

The Theodicy of Growth:
John Rawls, Political Economy, and Reasonable Faith

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The book opened with an invitation. “Let us imagine for a moment,” it asked the reader,

the next generation assembled in spirit in an ideal world, not knowing, before living on earth, who would be born to parents blessed with all the favors of fortune and who would be afflicted by misery from the very cradle. They would only be instructed in the principles of civil law; they would be told about the suitability of laws of property and presented with a picture of the disorder that would be the inevitable effect of a continuous variation in the distribution of goods. Then all those making up the new generation, all equally uncertain of the chance reserved for them by the hazards of birth, would sign up unanimously to the events awaiting them and, at such a moment, when all the relationships of society only exist in speculation, one might say that the private interest and the public interest are genuinely one and the same.²

This daring thought experiment cannot but ring eerily familiar to any political theorist today familiar with John Rawls’s “original position.”³ But the passage was written in 1788 and its author was the prominent Genevan banker and former French minister of finance, Jacques Necker.⁴ His book, entitled *De l’importance des opinions religieuses* and translated into English the same year by Mary Wollstonecraft, was the first fruit of Necker’s forced retirement seven years earlier – which was about to be interrupted by the calling of the Estates General and Necker’s return to the public finances until the fall of the Bastille in July 1789.⁵

Instead of working through the thicket of Necker’s moral philosophy, his Calvinist political economy, and its relation to Rawls’s original position, I here take a different path. To explore the relation between theology and political economy, I instead turn to the role of secular theodicy in Rawls’s thought. More specifically, I place two recent revisionist trends in

² Jacques Necker, *De l’importance des opinions religieuses* (Paris, 1788), 49; Jacques Necker, *The Importance of Religious Opinions*, trans. Mary Wollstonecraft (London, 1788), 21. My adapted translation. I first encountered the passage thanks to Michael Sonenscher’s brilliant excavations of eighteenth-century political thought. See his *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, 2007), 303.

³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition* (Cambridge MA, 1999).

⁴ Necker had been appointed *directeur général des Finances* in 1777. Due to his Protestant faith, he could not be formally named *contrôleur général des Finances*, the more senior title.

⁵ Necker is also widely credited for having coined the term “public opinion” (*l’opinion publique*) as part of his publication of the state’s accounts in 1781. *Compte rendu au Roi, par M. Necker, Directeur général des Finances* (Paris, 1781), 75, 104. See Robert D. Harris, *Necker: Reform Statesman of the Ancien Régime* (Berkeley, 1979), 217-35.

historical Rawls scholarship in conversation with one another: first, the recent interest in Rawls's early theological thought and the ways in which even his later project can be read as a secularized response to his earlier theological questions. Secondly, the recent recognition of just how dependent Rawls's frame was on the economic background conditions of the postwar welfare state and how twentieth-century welfare economics helped Rawls at the same time to formulate his theory. Linking the two, I will argue, is Rawls's secular response to the problem of theodicy under conditions of continuous economic growth. The resulting argument will place Rawls squarely in the context of American postwar economic growth during the Bretton Woods years, but also trace the eighteenth-century roots of what I will describe as Rawls's secular theodicy.

The relation between political economy and theodicy is, of course, deeply familiar to any reader of eighteenth-century political thought. From the theological origins of a natural market order in Jansenist thought to the explicit theodicy of physiocratic doctrine, questions of theology and political economy became deeply entangled in the eighteenth century in a way that is arguably still with us.⁶ It is in this spirit that I read Rawls through the eighteenth-century link between theodicy and political economy. Was Rawls then another refugee from the eighteenth century, as Judith Shklar once described herself?⁷ He can certainly seem like a visitor from the past. Consider the way in which Rawls's thought is often seen, misleadingly I think, as a straightforward embodiment of Kantianism.⁸ Others have been struck, more critically, by a seeming lack of anxiety on Rawls's part about the challenges of nineteenth-

⁶ David Grewal, "The Political Theology of Laissez Faire From Philia to Self Love in Commercial Society," *Political Theology* 17/5 (2016), 1-17; Michael Sonenscher, "Physiocracy as a Theodicy," *History of Political Thought* 23/2 (February 2002), 326-39.

⁷ Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge MA, 1989), 37.

⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008). Though note Geuss's qualification on page 89, which acknowledges a crucial complication: "Rawlsian political philosophy, as it developed, seems to have stronger similarities with Hegel than with Kant." I will take this up below.

century historicism. Allan Bloom, for example, voiced this frustration shortly after the *Theory of Justice* was published: “Simply, historicism, whether that of Marx or that of Nietzsche and the existentialists, has made it questionable whether an undertaking such as Rawls’s is possible at all; yet he does not address himself to these thinkers. He takes it for granted that they are wrong, that they must pass before his tribunal, not he before theirs.”⁹ Was Rawls then perhaps on the contrary a refugee from the horrors of the twentieth century to the eighteenth century?

Acting as a trafficker of ideas between eighteenth-century hopes and twentieth-century realities, as Albert Hirschman once put it, I will first embed Rawls in the synchronic context of the specific political economy and economic knowledge of the postwar world.¹⁰ I will then turn to some of the key motivating questions behind Rawls’s philosophical ambition by arguing that they are legible through the lens of eighteenth-century secular theodicies. I then connect this need for theodicy to the language of political economy, before arguing that this relation acquired a specifically temporal dimension in the course of the twentieth century that witnessed the construction of a liberal futurity premised on the expectation of perpetual economic growth. Rawls’s godless theodicy was in this sense premised on background condition of sustained and widely-shared economic growth whose disappearance since the 1970s has altered the fundamental frame of liberal politics. I will conclude with Max Weber’s critical observations about the modern thirst for theodicies.

⁹ Allan Bloom, “Justice. John Rawls vs. The Tradition of Political Philosophy,” *American Political Science Review* 69/2 (June 1975), 648.

¹⁰ Albert O. Hirschman, “The Turn to Authoritarianism in Latin America and the Search for Its Economic Determinants,” in *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, ed. David Collier (Princeton, 1979), 62.

1. Rawls in Bretton Woods

In the closing lines of *A Theory of Justice* Rawls famously expressed his hope to have offered a perspective onto society *sub specie aeternitatis*, “from all temporal points of view.”¹¹ Rawls’s attempt to transcend his historical moment was always questionable. But from our unenviable post-Piketty vantage point, this aspiration to escape his own timeliness looks more questionable than ever. Intellectual historians, such as Katrina Forrester, have meanwhile begun to use Rawls’s archive to disentangle the different strands of postwar Protestant theology and moral philosophy that Rawls reworked and braided together in the course of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s along the way of what eventually came to be known as his account of “justice as fairness.”¹² Crucially, despite numerous subsequent revisions, Rawls’s philosophical framework was essentially in place by the late 1950s.¹³ This framing, I want to suggest, relied philosophically on the political economy of statist welfarism and economic growth within the Bretton Woods system.

