

# The Spiritual Exercises of John Rawls

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## Abstract

In this article I interpret John Rawls's concept of the original position as a spiritual exercise. In addition to the standard interpretation of the original position as an expository device to select principles of justice for the fundamental institutions of society, I argue that Rawls also envisages it as a "spiritual exercise": a voluntary personal practice intended to bring about a transformation of the self. To make this argument, I draw on the work of Pierre Hadot, a philosopher and classicist, who introduced the idea of spiritual exercises as central to ancient and modern conceptions of philosophy. By reading Rawls alongside Hadot, this article portrays Rawls as a thinker deeply concerned with the question of how subjects can lead more just and fulfilling lives. It also proposes that the original position as a spiritual exercise can help defend liberalism as a social and political doctrine.

## Keywords

original position, moral psychology, liberalism, Pierre Hadot, selfhood, philosophy as a way of life

John Rawls (1921–2002) gave very few interviews over the course of his career. To mark the occasion of his retirement in 1991, however, he accepted an invitation from his students (Rawls 1991). Together they covered a wide range of topics on his life, work, reception, and teaching. But in Rawls's own

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draft copy of the interview, included with his personal papers and open for view at Harvard University, he adds a fascinating section that does not appear in the published version. Upon answering all the questions the students asked, he notes down a few “Questions They Didn’t Ask Me” and plays the role of both interviewer and interviewee:

### Questions They Didn’t Ask Me

There were lots of questions they didn’t ask me in [The Harvard Review of Philosophy] interview. Some of those they could have asked I’ll answer here:

HRP (as imagined): You never talk about religion in your classes, although sometimes the discussion borders on it. Why is that? Do you think religion of no importance? Or that it has no role in our life?

JR: On the role of religion, put it this way. Let’s ask the question: Does life need to be redeemed? And if so, why; and what can redeem it? I would say yes: life does need to be redeemed. By life I mean the ordinary round of being born, growing up, falling in love and marrying and having children; seeing that they grow up, go to school, and have children themselves; of supporting ourselves and carrying on day after day; of growing older and having grandchildren and eventually dying. All that and much else needs to be redeemed.

HRP: Fine, but what’s this business about being redeemed? It doesn’t say anything to me.

JR: Well, what I mean is that what I called the ordinary round of life—growing up, falling in love, having children and the rest—can seem not enough by itself. That ordinary round must be graced by something to be worthwhile. That’s what I mean by redeemed. The question is what is needed to redeem it? (Rawls 2003)

It may be surprising to hear Rawls speak like this. The main question associated with his work is the following: how is it possible for an institutional order to be just? The theoretical framework and concepts he developed to address it have since passed into the vernacular of political philosophy (Forrester 2019). But throughout his career Rawls wrestled with an equally fundamental question: how is it possible for a human life to be worthwhile (see Weithman 2010, 2016; Neiman 2002, 2019; Gališanka 2019; Macedo 1990; Cline 2012; Bok 2017; Reidy 2014)? Sometimes the context for this question is dark and tragic, as when he wonders in the introduction to *Political Liberalism* (1993) whether, in light of the evils of human history, “one might ask with Kant whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth?” (Rawls 1993, lx). Yet most of the time, the unspoken setting is rather more mundane, as is the case in the addendum to the

interview. Everyday human existence, “the ordinary round of life,” seems to be in need of redemption.<sup>1</sup>

Redeemed by what? This essay examines the answer Rawls gives in *A Theory of Justice* (1971, references are to revised edition 1999a). I propose that his signature concept from that work—the original position—can be interpreted as a “spiritual exercise” designed to help people in liberal democracies to work upon, transform, and ultimately redeem themselves. The original position is so much more than a thought experiment designed to select principles of justice for the fundamental institutions of society. I argue that Rawls also conceives of it as a personally formative practice: a point of view that members of liberal democracies can adopt at any time, one that has the potential to inspire them to become a different sort of person and citizen.

This essay makes two contributions. The first is to Rawls scholarship and how we interpret his idea of the original position and, along with it, themes of personal transformation, flourishing, and even salvation in his philosophy. The second reaches beyond Rawls to ask why, in general, we should care whether or not the original position can be read in the manner I propose. The answer is that, if my account is correct, members of liberal democracies stand to gain a powerful tool to realize the best aspects of their own public political culture: for the sake of their polity and, as Rawls believed, for their own sake. At a time when liberalism is under attack worldwide, a defense of it as a personal ethos is opportune. For if citizens of liberal democracies were to recognize the potential costs of a shift away from liberalism—in particular, those associated with the disappearance of a valuable source of selfhood—then perhaps they would be less inclined to resignation or indifference to its fate. They may even come to challenge the adage that a liberal is someone who won’t take sides even in defense of their own cause.

## Reading Rawls Today: Society as a Fair System of Cooperation

Let us begin with the second contribution stated above, on the topic of the current predicament of liberalism. That way we can establish what motivates my reading of the original position as a spiritual exercise in the first place.

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1. I note that Rawls’s earliest work (his undergraduate thesis at Princeton, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* [1942]) as well as one of his latest texts (“On My Religion,” written for friends and family, sometime in the 1990s) both focus on the quality and redeemability of everyday life in theism and nontheism. I do not discuss these works in this essay yet concur with Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel who, in their introduction to these works, state that they evidence a “deeply religious temperament” that travels through all of Rawls’s work (2009, 5).

