

POLITICAL LIBERALISM – UNFULFILLED PROMISE

Summary

Having become aware that his conception, as put forth in “A Theory of Justice”, could be accepted only by Liberals, J. Rawls concluded that a well-ordered society built on it would not be stable. Therefore, given the fact of reasonable pluralism of incompatible comprehensive religious, philosophical and moral doctrines, he no longer presents his “justice as fairness” as comprehensive, but as political. According to him, a political conception of justice has three features: it is concerned with the basic structure of a constitutional democratic regime; it does not presuppose accepting any particular comprehensive doctrine; and, it is formulated in terms of two fundamental ideas implicit in the public culture of a democratic society (the ideas of society as a fair system of cooperation, and of persons viewed as free and equal). Due to this change, the justification of justice as fairness proceeds from what is held in common and leads to an agreement based on the overlapping consensus of the reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

Political reinterpretation of liberalism seems very attractive, but a critical examination of it immediately unveils its weakness. The demand of bracketing comprehensive moral and religious questions for political purposes produces in citizens a kind of schizophrenia because they must not resolve issues (i.e., the question of abortion) invoking their own moral principles. Thus, in private, one can be a pro-life activist, but in public must accept the liberal solution to the problem. This means that it is possible to be a consistent adherent of political liberalism only if one is willing to accept its comprehensive version. In addition, even liberalism itself, in the most fundamental question, i.e., that of justice reveals a sharp controversy. There is an important strand in the liberalism which considers Rawls’ philosophy as dangerous to a free society and this prompts us to express doubts, not just about liberalism’s ability to indicate the common ground for incompatible comprehensive views but about its capacity to define justice.