The postwar decades were marked by unprecedented economic growth at consistent rates of five percent, at times even exceeding ten percent.¹⁴ (In the first quarter of 1950, US national income grew at an astonishing annualized rate of 16.9 percent.) This spectacular experience of growing affluence rapidly shifted the horizon of expectations of most observers who believed that the economic problem had either been solved or was rapidly on its way to being solved.¹⁵ Rawls thus embarked on his search for a theory of justice as fairness precisely

¹¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice. Revised Edition* (Cambridge MA, 1999), 514.

¹² Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton, forthcoming), esp. chapters 1 and 2; P. Mackenzie Bok, “To the Mountaintop Again: The Early Rawls and Post-Protestant Ethics in Postwar America,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/1 (2016), 1-33.

¹³ See, for example, Rawls, “Distributive Justice (Summer 1959).” John Rawls Papers, Harvard University Archives, HUM 48, Box 35, Folder 8; as well as John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness,” *The Philosophical Review* 67/2 (1958), 164-94.

¹⁴ Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford, 2000).

¹⁵ Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth. The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (Princeton, 2016). John Kenneth Galbraith captured this mood in his bestseller *The Affluent Society*

during the two postwar decades marked by unprecedented economic growth and relatively widely dispersed postwar affluence throughout the entire OECD. As Thomas Piketty's survey of income and wealth inequalities has highlighted so strikingly, the two decades during which Rawls wrote *A Theory of Justice* were both exceptional and unrepresentative.¹⁶ It has become clear by now just how much Rawls's framing of the problem tacitly relied on the particular historical pre-conditions of the postwar political economy of national welfarism embedded in a formalized international monetary system founded in Bretton Woods in 1944. More specifically, Rawls wrote in the shadow of the twin emergence of the United States as the global guarantor of the international trade and monetary order and the rise of technocratically-administered national welfare states acting in the shadow of this American hegemony. These conditions structured Rawls's account even where they are absent in his own philosophical discussion. Rawls's intentional institutional agnosticism and his seemingly transcendental striving for atemporal truth, obscured this historical reliance as well as the political nature of these preconditions.

The timing of the eventual publication of Rawls's *Theory of Justice* in early 1971 distorts our view in this regard. The book was arguably already out of sync with the times the very moment it finally appeared. In 1971 the United States trade account turned negative for the first time in the twentieth century. President Richard Nixon, eager to take an aggressive stance on domestic stimulus (he regarded inaction by the Federal Reserve in 1960 as having cost him his first presidential bid against John F. Kennedy), surprised his Western allies by unilaterally closing the gold window.¹⁷ On August 15, 1971, only a few months after the publication of Rawls's book, Nixon announced the suspension of the dollar's convertibility

(Boston, 1958). See also David Singh Grewal and Jedediah Purdy, "Inequality Rediscovered," *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* 18 (2016), 61-82.

¹⁶ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge MA, 2013).

¹⁷ Douglas Brinkley and Luke A. Nichter, eds., *The Nixon Tapes, 1971-1972* (New York, 2014), 231-8.

into gold that had been at the heart of the Bretton Woods monetary system.¹⁸ As Nixon's treasury secretary John Connally famously quipped to the rest of the world, "the dollar might be our currency, but it is your problem."¹⁹ After being in the works for nearly two decades, the publication of Rawls's magnum opus coincided precisely with the collapse of the certainties of the postwar economic order. In a constellation that would not have failed to amuse Hegel, the moment in which thought captured reality coincided with that reality vanishing.²⁰

This was not lost on Rawls whose original conception of justice as fairness contained more than a nod to Hegel's understanding of philosophy as closure and rational completion.²¹ At least part of Rawls's philosophical ambition appears to have been, to put it in Hegelian terms, to reveal the rational in the real. The book was thus originally less a call for radical disruptive change than a stamp of philosophical approval for the broad contours of existing institutions as well as, crucially, a blueprint for their continuing improvement. Given the timing of its publication, this right-Hegelian rationale almost immediately became a left-Hegelian call for change. Within a year of its publication Rawls's national welfarism had lost its historical timeliness. Both its national framing and its animating spirit of welfarism were in existential crisis. As Samuel Moyn has recently put it, for all its innovative aspects, a *Theory of Justice* appears from this perspective as "the swansong of national welfare in the United States."²² The 1970s experience of "stagflation" – and the ill-fated political conclusions of deregulation and financialization derived from it – eliminated any residual optimism about

¹⁸ Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed. The Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s* (Oxford, 2015).

¹⁹ As quoted in Harold James, *International Monetary Cooperation Since Bretton Woods* (Oxford, 1996), 210.

²⁰ As Jan-Werner Müller remarks in pointing to the Hegelian temporality of Rawls's argument, "certain owl-related clichés could easily come to mind." Jan-Werner Müller, "Rawls, Historian: Remarks on Political Liberalism's 'Historicism'," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 237/3 (2006), 329. See also Grewal and Purdy, "Inequality Rediscovered," 66.

²¹ Jeffrey Bercuson, *John Rawls and the History of Political Thought: The Rousseauvian and Hegelian Heritage of Justice as Fairness* (New York, 2014), 25.

²² Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough. Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge MA, 2018), 147.

growing affluence and its welfarist redistribution. Instead, as Daniel Bell observed at the time, inflation laid bare the brutal distributional struggles that had previously been disguised by the proverbial pie growing seemingly without limits.²³ Alongside this implosion of growth and welfarism, the national framing of Rawls's project appeared similarly outdated. The collapse of the postwar economic frame was mirrored by a broader disillusionment with national politics.²⁴ Instead, the early 1970s witnessed the emergence of "the global" – be it in the form of a new awareness of economic interdependencies, the "world food crisis," debates about population growth, or a nascent global environmental consciousness.²⁵

With the national welfarism Rawls had sought to defend moving into crisis, his theory already appeared to its first generation of readers in an altogether different light. The book's odd but fascinating reception as a neo-Kantian regulative ideal can be partially explained by this dramatic shift in the global economic context. Rawls himself was surprised by the way the book was received.²⁶ Almost immediately the entire debate focused on questions of distribution whereas few engaged with what Rawls himself had considered his central contribution, namely his account of stability and moral psychology in Part III. This decisive focus on the distributive implications must itself be seen as an artifact of the collapse of the kind of stable economic world Rawls could take for granted while writing the book. Soon the book was praised as a daring exercise in Kantian idealism that strove to find the real in the

²³ Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, 1976). Since 1970, productivity (measured as total factor productivity) has grown at barely a third of the rate achieved between 1920 and 1970. Gordon, *Rise and Fall of American Growth*, 2.

