

DIALOGUE AND UNIVERSALISM

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR UNIVERSAL DIALOGUE

Vol. XXX

No. 1/2020

PHILOSOPHY IN AN AGE OF CRISIS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS PART IV

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Published three times a year by
INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIOLOGY OF THE POLISH ACADEMY
OF SCIENCES and PHILOSOPHY FOR DIALOGUE FOUNDATION

PL ISSN 1234-5792

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RAWLS'S JUSTIFICATION MODEL FOR ETHICS: WHAT EXACTLY JUSTIFIES THE MODEL?

ABSTRACT

This is a defense of Rawls against recent criticism, ironically my own, though it is also a critique insofar as it addresses a problem that Rawls never does. As a defense, it is not a retraction of the original charges. As a critique, it is not more of the same opposition. In either capacity, it is not an afterthought. The charges were conceived from the outset with a specific solution in mind, which would have been too distracting to pursue in the same article. This is that solution. It also highlights the problem.

The original charges were that Rawls's decision procedure for ethics does not justify his own moral principles, namely his principles of justice, and that the underlying problem may well keep the decision procedure from justifying any moral principles whatsoever, or at least any normatively useful ones. The underlying problem was, and still is, the model's inherent universalism, which is built into the decision procedure through design specifications precluding relativism, yet only at the cost of limiting the relevant moral principles to generalities that are already widely accepted, thereby rendering the procedure at best redundant and very likely vacuous as an ethical justification model.

These difficulties are manifested in the work of Rawls as the dogmatism of championing a distinctive conception of justice, a liberal one as he himself calls it, through a justification model that is too universalistic to permit such a bias and possibly also too universalistic to permit any substantive conclusions at all. The solution contemplated here is to position the decision procedure as a dynamic justification model responsive to moral progress, as opposed to a static one indifferent to such progress and equally open to all moral input, thus removing the inconsistency between the universalistic design and any distinctive or controversial principles, including the ones Rawls himself recommends, so long as they are consistent with moral progress.

Keywords: Rawls, ethical justification, moral reasoning, principles of justice, moral progress.

1. EXEGETICAL BACKGROUND

Breakthroughs in moral philosophy often come in the form of innovations in metatheoretical positions. They also tend to come as contributions to normative perspectives. We normally do not expect both from the same person, much less from the same work, but that is what we get from Rawls, and not just in one work, but as the common denominator of his publication history.

Rawls has enriched our options in both areas. He has developed new methods for justifying moral principles, and he has formulated new moral principles. Not only has he done both but he has done both simultaneously and repeatedly. This has opened up new possibilities in ethical justification while at the same time supplying the content thereby justified.

But does the ethical justification model developed by Rawls justify the moral principles advocated by Rawls? Answering that question in the negative in a recent article (Alican, 2017), I went even further to suggest that the justification model developed by Rawls does not seem to justify any moral principles, whether by Rawls or by anyone else, that might possibly be useful in sorting out substantive moral problems.¹

My opposition in either case was a qualified stand, with room acknowledged for a possible solution, though not with an actual solution submitted for critical scrutiny. Here, I present that solution, again with some qualification.

While this is a defense of Rawls from one perspective, it is a critique of him from another. It is a defense in the sense that it responds to the charges in the original critique and presents a solution that could conceivably overcome the difficulties described there. It is a critique in the sense that the response is not a clarification of what Rawls says, or means, or does, but a solution specifying what he should have said.

2. CRITICAL CONTEXT

Ethical justification in Rawls does not have a specific locus of reference. Neither does the matter of the moral principles espoused by Rawls. We can try to look at everything he ever wrote or we can make do with the most representative sample. I did neither in the original article. I was not about to attempt in a single sitting a comprehensive analysis of what Rawls had accomplished in a lifetime. And I was not quite sure what his most representative work might be, but I was certain that enough had been done already with *A Theory of Justice*, whether or not that qualifies as his most representative work. I found Rawls's

¹ These can be either perennial or emerging moral problems. The tough cases that have been with us for a while include abortion, euthanasia, and capital punishment. Among more recent issues, we may cite genetic engineering, stem-cell research, and the moral status of artificial agents.

thought too dynamic for a timeless snapshot at any particular point in his career. My approach was to start from the beginning and to extrapolate from there while accounting for subsequent departures and turning points. The beginning I chose was his “Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics” (“Outline”).²

The advantage of starting with a limited scope of that sort is a clear view of the connection between the two issues: (1) Does the ethical justification model in the “Outline” justify the moral principles in that work?³ (2) Does the ethical justification model in the “Outline” justify any moral principles of practical import, as opposed to reaffirming universally accepted generalities standing in no particular need of justification. The first question asks whether the moral principles advocated by Rawls, collectively constituting a conception of justice as fairness, are justified by the decision procedure outlined by Rawls.⁴ The second question asks whether specific problems exposed through the first question evince a more general difficulty extending beyond the distinctive conception of justice as fairness, effectively precluding the justification of normatively useful moral principles, and thereby ruling out the possibility of a real impact on moral decisions.⁵

The reason that universally accepted generalities are in no particular need of justification is not so much that they are intrinsically and definitively justified as it is that we are in agreement about them. While agreement can indeed be the result of justification, or at least a sign of justifiability, it is not conclusive evidence of either. Hardly any justification model worth circulating in print will fail to pick out murder (unjust killing) as morally wrong. And such a basic moral judgment—“It is wrong to kill anyone unjustly”—is sure to inform Rawls’s own decision procedure, as are other judgments of the same degree of generality. What we usually want to know, however, is something far more specific, such as whether abortion is wrong, capital punishment is permissible, and so on. But since we are divided on those issues, and on a good many others like them, no corresponding judgment can simply be assumed to be among the “considered moral judgments of competent moral judges”—the methodological benchmark in the decision procedure of Rawls. Nor can we rely entirely on the most basic

² While there cannot be too many beginnings for the same thing, legitimate candidates in this case include Rawls’s senior thesis (1942) and his dissertation (1950) in addition to his “Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics” (1951).

