the internal inconsistency. So I had to change the account of the well ordered society and this led to the idea of overlapping consensus and related ideas. That is really what the later articles are about. Beginning with the three lectures in the *Journal of Philosophy*, that's what they are doing.

So I don't see these articles mainly as replies to other people's objections, although I do make replies to important objections here and there, and in footnotes. People deserve to be answered if their objections make valuable points and can be dealt with reasonably. That's part of one's obligation when one engages in these things. But the main aim is to develop this other part of the view and then to bring it together with the view of *A Theory of Justice*. As I see it, the development is from within — that is, I came to see there was something wrong, therefore I had to correct it. When I first began to work out the idea of overlapping consensus and the ideas that go along with it, I thought it would be simple, even trivial. I thought the idea of such a consensus is so obvious, it wouldn't be a problem; but it turned out to be more complicated than I had anticipated; and I'm still not quite done with it. Also, in the *Restatement*, as I have indicated, I wanted to make certain improvements in the argument. In some cases there were things that were unclear; in other cases, there were just plain errors.

**HRP:** You said that you feel that it is somehow your "duty" to reply to criticism, if you can reasonably do so. What role do you see yourself playing as a writer that makes you incur that responsibility?

JR: Well, there are a number of things. I think that first of all, you have an obligation as a member of an academic community to reply to people if it can be done reasonably, and in a way that advances discussion. You want to avoid quarrels and fruitless wrangles. There are people whose criticisms are very good and they deserve an answer. That's all part of academic life. In a democratic society, as ours is — although it distressingly falls short of what it should be — I see political philosophy as addressing the citizenry — not government, that's not who you are addressing — [but] other people like you who comprise the electorate. It's important to carry on political discussion at the deepest level, and to do it as clearly as possible so that it is accessible to people generally. In that indirect way, if they find your ideas convincing, you might change society for the better, or more realistically perhaps, you might prevent it from getting worse. In a democratic society, political philosophy doesn't, of course, have any authority; but it can try to win the authority of human reason. There is no institutional judge of whether you succeed in that, any more than there is in science, or in any other rational inquiry. Yet that it is the only authority political philosophy can recognize.

**HRP:** Supposedly your theories have influenced democratic movements in Eastern Europe. Do you know anything about that?

JR: I don't, really. *A Theory of Justice* has been translated into all major European languages. But I don't know how widely it is known among the Eastern Europeans. I was told that certain parts of *A Theory of Justice* were in Russian, but I haven't seen it. Parts of it has been translated, I'm also told, into Hungarian. I haven't heard of a Polish translation, but there may be one in part. It has been translated some time ago into Chinese, Korean, and

---

*"It's important to carry on political discussion at the deepest level, and to do it as clearly as possible so that it is accessible to people generally."*

---

Japanese. Someone told me he heard copies of the book were seen in Tiannanmen Square.

HRP: Did you expect that *A Theory of Justice* would receive the kind of response that it did?

JR: No. I certainly didn't expect it, and it's probably a good thing I didn't.

Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to write it. I mean, you would feel people were looking over your shoulder, and you'd have to be too careful.

HRP: How did it become so famous? It was published in 1971. Did it immediately become well known?

JR: That's an interesting question. I'm not the best person to answer it. My own view, to answer your question, is to grant that *A Theory of Justice* has some merit. I don't know how much, and that is not for me to say. Granting that, I think it gained attention from a conjunction of circumstances. You have to remember [the historical context.] It was a long time ago, so you probably don't remember. Why should you? I wouldn't remember in your place. It was during the Viet

