

Liberal Reasonability a Critical Tool? Reflections After Rawls

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RÉSUMÉ : Le recours au raisonnable est partout présent dans l'œuvre de John Rawls. Et cependant, le concept lui-même est souvent vu comme problématique et nombreux sont ceux qui pensent que le raisonnable ne saurait avoir la portée cruciale que Rawls lui attribue. Le concept est ici élucidé et certaines conceptualisations du raisonnable sont explicitées. L'auteur soutient que ces conceptualisations permettent au raisonnable de jouer le rôle-clé que Rawls en attend.

1.

Even a superficial reading of *Political Liberalism*, “The Law of Peoples,” and “A Reply to Habermas” reveals how abundant the references to reasonability are in John Rawls’s work.¹ The concept, plainly, plays a central role in his thought. But that itself—that luxuriant use of the term “reasonable”—will, and should, generate critical reaction, or at least scepticism. It will, and not unreasonably, widely be taken to be troubling, for it has not infrequently been thought that what is taken to be reasonable and what is not, to say nothing of our very concept as well as our many conceptions of reasonability, are too vague and too context-dependent for reasonability—what Rawls calls the reasonable—to be a proper term of critical appraisal. It, some have thought (among them Wittgenstein), is more like an ideological club to beat down those who disagree with us than a critical term to be used in philosophical or any other kind of critical or reflective assessment or deliberation. The use of the term “reasonable” is principally emotive or perlocutionary, or (what is not at all the

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same thing) the very concept is an essentially contested concept, or at least it is so context-dependent, so particular-practice dependent, that it could not possibly do the critical work Rawls has assigned to it or at least vaguely presupposes that it has.

I want here to begin to address this complex and tangled issue. My hope is to afford some plausible reasons for believing that it is, after all, a genuinely critical instrument that can do some critical work.

Rawls's later theory, as is well known, starts by accepting the idea—indeed, the plain sociological reality—that pluralism is an intractable fact in our rich capitalist democracies. Indeed, this situation in such contexts could only be changed, and a non-pluralistic society could only be sustained, if it could be sustained at all, by an oppressive authoritarian use of force. In short, under modern conditions, we would need an authoritarian régime to have a non-pluralistic society. It would have to be a society with one state-organized or state-backed (as in an alliance with a church) comprehensive conception of the so-called common good, in one way or another, forced on many of the society's members. (Think here of Franco's Spain, Salazar's Portugal, or Pinochet's Chile.) Rawls, not unsurprisingly, and as many others do, takes this, as I do as well, to be totally unacceptable. There can be no such attaining of legitimate moral authority. So in thinking about a just society—a just political order—for modern societies, pluralism must be taken as a given. It *may* not be stably achievable in modern societies with a democratic tradition, but, stably achievable or not, its rejection is not acceptable for such societies. It at least must be something we strive to approximate.

However, in the face of that *de facto* pluralism (the pluralism of our actually existing modern liberal societies), for his appeal to an overlapping consensus to have the normative importance Rawls believes it to have, the pluralism must also be a *reasonable* pluralism. For this to be so, it must be the case that, for the different and sometimes conflicting groups to be accepted as being members in good standing in the society, they must have reasonable conceptions generally reasonably applied. Where the various groups in the society are all in this way reasonable, we have a reasonable pluralism. They can be so, Rawls has it (here following Isaiah Berlin), even with their sometimes extensively differing and incommensurable comprehensive conceptions of the good—conceptions of the good that such reasonable people will continue reasonably to disagree about.² It is among such groups that Rawls seeks an overlapping consensus. Moreover, as members in good standing of such groups, reasonable people will respect people with their differing reasonable conceptions of the good, conceptions that not infrequently conflict—sometimes deeply—with their own conceptions of the good. Both the people and their views will be respected where the pluralism is a reasonable one. (Where we have people with

plainly unreasonable views, we should continue to respect them as human beings, but not their views.)

However, as difficult as such “incommensurabilities” concerning comprehensive conceptions of the good make it for us to construct an adequate conception of reasonability, doing so is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for such an overlapping consensus to play the important role it plays in Rawls’s account. But what is a *reasonable pluralism*? When do we have it? Does such a notion have the requisite objectivity and applicability to do the work in political theory that Rawls puts it to?

2.

Stuart Hampshire, a sympathetic critic, thinks that Rawls makes too much of claims about what is reasonable and unreasonable, and neglects both the deep and ineradicable passions that are a part of the very web of our lives and neglects, as well as the culturally pervasive different socialization that yields different conceptions of what is valuable, what is worth doing and having—differences that give rise to deep and ineradicable conflicts in the life of any society. Rawls’s account, Hampshire believes, is a kind of *misplaced rationalism*.³ To rest such final authority on reason, including what Rawls calls public reason, is a bad place for a liberal—or, for that matter, anyone—to occupy, because it is a conception, Hampshire claims, that is rooted in a “disastrous illusion descending unashamed to Kant and Rawls from Plato’s *Republic*.”⁴ We, particularly if we are philosophers, tend to be overawed by talk of reason. “We must still feel some awe or fear (*Achtung*) before the magnificent words ‘reason’ and ‘unreasonable’ brandished in front of us Kantian style.”⁵ But that, Hampshire claims, is a bit of self-deception to which philosophers are particularly prone. Rawls, as I remarked initially—as do Jürgen Habermas and Brian Barry—does a lot of such brandishing. With such a display of “the reasonable,” misplaced rationalism or not, it behooves us to get a little clearer about what we are talking about in saying that something is reasonable.

3.

