

## IDEOLOGICAL MYSTIFICATION AND ARCHIMEDEAN POINTS

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The claim has repeatedly been made by radical critics of Rawls that liberals such as Rawls largely ignore the facts about 'imposed consciousness', the facts about the myriad and often subtle ways in which the social formation of attitudes and beliefs skew even what we would reflectively choose and skew in certain determinate ways our considered judgements even – so the claim goes – when they are in reflective equilibrium<sup>(1)</sup>.

It might be responded that Rawls is not, and indeed need not be, overly concerned with this ideological distortion of moral thought or its cultural and perhaps class variability, for, like the intuitionists, he is concerned with what would be agreed on under *ideal* conditions. These very ideological distortions simply make the conditions described non-ideal. The considered judgements to be appealed to are those that would obtain in an *ideal reflective morality*. What the moral theorist is endeavouring to discover are those principles which explain this ideal set of judgements and which, when conjoined with true non-moral beliefs, will yield correct moral assessments of things in various possible worlds<sup>(2)</sup>. Only those considered judgements which would still be made and their corresponding convictions held under such ideal conditions are to be taken as evidence for which philosophical principles of justice or of morality generally are correct. Only such

(1) Milton Fisk, "History and Reason in Rawls's Moral theory" in Norman DANIELS (ed.), *Reading Rawls*, Michael Teitelman, "The Limits of Individualism", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 69 (October 5, 1972), pp. 545-556 and Robert Paul WOLFF, *Understanding Rawls*.

(2) M. B. SMITH, "Intuitionism and Naturalism", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (December, 1979).

considered judgements can be in reflective equilibrium with moral principles. When this reflective equilibrium obtains, the moral principles (including, of course, principles of justice) in such an equilibrium with such considered judgements are *ipso facto* the correct or, if you will, the true moral principles.

A philosopher, taking such a line of defense, could, and indeed, would, agree that, even for our considered judgements, it is not easy to know the extent to which bias is still operating. Even the attainment of substantial consensus on the non-moral propositions appealed to in making such moral judgements is not easy to obtain. Yet there are those who are convinced that we – that is any one of us as individuals, if we have anything like normal intelligence – can, in a reasonable proportion of the time, if we will engage in such disciplined reflection, attain an approximate satisfaction of the ideal conditions with those who will similarly engage in moral reflection with us. We can correct for non-moral disagreement and bias by appeal to simplified hypothetical cases where the non-moral properties in question are not in dispute and where our particular interests, including our class interests, are not involved. And the ‘we’ being appealed to are ‘a we’ who have so divested ourselves of partiality. When we have done this, that is, when we have, as best we can, approximated satisfaction of ideal conditions, then, if we, that is the community of people who have so divested themselves of their partiality, find substantial agreement among our considered judgements, we may take this to be sufficient evidence for their truth. We can continue in this way in a fallibilistic spirit to approximate an ideal reflective morality – what Kurt Baier once called ‘true morality’<sup>(3)</sup>. This ideal reflective morality – the beliefs and commitments displayed in our considered judgements so pruned and so rationalized – will not, in effect by implicit definition will not, be a moral ideology expressive of class interests. Instead it will be an index to the correctness of a normative ethical theory. (This, note, is stronger than anything Rawls claims for he also allows the normative ethical theory to continue sometimes to correct even such considered judgements. In other words the correction goes both ways. But I will ignore here such complications)<sup>(4)</sup>.

(3) Kurt BAIER, *The Moral Point of View*.

(4) John RAWLS, “The Independence of Moral Theory”, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (1976).

Marxists would tend to respond (perhaps react as an initial response would be better) by querying whether such impartiality can be recovered by such careful reflection. The individual, by such thought experiments, cannot sufficiently divest himself of his early socialization to respond in such a fashion. The very judgement that we have, as best we can, approximated satisfaction of ideal conditions, will not be one which will attain a cross-cultural, cross-class agreement. It will often not work between peoples of different cultures. Even within our own societies, members of the dominant class and their allies, which includes most professionals and many intellectuals, will typically be much more sanguine about whether such ideal conditions have been approximated as well as can be than will class-conscious proletarians and their allies among the intelligentsia. The view of society of these two groups will be very different. Consider, for example, their differing attitudes toward the existing established elites and what can be expected of them and their order.