Nam War and soon after the Civil Rights Movement. They dominated the politics of the day. And yet there was no recent book, no systematic treatise, you might say, on a conception of political justice. For a long time there had been a relative dearth of political philosophy — both in political science and moral philosophy. Very good things, some of permanent importance had been done. I am thinking, for example, of H. L. A. Hart's *Concept of Law* and his other writings, Isaiah Berlin's *Four Essays on Liberty* and his many essays, and Brian Barry's *Political Argument*, all these in the 1960's. But there was no book of the scope and extent of the book on the idea of justice that touched upon so many questions of the time. Its size and scope was a little mad, actually. In writing it I guessed it was about 350 pages; when it was put in galleys and the Press told me it was nearly 600 pages (587 to be exact) I was astounded. Anyway, so you had this, I would say 'political-intellectual', need for a book of this sort. For example, the issues discussed in chapter six about conscientious objection and civil disobedience were much discussed topics then. Yet there was no systematic contemporary book that dealt with them. Of course, there were older books, and there were contemporary essays. I am thinking of the splendid essays of Michael Walzer collected in his *Obligations*. So *Theory* was the first large work coming after this period of serious political conflict. And serious political conflict shows the need for political philosophy and normally calls it forth. So *Theory* captured attention fairly quickly. But, you know, I can't really take an objective view about all this. Yet that's my explanation. It was a matter of coincidence. Fifteen years earlier or later its status would be entirely different. Of course, you know, it's been criticized severely and much of it is quite just criticism. Yet somehow the book



---

continues to be read. I'm not one to say that it survives the criticism.

**HRP: How do you feel when you are criticized?**

JR: One has to learn to accept criticisms. Often they are not well founded and based on misunderstanding. Those I try to ignore. But there are criticisms that are very good. While I'm not overjoyed by those, I do appreciate them, eventually, and I try to incorporate them into what I write later. I'll give you an example. H. L. A. Hart in 1973 raised fundamental criticisms of my views on the basic liberties and he was absolutely right. I was stuck about what to reply but eight years later I decided what the answer should be. I wrote it out and it was published in 1982. That was of enormous value to me. It caused some pain, certainly, but now I can state the view in a much stronger form.

**HRP: What about having some of your more illustrious critics right here in the Harvard Philosophy Department. Does that make things more tense, or do you also appreciate that?**

JR: Well, actually there are two sides to it. A certain amount of tension goes with it. For example, Nozick [Professor Robert Nozick, Harvard University] had interesting and important objections. In part they were based on misunderstandings, though in part they were very good points. Although I haven't done a whole article replying to him, I have replied to him at several points (although not by name) in an article I did in 1978. I now see things more clearly. There is a part of the *Restatement*, the section on viewing the distribution of native endowments as a common asset. It is an attempt to cope with some of his objections. So even if you think an objection is not entirely right, it may raise a real question that enables you to understand things better.

**HRP: When you have a critical give and take with someone like Robert Nozick, does that go on only in the pages of major philosophy journals, or will you sit down together in your office and argue about it?**

JR: It all depends. But in the case of a colleague, we try first to talk about it. In the case of Hart, who is in England, we correspond a bit, and occasionally he comes into town and we have a talk. It varies from case to case. I have always viewed philosophy as a conversational subject. One learns best by talk and writing should be subjected to talk and criticism, sometimes it seems almost endlessly, before it gets printed up.

**HRP: How does it feel to be so well known?**

JR: I try to ignore it, though I probably don't succeed. It shows up in how people treat me, for example, when they are introduced to me and see me for the first time. It wouldn't be good for anybody to think about that, as it would badly affect their work. So I try not to walk around thinking about it.

**HRP: So you have found that the most rewarding part of engaging with critics is that it straightens out your thoughts?**

JR: Yes, I like to think that, yes. The straightening out of my thoughts. It would be dishonest to say that I don't care about the response. Sure I care about the response and I care about how accepting it is. I thought I would publish *A Theory of Justice* and some friends might read it. I had been writing it for a long time, so I would finally get it off my desk and then do

---

*“Robert Nozick had interesting and important objections. In part they were based on misunderstandings, though in part they were very good points.”*

---

---

*"I'm a monomaniac, really. I'd like to get something right. But in philosophy one can't do that, not with any confidence. Real difficulties always remain."*

---

something else. There were times in writing the book when I said to myself, "This is really pretty good." I put that aside as building morale to keep going. Had it been regarded as a decent enough work, that would, I think, have been enough to satisfy me. But [being accepted] is very important in that had the book fallen flat, that would have been upsetting. Since no attention is without criticisms, the criticisms I've gotten, however painful temporarily, have been important to me.