Rawls's theory of justice serves as a handy touchstone to make our way. As everyone with even a passing familiarity of his philosophy knows, it is complicated, systematic, and often technical. One reviewer of *A Theory of Justice* likened it to a Gothic cathedral in its simultaneous simplicity of plan and complexity of detail (Chapman 1975, 588). At its core, however, Rawls's great book is inspired by a simple idea. Society, he says, should be conceived of and run as a fair system of cooperation (1999a, 4).<sup>2</sup>

It is crucial, however, to recognize that Rawls does not claim this idea as his own invention. He says, instead, that citizens of liberal democratic societies by and large *already* see and structure their societies as fair systems of cooperation. It is the image that they, that *we*, hold of our polity and of ourselves as members of it.<sup>3</sup> Thus, as Rawls sees it, the first task of his theory of justice is to observe the main moral commitments of a liberal democratic society and read off a certain idea—society as a fair system of cooperation—which is ubiquitous in its public institutions and, more widely, in its background culture.

*A Theory of Justice* is now fifty years old. How has its simple idea fared? From one perspective, not so well. As many recent works attest, the past ten years have seen a worldwide erosion of liberal democratic norms, soaring inequality, and intensified anger and anomie (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Keane 2020; Stanley 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Deneen 2018; Mishra 2017; 2020; Zevin 2019). And if we zoom in closer, the notion that citizens of liberal democracies all think that their societies are fair systems of cooperation might seem laughable. Consider the headlines of a single day, February 21, 2021, which, to twist the knife, is the centenary of Rawls's birth. In the United States, Donald Trump was on every network discrediting the results of the presidential election, daily COVID-19 cases reached 78,000, and Texas suffered a massive yet predictable blackout that hit poor and nonwhite residents hardest. In Australia, where I live, Facebook blocked all Australian content in its News Feed in retaliation to a proposed small federal tax, and in Sydney our state government issued an almost parodically grim priority rule: if a resident is ordered to quarantine at home for COVID-19, yet also receives a bushfire evacuation notice, the latter takes precedence.

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2. As Rawls explains in his last book, *Justice as Fairness: a Restatement* (2001, 4), which originated as a set of lectures on *A Theory of Justice*, "The most fundamental idea in this [i.e., Rawls's own] conception of justice is the idea of society as a fair system of social cooperation over time from one generation to the next."
  3. Rawls's first statement of this method (i.e., that he looks to the public political culture of liberal democracies as the starting point of his theory of justice) is found in his Dewey Lectures delivered in 1980. But as Weithman argues, this idea was already implicit in *A Theory of Justice* (see Rawls 1999c, 1993; Weithman 2010, 11, 76).

We seem, then, to live at a time when a certain moral and political vision—say, the high liberalism of the mid-to-late 20th century—has run its course. Although few people outright reject the idea that society *should* be a fair system of cooperation, fewer still seem confident that our actual societies have any real prospect of becoming so. Maybe on quieter days we hope that Rawls's idea trundles on, but even then we sense that it is only as a kind of zombie liberalism: not dead because no one wants to kill it (and what would we replace it with?), yet not alive because no one can muster the conviction necessary for it.

I believe our situation is more complicated. My point is not that we should be sanguine about the viability of liberal democracy in troubled times. In this essay, and specifically in my interpretation of the original position, I wish to focus on the relation that we have to Rawls's idea (which again, he says is really our own idea) that society should be a fair system of cooperation. Its grip on us is simultaneously stronger and more extensive than we realize. It is and remains integral to how we see ourselves as citizens and, crucially, as people going about everyday life.

Let me speak plainly. In one form or another, liberalism has been the dominant social and political ideology of the past two hundred years. There are, of course, many historical and geographical variations of it. In general, though, its core values are personal freedom, tolerance, impartiality, reciprocity, and fairness—all of which, in different ways, serve to realize the idea and operation of society as a fair system of cooperation for each of its members.<sup>4</sup>

Where are these liberal values enshrined? Political scientists tend to locate them in political, legal, and economic institutions. This includes civil and human rights, rule of law, separation of powers, free and fair elections, progressive taxation, and free and fair markets. Hence the turbulent situation we find ourselves in today, in which certain public institutions of our democracies (for example, tax policy that favors the rich, or a justice system that is structurally discriminatory) elicit widespread distrust and anger, precisely because they disregard fundamental liberal principles.

There is a problem, however, with locating liberalism primarily in political, legal, and economic institutions. We miss how omnipresent it is in the wider culture. Indeed, vast realms of popular culture produced in liberal democracies—including novels, movies, television, music, video games,

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4. See the following excellent recent (Rosenblatt 2018; Freedman 2005; Fawcett 2014; de Dijn 2020; Anderson 2016; Hanley 2019; Gopnik 2019; Button 2016; 2008; Ignatieff 2017; Nussbaum 2013; Krause 2015) and classic (Macedo 1990; Rosenblum 1989; Berkowitz 1999; Shklar 1985) works on liberal values.

and much else—would be unintelligible to an audience not already steeped in liberal norms, values, and sensibilities. I am not saying that all popular culture is united in support of liberalism. Much of it is clearly intended to parody and challenge liberal dogmas. But that does not change the fact (rather, it reinforces the fact) that liberalism has entrenched itself as the central point of reference in both the public and background culture. Like the old joke where one fish asks the other “how’s the water?” liberalism is the water of our times.

