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# A COMPANION TO RAWLS



*Edited by*  
JON MANDLE  
AND  
DAVID A. REIDY

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# A Companion to Rawls

*Edited by*

Jon Mandle  
David A. Reidy

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*Editorial Offices*

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19  
8SQ, UK

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# Notes on Contributors

**Kenneth Baynes** is Professor of Philosophy and Political Science at Syracuse University. He has published widely on Rawls, Habermas, and Taylor, and on human rights. His next book will be on Habermas.

**Gillian Brock** is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Her most recent work has been on global justice and related fields. She is the author of *Global Justice: A Cosmopolitan Account* (2009) and editor or coeditor of *Current Debates in Global Justice* (2005); *The Political Philosophy of Cosmopolitanism* (2005); *Necessary Goods: Our Responsibilities to Meet Others' Needs* (1998); and *Global Health and Global Health Ethics* (2011).

**Daniel Brudney** is Professor of Philosophy at The University of Chicago. He writes and teaches in political philosophy, philosophy and literature, and bioethics. He is the author of *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (1998).

**Claudia Card**, Emma Goldman Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, studied with John Rawls at Harvard from 1962 to 1966 and wrote her PhD thesis, on punishment, under his direction. Her books include *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (2002), *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir* (edited, 2003), and *Confronting Evils: Terrorism, Torture, Genocide* (2010).

**Richard Dagger** is E. Claiborne Robins Distinguished Chair in the Liberal Arts at the University of Richmond, where he teaches in the Department of Political Science and in the Program in Philosophy, Politics, Economics, and Law. He is

the author of *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* and coauthor of *Political Ideologies and the Democratic Ideal*.

**Samuel Freeman** is Avalon Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Philosophy and Law at The University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of *Justice and the Social Contract* (2006) and of *Rawls* (2007). He has edited three volumes: *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls* (2003); *John Rawls's Collected Papers* (1999); *John Rawls's Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (2008); and he coedited *Reasons and Recognition: Essays in Honor of T.M. Scanlon* (2011).

**Barbara H. Fried** is the William W. and Gertrude H. Saunders Professor of Law at Stanford University. She has written widely in moral and political theory, and is the author of *The Progressive Assault on Laissez Faire: Robert Hale and the First Law and Economics Movement* (1998).

**Gerald Gaus** is the James E. Rogers Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona, where he directs the Program in Philosophy, Politics, Economics & Law. His most recent book is *The Order of Public Reason* (2011).

**Paul Guyer** is Jonathan Nelson Professor of Humanities and Philosophy at Brown University. He is the author of nine books on Kant, including three on Kant's moral and political philosophy, editor of six anthologies on Kant, and cotranslator of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and *Notes and Fragments*. He will shortly publish *A History of Modern Aesthetics* in three volumes.

**Thomas E. Hill, Jr** studied at Harvard and Oxford, taught for 16 years at the University of California, Los Angeles, visited at Stanford University and the University of Minnesota, and is now Kenan Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is author of *Virtue, Rules, and Justice* (2012); *Human Welfare and Moral Worth* (2002); *Respect, Pluralism and Justice* (2000); *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Ethics* (1992); and *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (1991).

**Aaron James** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. He is author of *Fairness in Practice: A Social Contract for a Global Economy* (2012), recipient of the ACLS (American Council of Learned Societies) Burkhardt Fellowship, and was recently a fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University.

**Alexander Kaufman** is Associate Professor of Political Theory at the Department of Political Science, University of Georgia. He is author of *Welfare in the Kantian State* (1999) and editor of *Capabilities Equality: Issues and Problems* (2006), and has published articles on Rawls, distributive justice, social contract theory, German Idealism, and philosophy of law.

**Erin I. Kelly** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University. Her research focuses on questions about justice, the nature of moral reasons, moral responsibility and desert, and theories of punishment. Her recent publications include "Reparative Justice," in *Accountability for Collective Wrongdoing* (2011), "Equal Opportunity, Unequal Capability," in *Measuring Justice: Capabilities and Primary Goods* (2010), and "Criminal Justice without Retribution," *Journal of Philosophy* (2009). She is editor of John Rawls,

*Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (2001).