³ These are the seven moral principles in section 5.5 of the “Outline” (Rawls, 1951, 192–193).

⁴ Rawls himself refers to the moral principles in the “Outline” (1951, 192–193) as “principles of justice” (191). Marking the inception of his conception of justice as fairness, they are later pared down to the more familiar twin principles, with modifications and elucidations provided on an ongoing basis: 1957, 653–654; 1958, 165; 1971, 60, 302, cf. 83, 250; or 1999, 53, 266–267, cf. 72, 220; 1982, 5, cf. 46–55; 1985, 227; 1993, 291, cf. 331–334; 2001, 42.

⁵ Strictly speaking, “justice as fairness” emerges with the transition from seven principles in 1951 (“Outline”) to two principles in 1957/1958 (“Justice as Fairness”). But this is true only of the technical term, not of the underlying notion, which Rawls had already developed as he drafted the “Outline” (1951, 192–193), where his concern is with “fair decisions on moral issues” (181) and with a “fair opportunity for all concerned” (182).

moral judgments, which account for the only sort of consensus available in reality. Perhaps a justification model cannot reasonably be expected to take stock of every conceivable action or practice that might possibly be wrong, but we do, in fact, require assistance with more than generalities regarding which we are neither confused nor hesitant nor ambivalent.

Yet that is the extent of the assistance Rawls can ever provide through the universalism of his justification model for ethics: Moral principles are justified insofar as they explicate moral judgments that coincide with the considered moral judgments of competent moral judges (Rawls, 1951, 187–189).⁶ While this may sound eminently reasonable, neither the judgments nor the judges are likely to be united around the happy coincidence imagined, unless, of course, the system is rigged. Does Rawls say that we must take stock of every single judgment by every last judge? No, not in so many words, but a demanding degree of universalism is implicit in the production of a consensus out of a plurality. The conformity required with the considered moral judgments of competent moral judges cannot be achieved through a partial correspondence any more than virginity can be maintained through occasional abstinence. The procedure requires coincidence with all the considered moral judgments (relevant to the context) of all the competent moral judges.⁷ This may sound overly rigorous, but the alternative is inadequate at best: coincidence with some of the considered moral judgments of some of the competent moral judges.

The universalism described permeates the entire decision procedure, including not just the primary features but also the concomitant definitions, explanations, and provisions.⁸ Rawls stipulates that both considered moral judgments (Rawls, 1951, 182–183) and reasonable moral principles (Rawls, 1951, 188) must transcend context, thereby making them both, by definition, valid and reliable in all circumstances. This anchor to universalism is the crux of the matter: Do the specific principles advocated by Rawls have a broad enough appeal to satisfy the universalism built into the decision procedure? And to take this a step further, would any set of serviceable moral principles be likely to have the comprehensive appeal required by the universalism built into the decision procedure?

Any answer must be sensitive to the inherent anchor to universalism, which is not only axiomatically present throughout Rawls's "Outline" but also fully explic-

⁶ Rawls's decision procedure is simple and elegant. Yet it requires cognizance of the intended meanings of technical terms expressed in ordinary language (1951): "considered moral judgments" have seven criteria (181–183), "competent moral judges" have four (178–181), and "reasonable moral principles" also four (187–189). Even "explication" comes with an explication (184–187).

⁷ Competent moral judges will have a variety of considered moral judgments. The "coincidence" required for justification is not a direct correspondence with every judgment in the entire spectrum of judgments but with those that are relevant to the matter on hand. This can be stated in terms of consistency (or noncontradiction) as well as coincidence. The requirement would then be either coincidence with the relevant judgments or consistency with all of them.

⁸ See, for example, the various criteria mentioned in footnote 6 above.

it in his “stability requirement” for considered moral judgments (Rawls, 1951, 182–183) and his “reliability requirement” for reasonable moral principles (Rawls, 1951, 188). While “stability” and “reliability” are terms I adopted for convenience in reference in the original article (Alican, 2017, 119–121), the referent in either case comes directly from Rawls. Both requirements are about the kind of stability or reliability rendering the effectiveness of the relevant judgment or principle independent of the corresponding contextual conditions and of any personal or cultural preconceptions by the rational agents in those conditions.

Assessing the feasibility of the stability and reliability invoked requires distinguishing between considered moral judgments that are shared by (or acceptable to) all competent moral judges and considered moral judgments that are not. That distinction is, in fact, meaningless, and that is precisely why it needs to be made. It is meaningless because considered moral judgments are, by definition, shared by (or acceptable to) all competent moral judges. We need a different term for moral judgments that would be “considered moral judgments” save for the fact that they are not shared by (or acceptable to) all competent moral judges. Let us call them “sensible moral judgments.” Hence, sensible moral judgments are (analogous to) considered moral judgments that do not satisfy the stability requirement and are therefore qualified in every way except universal appeal.⁹ From the opposite perspective, considered moral judgments are (analogous to) sensible moral judgments shared by (or acceptable to) all competent moral judges.

Working with this distinction, my position in the original article was that the moral principles Rawls presents in his “Outline” do not explicate moral judgments that coincide with the considered moral judgments of competent moral judges (Rawls, 1951, 187–189). Their coincidence is at best with sensible moral judgments, thus falling short of universal appeal. The evidence against Rawls is the sheer extravagance of presuming universal appeal for such distinctively liberal moral principles as he espouses, specifically his principles of justice as fairness.