To be concrete, here are a handful of places where liberalism can be found today. It is there when we pick up a novel by Sally Rooney that dissects the power dynamics of sex and class; when we read a satire by Kevin Kwan about the clashes between individualism and tradition; when we hear comedians like Hannah Gadsby, Kumail Nanjiani, or Stephen Colbert excoriate identity politics; when we watch television shows like *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* reimagine the workplace as a setting for self-realization; when we listen to the recriminations and empowerment of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*; when we see Disney princesses (from Ariel to Belle, Jasmine, Giselle, Tiana, Rapunzel, Merida, Elsa and Anna, and Moana) strive to learn and become who they were meant to be; when we play a video game like *The Last of Us Part II*, the violence of which is matched only by its perspectivism; when we visit [pornhub.com](http://pornhub.com) and the tab for gay pornography is on the homepage; and even when we tune into reality shows like *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, *Love is Blind*, and *Indian Matchmaking*, all of which turn romance into a buyer’s market. No item on this list is explicitly about liberalism, yet none would be comprehensible without it. Just try, if you are familiar with any one item, to imagine how you would begin to summarize it to someone who did not understand, as opposed to someone who agreed or disagreed with, the principle that individuals are free to lead the kind of life they want so long as it does not interfere with the ability of others to do the same (to name only one signature liberal idea). It would be like sending a code without the cipher on the receiving end. That is why liberalism is the water of our times. Written in principle into our foundational institutions, it underlies the culture that everyone living in liberal democracies daily lives and breathes. Liberalism is, and for now remains, inescapable.

It is in this context of the ubiquity of liberal ideas and values, woven into the public, political, and background culture of liberal democracies, that the value of reading Rawls at our fraught moment in history is most apparent. He is, I believe, a tremendous moralist. I would go so far as to say that he is the moralist we need right now. With this old-fashioned word, I mean he is someone able to judge the existing tendencies of a society, along with the self-conception and mores of its members, and lead it and them in promising new

directions.<sup>5</sup> That, after all, is what the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation is all about. He taps into the deepest sense of who we are as members of a liberal democratic society and, from there, generates not only a political philosophy for a just liberal order, but an entire moral psychology and existential analytic of what it means to *be* a liberal subject. It is as if he speaks directly to our conscience to say, “look, if in fact you see yourself in this way, and if this is the kind of citizen, and maybe even person, you want to become, then here is what you can do to live up to it.” Then he adds (this is the third and final part of *A Theory of Justice*, which this article focuses on), “oh yes, almost forgot, there are tremendous joys and benefits to come from living this way. Let me show you.”

This is the background for my interpretation of the original position as a spiritual exercise as theoretically and practically significant given the embattled predicament of contemporary liberalism. The original position is the tool that Rawls gives to members of liberal democracies to help orient themselves in relation to the commitments and values they already profess. To be clear, not everyone who lives in a liberal democracy will look kindly upon the original position as a spiritual exercise. It will not speak to citizens who reject the underlying idea that society should be a fair system of cooperation and who Rawls calls “unreasonable” (see Badano and Nuti 2018). But they are not the intended audience. Its recipient are citizens of liberal democracies—whatever their conception of the good, so long as it is reasonable and affirms the principle of reciprocity that underlies the basic structure of society as a fair system of cooperation—who are friendly to the moral presuppositions of liberalism but need reminding of the subjective dimensions of the project. This is not light work. Rawls is explicit about how personally demanding the original position can be if incorporated as a perspective on day-to-day life. Yet what he provides in *A Theory of Justice* is a broad set of reasons—“thin” and “full” reasons, to use his terms (1999a, 347–350)—as to why it is desirable to do so: for the ideal of justice itself, for the stability and decency of our own society, and just as importantly, for our own psychological well-being and felicity. He provides, in a word, an exercise to inhabit, strengthen, and reap the benefits of the public morality and background culture that subjects of liberal democracies share at a time when it is threatened with decline.

## The Rawlsian Sage

For many readers, the term “spiritual exercises” calls Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) to mind, the Spanish priest who devised a set of Christian meditations

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5. I borrow this definition of the moralist from Lucien Jaume (2013, 127).

and prayers, carried out over a four-week period, to better understand and serve God.<sup>6</sup> The truth, however, is that Ignatius's *Exercitia spiritualia* (1548) are themselves only a Christian version of an ancient Greco-Roman tradition that spanned more than a thousand years and that was recreated by later Christian theologians and modern philosophers.

The contemporary author who has done most to rekindle interest in spiritual exercises is the philosopher, classicist, philologist, and historian Pierre Hadot (1922–2010). Hadot was Chair of History in Hellenistic and Roman Thought at The Collège de France. He advanced two major claims over his long and distinguished career. The first is that ancient philosophy, as well as select traditions of modern philosophy, conceived of philosophy in terms of a commitment to a specific way of living one's life. Philosophy, on this view, is not primarily a theoretical discourse. It is a certain way of living and seeing the world, which theoretical discourse helps to bring about (Sharpe 2020).