I shall start with a conception of what it is to be reasonable that both has some determinate content and is, I believe, at least relatively uncontroversial. It is a characterization of reasonableness with more content than conceptions of reasonableness simply appealing to fairness or to being sensible. Although it is as old as Socrates, it has all the same a robust content, and, while being compatible with the still more determinate liberal conception of reasonableness that I shall also state, it is not an expression of it or identical with it, and is perfectly available to non-liberals. By the same token, it does not catch the fullness of the distinctive liberal concep-

tion of being reasonable that I shall articulate. Liberal reasonableness, that is, has all these features while having other distinctive features as well.

Thomas McCarthy puts this *general* conception this way: to be reasonable is to have the central and uncontroversial virtues of reasonableness such as “open-mindedness, avoidance of dogmatism, a willingness to discuss differences, to listen to others, to take their views seriously, and to change our minds, an ability to see things from the perspectives of others and to weigh up judiciously the pros and cons of issues.”⁶ This account is not a utopian account of reasonableness, but an accurate (though incomplete) description of what it is to be reasonable, though it *may* be utopian or at least overly optimistic to think that many people can be consistently reasonable in that way. Be that as it may, this is the way people must be if they are to be in the neighbourhood of being fully reasonable. (I should add that the very idea and ideal of “a fully reasonable person” is a heuristic ideal. But some people, some of the time, approximate it.)

This characterization of the virtues of reasonableness is, of course, indeterminate in certain ways, but not so indeterminate as not to have definite applications in certain plain cases. Many people, the query to the contrary I raised above notwithstanding, plainly exercise at least an approximation of these virtues frequently enough and consistently enough to count as reasonable persons, and it is likewise evident enough that many do not. We plainly have a non-vacuous contrast here. It is also equally obvious that many of us are more or less reasonable: sometimes more and sometimes, unfortunately, less.

In line with the above, there is also, standardly, for a given society at a given time, a broad consensus that certain views, beliefs, attitudes, and actions are reasonable, and that certain of them are unreasonable. And, while this has a certain historical and cultural specificity, nonetheless, throughout the Occident at least, the above-mentioned virtues of reasonableness—these general but not entirely indeterminate notions—have been taken to be virtues of reasonableness for a very long time. McCarthy is perfectly justified in saying that these ideas about reasonability, ubiquitously accepted now, are as old as Socrates. There is certainly nothing peculiarly liberal about them, but there is also nothing there whose truth is going to be challenged. What will be challenged is whether it gives us anything other than a platitudinous determinateness.

4.

I turn now to a specification of a distinctively liberal conception of reasonableness tailored in large measure to our societies (principally the rich capitalist democracies). It tells us in some detail what we moderns and, if you will, postmoderns mean by reasonableness, though I do not mean that all the elements that are said to be part of the liberal conception of reasonability are such that they only obtain, when they obtain, in liberal

societies. They are common to, and characteristic of, liberal societies, but—thinking of them individually—not all these elements are utterly peculiar to liberal societies. But the *ensemble* comes close to being both distinctive of and peculiar to liberal societies. It is, moreover, a conception of reasonableness shared by both political liberals (Rawls's sense) and liberals such as Mill and Kant who are also *comprehensive* liberals.

I shall give two lists of these liberal conceptions of reasonableness. The first contains what I take to be relatively uncontroversial elements in a liberal conception of reasonableness, and the second I take to be a more controversial list (controversial and uncontroversial, in both cases, from a liberal perspective). If the question is asked, "What makes one list controversial and the other not?" I think it should be said that nothing more need be involved than that almost all liberals would take the first list as articulating what it is to be reasonable (though, of course, there will be different phrasings and interpretations of what is being said), while the second would not yield such a consensus, or at least such a firm consensus, among liberals. But the distinction is not a hard and fast one, and the main point is to recognize that both lists go into a thick specification of a liberal understanding of reasonability.

It should also be apparent that my characterization, like Rawls's, is a moral (though not a moralistic) one. No attempt is made to set out a non-moral conception of the reasonable (something I do not think is even intelligible) and then to try to derive morality, or some significant subset of morality, from it. It is not at all like Hobbes, or (in our time) David Gauthier, trying—with, in their cases, a putatively morally neutral conception of rationality—to derive morality, or a significant part of morality, from it. That is not all the role the reasonable plays in Rawls's account, even though Rawls takes his account in some sense to be contractarian. The conception of reasonability is, to repeat, a moral and normatively political conception from the start, though it is not simply a moral or normatively political conception. (A normatively political conception is also plainly a moral conception.)

The lists (particularly the uncontroversial one) are long and reasonably detailed. We have what Michael Walzer might call a thick rather than a minimal conception of liberal reasonability.⁷ Without worrying overly about redundancy, I try, with the fullness of my characterizations of these conceptions, to give a description which will, in its thickness and detail, afford us some ground and means for sorting out a reasonable pluralism from a merely *de facto* pluralism and reasonable from unreasonable persons, views, beliefs, attitudes, practices, principles, plans, comprehensive conceptions of the good, and conceptions of justice for people in liberal societies. I would also hope that it would, in tandem with the more general conception lifted from McCarthy, enable us to get a grip on questions about the comparative reasonableness of whole societies and ways of

life. Armed with this, I hope that we could intelligibly, usefully, and non-question-beggingly ask if a liberal social order can correctly be said to be more reasonable than a non-liberal one. I want to be able to ask, and hope to be in a position to answer, such questions about societies and whole worldviews. My hope is that that specification of a conception of reasonableness will be sufficiently detailed, non-ideological, and uncontroversial to yield a critical instrument which will do some of that work. Finally, by way of preliminaries concerning indeterminacy (partial indeterminacy) of application, what I said about the more general conception of reasonableness should apply to the liberal conception as well.

