

IS AN OPEN SOCIETY A JUST SOCIETY? POPPER AND RAWLS

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There is only one piece of textual evidence that Popper read Rawls, and only one that Rawls read Popper. But I would argue that Rawls's methodology is rather Popperian, and that in some respects Popper's political philosophy can be interpreted as more or less Rawlsian, with some restrictions. But it is necessarily less Rawlsian than Rawlsians could wish, because it is more general.

1 The process of reflexive equilibrium, borrowed from Goodman, can be shown to have been anticipated by Popper, even in moral matters. Rawls's methodology is neither foundationalist nor akin to any "analytic meta-philosophy", but is a substantial, fallibilist and even falsificationist one, the empirical basis being replaced by our normative basic judgements ("If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong"). Rawls's criticism of utilitarianism is also "methodologically individualist" and "personalist".

2 Popper's incursion into political philosophy is dominated by the problem of freedom versus totalitarianism, and by his criticism of the "philosophies of history", problems not touched by Rawls, who regards them, perhaps wrongly, as already behind us.

3 Popper's thesis of "the ambivalence of institutions" is remarkable. Isn't Rawls a bit naïve on the innocuousness of the coercive institutions of a Just Society ? Perhaps not so much, as he is quite concerned by the necessity of a "sense of Justice" (see what Popper would call "traditions"), and by the promotion not of a Welfare Leviathan, but of a "democracy of owners".

4 Clearly, Popper is more sensitive than Rawls to Hayekian arguments against "constructivism", bureaucracy etc. Still, notice that in Rawls's theory, liberty is "lexically" prior to social justice. The young Popper was clearly a social-democrat of sorts. But even the old Popper was not a real libertarian, and his so-called "negative utilitarianism" has something to do with the intuitive appeal of the "difference principle". As a regulative ideal, it is not anti-Popperian in spirit.

5 In an open society, debates between Rawlsians and Nozickians, and others are to be expected, and that is a "Good". Popper's theory of an open society asserts the minimum set of principles that have to be accepted in liberal societies, just as Popperian meta-philosophy (critical discussion) is minimal, and the best meta-philosophy, even for anti-Popperians.