The second claim Hadot makes is that ancient philosophy is itself comprised of "spiritual exercises." These are practices that an individual undertakes in order to become a philosopher and to bring about a comprehensive change in his or her way of living. Spiritual exercises can be physical (such as dietary regimes), discursive (such as dialogue), or intuitive (such as meditation). The crux of Hadot's interpretation of ancient philosophy is that philosophical discourse is itself a spiritual exercise—one conducted in dialogue and instruction, as well as through solitary meditation—to reorient one's way of life and become a living, breathing philosopher (Hadot 2002, 1995; de Vries 2023).

In what follows I will interpret Rawls alongside Hadot to present the original position as a spiritual exercise. What is gained by pairing these authors? For starters, I hope it contributes to recent efforts of "cross-tradition" theorizing across the Continental and Analytic divide in political theory (see Arnold 2020; Patton 2010; Bankovsky 2012; Finlayson 2019; Redhead 2016; Rosenthal 2019). More specifically, I believe Hadot is the ideal author to draw out from Rawls what leading critics and devotees often miss about his doctrine: its personally transformative dimensions.<sup>7</sup> A remark of Hadot's encapsulates my strategy. A scholar of ancient philosophy, he summarizes the approach he brings to classical authors: "When we read the works of ancient

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6. Rawls himself briefly discusses Ignatius, but only to reject—indeed, to condemn as "inhuman"—a moral scheme where all pursuits are brought under a single dominant end (1999a, 485).

7. For a critic, see G. A. Cohen (2000, 1–7, 117–179), who reproaches Rawls for an evasion of the demands of justice in the choices we make in everyday life. For a devotee, see Jonathan Quong (2011), who follows in the wake of Rawls's "political turn" and underplays the importance of subject formation in Rawls's early and late work.



philosophers, the perspective [I] have described should cause us to give increased attention to the existential attitudes underlying the dogmatic edifices we encounter” (1995, 104). That is what I hope to accomplish with Rawls: to discern, behind his conceptual system, a powerful existential attitude about what it means to live justly, to identify the original position as the tool to help achieve it, and to lay out the other-regarding and self-regarding reasons as to why it is a good thing to strive for.

Before turning to the original position, I need to introduce another key concept of Hadot’s: the sage. Doing so will help identify the goal of spiritual exercises—in the wider tradition and for Rawls as well. The figure of the sage is important for Hadot because it is central to ancient philosophy. In a nutshell, wisdom is a mode of being in antiquity, and the kind of being who is fully and completely wise is called a “sage.” Each school of philosophy has its own sage—for example, Socrates for Platonism and Stoicism, Epicurus for Epicureanism, Diogenes for Cynicism—that philosophers (that is, members of the schools who love and pursue wisdom, yet who are not always equal to it) strive to imitate. The sage serves as an exemplar for a philosophical way of life: he or she is always satisfied, always tranquil, always identical to him or herself, always and only interested in true and important things, and naturally, always unattainable (Hadot 2002, 220). Though they may never reach that height, the sage inspires philosophers to a certain style of life.

Is there a sage to be found in Rawls’s philosophy? For specialists of Rawls, the question is bound to raise red flags. The figure of the sage seems perilously close to a philosophical position he took pains to avoid: perfectionism, insofar as it requires the state to dedicate greater liberty and resources for certain individuals, “on the grounds that their activities are of more intrinsic value” (1999a, 289; see also Nussbaum 2011). I will return to this point in a moment. More generally speaking, however, the sage just seems like something we should not expect to find in Rawls. After all, the standard interpretation is that he is primarily concerned with deriving moral principles and legal rules to establish the constitutional and political framework for a just society. Call this a “rights-based” interpretation of Rawls (Weithman 2010, 11–12; Forrester 2019, 104–139). Advanced by such readers as Ronald Dworkin (1977) and Rainer Forst (2014), it consists of placing Rawls in a long line of political philosophers who identify the core feature of liberalism as a basic right, or set of rights, to equal concern and respect.

If we take Rawls to be a rights-based thinker, it is fruitless to go looking for any kind of sage-like figure in his work. Yet perhaps there is another way to read him. Following interpretations by Paul Weithman, Stephen Macedo, Arnold Davidson, and Susan Neiman, I take Rawls to be a “conception-based” (and not a “rights-based”) philosopher. By this I mean that, for Rawls, the real foundation of a liberal society lies not in the rights and rules

it legislates, but in the conception of the person or citizen it upholds and promotes. Basic rights and constitutional rules are institutions to express, defend, and promote a particular conception of the person (for early Rawls, this would be an ethical conception that includes such ideals as autonomy, friendship, and association as specified by justice as fairness) and citizen (for late Rawls, this would be a strictly political conception, in which the ideals of justice as fairness are situated in the public or political sphere) (Freeman 2007, 383–400).

