

Dominic Welburn

Rawls and the Environmental Crisis

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In *Rawls and the Environmental Crisis* Dominic Welburn offers readers an impressively researched collection of the pantheon of scholars who have either critiqued or written in defence of the environmental implications of John Rawls' *Political Liberalism*. With an increased public awareness of the effects of environmental degradation caused by human action and our dwindling supply of our planet's resources, there is a growing view in political theory that considering political justice separately from discussions of our environmental responsibilities is outdated and untenable moving forward. Welburn provides an overview of the environmental critiques of Rawls by collating work by theorists who seek to identify to what extent Rawls can offer solutions to green concerns. The term 'green' is used throughout the book as an umbrella term that ties concepts of nature and the environment as subject with values of sustainability for human agents. There is an overarching opinion that Rawls' liberalism can include some amount of consideration for the preservation of nature, but that this can only be guaranteed at a shallow, instrumental level (light green on the scale from light to dark). However, at the end of this book Welburn argues that Rawls' principle of just savings will ensure darker green considerations by citizens, defending Rawls from the accusations levelled by the green critique.

The book is divided into four chapters, starting with a historical summary aimed at tracing Rawls' move from Kantian liberalism to his own political liberalism. This is a relevant starting point for the other chapters, as it explains how Rawls is attempting to answer perennial political theory questions, such as finding a justified median between individual freedoms and too thick or too thin requirements from governing society. Welburn also explains the role of and justification behind common aspects of Rawls' theory that environmental extensionists tend to make use of, such as the original position, reflective equilibrium and the importance of stability. Chapter one sets up the following two chapters well for any readers without much familiarity with Rawls, but some basic understanding of either Rawls or related political theory does seem necessary in order to follow everything Welburn includes here. Those completely unfamiliar with Rawls could struggle considering the quickness with which Welburn moves through the many aspects of political liberalism he includes, and because of this I wouldn't consider this an appropriate beginner's introduction to Rawls. At the other end of the spectrum, those who are well versed in Rawlsian theory won't get much from the first chapter, as it is largely a descriptive overview of concepts with which they would already be familiar. That is not to say that Welburn's audience with this chapter is overly narrow;

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I'd imagine that the majority of philosophy students and teachers would fit right into the target audience and could follow and learn from this chapter.

The second chapter moves into the main subject of the book, which is the collection of literature debating what Rawls' theory can say about green concerns. Welburn first goes through what Rawls himself says and brings together the justification for the separation argument (that it is correct to separate environmental concerns from the sphere of political justice), which is valuable as this is fragmented in Rawls' own writings. Welburn then goes through four types of arguments for extending Rawls' theory to address green concerns that call for a stronger commitment to protecting nature: Rawls' 'heuristic original position; the notion of sentientism as an ethic capable of protecting non-human species; his own approach to extensionism; and the idea of preserving institutions via a principle of just savings' (p. 13). A structural theme is introduced in this chapter which helps readers keep track of how all of the separate arguments presented throughout this book relate to each other, a framework Welburn takes from Derek Bell which asks 'who, what and how' with regards to the distribution of resources demanded by each theory's system of justice (who is a subject of justice, what is being distributed and how this distribution occurs).

In the third chapter Welburn presents arguments from various critics of Rawls/Rawlsian extensionists, who although working from different angles, all claim that Rawls can only be extended to the point of shallow, instrumental reasons for environmental justice. The value of this chapter comes from its aim to bring together a unified 'green critique' of Rawls, similar in standing to the feminist or race critiques. As Welburn points out, the green critique of Rawls has a major weakness in being currently recognised as a unified critique because the theorists presented rarely engage with each other and often focus on individual aspects of Rawls' theory while ignoring other aspects that are relevant. It is a bigger project than Welburn undertakes to attempt to combine these disparate criticisms into the single critique desired, but in bringing them together into one location and presenting their strengths and weaknesses so clearly, he offers an excellent starting place for this to be achieved. This chapter is structured by combining the arguments in defence of using Rawls to address green concerns into two categories (those who think his theory includes adequate consideration of environmental issues despite only being light green, and those who want to add an additional ecological principle to achieve a darker green theory), followed by presenting a critique of each of these strategies. As presented, and with the final critique of the chapter summarising the argument that Rawls' justice as fairness is 'but a smokescreen for an exploitative, capitalist economic system that is ecologically ruinous' (p. 14), chapter three leaves readers with the conclusion that Rawls' theory is unable to move past light green, instrumental ecological considerations.

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The fourth and final chapter disputes this conclusion by bringing together several authors who, unlike those presented in the last chapter, help Welburn to make his primary argument that Rawls' theory without any modifications can give us a darker green theory of environmental justice and that this will be achieved through a liberalised conception of environmental stewardship. 'The main aim of this chapter will be to demonstrate how recent developments in the literature on environmental stewardship have stumbled, unwittingly, upon similarities between a liberalised version of the concept and the key tenets of Rawls' political liberalism' (p. 88). The intergenerational project of justice generates duties and obligations of environmental protection in individual citizens as part of our identification of transpolitical goods. 'Ensuring that these institutions endure from one generation to the next would seem to commit citizens to acting as trustees, or stewards ... This tension means that it is difficult to see the just savings principle as purely an instrumental means to the individual good, as it starts to resemble something much more profound' (p. 52).

Although it is seemingly the culmination of the book, there isn't comparatively much space dedicated to presenting Welburn's own theory of environmental stewardship or its justification and defence against potential objections. The last chapter does offer a comprehensive explanation of environmental stewardship as a theory and gives the reader an understanding by the end of the book as to why it could be a way of greening Rawls to a darker degree than other avenues brought up in chapters two and three, but I would have liked to see more time spent engaging with potential objections, in the same manner as the theories in the previous chapters were reviewed. Without this the argumentative strength of Welburn's defence of his environmental stewardship as a favourable environmental interpretation of Rawls isn't as robust as I had hoped for. However, Welburn's larger aim with this book as a collation of the arguments for and against Rawls' political theory as capable of addressing pressing environmental concerns I consider to be an overwhelming success. I would recommend this book to anyone wanting to write about Rawls and the environment; by bringing together such a comprehensive scope of authors and organising the book as Welburn has, their arguments become clear and connected in a way that will allow future studies in this subject to be more intelligent and productive.

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