²⁴ Katrina Forrester, "War and the Origins of International Ethics in American Political Philosophy 1960-1975," *Historical Journal* 57/3 (September 2014).

²⁵ Moyn, *Not Enough*, 147-72.

²⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1993), xv-xvii; "John Rawls: For the Record," Interview by Samuel R. Aybar, Joshua D. Harlan, and Won J. Lee, *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* (Spring 1991), 44; as well as John Rawls, "My Teaching" [1993]. Rawls papers: fol. 12, box 42. Also see Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (Abingdon and New York, 2007), 6-7; and Forrester, "War and the Origins of International Ethics," 794.

rational, rather than the rational in the real. Rawls himself inhabited the resulting ambiguity between Kant and Hegel with self-conscious and characteristic ambivalence.

2. The Task of Philosophy

This shift in context makes it important to recover Rawls's reconciliatory ambition of capturing the rational in the real by linking it to his understanding of the task of philosophy. Most fundamentally, that purpose was not to provide a metaphysical grounding of morality or justice. Instead, Rawls's understanding of the purpose of political philosophy was, to use Jeffrey Bercuson's words, "to provide a philosophical account ... of the principles and institutions that have characterized the evolution of this or that liberal democratic community."²⁷ As Bercuson argues, Rawls held a serious commitment to a number of basic Hegelian principles. These included not least the conviction that "we always have to begin from where we are," as Rawls put it in a lecture in 1959.²⁸ This framing is more explicit in the situated argument of *Political Liberalism* (1993), but instead of wondering why Rawls moved from Kantian universalism (in *A Theory of Justice*) to Hegelian historicism (in *Political Liberalism*), Hegel is present throughout Rawls's writings. As Rawls wrote in the aforementioned 1959 lecture:

As to whether these institutions are better seen in a liberal capitalist framework or under a liberal socialist regime, this questions turns on many historical and psychological and other questions (e.g. economic efficiency). Since we are a liberal (relatively) capitalist society rational conservationism suggests that we try to work these institutions in a capitalist framework. We always have to begin from where we are and prima facie our obligation is to attempt to reduce the discrepancy between actual and just institutions in a rational way.²⁹

²⁷ Bercuson, *Rawls and the History of Political Thought*, 25.

²⁸ Rawls, "Distributive Justice (Summer 1959). Lecture XXII: Distributive Justice and the Conflict of Criteria," Box 35, Folder 8 (Multiplicity of Criteria and Distribution of Income and Wealth, 1959), 3.

²⁹ Rawls, "Distributive Justice (Summer 1959), 3.

In the margins Rawls credited Hegel. In *Justice as Fairness* (2001), Rawls similarly presented reconciliation as one of the four roles of political philosophy and linked it explicitly to Hegel. The task of reconciliation, “stressed by Hegel,” tries “to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions, when properly understood from a philosophical point of view, are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form.”³⁰ The goal, according to Rawls, was to accept and affirm our social world positively by replacing resignation with reconciliation.

Recovering this important Hegelian strain should however not lead us to dismiss the simultaneous Kantian quality of Rawls’s position. Doing so would fail to get to the heart of Rawls’s project. As Paul Weithman has shown in extraordinary detail, the same basic understanding of the task of philosophy as providing rational foundations to the real can equally be expressed in Kantian terms of “reasonable faith.”³¹ But instead of playing Kant against Hegel, what a close reading of Rawls’s ambition indicates is a thorough-going analogy to other late eighteenth century secular theodicies. Instead of being a neo-Kantian, Rawls was instead always closer to Kant himself and in particular to Kant’s appreciation of Rousseau’s account of *amour-propre*.³² Indeed, the single most striking feature of Rawls’s *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* is his sympathetic proximity to a very particular and peculiar Kantian reading of Rousseau’s account of *amour-propre* as a secular theodicy.³³ I will return to this.

³⁰ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge MA, 2001), 3.

³¹ Paul J. Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn* (Oxford, 2010).

³² Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love. Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition* (Oxford, 2008).

³³ Christopher Brooke, “Rawls on Rousseau and the General Will,” in *The General Will: The Evolution of a Concept*, ed. James Farr and David Lay Williams (Cambridge, 2015), 429-46; Rob Jubb, “Rawls and Rousseau: ‘amour-propre’ and the strains of commitment,” *Res Publica* 17:3 (2011), 245-260;

While Rawls couched his political philosophy in explicitly secular terms, we now know that the shadow of his early Christian faith lingered on for much longer, both explicitly and more interestingly in the form of various secularized translations of formerly theological concerns.³⁴ As Rawls attested in his short reflections “On My Religion” from 1997, and as many of his students had stressed before, throughout much of his life he felt a keen religious motivation. Raised in an Episcopalian family in Baltimore (his mother was an Episcopalian, his father a Southern Methodist), during the last two years of his undergraduate degree at Princeton between 1940 and 1942 Rawls had become deeply concerned with theology and its doctrines.³⁵ He seriously considered entering the priesthood. “But,” as Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel put it somewhat flippantly, “he decided to enlist in the army instead.”³⁶ What may sound like an odd choice becomes understandable once one appreciates that the problem weighing heavily on the young Jack Rawls was the problem of evil in the world.

As a result of his war experience in the Pacific, Rawls abandoned his Christian faith after 1945 and – at least in his self-narration – turned to philosophy instead. This loss of faith in the existence of God did however not translate into a loss of his “deeply religious temperament that informed his life and writings, whatever may have been his beliefs,” as many family members, friends, and students have attested.³⁷ The religious philosophical motivation Rawls felt extended far beyond his Christian youth. The formal restrictions he later placed on the role of explicitly religious arguments in public reasoning should thus not mislead us into underestimating the implicit importance of religious motivations for Rawls’s

³⁴ John Rawls, “On My Religion” in *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith, with On My Religion*, ed. Thomas Nagel (Cambridge MA, 2009). On Rawls’s Christian ethics, see Eric Gregory, “Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35/2 (2007), 179-202; David A. Reidy, “Rawls’s Religion and Justice As Fairness,” *History of Political Thought* XXXI/2 (Summer 2010), 309-43; Bok, “To the Mountaintop Again,” 1-33.

³⁵ Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel, “Introduction,” in Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, 1.

³⁶ Cohen and Nagel, “Introduction,” 1.

³⁷ Cohen and Nagel, “Introduction,” 5.

thought. Restricting the use of religious arguments in public reasoning did not reflect a turn away from religious thought (broadly conceived) but a form of self-restriction and an exhortation to secularize faith by advancing a form of what Kant called “reasonable faith.” This also entailed acts of secular translation on Rawls’s own part.