**HRP:** So you expected, when you published originally, that you would then move on to some new topic?

JR: Yes, I had planned on doing some other things mainly connected with the third part of the book, which was the part I liked best, the part on moral psychology. That would not be exactly a new but a related topic. I have never gotten around to that and never will. I thought, the way things have turned out, that it would be better if I spent my time trying to state justice as fairness more convincingly and to reply to people and remove their objections. I'm not sure that's the best thing to have done, but that's what I have done. I'm a monomaniac really. I'd like to get something right. But in philosophy one can't do that, not with any confidence. Real difficulties always remain.

**HRP:** What can we expect from you in the near future in terms of publications and teaching?

JR: I just turned 70, so I have to take that into account. Some time soon, I hope I can get the *Restatement* in shape. It will be about the size it is now, less than 200 pages. I don't want it to get longer. There are no surprises in it. What you have seen is what you get. I also have some lectures I'm working on which are based on the lectures I gave at Columbia in 1980. From my later articles I am adding three more to those three, so eventually they may come out too. Both books are about the same length. After that, I have no plans. There comes a time when you should stop writing and that may be it.

**HRP:** Are you going to teach next year at Harvard?

JR: Yes, I'll teach one course next year. Well, if my health holds up, I will. I haven't decided exactly what course, but most likely I'll do 171.

**HRP:** Has using the *Restatement* in class been useful in its development?

JR: Yes, definitely. It began as handouts for the course and I have used it a number of times now and each time it gets bigger. Actually, I wrote the book in much the same way and there were versions of it that existed as early as 1963. I don't know that I could do this anywhere but at Harvard. The class has never complained about this and I am very appreciative of that.

**HRP:** How did you select the authors, other than yourself, that you ask students in your class on political philosophy [Philosophy 171] to read?

JR: Well, we did four last year. I'm trying to indicate the tradition of democratic thought that's been in our political culture for a long time. One way to do that is to read a few important historical texts in political philosophy. One studies how a present day restatement tries to use ideas in these texts in a serious way. The ideas are changed in certain ways, but nevertheless they are there. That's one way to do political philosophy. As you read these older texts, and read them seriously, you come to see how a

tradition of thought can evolve over time. Of course, you could equally well read contemporary writers, and in some ways that might be better. But I haven't often done that. I might do that next year. I don't know how the historical approach that I have most often followed appeals to students, but that is one way to do it. The four I picked last year [Locke, Rousseau, Mill and Marx] are obviously important, but another four might do just as well. I pick Marx because now he tends not to be taken seriously and it's good to know his thought. His criticism of capitalism is an important part of the democratic tradition and I try to present him as sympathetically as I can. I don't know if that comes across or not, but I try to do that. I try to treat them all seriously. They are well worth studying.

**HRP:** Were you ever interested in going into politics yourself?

**JR:** No. I've never been interested. Well, I'm interested in politics, but not in having a political career. I think I'd be very bad at it.

**HRP:** You seem far too honest.

**JR:** I don't know if that is it, because I might learn to be dishonest. There are different skills that one has. It's not suited to my temperament.

**HRP:** When you look at current events, in general, do you think of them with the *A Theory of Justice* framework in mind?

**JR:** Not really. Well, like anyone else, I react to current events and present problems in a certain way. I'm sure that my view must affect in some manner how I see them, but I don't just ask what justice as fairness would say. That would be limiting. I don't see a political conception of justice as something that will tell me what to think. It's a great mistake to think of it as a device that will give you answers, that will deliver the answers to all sorts of questions when you want them. That is one reason I am reluctant to answer questions about specific political topics. It suggests the wrong idea: that we could [have] some theoretical way of doing that, which is usually not so at all. I think of justice as fairness as trying to answer certain specific though basic questions. Its scope is limited. In any case, a reasonable view is important but it doesn't begin to be enough by itself. Judgment, informed opinion, due consideration, and much, much else are required. Usually if a question interests me, I may form an opinion on its merits. That's probably the best thing to do — and then see whether the opinion is reasonable, and what other people think. Except for special cases, I wouldn't ask whether the opinion fits with *A Theory of Justice*. Besides, it would be a mistake to apply one's principles all the time. You need to examine things apart from them, else you risk becoming an ideologue. People who have opinions on everything derived from their so-called principles are not to be trusted.