A Liberal Conceptual of Reasonableness

Uncontroversial List

1. The views and beliefs reasonable people hold must be such that they will be prepared to modify them, or the actions they take on the basis of them, in order to make possible social cooperation in terms of freedom and equality with others who may hold different views and have different beliefs.⁸
2. Reasonable persons “desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept.”⁹ Such persons, as a fundamental desire, will want to be able to justify their actions to others on grounds they could not sensibly reject.¹⁰
3. Reasonable people will desire a social world where people stand in relations of freedom and equality, and in which reciprocity obtains in such a way that each, from that reciprocity, benefits along with the others.
4. Where people are being reasonable, some will seek to articulate the reasons we are to share and publicly recognize before one another as grounding our social relations. And all reasonable persons will welcome and be prepared, where they can see that they are justified, to accept such reasons. They will wish to see worked out, and some will engage in the working out, of the framework for the public social world that it is hoped, and expected, everyone will endorse and act on, provided others can be relied on to do the same.¹¹
5. There will be a rejection of all forms of fanaticism.
6. There will be an openness toward and a tolerance of all those who are similarly tolerant. There will be criticism of the intolerant and resistance to their intolerance, but there may even be tolerance of the intolerant, where (if ever that obtains) their intolerance will do no

substantial harm to others. (Intolerant persons, of course, cannot count as reasonable persons.)

7. There will, along with the tolerance mentioned in 6, be a respect for all persons.
8. Reasonable persons will have a sense of fairness, be willing to meet others halfway, be ready to compromise where deep issues of principle are not threatened, believe in the value of mutual respect, and have a sense of civility.¹²
9. Reasonable persons will be concerned that agreements will be regulated so as to ensure a fair balancing of interests.
10. Agents, if they are reasonable, must be willing “to listen to others” and display “fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should . . . be made.”¹³ There will, on the part of such persons, be a commitment to public dialogue and justification.
11. Agreements must—or, at least, normally must—be obtained through dialogue where all taking part are treated as equals with an equal say and with an equal consideration of their interests. Agreements, if they are to be reasonable, must be obtained in this way and not through the employment of rhetorical skill, charismatic influence, physical coercion, or bargaining in which the powerful have a greater say.
12. There will be a commitment to impartiality and fairness, and to fair dealing with everyone.
13. There will be a concern to hear, and fairly attend to, all sides of, and all parties to, a dispute before making a judgement concerning any matter at hand or before opting for a certain public policy. And there will always be a willingness to review judgements or policies in the light of new evidence or newly articulated cogent reasons; attitudes and manner and styles of reasoning will be thoroughly fallibilistic.
14. There will be a self-criticalness concerning one’s own beliefs, attitudes, and ways of behaving, and, as well, a critical attitude, though with a valuing of civility and with a sceptical caution, toward the institutions and practices of one’s own society, and other societies as well.
15. In matters of public concern, there will be a commitment to trying to hold beliefs that are at least in accordance with readily available, plainly recognizable facts. And there will be a concern to have a clear awareness of the full range of such facts, or at least as many of the relevant ones as can practically be garnered for the matter at hand, and not to avoid any such facts as may be inconvenient.

16. At least over matters of public concern, there will be a concern (a) to have (where relevant) evidence for one's beliefs, (b) to be consistent and coherent, (c) to be concerned, where possible, to ascertain the better argument or more adequate deliberation, and to accept the force and the practical implications of such an argument or deliberation.
17. There will be a concern to have beliefs and policies which are intelligible and coherent in the light of the circumstances in which reasoning is usually exercised.
18. There will be an acceptance among reasonable people of the view that, in a well-ordered and just society, none of the contending sides in a dispute can legitimately impose their moral convictions on the society—and thus, perforce, on others—by forceful domination. What is needed, instead, for ideas to have a society-wide normative force is that they not be accepted unless they are in accordance with what can be established by the recognized procedures of fair discussion and of consistent and rule-governed adjudication already established in the society.
19. Even when there is no agreement about certain crucial ends, procedurally correct outcomes will be accepted by reasonable people.

Controversial List

1. Among reasonable people, there will be a common recognition that it will be unavoidable in our complex modern world that many of our most important judgements will be made “under conditions where it is not to be expected that conscientious persons with full powers of reason, even after free discussion, will arrive at the same conclusion.”¹⁴ This fact—part of what Rawls calls the burdens of judgement—is to be taken to heart, and, in such a circumstance, we should seek to avoid imposing any of these contested views or plans on anyone in the society. None of the beliefs that various people hold, where there is such a dissensus, are to be taken as *authoritative* social norms that require that in our public life we must act in a certain way.
2. “An understanding of value is fully reasonable just in case its adherents are stably disposed to affirm it as they acquire new information and subject it to careful reflection.”¹⁵
3. Faced with a persistent diversity of equally reasonable, or nearly equally reasonable, comprehensive, or partially comprehensive conceptions of the good, we should, if we would be reasonable, restrict ourselves over claims for a just ordering of society and for similar social norms to the common ground (if such there be) between such

diverse views, acknowledging that reason (careful, reflective reasoning), as far as can be ascertained now, does not mandate a single moral view, and, because of that, we should refrain from imposing, or trying to impose, our own comprehensive, or partially comprehensive, conception of the good on anyone. Only what is in common to those conceptions—that is, matters over which there is a consensus among reasonable persons—can serve as an *authoritative* ground for the design of a society's institutions or for determining what is required of human beings in the society in question.

4. Reasonable people will recognize that it is plausible to believe as a general fact that there will always be people with *unreasonable* views. Indeed, that well may be an empirical truism. But they will also recognize that “the fact that there are some people with unreasonable views does not require that we adjust our conception of justice so that it can be supported by an overlapping consensus that will appeal to them.”¹⁶ We do not need to accommodate the unreasonable. Indeed, if “we did accommodate the unreasonable in the formulation of fundamental principles, then we would be unacceptably adjusting principles to *de facto* power.”¹⁷

5.