This reference to the liberalism of Rawls is not an *ad hominem* generalization reducing his moral, social, and political philosophy to a polemical position. It is a direct reference to how he presents his own position.¹⁰ The principles in question represent a moral, social, and political outlook (a “liberal” one, to honor the designation Rawls uses) that is both reasonable and appealing but incon-

⁹ The point of the parenthetical qualification invoking analogic comparison is to avoid what would otherwise be a misleading construal of sensible moral judgments as a type of considered moral judgment, which they cannot be, given their failure to satisfy the stability requirement, satisfied without exception by considered moral judgments. Some degree of qualification seems appropriate in the opposite direction as well because of the derivative nature of sensible moral judgments in relation to the considered moral judgments of Rawls.

¹⁰ The liberalism I attribute to Rawls is the liberalism he claims for himself: 1985, 245–251; 1987, 1–25, especially 18, including note 27; 1993, 6, 156–158, 233; 2001, 104–106, 148–150, 153–157, 189–192.

sistent with equally reasonable and appealing alternatives.¹¹ And the same evidence undermines the possibility, or weakens the likelihood, of bringing competent moral judges together on any moral principles, or on any that would be useful in moral deliberation, or at least on a sufficiently good many to support a moral life, one that is not left unexamined.

If Rawls's moral principles are too liberal for his anchor to universalism, others may be too conservative, or perhaps not conservative enough, or possibly not liberal enough. Moral insight with universal appeal is not likely to be very helpful either, as it is typically limited to easy cases: no killing (without just cause), no lying (without just cause), and so on. The immediate result is a discrepancy between Rawls's decision procedure for ethics and his principles of justice. His universalistic decision procedure is too objective to accommodate his liberal principles. Since there seems to be nothing patently wrong with Rawls's principles of justice, apart from their liberal orientation not being consistent with the objectivity promised, one wonders whether any moral principles at all, or any normatively useful ones, can be justified by a decision procedure failing to justify Rawls's apparently reasonable principles of justice.

This seems to leave Rawls with dogmatic moral principles and a vacuous or otiose decision procedure. This is not a palatable outcome. Yet it is also not without support. With a figure like Rawls, one wants to invoke the principle of charity wherever possible. It is possible here. But we must step outside the dynamics of the decision procedure and the particular principles used in the original test run. Those principles are just not justified by that procedure. It is too much to expect all competent moral judges to be on board with moral principles that represent or define a moral or sociopolitical platform that is liable to attract as many detractors as supporters.¹² Quite possibly, and for the same reason, no useful principles at all might be justified by that procedure, or not enough of them, at any rate. The evidence is not irrefutable, but the consequences, potential though they may be, present too great an obstacle to rest easy.

Neither the problems exposed in the original article nor the solution developed in the next section is limited to the seminal "Outline" of 1951, which serves only as a medium for a case study demonstrating serious difficulties that would otherwise amount to little more than vague impressions. In the original article, I presented evidence of the generalization of the relevant problems

¹¹ To be precise, Rawls takes justice as fairness to be a political conception, never explicitly identifying it as part of a "comprehensive moral doctrine" (cf. Rawls, 1985; 1987; 1988). I do not mean to contradict this. I mean only to note that justice as fairness is a liberal conception, as Rawls himself asserts (e.g., Rawls, 1987, 17–22; 1993, 3–46, 144–168), whether it is classified as a moral conception or as a political one, and whether, in either case, it is "comprehensive" or not.

¹² This is not a quantitative assessment. The number of detractors need not equal the number of supporters for there to be a problem. The point is qualitative: Not everyone will be on board with "liberal" principles, as Rawls himself calls them. See the preceding two notes (notes 10, 11) for a representative list of where he actually calls them that.

across Rawls's evolving understanding of justification in ethics and through all formulations of his principles of justice.¹³ Here, I focus only on the solution.

3. DEFENSIVE STRATEGY

The solution I propose is the establishment of moral progress as the reason why Rawls's moral principles trump competing moral principles. To be clear, the same approach could work just as well for competing moral principles. I am not saying that Rawls's principles of justice indubitably represent progress over all actual and imaginable alternatives. I am saying only that this is a legitimate appeal for any moral principles, whether by Rawls or by others, that happen to fall short of universal coincidence with the considered moral judgments of competent moral judges. The strategy would obviously need to include not just this appeal, basically an unsubstantiated claim, but also an accompanying rationale for its validity, as discussed further in subsections 4.2 and 4.3.

Such an appeal to moral progress, including the accompanying justification, can be used to connect the decision procedure to the mindset or outlook representing the postulated progress, so that the justification mechanism is no longer a generic algorithm but a decision procedure indexed to a well-defined group or community, one where sufficient progress has already taken place. Our best candidate for that, as Rawls keeps reminding us, is a Western democracy.

The first step is to relax the deceptively rigorous universalism suffocating the decision procedure.¹⁴ One way of doing that is to associate the evaluation mechanism (the judges, the judgments, and so on) with a particular culture during a particular period, preferably with the morally most advanced position at present, if we can identify what that is as easily and as surely as Rawls seems to be able to do. That is more practicable than leaving the entire platform adrift in the moral universe, where the sources of appeal remain endless. What worked for Athens in the age of Pericles, for example, is unlikely to work for Sweden or Switzerland today, and what works for Sweden or Switzerland may not work for Iran or India.

Relaxing the universalism in recognition of moral progress should alleviate the discrepancy created by a dogmatic outcome. Tapping the decision procedure

¹³ I do not claim to have put together conclusive evidence of the susceptibility of each and every one of Rawls's later works to the problems in the "Outline" of 1951. Nor was this the claim in the original article (Alican, 2017). My position has always been that the problems discussed here are apparent everywhere in Rawls, and that this appearance, supported by corroborating evidence in the original article, provides sufficient motivation to take the matter seriously enough to seek a solution, even without incontrovertible proof of the universal range and relevance of the problem.

