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 economic theory. In this article I argue that what held together Rawls’s evolving interest in postwar political economy and his commitment to philosophy as reconciliation was his understanding of the need for secular theodicy. In placing Rawls in the intellectual context of a postwar political economy of growth 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. Second, I suggest that Rawls’s theodicy was initially rendered plausible by the economic background conditions of economic growth that were fractured and fragmented just as Rawls’s book was published in 1971. This divergence between text and context helps to account for Rawls’s peculiar reception and his own subsequent attempt to insist on the applicability of his theory under radically altered circumstances.

[W]e must try to postpone the day of reckoning as long as possible, and try to arrange society so that it never comes.


I. Introduction

“Let us imagine for a moment,” the author invited his readers, “the future generation assembled in an ideal world, and ignorant before they inhabit the earth, who those individuals are that shall be born to parents loaded with the gifts of fortune, and who those are that will be 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 the author of this thought experiment was not John Rawls but instead Jacques Necker, the Calvinist Genevan banker and eighteenth-century French...
minister of finance. Necker wrote these words in 1788 in a treatise that combined religion, moral philosophy, and political economy. Mary Wollstonecraft translated the book the same year into English.

I open with this original original position because it illustrates the three interrelated claims of philosophy and political economy that I will develop in this article. First, while recent histories of Rawls’s intellectual formation have helped us to better understand his engagement with problems in mid-twentieth-century philosophy, they have at the same time highlighted the ways in which Rawls was working from within a number of long-standing traditions. More specifically, as I stress throughout this article, many of the traditions that most shaped Rawls’s philosophical outlook can be dated back to the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Second, I read Rawls’s engagement with late eighteenth-century thought through the lens of debates concerning the nature and scope of secular theodicies. In this sense, I read Rawls’s overarching philosophical project of reconciliation as a form of theodicy. Third, Rawls’s secular theodicy of reconciliation, like the secular theodicies of the late eighteenth century, relied for its plausibility on the promises of political economy.

Reading Rawls as seeking to offer a secular theodicy reveals both the scope of his philosophical ambition and the blind spots of his endeavor. Rawls’s philosophical work was born out of a desire to reconcile oneself to the existence of injustice in the present while pointing to the possibility of a better future. The plausibility of such a secular theodicy was, however, uncomfortably dependent on a number of historical preconditions—not least the growth-based political economy of the postwar years—that entered crisis just as Rawls’s theory ascended.

1 Jacques Necker, De l’importance des opinions religieuses (Paris, 1788), 49, my translation. I first encountered the passage thanks to Michael Sonenscher’s brilliant excavations of eighteenth-century political thought. See his Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution (Princeton, 2007), 302–3. Necker had been appointed directeur général des finances in 1777. Due to his Protestant faith, he could not be formally named contrôleur général des finances, the more senior title. De l’importance des opinions religieuses was the first fruit of his forced retirement in 1781 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 his 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.


3 Katrina Forrester, In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy (Princeton, 2019); Andrius Gališanka, John Rawls: The Path to a Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA, 2019). As Teresa Bejan shows in her contribution to this issue, these traditions included not least the tradition of political philosophy itself.

4 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. Secular theodicy is in this sense the attempt to reconcile one’s own existence with the existence of injustice in the world. I expand on this in Sections IV and VI below.


6 Where Ben Jackson and Zofia Stemplowska recover in their contribution to this issue Rawls’s engagement with postwar welfare economics and game theory, I emphasize Rawls’s indebtedness to postwar growth economics—as well as his problematic subsequent attempt to distance himself from it.
The relation between philosophy, theodicy, and political economy is by now a widely recognized one in modern political thought. From the theological origins of the market order in Jansenist thought to the natural theodicy of Physiocratic doctrine, in the eighteenth century the emerging science of political economy began to offer a new kind of secular theodicy that promised to explain why bad things happen to good people and why what might seem evil fulfils in truth a benign purpose.\(^7\) It is through his indebtedness to this entanglement of philosophy, theodicy, and political economy that Rawls can appear as another refugee from the eighteenth century, as Judith Shklar once described herself.\(^8\) More skeptically, 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.\(^9\) But Rawls’s position, I want to suggest, reflects not so much a lack of interest in the relation between history and philosophy as rather its peculiar invocation in the form of a secular theodicy.\(^10\)

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. 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 secular theodicies. In connecting the quest of theodicy to the language of political economy, I argue 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 theodicy was in this sense rendered plausible (at least initially) by an expectation of continuous material improvement. The crisis of that tacit background condition since the 1970s—through both economic and environmental crisis—altered the fundamental frame of liberal politics. As a result, the dissemination of Rawls’s theory coincided


\(^9\)Allan Bloom, for example, voiced this frustration shortly after *A Theory of Justice* was published: “Simply, historicism, whether that of Marx or that of Nietzsche and the existentialists, has made it questionable whether an undertaking such as Rawls’s is possible at all; yet he does not address himself to these thinkers. He takes it for granted that they are wrong, that they must pass before his tribunal, not he before theirs.” Allan Bloom, “Justice: John Rawls vs. the Tradition of Political Philosophy,” *American Political Science Review* 69/2 (1975), 648–62, at 648.

\(^10\)For a sustained examination of the way in which Rawls’s normativity depended on history even where it eschewed it see Richard Bourke, “History and Normativity in Political Theory,” in Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner, eds., *History in the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Cambridge, forthcoming).
with the disappearance of the postwar promise of widespread affluence reshaping public mores.

