Abstract: Rediscovery of John Rawls’s early interest in theology has recently prompted readings of his philosophical project as a secularized response to earlier theological questions. Intellectual historians have meanwhile begun to historicize Rawls’s use of contemporary philosophical resources and his engagement with postwar economics. In this paper I argue that holding together Rawls’s evolving interest in theology and political economy was his understanding of the task of philosophy as reconciliation. In placing Rawls in the intellectual context of postwar political economy as well as in relation to the history of political thought, including his reading of that history, I defend two claims. First, I argue that Rawls’s philosophical ambition is best understood as providing a secular reconciliatory theodicy. Secondly, I suggest that Rawls’s theodicy was initially rendered plausible by the economic background conditions of economic growth that disappeared with the book’s publication in 1971. This divergence between text and context helps to account for Rawls’s peculiar reception.

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1 For comments and discussion I am indebted to Teresa Bejan, Kenzie Bok, Christopher Brooke, Carmen Dege, Katrina Forrester, Eric Gregory, Hetty van Hensberg, Murad Idris, Rob Jubb, Stephen Marglin, Sarah Mortimer, Sophie Smith, Brandon Terry, and Annette Zimmermann.
“Let us imagine for a moment,” the author invited his readers, “the future generation assembled in idea, in an imaginary world, and ignorant before they inhabit the earth, who those individuals are that shall be born of parents loaded with the gifts of fortune, and those who are beset with misery from the cradle.” Ignorant about their future lot, they would all be instructed in the principles of law, rights, and property, while being impressed with a sketch of the inevitable disorder that would follow from a gross inequality in the division of property. “All equally uncertain of the chance reserved for them by the hazards of birth,” they would form in their minds a speculative image of society in which private and public interests were one and the same.

It might come as a surprise that this thought experiment is not John Rawls’s. Instead, these words were written in 1788 by Jacques Necker, the Genevan banker and former French minister of finance, and translated into English the same year by Mary Wollstonecraft. I open with this passage to illustrate three interrelated claims that I will develop in the course of this article. First, the excitement occasioned by the publication of Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* in 1971 easily obscures the ways in which Rawls in fact worked from within a number of long-standing traditions, many of which reach back to the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Secondly, these traditions are not reducible to the social contract but are also intimately related to the philosophical status of religion and, in turn, the theological status of philosophy. Thirdly, the terrain on which these philosophical anxieties about reconciliation

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4 Necker’s book was the first fruit of his forced retirement seven years earlier after his scandalous publication of the public accounts—a forced retirement that was about to be interrupted by the calling of the Estates General and Necker’s brief return to the public finances until the fall of the Bastille in July 1789. Robert D. Harris, *Necker: Reform Statesman of the Ancien Régime* (Berkeley, 1979), 217-35.
and justice unfolded was that of political economy. Combining these three strands, I will argue that Rawls’s work engages in a profound way with the status of modern philosophy as a form of secular theodicy. I understand theodicy in this context as the attempt, originally developed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil – or in a broader secular key to reconcile one’s own existence with the existence of injustice in the world. Reading Rawls in this light allows us to see his philosophical work as the expression of a desire to reconcile oneself to the existence of injustice in the present. This framing of justice as a theodicy reveals both the power and the blindspots of Rawls’s endeavour. As I will argue, it also shines light on the way in which the political economy of the second half of the twentieth century formed the changing backdrop for Rawls’s theory and its reception.

The relation between philosophy, theodicy, and political economy is a widely recognized one in modern political thought. From the theological origins of market order in Jansenist thought to the natural theodicy of physiocratic doctrine, questions of theology and political economy became deeply entangled in the eighteenth century in a way that is arguably still with us. It is through this entanglement of philosophy, theodicy, and political economy that Rawls can appears as another refugee from the eighteenth century, as Judith Shklar once described herself. More sceptically, other readers have long been struck by a seeming lack of anxiety on Rawls’s part about the challenges of nineteenth-century historicism and ideology critique. But Rawls himself stressed, of course, his philosophical indebtedness to the

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7 Allan Bloom, for example, voiced this frustration shortly after the Theory of Justice was published: “Simply, historicism, whether that of Marx or that of Nietzsche and the existentialists, has made it questionable
eighteenth century. His position reflects not so much a lack of interest in the relation between history and philosophy but rather its peculiar invocation in the form of a secular theodicy.

To develop my argument, I will first embed Rawls in the synchronic intellectual context of the American postwar economic boom during the Bretton Woods years.\(^8\) I will then turn to some of the key motivating questions behind Rawls’s philosophical ambition by arguing that they are legible through the lens of eighteenth-century secular theodicies. I then connect this need for theodicy to the language of political economy, before arguing that this relation acquired a specifically temporal dimension in the course of the twentieth century that witnessed the construction of a liberal futurity premised on the expectation of perpetual economic growth. Rawls’s secular response to the problem of theodicy was in this sense rendered initially plausible by an expectation of continuous economic growth. Its disappearance since the 1970s altered the fundamental frame of liberal politics and forced Rawls to rework his theory in the face of sluggish growth and the disappearance of the promise of wide-spread affluence.