**Larry Krasnoff** is Professor of Philosophy at the College of Charleston. He is coeditor of *New Essays on the History of Autonomy* (2004) and author of *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: An Introduction* (2008). His essays have appeared in the *European Journal of Philosophy*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, and the *Philosophical Quarterly*.

**Anthony Simon Laden** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author of *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (2012) and *Reasonably Radical: Deliberative Liberalism and the Politics of Identity* (2001), as well as numerous articles on Rawls's work.

**Daniel Little** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan-Dearborn and Professor of Sociology at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. His fields of research include the philosophy of the social sciences, the practice of democracy, and globalization. His recent books include *New Contributions to the Philosophy of History* (2010) and *The Paradox of Wealth and Poverty: Mapping the Ethical Dilemmas of Global Development* (2003). His academic blog can be found at [www.understandingsociety.blogspot.com](http://www.understandingsociety.blogspot.com).

**S.A. Lloyd** is Professor of Philosophy, Law, and Political Science at the University of Southern California. She is the author of *Morality in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Cases in the Law of Nature* (1992), *Ideals as Interests in Hobbes's Leviathan: Mind over Matter* (1992), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hobbes* (2013), and *Hobbes Today* (2013), as well as numerous articles on Rawls on the family and liberal feminism.

**Colin M. Macleod** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Law at the University of Victoria in Canada. His research focuses on issues in contemporary moral, political, and legal theory with a special focus on distributive justice and equality; children, families, and justice; and democratic ethics. He is the author of *Liberalism, Justice, and Markets* (1998) and coeditor with David Archard of *The Moral and Political Status of Children* (2002).

**Jon Mandle** is a Professor in the Philosophy Department at the University at Albany (SUNY). He is coeditor with David Reidy of this volume and of the forthcoming *Rawls Lexicon*, and the author of *What's Left of Liberalism: An Interpretation and Defense of Justice as Fairness* (2000); *Global Justice* (2006); and *Rawls's A Theory of Justice: An Introduction* (2009), as well as articles on political philosophy, ethics, and their history.

**Rex Martin** is Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, at the University of Kansas and Honorary Professor in the School of European Languages and Politics at Cardiff University. His fields of major interest are political and legal philosophy and history of political thought. He is the author of several books, including *A System of Rights* (1993) and the editor or coeditor of several more, including *Rawls's Law of Peoples: A Realistic Utopia?* (2006).

**Richard W. Miller** is Hutchinson Professor in Ethics and Public Life and Director of the Program on Ethics and Public Life in the Department of Philosophy at Cornell University. His writings in political philosophy and ethics include *Analyzing Marx* (1984), *Moral Differences* (1992), and *Globalizing Justice: The Ethics of Poverty and Power* (2010).

**Darrel Moellendorf** is Professor of International Political Theory at Goethe University Frankfurt. He is the author of *Cosmopolitan Justice* (2002), *Global Inequality Matters* (2009), and *Dangerous Climate Change: Values, Poverty, and Policy* (2013). He has been a Member of the School of Social Sciences at the Institute for Advanced Study and a Senior Fellow at Justitia Amplificata at the Johann Goethe Universität, Frankfurt and the Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften.

**Jonathan Quong** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Liberalism without Perfection* (2011), as well as articles on political liberalism, public reason, democracy, distributive justice, and the morality of defensive harm.

**David A. Reidy** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Tennessee. He has published widely in political and legal philosophy and has focused his work in recent years on Rawls and on issues of global justice and human rights.

**Jonathan Riley** is Professor of Philosophy and Political Economy, Tulane University, and, during 2013, Visiting J.S. Mill Chair in Social Philosophy at the University of Hamburg, Germany. He is currently completing the second edition of his *Mill: On Liberty* (1998) as well as a companion volume, *Mill's Radical Liberalism*.

**Zofia Stemplowska** is University Lecturer in Political Theory and Asa Briggs Fellow, Worcester College, University of Oxford. Her publications include the coedited *Responsibility and Distributive Justice* (2011).

**Adam Swift** is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Warwick. He is coauthor (with Stephen Mulhall) of *Liberals*

*and Communitarians* (1996) and author of *How Not To Be a Hypocrite: School Choice for the Morally Perplexed Parent* (2003) and *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians* (2013).