Consider a striking passage from Rawls's essay that showcases his conception-based approach. It comes from "A Kantian Conception of Equality" (published in 1975), yet the same idea is also found throughout *A Theory of Justice*: "When fully articulated, any conception of justice expresses a conception of the person, of relations between persons and of the general structure and ends of social cooperation. To accept the principles that represent a conception is at the same time to accept an ideal of the person, and in acting from these principles, we realize such an ideal" (1999b, 254–255). Strictly speaking, there is no personified sage in Rawls's writings, no charismatic equal of Kierkegaard's Socrates or Nietzsche's Zarathustra. Interpreters and students of Rawls have claimed that he himself—that is, Jack Rawls—was the living embodiment of his philosophy, but that is a different matter (Nagel 2002). Yet we can see that the "ideal of the person" he outlines here plays a similar role to the sage. His claim is that by acting on principles of justice we become a certain kind of person and realize an ideal in ourselves. That makes his ideal of the person sage-like for two reasons. First, just like the sage, the ideal of the person is precisely that: an ideal. As we said earlier, "accept[ing] the principles of justice," as Rawls laconically puts it here, is no mean feat: it entails wholehearted commitment to justice in everyday life. Second, and again just like the sage, the ideal of the person is "ideal" in the sense of being attractive—that is to say, a model for a desirable kind of person to become. In a moment, we will see why it is attractive. For now, however, I simply propose that reading Rawls as a "conception-based" thinker brings him into the orbit of Hadot's work on spiritual exercises. From this perspective, Rawls is doing more than working out the correct arrangement of rules, laws, and institutions for liberal polities. He is showing us a way of being in the world, one that he suggests is rewarding, even though it is admittedly difficult.

Now, the reader may worry that reading Rawls as conception-based thinker, and emphasizing themes of moral education and personal transformation, runs afoul of his critique of perfectionism and especially the "political" turn of his later work. After all, his later conception of personhood was avowedly political and not intended to impose or replace thick ethical (and/or metaphysical) conceptions of personhood found in reasonable

comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1993, 29–34; Brooks and Nussbaum 2015). I do not believe this poses an obstacle to my interpretation. The reason is that although the later Rawls insists that a liberal political conception, along with its conception of the person, must be “freestanding” of any particular comprehensive doctrine, he does not make the reverse claim—namely that comprehensive doctrines must be freestanding of the liberal political conception. In fact, he very much hopes for the opposite: that citizens of different comprehensive doctrines will be shaped by a reasonable political conception that they affirm for the right reasons (see Rawls 1993, 66–71).

For my purposes, this is significant for two reasons. On the one hand, if a person already accepts, or wishes to adopt, the thick ethical conception of personhood from *A Theory of Justice*, it is a viable and reasonable comprehensive doctrine. On the other hand, there is no reason why people with different comprehensive doctrines, should they so desire, cannot adopt the original position as a device of self-transformation. In short, there are excellent moral and political reasons as to why a political conception should not favor particular comprehensive doctrines or impose its view on them. Yet that should not foreclose the possibility that a liberal political conception—along with its conception of the person and its device of the original position—can be adopted by people with differing comprehensive doctrines in their pursuit of leading more just and fulfilling lives.

## The Original Position as Spiritual Exercise

In an interview, Hadot provides a nice short definition of spiritual exercises. “I would define spiritual exercises,” he says, “as voluntary, personal practices meant to bring about a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self” (2011, 87). There are four criteria here, each of which must be satisfied for an activity to count as a spiritual exercise. Spiritual exercises are *voluntary* and freely taken up. Spiritual exercises are *personal*, such that one’s own person is a matter of care and concern. Spiritual exercises are *practices*, meaning that they are embodied regular activities. And spiritual exercises are *transformative*, the goal of which is to alter the person practicing them.

By way of example, picture yourself a Stoic, circa late second century. Your first exercise of the day would be a premeditation, in which you mentally rehearse potential difficulties of the hours to come so that you will bear them if and when they happen. Afterward, you might meet and dialogue with a friend or teacher, which for Stoics (and all other major schools of ancient philosophy) were occasions for spiritual activity (Hadot 2002, 22–38, 146–171). Maybe the conversation dwells on physics and your place in a rationally ordered cosmos, or maybe discussion steers toward ethics and the need

for coherence in your wider pattern of actions—either way, you acknowledge your place within a larger whole and remember the need to harmonize with it (Hadot 1998, 243–307). Finally, to finish the day, you examine your conscience to observe where your thoughts and deeds fell short of a philosophical ideal, and then reflect on how to become worthier of the events of tomorrow.

My extended example is not by coincidence drawn from antiquity. That is Hadot's specialism, and he made it his life's mission to demonstrate that spiritual exercises are at the core of all major schools of ancient philosophy. Now and then, he sketches how modern authors (such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Henri Bergson) inherit this tradition and design their own spiritual exercises (2002, 253–270; 2011, 9, 96, 125–128). He also wrote a late book on J. W. Goethe that situates him in the long line of ancient, Christian, and romantic spiritual exercises (2008a). Yet the vast majority of his writings are anchored in ancient history, philosophy, and philology.

That said, nothing bars us from opening up cross-civilizational perspectives to investigate spiritual exercises in world religions and non-Western cultures. Moreover, spiritual exercises can be creatively adapted to contemporary contexts without ceasing to be recognizably spiritual exercises. Hadot would not have opposed these suggestions. He often observes, for example, how what he calls spiritual exercises can be found in Buddhist and Indian philosophy (Fiordalis 2018). Moreover, as Arnold Davidson (himself a student of Rawls's) reports in his preface to Hadot's interviews, "We had innumerable discussions about, and Hadot was passionately interested in, the ways in which the notions of spiritual exercises and philosophy as a way of life could be applied and extended to unexpected domains" (2011, xii).