**Rawls in Bretton Woods**

In the closing lines of *A Theory of Justice* Rawls famously expressed his hope to have offered a perspective onto society “*sub specie aeternitatis.*”\(^9\) His theory, Rawls claimed, not only captured the ideal of justice from all social points of view but also “from all temporal

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points of view.” His was a “perspective of eternity” that transcended its own historical conditions of possibility. Even leaving questions of historicity aside, Rawls’s project was not created in a vacuum, despite its relative paucity in footnotes to contemporaries. Intellectual historians have since productively turned to Rawls’s archive and correspondence to recover the different strands of postwar moral philosophy, Protestant theology, and welfare economics that Rawls reworked and combined. But Rawls’s “perspective of eternity” was also always more indebted to the specific political economy of the postwar decades than he himself acknowledged or perhaps even realized.

The postwar decades in America were marked by unprecedented economic growth. This spectacular experience of growing affluence rapidly shifted the horizon of expectations as observers came to agree that the economic problem of scarcity had been solved or was about to be solved. John Kenneth Galbraith captured this mood well in his bestseller The Affluent Society (1958) when he announced that unprecedented prosperity was on its way to produce a society for which the animating problem was no longer the generation of wealth or the distributional struggle over scarce resources but instead how to use the newly available prosperity in a fair and widely dispersed manner.

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13 Despite numerous subsequent revisions, Rawls’s philosophical framework was essentially in place by the late 1950s. See, for example, Rawls, “Distributive Justice (Summer 1959).” John Rawls Papers, Harvard University Archives, HUM 48, Box 35, Folder 8; as well as John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness,” *The Philosophical Review* 67/2 (1958), 164-94.
suggest, relied philosophically on these historical conditions of growth-based postwar national welfarism embedded in an international monetary system founded in Bretton Woods. More concretely, what lent credence to Rawls’s account of stability in Part III of A Theory of Justice was that his moral psychology – such as the disappearance of envy – aligned with the contemporary expectation that perpetual economic growth would dramatically ease distributive conflicts and facilitate redistribution. Not least due to his striving for transcendental truth, Rawls explicitly obscured this historical reliance and instead couched his theory in a form of institutional agnosticism.17 But as Thomas Piketty has recently highlighted so strikingly, the two decades during which Rawls wrote A Theory of Justice were both fleeting and singularly exceptional.18

The timing of the eventual publication of Rawls’s Theory of Justice in 1971 further distorts our view in this regard. The very moment the book finally appeared, it was already out of sync with the times.19 In 1971, the US trade account turned negative for the first time in the twentieth century. On August 15, 1971, just as Rawls put the finishing touches on the book’s preface, President Richard Nixon announced the suspension of the dollar’s convertibility into gold that had been at the heart of the Bretton Woods monetary system.20

Having been in the works for nearly two decades, the publication of Rawls’s book coincided precisely with the collapse of the certainties of the postwar economic order. In a constellation

17 In speaking of “institutional agnosticism” I have in mind Rawls’s openness toward any kind of institutional arrangement that satisfies the two principles of justice. From this flowed both a refusal to elaborate on whether or not capitalism was compatible with the difference principle and a relative lack of attention to concrete political institutions, be it legislatures, parties, or central banks. See Rainer Forst, Justification and Critique: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, 2014), 27n33 and Jeremy Waldron, Political Political Theory. Essays on Institutions (Cambridge MA, 2016), 3, 20, 288. Only toward the very end of his life did Rawls briefly gesture at how the difference principle might translate into more concrete institutional questions. See Rawls, Justice as Fairness. A Restatement (Cambridge MA, 2001), 136-8.
19 The preface to the original edition of A Theory of Justice is dated “August 1971”. (xii)
that would not have failed to amuse Hegel, the moment in which thought captured reality coincided with that reality vanishing.\textsuperscript{21}

This was not lost on Rawls whose original conception of justice as fairness contained more than a nod to Hegel’s understanding of philosophy as closure and rational completion. As becomes clear once we read \textit{A Theory of Justice} alongside Rawls’s archive, as well as his Harvard lectures on the history of moral and political philosophy, at least part of his philosophical ambition appears to have always been to reveal the rational in the real, to put it in Hegelian terms.\textsuperscript{22} In several of his writings, Rawls openly stressed his own indebtedness to Hegel, and especially Hegel’s critique of Kant.\textsuperscript{23} In his John Dewey Lectures, given in April 1980 at Columbia University, Rawls aligned himself, for example, with Dewey’s Hegelianism by observing that “Dewey opposes Kant, sometimes quite explicitly, and often at the same places at which justice as fairness also departs from Kant.”\textsuperscript{24} Despite many obvious differences, Rawls explained, justice as fairness converged with Dewey’s moral theory in their common Hegelian aim of “overcoming the dualisms in Kant’s doctrine.”\textsuperscript{25} As we will see, this affinity with Hegel becomes even more pronounced once we turn to Rawls’s conception of the very purpose of philosophy. For now let me just suggest that \textit{A Theory of Justice} was originally conceived as less a plea for radical change than a stamp of philosophical approval for the broad contours of existing economic and political institutions as well as, of course, for their further improvement toward the ideal of justice as fairness.