II. 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.”

His theory, Rawls claimed, captured the ideal of justice not only from all social points of view but also “from all temporal points of view.” His was a “perspective of eternity” that transcended its own historical conditions of possibility. Despite *A Theory of Justice*’s relative paucity of footnotes to contemporaries, Rawls’s intellectual formation has recently become the subject of intense scrutiny. Intellectual historians have productively turned to Rawls’s archive and correspondence to recover the different strands of mid-century moral philosophy, Protestant theology, and postwar economics that Rawls combined and reworked for his purpose. This has in particular involved placing due emphasis on the importance of the 1950s as a formative decade during which Rawls forged the main outlines of his theory.

As Katrina Forrester has shown, in the course of the decade Rawls shifted away from an early antistatist pluralism toward an engagement with Wittgenstein and contemporary accounts of conventionalism. It was in particular a research stay in Oxford in 1952–3 that provided an important further impetus. In the process, Forrester explains, Rawls found “inspiration in British debates about equality and social justice on the right wing of the Labour Party and also in American discourses of poverty.” if we pause to ask what drove these debates at the time about social justice in the British Labour Party and what formed the backdrop to American postwar discourses of poverty, any answer turns on the dazzling experience of unprecedented economic growth that fueled an optimistic revisionism.

The 1950s were by any account years of extraordinary economic expansion. The result was, in Eric Hobsbawm’s words, “the most dramatic, rapid, and profound revolution in human affairs of which history has record.” The spectacular experience of growing affluence rapidly shifted the horizon of expectations as

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12 Ibid., 587; 514.


16 Ibid., xii.


observers came to agree that the economic problem of scarcity was soon to be solved.\textsuperscript{20} John Kenneth Galbraith captured this mood well in his best seller \textit{The Affluent Society} (1958), in which 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.\textsuperscript{21}

As I want to suggest in this article, Rawls’s eventual “perspective of eternity” was always more indebted to the specific political economy of the postwar decades than he himself acknowledged or perhaps even realized. Rawls’s philosophical framing relied 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 his account of stability in Part III of \textit{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.\textsuperscript{22} Rawls explicitly obscured this historical reliance and instead couched his theory in a form of institutional agnosticism.\textsuperscript{23} But the two decades during which Rawls wrote \textit{A Theory of Justice} were singularly exceptional.\textsuperscript{24}

The timing of the eventual publication of Rawls’s \textit{A Theory of Justice} in 1971 further distorts our view in this regard. At the very moment the book finally appeared, it was already out of sync with the times. In 1971, the US trade account turned negative for the first time in the twentieth century. The pressures and tensions inherent in the Bretton Woods system were rapidly mounting.\textsuperscript{25} On 15 August 1971, just as Rawls put the finishing touches to the preface to \textit{A Theory of Justice}, President Richard Nixon announced the suspension of the dollar’s convertibility into gold that had been at the heart of the Bretton Woods monetary


\textsuperscript{22}Rawls, \textit{A Theory of Justice}, 144, 530–40; 124, 464–73.

\textsuperscript{23}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, \textit{Justification and Critique: Towards a Critical Theory of Politics}, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge, 2014), 27 n. 33; and Jeremy Waldron, \textit{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 map onto more concrete institutional proposals. See John Rawls, \textit{Justice as Fairness: A Restatement} (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 136–8.


Having been in the works for nearly twenty years, the publication of Rawls’s book coincided precisely with the collapse of the certainties of the postwar economic order. In a constellation that would not have failed to amuse Hegel, the moment in which thought captured reality coincided with that reality vanishing.

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 *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 Rawls’s philosophical ambition appears to have always been to reveal the rational in the actual, to put it in Hegelian terms, and to offer a model of political philosophy as reconciliation, as he put it in his lecture notes. As Rawls reflected in a handwritten note from 1964 entitled “Is Political Philosophy Dead?”, the task of political philosophy was no longer merely to articulate conceptions of liberty and equality. The moral problems of the age had changed and what mattered now was “the giving of meaning to social life in [a] community which is affluent and secular.”

Given the timing of its publication, this Hegelian rationale almost immediately evaporated. Within a year, Rawls’s project had lost its historical timeliness as the postwar welfarism that he could take for granted while writing his book moved into existential crisis. As Samuel Moyn has recently put it, *A Theory of Justice* can appear from this perspective, despite all its philosophical innovations, as “the swansong of national welfare in the United States.” This assessment must be qualified both by Forrester’s recovery of the young Rawls’s initial unease about the administrative welfare state, and by her observation of the ways in which the Rawlsian welfarist ideal ended up outliving its actually existing counterpart as a “spectral presence.” While Moyn accurately captures the pivotal significance of the 1970s, it was in particular the experience of stagflation—and the ill-fated political conclusions of deregulation and financialization derived from it—that eliminated any residual

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28 This claim has been defended most fully in Jeffrey Bercuson, *John Rawls and the History of Political Thought: The Rousseauvian and Hegelian Heritage of Justice as Fairness* (New York, 2014), 3, 25, 30–61. By the end of the 1950s, Forrester summarizes Rawls’s intellectual development, “he used Wittgenstein to explain that morality was social, defined by its use—there in the world to be discovered, not chosen. Having a morality was like having a sense of humor. It was part of what it meant to be human, part of a ‘form of life’.” The phrase was Wittgenstein’s, but Rawls recognized that it was a ‘Hegelian notion’.” Forrester, *Shadow of Justice*, 9. Citing from John Rawls, “Topic VII: Concept of a Morality,” Folder 1, Box 35, John Rawls Papers (HUM 48), Harvard University Archives (henceforth Rawls Papers), 1.


30 Ibid.

31 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.


optimism about the politically transformative potential of growing affluence. Stagnation and inflation, as Daniel Bell observed at the time, now laid bare the brutal distributional struggles that had previously been disguised by the proverbial pie growing without limits. 34 Welfarist redistribution, about which Rawls had long been ambivalent, had hinged on postwar growthmanship.