The original position is not the only spiritual exercise that can be discovered in Rawls's work. Suitable candidates include reflective equilibrium, public reason, and the roles of orientation, reconciliation, and utopic thinking that Rawls identifies with political philosophy (2001, 1–4). It would take a book-length study to catalogue, analyze, and expand on them. For now we will confine ourselves to the original position, which Rawls describes as a "thought-experiment" designed to help citizens of liberal democracy select which principles of justice should regulate the basic institutions of their society (2001, 14–18; see Hinton 2015). His key claim is that the principles of justice chosen from the perspective of the original position are those that should regulate the fundamental institutions of society seen as a fair system of cooperation between free and equal persons.

All that is fine and well. But what exactly is the original position? Since spiritual exercises are a practical business, let us address that question in a pragmatic vein: how do we, here and now, *do* the original position? How is it practiced?

The original position is a meditative exercise, practiced on one's own. Let's break it down. Step one, imagine that you are with a group of people. Next comes the crucial twist: neither you, nor anyone else in the group, know their own identity. You don't know your sex or gender, social class, religion, ethnicity, talents, conception of the good, or anything else that might differentiate you from other people. As Rawls famously puts it, you are situated behind the "veil of ignorance" (1999a, 118–123).

The spiritual exercise continues with step two: it is up to you, along with all these imagined people—none of whom know anything about themselves either—to select and agree upon the principles that will regulate the fundamental institutions of your society. Your job, in other words, is to specify the terms of fair social cooperation without being influenced by positional factors. You are to imagine yourself as a free and equal person, deciding alongside other free and equal people, which principles will govern you.

The original position is a hypothetical exercise. There is no question of convening citizens in a town square. In a sense, then, nothing happens as a consequence. Politics are not committed by meditations, nor are numerically distinct people deliberating together and changing minds (again, the original position is a hypothetical, not a discursive space of communicative action). At the same time, however, everything happens: sincerely and repeatedly practiced, an entire worldview can change. Consider the final lines of *A Theory of Justice*. In the following sections, I will specify how the original position can be transformative. But it is important to state up front how powerful and total that transformation can be. To use a favorite term of Hadot's, Rawls is talking about nothing short of a "conversion" of one's way of life:

Finally, we may remind ourselves that the hypothetical nature of the original position invites the question: why should we take any interest in it, moral or otherwise? Recall the answer: the conditions embodied in the description of this situation are ones that we do in fact accept. . . . Thus to see our place in society from the perspective of this position is to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*: it is to regard the human situation not only from all social but also from all temporal points of view. The perspective of eternity is not a perspective from a certain place beyond the world, nor the point of view of a transcendent being; rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world. And having done so, they can, whatever their generation, bring together into one scheme all individual perspectives and arrive together at regulative principles that can be affirmed by everyone as he lives by them, each from his own standpoint. Purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view. (1999a, 514)

Earlier I gave Hadot's definition of a spiritual exercise as a voluntary, personal practice meant to bring about a transformation of the individual. The

original position satisfies its criteria in letter and spirit. It is *voluntary* and there is no obligation to take it up. It is *personal* in that it is a device of self-clarification that we adopt on ourselves and our social world. It is a *practice* that can be consciously and regularly adopted. And it is *transformative*, indeed magnificently so: purity of heart, grace, and self-command can be won. Read this way, the original position is no mere thought-experiment, if that means testing a hypothesis or gauging the consequences of a point of view. It is a spiritual exercise, equal to any from antiquity.

## Why Enter the Original Position?

To delve deeper into the original position as a spiritual exercise, allow me to briefly survey the structure of *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls's opus is divided into three parts. Part I identifies the principles of justice for a well-ordered society; Part II analyzes the institutions associated with justice as fairness; and Part III examines whether and how a society ordered by Rawls's principles will be "stable," in the sense that it will generate and sustain a sense of justice in its members and lead them to want to be just. Part III is most relevant for our investigation, for it contains the key topics from which to develop Rawls's notion of personal transformation: his conception of goodness, his theory of moral psychology, and his extended account of childhood and moral education. Yet one concept is particularly essential: "congruence." With this technical-sounding term, Rawls seeks to demonstrate why it is rational for members of the well-ordered society to make justice (or more precisely, their sense of justice) supremely regulative of their rational plans of life and character. If he can demonstrate why it is *good* for individual persons to be *just*, he will have established that a society ordered by his principles of justice is as stable as any that human beings can create (1999a, 496–505).

With this overarching concern for congruence in mind, we can revisit the final paragraph of *A Theory of Justice*. Recall that Rawls gives a strong, indeed extraordinary, list of reasons as to why we, as individuals, should want to practice the original position as a spiritual exercise (and become the kind of sage-like person who makes a sense of justice supremely regulative of their rational plans of life). But to appreciate the stakes and challenges of Rawls's argument for congruence and the good of justice, we need to be crystal clear about how irrational and unattractive, from a certain self-interested perspective, the original position can appear. Far from seeming like a viable exercise to transform and cultivate ourselves, the original position may give exactly the opposite impression. It seems to require people to do—and especially, to relinquish—certain things that contradict their own self-interest.