\textsuperscript{22} This claim has been defended most fully in Jeffrey Bercuson, \textit{John Rawls and the History of Political Thought: The Rousseauvian and Hegelian Heritage of Justice as Fairness} (New York, 2014), 25, 30-61.

\textsuperscript{23} Bercuson, \textit{Rawls and the History of Political Thought}, 3.


\textsuperscript{25} Rawls, “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,” 516; 304.
Given the timing of its publication, this Hegelian rationale almost immediately evaporated. Within a year of its publication, Rawls’s project had lost its historical timeliness as the postwar welfarism that had animated it moved into existential crisis. As Samuel Moyn has recently put it, *a Theory of Justice* appears from this perspective, despite all its innovative aspects, as “the swansong of national welfare in the United States.” The 1970s experience of stagflation – and the ill-fated political conclusions of deregulation and financialization derived from it – eliminated any residual optimism about growing affluence and welfarist redistribution. Instead, as Daniel Bell observed at the time, inflation laid bare the brutal distributional struggles that had previously been disguised by the proverbial pie growing without limits. Alongside the implosion of growth and welfarism, the national framing of Rawls’s project appeared similarly outdated. The collapse of the postwar economic frame was mirrored by a broader disillusionment with national politics. Instead, the early 1970s witnessed the emergence of “the global” – be it in the form of a new awareness of economic interdependencies, the world food crisis, debates about population growth, or a nascent global environmental consciousness.

With national welfarism rapidly moving into crisis, Rawls’s theory appeared in an altogether different light already to its first generation of readers. Soon justice as fairness came to be read as a neo-Kantian “regulative ideal.” But this reception of Rawls’s book as a straightforwardly Kantian endeavour must itself be historicized and read as one of the side effects of text and context unexpectedly diverging in the course of the 1970s. Indeed, Rawls

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26 One could equally say that Rawls’s right-Hegelian stamp of approval for the broad redistributive contours of the postwar political and economic system flipped over into a left-Hegelian plea for radical change. Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough. Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge MA, 2018), 147.
himself was surprised by the way the book was received. Almost immediately the entire debate focused on questions of distribution whereas few engaged with what Rawls himself had considered his central contribution, namely his account of stability and moral psychology in Part III. But given the disintegration of the economic world Rawls could take for granted while writing the book, his distributive theory – whose formulation in terms of game theory attracted the attention of economists and decision theorists – appeared at once as radical and ambitious. Soon the book was praised as a daring exercise in Kantian idealism that strove to find the real in the rational, rather than the rational in the real. Rawls himself inhabited the resulting ambiguity between Kant and Hegel with self-conscious ambivalence.

The Task of Philosophy

Appreciating this ambivalence requires us to take stock of Rawls’s understanding of the task of philosophy. Most fundamentally, Rawls’s self-declared purpose seems never to have been to provide a metaphysical grounding of justice. Instead, he saw philosophy as endowed with a reconciliatory ambition. Philosophy could provide a legitimating account of the rational principles that could be detected in the development of liberal democracy. As Jeffrey Bercuson has shown, this framing implied a commitment to a Hegelian conception of philosophy as reconciliation. This included not least the conviction that “we always have to begin from where we are,” as Rawls put it in a lecture in 1959. Rawls made such a situated framing most explicit in Political Liberalism (1993). But Hegel is present in Rawls’s work

32 Bercuson, Rawls and the History of Political Thought, 25.
almost from the beginning and at least since the 1950s. As he wrote in the aforementioned 1959 lecture:

As to whether these institutions are better seen in a liberal capitalist framework or under a liberal socialist regime, this question turns on many historical and psychological and other questions (e.g., economic efficiency). Since we are a liberal (relatively) capitalist society rational conservatism suggests that we try to work these institutions in a capitalist framework. We always have to begin from where we are and prima facie our obligation is to attempt to reduce the discrepancy between actual and just institutions in a rational way.34

In the margins Rawls credited Hegel. In *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (2001), Rawls similarly presented reconciliation as one of the four roles of political philosophy and linked it explicitly to Hegel.35 The task of reconciliation, “stressed by Hegel,” tries “to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form.”36 The goal of political philosophy was to affirm our social world positively by replacing resignation with reconciliation.

