

Guest Editor's Introduction

Critical Thinking and the Tradition of Political Philosophy: An Historical Overview¹

JACK RUSSELL WEINSTEIN

Ken Aman, to whom this issue of *Inquiry* is dedicated, summarized the new dominance of political philosophy in an advertisement for a senior seminar. He wrote: "When Isaiah Berlin gave his famous inaugural lecture at Oxford University, he apologized for his interest in political philosophy, as if it were not 'real' philosophy. Today, we have come full circle. The liveliest and hottest discussions in philosophy are about political concepts and values. It has also become clear that one's political or social vision has an enormous impact on other philosophical positions or commitments."

Sadly, Ken did not get to teach that course. Yet, his memory drove all of us in that seminar to understand the urgency of political theory. Ken's work on transitional justice, his personal involvement in Latin America, his commitment to the communities he found himself a part of, made us all aware, even after his untimely passing, that political philosophy is first and foremost about *people*. To neglect political philosophy is to neglect those with whom we share the world. To seek its answers is to help and heal an entire world population.

As much as political philosophy is about people, it is also a division within the wider field of philosophy, and insofar as it is a part of the larger discipline, political philosophy must be concerned with the pursuit of knowledge. Herein lie core questions of the tradition: What is the relationship between political philosophy and the rest of the discipline? Epistemology, for example, asks about the nature and limits of human knowledge; political philosophy asks how such limitations limit the realization of justice. Logic asks about the nature of human reasoning; political philosophy asks how deliberation determines political institutions. Metaphysics asks about the nature of truth; political philosophy asks how society is to manage the debates regarding the differing truths groups and individuals are committed to.

Critical thinking is the tool one uses to engage in inquiry, yet the histories of political philosophy and inquiry are fused. In this introduction, I hope to illustrate the relationship between CT and political philosophy. I seek to justify my claim that particular political theories assume a certain conception of critical thinking, and that this conception contributes to the nature and role

of the citizen within society. In doing so, I focus on three theorists: Plato, Hobbes, and Rawls. I suggest that these three philosophers represent, not only a shift in political commitment, but also a shift in perspective regarding inquiry. Each has, at the core of his theory, a conception of critical thinking that quite directly defines the limitations of the institutions that they describe.

Plato's Imperfect Utopia

Despite the prevalence of political themes in almost all of his dialogues, Plato's political theory is most clearly defined in three works in which politics are the main focus. These are also his longest dialogues. Whereas *Crito* and other such dialogues do focus on key political questions—*Crito* asks, among other questions, about the nature of reciprocity between the state and citizen—Plato's description of the *nature* of the state is most clear in *Republic*, *Statesman*, and *Laws*. In their proper chronology—*Republic* is clearly the earliest of the three, *Laws* almost certainly the latest—there is an important element that must not be ignored. As the dialogues progress chronologically, the role of Socrates dwindles into non-existence. I intend to show that the diminished role of Socrates is indicative of Plato's belief that the role of critical thinking is unimportant to any but the most utopian societies.

Republic is a work of utopian fiction. Its purpose is to create a city in speech. In it, the Platonic character Socrates directs conversations towards a description of a rigidly hierarchical and segregationist state, the purpose of which is justice insofar as justice is regarded as, among other things, the pursuit of truth. Socrates is the dominant speaker and despite the fact that the dialogue contains several characters engaged in a conversation of sorts, there is no community of inquiry.² The interlocutors rarely speak to each other and when they do, their comments are almost always inconsequential. A community of inquiry requires a balance of power and an attempt to share in inquiry. In *Republic*, as in most of Plato's dialogues, the interlocutors address matters of substance only to Socrates, and Socrates responds as an oracle and not as an equal member. The Platonic Socrates presents the blueprint of the hierarchy of society as fact. He concludes with an unchallenged myth about the nature of rewards and punishment after death that underscores the parallel between the just city and the just soul.

Republic is plagued with a concern that the ideal city will never come into being for two reasons. First, there is question as to whether true knowledge—knowledge of the Forms—is ever attainable. Second, there is the realization that those whom Plato believes would be capable of attaining such knowledge, if knowing such things is in fact possible, have no desire to govern. *Republic* is, in many respects, a highly pessimistic view of the ideal state.