What I am concerned to ascertain is whether such a liberal conception of reasonability, hopefully giving us a plausible understanding of the concept of reasonability, also provides us with a critical instrument to use in criticizing certain beliefs and ways of doing and of viewing things, including liberal ways of doing and of viewing things, or whether, instead, it is so vague and indeterminate as to be compatible with almost anything we might think or do, or—to mention still another alternative—whether it is actually an ideological or ethnocentric conception giving us what, in effect, is a distorted and prejudiced view of how things should be. Is it just an ethnocentric conception which helps rationalize liberal ideology? I think, *au contraire*, that it yields a critical instrument with a proper contextual and historicized intersubjective objectivity. But it is *no* more than that. It does not give us some ahistorical objective Archimedean point—something that I very much doubt we can have in any substantive domain.

Employing that liberal conception of reasonability, Rawls argues for a certain account of political justice. He has made a strong case for its being reasonable, in the sense specified above, and, perhaps, broadly speaking, even to be more reasonable than the alternative accounts of political justice we now have before us. (His major competitor seems to be Brian Barry's broadly similar conception.) Moreover, in his arguing for a conception of political justice, the conception of reasonability Rawls employs is both procedural and substantive, not just rhetorical and empty. It is, as the above

listing makes clear, something that we—at least if we are liberals and the like—would, on due reflection, wish to see obtain: to become, that is, a social and political reality in our (to put it conservatively) far from just societies. We would like such reasonability to be operative in our societies.

The question remains, however, whether the liberal conception of reasonableness can play a useful role in making such a case for political justice or in the making of sound social critique. Talk or reasonableness comes trippingly on the tongue for Rawls as it does for Barry and Habermas, but to be operative in our societies—to be anything other than a rhetorical flourish—it must yield, or help yield, some substantive normative standards that make a good claim to being objective. Is it, if we pursue the matter as far as we can, that we finally just appeal to a liberal conception such that, at best, we could show, *internal to liberalism*, that certain views are more reasonable than others, while never being able to show that liberalism itself is more reasonable than non-liberal views without begging the question by just appealing to what liberals, but not always non-liberals, in fact accept, and, no doubt, on reflection will continue to accept? Is it the case that all we can say with any objectivity is that liberals have their culture and its institutions, but that both historically, and actually at the present time, there are about in the world alternative cultures with their distinctive institutions—cultures that do not accept important elements of the liberal conception of reasonableness—and that's that? Is it the case that we can have no non-question-begging way of claiming that one of these social orders is better—more reasonable—than another? Is our conception of reasonability so *internal* to a given *Weltanschauung* that we can have nothing objective to say here? Is our conception of reasonability in reality little more than a device for cheerleading for liberalism?

The liberal conception of reasonableness I have articulated is, indeed, and hardly unsurprisingly, a conception of reasonableness for liberal persons, whether they are just political liberals or are comprehensive, or more or less comprehensive, liberals as well. It fits well with the whole liberal *Weltanschauung*. But does it give us grounds for believing it to be the most reasonable thing—or even a more reasonable thing, where we have a choice in the matter—to be liberal persons? Perhaps it would be more reasonable, or at least better—though certainly not in the liberal sense of “reasonable”—to become Sunni Muslim *taibaan* or Orthodox Jews or Pat Robertson-type Christians, and, thereby, in all these instances, by doing so, to become fundamentalists to the core. Can we rightly say that any well-informed person living in the modern world will, if he or she would be clear-mindedly maximally reasonable, try to be a reasonable *liberal* person? Have we at best established only that, if we *want* to be liberal persons—have a *pro-attitude* toward being liberal persons—we will try to be reasonable in the liberal way of conceiving of what it is to be reasonable? If not, then not; and, given that, there will be no showing that to be rea-

sonable without qualification we must be liberal persons, reasonable in the liberal's distinctive sense of what it is to be reasonable. Indeed, perhaps there is no coherent conception of being reasonable, period. Perhaps the question I am trying to ask cannot even be coherently put. But then, is it just a matter of some people being socialized into being liberals while others are not, and there is an end on it—the rest is sound and fury, signifying nothing? There is no higher perch from which and in accordance with which we can non-question-beggingly assess things here.

I do not think we are so stuck with a liberal ideology of reasonableness, for we can appeal to bootstrapping arguments to move from the more general conception of the reasonable—the old-as-Socrates conception—to the liberal conception with the help of some plausible factual beliefs and a few widely shared—not only in a liberal ethos but beyond it—moral truisms, themselves not dependent on the liberal conception of reasonability. It is here that an appeal to the method of wide reflective equilibrium is vital. There is no bootstrapping from the general account of reasonability to the liberal account of reasonability without it, and it is important, as well, that a genuinely wide and general reflective equilibrium not be such that we are just stuck with saying that there are reasonable conservative and reasonable liberal reflective equilibria, and there is nothing justifying accepting one rather than the other. *If* we were so stuck, we would not, where we are aware of this, have achieved wide reflective equilibrium. If we put these elements together they will yield norms that can be soundly deployed in wide-ranging social critique. (I turn to a consideration of wide reflective equilibrium in Section 6.)

I will now illustrate what I have in mind. *Fundamentalist* views, whether Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, are not reasonable views, even on the more general, moral, culturally universal conception of the reasonable, to say nothing of the liberal conception of reasonableness. Reasonable people, to just stick, for starters, with the general conception, are open-minded; they are willing to seriously consider the views of others; they seek to avoid dogmatism; they are willing to discuss differences, to see things not only from their own perspective but from the perspectives of others; and they are willing to weigh judiciously the pros and cons of the issues. Fundamentalists will not do any of these things. God has spoken to them and given them the Ultimate Truth about Life, how people are to live, and how things must be ordered. They claim to have a Divine Scripture which unerringly gives them The Truth. They further claim that God speaks to them in such a way that there can be no controversy about whether it is *God* that is speaking, about what God says, or about what, concerning such matters, they are to think, or what they and their children and grandchildren are to do, and, more generally, how people are to live. Scripture gives them Infallible Truth here. People who doubt these things are fallen, deluded and corrupted by sin. Their voices are not to be heard. Indeed,

some fundamentalists will even hold that such doubters are anathema. The "ultimate truth of life," fundamentalists believe, has been infallibly revealed to them, as children of God, by God himself.

