A Public Faith:
Political Liberalism and the Problem of Epistemological Abstinence

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John Rawls, in his transition from *A Theory of Justice* to *Political Liberalism*, explicitly disregards the “unrealistic idea of a well-ordered society,” which had played an important role in his previous work (xvii, 1993). Political philosophy, Rawls argues, must reflect the nature of contemporary societies, in which there is no widespread agreement upon the right principles of justice. *Political Liberalism* is in part Rawls’ attempt to correct for this unrealistic assumption, however, Joseph Raz argues in “Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemological Abstinence,” that Rawls commits a more serious error. Rawls, Raz claims, welcomes pragmatic concerns at the cost of truth. Raz argues that political liberalism requires “epistemological abstinence,” that is, it requires one to remain neutral in regard to truth claims (9). Epistemological abstinence is potentially fatal to political liberalism because, Raz asserts, the principles of justice for a society must be presented as true principles. This challenge to Rawls’ post-*Theory of Justice* work is significant; if valid, it will show that political liberalism lacks the justificatory power it needs in order to assert its own premises. More generally, contemporary liberalism has long faced a similar problem: namely, how to defend its own principles in the face of pluralism.

While Raz provides a strong critique of political liberalism, it can be answered in two ways: first, by appealing to Rawls’ arguments, and second, by appealing to Rawls’ general conception of political philosophy. I shall argue that on Raz’s own terms political liberalism does not lead to epistemological abstinence. In *Political Liberalism* Rawls refers to a “reasonable faith” as the grounds for the possibility of his work (101, 172, 1993). Rawls’ reasonable faith, I argue, is a crucial part of his epistemology and of

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1 I will use the phrase “political liberalism” to refer to the theory itself. When referring to the text I will use the italicized title, *Political Liberalism*. 
his treatment of truth claims. By looking at this reasonable faith, I shall provide a full answer to Raz, and in so doing I shall also examine Rawls’ conception of the necessary epistemological conditions for modern democratic societies.

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls claims that his theory is strictly applicable to a hypothetical, “well-ordered society,” in which “everyone accepts and knows that the others accept the same principles of justice” (4, 1971). In a well-ordered society there is no dispute over the basic principles of justice. But in his later work Rawls claims that this assumption is self-defeating. He writes, “Political liberalism starts by taking to heart the absolute depth” of the conflict between comprehensive doctrines (xxvii, 1993). While the principles of justice in *Theory* were derived from a hypothetical, ideal society, political liberalism is bounded by the conditions of modern democracies, and thus is of “limited applicability.” Since political liberalism assumes that certain pluralistic conditions hold, it can only be applied where those real-world conditions exist.

Rawls accepts certain facts about modern democracies without questioning their justification, which is an instance of, Raz claims, political liberalisms’ “shallow foundations” (9). Political liberalism is unnecessarily constrained by its realism in regard to contemporary political culture. A theory with a deeper foundation might begin by arguing that the facts of contemporary political culture are merely contingent or are irrelevant to the claims of justice. Political shallowness, Raz claims, is not a necessary feature, but follows from Rawls’ separation of political philosophy from general moral theory. This separation or “autonomy,” as Raz argues, means that political liberalism is not justified in reference to a comprehensive moral doctrine (9). As Rawls notes, “matters of basic justice are so far possible to be settled by appeal to political values
alone” (138, 1993). Political liberalism, it seems, is a conception of political values free from finding justification in wider moral claims.

These features, Raz argues, indicate that political liberalism is essentially an “epistemic withdrawal from the fray” (4). Political liberalism does not seek justification for the existent political culture, nor does it seek to prove or disprove reasonable comprehensive doctrines. The further step, which Raz argues is “epistemic abstinence,” is that Rawls does not seek to prove that political liberalism is a true theory of justice (9). To do so, Raz claims, would be to seek a truth that “must be derived from deep, and possibly nonautonomous foundations, from some sound comprehensive moral doctrine” (9). The argument here takes issue specifically with Rawls’ conception of political stability. Political liberalism indeed does not evaluate truth claims, but rather can be justified from the standpoint of a variety of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. In Rawls’ words, it is left not to the theory but to the “citizens individually…to settle how they think the values of the political domain are related to other values in their comprehensive doctrine” (140, 1993). Political liberalism is a freestanding expression of the deeply shared political culture of modern democracies. It is not evaluative of further truth claims insofar as they are reasonable, and thus it seems correct to say with Raz that political liberalism is epistemically abstinent. Because of the inclusion of pragmatic concerns regarding social stability and pluralism, and the desire to avoid comprehensive truth claims, Rawls introduces the idea of an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Rawls claims that the consensus approach draws upon “the fundamental ideas we seem to share through the public political culture” (150, 1993). Political liberalism seeks, through the overlapping consensus, the proper values for our
societies’ conception of justice. If political liberalism is endorsed because it achieves these values, then it is endorsed as a true theory of justice for our society, a claim Rawls cannot allow because of how it contradicts one of the basic tenets of his own constructivist approach. However, the alternative would be to either endorse a theory of justice that is false or to accept the fact that political liberalism will override a true theory of justice; neither of these are attractive options. But if political liberalism is endorsed because it best expresses modern democratic political values, such as social stability and unity, then it must be the true theory of justice for modern democracies. Rawls, it seems, cannot coherently claim that political liberalism works for our society but is neutral in regard to truth claims, and so he is inexorably drawn back into the epistemological fray.