Statesman's dialectic is slightly more of a community of inquiry. Socrates barely speaks even though he is present, but the majority of the dialogue is still a discussion between only two people at one time: a young Athenian also

named Socrates and a mysterious stranger who is never named. *Statesman* does not focus on the nature of the philosopher; it focuses on the nature of the legislator. It is fraught with early mistakes and missteps that often result in absurd conclusions. At one point, the interlocutors define the statesman as "the herder of featherless bipeds."³

In contrast to the utopian goal of *Republic*, *Statesman* is the search for the second-best regime. The elder Socrates is, as one assumes from Platonic tradition, the representative of the ideal. In *Statesman*, he is outside the dialogue and therefore he represents the unattainable. The stranger, the second-best person to guide the conversation, governs the dialogue with an interlocutor who is an imperfect copy of the Platonic Socrates and even has the same name. Clearly, he too is a second-best interlocutor. Yet, despite the silence of the elder Socrates, the presence of Plato's own teacher is a constant reminder of the desire and attraction of the utopian ideal, however unattainable it may be.

In *Statesman*, the stranger concludes that a statesman is comparable to a ship's captain. A captain does not rule by decree, his or her law is neither unbendable nor unchangeable. Instead, the captain rules by "supplying his art as law."⁴ Like piloting a ship, being a statesman is a *techné*. A leader does not follow a written set of rules, but instead develops a system that allows skill to determine one's decision. Each situation must be dealt with individually while still being based upon a clear awareness and understanding of how things work. For Plato, this is the description of the second-best method of governance since even the ideal statesman is inferior to that of the philosopher. Under such a regime, law would be unnecessary.

Plato, despite this rejection of law, does have his characters discuss the necessity of legislation because, as both *Republic* and *Statesman* acknowledge, the ideal state is not to be achieved. *Statesman* paints a picture of a democratic society in which the multitude, regardless of their level of skill, are permitted to participate in the political system. Laws are created out of ignorance by the people and are imperfect, but they are used to hold an imperfect ruler accountable for his or her actions. It becomes clear then, that the laws, although imperfect, are used to complement imperfection. For Plato, it is better to control ignorance under the guidance of law than it is to live under unregulated chaos.

The transition to *Laws* is thus made easier by *Statesman*. Laws are inherently imperfect and the dialogue which focuses on them cannot be utopian. Indicative of this assumption, *Laws* is the only Platonic dialogue in which Socrates does not appear at all. *Statesman* has made it clear that laws are not necessary in an ideal situation; therefore Socrates, the Platonic ideal, is extraneous to a discussion of laws.

Laws is a discussion between three interlocutors: the Spartan Megillos, the Cretan Kleinias and a nameless Athenian Stranger. The dialogue takes place outside of Athens, and, as a result, is twice removed from the standard Socratic

dialectic. It is a debate as to whether the ideal state is that which should be guided—as are Sparta and Crete—towards war. The Athenian Stranger concludes, as does Socrates in *Republic*, that the state must be guided by virtue. The purpose of a legislator is to create laws that can guide citizens, but he or she must also govern citizens in such a way that citizens will never disobey. To do this, the legislator must be able to justify the laws in numerous different ways depending on what class of person is being addressed.

For example, the Athenian Stranger concludes that Sparta and Crete are wrong to prohibit the consumption of alcohol. According to the Athenian Stranger, drinking should be permitted, but only in public under the guidance of the laws and the legislator, and the legislator him- or herself must be free of a desire to drink. In making this claim, *Laws* modifies the claims of *Statesman*. It is not enough that a captain of a ship be knowledgeable in the art of sailing. He or she must also be free of *seasickness*.⁵

All of the above comments are made in the shadow of the Athenian Stranger's assertion, exemplified by the chance meeting of the three interlocutors, that humans don't legislate, chance does. According to Plato, most laws are the consequence of necessity and disaster. They are responses to specific and unforeseen events. Consequently, the legislator is ever subject to the shifts in fortune. The acknowledgment of the role of chance is yet a further indication that legislation is the product of the second-best regime, since the best state would be governed by reason, and legislation is not.