Put it this way: the purpose of the original position and veil of ignorance is to remove any positional advantage, whether due to natural contingency or

social accident, that might skew the terms of social cooperation in a particular direction. But say that, in the real world, you are a relatively advantaged member of society. Say, to speak bluntly, that, like me, you are a white, upper middle class, able-bodied heterosexual male in a Western capitalist liberal democracy. Why, from a strictly rational point of view, should I ever entertain a point of view (i.e., the original position) that would bracket my positional advantage? In the present state of affairs I definitely enjoy more than my fair share of what Rawls calls “primary social goods,” which include rights and liberties, opportunities, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect (1999a, 78–81). To suspend knowledge of my whiteness—or maleness, or upper middle classness, and the rest—in reflecting on which terms of social cooperation to affirm would be positively irrational.

This same observation can be translated into Rawls’s own terms. In setting up the thought-experiment of the original position, he makes an important stipulation about the motivation (the psychology, if you like) of persons in the original position. We assume, he states, that persons in the original position are mutually disinterested and not bound by moral ties to one another. Each is out to secure the most favorable terms of social cooperation for someone who, behind the veil of ignorance, does not know their own position (Rawls 1999a, 12–14). The reason why Rawls builds in this stipulation is not relevant for us (it has to do with his desire to build his own theory of justice on weaker assumptions about human motivation than utilitarianism does). But the consequence certainly is: he makes the selection of the principles of justice from within the original position a matter of rational choice (1999a, 15, 221). Persons within the original position are in the same situation as the individual who gets to cut the cake on condition that he chooses his piece last. The cake is divided evenly out of self-interest, not altruism. Hence the reason why Rawls calls his theory of justice “justice as fairness”: the name does not mean that justice and fairness are the same thing, but that the principles of justice are agreed to in a situation that is fair (1999a, 11).

My point is that no relatively advantaged member of society would ever choose to enter the original position *if he or she were thinking like a person in the original position*. That is not an objection to the original position but instead a clarification as to what it is trying to accomplish. Rawls is not trying to get us to think more like persons *within* the original position. Most of us are all too adept at rational self-interest and maximin choice strategies. His goal, rather, is to get us to become the kind of person who *wants to adopt* the perspective of the original position. The original position is, after all, by definition, a limiting point of view: it incorporates moral conditions that are reasonable to impose on the choice of principles of justice. Given that, Rawls needs a convincing explanation as to why ordinary people in liberal democracies—advantaged and disadvantaged alike—would want to adopt it. Why,

negatively speaking, is it so bad to be the kind of person who refuses to think about social cooperation without knowledge of where they and their friends stand in it? Or why, put positively, is it so good to become the “ideal of the person” that I said earlier doubles as the Rawlsian sage?

## Soulcraft for Liberals

*A Theory of Justice* provides members of the well-ordered society with a great many reasons as to why they should want to become just. Some concern the overall stability of the polity. Others are moral reasons that value justice as an end in itself. Others still can be classified as benefits to the individual. These include enhanced ties of civic friendship, participation in rich and inclusive social unions, and even unification of our reasonable and rational selves (Rawls 1999a, 221–227, 456–463, 491–505; Weithman 2010, 122–147). An article could be written about each from the perspective of personal transformation and care for one’s self.<sup>8</sup> To conclude, however, I raise a specific virtue that is instilled by the original position practiced as a spiritual exercise—impartiality—and sketch two of its features. That will furnish a preliminary response to our devil’s advocate from the previous section as to why it is good, for the individual him or herself, to affirm in day-to-day life, the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation.

Following Hadot, I call the first feature the “view from above.” Impartiality in the original position consists of achieving distance not just from one’s own egoistic desires, but also from our group-based interests and preference for those near and dear to us. Hadot also cares a great deal about impartiality. In an interview, he suggests that, at the end of the day, a single attitude underlies any and all spiritual exercises. It consists in a choice—“a fundamental philosophical choice”—to overcome “the partial, biased, egocentric, egoist self in order to attain the level of the higher self. This self sees all things from a perspective of universality and totality, and becomes aware of itself as part of the cosmos that encompasses, then, the totality of things” (Hadot 2011, 86).

A favorite spiritual exercise of Hadot’s to achieve impartiality, which he examines in ancient and modern contexts, is “the view from above.” It

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8. “Care of the self” is a term associated with Michel Foucault, himself deeply influenced by Hadot (in fact, it was Foucault who secured Hadot’s appointment at The Collège de France). An additional line of rapprochement between Rawlsian and Foucauldian political theory could be carved out by comparing Foucault’s later writings on self-cultivation with Rawls’s notion of congruence, in order to establish how and why both authors think, to use Rawls’s terms, it is good to be just. For a discussion of care of the self in political theory, see Lefebvre (2018).



consists in ascending, in the mind's eye or even physically, to a perspective that can take in the totality of reality (Hadot 2008a). The reality in question can be physical or moral, but the essence of the exercise lies in the willingness and effort to pass from our limited and often egoistic point of view to a wider more universal perspective. "I have always rather liked," he says, "the saying of a Chinese philosopher who holds that we are like vinegar flies trapped in a vat; one must get out of his confinement to breathe fresh air in the world" (Hadot 2011, 137).