Raz writes that to assert the truth of political liberalism “would negate the very spirit of Rawls’ enterprise,” which would “disqualify it from fulfilling its role of transcending the disagreement among these many incompatible moral doctrines” (9). However, in a footnote Raz accepts that “this conclusion does not follow if all members of the community regard the doctrine of justice as self-evident” (9, n.13). The political culture of a community, Raz implies, is generally accepted as self-evident by its members. If a doctrine of justice is self-evident, then there is no need to assert or debate its claim to truth, because the issue will not arise. But this is not the case for political liberalism because, as Raz notes, “Rawls has…sufficient evidence to know that his theory of justice is not accepted as self-evident by all in our society” (9, n.13). Because it is it is a highly-debated political theory, political liberalism must assert and defend its claim to truth.
Raz is correct in saying that political liberalism in its entirety is not self-evident. However, Rawls writes in the chapter, “Fundamental Ideas,” “I view these principles as exemplifying the content of a liberal political conception of justice” (6, 1993). Political liberalism is an attempt to draw out and extend the liberal principles of the existent political culture. As such it may not look familiar, but this is because Rawls seeks to construct a theory of justice upon the blueprints provided by modern democracies. He writes:

We start, then, by looking to the public culture itself as the shared fund of implicitly recognized basic ideas and principles. We hope to formulate these ideas and principles clearly enough to be combined into a political conception of justice congenial to our most firmly held convictions (8, 1993).

The foundations, Rawls’ “basic ideas and principles,” must be self-evident, but the same is not necessarily true of the resultant theory.

A political theory that expresses shared political principles must not be completely unrecognizable, as this might indicate that its foundations are not those of a particular political culture. But the larger point is that if a community shares a doctrine of justice, then, as Raz concedes, “they could all agree to its truth without getting involved in any disagreements arising out of their comprehensive ethical and political views” (9, n.13). Given that a set of principles must underlie a doctrine of justice it follows that a community could agree to a set of principles and similarly bypass discussions of truth. By such reasoning one can see why Rawls claims that political liberalism is “independent of the opposing and conflicting philosophical and religious
doctrines that citizens affirm” but that it still “expresses their shared and public political reason” (9, 1993). While Raz may take issue with how correctly political liberalism expresses the political culture, he cannot convincingly claim that a doctrine of justice necessarily requires comprehensive truth. If such a doctrine evolves from shared political principles already in place truth claims become unnecessary.

Raz goes on to claim that the acceptance condition of a theory of justice is determined by how well it expresses the values of a society. The achievement of these values, Raz argues, “that is, the fact that endorsing the theory leads to their achievement… makes the theory true” (15). But, as I have already shown, by Raz’s own criteria, it is possible for a theory of justice to avoid dealing with truth claims so long as it expresses a society’s shared political values. If a particular theory of justice best expresses these general, deeply held political values then, as Raz claims, must one go on to assert its comprehensive truth? Such a theory of justice does not require an assertion of its truth for two reasons. First, Rawls argues that political liberalism is derivable from within any reasonable, comprehensive doctrine. Given that it begins with the common political fabric, political liberalism does not require at any stage an assertion of truth. One could argue that there may be better or worse expressions of the common political fabric, but this is not to claim, as Raz does, that political liberalism is self-defeating. A theory of justice drawn from shared assumptions and derivable from a multitude of comprehensive doctrines simply does not require a comprehensive truth value.

The second reason why political liberalism does not require an assertion of truth addresses Raz’s fundamental concern, namely the nature of the relationship between political and moral philosophy. Frequently his argument returns to this issue, as
evidenced in the claim that “there can be no justice without truth” (15). If justice requires truth, then more basic philosophical, (in this case, moral), questions must be answered before attempting political philosophy. The answer to these more basic questions, Raz implies, will guide and partially determine a particular theory of justice. Although Raz rightly notes that “Rawls’ aim is…not merely political expediency,” he claims that political liberalism “starts not with general moral truths but with the givens of our common culture… And that is as far as it goes” (13, 8).

Such condemnation is premature. Discussing the “larger question of how political liberalism is possible,” Rawls invokes the idea of a “reasonable faith,” indicating that political liberalism has a more complex basis than Raz’s argument appreciates (172, 1993). Rawls discusses reasonable faith only a few times in *Political Liberalism*, but if it forms the basis of his work, as he indicates, then it is indeed a highly significant component. In order to provide a more complete reply to Raz I shall explore Rawls’ reasonable faith in greater detail, beginning with the use of the phrase in Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. I shall examine how Rawls appropriates the idea, and how it might provide the basis for the possibility of political liberalism. Far from epistemologically abstinent, political liberalism is in fact a public faith.

Kant’s reasonable faith is not religious in nature, but rather it is a necessary presupposition for his work in regard to both pure and practical reason. Rawls notes that through the concept of reasonable faith “our knowledge is extended,” although “only from the practical point of view” (309-310, 2000). Reasonable faith, in the theoretical realm, justifies Kant’s presupposition that the various powers of the intellect, (i.e.

