

DOCTORAL THESIS

The Historical Development of John Rawls's Understanding of Moral Reason: From His Senior Thesis to The Law of Peoples

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Abstract

The recent discussion on Rawlsian public reason reveals a crisis concerning its limitation on comprehensive doctrines, especially religious beliefs, in public reasoning. This dissertation proposes to give a new light on this issue, but not through joining the debate, rather, by a comprehensive interpretation on the historical development of John Rawls's understanding of moral reason. It starts from a brief introduction including Rawls's life and main writings, the rationales why "moral reason" is the kernel term in this dissertation, a review about that crisis, and the methodology I use.

The second chapter regarding young Rawls's understanding of moral reason firstly analyzes the text of Rawls's senior thesis and the expressions about moral reason. Then, it traces to young Rawls's primary intellectual sources which are listed in the bibliography of his senior thesis. Finally, the understanding of reason in morality young Rawls possibly holds is called an idea of "finite rationality" mainly influenced by Brunner. It contains two aspects: intellectual ability and religious experience. In realizing morality, intellectual ability should be guided by religious experience founded on God's power.

Mature Rawls's understanding of moral reason is divided into two aspects: the philosophical side (Chapter 3) and the religious side (Chapter 4). In order to highlight the change between young and mature Rawls, my interpretation chooses Rawls's final understanding in political liberalism as the representation, but there is a brief history of mature Rawls's theory of justice to reveal the historical development of Rawls's thought. Mature Rawls's philosophical understanding of moral reason is mainly interpreted from its validity, meaning and chief intellectual sources. The fourth chapter discusses Rawls's early exploration on religious and philosophical ethics, and the influence from logical positivism and later Wittgenstein. It also contains an investigation of Rawls's words regarding religion in his writings of social justice,

lectures on moral and political philosophy, a short paper about his religious belief and Pogge's interview on him. At last, this dissertation concludes that mature Rawls's understanding of moral reason is an idea of "bound rationality." It is a double-part conception: the first part is a philosophical one in which our moral reason is described as the powers to be rational and to be reasonable with the priority of the latter; the second part is a religious one which reveals the supernatural origin of our natural moral reason and its autonomy.

In the final chapter, following a summary on the relationship between young and mature Rawls's understandings explained as a reconstruction with development, the new light is described by a question: Is the assumption of Rawlsian moral reason religiously independent? If my understanding is right, historically speaking, the answer is no. Inspired by the case of Rawls, my reflection raises three basic questions of a religious theory of justice: What is the concept of God? What is the role of God in moral and political reason? What is a religious conception of social justice?

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