Clearly, the *sub specie aeternitatis* perspective of the original position operates as a view from above. It is an exercise in and of letting go: of our own all-too-dear contingent position, together with the whole texture of attachments (to family, friends, profession, church, and country) wrapped up with it. The objective, of course, is not to extract oneself from social ties as an isolated individual (that is only what hasty critics think Rawls say). Nor is it to distance oneself from the morality of our own time (in the manner of Nietzsche, perhaps). Quite the opposite: the purpose of the exercise is to take a deeper dive into that morality (i.e., the morality of our own background and public liberal culture), one where we do not permit ourselves to be distracted or buffered by our social position. We plunge, if you like, into the idea that society should be a fair system of cooperation. If we do so regularly, and if we cultivate what Hadot would call a "real" rather than "notional" commitment to it, we find ourselves exposed to, and perhaps eventually committed by, the principles behind our own most considered judgments (1995, 277). That process is transformational. We disengage from our social position; we reengage with our social position; and in that ever-renewed activity, we become impartial.

The second feature of impartiality concerns wonder—in particular, the sentiment of wonder that we might feel with respect to everyday life. Here it is illuminating to return to Hadot. A theme he addresses time and again in his writing is perception—specifically, the desire to regain a rich and "naïve" perception of the world that breaks away from the artificial, habitual, and conventional. One might even see this as the guiding thread of his life and work: from a precocious experience in his childhood of "oceanic" oneness with the world, to a fateful exam question on Bergson for his baccalaureate, right up to his final book on nature in antiquity (2011, 6, 125–126; 2008b). Philosophy, for Hadot, does not exactly begin in wonder. It would be more accurate to say that philosophy, practiced over the course of a lifetime, is what can return us, for brief and privileged instants at a time, to a state of wonder.

Rawls seldom discusses the natural world in his writings. But the question of human nature, and specifically, our moral nature, is front and center in *A Theory of Justice*. In an important section (§40, "The Kantian Interpretation of Justice as Fairness"), he argues that the original position amounts to a point of

view “from which noumenal selves see the world” (1999a, 225). The reason why, of course, is because it separates the wheat from the chaff: by screening out social and natural contingencies—that is, by becoming well and truly impartial—the original position allows our nature as free and equal moral persons to shine through, such that we apprehend our social and political world, fellow human beings, and ultimately ourselves under this aspect. The original position is designed to correct for “the arbitrariness of the world”: by selecting principles that enable individuals to view themselves from outside the contingency of their position, to act from that point of view by honoring the principles of justice, and thus to recover a naïve (or simple, or original) perception of themselves (Rawls 1999a, 122). We apprehend our world, and ourselves in it, from nothing less than “the perspective of eternity.” At once cognitive and affective, it is a point of view that, as Rawls emphasizes in the last lines of his book, we adopt from within our social world.

For Rawls, self-formation in and through the original position is cause of wonder and hope. It is cause for wonder because we recover a naïve perception of ourselves, one that pierces through the accumulated happenstance of our empirical existence. It is cause for hope because that naïve perception itself redeems everyday life. The original position is not a hermitage away from our empirical lives. It is a perspective that we can adopt in everyday life on everyday life for everyday life. Recall the first words I cited from Rawls in this article, from the unpublished “Questions They Didn’t Ask Me” addendum to his interview: “[By redemption] what I mean is that what I called the ordinary round of life—growing up, falling in love, having children and the rest—can seem not enough by itself. That ordinary round must be graced by something to be worthwhile” (2003). Rawls does not imply that this redemption is unachieved or is yet to come. Perhaps we have already been graced by something. By what, he does not say. Yet if we look at what the original position can accomplish, it might answer his deepest and most spiritual of questions.

## **Conclusion**

It may seem misplaced to evoke Hadot on wonder in a discussion of Rawls. What, after all, could be less full of wonder, futurity, and imagination than liberal democracy today? Lassitude and irony seem much more in the air. But reading Rawls alongside Hadot may change our mood. If we appreciate that the principles of justice that underlie our liberal democracies are the ones that our “noumenal selves” would select, two sorts of emotions may grip us. The first is wonder and appreciation—“reconciliation”, Rawls might say (2001, 3–4)—that we live in a world that, to some degree at least, corresponds with the moral aspirations we set for ourselves and society. The

second is shame (which is a self-regarding emotion) and indignation (which is an other-regarding emotion) that our own worlds may be on the verge of veering away from it.

As we have said, Hadot mostly confines his writing on spiritual exercises to antiquity. In an interview, however, he makes an observation that cuts directly to our concerns with Rawls and the original position. Upon commenting on how objectivity is both a scholarly and spiritual virtue, he states, “One must get rid of the partiality of the individual and impassioned self, in order to elevate oneself to the universality of the rational self. The exercise of political democracy, as it should be practiced, should correspond to this attitude as well. Self-detachment is a moral attitude that should be demanded of both the politician and the scholar” (Hadot 2011, 167).

The soulcraft of the original position is precisely of this kind: the self-cultivation of an impartial soul ready and willing to be worthy of the demands of liberal democracy. In that sense, Rawls would agree on the need for an ethic of self-detachment, and subsequent re-attachment, in democracy. In fact, he wrote the book on it. Reading Rawls alongside Hadot, then, has the potential not just to elicit a sense of what we might lose should liberalism become displaced. It can inspire liberals to realize their own morality, already at hand, in a way that would transform them into the kind of person they think that they already are.

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