To be sure, recovering this neglected Hegelian strain should not lead us to dismiss the simultaneous Kantian quality of Rawls’s position. As Paul Weithman has shown, the basic understanding of the task of philosophy as providing rational foundations to the real can also be expressed in Kantian terms of “reasonable faith.”37 Instead of playing Kant against Hegel, what a close reading of Rawls’s ambition indicates is a thorough-going analogy to other late eighteenth-century secular theologies.38 Framing Rawls’s animating concern in this way

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34 Rawls, “Distributive Justice (Summer 1959), 3.
38 These included not least Rousseau’s. Indeed, the single most striking feature of Rawls’s *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* is his sympathetic proximity to a very particular and peculiar Kantian reading of Rousseau as having provided a secular theodicy. See Christopher Brooke, “Rawls on Rousseau and the General Will,” in *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept*, ed. James Farr and David Lay Williams (Cambridge,
through the problem of theodicy also renders visible the subtle role of religion. While Rawls couched his political philosophy in explicitly secular terms, we now know that he laboured under the shadow of his earlier Christian faith. As Rawls attested in his short reflections “On My Religion” from 1997, throughout much of his life he had felt a keen religious motivation. Raised in an Episcopalian family in Baltimore (his mother was an Episcopalian, his father a Southern Methodist), during the last two years of his undergraduate degree at Princeton between 1940 and 1942 Rawls had become deeply concerned with theology and its doctrines. He seriously considered entering the priesthood. “But,” as Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel put it somewhat flippantly, “he decided to enlist in the army instead.” What may sound like an odd choice becomes understandable once one appreciates that the problem weighing heavily on the young Jack Rawls was the problem of evil in the world.

As a result of his war experience in the Pacific, Rawls abandoned his Christian faith after 1945 and – at least in his self-narration – turned to philosophy instead. This loss of faith in the existence of God however did not translate into a loss of his “deeply religious temperament that informed his life and writings, whatever may have been his beliefs,” as many family members, friends, and students have attested. The religious philosophical motivation Rawls felt extended far beyond his Christian youth. The formal restrictions he later placed on the role of explicitly religious arguments in public reasoning should thus not mislead us into underestimating the implicit importance of religious motivations for his

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thought. Restricting the use of religious arguments in public reasoning instead reflected a form of translating and secularizing faith by advancing what Kant called “reasonable faith.”

This also entailed acts of secular translation on Rawls’s own part. Paul Weithman has pointed to one particularly telling act of self-translation. In a manuscript draft of The Law of Peoples (1999), Rawls summarized the book’s philosophical ambition in the concluding paragraph as follows:

These thoughts quickly lead to a question not unrelated to the question of theodicy. It is said that after fashioning the world God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1) If it is good, a reasonably just society must be possible; and for it to be possible, human beings must have a moral nature.\(^{43}\)

In correspondence Weithman pressed Rawls on the passage’s religious dimension. But instead of an explanation or a more explicit engagement, Rawls simply dropped the paragraph in the final manuscript. The Law of Peoples ends instead with a beautiful, if cryptic, nod to paragraph 49 of Kant’s Rechtslehre:

If a reasonably just Society of Peoples whose members subordinate their power to reasonable aims is not possible, and human beings are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask, with Kant, whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth.\(^{44}\)

Rawls had employed almost the same wording in the introduction to the paperback edition of Political Liberalism from December 1995.\(^{45}\) Instead of making explicit the language of theodicy, Rawls decided to translate his motivating framing into a Kantian language. The associated task of reconciliation nonetheless remained central to his conception of philosophy. He repeatedly described the aim of political philosophy as defending “reasonable faith,” in particular reasonable faith in the possibility of a just and stable order, a possibility whose


\(^{45}\) “If a reasonably just society that subordinates power to its aims is not possible and people are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask with Kant whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth?” Rawls, Political Liberalism, lxii.
recognition is able to displace our doubts (or rather Rawls’s doubts) as to whether “it is worthwhile for human beings to live on earth” in the first place. Rawls removed God but he could not, and did not want to, remove the affirmation of reasonable faith. His account of a just society forms the capstone of this project because it vindicates hope in the possibility of a just world and just political institutions.\(^47\)

**Theodicy as Reconciliation**

Rawls’s invocation of Kant at the end of *The Law of Peoples* is nonetheless even more intriguing than Weithman lets on. By couching the problem of theodicy instead in the language of “reasonable faith,” Rawls precisely mirrored Kant’s own intellectual trajectory. Theodicy, in its most basic understanding, was originally the task of reconciling human beings to a world in which evil exists. Leibniz coined the term in 1710 as the title of a series of essays written in French.\(^48\) Meant as a plea for God’s cause or, more literally, “the justice of God” (*theos* + *dike*), it constituted a theological response to sceptical rationalism. The task of Leibniz’s *Essays of Theodicy* was to demonstrate the rationality and morality of the universe without recourse to either Cartesian dualism or a separation of faith and reason. As Leibniz famously claimed in §8, God had created the best of all possible worlds.\(^49\) These essays were