Everyone can agree, and surely reflective, informed people will agree, that it is not easy to know whether bias is operating when we make considered judgements. After all, it is very difficult indeed to divest oneself of partiality. We are prone to self-deception here and the person who is very confident that he has so divested himself is very likely to be thoroughly self-deceived.

What are the marks of divestment of partiality here? Plainly that we will be willing to examine the available evidence (here the non-moral facts judged relevant), that we will look at all sides of the issue and that we will attempt to give reasons for our beliefs and assess the opposing or probing arguments of others. All of this is elementary and is surely something that we must do if we would divest ourselves of partiality, but that done there are still some evident roadblocks remaining to such divestment. What non-moral facts are judged to be relevant, and their degree of relevance, will plainly vary with the social theory accepted with its deeply embedded ideological elements. A Marxist will cast a much wider net than a Humean. Facts about forces of production and relations of production and facts about the class origins, class position and the structural role of certain types of people in the society will be of dubious relevance to the Humean, but they will be taken to have evident relevance by the Marxist. What will count as 'looking at all sides of the issue' will have similarly contestable features and it is not evident what would count as an objective resolution of the conflict.

And while we do, if we are trying to do so discipline ourselves, attempt to give reasons for our moral beliefs, we also sometimes run out of reasons and we fall back on our considered convictions. This is something we are particularly liable to in extended and at least seemingly intractable moral disputes. Even in such situations, we still have, as Hare has reminded us, our reasons, but they, when we so run out of reasons, are recognized by us in such situations, where we are clear-headed, not to trump, by way of an appeal to reason or the facts, the reasons of our advisaries, and we then, where we continue to maintain our stance, fall back on our considered convictions. (I do not say that we must do this for all eternity or that we must be committed to the belief that in such situations there are no reasons which, if we were aware of them could resolve the dispute, and we have only our considered convictions to fall back on. I do not see how we could know or justifiably believe anything like that. But what we do know is that we do here rely on our considered convictions and that we do not have any reasons at hand that we can upon demand articulate that would trump the reasons of our advisaries.) Moreover, when we assess the arguments and probings of others, we do not – and cannot – do this as neutral spectators of the actual, but always, and unavoidably, from a perspective. There is and can be no *perspectiv-frei* position. There can be, of course, arguments about perspectives and their scope. But here their contestability is very evident. Moreover, it is the case, as Wittgenstein stressed, that it is difficult for us to recognize the extent of our groundless believing. There are deeply embedded but quite groundless beliefs, beliefs which have been called framework-beliefs, e.g., ‘Things do not disappear without cause’ or ‘Nature is continuous’, which are firmly and unquestionably believed by us, but not necessarily by all people in all cultures. Even if this Wittgensteinian point about groundlessness is in some way overstated, what is the case is that (a) we are on very contestable ground here and (b) while we can talk as much as we like of the myth of the framework, it remains the case that in reasoning about what principles of justice to adopt, we reason from a perspective, a perspective cluttered with ideological notions, and it is not evident how, if at all, we can break out of all such perspectives and simply see things in the light of cold reason or as neutral spectators of the actual. (I do not imply this is unique to morality. I contend only that it applies to morality.)

Considerations of this sort are behind the claim that contractarians such as Rawls believe that too much can be recovered in intuition or achieved in the way of an Archimedean point by appealing to our considered judgements, even when these considered judgements are in reflective equilibrium<sup>(5)</sup>. Disciplined reflection is not enough to make our considered judgements non-ideological. People will differ on whether we have attained approximate satisfaction of ideal conditions and there is no clear criteria for how we could establish who, if anyone, is right, or even approximately right, in claiming such issues have been resolved. Moreover, to resolve this would require some reasonable resolution of a whole cluster of issues, including issues about which account of society is the more adequate – an issue deeply encrusted with ideology.

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(5) Bernard WILLIAMS, "The Moral View of Politics", *The Listener* (June 3, 1976).