¹⁴ The suffocation comes specifically from Rawls's "stability requirement" for considered moral judgments (Rawls, 1951, 182–183) and his "reliability requirement" for reasonable moral principles (188), both identified as such earlier in the main text.

for a conception of justice as fairness would then cease to be a transgression of the model's design specifications so long as the reconciliation of universalism with dogmatism favors the shared ideals of constitutional democracies representative of the Western world, or more generally, so long as the mutual realignment weeds out contingencies inimical to justice as fairness. This is not to say that such a realignment is itself fair, or morally acceptable, but that it would eliminate the inconsistency (manifested at present as a manipulation of the model) between the universal configuration of the original decision procedure and the dogmatic recommendation of justice as fairness.

This is a promising step because the obstacle to consensus in Rawls's theoretical framework is the accretion of cultural and temporal differences coalescing into an ideological discordance in the system. Embracing the global matrix of moral judgments all at once would be an exercise in futility in the absence of adequate convergence. Acknowledging the discordant constituents to be distributively valid, each in its proper context, would be relativism. On the other hand, the universalism introduced by default through the requirement of widespread consensus is liable to leave us with no justification at all, given that an inclusive consensus out of divergent views may well turn out to be either superficial or altogether impossible.

The reason why the recommendation is only to relax and not to eliminate the universalism is that the elimination of universalism suggests submission to relativism, whereas the proposed solution is to index the decision procedure to a reference group representing moral progress and thereby providing an objective basis and rational grounds for vindicating the apparent dogmatism.

The choice of relaxation over elimination may appear to be something of a compromise, but that would be a misconception. Relaxing the scope of universalism may, for example, be interpreted as admitting a certain degree of relativism into the decision procedure, while stopping short of fully eliminating the universalism may be thought to consign the system to dogmatism, namely the dogmatism of proceeding with the reference group favoring Rawlsian liberalism. This is a false dilemma presenting the realignment as suffering from relativism while at the same time engaging in dogmatism. What may look like dogmatism is legitimized through the appeal to moral progress. The reason that it may still look like dogmatism is that it is the same position that is indeed dogmatic in the absence of indexation to moral progress. The realignment adds the missing justification to an otherwise arbitrary choice among others with an equal claim to consistency with the relevant judgments of the proper judges.

The realignment does not dispense with universalism. Moral principles are still justified only insofar as they explicate the considered moral judgments of competent moral judges, but those are now linked to a morally enlightened reference group. The modified decision procedure continues to acknowledge the prevalence of cultural and ideological differences throughout the general population. It neither emphasizes nor suppresses such differences any more than the

unmodified version. As cultural or ideological differences arise, any judgments in polar opposition remain outside the common ground of universal relevance, just as they do in the original model, while the resulting consensus transcends cultures and ideologies, no more or less than can reasonably be expected in the original model. The difference is in the recognition that the approach is dogmatic, and remains dogmatic, without the appeal to moral progress.

This is not a magical solution. As stated earlier, the appeal to moral progress, if it is to work at all, cannot be left as a mere appeal. Declaring moral progress to favor a certain position or platform is no better than skipping the façade of justification altogether and proclaiming the validity or superiority of the relevant position or platform. The progress claimed for the position favored requires proof. Otherwise, it is a declaration rather than a demonstration.

Yet there can be no proof here in the strictest sense of the term, just as there can be no proof that the relevant moral principles really do, as Rawls insists, coincide with the considered moral judgments of competent moral judges (Rawls, 1951, 187–189). Even so, the appeal to moral progress is no weaker in terms of evidentiary value than the connection Rawls makes in any of his works between the ethical justification model he submits for consideration and the moral principles he recommends for adoption.

Rawls never actually “proves” in any commonly acceptable sense that his moral principles are justified by his decision procedure. He merely asserts that they are. To be specific, he claims that they are such principles as would be adopted by reasonable persons working toward a mutually acceptable solution.¹⁵ Finding or forging a connection between Rawls’s position and moral progress, as recommended in this article, requires no greater a leap of faith than does the original appeal of Rawls. The difference is that the approach here adds the prospect of justification whereas Rawls’s own efforts limit him to dogmatism.

In his later works, as in “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical” (1985), Rawls himself relaxes the universalism of his decision procedure and openly anchors his principles of justice to a society operating within the framework of a modern constitutional democracy. That makes it tempting to conclude that the recommendation in the present article must be good because Rawls gravitates toward something similar to it in his later thought. But that would be to beg the question with an apparently relevant but ultimately illicit appeal to authority. A more convincing approach would be to stay within the realm of the “Outline” to capitalize on Rawls’s analogy there between ethics and science:

“For to say of scientific knowledge that it is objective is to say that the propositions expressed therein may be evidenced to be true by a reasonable and

¹⁵ No matter how sophisticated the model, the justification associated with the decision procedure is a claim rather than a proof. For example, to invoke the imagery of his most famous model, we really have nothing to go by except Rawls’s assurance (supported by our own sensibilities if we happen to agree) that contractors working out a reflective equilibrium from the original position would end up with the principles Rawls says they would.

reliable method, that is, by the rules and procedures of what we may call ‘inductive logic’; and, similarly, to establish the objectivity of moral rules, and the decisions based upon them, we must exhibit the decision procedure, which can be shown to be both reasonable and reliable, at least in some cases, for deciding between moral rules and lines of conduct consequent to them” (Rawls, 1951, 177, cf. 189–190, 194–196).

This is the perfect place to incorporate moral progress. But there are difficulties. The notion of moral progress is itself complicated.¹⁶ Scholarly disagreement persists not only in defining and measuring moral progress but also in ascertaining whether any has taken place so far, and indeed, whether such progress is likely, or even possible at all.¹⁷ Moreover, scientists have effectively taken over the field, practically displacing moral philosophers, though perhaps not neurophilosophers. As a result, the justifiability of moral enhancement, for example, an outgrowth of the question of moral progress in the face of rapidly advancing technology, has become a hotly debated topic.