There is an important tension in Plato's work that is made clear by the diminishing presence of Socrates in Plato's chronology. The first element of the tension is the philosopher's desire to seek the truth. The city must be ruled through wisdom, judgment governed by truth. The second element of the tension is introduced by Plato's seemingly constant claim that a utopia can never be realized. Justice, for example, can never properly manifest itself because only the Forms are in a true state of being. All instances that merely participate in the Form of Justice are still in the process of becoming; they are still imperfect. Notice that realization of Justice is a different problem than that of simply "knowing" the Form of Justice. It is certainly consistent to say that, according to Plato, the Philosopher may know what justice is but must remain skeptical as to its realization.

For Plato, inquiry is a process of approximation. Critical thinking is the ability to make judgments in light of a truth that can never be realized. CT must contribute to a less than perfect world guided by a less than exact image of the truth. This may be why *Republic* ends in a myth. Myth is an imperfect depiction of the truth. Its presence in Plato seems to be a realization that other means must be employed to explicate Justice.

For Plato, critical thinking is not based on social equality, or a community of inquiry in which each interlocutor has an equal claim to reason. According to Plato, critical thinking must be guided by the experts. Only the philoso-

phers, or in a less than perfect world, the legislator, can organize individuals. Even alcohol must be consumed under the guidance of the experts of the state in order to insure that it is ingested in proper moderation.

For Aristotle, this retreat from perfection would manifest itself in a retreat from precision. Politics and ethics would require the shift from a pure syllogistic logic to an imprecise practical reasoning. Thus, Plato's claim of the imperfection of justice, the groundwork for Aristotle's discussion of practical reasoning, may be seen as the birth of informal logic.

Hobbes' Retreat from Reason

Whereas René Descartes is generally regarded as the first modern philosopher, his contemporary Thomas Hobbes is most often regarded as ushering in modern political philosophy.⁶ Hobbes did develop themes previously discussed by Grotius and Machiavelli, and he was very much a proponent of an already established humanist school of thought. However, Hobbes' materialism, individualism, and scientific grounding redefined the language and character of political philosophy much in the same way that Descartes' scientific and mathematical groundwork redefined the language of epistemology and metaphysics. As in Plato, law plays an important role for Hobbes, and as in Plato, the role of law is that which will allow us to see the nature of CT that underlies his system. However, the nature of the law for Hobbes was very different than for Plato.

In short, the popular summary of Hobbes' *Leviathan* is as follows: Human beings existed at one time in a natural condition or state of nature. Although some individuals in the State of Nature may be stronger than others, others may be more clever, or more charismatic, or simply faster. Collectively, these inequalities create a state of equality among all human beings, and since all people desire self-preservation, the satisfaction of desires, and the tools required to achieve them, human beings in their natural condition are in a constant state of war with one another. Famously, according to Hobbes, the consequence of this conflict is that life in the state of nature is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."⁷

According to Hobbes, in an effort to quell their fears and lengthen their lives, people in the state of nature agree to give up the pursuit of their personal desires in exchange for an equal agreement from others. This agreement is most commonly known as the social contract, and it results in the formulation of a society governed by a sovereign, where the sovereign is an agent or agency that enforces the laws and the social contract itself. The power of the sovereign is justified by the sovereign's *not* taking part in the social contract; the sovereign retains all of the rights accorded within the state of nature. People leave the state of nature because of fear and abide by the social contract because of fear as well. However, Hobbes argues that ultimately, it is better to fear only the sovereign than it is to fear everyone.

The standard account, although accurate, lacks a certain amount of detail that must be explored in order to see the conception of inquiry and CT that forms the foundation for Hobbes' political theory. It is important to note that Hobbes wrote more than just *Leviathan*, although his other work tends to be neglected—at least in part because it is, to a very large extent, incorporated within his masterpiece. Hobbes saw himself as participating in the scientific endeavors of the time. He was a contemporary critic of Descartes, he commented and built upon Galileo, and his second most famous work *De Cive* (*The Citizen*) was always intended to be the third part of a larger work titled *Elements of Philosophy* which was completed later in his life. It was comprised of two other parts: *De Corpore* (*Matter*) and *De Homine* (*Man*). Hobbes wrote a further piece called *Elements of Law*, and we have several other works and translations as well. The scientific and metaphysical foundation of his politics was, at the very least, well thought out.