With dispersed economic growth moving into crisis, Rawls’s theory appeared in an altogether different light already to its first generation of readers. Indeed, Rawls himself was surprised by the way the book was received.35 (In her contribution to this forum Sophie Smith unfolds the complex reception history of A Theory of Justice with more nuance than I can do justice here.) 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 premises Rawls had taken for granted while writing the book, his distributive theory—whose formulation in terms of game theory attracted the attention of economists and decision theorists—now appeared at once politically cutting and radically ambitious. Soon the book was praised as a daring exercise in Kantian idealism that set out a neo-Kantian “regulative ideal.” What had started out as a postwar attempt to locate the rational in the actual came to be seen as an articulation of the actual in the rational. While this reception of Rawls’s project as a straightforwardly Kantian endeavour was one of the side effects of text and context unexpectedly diverging in the course of the 1970s, Rawls himself characteristically inhabited the resulting ambiguity between Kant and Hegel with self-conscious ambivalence.

III. The task of philosophy

Appreciating this ambivalence requires us to take stock of Rawls’s understanding of the task of political philosophy. Most fundamentally, Rawls’s self-declared purpose was never to provide a metaphysical grounding of justice. Instead, he saw philosophy as endowed with a reconciliatory ambition. Political philosophy could provide a legitimating account of the rational principles that could be detected in the development of liberal democracy. This conception of philosophy as reconciliation reflected an intellectual debt to Hegel, not least in the form of the conviction that “we always have to begin from where we are,” as Rawls put it in 1959.36

Such a situated framing is most explicit in *Political Liberalism* (1993), but the influence of Hegel’s conception of philosophy is present in Rawls’s work at least since the 1950s. As Rawls reflected in the same lecture in 1959,

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 conservationism 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.38

As the language of actuality already indicated, in the margins Rawls credited Hegel. Pointing toward the obligation of narrowing the gap between actual and just institutions required in turn an assessment of one’s starting point, both as a society and as an individual, and Rawls repeatedly returned to Hegel for this insight. In his John Dewey Lectures, given in April 1980 at Columbia University, Rawls similarly aligned himself 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.”39 Despite many obvious differences, Rawls explained, justice as fairness converged with Dewey’s moral theory in certain shared Hegelian roots.40 In *Justice as Fairness* (2001), Rawls made the Hegelian debt most explicit when presenting reconciliation as one of the four roles of political philosophy and linking it explicitly to Hegel.41 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.”42 The goal of political philosophy was to affirm our social world positively by replacing resignation with reconciliation.

Recovering this Hegelian dimension of Rawls's conception of political philosophy as reconciliation should not lead us to dismiss the complex Kantian quality of his position. As Paul Weithman has shown, the basic understanding of the task of philosophy as providing rational foundations to the actual can also be expressed in Kantian terms of “reasonable faith.”43 Instead of playing Kant against Hegel, what a close reading of Rawls’s ambition indicates is a thoroughgoing analogy to German idealism’s grappling with the relation between philosophy and

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37 Jeffrey Bercuson has most extensively stressed the Hegelian debt of Rawls’s position. See Bercuson, *Rawls and the History of Political Thought*, 25.
40 Ibid., 516; 304.
42 Ibid.
Indeed, as many others have noticed, the perhaps single most striking feature of Rawls’s Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy is his sympathetic proximity to a peculiarly Kantian reading of Rousseau as having provided a secular theodicy. 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 he 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.

According to his own self-narration, Rawls abandoned his Christian faith after 1945 as a result of his war experience in the Pacific and turned to philosophy instead. This loss of faith in the existence of God, however, did not translate into a loss of the “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 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

44Drawing on Éric Weil, Müller has described Rawls’s stance as that of a “post-Hegelian Kantian.” Müller, “Rawls, Historian,” 339.
48Ibid.
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.”

In their correspondence Weithman pressed Rawls on the passage’s reference to theodicy. But instead of an explanation or a more explicit engagement, Rawls simply dropped the allusion to theodicy 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.” Rawls had employed almost the same wording in the introduction to the paperback edition of Political Liberalism from December 1995. 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 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. As Weithman has consequently insisted, despite Rawls’s self-translation, the theory of justice is in this sense “a brilliant and subtle exercise in naturalistic theodicy.”

IV. Theodicy as reconciliation

Rawls’s invocation of Kant at the end of The Law of Peoples is even more intriguing than Weithman lets on. By couching the problem of theodicy instead in the language of “reasonable faith,” Rawls 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. Meant as a vindication of God’s ways or, more literally, “the justice of God” (theos + dikē), it constituted a...

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53 Rawls, Political Liberalism, lii.
theological response to early modern skeptical rationalism.\(^{57}\) 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.\(^{58}\) These essays were widely read in the eighteenth century, inspiring not least Voltaire’s biting satire in *Candide* (1759).\(^{59}\)

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.\(^{60}\) 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.\(^{61}\) By the 1790s, however, Kant had come to question not the need for theodicies but his own prior attempts. 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.\(^{62}\) To replace them, Kant relied on his account of “reasonable faith” (*Vernunftglaube*, sometimes also translated as “rational faith”) that he had first sketched in the *Second Critique* (1788).\(^{63}\) The concept became a central pivot of Kant’s thought in the course of the 1790s and it was meant to provide a philosophically more satisfying answer to the same underlying concern as theodicies.\(^{64}\)

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


\(^{59}\) Voltaire, *Candide, ou l’Optimisme* (Geneva, 1759).