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widely read in the eighteenth century, inspiring not least Voltaire’s biting satire in *Candide* (1759).\(^{50}\)

Before his critical turn, Kant himself had been a follower of Leibniz and Leibniz’s views on theodicy, as disseminated through the work of Christian Wolff. Importantly, while Kant’s critical turn implied a rejection of Leibniz and Wolff, it did not undercut his faith in theodicy. Kant thought that the task of theodicy had become neither obsolete nor impossible for critical philosophy.\(^{51}\) Instead, his post-critical *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* (only published posthumously in 1817), as well as his essays on the “Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose” (1784) and the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” (1786) all contained prominent and well-developed attempts at theodicy.\(^{52}\)

By the 1790s, however, Kant had come to question not the need for theodicies, but his own prior attempts at providing them. In an essay “On the Failure of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy” (1791) for the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* he now argued that all existing attempts to account for moral evil, including his own, were deeply problematic.\(^{53}\) To replace them, Kant relied on his account of “reasonable faith” (*Vernunftglaube*, sometimes also translated as “rational faith”) that was meant to provide a philosophically more satisfying answer to the same underlying concern.\(^{54}\) He had first sketched the outline of such a “reasonable faith” in

\(^{50}\) Voltaire, *Candide, ou l’Optimisme* (Geneva, 1759).


the Second Critique and in the course of the 1790s it became a central pivot of Kant’s thought.\footnote{Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason [1786], trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett, 2002), 144-6.}

Rawls reconstructed these steps keenly. There are undated note cards on Leibniz’s theodicy essays in Rawls’s archive, and while he left no direct written engagement with Kant’s essay on theodicy he worked in detail through the respective passages in both the Rechtslehre and the Second Critique.\footnote{John Rawls Papers, Harvard University Archives, HUM 48, Box 59. Some of the other note cards in the box contain notes on Hegel and Weber.} In the course of the 1980s, both in his Harvard lectures on the history of moral philosophy as well as in a series of articles Rawls came to align his own philosophical project with a reading of this Kantian idea of “philosophy as apologia.”\footnote{Rawls, Political Liberalism, 101; Rawls, Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy, 309-25; Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” Oxford Journal of Legal Studies 7 (1987), 1-25; reprinted in Rawls, Collected Papers, at 421-48, at 448; John Rawls, “Themes in Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” in Eckart Förster (ed.), Kant’s Transcendental Deductions: The Three ‘Critiques’ and the ‘Opus Postumum (Palo Alto, 1989), 81-113, at 94; reprinted in Rawls, Collected Papers, 497-528, at 509.} As Rawls explained in 1987, Kant’s understanding of philosophy as “the defense of reasonable faith” could be translated into “the defense of reasonable faith in the real possibility of a just constitutional regime.”\footnote{Rawls, “The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus,” Oxford Journal of Legal Studies 7 (1987), 1-25; reprinted in Rawls, Collected Papers, at 421-48, at 448.} This was the position Rawls defended more fully in Political Liberalism.\footnote{Rawls, Political Liberalism, 101, 172.} He thereby followed Kant’s own substitution of “reasonable faith” for the earlier language of theodicy.

But what are differences between theodicy and “reasonable faith”? Several recent readers of Kant have come to question Kant’s own sharp delineation between theodicy and reasonable faith of the 1790s. Far from rejecting all theodicies, Kant’s own essay in fact left open the possibility of certain forms of rational, secular quasi-theodicies.\footnote{Susan Meld Shell, “Kant’s Secular Religion,” in Rethinking Kant: Volume 3, ed. Oliver Thorndike (Cambridge, 2011), 20-32; George Gilbert Huxford, The Scope and Development of Kant’s Theodicy, Doctoral Thesis, King’s College London (London, 2015).} More specifically, as Rawls noticed, Kant read Rousseau’s account of amour-propre along these lines “as part of
a narrative that treats human history as a kind of theodicy." Significantly, Rawls’s *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* contained a full articulation of this idiosyncratic reading. Once we are aware of Rawls’s early theological interests we can highlight the ways in which its motivating questions continued to structure Rawls’s thought in the form of a reconciliatory theodicy. Rawls may have left behind the Christian ideas of sin, faith, and conversion, but he translated their philosophical purpose into the quasi-secular language of a civic theodicy. Membership in a liberal political community, for example, is mirrored in Rawls’s analysis by a more or less explicit analogy to religious conversion. Both civic and religious conversions are hopeful acts of faith. Just as gaining religious faith implied for the young Rawls a holistic transformation of one’s character, so we may say that the liberal commitment to a fair scheme of cooperation is meant to submit its members to an analogous exercise of profound character transformation. Insisting on the possibility of such a fair and stable scheme of cooperation – however far removed – became for Rawls a way of reconciling himself with the obvious existence of injustice in the actual world.