**Robert S. Taylor** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Davis. He specializes in contemporary analytic political philosophy and the history of liberal political thought. He is the author of *Reconstructing Rawls: The Kantian Foundations of Justice as Fairness* (2011) as well as articles in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, *Ethics*, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Political Theory*, *Journal of Politics*, and *Review of Politics*.

**Steven Wall** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Arizona, where he is also a member of the Center for the Philosophy of Freedom. He is the author of *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint* (1998) and coeditor of *Reasons for Action* (2009).

**Paul Weithman** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where he has taught since 1991. He has worked on political philosophy, the philosophy of education, religious ethics and medieval political theory. His most recent book, *Why Political Liberalism: On John Rawls's Political Turn* (2011) was recognized with the 2012 David and Elaine Spitz Prize as the best book published in liberal and democratic theory in the previous year.

**Stuart White** is Fellow in Politics at Jesus College, Oxford. His research focuses centrally on the political philosophy of economic citizenship. He is the author of *The Civic Minimum* (2003) and *Equality* (2006).

**Huw Lloyd Williams** is Lecturer in Philosophy at Cardiff University. He is the author of *On Rawls, Development and Global Justice: The Freedom of Peoples* (2011).

# Introduction

Jon Mandle and David A. Reidy

It is now more than 10 years since John Rawls died in 2002, at the age of 81, and more than 60 years since his first publication in 1951. Yet, his work continues to occupy a unique and central position in contemporary political philosophy. Over the years it has generated an enormous secondary literature and sparked numerous interpretive and critical debates. The recent publication of Rawls's Princeton undergraduate thesis and his Harvard lectures in moral and political philosophy and the archival processing by Harvard of Rawls's unpublished papers, lectures, letters, annotated books, and so on, have only served further to stimulate interest in and debate over Rawls's work, often raising new questions, reviving debates thought to be settled, and suggesting new ways of understanding Rawls's work. With all this in mind, we were keen to produce with this volume not so much a summary of past scholarly work as a serviceable roadmap for current and future work on Rawls. Accordingly, we asked our contributors to address themselves to the themes and issues that in their view will or should occupy the attention of the scholars engaged or likely to engage in this work. As evidenced by their contributions, this scholarship is likely to range beyond issues of justice. For while Samuel Freeman is certainly correct that "Rawls devoted his entire career to one general philosophical topic and as a result wrote more on the subject of justice than any other major philosopher" (2007, x), as the essays in this collection establish, and as Freeman would readily acknowledge, to understand fully and evaluate fairly Rawls's work one must engage an immense number of related issues, just as Rawls himself did.

In Part I, David Reidy and Paul Weithman draw on materials only recently available to cast new light on Rawls's own understanding of his project and philosophical ambitions. Drawing on Rawls's undergraduate senior thesis (*BI*) and unpublished material from the Rawls archives, including papers from graduate school, Reidy ([Chapter 1](#)) gives us a series of “postcards” from Rawls's early philosophical development. Each offers a glimpse into the origin of one of the several enduring themes or concerns animating Rawls's mature work. Although *BI* is one of the few places where Rawls presents his work in an explicitly religious framework, in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, he notes that Kant's work, clearly a source of inspiration for Rawls, has “an obvious religious aspect” (*LHMP*, 160). Rawls sometimes acknowledged in conversation that his own work was motivated by, among others, an essentially religious concern. Weithman ([Chapter 2](#)) provides a non-theistic interpretation of when a work has a “religious aspect” and argues that this characterization applies to Rawls's work as well as to Kant's. Weithman does not argue that this characterization informs Rawls's own understanding of his work, but the possibility is clearly a live one.

The essays in Part II explore certain key ideas in Rawls's philosophical method. Both Anthony Laden and Larry Krasnoff examine the meaning and significance of Rawls's “constructivism.” Laden ([Chapter 3](#)) explores the relationship between constructivism and the idea of reflective equilibrium, arguing that, contrary to commonly held views, it is the latter that captures Rawls's metaethical commitments while the former constitutes Rawls's method for theory-building. Krasnoff ([Chapter 4](#)) argues that the significance of Rawls's 1980 Dewey Lectures has been widely misunderstood. Kantian constructivism was a response to certain challenges to the ideas of the original