Weithman has pointed to one such telling act of self-translation. In a manuscript draft of *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls summarized the book and his philosophical ambition in the concluding paragraph as follows: “These thoughts quickly lead to a question not unrelated to the question of theodicy. It is said that after fashioning the world God saw that it was good. (Genesis 1) If it is good, a reasonably just society must be possible; and for it to be possible, human beings must have a moral nature.”³⁸ In correspondence Weithman pressed Rawls on the point and the passage’s religious dimension. But instead of a more explicit engagement, Rawls simply dropped the line in the final manuscript in a seeming act of secular self-translation. *The Law of Peoples* instead ends with a cryptic reference to Kant (paragraph 49 of the *Rechtslehre*): “If a reasonably just Society of Peoples whose members subordinate their power to reasonable aims is not possible, and human beings are largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered, one might ask, with Kant, whether it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth.”³⁹

While Rawls decided to translate his reference to theodicy into a Kantian language, the task of reconciliation remained central to his conception of philosophy. He repeatedly described the aim of political philosophy as defending “reasonable faith,” in particular reasonable faith in the possibility of a just and stable order, a possibility whose recognition is able to displace our doubts (or rather Rawls’s doubts) as to whether “it is worthwhile for

³⁸ Rawls’s hand-dated copy from September 25, 1995. Rawls Papers, Harvard University. As cited in Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?*, 368.

³⁹ John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge MA, 1999), 128.

human beings to live on earth” in the first place.⁴⁰ But what is this if not a secular form of theodicy? Weithman has consequently insisted – despite Rawls’s own self-translation – that the theory of justice is in this sense “a brilliant and subtle exercise in naturalistic theodicy.”⁴¹ Rawls removed God but he could not, and did not want to, remove the affirmation of reasonable faith in a secular key. From early on, Rawls was deeply concerned as to whether or not justice is possible in this world. His account of a just society forms the capstone of this secular theodicy because it vindicates hope in the possibility of a just world and just political institutions.⁴² Despite their many obvious differences, Rawls’s writings on Christian ethics and his later philosophical work converge on this point in one continuous moral project that seeks to respond to a question “not unrelated to the question of theodicy,” to use Rawls’s own words.

3. Theodicy

Rawls’s invocation of Kant at the end of *The Law of Peoples* is from this perspective even more intriguing than Weithman lets on. In shifting from the language of theodicy to rational faith, Rawls here mirrored Kant’s own trajectory. Theodicy, in its most basic understanding, was originally the task of reconciling human beings to a world in which evil exists. Gottfried Leibniz coined the term in 1710 as the title of a series of essays written in French.⁴³ Meant as a plea for God’s cause or, more literally, “the justice of God” (*theos* +

⁴⁰ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lx; as well as Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 128. I am here largely following Cohen and Nagel in their introduction to John Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, ed. Thomas Nagel (Cambridge MA, 2009), 5.

⁴¹ Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?*, 8. Jan-Werner Müller has in this sense similarly referred to “Rawls’s liberal, godless theodicy.” Müller, “Rawls, Historian: Remarks on Political Liberalism’s ‘Historicism’.”

⁴² Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?*, 8, 14.

⁴³ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l’homme, et l’origine du mal* (Amsterdam, 1710); Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. E. M. Huggard (Lasalle IL, 1985). For a recent commentary, see Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (eds.), *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy* (Oxford, 2014).

dike), it constituted a theological response to skeptical rationalism. The task of Leibniz's *Essays of Theodicy* was to demonstrate the rationality and morality of the universe – as he claimed in §8, God had created the best of all possible worlds – without recourse to either Cartesian dualism or a separation of faith and reason.⁴⁴

Before his critical turn, Kant himself had been a follower of Leibniz's views on theodicy, as disseminated through the work of Christian Wolff. Importantly, while Kant's critical turn implied a rejection of Leibniz and Wolff, it did not undercut his faith in theodicy. Kant thought that the task of theodicy had become neither obsolete nor impossible after his turn to critical philosophy.⁴⁵ Instead, both his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* (only published posthumously in 1817), as well as his well-known essays on the "Idea for a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784) and the "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786) all contain prominent and well-developed attempts at theodicy.⁴⁶ By the 1790s, however, Kant had come to question not the question of theodicy, but even his own attempts to resolve it. Instead, in an essay "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (1791) he now argued that attempts to account for moral evil, including his own, were deeply problematic.⁴⁷ To replace it, as Susan Neiman has shown, Kant developed an account of reasonable faith that was meant to provide a philosophically more satisfying answer to the same underlying concern.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 131.

⁴⁵ Sam Duncan, "Moral Evil, Freedom and the Goodness of God: Why Kant Abandoned Theodicy," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20/5 (2012), 973-91; Johannes Brachtendorf, "Kants Theodizee-Aufsatz – Die Bedingungen des Gelingens philosophischer Theodizee," *Kant-Studien* 93 (2002), 57-83.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge, 2001), 335-452. Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1991), 41-53, 221-34. See Duncan, "Moral Evil, Freedom and the Goodness of God," 975.

⁴⁷ Immanuel Kant, "Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee," *Berlinische Monatsschrift* (September 1791), 194-225; Immanuel Kant, "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 2001), 24-37.

⁴⁸ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, 2015), 67-70.

As far as we know, Rawls left no written engagement with Kant's essay on theodicy. But it is clear that Rawls judged Kant's substitute language of "rational faith" superior to the language of theodicy, which seemed too steeped in theology even when it was meant to apply to secular theodicies in historical time. But some recent readers have questioned Kant's own sharp line between theodicy and rational faith in the 1790s. Far from rejecting all theodicies, Kant's essay in fact left open the possibility of certain forms of rational, secular quasi-theodicies.⁴⁹ We can link this assessment to Kant's reading of Rousseau that exercised such a sway over Rawls. As I mentioned above, Rawls approached Kant's rational faith through its relation to Rousseau's secular theodicy of *amour-propre*. Rawls's Kantian reading of Rousseau in his *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* contains a full articulation of this perspective.⁵⁰ What this reading highlights is the way in which Kant's interpretation of Rousseau "forms part of a narrative that treats human history as a kind of theodicy."⁵¹ This is neither obvious nor uncontroversial. After all, many other readers of Rousseau have read him – especially the *Second Discourse* – as precisely developing a critique of modern theodicies.⁵²

Becoming aware of Rawls's early theological interests we can highlight the ways in which these motivating questions of a reconciliatory theodicy continued to structure Rawls's thought, if only in the background and in consciously modulated form.⁵³ Rawls may have left behind the Christian ideas of sin, faith, and conversion, but he translated their philosophical

⁴⁹ George Gilbert Huxford, *The Scope and Development of Kant's Theodicy*, Doctoral Thesis, King's College London (London, 2015).

⁵⁰ Céline Spector, "Rousseau at Harvard: John Rawls and Judith Shklar on realistic utopias," in Avi Lifschitz ed., *Engaging with Rousseau* (Cambridge, 2016), 152-67.