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Political Economy and the Theodicy of Growth

When grappling with the problem of a secular theodicy, both Kant (in his political essays of the 1790s) and Hegel (in the *Philosophy of Right*) turned toward political economy to undergird their respective accounts. So did Rawls in his own way. Having pointed to Rawls’s conception of the task of philosophy as providing a secular form of theodicy, I now want to place this back in the context of political economy with which I began. In relating Rawls’s political economy to his formerly theological concerns it is helpful to recall the ways in which eighteenth-century political thought entwined political economy with theology. In the case of physiocracy this link was most explicit, not least in its origins in Jansenism and its providentialist theology.\(^{67}\) The market was on this view, quite explicitly, a new form of theodicy for commercial society. Physiocracy was, as Sonenscher explains, “a theodicy, or an explanation of how the idea of a just, omniscient and omnipotent God could be reconciled with the existence of evil in human affairs.”\(^{68}\) Such theodies did not have to be tied to God – as they were for the Jansenists – but often also appeared in a secular key. Consider, for example, Condorcet’s ambition for the rise of *les sciences sociales*. For Condorcet, it was precisely the new social art and the new social sciences that would bring “the perfection of laws and public institutions,” which in turn would spell “the reconciliation, the identification of the interests of each with the interests of all.”\(^{69}\) Despite many differences Rawls worked within this existing tradition of reconciling divergent interests.

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This link between theodicy and the social sciences – and especially the social science of political economy – helps to shine a different light onto Rawls’s development during his formative years as a junior faculty member at Cornell during the 1950s. During these years Rawls taught a seminar on Christian ethics, while simultaneously immersing himself in graduate level courses in economics as a student. Tellingly, asked in 1991 about the origins of the original position, Rawls responded not with reference to Kant or Wittgenstein but by describing his self-education in economics during the 1950s. Where Rawls had initially sought to solve his philosophical problem of reconciliation by trying to arrive at a definition of reasoning, a reasonable decision procedure, or the behaviour of “reasonable man”, in the course of the 1950s his strategy shifted toward placing people into a simplified background condition as he became interested in questions of rules and games. Much of this interest has been rightly credited to the influence of Wittgenstein. But it also flowed from an engagement with welfare economics and, especially, the thought of Frank Knight who offered Rawls a bridge to an earlier Protestant tradition of theodicy. To conceive of society as the outcome of a bargaining game contained the promise of a just and stable society that could provide a civic theodicy without God.

But what eased and stabilized his construction of a secular theodicy for Rawls, writing in the 1950s and 60s, was the miracle of economic growth. Secular temporality and theology have, of course, always shared an intimate relationship. As Reinhart Koselleck stressed for the eighteenth century, its novel temporal structure was marked by a secularized theological

logic. In Koselleck’s terms, with the rise of modern historical time, past, present, and future ceased to be perceived as fundamentally alike. Instead, concepts of movements – from “progress” to “revolution” – came to define modern political temporality. The notion of “growth” firmly belongs into this category. Indeed, our ongoing preoccupation with economic growth is arguably the last remnant of an eighteenth-century faith in progress. It is hardly an overstatement to describe economic growth – as Pratap Mehta, among others, has stressed – as the master theodicy of all modern politics. This was certainly the tacit perception of economic growth in the postwar period of the twentieth century. The rise of economic growth in seeming perpetuity altered political temporalities and expectations into what Robert Collins has dubbed “growth liberalism.” The pursuit of growth had become an essential part of prudent policy making. But, as such, growth also acquired an almost theological societal significance. As Daniel Bell put it in 1976, “economic growth has become the secular religion of advancing industrial societies.” Growth, according to Bell, had come to act in functional analogy to the tasks once achieved by religion: it formed the basis of political solidarity, individual motivation, and the mobilization of society for a common purpose more generally.

This transformative affluence of growth provided Rawls in A Theory of Justice with the historical background that could be taken for granted to stabilize the just society. In

76 Collins, More, 40-67.
particular, what Rawls presented as facts of moral psychology were all too often extrapolations based on the experience of the postwar boom. Consider, for example, the problem of envy, which Rawls argued would fade away in a just society.  As he bluntly put it regarding the original position, “the special assumption I make is that a rational individual does not suffer from envy.”  It has been insufficiently appreciated that the one background condition that rendered this argument even vaguely plausible was continuous economic growth that was at the time widely expected to transform our moral psychology away from envious competitiveness.