Such views are unreasonable, given the plain meaning of what it is to be reasonable *both* on the general conception and on the more specific and *perhaps* ideologically skewed liberal conception. Of course, fundamentalists will not—or, at least, not characteristically—say or think their views are unreasonable. That is perhaps something that no one, not even some of Dostoevsky's characters, will say without irony of himself or herself, or at least say it seriously. But their actions and expressed beliefs show, given the plain meaning of "reasonable" that we have specified, that these views are unreasonable. This is so, even if we, so as not to beg any questions, limit ourselves to the general conception.

Such fundamentalists, where they are adults, and most particularly where they live in a modern culture in which they can be aware of alternatives, are being unreasonable in having such commitments, and their views are unreasonable. They are being unreasonable *sans phrase*. We need not be using "reasonable" in making such an argument according to what may be a liberal ideology, but only in the way specified by the more general conception (the old-as-Socrates view). If we try to stand outside of that, we will lose any understanding of what "reasonable" means, for this is a crucial part of what its sense has in the language games we play with "reasonable." (If it is said that in the above characterization I have made out fundamentalists to be worse than they are, then, *if that is true*, I would say that of anyone having the views I have attributed, perhaps mistakenly, to fundamentalists. We still have with such views a determinate and unproblematic possible application of what it is to be unreasonable. Even if, contrary to what I believe, it lacks plain and frequent exemplification, it very well could have exemplification. And that, after all, is what is most crucially involved. Let sociologists dispute—if, indeed, dispute is called for—whether I have got my characterization of fundamentalism right. That is an important thing to sort out in some contexts, but not this one.)

Starting with this general conception of reasonableness and thinking through, with some attention to the facts, what it is in some detail and in practice to be open-minded, non-fanatical, weigh the pros and cons, see all sides of the issue, take into consideration the perspectives of different people and the like, we will be led, if we think carefully and take these matters to heart, from the general to the liberal conception of reasonableness, or at least to something rather like it. That is where and how the bootstrapping argument comes in. Via bootstrapping, we get from the general view of reasonability to the liberal view by thinking through what, in our complex, interdependent, intractably pluralistic world being open-minded, seeing all sides of the issue, taking into consideration the per-

spectives of other people, and being non-fanatical would come to. That is, we will see that it will involve ideas that are an integral part of the liberal conception of reasonability. If we are open-minded, non-fanatical, and take into consideration the views of others, we will want to be able to justify our actions to others on grounds they could not sensibly reject. We will also wish to articulate the reasons we all should share and publicly recognize as grounding our social relations. Moreover, being open-minded and non-fanatical will lead to tolerance on our part. Being willing to listen to others and balance the pros and cons of an issue will lead to fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to the views of others should be made, and that, in turn, will lead to our desiring a social world where people, taken to be free and equal, can cooperate with each other on terms all can accept. When, against the background of our social life, we translate the abstract conceptions of the general conception of reasonability into the concrete, we get key elements of the liberal conception of reasonability.

I think that one of the reasons there is a reluctance on our part to say that a person is unreasonable, or that some of his or her views are unreasonable, is that to do so is to make a harsh criticism of that person. The very duty of *civility* that Rawls so much stresses—something which is very important for us as liberals (indeed, I would say for civilized human beings) and which is tied up with our own extended conception of what it is to be reasonable—militates against our making such ascriptions, or, at least, it makes us reluctant to make them. We will, in many instances, worry about whether, in doing so, we are ourselves failing to be consistently reasonable. We will worry about whether we ourselves, if we make such harsh judgements about other people, are not being in some sense fanatical ourselves. If we are, then we will, of course, have hoisted ourselves by our own petard, and will stand convicted, at least in our own eyes, whether anyone else says so or thinks so or not, of being unreasonable in calling another person or that person's beliefs or point of view unreasonable. So, at the very least, we need to be cautious and charitable here. But that itself has its limits. When someone claims to have The Truth, and does not want to hear what anyone else has to say, for his or her "insight" (thinking it is from God) is beyond controversy, then that person is being unreasonable, and, in many circumstances, duties toward civility notwithstanding, it is evasive on our part not to politely but firmly say so.

Given the liberal conception of reasonability that has just been articulated—a conception also held by John Rawls, Brian Barry, and Joshua Cohen—there is no need to accommodate the unreasonable. We need not—indeed, should not—adjust our conception of justice or our principles of justice so that they can be supported by an overlapping consensus that will have as a part of that consensus those unreasonable views, or any unreasonable views. There is, that is, no need to accommodate our con-

ception of justice or principles of justice to unreasonable views. To alter our conception of justice or social norms to accommodate unreasonable views would, as we have seen, be giving in to *power*; it would be wrongly to adjust our principles in the face of unreasoned and unreasoning power. In resisting unreasonable claims or demands, we are not being intolerant or fanatical, meeting power with power; rather, we are refusing to give in to those who insist on having their way *without reason*. We remain open to their arguments, to hearing their case for what they believe should obtain. But they have to make out their case by an appeal to what can reasonably be defended, or at least what they believe can reasonably be defended. We should not just give in to their demands or assent to their views just on their proclaiming them and insisting that they are right and what they say must be done or adhered to. It is not we who are being fanatical in resisting such demands, but they who are being fanatical, and thus unreasonable, in making them and insisting on them.