⁵¹ David James, *Rousseau and German Idealism. Freedom, Dependence and Necessity* (Cambridge, 2013), 52-7, at 52. The suggestion that Rousseau's writings can be read as a form of theodicy originates with Kant himself. See Karl Ameriks, *Kant's Elliptical Path* (Oxford, 2012), 260-80 and Neuhauser, *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love*, 2n1. In the editorial note to his *Pléiade* edition of Rousseau's *Second Discourse*, Jean Starobinski has similarly highlighted this point. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1964), lix.

⁵² James helpfully cautions against forcing Rousseau's argument into this Kantian frame. James, *Rousseau and German Idealism*, 62, 83-5.

⁵³ See also Istvan Hont, "Adam Smith's history of laws and government as political theory," in Bourke and Geuss (ed.), *Political Judgement. Essays for John Dunn* (Cambridge, 2009), 131-71, at 133n7.

purpose into the quasi-secular language of a civic theodicy.⁵⁴ Membership in a liberal political community, for example, is mirrored in Rawls's analysis by a more or less explicit analogy to religious conversion.⁵⁵ Both civic and religious conversions are hopeful acts of faith. Just as gaining faith implied for the young Rawls a holistic transformation of one's character, so we may say that the liberal commitment to a fair scheme of cooperation is meant to submit its members to an analogous exercise of profound character formation. Insisting on the possibility – however far removed – and stability of such a fair scheme of cooperation became for Rawls a way of finding reconciliation with the obvious existence of injustice in the actual world. Even Samuel Freeman – while insisting on the thoroughly secular character of Rawls's thought – has in this sense emphasized Rawls's disappointment with traditional theodicy as one of the central inspirations for his search for a secular alternative.⁵⁶

This preoccupation with the task of theodicy is of course far from unique to Rawls. According to Susan Neiman, the problem of evil and the attempt to provide theodicies are at the very heart of the history of modern philosophy.⁵⁷ Raymond Geuss has similarly stressed the centrality of theodicies and the modern difficulty – perhaps impossibility – of escaping the

⁵⁴ Paul Weithman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* (Cambridge, 2018), 213.

⁵⁵ Even during his early theological days Rawls had held an interpretation of faith as being sustained by the character of members of community, not (merely) fear of punishment or submission to authority. In one of the most memorable passages of his undergraduate thesis, Rawls wrote: "A community is always a group of persons integrated together by faith. ... The reconciliation between the person and community, between the individual and society, can be understood by analyzing the concepts themselves. They are mutually interdependent. One cannot exist without the other. The dichotomy between the individual and society which recent Western thought has puzzled over is really no dichotomy at all. Where the difficulty arises is how personality and community can be achieved in face of the pervasive sin which exists in the world. Therefore, the chief problem of politics is to work out some scheme of social arrangements which can so harness human sin as to make the natural correlates of community and personality possible." Rawls, "Brief Inquiry," 127.

⁵⁶ Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (London, 2007), 8-28. Kerstin Budde has similarly argued that Rawls's theory provides us with a theodicy (in the broad sense). Kerstin Budde, "Unreasonable or Evil?," in *Evil in Contemporary Political Theory*, ed. Bruce Haddock, Peri Roberts, and Peter Sutch (Edinburgh, 2011), 81-100, esp. 82-6. Benjamin McKean prefers Rawls's own term of "reconciliation" to capture his redemptive ambition and contrasts it with a narrow view of theodicy. Benjamin L. McKean, "Ideal Theory after Auschwitz? The Practical Uses and Ideological Abuses of Political Theory as Reconciliation," *The Journal of Politics* 79:4 (October 2017), 1177-90.

⁵⁷ Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 97. On Rawls, see 310-4.

need to offer forms of philosophical theodicies, capaciously understood.⁵⁸ As Hegel put it in the closing pages of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, modern philosophy was “the true theodicy [*die wahrhafte Theodizee*].”⁵⁹ As I have suggested, it is precisely this ambition of providing a secular theodicy of reconciliatory, rational faith that betrays Rawls’s late eighteenth century roots. Let me add one more twist to this observation.

When grappling with the concrete task of theodicy and rational faith, it is striking that both Kant (in his political essays of the 1790s) and Hegel (in the *Philosophy of Right*) both turned toward political economy to undergird their respective accounts. Indeed, so did Rawls. To return to my earlier discussion of political economy, what I am here interested is not merely the secular theology of Rawls’s theodicy of reasonable faith in a just society but in particular the understanding of political economy that undergirded Rawls’s reasonable faith.

4. Political Economy

Having pointed to the link between Rawls’s conception of the task of philosophy and the problem of theodicy, I now want to place this relation in the context of political economy with which I began. In particular I will argue that it was economic growth that furnished Rawls with the tacit solution to his problem of theodicy. In relating Rawls’s political economy to his formerly theological concerns it is helpful to recall the ways in which eighteenth-century political thought was saturated with earlier attempts to reconcile particular and general interests in so-called *Harmonielehren*. Often even the pursuit of self-interest – under the right conditions – was seen as a path to harmony. As Hume wrote in the *Treatise* in a passage that Rawls quotes in his lectures on the history of moral philosophy, “Self-interest is

⁵⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History. Essays on German Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1999), 89.

⁵⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, Werke in zwanzig Bänden (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), vol. 20, 455. See also G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis, 1988), 18.

the original motive to the establishment of justice.”⁶⁰ These accounts of harmony bear a strong resemblance to earlier forms of theodicy. In the case of the Physiocrats this legacy was most explicit, not least in its origins in Jansenism and its providentialist theology.⁶¹ The market was on this view, quite explicitly, a new form of theodicy for commercial society. Physiocracy was, as Sonenscher explains, “a theodicy, or an explanation of how the idea of a just, omniscient and omnipotent God could be reconciled with the existence of evil in human affairs.”⁶² Such theodicies did not have to be tied to God but often appeared in a secular key. Consider, for example, Condorcet’s ambition for the rise of *les sciences sociales*. For Condorcet, it was precisely the new “social art” and the new “social sciences” that would bring “the perfection of laws and public institutions,” which in turn would spell “the reconciliation, the identification of the interests of each with the interests of all.”⁶³ Reconciling private with public interests would mean solving the greatest of all social problems.

This link between theodicy and the social sciences – and especially the social science of political economy – helps to place Rawls’s development during his years as a junior faculty member at Cornell in a different light. These years during the 1950s were marked by Rawls’s simultaneous immersion in graduate level postwar economics and a transformation of his Christian ethics. Asked in 1991 about the origins of the original position, Rawls responded

⁶⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1738], ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1988), Book III, Part II, Section II, 499. See Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 67.

⁶¹ Grewal, “The Political Theology of Laissez Faire,” 1-17. See also Lisa Hill, “The Hidden Theology of Adam Smith,” *The European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 8/1 (2001), 1-29.