Yet the underlying issue of moral progress is not a new problem. The discussion was well underway among the Stoics, or to narrow down the reference, in the discourses of Epictetus. The secondary literature today is replete with references to this or that philosopher’s conception of moral progress, with particular recourse to the thought of Kant and Dewey, the first mainly in defensive approaches denying any neglect or inconsistency in Kant, and the second mostly in constructive approaches building on the original contributions of Dewey.¹⁸

Much of this is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, some discussion is in order since moral progress is an integral part of the salvage operation contemplated here for the decision procedure of Rawls. That discussion proceeds, however, not from a particular perspective but with a general account (see especially subsection 4.1) setting aside metatheoretical issues concerning the possibility and reality of moral progress itself.

¹⁶ The secondary literature, already vast, has been growing and diversifying rapidly in recent years. The following is a sampling: (Anderson-Gold, 2001; Buchanan, Powell, 2015; Dixon, 2005; Godlovitch, 1998; Hodges, 1968; 1971; Jamieson, 2002; Kleingeld, 1999; Macklin, 1977; Moody-Adams, 1999; Moran, 2012; Nussbaum, 2007; Rorty, 1989; 1998; 2007; Singer, 1981; Wilson, 2011).

¹⁷ A familiar approach is to take moral progress as a matter of expanding the sphere of moral consideration from the self to the universe, that is, to all of creation, with the level of expansion current at any time signifying the degree of moral progress prevailing at that time, presumably in relation to some initial state, perhaps something along the lines of the “state of nature” of the social contract tradition. This, in other words, is the extension of full moral consideration to others, typically starting with the family and ending with the world at large, but also breaking down the barriers between species, not just those between tribes, nations, or races. Leading proponents include, among others, Rorty (1989, 189–198; 1998, 165–243) and Singer (1981).

¹⁸ On Kant, see (Anderson-Gold, 2001; Kleingeld, 1999; Moran, 2012). On Dewey, see (Rorty, 2007) and the response by Nussbaum (2007).

To return to Rawls, an appeal to moral progress requires an admission of dogmatism in the decision procedure. This is not necessarily an admission of failure. Quite the contrary, it is a precaution against failure. The unacknowledged dogmatism that is there anyway must be replaced with legitimate indexation. That is where the argument from moral progress comes in. Such an argument would have to establish that Rawls's moral principles trump alternatives because they represent moral progress relative to the alternatives. The task at present is not to prove that conclusion but to demonstrate that the attempt is necessary.¹⁹

Given that Rawls himself is in pursuit of relevant parallels between ethical and scientific reasoning, the appeal to moral progress would be a fitting response to the charges of dogmatism. If scientific principles can vary over time and across scientific communities, and if scientific progress can still proceed without being undermined either by dogmatism or by relativism, why should differences in moral judgments and in moral principles over time and across cultures be so disconcerting? Why can we not praise Rawls's principles of justice as the result of moral progress instead of condemning them as a product of dogmatism?

Rawls's principles of justice are dogmatic at least in the sense that they are firmly grounded in the values he associates with a typical, or preferably ideal, contemporary Western democracy. The argument from moral progress makes this defensible. The very possibility of moral progress suggests that some positions are more tenable than others. Rawls's position may well be at the head of the list, or it may not, there being no guarantee either way. Any apparent dogmatism could, in the event of a positive match, be validated as a result of the corresponding progress.

This is a solution that suggested itself together with the charges in the original article: anchoring the ethical justification model, including but not limited to the decision procedure of 1951, to a community of morally enlightened judges with morally advanced judgments, and consequently establishing Rawls's principles of justice in any rendition, and thereby his conception of justice as fairness, as the product of moral progress. The remainder of the present article is devoted to the anticipation of likely objections and the formulation of reasonable responses.

4. POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

Three objections come to mind. The first is that the universalism of Rawls's decision procedure, even after relaxation as recommended here, leaves the model incompatible with variation or change, thus precluding the possibility of moral progress. The second is that, even if Rawls's decision procedure could

¹⁹ Any such argument would have to be supported by a separate argument, or at least by an assumption (explicit or implicit), that progress in morality is both possible and desirable.

accommodate moral progress, further argumentation would be necessary to establish that the moral principles he associates with Western democracies do in fact represent progress over those in other distinctive groups, say, the principles prevailing in Athens during the age of Pericles, or the entirely different set in effect in Iran at present, or the common core operative in India throughout its history. The third is that, even if Rawls's moral principles represent progress over those of ancient cultures as well as over those of current autocracies, theocracies, and caste systems, the argument from moral progress does not seem to address the possibility of conflict or disagreement within the favored group, that is, competent moral judges born and raised in a Western metropolis and flourishing there today.

4.1. Suppression of further progress

The first objection questions the compatibility of ethical universalism with moral progress. The charge is that the elements of universalism in the decision procedure, namely the stability requirement for considered moral judgments and the reliability requirement for reasonable moral principles, indicate finality and thereby preclude progress. Given that the recommendation is to relax the universalism, it may seem that the objection is irrelevant. Yet it is not. Rawls is right to insist on some type of stability and reliability. What is to be relaxed is the universalism that binds his decision procedure to the judgments of competent moral judges without restriction, which leaves it open to all judges in all cultures through all time. But even when this sweeping universalism is relaxed, there will still be room for universalism within the representative population of judges and judgments, thus sustaining the relevance of the objection.

Any response would do well to consider precisely what is involved in progress in general and in moral progress in particular.²⁰ Progress is best mapped out in two dimensions, using both descriptive and normative factors. The first dimension calls for a description of the relevant trend or pattern, measured either as a growing difference from an initial state or as a growing similarity to a final state. For example, progress in software design is routinely expressed in terms of differences from an initial state (often released with a version number such as 1.0 accompanying the brand name), while progress in pest control is typically assessed in relation to a targeted goal or ideal final state (the complete extermination of specified pests in designated areas). The case of moral progress seems closer to the example of software design than to that of pest control because, for comparisons with the present state, the initial state of morality (perhaps the state of nature) is more readily accessible than the final state. This

²⁰ The account here draws liberally on the work of Mayo (1986, 86–95), not because it is unique in the literature, but because it is the inspiration behind my own understanding. I admire the way he has untangled the relevant conceptual elements and clarified the corresponding methodological issues.

holds unless one wishes to argue either that the present state of morality is the final state of morality or that the final state of morality can be predicted accurately enough for fruitful comparisons with the present state. The second dimension in progress is a normative assessment of the value of the change in question. The normative judgment indicates whether the trend depicted is positive (good) or negative (bad): If it is positive, it is progress. If it is negative, it is regress. If it is neither, it is neutral.