Hobbes' starting point is both a skeptical epistemological individualism and a metaphysical materialism. He argued that human beings are *automata* who simply respond to outside stimuli. Like Descartes, he doubted the reliability of the senses and questioned the accuracy of the reports our impressions made of the external world. However, unlike Descartes, Hobbes argues first that there is no soul separate from the body and second, that the questionable nature of impressions is irrelevant. Individuals act based on their own interpretation of their own impressions. As long as a person assigns words to events or perceptions in a consistent manner, a person is able to reason. Isolated individuals such as Descartes' dreamer would still be capable of developing a language for identifying his or her experiences as long as experiences remained uniform; language need not be a product of a community. However, given such a limitation, one wonders what Hobbes might mean by consistent language. Since there are no objective standards, how do agents know if their language is a consistent representation of their impressions? Hobbes' answer seems to lie in a distinction between 'marks' and 'signs'. Marks are those words that serve as "notes of remembrance" to the individual.⁸ Signs are those words which signify to others what a person may "conceive, or think of each matter; and also what they desire, feare, or have any other passion for."⁹ In isolation, the consistency of language is identified by the successful reasoning that achieves a desired goal. In social situations, consistency can only mean that the actions of others seem to respond predictably given our utterances. It is in that way that Hobbes is a behaviorist.

Whereas signs do seem to have some intersubjective definition, Hobbes' materialism results in a purely atomistic morality. Hobbes' theory of morality is defined purely in terms of motion towards and away from objects of desire. Hobbes' materialism prevents him from relying on any abstract absolute good. He writes: "... the Felicity of this life consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied. For there is no such *Finis ultimus* (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest Good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers ...

Felicity is a continuall progresse of the desire, from one object to another; the attaining of the former, being still but the way to the latter." Hobbes argues that human beings define "Good" simply as that which is pleasing, and "Evil" simply as that which is not.¹⁰ Due to the nature of the *Sunnon Bonum*, people need not retain the same belief about goodness over time, and they need not agree with others. Individuals are the sole judges of the value or goodness of an act since the individual is the agent who assigns meaning to the definition. It makes no sense for one person to claim that either their new definition or the definition put forth by another is inaccurate, because *no* impression is guaranteed accurate. To claim that "Good" actually means something different from what any individual defines it as would be to set a unique standard for moral matters that would be beyond human epistemological limitations.

Hobbes did not accept the primacy of reason over emotion or desire. He felt that desire would, in most instances, direct the agent beneficially. In fact, in *Leviathan*, he defines deliberation simply in emotive terms as "the whole summe of Desires, Aversions, Hopes and Fears."¹¹

For Hobbes, the individualistic nature of the Good leads us to distinguish between *good* and *right*. *Good* is that which we identify as desirable, whereas *right* is that which is rational for us to pursue. In the state of nature, it is right—or rational—for us to pursue everything that we desire. It can be said then, that in the state of nature, all people have the right to everything they desire.

For Hobbes, good reasoning must meet two criteria. First, it must recognize the consistency of a personal language, and second, it must be the outcome of an *ordered* thought process. Reasoning is good in so far as there is an identifiable progression of words or beliefs leading to the acquisition of that which is desired. Human reasoning is the product of a machine with the only standard of evaluation being the fulfillment of the desire of the machine. Faulty reasoning is not an indication of a faulty machine, it is incidental to the agent's essence. Richard Tuck equates Hobbes' notion of ordered thinking to the modern conception of a well-ordered computer program. He writes that one can "distinguish between a case where the program is functioning smoothly, and the machine is thereby doing something effectively, and a case where there is some malfunction. But in either case the computer remains a machine, and the difference between the cases is a purely formal one."¹²

The non-essential nature of human reasoning is that which allows the social contract to take the form it does because for Hobbes, agreeing to the social contract is not simply forfeiting the right to act on our judgments. It is also transferring the legitimacy of moral and political judgment itself. As a consequence of the agreement, the sovereign takes upon himself the responsibility of political judgment and adjudicates in the name of those who have agreed to give up their judgments to the new authority. The sovereign's judgment is binding and final.

Hobbes' conception that one is able to pass along the right of judgment may seem odd to the modern reader. However, it must be recalled that Hobbes concludes that all our knowledge is suspect. Since our impressions may not be accurate representations of reality anyway, there is no reason to attach any preference to any one person's judgment. To quote Tuck again, 'There is no fact of the matter in these doubtful cases, and people therefore have no reason to prefer their own judgment to another person's. Since they do have a most powerful reason for wanting their judgments aligned with other people's, it is a simple conclusion to draw that they should all find some single source of opinion whose view about the danger to each of them in doubtful or contentious cases they will accept.'¹³

Hobbes writes that the masses are more than willing to accept the judgment of the new authority. Humans are weak-willed in the sense that they are easily manipulated, although it is important to note that for Hobbes, there was not necessarily any negativity in this estimation. Humans are designed to receive the opinion of the authority. He writes that the minds of the common people are "like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by Publique Authority shall be imprinted in them."¹⁴ The educated are not as susceptible to opinion only because their minds have already been filled with ideas.

