

Ambiguity and Liberalism Reconsidered

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The central theme of Huey-li Li's essay "On Ambiguity" concerns the inadequacy of liberal political and ethical theory for issues in cultural pluralism, multicultural education and curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, and "diversity" more generally. John Rawls is used as a representative of liberal political and ethical theory. While Rawls is certainly a significant contributor to modern ethical theories of justice and liberal political theory, there are alternative versions of liberalism that address questions of culture and difference more directly. However, I will devote most of my response to Rawls since his work is the focus and foil for this paper.

As mentioned, the work of Rawls is offered as a proxy for liberal political and ethical theory in Li's essay. It is claimed that liberal political theory is indifferent to the policies and practices of cultural pluralism. This bears on educational issues because school curricula and teacher education programs are increasingly developed and accredited in relation to ideas of "diversity." Thus, educators who support a culturally responsive pedagogy for a culturally pluralistic educational and political system cannot expect theoretical support from liberal political theory. Finally, Li offers Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity as an alternative source for a pedagogy more appropriate for a culturally diverse society.

There is extensive literature on John Rawls. One strand of this literature focuses on whether to read Rawls as an ethical philosopher or a political theorist. Although Rawls's consistent position was that he was developing ethical theory, there is certainly evidence that he understood and worried about the consequences of a theory of justice for political theory. A related theme in the critical literature on Rawls is metaphilosophical. Was Rawls a Kantian foundationalist offering a rationalist epistemology of self-evident principles of justice? Or was Rawls a conflicted philosophy professor with as much interest in the messy business of providing a way forward through practical reason as in the equally messy business of justifying philosophical foundationalism? Finally, there are issues about the roles of rationality, reason, and reasonableness in ethics and political theory. Li consistently conflates the terms "reasonable," "rationalistic," "rational," and "reasonableness" in the argument. However, a direct reading of Rawls provides evidence to make distinctions that might clarify, if not resolve, important issues. For example, for Rawls, an appeal to "reasonableness" specifically calls for attention to particularities of context to mediate strict claims of rationality. Thus, there is no reason a rationalist ethical or political theory cannot demand an accounting of contingency.

I will focus my remarks on the 1980 Dewey Lectures in which Rawls systematically addresses these issues.¹ Rawls writes that he uses "'reasonable' and 'rational' to express different notions" (*MT*, 516). Rational autonomy is a "relatively narrow notion" compared to "full autonomy," which refers to the way "citizens in everyday

life ... think of themselves in a certain way” (*MT*, 521). That is, full autonomy is grounded in reasonableness, not the narrower notion of rationality, and is marked by the practices of cooperation citizens encounter in their daily lives. The reasonable “subordinates” and “frames” the rational, so that strict claims of rationality are constrained and informed by socially constructed claims of practical reason. Thus, for Rawls, while the procedural principles of justice are products of rational autonomy, substantive rules of justice are derived from practical reason and practices of social life informed by particularity and difference.

One worry with the suitability of Rawls’s theory for cultural pluralists is his idea of the “veil of ignorance,” a theoretical device used to strip persons of particular knowledge for the exercise of strict rationality. Again, while there are problematic issues with this device, it is important to read Rawls directly to understand the scope of his argument. Rawls distinguishes between a conception of a person and a theory of human nature. A conception of a person is a “moral ideal paired with that of a well-ordered society” (*MT*, 534). The veil of ignorance offers a conception of a person as a moral ideal. It is not a social scientific description of any particular person or social group. A theory of human nature, in contrast, fills in the social facts given the state of public knowledge. This is the work of public education, conceived broadly to include all the elements in a configuration of educational institutions. Rawls’s theory of justice offers a moral ideal of a person as a starting point for a thought experiment about principles of justice. It does not pretend to offer a political theory for a culturally pluralistic democratic society. Thus, Rawls’s claims are very circumscribed; principles of justice are not equivalent to political justice. It is worth citing Rawls at length here:

Justice as fairness assumes that deep and pervasive differences of religious, philosophical, and ethical doctrines remain. For many philosophical and moral notions public agreement cannot be reached. (*MT*, 539)

And,

It is important to observe that this practical answer does not imply either skepticism or indifference about religious, philosophical, or moral doctrines. We do not say that they are all doubtful or false.... Instead, historical experience suggests ... that on such doctrines reasoned and uncoerced agreement is not to be expected.... Our individual and associative points of view, intellectual affinities and affective attachments, are too diverse, especially in a free democratic society, to allow of lasting and reasoned agreement. Many conceptions of the world can plausibly be constructed from different standpoints ...; it is unrealistic to suppose that all our differences are rooted solely in ignorance and perversity.... Justice as fairness tried to construct a conception of justice that takes deep and unresolvable differences on matters of fundamental significance as permanent conditions of human life. (*MT*, 542)

And finally,

Justice as fairness ... holds that not all the moral questions we are prompted to ask in everyday life have answers. Indeed, perhaps only a few of them can be settled by any moral conception that we can understand and apply. (*MT*, 563–64)

This evidence is not cited to defend Rawls or, by extension, political liberalism. However, I think it is clear that for at least the version of liberalism associated with Rawls it is not accurate to characterize it as narrowly rationalistic, indifferent to

cultural pluralism and difference, dismissive of non-mainstream ways of thinking as “unreasonable,” or grounded in *a priori* assumptions about persons or human nature. There are deep issues with Rawls and political liberalism, but not these. In fact, I believe a strong case can be made that Rawls not only recognizes ambiguity, but also offers a theory of justice in recognition of ambiguity as one of the “permanent conditions of human life.”

If liberalism is not an effective theoretical position from which to construct responses to issues of difference, cultural pluralism, multicultural curricula, and culturally responsive pedagogy, a conclusion with which I agree, what do we do? I also agree with Li that “Marxism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism have yet to provide alternative viable visions for building a just society.” Li offers Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as an alternative starting point.² On this, I must disagree. In my view, Beauvoir is caught in the very ontological traps her rhetoric seeks to avoid. Consider a few quotes from Beauvoir cited in Li’s essay: “Man is man only through situations whose singularity is precisely a universal fact.” Or, “An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be found to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all.” Or, “separation does not exclude relation, nor vice versa” and subjectivity is based on an individual’s “relation to the world and other individuals.”³

Beauvoir, like Rawls and so many others, wants to have it both ways: subjectivity and solidarity, the particular and the universal, the private and the public, the One and the Many. This is not surprising. The vocabulary of ambiguity as “bothness” is endemic to ethics. After all, if we were clear and certain, we wouldn’t need ethical theory at all. Where Rawls and much of the liberal tradition begins with emphasis on what is common, universal, and public and then struggles to account for the particular, contingent, and private, Beauvoir, from the flip side of the very same tradition, emphasizes the singular, subjective, and private and then struggles to account for the common, intersubjective, and public. Beauvoir’s ethics specifically argue for a devaluation and de-emphasis of tradition, association, and social consequences in individual moral practice, and instead counsels “choice” grounded in individual intuition. I simply do not see how this position can be a viable starting point for questions of social or educational policy. If Rawlsian liberalism constrains the consideration of associative bonds, Beauvoir’s ethics shuts it off completely at the existential source.

So, the problem remains. Hinted at, but never explored in Li’s essay is the way multicultural curriculum and “diversity” standards have become part of the legitimizing functions of schools and teacher education programs. While always present, these functions become more important for superstructural institutions such as schools when base institutions such as economies and state apparatuses are in crisis and need cultural legitimation. Rather than Rawls and Beauvoir, perhaps we should be talking about the ways “diversity” is used as part of the legitimation function of educational institutions in the late stages of advanced capitalism. But that is another story.

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1. John Rawls, "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory: The Dewey Lectures 1980," *Journal of Philosophy* 77, no. 9 (1980): 515–572. This work will be cited in the text as *MT* for all subsequent references.
 2. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel, 1967).
 3. *Ibid.*, 144, 18, 122, and 156.