So we can see in the case of fundamentalism—and sometimes the religious right as well, if it can be said to differ from fundamentalism—that our conception of reasonableness can serve in a non-ideological way as a critical instrument in the critiquing of such views and in arguing for setting them aside. Such a critique can be extended, though in a somewhat more controversial way, to such Calvinist views as those of Alvin Plantinga when he claims, following Calvin himself, to have an awareness of God where that very claimed awareness is *beyond controversy*.¹⁸ However, the case for using reasonableness as a critical instrument is less clear in other instances.

Let me illustrate. I, like Rawls and Barry, have argued for an egalitarian conception of social justice. But it is not clear that establishing it can be made out on grounds of reasonableness alone. There have been, and still are, non-liberal—indeed, even illiberal—societies with hierarchical and aristocratic theories of justice which are quite different from liberal conceptions. And they have, of course, philosophers and other intellectuals articulating conceptions in their defence. These intellectuals are sometimes thoroughly reasonable by our general conception of being reasonable. They can be, and sometimes are, open-minded, unfanatical, undogmatic, open to the examination of evidential claims, willing to discuss differences, willing to listen to others and take their views seriously, to change their minds, sometimes to see things from the perspectives of others, and judiciously weigh the pros and cons of the issues. On this relatively thick, but still unproblematical and uncontroversial conception of reasonableness, they can be thoroughly reasonable, and their views can be reasonable. But they are views which firmly support non-liberal and sometimes even illiberal hierarchical societies. Such people believe that, if we can gain a clear and unsentimental view of human nature and of the way a stable, and, by their lights, a well-ordered society works, we will see

that all people do not have the same moral and intellectual capacities; we will see that they are not all equally autonomous, or equally capable of acting intelligently and reflectively in the ordering of their lives, to say nothing of participating in the ordering of social life. This being so, a really well-ordered and just society—a society which engenders respect for principles of justice—will allot appropriate privileges and distinctive constitutional powers to a group of superior and discerning persons. Keeping in mind Nietzsche’s maxim that it is the termination of justice to treat what is unequal equally, these superior people are, they believe, to stand above the great mass of inferior people and determine how the social order is to be structured. In doing so, they will seek to structure it in such a way that the various orders of human beings (the people of gold, of silver, and of brass), for their own good, will have their appropriate stations and duties. There will be a proper subordination of some people to others in such societies. There are some things—including some moral, political, and religious things—that the vast majority of people are not capable of questioning or properly understanding and must just, if things are to go well, accept on the say-so of their betters. This aristocratic conception—very distant from our liberal conceptions of justice—could be argued for, or urged, in a temperate, tolerant, and soft-spoken manner, and with perfect civility, though no doubt rather paternalistically. Conservatives need not be shouting moralists.

Given the general conception of reasonableness we have articulated, such conservatives can be thoroughly reasonable persons—but not, it is natural to respond, on the thicker liberal conception of reasonableness that we have articulated. To this, it should in turn be responded that many (but by no means all) of the elements of the liberal conception would apply to them as well; would, that is, be a part of their understanding of reasonableness. Moreover, and centrally, the parts of the liberal conception which would enable us to say, if we appealed to them, that these aristocrats and their defenders are unreasonable, are themselves controversial elements where “reasonable” may be, in effect, *persuasively* defined, and may well function as an ideological instrument for liberalism—and more generally for modernity, or even, as well, postmodernity—rather than as a critical instrument to be used in critiquing society.

Let me give that substance. The liberal conception has it that reasonable people will desire a social world in which people will stand in relations of freedom and equality. In ordering that social world we must, they believe, order it with that in mind. We must, if we are to be reasonable in the liberal sense of “reasonable,” take it that all human beings have equal moral standing, and that our political arrangements must acknowledge that and effectively support it, if they are to be just. Reasonable persons—that is, reasonable *liberal* persons—will believe in *moral* equality—namely, that the life of everyone matters, and matters equally. Liberals,

whether they are libertarians, social democrats, or socialists (the spectrum runs from Robert Nozick and David Gauthier on the right to G. A. Cohen and John Elster on the left), will believe that, as will genuine communists as well. Non-liberal aristocrats will not believe that, but will regard those elements of the liberal and communist conception of reasonableness as a moralistic and sentimental intrusion that has nothing to do with reasonableness. It is not their intelligence or open-minded reflectiveness, such conservatives will maintain, that leads such people to desire a social world in which all people have equal moral standing, but their liberal or communist *sentiments* and *sympathies*. It is a bit of self-deception to believe that reasonableness requires that egalitarian commitment. Such egalitarian views may be—indeed, I think, are—*consistent* with reasonableness, but they are not *required* by it.

6.

What it looks like the above shows is that morality, or politically normative views, including the claims of political or social justice, cannot be derived from the general conception of reasonableness *alone*, or even from such reasonableness plus a good knowledge of the non-moral facts (if that is not pleonastic). We can no more get morality out of reasonableness than we can get it out of rationality. Or, to put it more accurately, though more pedantically, since reasonability and reasonableness are themselves normative and moral conceptions, from those distinctive moral notions, where it is the general conception of reasonableness that is at issue, we cannot derive what justice requires or what rights we have or how society is to be ordered. Hobbes and, in our time, David Gauthier, have made hard-nosed efforts to get a rational kernel of morality out of pure practical rationality. But what has been established, at best, is that ethical egoism (better *so-called* ethical egoism) is ruled out. But there remains before us the completely open rational choice of a full range (perhaps *the* full range) of moralities and moral views. Moreover, the falsity or incoherence of “ethical egoism” does not show that *personal egoism*—the prudent amorality of Hobbes’s foole—is in all circumstances irrational.¹⁹ However, reasonability, as distinct from rationality, already itself, in part, a moral notion, looks like a better candidate than rationality for grounding morality. But, as we have seen, hierarchical conceptions of justice and liberal egalitarian conceptions of justice, while in conflict, can both be reasonable. Unless we are already going beyond the general (though still thick) old-as-Socrates conception of reasonability and are taking on, in addition, the liberal conception of reasonability, already carrying, with that very taking on, rather more determinate moral and political choices, we cannot, just by being reasonable, justify opting for a liberal social order rather than an illiberal, hierarchical social order. We cannot justify a commitment to egalitarianism, or even a commitment to the weaker

notion of *moral* equality (something even Nozick buys into), by an appeal to reasonableness alone, unless we widen the conception of reasonableness to include the full, thick liberal conception of reasonableness. But then, we may have already built that very egalitarian notion into our conception of reasonableness. We may have—unwittingly, in effect—so persuasively defined “reasonable” that many plainly reasonable people will no longer be said to be reasonable. But, if that is what we end up doing, nothing will be established or gained by such gerrymandering.²⁰