Mapping out moral progress, whether from the descriptive or the normative perspective, also requires accounting for the type of change. This points to at least three possibilities: changes in moral truths, changes in moral awareness (understanding of moral truths), and changes in moral attitudes (adherence to moral truths). Ethical universalism and moral progress are mutually inconsistent only at the first level, the one concerning changes in moral truths. One cannot sensibly hold both that moral truths are universal, or absolute, and that moral progress proceeds with changes in moral truths. However, ethical universalism and moral progress are quite compatible in connection with either of the other two possibilities: People may in time achieve a clearer understanding of unchanging moral truths, if there are such things, as well as adopting a stricter adherence to those truths.

The progress relevant here is exemplified by the latter two types of change. Either one of those, but especially both of them together, will accommodate an appeal to moral progress in defense or explanation of the dogmatism in Rawls, without any conflict with the universalistic character of his decision procedure. As a matter of fact, the Rawlsian system, throughout its various evolutionary phases, tacitly draws on the notion of moral progress, as is evident in allowances for "critical examination" (Rawls, 1951, 188) and "reflective equilibrium" (Rawls, 1971, 20–21, 48–53; or 1999, 18–19, 42–46).²¹

Undertones of moral progress are especially prominent in Rawls's mature thought, for example, in his appeal to "overlapping consensus," a process envisaged to take several generations (Rawls, 2001, 32–38, 192–195). The assumption is also consistent with his adoption of what he calls the Aristotelian Principle (Rawls, 1971, 424–433; or 1999, 372–380), a principle of human motivation postulating a preference for activities that challenge our realized abilities and capacities (natural or developed) and that are more complex as opposed to simple or less complex. This principle underpins Rawls's understanding of moral psychology in *A Theory of Justice* (1971, 490–496; or 1999, 429–434). Moral progress, if it is a fact, can be expected to make increasingly greater demands of this sort on our abilities and capacities, and would probably, given the associated push toward development, count as a more rather than less complex phenomenon (cf. Rawls, 1993, 203, note 35, 207; 2001, 200, note 21).

²¹ See (Alican, 2017, 130–132, including note 18) for discussion and documentation of reflective equilibrium.

None of this contradicts the universalism that Rawls employs in his decision procedure. Moral progress does not preclude moral truth, but moral principles can still be revised, and moral judgments may still vary over time and between persons. It is only considered moral judgments that are universal. Subsuming Rawls's moral principles and the notion of sensible moral judgments under the awareness and adherence models of change allows for moral progress while embracing ethical universalism. On this interpretation, considered moral judgments are Rawls's moral truths, which remain changeless, while moral progress takes place through improvements either in our awareness or in our adherence, or in both, as reflected in the transformation of sensible moral judgments into considered moral judgments as well as in the revision of moral principles.

Decoupling awareness and adherence, a possibility left open in the discussion so far, particularly in the previous paragraph, may be thought to expose this line of defense to ambiguity wherein greater adherence to misunderstood truths may count as progress. While awareness and adherence do indeed work better together than they do separately, my point is that each one is a mark of moral progress and that each would be so even if the other were not. A heightened moral awareness (better understanding of moral truths) generalized across the human race, or across a meaningful portion of it, is a sign of moral progress, as is a better moral attitude (stricter adherence to moral truths), again generalized across a relevant group, narrow or broad. If these cannot reasonably be considered severally sufficient conditions of moral progress, especially evident when an improvement in one is coupled with a deterioration in the other, I am willing to concede that point. My main concern with moral progress is to come up with descriptors that are pertinent to the concept. I am open to suggestions and objections. But I doubt that any deficiency in the present account is serious enough to preclude moral progress as a possible explanation for the apparent dogmatism in Rawls's position.

It may seem tempting, as an alternative, to dismiss the objection in this subsection with an outright denial, arguing that the appeal to moral progress would render the problematic elements of the decision procedure progressive, which would naturally imply that the progress in question has already taken place, whereupon it would become pointless to object that the universalism of the decision procedure is incompatible with moral progress, because it would no longer be true, or even relevant, at that point. But that would be to deny or ignore both the possibility and the demands of further progress, which contradicts the spirit of the defense offered.

Moreover, even if the justification model were perfect to begin with, thus obviating any need for improvement, and in fact leaving no room for progress, the principles Rawls uses as a test case, his principles of justice as fairness, may themselves not be perfect. The decision procedure and the principles of justice are mutually independent. Moral progress may be invoked in either case, but only as separate initiatives. While the first objection was about the decision procedure, the next two objections deal with the relevant moral principles.

4.2. Proof of progress in Rawls

The second objection concerns the validity of the value judgment in the assessment of moral progress: What makes Rawls's moral principles more advanced than others? Why should his moral principles (whether the generically "reasonable" ones invoked without specification in the decision procedure or the familiar ones specifically recommended by him later) be taken to represent a state of morality superior to the one represented by the moral principles prevalent in Periclean Athens or in modern-day Tehran or Mumbai?