engagement with Kant’s essay on theodicy he worked in detail through the respective passages in both the Rechtslehre and the Second Critique.65 In the course of the 1980s, both in his Harvard lectures on the history of moral philosophy and in a series of articles, Rawls came to align his own philosophical project with a reading of this Kantian idea of “philosophy as apologia.”66 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.”67 This was the position Rawls defended more fully in Political Liberalism.68 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? Recent readers of Kant have come to question whether Kant in fact meant to delineate the two as sharply as he is often taken to have done. Far from rejecting all theodicies, Kant have come to question whether Kant in fact meant to delineate the two as

cooperation is meant to submit its members to an analogous exercise of profound

Jean-Jacques Rousseau,

Elliptical Path

Rawls himself noted in his lectures, Kant after all continued to read Rousseau account of

amour-propre

Rawls

Leibniz–Kant

Idealism: Freedom, Dependence and Necessity (Cambridge, 2013), 52

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of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244320000475


65 Box 59, Rawls Papers. Some of the other note cards in the box contain notes on Hegel and Weber.
68 Rawls, Political Liberalism, 101, 172.
72 Weithman, Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith, 213.
73 Already during his early theological days Rawls had held an interpretation of faith as being sustained by the character of members of community, not (merely) fear of punishment or submission to authority. Rawls, A Brief Inquiry, 127.
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.74

V. Political economy and the theodicy of growth

We can now relate this account of Rawls’s understanding of the purpose of political philosophy back to the economic question. 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.75 So did Rawls in his own way. Having pointed to his conception of the task of philosophy as providing a secular form of theodicy, I now want to place this back in the context of postwar 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 theodicy. In the case of Physiocracy this link was most explicit, not least in its origins in Jansenism and its providential theology.76 The market was quite explicitly, in this view, a new form of theodicy for commercial society. Physiocracy was, as Michael Sonenscher has observed, “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.”77 Such theodicies did not have to be tied to God—as they were for the Jansenists and most Physiocrats—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 art of a science of society that would bring “the perfection of laws and public institutions,” which in turn would spell “the reconciliation [rapprocher], the identification of the interests of each with the interests of all.”78 In basing his account of civil society on the tenets of Scottish political economy, Hegel similarly sought to find a reconciliation of seemingly divergent interests that otherwise threatened the stability of the postrevolutionary state.79 Despite many differences, Rawls worked within this

74Even Samuel Freeman—who insists on the thoroughly secular character of Rawls’s thought—has emphasized Rawls’s disappointment with traditional theodicy as one of the central inspirations for his search for a secular alternative. Freeman, Rawls, 8–28.

75For an account of the postrevolutionary need for political economy see Geoff Mann, In the Long Run We Are All Dead (New York, 2017), 191–201, 379.


79G. W. F. Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge, 1991), §189. See also Mann, In the Long Run We Are All Dead, 191. As Hegel realized, this approach produced its own aporia in the form of a new kind of poverty. Frank Ruda, Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (London, 2011).
existing tradition of reconciling divergent interests through the conceptual tools of political economy.

This link between theodicy and the social sciences—and especially the new social science of political economy—can help 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. 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 decision procedure for agreement among “reasonable men,” his strategy gradually 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 as Ben Jackson and Zofia Stemplowska further elaborate in their contribution to this issue, it also flowed from an engagement with the thought of Frank Knight.

In reading Knight’s essays from the 1920s and 1930s, Rawls encountered not only a creative use of game analogies and a radical defense of ideal theory, but also Knight’s own complex and conflicted relation to religion. According to Knight, his foremost interpreter observes, “in a world where there is no God, scarcity replaces moral evil as the central problem of theodicy.” As several commentators have noticed, Rawls shared a number of philosophical interests and commitments with Knight, not least a secularized reworking of an Augustinian account of desert. Rawls’s conclusion nonetheless radically diverged from Knight’s. Writing during the postwar decades—rather than the interwar years—what could tacitly ease and stabilize Rawls’s search for agreement in an idealized coordination game was the seeming miracle of unprecedented economic growth.

Growth opened up a new temporized sense of improvement that embodied the last refuge of progress as a distinctly modern temporal category. In Reinhart Koselleck’s terms, with the rise of modern historical time, past, present, and future

82Jackson and Stemplowska, this issue. See also Andrew Lister, “Markets, Desert, and Reciprocity,” Politics, Philosophy and Economics 16/1 (2017), 47–69; Forrester, Shadow of Justice, 12–13, 292.
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 in this category. Indeed, our ongoing preoccupation with economic growth is arguably the last remnant of an eighteenth-century faith in progress. The quest for economic growth—no matter how elusive—remains in this sense the last master theodicy of modern politics. During the postwar decades an expectation of seemingly perpetual growth altered political temporalities and shaped what Robert Collins has dubbed “growth liberalism.” As Rawls himself put it in 1967, “it is generally accepted that the ends of economic policy are competitive efficiency, full employment, an appropriate rate of growth, a decent social minimum, and a more equal distribution of income.” The pursuit of growth had become an essential part of prudent policy making. But growth was more than that. It had to come to acquire an almost theological societal significance. As Daniel Bell put it in The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, “economic growth has become the secular religion of advancing industrial societies.” Growth, according to Bell, had come to act in functional analogy to the roles once fulfilled by religion: it formed the basis of political solidarity, individual motivation, and the mobilization of society for a common purpose, while promising the prospect of a better world once the problem of immediate scarcity had been solved.

