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- This is the peer reviewed version of the following book reviews: PARVIN, P., 2011. John Rawls: An Introduction by Percy B. Lehning. Reflections on Rawls: An Assessment of His Legacy by Shaun P. Young (ed.) [book reviews]. Political Studies Review, 9 (1), pp. 74 - 75, which has been published in final form at http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9032.2010.00227_1.x. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving.

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One of the striking things about Rawls's work is that its scope is both huge and tiny. It is huge because justice as fairness is huge. It is a beast of a theory: nothing less than a technical, rigorous, and systematic defence of liberal principles from the ground up which has defined the terms for normative political philosophy ever since. Had he written nothing more than *A Theory of Justice* in his career, Rawls would still be appropriately celebrated as one of the most important political philosophers ever to have lived, whose work did more than any other to re-invent analytical political philosophy.

However, Rawls was not content in stating his theory just the once. Rather, he spent the rest of his career refining, re-stating, and amending it in order to make it more appealing to its detractors. In this sense, the scope of Rawls's work was small indeed: he had one project, and he spent over half a century trying to perfect it. In Lehning's *John Rawls: An Introduction*, the author quotes Rawls as saying in 1991 that after writing *Theory* he had always ‘planned on doing some other things mainly connected with the third part of the book,’ which was, he said, the part he liked the best (p. 9). However, the desire to perfect his original theory proved too strong, and these wider interests were shelved. The jury is out as to whether Rawls’s repeated revisions of his ideas made things clearer or more confusing. What it did do, however, is give rise to a thriving scholarly literature aimed at getting straight what Rawls actually meant.

Hence, it seems, the need for so many introductory books on precisely this topic. Like many ‘introductions’ to the work of famous philosophers, Lehning’s book is not strictly ‘introductory’ at all. Rather, it is a thorough (and therefore complex) exploration of Rawls’s key ideas. After a potted biography of his subject, in which he mentions the key moments in Rawls’s life which shaped his philosophy, Lehning provides an erudite dissection of the central ideas at the heart of justice as fairness, beginning with their seminal formulation in *A Theory of Justice*. Having done so, Lehning then describes Rawls’s many re-thinks and shifts, tracing the evolution of Rawls’s ideas through their countless re-statements and extensions, before discussing the practical implications of the theory for public policy and the design of social and political institutions. Lehning succeeds in presenting Rawls’s ideas in all their intricacy and also succeeds in providing a helpful intervention into many debates about Rawls’s work. Lehning manages to convey not just the breadth of Rawls’s ideas, but also their depth, and the many intricate ways in which they hang together.

And for Lehning, the fact that they hang together is important. Lehning’s central aim is to present Rawls’s work as constituting a single, unified project. There are strengths as weaknesses to such an approach. It is probably the approach that Rawls himself would have been happiest with. But in presenting the entirety of Rawls’s work as a unified set of conclusions about justice on the world stage, the only option open to the reader is either accept it, or reject it, in its entirety. That is, if Lehning is right, then one either has to buy into the whole Rawlsian project or none of it. Importantly, therefore, one presumably cannot do what a very large number of political philosophers have done, which is to defend certain aspects of Rawls’s work (for example, most of *Theory*), while rejecting
others (for example, most of Law of Peoples). To do so is merely to make a basic mistake. But this seems too demanding. Can Rawls’s philosophy fit such a ‘take it or leave it’ approach? Brian Barry didn’t think so, and neither did Charles Beitz, Allen Buchanan, Thomas Pogge, and many others who all criticised Rawls’s later work for moving away from what he wrote in Theory and whom, it must be presumed, are all guilty of misunderstanding Rawls’s point.

One final point on Lehning: what becomes clear quite quickly is that he does not want us to merely understand Rawls’s ideas, rather, he wants us to agree with them. To be fair, he does outline some of the criticisms that have been made of Rawls’s ideas, but they are generally batted aside before they get going. And there is no serious discussion of any of the many thinkers writing in the past thirty years who have rejected Rawls’s approach to philosophy at a more fundamental level. Lehning’s book seems to be aimed squarely at explaining Rawls’s theory to those who already agree with it, and who already work within the dominant Rawlsian approach to normative theorising that he established.

For more critical engagement with Rawls’s work, readers might well look to Shaun P. Young’s Reflections on Rawls, a collection of ten essays dealing with a wide range of issues arising out of Rawls’s work. Topics include Rawls’s approach to toleration (Glen Newey, Patrick Neal), his thoughts on international justice (Rex Martin, David Shugarman), the idea of public reason (George Klosko, William Galston), capabilities (Harry Brighouse and Elaine Unterhautler), and the historical and philosophical roots of Rawlsian liberalism (Lesley Jacobs, Ronald Beiner, Jan Narveson). On the whole, the essays are interesting, thought-provoking, and generally shed new light on perennial disagreements among Rawlsian scholars about the limits and implications of Rawls’s justice as fairness.

Name of reviewer (CAPITALS)
Institution (Underline)

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