Like Plato's theory, Hobbes political philosophy is dependent upon and justified by his theory of critical thinking. Reasoning is the process of emotional deliberation, a deliberation that is, for the most part, reliable in that it tends to achieve the desired consequences. A person's ability to think critically is not part of the essence of a person; it is alienable. A person is no less a person if they refrain from the process of judgment than if they make the judgments for themselves. In fact, it makes good sense to pass along this responsibility to others since to do so ensures that others will abide by the same rules. Society will thereby refrain from falling back into a state of war.

The concept of the community of inquiry is nonsense to Hobbes except insofar as it might be loosely interpreted as an imaginary contractual convention. It is the sovereign who makes decisions, and these decisions are just as legitimate as those made by anyone else. One sees, then, that Hobbes acknowledges a radical equality between the critical thinking skills of all individuals. There is no reason to prefer one person's conclusions over another person's. The only political skill that needs to be cultivated is the skill of obeying the law.¹⁵

In a political theory based upon an individualistic and materialistic relativism, there is no truth to gain in the long run. There is no political need for inquiry. As in Plato, the citizen is a follower. The purpose of the law is to provide direction; it is not to be questioned. Unlike Plato, however, the law is not designed to provide virtue, it is designed to provide security. The sovereign might be called an expert, but he or she is deemed an expert as a consequence of a contractual agreement and not as a consequence of special knowledge; no

person's political knowledge is any more reliable than anyone else's.

Hobbes calls into question the concept of agency as well as deliberation. Does the transfer of judgment from an individual to the sovereign transfer agency as well? Is deliberation not rational in the sense that Plato would have us believe? Hobbes forces his readers to reevaluate much of the discussion regarding the nature of critical thinking. His political system is based on an assumption that truth, inquiry, and critical thinking are irrelevant to politics.

Rawls: Shifting the Context of Deliberation

Discussing Rawls is infinitely more complicated than it was ten years ago. With the publication of several newer essays in the late eighties as well as the 1993 publication of his second book, *Political Liberalism*, Rawls' claims have become much more difficult to assess. The central difficulty is a debate between Rawls and many of his readers. Rawls claims that his new work is an extension and elaboration of his earlier work in *A Theory of Justice*. His critics argue that *Political Liberalism* is a serious departure from his earlier work and that it undercuts his earlier normative claims.

A Theory of Justice was the spark that lit the current flame under political philosophy. Its publication in 1971 led to a surge of critical examinations which themselves spawned offshoots. No political theorist can be taken seriously unless he or she responds to Rawls. As Robert Nozick wrote: "*A Theory of Justice* is a powerful, deep, subtle, wide-ranging, systematic work in political and moral philosophy which has not seen its like since the writings of John Stuart Mill, if then.... Political philosophers now must either work within Rawls' theory or explain why not.... It is impossible to read Rawls' book without incorporating much, perhaps transmuted, into one's own deepened view. And it is impossible to finish his book without a new and inspiring vision of what a moral theory may attempt to do and unite; of how *beautiful* a whole theory can be."¹⁶

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls provides a normative core to political institutions which may be regarded as having a universal legitimacy. He combines Hobbes' social contract tradition with the autonomous agency of Kant. He begins with a hypothetical version of the state of nature called the original position. In the original position, individuals are under a veil of ignorance, a mechanism that provides selective ignorance. This veil shields all participants from information regarding their own social status and capabilities. Individuals are unaware of their gender, their class, their ethnicity, their religion, their ability, their intelligence, their potential, their level of attractiveness, their health—any and all information that hints at their position in society.¹⁷ Individuals in the original position are mutually self-interested, and will choose only those principles that will result in institutions that benefits them, as individuals.¹⁸ The normativity and the persuasiveness of *A Theory of Justice* lie in Rawls' claim that *all* individuals so situated will *always* choose the same

principles of justice. The principles are as follows: "(1) Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others. (2) Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and b) attached to positions and offices open to all."¹⁹