This prospect of transformative growth toward widely shared affluence provided Rawls in A Theory of Justice with the historical background that could be taken for granted to stabilize his sketch of the just society. As such, the background assumption of ongoing economic growth tacitly structured Rawls’s framing of the search for agreement in the original position, stabilized the just society, and rendered his conclusions broadly plausible to a contemporary American audience. In particular, what Rawls presented as facts of moral psychology were often extrapolations based on the experience of the postwar boom. Consider, for example, the problem of envy, which Rawls both assumed away in the original position and returned to later in the book in his discussion of the stability of a just society. It was one thing

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87Pratap Bhanu Mehta has rightly stressed this point in his analyses of both eighteenth-century political economy and contemporary Indian politics. The underlying relationship between secular temporality and theology is, of course, fiercely contested. One does not have to go as far as to argue that modern historical consciousness is tout court derived from Christianity (as Karl Löwith arguably did) to appreciate the ways in which certain aspects of the eighteenth century’s novel temporal structure were marked by a secularized theological logic. Reinhart Koselleck, Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society (Cambridge, 1988), 109; Karl Löwith, Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History (Chicago, 1949).

Koselleck, Critique and Crisis, 109.


91For a more detailed analysis of the problem of envy see Jeffrey Edward Green, “Rawls and the Forgotten Figure of the Most Advantaged: In Defense of Reasonable Envy toward the Superrich,”
to make “the special assumption” that the individuals in the original position did not suffer from envy. This was, after all, an ideal construction. But, more puzzlingly, Rawls also turned to the problem of envy in his account of stability in Part III of A Theory of Justice. The question, he explained, was whether the “inequalities sanctioned by the difference principle may be so great as to arouse envy to a socially dangerous extent.” Envy was not a moral feeling but a “vice.” But there was nonetheless an excusable form of envy that was psychologically rooted in a lack of self-esteem and self-respect: a “lack of self-confidence in our own worth combined with a sense of impotence.” Could a just society generate inequalities that were large enough to evoke such a loss of self-respect? Rawls concluded in the negative. Not only would the difference principle limit the kinds of inequality that were permitted, but also a well-ordered society revolved around the cultivation of self-esteem in other fora while offering constructive alternatives to envy. Finally, in a well-ordered society, abstract inequality would be largely invisible as citizens would compare themselves to those similar to them. A plurality of small associations, for example, would tend “to reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility, of variations in men’s prospect.” The successful emergence of the conception of justice as fairness would thus eliminate the conditions that could give rise to disruptive attitudes, such as envy, thereby rendering the resulting social order inherently stable.

One can, of course, question the plausibility of various aspects of this argument, but what has, I believe, been insufficiently appreciated in existing readings of the passage is the way in which the presumed disappearance of envy resonated with contemporary accounts concerning the predicted social and psychological effects of growing affluence. By the late 1950s continuous economic growth was widely expected to transform our moral psychology away from envious competitiveness. As John Kenneth Galbraith explained in his influential reflection on The Affluent Society (1958), Emulation or, when this is frustrated, envy has long played a large role in the common view of human motivation … However, these disenchanting traits are less cosmic than has commonly been supposed. Envy almost certainly operates efficiently only as regards near neighbors. It is not directed toward the distant rich. If the individual’s own real income is rising, the fact that unknown New Yorkers, Texans or West Coast computer entrepreneurs are exceedingly wealthy is not, probably, a matter of prime urgency … The individual whose own income is going up has no real reason to incur the opprobrium of this discussion.

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93Ibid., A Theory of Justice, 530–41; 464–74.

94Ibid., 531; 466.

95Ibid., 534; 468.

96Ibid., 535; 469.

97Ibid., 533–4; 467–8.

98Ibid., 536; 470.

If the growth of incomes removed one immediate spring of envy, the benefits of extreme wealth had at the same time been clipped from above. In the course of the twentieth century, Galbraith argued, wealth had ceased to translate in an unencumbered way into power, esteem, or even physical possession. “All of these returns to wealth have been greatly circumscribed in the last seventy-five years and in a manner which also vastly reduces the envy or resentment of the well-to-do or even the knowledge of their existence.”

To be sure, extreme inequities in wealth persisted, but these no longer offered access to power and distinction as they had done in an earlier age. Now the rich were merely rich. Those Americans who were growing richer every year and moreover now no longer worked directly for the rich would experience a gradual subsiding of envy. Galbraith was far from alone in sharing this analysis about the transformative effect of affluence. As Jürgen Habermas put it in the concluding pages of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), the expansion of social wealth in industrially advanced societies on the back of high and ever higher levels of production meant that it was no longer “unrealistic to assume that the continuing and increasing plurality of interests may lose the antagonistic edge of competing needs to the extent that the possibility of mutual satisfaction comes within reach.”

In the coming affluent society the old distributive struggles, based on scarcity and envy, would give way to a new general interest.

Growing affluence and a widespread expectation of steadily rising incomes were thus the background conditions as Rawls wrote A Theory of Justice during the 1950s and 1960s. 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 economic growth reconciled the pull of these two principles that otherwise risked diverging. Citing a range of growth and welfare economists from Robert Solow to James Tobin, 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:

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Ibid., 72.

While Galbraith insisted that all this pointed to the gradual subsiding of envy, he conceded that wants and emulation were now increasingly cultivated by producers and advertising themselves. Instead of production fulfilling consumers’ wants, this meant that production “only fills a void that it has itself created.” Ibid., 124–5. Emulation was no longer fed by preexisting envy but instead stirred by the new forces of advertising. Ibid., 194.

Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989; first published 1962), 234.


My thanks to Stephen Marglin for discussion of this point.