The problem with appealing to moral progress for justification, so the objection goes, is that we do not have a court of appeal for evaluating moral progress if we do not yet have an ethical justification model. The evaluation requires a decision procedure, which itself happens to be up for evaluation, along with the principles. It is circular to declare Rawls's moral theory superior to another by employing principles of selection, or evaluation, originating in Rawls's own moral theory. But it is just as problematic to bring in a third moral theory from which to derive independent principles of selection to choose between Rawls's moral theory and the original alternative. The latter is problematic because, in that case, it would be necessary to evaluate the principles of selection in the third theory as well. This presents two problems. First, if the third theory turns out to be better (more advanced) than the other two, then Rawls's theory would not be the best (most advanced) one. Second, to avoid circularity, we would need yet another theory to judge the merits of the third one, and so on to infinity. These are important challenges to the argument from moral progress.

However, despite the apparent paradox of infinite regress, meaningful comparisons between moral theories are possible. The fact that different competent moral judges have different sensible moral judgments does not mean that the judgments are equally acceptable or respectable. Nor does it mean that such judgments are explicated by equally useful moral principles. Rather than being a problem or obstacle, it is both consistent with and necessary for moral progress that our moral principles not be identical with those of the ancient Greeks, or Vikings, or Visigoths, and so on. We are not supposed to adopt, assimilate, or inherit moral principles uncritically. This is anticipated by Rawls himself in the second test he prescribes for the reasonableness of moral principles:

“[T]he reasonableness of a principle is tested by seeing whether it shows a capacity to become accepted by competent moral judges after they have freely weighed its merits by criticism and open discussion, and after each thought it over and compared it with his own considered judgments” (Rawls, 1951, 188).

We must make room for dialogue, both interpersonal and intercultural, in addition to an inner monologue of sorts. Only then can we expect moral progress. Principles alone are not sufficient for moral education. Moral experi-

ence, negotiation, and discourse are also needed. Morality is, by and large, dialectical.

Note that embracing “criticism and open discussion” invites a certain degree of subjectivity, which, in turn, gives rise to another question: Are moral truths not independent of what people think? Moral truths, if they exist, are indeed independent of what people think, but this does not make criticism and open discussion inimical to their discovery. Quite the contrary, the process under consideration is suitable for ethics as well as science. Neither in ethics nor in science do the canons of reasoning that govern theory formation, justification, and selection operate independently of the people involved.

To recall a contemporary of Rawls, we may consider how Thomas Kuhn (1977, 320–339), both as a scientist and as a philosopher, reconciles objectivity and subjectivity in the process of scientific progress. Any choice between competing scientific theories depends, according to Kuhn, on a mixture of shared and individual standards, that is, on a combination of objective and subjective criteria.²² Objective criteria play a greater role in justification, while subjective criteria play a greater role in discovery, but the context of pedagogy differs almost as much from the context of justification as it does from that of discovery. Theory selection proceeds with “exemplary crucial experiments” that help pick one theory over another, but they are not the sole reason for acceptance. The experiments invoked in theory selection are the ones most favorable to the theory in question, while each theory comes with more as well as less favorable experiments, sorted out in accordance with objective and subjective criteria.

Kuhn’s portrayal of the principles of progress in science supports the analogy Rawls draws between ethics and science. In ethics, too, objective criteria play a greater role in the evaluation and justification of theories, while subjective criteria play a greater role in their conception and formulation. The former is the source of objectivity, the latter, of creativity. Objective criteria are presumably shared by all or nearly all theorists, thus determining the ultimate success or failure of any theory.

In Rawlsian terms, subjective criteria play a greater role in the formulation of sensible moral judgments, some of which become considered moral judgments as they are filtered through objective criteria. The counterparts in Rawls of “exemplary crucial experiments” in Kuhn are the “principles of selection” mentioned above. Just as the scientist chooses from among favorable and unfavorable exemplary crucial experiments, using both objective and subjective criteria, the moral theorist uses both objective and subjective criteria to decide which principles of selection to employ in theory construction. The element of

²² The shared basis of theory choice includes accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness. The individual basis of theory choice includes a scientist’s previous experiences both as a scientist (field, experience, school of thought, etc.) and as a human being (personality traits, demographic factors, historical background, etc.).

subjectivity introduced thereby is not detrimental to the argument from moral progress, so long as objective criteria dominate the process of justification.

4.3. Progress among contemporaneous positions

The third objection concerns the possibility of conflict among principles that happen to be in currency at the same time. How can moral progress still be relevant when we switch from historical to contemporary comparisons where chronology is no longer an issue? An apparent implication here is that even if moral progress is a good explanation for why a current position is to be preferred over an ancient one, it is not as relevant to a choice between contemporaneous theories or systems.

This is a misconstrual of progress. Any one or more of concurrent platforms may be more advanced (or less advanced) than any one or more of others in comparison to a benchmark state. There is nothing irrelevant about the comparative evaluation of alternative theories in terms of their progress relative to a common point of reference even where they have all outgrown the chosen reference. The fact that we are no longer competing with the state of nature, for example, does not mean that we could not, if we so desired, continue to measure progress in reference to it.

Moral progress is not just consistent with conflict among competing moral theories but is in fact dependent on that very conflict. The relevant theories at any point in time are all part of the moral progress unfolding at that time. Far from blocking progress, conflict actually promotes it. Arguments and counter-arguments can remain in a standstill for only so long, eventually falling out of equilibrium in one direction or the other, and often giving way to fresh perspectives and productive modes of thinking.

The argument from moral progress does not imply or require the immediate or even rapid resolution of all disagreements in belief and attitude. Granted, compared to ethics, progress in science has brought greater uniformity in beliefs and attitudes. However, most of the scientific progress to date has taken place over the last few centuries, whereas we have been struggling with many of the same moral problems for millennia, adding quite a few new ones along the way. This shows that science has come a long way, not that ethics must stay the same as it ever was, forever barred from progress.

Nor does this assessment of disproportionate progress contradict the history of philosophy as exhibiting comparably recent developments in ethical theory. No doubt, we now have access to, say, the categorical imperative and the principle of utility, two normative decision procedures (or rather the central elements in them) coinciding in origin with the advances in science giving rise to the Industrial Revolution. But such developments in ethical theory have yet to generate correlative advances in our moral outlook or disposition. Science has less of a lag with technology in that respect.