The presumption of growth furthermore allowed Rawls to finesse an apparent contradiction between justice within a generation and justice between generations: whereas the difference principle limited inequality to the level that offered the greatest benefit to the least advantaged, the just-savings principle allowed for future generations to become successively richer.  An expectation of perpetual economic growth reconciled the pull of these two principles that otherwise risked divergence.  Citing a range of economists such as Amartya Sen, James Tobin, and Robert Solow, Rawls admitted the difficulty of determining the ideal rate of savings and cautioned against imposing excessive burdens on the present generation.  Instead, he offered in a footnote a “theoretical” speculation to complicate his argument:

If for theoretical purposes one thinks of the ideal society as one whose economy is in a steady state of growth (possibly zero), and which is at the same time just, then the

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78 Rawls, Theory of Justice, 125, 450. For a more detailed analysis of the problem of envy in Rawls, see Jeffrey Edward Green, “Rawls and the Forgotten Figure of the Most Advantaged: In Defense of Reasonable Envy toward the Superrich,” APSR 107:1 (February 2013), 123-38; as well as Daniel Luban, “Rawls and Envy,” working paper (2016).
79 Rawls, Theory of Justice, 124; Rawls, “Fairness to Goodness,” in Rawls, Collected Papers, 277.
80 This was, for example, Habermas’s expectation in Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere [1962] (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 234-5.
81 Rawls, Theory of Justice, 252-3.
82 My thanks to Stephen Marglin for this observation.
83 Rawls, Theory of Justice, 253.
savings problem is to choose a principle for sharing the burdens of getting to that
growth path (or to such a path if there is more than one), and of maintaining the justice
of the necessary arrangements once this is achieved. In the text, however, I do not
pursue this suggestion; my discussion is at a more primitive level.\textsuperscript{84}

Rawls’s reasoning and language is ambiguous here. His reference to a “steady state of
growth” and the parenthetical addition of “possibly zero” seem to suggest that Rawls
entertained the theoretical possibility of a “stationary state of growth.” But his subsequent
reference to a particular “growth path” suggests by contrast that in a “steady state of growth”
it is the rate of growth that remains steady not that the national income remains stationary.

But what was at most a theoretical speculation, relegated to a footnote become reality
in the course of the 1970s as the world slid into economic crisis and growth came to an abrupt
halt. By 1973, the US economy settled into the worst recession since the 1930s.
Unemployment, virtually unheard of during the 1960s, was back. At the same time, inflation
reached levels not witnessed during peacetime since the interwar years. How did Rawls
respond? Despite his implicit theoretical reliance on the sustained economic growth, Rawls
gradually came to insist that his principles of justice were perfectly compatible with a world
without growth. In the course of the 1970s, he became increasingly interested in John Stuart
Mill’s discussion of a “stationary state” in \textit{The Principles of Political Economy}.\textsuperscript{85} As Rawls
explained in his “Remarks on Mill’s Social Theory” (dated to circa 1980), Mill “sees this state
not as a doomsday to be avoided by continual capital accumulation and innovation, but as a
desirable state to be welcomed. This shift undercuts the ethos of a modern capitalist society as
one of perpetual growth of capital and wealth.”\textsuperscript{86} Rawls had found a way to turn the waning of
economic growth in the stagflationary crisis of the 1970s into a hopeful nod to Mill’s utopian
stationary state.

\textsuperscript{84} Rawls, \textit{Theory of Justice}, 252n20.
\textsuperscript{85} John Stuart Mill, \textit{Principles of Political Economy} (London, 1848), Bk IV, Ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{86} John Rawls, \textit{Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy} (Cambridge MA, 2008), 316.
Where *A Theory of Justice* had wondered whether there are limits on the just rate of savings and how precisely growth was to be shared between generations, in *Political Liberalism* (1993) Rawls now stressed that his principles of justice did in no way depend on economic growth. As he explained in a footnote, “the principle does not require continual economic growth over generations to maximize upward indefinitely the expectations of the least advantaged. It is compatible with Mill’s idea of a society in a just stationary state where (real) capital accumulation is zero.” Referring to his own highly condensed note, Rawls admitted that “[t]hese brief remarks are hardly clear.” But such “complexities” were simply “not our concern in these lectures.” In the rest of the book he never returned to the question of growth.

The idea of a Millian stationary state had nonetheless grown on Rawls. By the mid-1990s, he regarded Mill’s idea of the stationary state as not only compatible with his own normative ideal but converging with it. “I am under no illusion that its time will ever come – certainly not soon – but it is possible, and hence it has a place in what I call the idea of realistic utopia.” As he explained in *The Law of Peoples* (1999), the point of his theory was “to realize and preserve just (or decent) institutions, and not simply to increase, much less to maximize indefinitely, the average level of wealth, or the wealth of any society or any particular class in society.” In a footnote he cited Mill’s chapter on the stationary state as inspiration, adding that “[t]he thought that real saving and economic growth are to go on indefinitely, upwards and onwards, with no specified goal in sight, is the idea of the business...