⁶² Michael Sonenscher, “Physiocracy as a Theodicy,” *History of Political Thought* 23/2 (February 2002), 334. See also Paul Oslington, ed. *Adam Smith as Theologian* (New York and Abingdon, 2011) and A.M.C. Waterman, *Political Economy and Christian Theologys since the Enlightenment: Essays in Intellectual History* (London, 2004).

⁶³ Jean-Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* [1795] (New York, 1955), 192; Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (New York, 2008), 43; Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments. Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge MA, 2001), 195-217.

candidly, not with reference to Kant or Wittgenstein but by describing his self-education in economics during the 1950s:

I began to collect notes around the fall of 1950 after I had completed my thesis. By then I had been reading some economics on my own and that fall I attended a seminar given by W. J. Baumol ... We read *Value and Capital* by J.R. Hicks, and I attempted to master that book, and also parts of Samuelson's *Foundations*, its chapter of welfare economics leading me to articles in the so-called new welfare economics. ... I also read some of Walras's *Elements* and studied a little bit of game theory. Von Neumann's book with Morgenstern had just come out in 1944; that was the big work on game theory that founded the subject. Several essays by Frank Knight in his *Ethics of Competition* I found highly instructive; he was as much interested in social philosophy as economics. As a result of all these things, somehow – don't ask me how – plus the stuff on moral theory which I wrote my thesis on – it was out of that, in 1950-51, that I got the idea that eventually turned into the original position.⁶⁴

In addition to the standard works of mid-century economics (Samuelson, Baumol, Hicks, all the way back to Walras) and treatises in game theory (Von Neumann and Morgenstern), Rawls read especially widely in the new field of welfare economics. The pioneering welfare economist James Meade came to function in this context “as a kind of economic guru for Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*,” as Brian Barry once put it.⁶⁵

But it was Frank Knight who helped Rawls straddle the divide between theology and political economy.⁶⁶ Where Rawls had initially sought to solve his philosophical problem by trying to arrive at a definition of reasonable reasoning, a rational decision procedure, or the behavior of “reasonable man”, in the course of the 1950s his project shifted toward placing people into a similarly simplified background condition while he became interested in questions of rules and games. Much of this has been rightly credited to the influence of

⁶⁴ “John Rawls: For the Record,” Interview by Samuel R. Aybar, Joshua D. Harlan, and Won J. Lee, *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* (Spring 1991), 39.

⁶⁵ Brian Barry, *Theories of Justice* (Berkeley, 1991), 394. On Richard Musgrave and Rawls's proximity to conservative Keynesians during the late 1950s, see Forrester, *Shadow of Justice*, 43.

⁶⁶ Frank Knight, *The Ethics of Competition and Other Essays* (London, 1935), 277-359, esp. the footnote on 345-7.

Wittgenstein.⁶⁷ But it also constituted both an engagement with Knight, as well as a bridge to an earlier Protestant tradition of theodicy.⁶⁸ To conceive of society as the stable outcome of a bargaining game contained the promise of a just and stable society that could instill reasonable faith and provide a civic theodicy without God.

5. Growth

Reinhart Koselleck and others have of course long stressed the theological origins of much of the conceptual vocabulary of modern political thought.⁶⁹ As bourgeois intellectuals took the place of the clergy, so was Leibniz's theodicy translated into the legitimacy of a new political economy. Both the novel temporal structure of the eighteenth century and the political revolutions it carried, were in an important sense secularizations of earlier theological elements. In Koselleck's terms, with the rise of historical time in the course of the eighteenth century, past, present, and future ceased to be perceived as fundamentally alike.⁷⁰ Instead, temporally-charged concepts of movements – from “progress” to “revolution” – came to structure the modern political vocabulary. The notion of “growth” firmly belongs into this category. Indeed, our ongoing preoccupation with economic growth is arguably the last remnant of an eighteenth-century faith in progress. It is hardly an overstatement to describe economic growth – as Pratap Mehta, among others, has stressed – as *the* master theodicy of

⁶⁷ Mark Bevir and Andrius Galisanka, “John Rawls in Historical Context,” *History of Political Thought* 33/4 (2012), 714.

⁶⁸ See Rawls's 1956 seminar at Cornell on “Rational Choice” that worked through some of the philosophical questions thrown up by that new literature; as well as John Rawls, “The Grounds of Principles of Rational Choice,” in *Rational Choice and The Concept of Goodness. Seminars 1956*, The Papers of John Rawls, Harvard University Archives, HUM 48 Box 9, Folder 3 (1956).

⁶⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis. Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society* [1959] (Cambridge, 1988), 109. For an argument in this spirit that links Rawlsian moral arbitrariness to anti-Pelagianism, see Eric Nelson, “‘The Bargain Basis’: Rawls, Anti-Pelagianism, and Moral Arbitrariness,” unpublished working paper on file with the author (2016).

⁷⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* [1979], trans. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York, 2004), 255-76; Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, 2004), 218-35.

all modern politics. This was certainly the tacit perception of economic growth in the postwar period of the twentieth century.⁷¹ As Daniel Bell put it in his *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), “economic growth has become the secular religion of advancing industrial societies.”⁷² Growth had come to act in strict functional analogy to the tasks formerly achieved by religion: it formed the basis of political solidarity, individual motivation, and the mobilization of society for a common purpose more generally. We can place this specific observation about the role of growth in a larger context of capitalism’s theological underpinnings. As Walter Benjamin put it in an unpublished fragment from 1921, “capitalism is to be regarded as a religion.”⁷³ As a cultic religion, Benjamin explained, capitalism served “to satisfy essentially the same worries, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions once offered answers.”⁷⁴

The rise of expectations of perpetual economic growth – and the construction of a system of political rule premised on the fulfillment of this condition – was thus tied to fundamental changes in the perception of temporality.⁷⁵ In his history of the making of the modern economic growth paradigm during the postwar decades, Matthias Schmelzer similarly speaks of growth as a “core feature of the religion of capitalism” and sees its roots reaching back to the eighteenth century.⁷⁶ As I suggested above, for Rawls in the *Theory of Justice*, it was the utterly unprecedented economic growth miracle of the postwar decades that provided him with the historical economic background that could be taken for granted. It was not least

⁷¹ Mehta has drawn attention to this observation both in his analysis of eighteenth-century Scottish political economy and contemporary Indian politics.

⁷² Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, 237-8.

⁷³ Walter Benjamin, “Kapitalismus als Religion [1921],” Fragment 74, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VI (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 100-3; Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 288-91.

⁷⁴ Benjamin, “Kapitalismus als Religion, 100; Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 288.

⁷⁵ Schmelzer, *Hegemony of Growth*, 76.