We have been quick, one and all, to assimilate breakthroughs in science, but not so quick to do the same with developments in ethics. This may be partly because developments in ethics are not perfectly analogous to those in science in the first place, but it is mostly because we all “feel” we know the difference between right and wrong anyway, whereas we remain relatively receptive to what science can teach us about the world around us and beyond. We are willing to admit that we do not know whether there are parallel universes, extra dimensions in the fabric of reality, or states of matter we have not yet discovered, and so on. But we are not willing to admit that we might possibly be wrong on abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, or anything else of that sort. Everyone is a moralist, but not everyone is a scientist.

The “everyone” here, like the “we” before that, is a reference to human nature as it is commonly manifested, with the manifestation being open to observation. The generalization that people feel confident in their moral attitudes is not meant to suggest that no one could possibly be undecided on a moral problem. One could certainly suspend judgment on a moral issue after careful consideration with full information. But even that can be done with confidence. The point is that ordinary people regularly consider themselves qualified in moral discourse, whereas they normally do not have that attitude regarding scientific matters. Just about anyone who cares enough would be happy to debate Rawls on the moral permissibility of abortion or euthanasia, but hardly anyone who is not a theoretical physicist would be chomping at the bit to engage Hawking on the radiation output of black holes.

A present deficiency of progress in ethics, if there is such a deficiency, does not condemn morality to relativity, or ethical theory to indeterminism. Progress in science, particularly in the natural sciences, overcame various prejudices to reach cross-cultural consensus. Comparable progress can be expected in the humanities. The persistence of individual and cultural differences does not preclude the development of rational methods toward a progressive resolution. Differences could be due to prejudice, ignorance, insensitivity, or misuse of rational methods for establishing moral rules, all of which can be overcome in time through a Rawlsian “critical examination”—just as they could through any other sober system of rational reflection.

5. CONCLUSION

Rawls assumes custody of a delicate balance as he embraces universalism to avoid relativism in his decision procedure for ethics. Such delicacy comes with special problems. Chief among them is the threat to that balance from the dogmatic promotion of a liberal conception of justice through a decision procedure that should, according to its own design specifications, resist any bias in any direction in the sociopolitical spectrum.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the conception of justice in play, basically the famous principles of justice (as fairness) in any of their various formulations throughout Rawls's career, but they just do not look like they have a special claim to justification through the decision procedure employed. And because there is nothing especially wrong with this conception of justice, the problem then appears to be with the decision procedure, which therefore begins to look like it might possibly be sterile as an ethical justification model irrelevant to anything beyond a readily and widely acceptable backbone of morality that does not go far toward assisting moral agents with actual moral problems.

This is a serious matter but not a decisive obstacle. Rawls can keep his principles and justify them too. He can conceivably even do so with the same model. But he must relax the universalism and validate the dogmatism, which then ceases to be dogmatism. The way out, as shown here, is through the equilibrium emerging in the recalibration of dogmatism as moral progress, including a consequent realignment of universalism and dogmatism, with relativism kept safely at bay.

The only viable option for Rawls, especially in contrast to ignoring the problem, which is essentially what he does, is to argue that his position is morally more advanced than anything contradicting it. The tension between the implementation of universalism and the adoption of moral principles representative of a distinctive sociopolitical platform will not go away on its own. While he never acknowledges it as a problem, this is the same tension Rawls silently consigns in his later work to sociopolitical tendencies naturally and gradually converging around a liberal conception of justice eventually adopted universally as an enlightened consensus. That is nothing other than moral progress.

Without trumpeting it as loudly as he should, then, Rawls himself ends up relying on moral progress to prove him right in the end. The strategy of this article has been to assert that connection up front as the only way of making Rawls right from the beginning. It remains to be shown whether moral progress favors the position Rawls holds and supports the justification he proposes, but the argument here still leaves Rawls a step ahead of where he otherwise stands with liberalism as a *deus ex machina* and natural sociopolitical developments as an imaginary ally that could just as easily favor the opposite position.

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²³ References are primarily to the original, and sometimes to both, but never to the second alone. A date is supplied in either case to avoid confusion.

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Dialogue and Universalism tends to show that philosophy is an essential eternal domain of human culture and an inevitable element of the nowadays human world. Critical and creative rational thinking is an opportunity for humankind to resist the lies and illusions of ideological manipulations that serve as instruments of enslavement and oppression. This open and broad vision of philosophy as an expression of human rationality offers a chance to free people's awareness, to open their minds, and to extend their possibilities of thinking and acting. In doing so, philosophical reflection is able to refine and renew old ideals and values as well as to create new ones. It is these two aspects—free consciousness and new ideals—that are necessary to build a more decent human world. The International Society for Universal Dialogue (ISUD) community is convinced that philosophy has an important role to play in the struggle for the future of humanity. Philosophy with its amazingly sophisticated ways of thinking disposes a tremendous power to cope with the world and to change it. Philosophy is free from technical and practical interests, and constituted by the pursuit of removing—from a highly distanced and neutral perspective—falsehood, prejudices, mental, cultural, religious and social slavery. So it gives a hope for human beings' emancipation as well as for an alteration of the world.

Dialogue and Universalism is wholly open for all scholars in the world, not being a publishing forum for the ISUD members only. All contributors are equally kindly welcome.

Dialogue and Universalism publishes monothematic issues. However, each monothematic issue of the journal is completed with a few texts thematically different from the main theme of the issue. This decision allows for a broader thematic diversity. The forthcoming main themes are announced in advance at the *Dialogue and Universalism* website. The announcements should be treated as an open invitation for every scholar to participate in *Dialogue and Universalism* projected enterprises. Besides, proposals of themes and contents of next *Dialogue and Universalism* issues are kindly welcome.