Putting matters this way, however, is overly simple. We can begin to see something of this if we tell ourselves that we should not be trying to set reason and passion in opposition to one another. But we should not be trying to collapse the distinction, either, or give one precedence or authority over the other. Wide reflective equilibrium appeals to both. Within the holistic, largely coherentist method that is reflective equilibrium, both what is reasonable to believe and to do and our sympathies (most particularly our considered, reflectively sustainable sympathies) play an important role. In getting our conception of justice, and of morality more generally, into wide reflective equilibrium, we need to get clear about what is the case (get our views in line with how things are), judiciously weigh the reasons for and against claiming that things should be ordered in one way rather than another, and get as clear as we can about how it is that we really *feel* about the various ways that social life may be. To ascertain what is reasonable to do we need to get clear about both. We need to get these and other matters into a coherent conception.²¹

Wide reflective equilibrium is a largely proceduralist form of justification. Whatever considered judgements we can get into a wide reflective equilibrium are the considered judgements that, for that time, we will take to be justified considered judgements. What we shall take to be just, to be good, to be rational or reasonable, is what we can get into wide reflective equilibrium, though that will always be a *for-a-time judgement*, for any reflective equilibrium that will at some time be achieved will sooner or later be upset, but, if we apply the method intelligently and resolutely, it is reasonable to expect that a new one will in time be forged. But in making these judgements, we must have in hand, though perhaps not terribly well understood, both concepts and conceptions of justice, reasonability, rationality, goodness, and the like. With them in mind, we seek, in the light of what we now plausibly believe and honestly and non-evasively feel, to forge a coherent conception of things that will articulate for us what we take to be justified to do, to be, and to believe. Considerations of reasonability are central here, but so is the matter of human sympathies and sensibilities. However, none of these considerations stand alone or have absolute priority over the others. Neither reason nor sentiment nor the facts of the matter nor “intuitive insight” nor interests nor needs are “the real foundation” of morality. Morality, without being arbitrary or

merely conventional, can have no “real foundations.” What we have, instead, is the holistic conception of wide and general reflective equilibrium. It is itself a filling out, an exemplifying, and in a certain way even in part a constituting, of reasonableness. Rawls has rightly remarked that the “overall criterion of the reasonable is general and wide reflective equilibrium.”²² But this means that there can be no specifying of what is reasonable without specifying what our moral sensibilities and sentiments are. What we feel is right and what we take to be reasonable on a basic level cannot be pulled apart. It was this that was missed in how the argument proceeded above about the non-derivability of morality from reasonableness, and about how egalitarian views about justice were, at best, consistent with reasonableness but not required by it. The thing to see is that our moral sentiments and conceptions of reasonableness are not independent of each other. There is no problem of deriving justice, or morality more generally, from reasonableness, because distinctive moral sentiments and the sense of reasonableness are not independently specifiable. So there is no distinct something to be derived from another distinct something. Moreover, and distinctly, there is nothing—no one sort of thing—that all of morality, or even all the non-utterly conventional part of morality, is grounded in or takes as its basis. We can, of course, say, as Stuart Hampshire, who is as holistic as Rawls or Quine, says, that “moral philosophy . . . is the inquiry into reasonable foundations for morality. . . .”²³ But this, from the philosopher who said Rawls’s account contains a misguided rationalism, is a metaphorical and non-pedantic way of saying that moral philosophy seeks or should seek to ascertain the rationale or rationales of our moral conceptions—to see that and how they are not just a chaos and a jumble—by seeking perspicuously to display how our moral conceptions and convictions fit—if, indeed, they can be made to fit—into a coherent whole with the rest of what we reasonably believe, feel, and know. In seeking to so frame, or so pattern, things, considerations about what is reasonable and how one must be to be reasonable are vital matters, and are matters, as I have sought to show, which have some determinate content. Appealing to reason is not everything, or the rock-bottom of everything—there is no “rock-bottom” of everything—but it is not a mere expressive-evocative, rhetorical, or ideological flourish either. And, as an element in a coherentist and holistic way of going about things—a repeated rebuilding the ship at sea—there need be nothing ethnocentric about it either. It is one of our critical tools, and a valuable one. But, without a Humeian, Smithian, or Westermarckian acknowledgement of the importance of our moral sympathies, that critical tool will not take us as far as most philosophers, with their penchant for rationalism, are wont to believe. But that being so does not make reason wanton or the slave of passions. The image, to return to what was argued in the previous paragraph, of driving morality from “the reason-

able” or from anything else is wrong. Rather, moral beliefs—including principles of justice—are justified by getting them into wide and general reflective equilibrium, and what is in such reflective equilibrium is what it is reasonable to believe, do, and be.²⁴