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2 For practical reasons my exposition of Kant’s use of reasonable faith, and Rawls’ interpretation of it, are abbreviated. I shall present the main points and show how they support my argument, but for a full account of Kantian reasonable faith in Rawls work, cf. Rawls’ *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy.*
sensation, consciousness, imagination, etc.), are logically reducible to one “fundamental power” (B 677, 1956). Yet, Kant claims, this principle, the “unity of reason”, is not genuine knowledge, because, he asks, “how can reason do this, if it be free to admit as likewise possible that all powers may be heterogeneous, and that such systematic unity of derivation may not be in conformity with nature?” (B 629, 1956). If reason is but one piece in a set of disparate powers, it could simply be the case that it has no analytic priority over the intellect. Kant’s attempt to “make trial” of it, in this case, would be an impossible task (B xvii, 1929). In the practical realm, Kant claims that a reasonable faith is required to sustain certain moral ideas, such as the inevitability of human progress. Rawls notes that Kant writes, “I base my argument upon my inborn duty of influencing posterity in such a way that it will make constant progress (I must thus assume that progress is possible)” (Reiss, 88f). Notice that Kant explicitly denies that he must make a truth claim in regard to his presuppositions. A reasonable faith in the possibility of intellectual unity and human progress allows Kant to proceed, albeit he is mindful of his tentative claim to knowledge.

As with Kant, political liberalism shifts the burden of proof, by beginning with the premise that an overlapping consensus of diverse, conflicting comprehensive doctrines can form the basis of a society of free and equal individuals. If Rawls succeeds, critics of this conception of society, anti-liberals and liberals alike, must convincingly show that social stability and unity among conflicting comprehensive doctrines cannot be reasonably ordered. Rawls is indicating that there can be no sufficient answer to the critic who claims that modern democracies cannot be reasonably ordered. The debate will inevitably result in an impasse, as there seems to be no way Rawls could definitively
prove that conflicting comprehensive doctrines can be reasonably ordered. Rawls claims that “given reasonably favorable conditions,” he is justified in having faith in finding a reasonable solution (101, 1993). Rawls is aware that the correct set of historical, institutional, and intellectual conditions must maintain in order for the faith to avoid becoming naïve idealism. With these criteria, the real possibility of political liberalism can be defended, though, as Raz might respond, it lacks the force of truth.

But how can Rawls’ reasonable faith provide a defense against Raz’s critique? First, Raz’s argument fails to account for how reasonable faith functions in political liberalism. Raz is aware of the idea, although he understands it to mean, “faith in the possibility of a truly just regime, not merely the possibility of a regime which is called just by its members” (15). Rawls writes, though, that political liberalism “understands itself as the defense of the possibility of a just constitutional regime,” which is to say that political liberalism understands itself to be a reasonable faith (101, 1993). It must be the case then, that Rawls’ reasonable faith does more than provide for the possibility of an objectively just regime, although this may be part of what a reasonable faith demands.

The primary function of Rawls’ reasonable faith is to form the possibility of political liberalism itself, that is, “to exhibit the possibility of an overlapping consensus in a society with a democratic tradition characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism” (172, 1993). Thus, it is correct to say that a reasonable faith is at the core of political liberalism. Rawls begins with the presupposition that an overlapping consensus of conflicting comprehensive doctrines is actually possible; he does not need to assert its truth, for it becomes the burden of the critic to prove that this faith is unwarranted.
Second, given that political liberalism is based upon a reasonable faith, and, as I have shown, since it is drawn from the common culture of modern democracies, Raz’s argument fails to take hold. Rawls’ faith is justifiable because there exists no conclusive argument denying the possibility of a reasonable ordering of conflicting comprehensive doctrines. Insofar as modern democracies are reasonably ordered, political liberalism is a genuine possibility. Given the plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines and the assumption that a society can be both reasonably ordered and acceptable to citizens holding differing comprehensive doctrines, no reasonable society may be based on a comprehensive truth claim. As a logical extension of the underlying principles of reasonable political regimes, political liberalism simply draws out the ideas implicit in democratic culture, thereby avoiding comprehensive truth claims. To amend Raz’s phrase, there can be justice without truth, though not without reason.

In sum, political liberalism does not foist upon citizens the undue burden of epistemological abstinence. As I have shown, Rawls draws upon the political fabric of contemporary society and thus, as Raz admits, questions of comprehensive truth do not arise. This is not to suggest that there is or will be immediate and general agreement on political liberalism. Rawls is certainly open to the claim that his theory is not the best expression of the underlying principles of contemporary democracies. However, this is a question of accuracy, not of truth. Finally Rawls’ justification for political liberalism, his use of reasonable faith, does not require comprehensive truth. Reasonable faith is not a comprehensive doctrine, but neither is it absent from the epistemological fray. Rather, it is a necessary presupposition about the power and unity of human reason. In the case of
political liberalism, it is a faith in the successful application of reason in public life, and in this sense political liberalism is a public faith.
Works Cited


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