According to Rawls, the process of establishing the rules which govern society follow a lexicographic order. First, agents in the original position establish the conditions to realize the first principle of justice creating compatible and equal basic liberties for all. No consideration may trump this principle since individual rights are of primary importance. Second, the agents in the original position establish the conditions in which the second principle of justice is realized, in other words, they establish the conditions for equality of opportunity. No considerations other than those that are the consequence of the first principle of justice can trump concerns for equality of opportunity. Third and finally, the specific nature of the institutions of society are developed based upon what Rawls calls the *maximin* principle. This principle states that given a list of options regarding the structure of the state, agents in the original position will choose those institutions in which the least well-off of society are the most well-off when compared to the least well-off individuals of other political institutions. In other words, agents will choose that option which results in the maximum amount of good for those people who are in the minimum social position, hence the term *maximin*.²⁰ Since the agents do not know their place in society, they must assume that it is likely that they will end up part of the worst-off group in society—Rawls suggests that agents should assume that their enemies will determine their place in society, thereby guaranteeing that they will always find themselves in the lowest rung of society. Consequently, according to Rawls, agents will necessarily choose institutions in which the lowest rung is the most beneficial of all possible lowest rungs and that economic inequality is permissible insofar as the inequality contributes to the increased well-being of the least fortunate. For example, imagine two societies, one egalitarian, one hierarchical. Suppose that the status of every member of the egalitarian is some level that I will call w , whereas the status of the members of the hierarchical society ranges from level $w+1$ to level $w+100$.²¹ Despite the vast range of social difference in the hierarchical society, Rawls argues that agents in the original position will still choose the hierarchical society because to be at position $w+1$ is better than being in position w . Upward mobility is not an issue, neither is a sense of community, and Rawls explicitly precludes envy as a motivating factor.²² It is important to note that since no economic concerns can trump the basic liberties guaranteed by the first principle of justice, the concern that vast social inequalities will result in a limitation on the ability of the least well-off members of society to participate in governance are unfounded. Such limitations would be regarded as interfering with the basic liberties and would preclude that possibility of such a social arrangement from being chosen by the members of the original position.

Rawls' theory is contractarian in so far as the original position is analogous to the state of nature in Hobbes' and other social contract theories, although it is important to acknowledge that consensus situations—of which this is one—do not necessarily meet the model of a contractual agreement. Rawls' theory is Kantian in that he argues that all human beings share a universal reasoning which, all else being equal, will result in consensus. Humans, in the original position, are free to choose using reason alone and this, he argues, results in autonomy. Justice is the product of a fair and equal deliberation that determines the rules governing the institutions of society.

There is great debate over Rawls' notion of agency. How, for example, can individuals make any decisions without knowing their history? Practical rationality requires a tradition or at least a context, or so it is argued. It is the original position that best indicates Rawls' conception of critical thinking because this is where agents engage in binding and convincing political deliberation. First, according to Rawls, inquiry is best engaged in apart from one's biases and experiences. History, emotions, and commitments are barriers to CT and do not assist the agents in political adjudication. If a person's political judgments are not in accordance with the conclusions of the original position, it is because the agent is operating based on a personal attachment to the *status quo* and seeks only to preserve his or her current social status. The original position is designed to overcome such selfishness. Second, CT is an essential part of the human condition. Whereas for Hobbes, judgment can be separated from the individual and deliberation is simply a product of competing desires, for Rawls, the ability to think critically and to deliberate is that which is at the core of the human creature. *A Theory of Justice* rests on the claim that even after you strip away all accidental qualities such as physical attributes, and even after you remove the agent from his or her context, a person is still able to engage in political inquiry with such normative force that all conclusions would be binding.

For Rawls, inquiry takes place in a community of inquiry geared towards and satisfied only with consensus, but it is an abstract community that has no context. Every voice is equal in strength and equal in worth, because, for Rawls, every voice will ultimately reach the same conclusion. As Rawls himself writes, "whereas the principles of justice (and the principles of right generally) are those that would be chosen in the original position, the principle of rational choice and the criteria of deliberative rationality are not chosen at all."²³

According to Rawls, human beings do not like to gamble. Critical thinking is reasoning about *safe* options. One would never choose a society in which he or she would not be guaranteed the best possible minimal condition. Critical thinking is economic in nature. Given several options, one will always choose the option with the greatest level of immediate satisfaction as opposed to risk or potential, regardless of the odds.