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87 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 7n5.
89 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 7n5.
class of a capitalist society.”92 By the time he published Justice as Fairness: A Restatement in 2001, Rawls’s embrace of Mill’s stationary state had migrated from the notes to the main body of the text. “A further feature of the difference principle,” Rawls now asserted, “is that it does not require continual economic growth over generations.”93

A comparison to John Maynard Keynes is illustrative here. Keynes, even more than Rawls, drew on Mill to sketch a future stationary state when the problem of scarcity could be considered solved.94 But what separates Keynes from Rawls was Keynes’s conviction that society’s moral outlook would change dramatically once prosperity was reached. “For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.”95 Rawls by contrast argued that his distributive principle applied both under conditions of scarcity and superfluity: his rules of justice would be ideal both under conditions of high growth as well as in a steady state economy without growth. What this claim intentionally sidestepped was the way in which Rawls’s original discussion of stability and moral psychology in Part III of A Theory of Justice had been rendered plausible by the expectation of perpetual growth. If growth was no longer possible, or even desirable, this had far ranging consequences for Rawls’s account of stability, which he consequently radically reworked in Political Liberalism by making more explicit his reconciliatory ambition for philosophy.

93 Rawls, Justice as Fairness. A Restatement, 63. The point was repeated almost verbatim on page 159 and listed in the book’s index as “Difference principle: does not require continual economic growth.”
The Thirst for Theodicy

Rawls’s preoccupation with the question of theodicy is, of course, far from unique in the history of modern philosophy. Indeed, as Susan Neiman has shown, much of that history can be read as an engagement with the problem of evil and the question of theodicy. As Hegel put it in the closing pages of his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, modern philosophy is “the true theodicy [wahrhafte Theodizee].” It was precisely this ambition of providing a secular theodicy of reconciliatory rational faith that motivated Rawls. But to fully appreciate the task of reconciliation it is necessary to take a sufficiently broad view of theodicy. It was Max Weber who once observed in his sociology of religion that theodicies are not only the central feature of all religious faiths, but also the hallmark of all modern political societies. As Weber explained, theodicies were systems of meaning for dealing with individual and collective suffering, not merely evil in the religious sense. Every society is in this sense built on a particular theodicy that provides meaning for the particular forms of suffering and unequal patterns of rule and power in that society. As a result, Weber spoke of a “rational need” and an “inercidable demand” for theodicies, even in modernity or perhaps in particular in modernity. For better or worse, Rawls satisfied this demand and in doing so

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96 Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought, 97. On Rawls, see 310-4; see also Kerstin Budde, “Unreasonable or Evil?,” in Evil in Contemporary Political Theory, ed. Bruce Haddock, Peri Roberts, and Peter Sutch (Edinburgh, 2011), 81-100.
alerts us to the necessity of secular faith for liberalism. The result was a distinctly ambivalent success.

Writing in 1949, just as Rawls began to work out his own answer of reconciliation, it was Friedrich Hayek who ushered a call to counter liberalism’s despair by offering the distant vision of a just liberal society. “What we lack,” Hayek insisted, “is a liberal Utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defense of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty…, which is not too severely practical, and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible.”100 Perhaps surprisingly, Rawls came to offer precisely such a distant vision of a just liberal society, radically liberal yet not too severely practical. His sketch of the ideal of justice offered a powerful critical yardstick for a present found to be deficient. But his theory at the same time paradoxically stabilized that deficient present by declaring its underlying principles and institutions rational, thus rendering them worthy of immanent reform.

Rawls thereby reconciled himself to an unjust present by harnessing it to a theodicy that posited the theoretical possibility of an ideal just society. A theodicy of liberal futurity here served to stabilize an unjust present. But precisely because of its reconciliatory ambition, Rawls’s “realistic utopia” remained arguably both insufficiently utopian to truly raise our political imagination and at the same time insufficiently realistic in its portrayal of injustice.101 As Charles Mills has highlighted, those suffering under “decent but imperfect” institutions share an understandable distrust toward idealizing portrayals meant to shore up reasonable


faith in existing institutions. Instead of taking “men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived,” why not take them “as they actually are,” to use Marx’s words? This worry was not alien to Rawls. Writing a year before his death in 2002, Rawls inserted a searching footnote in the opening pages of Justice as Fairness. “The idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care,” he cautioned.

For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and unworthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx’s sense. From time to time we must ask whether justice as fairness, or any other view, is ideological in this way; and if not, why not? Are the very basic ideas it uses ideological? How can we show they are not?

Rawls left his own question unanswered.

9,355 words (including notes); 6,359 words (excluding notes)

104 Rawls, Justice as Fairness. A Restatement, 4n4.