Notes

- 1 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); John Rawls, “The Law of Peoples,” in *On Human Rights*, edited by Stephen Shute and Susan Hardy (New York: Basic Books, 1993), pp. 42-82; and John Rawls, “Reply to Habermas,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92, 3 (March 1995): 132-80. Since this article was first drafted, a rereading of *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971) and of his 1989 manuscript *Justice as Fairness: A Briefer Statement* reveals the same thing. The texts are peppered with occurrences of “reasonable” and the like.
- 2 About the path such reasonable disagreement takes, and, as well, more generally about Rawls’s liberal vision of society and its tensions, John Burt’s insightful essay, “John Rawls and the Moral Vocation of Liberalism,” *Raritan* (1995): 133-53, is very helpful. He gives, free from Rawls’s sometimes formidable vocabulary, a revealing interpretation of his liberalism.
- 3 Stuart Hampshire, “Liberalism: The New Twist,” *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1993, p. 45.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Thomas McCarthy, “Kantian Constructivism and Reconstruction: Rawls and Habermas in Dialogue,” *Ethics*, 105, 1 (October 1994): 62.
- 7 On thick contextuality, see Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994). See also his *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 8 There is, no doubt, some redundancy in the lists. Rather than make them as short as possible—all the while seeking canonical statements in as short a list as possible—I sought, by tolerating different phrasings, though with differing nuances of what may come in some instances to much the same thing, to capture in its thickness what liberal reasonability comes to.
- 9 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 50.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50. Rawls follows Thomas Scanlon here.
- 11 Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 53.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 157, 163.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 16 Joshua Cohen, “Moral Pluralism and Political Consensus,” in *The Idea of Democracy*, edited by David Copp et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 282.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

- 18 Alvin Plantinga, "Belief in God," in *Perspectives in Philosophy*, edited by Michael Boylan (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1993), p. 405. Alvin Plantinga quotes with approval John Calvin's remark, "'There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.' *This we take to be beyond controversy*" (emphasis added). See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1, chap. 3, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), pp. 43-44.
- 19 Kai Nielsen, *Why Be Moral?* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), pp. 143-206. See also Debra A. DeBruin, "Can One Justify Morality to Fools?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 25, 1 (March 1995): 1-32.
- 20 It is vital here to go on to the next two paragraphs, for, left like that, it might be thought that I contradict myself in making *both* the bootstrapping argument and in saying that we cannot get morality out of reasonableness (either the general or the liberal conception). But, trivially, we cannot in any interesting sense derive morality from either, because both are already moral conceptions. We are not going from non-moral considerations to moral ones, but only, within morality, from some moral considerations to others. If the bootstrapping argument is sound, it is true that, in the context of our social life, the general conception of reasonability yields the liberal one. Thus, a conservative, where he is aware of what reasonability requires in the context in which he is *and* is aware, as well, of the relevant non-moral facts, will have to accept the liberal conception, and, thereby, to be consistent, shift to some form of liberalism, including accepting some form of liberal justice. We can see here how reasonability, embedded in wide reflective equilibrium, does critical normal work. It is not that we just have here an ideological weapon for liberalism, and, as such, something that conservatives can justifiably brush aside. Indeed, where they see the force of what reasonability requires in the context of modern life, as well as being aware of some rather non-controversial, non-moral facts, they will be led out of their conservatism. We are not just stuck with the truism that *liberals* can make critical use of a specifically *liberal* conception of the reasonable.
- 21 See Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nielsen, "Whither Moral Philosophy?" in *On the Relevance of Metaethics*, edited by Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nielsen (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), pp. 296-329.
- 22 Rawls, "Reply to Habermas," p. 141.
- 23 Stuart Hampshire, "A New Philosophy of the Just Society," *The New York Review of Books*, February 24, 1972, p. 39.
- 24 During the symposium on Rawls at the 1995 SPQ conference where a truncated version of this article was read, Michel Seymour asked if the holism, of which the method of wide reflective equilibrium is an expression, is a semantical holism, an epistemological holism, or a methodological holism. As it is a method for fixing belief, I replied that it is a methodological holism. But, as a matter of fact, people who articulate and use the method of wide reflective equilibrium (myself included) do not employ those distinctions. I think the

reason for not doing so is that to fasten on any one of them, or even on all of them together, properly distinguished, does more harm than good. We could just as well say that our holism is all three of these types, or is none of them. It could, if you want to talk that way, be said to be semantical, in that it concerns itself with conceptions and concepts of justice, goodness, reasonability, warrant, justification, explanation, the person, the moral, the political, and the like. Taking it that we have a concept of justice, goodness, and reasonability (we know how to operate with, if not upon, such concepts), it seeks, as Rawls, Normal Daniels, and I employ it, both in explaining and justifying a certain political conception of justice with its allied moral and political beliefs, to get all these elements into a consistent and coherent pattern, always seeking to maximize coherence, with the other relevant things we know or believe, with our other convictions, with their allied sympathies and antipathies and the like. This, if you will, involves semantics and epistemology, though, again, someone using that method might eschew such a way of describing things. It is a method of fixing *belief*, and so it could be called a methodological holism, or an epistemological holism. I think the best thing to do, in saying it is a holism, is to eschew such categories altogether. The drawing of such distinctions fits badly with the idea of what a holism is. In articulating a conception of justice, we should not try to be atomistic or molecularist. Gaining a proper understanding requires, instead, that we seek to set out broad patterns of belief, conviction, and conception which we seek to coherently relate in a whole in which all elements are interrelated and clearly displayed in their relations to each other. See my "How to Proceed in Social Philosophy: Contextualist Justice and Wide Reflective Equilibrium," *Queen's Law Journal*, 20, 1 (Fall 1994): 89-138; *After the Demise of the Tradition* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 195-248; and "Relativism and Wide Reflective Equilibrium," *The Monist*, 76, 3 (July 1993): 316-32. For a perceptive critique of my views here, see Isaac Nevo, "Is There a Widest Equilibrium?" *Iyyun*, 45 (1996): 3-21, followed by my response, "Wide Reflective Equilibrium Without Uniqueness," *Iyyun*, 45 (1996): 23-35, which is also a further development of my views. See as well my *Naturalism Without Foundations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996).