A commitment to a universal reason may be controversial, but it easily justifies normative claims. If all individuals reason in the same manner, then reason is equally binding to all. Furthermore, if all individuals reason in the same manner, then all individuals will be satisfied by the same conclusion, assuming, of course, that the conclusion is the product of their autonomous reason. In many ways, these are the same insights that drove Hobbes to his claim of transfer of judgment. However, in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls steps away from his claim of universal reason, and, as a result, calls into question the normative claims of his political theory. In it, he claims that the original position is meant simply as a "device of representation," and in doing so, he shakes the normative foundation presented in *A Theory of Justice*.²⁴ If such reasoning is only a metaphor for a process, why should it be taken seriously? This is one of the many problems faced by Plato when he uses myth to assist in the explanation of Justice in *Republic*. Why are the truths portrayed in myths binding? Why should philosophers take metaphors, devices of representation or other literary devices seriously?

In his later work, and in apparent response to claims that his conception of the political self was too "thin" to provide an adequate foundation for deliberation, Rawls removes the emphasis from the original position and rests his theory on an overlapping consensus. An overlapping consensus is an area of commonality that all members of society share, although they may defend or justify it in different ways.²⁵ Rawls makes a distinction between a "comprehensive moral doctrine" and a "political conception of justice." A comprehensive moral doctrine includes "conceptions of what is valuable in human life, as well as ideals of personal virtue and character, that are to inform much of our non-political conduct..."²⁶ It is their comprehensive moral doctrine that people refer to when choosing how they should live, which religion to subscribe to, or other substantive life decisions. A political conception of justice is described by Rawls as a "module, an essential constituent part, that in different ways fits into and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it."²⁷ In other words, a political conception of justice is like a missing puzzle piece that can fit into and be the last piece needed for completion in a wide variety of different jigsaw puzzles. It is the political conception of justice that all members of society share.

In short, Rawls' argument in *Political Liberalism* is as follows: Given the fact that modern society is pluralistic, one must organize society in such a way that the pluralism does not destabilize the society itself. The pluralism of a well-ordered society lies in the diversity of its comprehensive moral doctrines. Pluralism accounts for, among other things, varying beliefs in God, what the good life is, and what human beings should strive for. Since the modern state is a representative democracy, various people, all of whom may hold different opinions on fundamental matters, must interact in order to make decisions. The people engaged in deliberation must have some common ideas, otherwise

interaction would be impossible, unproductive and chaotic. That which citizens share is the overlapping consensus and it defines the standards by which citizens *qua* citizens actually interact. Citizens refer to and debate the details of the political conception of justice, but they *believe* in it because their comprehensive moral doctrine justifies them in doing so.

There are two qualifications. The first is that public discussion regarding the political conception of justice cannot be framed in terms of beliefs that the society does not have in common. The second is that the blueprint of the political conception of justice begins with a public political culture.²⁸ According to Rawls, individuals in a society share certain beliefs and develop political philosophies based upon what they already hold in common as a society.²⁹ The consequences of these two qualifications are, at least in my opinion, damning. First, if the first qualification is to be taken seriously, then only those who share the commonality of the political conception of justice are permitted to participate in society. This destroys meaningful pluralism and prevents political change. The consequence of the second qualification is that the device of representation that is the original position becomes simply a product of the political culture. It is neither necessary nor does it have a normative impact in anything other than a liberal democratic society. I defend and provide much more detail regarding these conclusions elsewhere.³⁰

Notice that Rawls has no claim to universality in his new argument. That which justifies the overlapping consensus is the tradition or comprehensive moral doctrine of the defender. That which makes the overlapping consensus legitimate is simple commonality. One can certainly imagine numerous political beliefs that may be held common over a long period of time that are not conducive to either freedom or equality.