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 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.¹⁰⁶

As many commentators have noted, Rawls’s account of intergenerational justice was uncharacteristically vague, at times seemingly intentionally ambiguous.¹⁰⁷ The parenthetical addition of “possibly zero” seemed to suggest, for example, that Rawls sought to allow for the theoretical possibility of no growth. This is how the note is conventionally read today. But it would be misleading to read into the parenthesis a serious consideration of stagnation, let alone to detect a continuity with Rawls’s later embrace of Mill’s stationary state.

Note, to begin with, that Rawls’s language of a “steady state of growth” was that of Solovian postwar growth economics. Here the “stationary state” of classical political economy, which Rawls would only discover a decade later, had been replaced by a “steady state” that no longer referred to stagnation but precisely its inverse: an economy with exponentially rising incomes.¹⁰⁸ For a country to find itself in a Solovian “steady state” meant that it was on a self-sustaining growth path. As Solow put it in a series of lectures that Rawls cited in *A Theory of Justice*,

An economy growing according to the first three (or perhaps four) of these rules [real output per capita and the capital stock both growing at a constant rate] is said nowadays to be in a “steady state.” Its output, employment, and capital stock grow exponentially, and its capital/output ratio is constant ... Most of the modern theory of economic growth is devoted to analyzing the properties of steady states and to finding out whether an economy not initially in a steady state will evolve into one if it proceeds under specified rules of the game.¹⁰⁹

Rawls was intimately familiar with these arguments. He had been Solow’s colleague at MIT briefly in the early 1960s during the heyday of “growthmanship” and he maintained a correspondence with him.¹¹⁰ Rawls’s understanding of time and

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¹⁰⁸ What remained “steady” in these growth models was thus the rate of growth and the capital–output ratio.


the future, Forrester summarizes, “reflected those of the growth theorists.”111 This did not mean that Rawls was committed to limitless perpetual growth. Rather, reaching the status of a well-ordered affluent society itself required growth. As he explained in his discussion of saving rates:

Presumably this rate changes depending upon the state of society. When people are poor and saving is difficult, a lower rate of saving should be required; whereas in a wealthier society greater savings may reasonably be expected since the real burden is less. Eventually once just institutions are firmly established, the net accumulation required falls to zero. At this point a society meets its duty of justice by maintaining just institutions and preserving their material base.112

We can infer from that passage that while Rawls thought that a just society, once realized, might no longer require additional growth, the transition toward such a society would by the same logic precisely require growth to allow for just institutions to be firmly established and accepted.113 A well-ordered society was, after all, a society that had reached a certain developmental “state of society” and now qualified as wealthy. Both Rawls’s insistence concerning the disappearance of envy in a just society and—more broadly—the very plausibility of his theory were in this sense more reliant on the presumption of further growth than he admitted or perhaps even realized at the time.114 While the difference principle might not require growth in the sense of dictating perpetual accumulation, the realistic adoption of the difference principle depended on the assumption of growth because growth was expected to ease the burden of transition.

VI. The crisis of the 1970S and the stationary state
What had been a mere parenthetical speculation about the end of growth in a future just society soon became reality in an altogether different way in the course of the 1970s. By 1973, the postwar growth engine had come to an abrupt halt and the US economy settled into the worst recession since the 1930s. Unemployment, virtually unheard of for two decades, was back. Inflation, meanwhile, reached levels not witnessed during peacetime since the interwar years. At the same time, a new set of environmental concerns and anxieties over resource constraints appeared on the scene and pointed to the ecological limits to growth. As William Nordhaus and James Tobin reminisced in 1972, “a long decade ago economic growth was the
reigning fashion of political economy … The climate of opinion has changed dra-
matically.”115 Growth had not only rapidly vanished; it had also become at once
spurious and dubious. How did Rawls respond?

Where growth would have previously tacitly eased the path toward a just society,
Rawls now fully discarded the question of transition. In the course of the 1970s, he
instead became increasingly interested in John Stuart Mill’s discussion of a “station-
ary state” in Book IV of The Principles of Political Economy.116 As Rawls explained
in “Remarks on Mill’s Social Theory” (dated to c.1980 and written for his lecture
class on political philosophy), Mill’s reinterpretation of the Ricardian stationary
state “greatly alters its political and social implications: he 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 cap-
nitalist society as one of perpetual growth of capital and wealth.”117

Rawls had found a way to turn the waning of economic growth in the stagna-
tionary crisis of the 1970s into a hopeful nod to Mill’s utopian stationary state.
As we saw above, in A Theory of Justice Rawls had wondered what the limits of
the just rate of savings were and how precisely growth was to be shared between
generations as society grew wealthier. Precisely because growth was expected to fур-
nish the level of affluence that would then underwrite the stability of the well-
ordered just society, this society might at some point in the future no longer require
to grow.

Instead Rawls now fully sidestepped the transitional necessity of growth and
simply pointed out (not wrongly, of course) that a just society did not need to
grow. As he insisted in Political Liberalism (1993), the relation of the principles
of justice to economic growth was entirely agnostic. While Rawls had previously
argued that a society that had successfully implemented the principles of justice
no longer needed to grow, he now simply stated that a just society did not require
growth. The question of growth was unrelated to the principles of justice. As he
emphasized in a footnote in the opening section, “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.”118 Referring
to his own highly condensed note, Rawls admitted, “These brief remarks are hardly
clear.”119 But such “complexities” were simply “not our concern in these lec-
tures.”120 In the rest of the book he never returned to the question of growth.
Transformative economic growth, the one empirical force that had previously ren-
dered the transition to a just society at least superficially plausible, had been excised
from the picture. While Rawls now stressed more explicitly the ways in which his
just society would differ from contemporary capitalism, this only further raised the

115William Nordhaus and James Tobin, “Is Growth Obsolete?”, in Nordhaus and Tobin, Economic
116John Stuart Mill, Principles of Political Economy (London, 1848), Bk IV, Ch. 6.
117John Rawls, Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy, 316, original emphasis. See also Forrester,
Shadow of Justice, 202.
118Rawls, Political Liberalism, 7 n. 5.
119Ibid.
120Ibid.
question of how one could possibly move from capitalism toward a just stationary-state society.