⁷⁶ Matthias Schmelzer, *The Hegemony of Growth: The OECD and the Making of the Economic Growth Paradigm* (Cambridge, 2016), 342-3. See also Christoph Fleischmann, *Gewinn in alle Ewigkeit: Kapitalismus als Religion* (Zurich, 2010).

reasonable faith in the prospect of continued economic growth (what Robert Collins has dubbed “growth liberalism”) that stabilized Rawls’s position.⁷⁷ What Rawls presented as his moral psychology were all too often assumptions based on the experience of the postwar boom. Consider, for example, the problem of envy. Rawls assumed that the striving for status and recognition would fade into the background in a just society. As he put it with regard to the original position, “the special assumption I make is that a rational individual does not suffer from envy.”⁷⁸ Rawls argued that it was precisely the adoption of his principles of justice that would “mitigate the propensity to envy.”⁷⁹ It has been insufficiently appreciated that the one background condition that rendered this assumption broadly plausible was the expectation of continuous economic growth that would ease distributional pressures and was expected to transform our moral psychology away from envious competitiveness.⁸⁰

But as we saw above, in the course of the 1970s the world slid into crisis. Whereas average annual GDP growth between 1950 and 1973 had approximated seven percent across Western Europe and the United States, growth came to an abrupt halt in the early 1970s. In late 1973, the US economy settled into the worst recession since the 1930s. By 1974, growth in industrialized economies had shrunk to a mere one percent. By 1975, they contracted.⁸¹ Unemployment, virtually unheard of during the 1960s, was back. At the same time, inflation

⁷⁷ Collins, *More*, 40-67.

⁷⁸ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 124. See also Rawls, “Fairness to Goodness,” in Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 277. As Weithman comments, “I have not found a sustained defense of this step in Rawls’s later work and have wondered why he seems to have accepted it so uncritically.” Paul Weithman, “Review of Rawls’s *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin & Faith*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (2009).

⁷⁹ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 450. See also 125. Rawls defined envy as “the propensity to view with hostility the greater good of others even though their being more fortunate than we are does not detract from our advantages.” (466)

⁸⁰ Habermas closed his 1962 *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* similarly with the tantalizing thought that the unprecedented expansion of social wealth made it “not unrealistic to assume that the continuing and increasing plurality of interests may lose the antagonistic edge of competing needs to the extent that the possibility of mutual satisfaction comes within reach.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 234-5.

⁸¹ Angus Maddison, *The World Economy: Millennial Statistics*, available online: <http://www.theworlddeconomy.org>

reached levels not witnessed during peacetime since the interwar years. In 1974, US inflation stood at eleven percent. In Britain, it reached twenty-five percent. How did Rawls respond to the vanishing of the economic background conditions of his theory? Despite his implicit reliance on the benefits of widely dispersed and sustained economic growth, from the 1970s on Rawls came to insist that his principles of justice were perfectly compatible with a world without growth. They might even point toward such a “stationary state.” In his discussion of justice between generations and specifically the difficulty of defining a “just savings principle” in *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls had already touched upon the question of growth.⁸² Citing Sen, Tobin, and Solow, he admitted the difficulty of determining the ideal rate of savings and cautioned against imposing excessive burdens on the present generation.⁸³

Instead, he offered in a footnote the following “theoretical” speculation:

If for theoretical purposes one thinks of the ideal society as one whose economy is in a steady state of growth (possibly zero), and which is at the same time just, then the savings problem is to choose a principle for sharing the burdens of getting to that growth path (or to such a path if there is more than one), and of maintaining the justice of the necessary arrangements once this is achieved. In the text, however, I do not pursue this suggestion; my discussion is at a more primitive level.⁸⁴

Rawls’s reasoning and language is ambiguous here. The parenthetical addition of “possibly zero” suggests that Rawls seems to have conceived of a “steady state of growth” as a “steady rate of growth” that could be substantial or zero – rather than a genuine “steady state” which would by definition be without growth.

While Rawls’s reference to a “steady state of growth” in *A Theory of Justice* was thus left ambiguous, by the late 1970s Rawls became interested in John Stuart Mill’s discussion of

⁸² Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 252-3.

⁸³ “How the burden of capital accumulation and of raising the standard of civilization and culture is to be shared between generations seems to admit of no definite answer.” Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 253.

⁸⁴ Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 252n20.

a “stationary state” without growth.⁸⁵ Rawls now flagged Mill’s idea to his students. As he explained in a set of “Remarks on Mill’s Social Theory” (dated to circa 1980), Mill “sees this state not as a *doomsday* to be *avoided* by continual capital accumulation and innovation, but as a desirable state to be welcomed. This shift undercuts the ethos of a modern capitalist society as one of perpetual growth of capital and wealth.”⁸⁶ Rawls had found a way to turn the waning of economic growth in the stagflationary crisis of the 1970s into a hopeful nod to Mill’s utopian stationary state. Where *A Theory of Justice* had wondered whether there are limits on the just rate of savings and how precisely growth was to be shared between generations, in *Political Liberalism* (1993) Rawls now stressed that his principles of justice were entirely divorced from considerations of growth. As he explained in a footnote, “the principle does not require continual economic growth over generations to maximize upward indefinitely the expectations of the least advantaged. It is compatible with Mill’s idea of a society in a just stationary state where (real) capital accumulation is zero.”⁸⁷ Rawls admitted at this point that “[t]hese brief remarks are hardly clear,” and he did not return to the question of growth in the rest of the book.⁸⁸ But the idea of a Millian stationary state grew on Rawls.

By 1998, in a letter to Philippe van Parijs, Rawls even declared that he now regarded Mill’s idea of the stationary state as his normative ideal. “I am under no illusion that its time will ever come – certainly not soon – but it is *possible*, and hence it has a place in what I call the idea of realistic utopia.”⁸⁹ As he explained in a footnote in *The Law of Peoples* (1999), the point of the *Theory of Justice* was “to realize and preserve just (or decent) institutions, and not

⁸⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy* (London, 1848), Bk IV, Ch. 6.

⁸⁶ John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge MA, 2008), 316.

⁸⁷ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 7n5.

⁸⁸ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 7n5. “[t]hese brief remarks are hardly clear; they simply indicate the complexities that not our concern in these lectures.”

⁸⁹ John Rawls and Philippe Van Parijs, “Three Letters on the Law of Peoples and the European Union,” in *Autour de Rawls. Special issue of Revue de philosophie économique* 7 (2003), 7-20, at 9.

simply to increase, much less to maximize indefinitely, the average level of wealth.”⁹⁰ This idea, Rawls added, was drawn from Mill’s *Principles of Political Economy*.⁹¹ By the time of *Justice as Fairness* (2001), Rawls’s embrace of Mill’s stationary state had migrated from the footnotes to the main body of the text. “A further feature of the difference principle,” Rawls now announced, “is that it does not require continual economic growth over generations.”⁹²

A comparison to John Maynard Keynes is illustrative here. In his essay on the “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren” (1930), Keynes – like Rawls – drew on Mill’s outlook toward a future stationary state when the problem of scarcity could be considered solved.⁹³ But what separates Keynes from Rawls was Keynes’s conviction that society’s moral outlook would change dramatically once prosperity was reached. “For at least another hundred years we must pretend to ourselves and to everyone that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury and precaution must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.”⁹⁴ Rawls by contrast curiously claimed that his rules of justice applied both to postwar conditions of high growth as well as to a steady state economy without growth.