**HRP:** What has been your reaction to the campus controversy surrounding the hanging of a Confederate flag in a dormitory window?



---

*"I think philosophy is a very special subject, particularly in our society, which pays very little attention to most serious philosophy, even when it is very well done."*

---

JR: I don't know that I have a useful opinion on that. I'm not acquainted with the circumstances. But it would be highly offensive to black students. The southern secession that caused the Civil War was totally unjustified. It was unjustified because it was secession to preserve slavery. There are some circumstances under which secession is permissible; but it has to be done for a reasonable cause. The preservation of slavery is plainly not such a cause. That fact dominates the picture. Also, we have to ask what kinds of symbols are appropriate for undergraduates to display. I would try to encourage southern students to find another symbol of their southern culture. Because whatever they say to themselves, the meaning of the Confederate flag is already fixed by our history, by secession as a way to preserve slavery; and that as late as the last century and even then as secession from the oldest democracy in the world. It is impossible now to change the meaning of the flag.

**HRP: If you were an administrator of the University, would you hold President Bok's position ("I don't approve of this, but I'm not going to compel anyone to take it down,") or would you feel that a student engaging in offensive behavior should be compelled to stop?**

JR: I haven't thought about the matter from the President's point of view. One might make a distinction between free discussion of ideas, which is especially important in the university, and forms of behavior that might be properly thought offensive to other students and then penalized in some way. But suppose that displaying the flag is a form of verbal behavior, or speech, then you have to decide when forms of behavior become legitimate speech, where that line is. And that is very difficult. I think I would try to persuade southern students to find another symbol. In a student body, itself viewed as a democratic society in the small, there are forms of speech that, for historical or other good reasons, certain groups find offensive or demeaning or hostile, and therefore out of decency and mutual civility ought not to be said. But I would probably do the same thing Bok did, when all things were considered. While there ought to be a tacitly understood code of decent and civil conduct among undergraduates, one would hope it could be affirmed by students themselves, without administrative enforcement. One hopes they could have a shared sense of what is appropriate to other people's legitimate feelings.

**HRP: What would you say to a student in 1991 who is interested in philosophy? Would you say to make it a career?**

JR: I rarely, if ever, encourage people to go into philosophy. I impress upon them the drawbacks. If you very strongly want to do it, that's one thing. Otherwise, you probably shouldn't go into philosophy, because it does have its hardships and trials, and most who would be good at it would be much better off — at least by society's standards — in doing something else. The real rewards of philosophy are personal and private and you should understand that. I think philosophy is a very special subject, particularly in our society, which pays very little attention to most serious philosophy, even when it is very well done. However, this is not a complaint, and it may be a good thing.

**HRP: Why do philosophy?**

JR: In every civilization there should be people thinking about these questions. It's not just that this kind of inquiry is good in itself. But a society in which nobody thinks seriously about questions of metaphysics and

---

epistemology, moral and political philosophy, is really lacking as a society. Part of being civilized is being aware of these questions and the possible answers to them. They affect how you see your place in the world, and part of what philosophy does if it is done well is to make reasonable answers to these questions accessible to thoughtful people generally, and so available as part of culture. It's the same thing as art and music — if you're a good composer, or if you're a good painter, you contribute to people's understanding. Don't ask me exactly how.

In particular, political philosophy takes various forms. Society often has very deep problems that need to be thought about seriously. In a democratic society you are always having conflicts between liberty and equality. Moreover, it is still an unsettled question, I think, as to what are the most appropriate grounds of toleration and of the fundamental pluralism that characterizes our society. It is vital to have views about these matters. It's important also to have a conception of one's society as a whole. I believe people, or at least many people, have a need of such conceptions and it makes a difference in preserving democratic institutions [as] what they are. Political philosophy may address that need.  $\varphi$