The attraction of a Millian stationary state at the same time continued to grow on Rawls. By the mid-1990s, he regarded Mill’s idea of a zero-growth world as not only compatible with his own normative ideal but converging with it. As he explained in The Law of Peoples (1999), the point of his theory was “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 as his inspiration, adding, “The 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 class of a capitalist society.” 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.” What are we to make of Rawls’s insistence of having liberated his theory from the clutches of growth?

A comparison to John Maynard Keynes is illustrative here. During the interwar years, Keynes similarly drew on Mill to sketch a future stationary state when the problem of scarcity could be considered solved. But unlike Rawls, Keynes left no doubt that precisely because a future state of plenty was so attractive, growth was all the more urgently required in the short run. Moreover, Keynes argued, the future world that had weaned itself off the treadmill of growth once prosperity was reached would fundamentally differ from the current world that still needed growth. Both society’s moral outlook and the moral psychology of its members would differ dramatically between the two. “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.”

Rawls, by contrast, came to argue that his distributive principle applied under conditions of both scarcity and superfluity: his rules of justice would be ideal both under conditions of high growth and in a steady-state economy without growth. But what this claim intentionally sidestepped was the way in which Rawls’s discussion of stability and moral psychology in Part III of A Theory of Justice had originally been rendered plausible precisely by the expectation of growth as paving the way toward a just society. If growth was no longer possible, or even desirable in light of its ecological impact, this should have far-reaching consequences both for Rawls’s account of stability and for the feasibility of his principles. Instead of

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122 Ibid., 107 n. 33.
123 Rawls, Justice as Fairness, 63; the point was repeated almost verbatim at 159 and listed in the book’s index as “Difference principle: does not require continual economic growth.”
125 Ibid., 372.
126 We can detect some of these consequences in the radically reworked account of stability in Political Liberalism, where Rawls made his reconciliatory ambition for political philosophy more explicit.
grappling with the now glaring problem of transition, Rawls recast the purpose of his project in *The Law of Peoples* (1999) as offering a “realistic utopia.” As he explained in his lectures on the history of political philosophy, the idea of a “realistic utopia” was meant to capture “reasonably favorable but still possible historical conditions.” Yet “realistic” and “possible” were here understood in an extremely thin sense. They emphatically did not require plausibility or feasibility based on a particular path of transition or historical judgment. Instead what counted was that “it could and may exist.” Rawls extended the same yardstick to the Millian stationary state. “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.” A “realistic utopia” did not have to spell out a plausible path of transition. Instead, what rendered a stationary state of affluence and justice “realistic” was merely that it was not in principle impossible.

**VII. The thirst for theodicy**

Rawls’s preoccupation with how to reconcile himself to the existence of injustice is, of course, far from unique in the history of modern political and moral philosophy. Indeed, as Susan Neiman has shown, much of that history can be read as a series of attempts to provide responses to the problem of evil. As Hegel put it programmatically in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, modern philosophy is in this sense “the true theodicy” (*wahrhafte Theodizee*). Apart from his erased reference in *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls consciously refrained from employing the notion of theodicy in his written work to characterize his philosophical enterprise. Instead, he chose a Kantian language of rational faith as well as Hegel’s notion of philosophy as reconciliation. Yet, as I have argued in this article, reading Rawls’s ambition of reconciliatory rational faith as a form of secular theodicy nonetheless helps to make legible certain aspects of Rawls’s position and reassess its relation to its own historical conditions of possibility.

To speak in this context of a “secular theodicy,” as I have done in this article, might appear as an oxymoron or, more subversively, as an attempt to unmask

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the tacit influence of theology on Rawls. But to appreciate what I mean by secular theodicy and why we might want to consider Rawls’s ambition of philosophical reconciliation as an attempt at secular theodicy it is helpful to consider Max Weber’s broad understanding of theodicies. As Weber observed in his sociology of religion, theodicies are not only the central feature of religious faiths but also the hallmark of all modern political societies.133 Theodicies, Weber explained, are systems of meaning for dealing with individual and collective suffering. Every functioning society required in this sense an “ethical interpretation of the ‘meaning’ of the distribution of fortunes among men” that could account for the particular patterns of power and plenty in that society.134 The “rational need for a theodicy of suffering” was thus not restricted to evil in the religious sense, but only increased with the growing rationality of conceptions of the world—even where such attempts at theodicy encountered increasing difficulties.135 Far from leaving the theodicies behind, the secular age thus produced an “ineradicable demand for a theodicy.”136

To employ the notion of a secular theodicy, then, does not have to imply a tacit continuation of theology into modernity (nor, relatedly, to attempt to reveal some kind of tacitly persistent religious commitment on Rawls’s part). Instead, as Hans Blumenberg observed, most modern theodicies have paradoxically very little, if anything, to do with theology.137 While Blumenberg saw in modern philosophy the imprint of theodicy, he distanced himself from attempts to reduce theodicies to a theological commitment.138 Far from modern theodicies being justifications of God, they are more accurately seen as disillusioned acceptances of the world.139 In his own idiosyncratic way, Blumenberg thereby sought to distance theodicy from existing secularization narratives that variously stressed the theological


138Blumenberg directed this critique primarily at Odo Marquard, who had not only detected in German idealism’s emphasis on the autonomy of the subject a kind of “theodicy in disguise,” but also arrived at the sweeping conclusion that “[w]here theodicy is, modernity is; where modernity is, theodicy is.” Odo Marquard, “Entlastungen: Theodizeemotive in der neuzeitlichen Philosophie,” in Marquard, Apologie des Zufälligen (Stuttgart, 1986), 11–29, at 14. As cited in Styhals, “Modernity as Theodicy,” 115. See also Odo Marquard, “Idealismus und Theodizee,” Philosophisches Jahrbuch 73 (1965), 33–47.