6. The Thirst for Theodicy

I have argued, first, that at the heart of Rawls’s philosophical ambition sits a deep concern for secular theodicy and, secondly, that it was economic growth that stabilized this secular theodicy. I want to close by turning briefly to Max Weber’s classification of theodicies in order draw some larger implications from this assessment. As part of his

⁹⁰ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 107.

⁹¹ Rawls, *The Law of Peoples*, 107-8n33.

⁹² Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 63. The point was repeated almost verbatim on page 159 and listed in the book’s index as “Difference principle: does not require continual economic growth” (205).

⁹³ John Maynard Keynes, “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren (1930),” *Essays in Persuasion* (London, 1963), 358-73.

⁹⁴ Keynes, “Economic Possibilities,” 372.

sociology of religion, Weber furnished one of the most comprehensive surveys of theodicies that portrayed not only all world religions but also, fascinatingly, all modern society as more or less successful attempts at theodicy.⁹⁵ Theodicy, for Weber, was not only *the* central feature of all religious faith, but it extended to political societies at large. A theodicy in this broader sense was a system of meaning for dealing with individual and collective suffering, not merely evil in the religious sense. As such, Weber spoke of a “rational need” and “ineradicable demand for a theodicy.”⁹⁶ Every society was in this sense built on a particular theodicy that provides meaning for the particular forms of suffering and unequal patterns of rule and power in that society.

In his discussion, Weber drew a fundamental distinction between two kinds of theodicy: those that provide compensation for suffering and those that provide justification for the privileged.⁹⁷ We can detect traces of both in Rawls’s vision. Rawls sketched an account of basically just institutions as simultaneously inherently rational and imperfect. In doing so he pointed to the need for far-reaching distributive reforms as required by justice. But he also held out the mere possibility of such reforms as an argument for the ongoing adherence to that liberal state even from those currently suffering under it. As Charles Mills has highlighted, those suffering under “decent but imperfect” institutions share an understandable distrust toward idealizing institutional portrayals meant to shore up reasonable faith.⁹⁸ It is this unease and suspicion that has driven the recent interest in non-ideal theory, as well as more

⁹⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1968), Vol. 1, Part Two, Ch. 6 (“The Sociology of Religions”), §8, 518-29. See also H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology* (1946), 358-9.

⁹⁶ Weber, “The Social Psychology of the World Religions,” in *From Max Weber*, 275. See also Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber* (Oxford, 1946), 122.

⁹⁷ For an illuminating discussion, see Bryan S. Turner, “Theodicy, the career of a concept,” in Turner, *For Weber* (London, 1981), 166. Drawing on Weber, Marx and Durkheim, Peter Berger has equally stressed the sociological role of secular theodicies in Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, 1990), 53-80.

⁹⁸ Charles W. Mills, “Ideal Theory as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20/4 (2005), 165-84.

historically-inclined scholarship. Instead of taking “men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived,” is it not preferable to take them “as they *actually* are,” to use Marx’s words?⁹⁹

It is possible to acknowledge the force of this critique while nonetheless appreciating the broader philosophical purpose of Rawls’s project by framing it as an ambivalent theodicy.¹⁰⁰ For better or worse, Rawls – alongside Knight and Keynes – alerts us to the necessity of faith for liberalism. This did not have to be religious faith but could be some kind of affirmative futurity and optimism. None of this does away with the uncomfortable paradox that such a liberal futurity also functions as a form of theodicy that inevitably stabilizes the unjust present and delays the future. Writing in 1949 under the heavy impression of an embattled liberalism, at the same time as Rawls began to work out his answer to the question that was to take up the rest of his life, it was Friedrich Hayek who ushered a call to counter liberalism’s despair by offering the distant vision of a just liberal society. “What we lack,” Hayek insisted, “is a liberal Utopia, a programme which seems neither a mere defense of things as they are nor a diluted kind of socialism, but a truly liberal radicalism which does not spare the susceptibilities of the mighty..., which is not too severely practical, and which does not confine itself to what appears today as politically possible.”¹⁰¹ In an odd and unexpected way, Rawls came to offer precisely such an ambivalent, distant vision of a just liberal society that offered a critical yardstick for a present found to be deficient and at the same time paradoxically stabilized that deficient liberal present by harnessing it to a theodicy of the possibility of ideal just liberal society.

⁹⁹ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology” [1845], *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 5, Part I, 35-6.

¹⁰⁰ McKean, “Ideal Theory after Auschwitz,” 1177-90.

¹⁰¹ Friedrich August Hayek, “The Intellectuals and Socialism,” *The University of Chicago Law Review* (Spring 1949), in Hayek, *Socialism and War: Essays, Documents, Reviews*. The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek, vol. 10, ed. Bruce Caldwell (London, 1997), 237.

Rawls’s “realistic utopia” can from this perspective easily appear both insufficiently realistic to guide political action and insufficiently utopian (and insufficiently poetic!) to stir our imagination.¹⁰² This worry was not alien to Rawls. In an intriguing footnote in *Justice as Fairness* from 2001, he cautioned that

The idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care. For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and unworthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx’s sense. From time to time we must ask whether justice as fairness, or any other view, is ideological in this way; and if not, why not? Are the very basic ideas it uses ideological? How can we show they are not?¹⁰³

Rawls left the question unanswered. But let me conclude by returning to Jacques Necker with whom I began. Having introduced his own original original position, Necker proceeded to cast doubt on the moral judgments won from such a thought experiment. One had to distinguish sharply between political society “in imagination [*en projet*]” and political society “in action.” In the minds of “political moralists [*moralists politiques*],” Necker complained, “they are almost invariably confused.”¹⁰⁴ Instead, the one “invisible spring [*ressort invisible*]” that connected the two visions of society was religious opinion.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Sophie Smith, “Imagining Politics: Poetry & the Origins of Political Theory,” 2017 *Quentin Skinner lecture*, University of Cambridge (June 9, 2017). I here leave aside — for reasons of both space and expertise — the important question to what extent the two more recent literatures on global justice and non-ideal political theory remedy or perpetuate these problems.

¹⁰³ Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 4n4.

¹⁰⁴ Necker, *Opinions religieuses*, 51; Necker, *Religious Opinions*, 23.

¹⁰⁵ Necker, *Opinions religieuses*, 3; Necker, *Religious Opinions*, iii.