139Indeed, Rawls might have recognized himself in Blumenberg’s self-description as a “pious atheist.” As cited in Styhals, “Modernity as Theodicy,” 130.
origins of various modern phenomena. While the quest for theodicy was thus a foundational aspect of modernity, the underlying motivation was more accurately described as an “anthropodicy.” One way to understand Rawls’s reconciliatory rational faith in the possibility of a just political community is to detect in his overarching philosophical project the imprint of a secular theodicy along these lines.

In his survey of liberalism’s entanglement with theodicy, Eric Nelson has recently drawn attention to a Pelagian (“proto-liberal”) tradition that responded to the problem of theodicy by rejecting the Augustinian account of the Fall and instead embracing human freedom. This was not Rawls’s strategy. Nelson instead describes his position as relying on anti-Pelagian premises, be they Augustinian or Calvinist. Nelson concludes from this that Rawls, even where he may have attempted to provide a theodicy, precisely failed to provide a coherent one. By pointing toward the historical role of political economy and growth in undergirding secular temporalized theodicies a further possible answer becomes visible.

At first sight the above definition of secular theodicies might seem to render the concept too broad and all-encompassing to be of conceptual use. But as I have argued, it can nonetheless help us to distinguish between secular theodicies that are grounded in an assessment of their own historical conditions and those that have become divorced from their own conditions of possibility. In its original implicit reliance on what I have referred to as a theodicy of growth, Rawls’s project placed the prospect of a just society into a future that would be made possible by a political economy of growth. While A Theory of Justice was not simply an apologia of the postwar welfare state, its account of a just society tacitly depended on the prospect of economic growth as paving the way to a more just society in which envy would disappear and distributive struggles could be settled comprehensively without endangering stability. To be sure, Rawls’s theory was never an unqualified celebration of endless growth for its own sake. But precisely where Rawls insisted that a just society would no longer need to grow, the possibility of that society initially hinged on the transformative capacity of growth.

Just as Rawls completed his book this faith in transformative growth—which had been widespread during the postwar decades—went into crisis. Rawls’s strategy of reconciling himself to an imperfect present by harnessing it to the theoretical possibility of an idealized future had already come with costs beforehand. But in the course of the 1970s the expectation of transformative affluence gave way to a new political economy of discipline and competition. Even where growth remained within reach it has come to be linked to environmental devastation and climate change. As a result, Rawls’s secular theodicy that posited the theoretical possibility of an ideal just society was cut off from the historical conditions of possibility that had produced it. Instead of revising the principles of justice in the face of their original empirical grounding having disappeared, Rawls doubled down on the virtues of philosophical abstraction and the promise of philosophy as reconciliation. What started out as a temporalized theodicy of growth had become a theodicy of hope and rational faith.

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140 Blumenberg, Legitimacy of the Modern Age, 142.
142 Ibid., 205.
Rawls’s achievement of setting out a secular faith of redistributive liberalism has in this sense been a distinctly ambivalent one. Precisely because of its reconciliatory ambition, his “realistic utopia” can seem at once insufficiently utopian to truly raise our political imagination and insufficiently realistic in its portrayal of injustice and its refusal to provide a plausible path of transition. What unites both strands of critique is the worry that an account of justice based on reconciliation risks becoming ideological. 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. We can express the same unease also in terms of what I have referred to as Rawls’s a secular theodicy. To be sure, Rawls’s ideal of justice also offered a powerful critical yardstick to judge a present found to be deficient. But his theory was at the same time paradoxically intended to stabilize that deficient present by declaring its underlying principles and institutions at heart rational, thus rendering them worthy of immanent reform based on the hope of reconciliation. Moreover, the risk of a secular theodicy of the possibility of a better future morphing into ideology increases with it becoming decoupled from its own historical grounding.

For some this was, of course, precisely the desired ideological function of utopia. Writing in 1949, just as Rawls began to work on his answer to the problem of agreement, Friedrich Hayek issued a call to overcome liberalism’s despair by offering the distant vision of a just liberal society. “What we lack,” Hayek insisted, “is a liberal Utopia, a program 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.” Hayek’s intent was Rawls’s disquiet. 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? 148

Rawls left his own questions unanswered. As he himself at times suspected, there was a danger that a reconciliatory theory of justice as a secular theodicy risked itself becoming a form of ideology. One possible answer to this worry would of course have been to place one’s account of “realistic utopia” in relation to the historical conditions that enabled it and to assess the link between the two. While Rawls, perhaps understandably, steadfastly refused to historicize himself, the task of “historicizing Rawls” is also to contribute to this effort. This entails accounting for formative intellectual influences, tracing intellectual debts, and placing these into a changing landscape of twentieth-century politics and political economy. But “historicizing Rawls” also requires us to historicize the tacit futures—that once animated his intellectual project. Highlighting the changing role of growth affords one such vantage point, even where it proves elusive. As Albert Hirschman put it elegantly in a related context, the disappointed expectation of a future that never came to be is all the more difficult to recover because it not only failed to happen, but also, as a result, is likely to be actively repressed. 149

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148 Rawls, Justice as Fairness, 4 n. 4.