For the Rawls of *Political Liberalism*, critical thinking is a process which requires a context, albeit a very specific one. One can justify and defend commitments without using religious or personal beliefs, but one cannot justify them without using those beliefs that a community holds common. That which legitimizes conclusions is that which people agree upon, but there is no further recourse than the agreement. There is a community of inquiry in Rawls' later work. Those who are deemed citizens are regarded as equal and their opinions must be considered. The overlapping consensus is, of course, a form of consensus, and given that, the opinions of all citizens must be considered valid. However, the community of inquiry is a closed system, and by not allowing those who do not share the core political beliefs into the discussion, Rawls has changed the criterion for good reasoning. Given the universal claims of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls portrayed critical thinkers as safe deliberators who justified their conclusion using a claim about human nature and essentialism; reasoning was all-inclusive. Given the fact that *Political Liberalism* provides no normative defense of Rawls' new system, the only criterion for good reasoning is that a society agrees with it. There are no all-encompassing standards, nor are there any attempts to provide any objective or impartial

evaluation of the system. Whereas agents in *A Theory of Justice* were safe, agents in *Political Liberalism* are xenophobic.

It is not necessary at this point to choose between the early and later Rawls. However, it is interesting to note that the first reviews of *Political Liberalism* were more than critical; they were angry.³¹ It should not be too difficult to see why many of Rawls' critics feel that he has abandoned his earlier claims, and, seeing as his work was so important to contemporary political theory, it should also be easy to see why many of them might feel betrayed. However, much of what will allow one to choose one of Rawls' theories over the other, if they are in fact two theories, is the conceptions of critical thinking that underlies them. Should political philosophy be committed to some sort of universal truth, or should it return to Hobbesian relativism? Is tolerance to be extended to knowledge-claims or does critical thinking permit one to claim that a particular position is wrong and should not be entertained? If one loses the ability to reject the legitimacy of competing truth-claims, what criteria does one use to adjudicate conflicting positions, or is such an adjudication itself impossible? These questions must remain unanswered here, but they are important enough that they are the major items on the agenda facing political theorists today.

Critical Thinking and Political Philosophy

The language of critical thinking is political in nature. The very term "community of inquiry" assumes a political preference. Education departments that see themselves as contributing to democracy and educating citizens are doing so given a particular belief about the validity of political participation.³² That Education departments are embattled in debates about the legitimacy of teaching moral or political values to their students is unique to the contemporary political structure. The very nature of the student-teacher relationship, and the chosen structure of the classroom or curriculum, is indicative of views regarding the privileged status of the educated. Why educate the masses at all? Why contribute to state sponsored education? Why spend the first sixteen to twenty-five years of a person's life focusing on his or her ability to learn to read, write, and understand? Why care about critical thinking? It is only because of a commitment to certain political beliefs that we, as a political unit, offer one set of answers to these questions as opposed to another. It is only because of our political commitments that we regard these questions as worth answering in the first place.

We, as a society, are committed to a particular conception of agency. This agency is exemplified by the early Rawls. To think critically is to be autonomous. Certainly, we regard a group or community as helping establish our ability to think for ourselves—this is where Rawls and Kant part ways—but we regard our CT skills as preventing us from being subsumed by the larger whole. Similar to Rawls and unlike Hobbes, we, as a society, regard such

subsumption as negative. For Hobbes, being relieved of the burden of decision-making is a blessing. It makes our life more pleasant and more secure. For Rawls, being relieved of the burdens of political and moral adjudication makes us subject to injustice.

A discussion of agency leads theorists to identify problems made evident by the interaction of multiple agents. This is the debate over the nature and limits of pluralism and tolerance. Modern liberal democracies are struggling with the meaning of tolerance. What is it moral for us to judge and what should we allow despite our disapproval? It is now common to hear theorists suggest that tolerance presupposes disapproval. One does not *tolerate* a belief or action one approves of. We are asked to tolerate different moral systems and religious beliefs. We are expected to separate politics from morality. This too is exemplified by Rawls. His distinction between a moral comprehensive doctrine and a political conception of justice is reaffirmed with every claim of a women's right to choose or every defense of the separation of church and state. Yet, our lack of tolerance on knowledge-matters is typified by Plato. A teacher is not expected to believe that the test answer " $2 + 2 = 5$ " is somehow equal in worth to the answer " $2 + 2 = 4$ ". Plato would be the first to admit that the uneducated have a proper place in society. According to Plato, the non-philosophers should be free to seek money or success. Plato even provides a mechanism for upward mobility. He acknowledges that sometimes people are mistakenly regarded as belonging to one class as opposed to another and that the philosopher must be vigilant in his or her ability to judge who belongs with what group. Plato departs from democratic liberalism in his claim that knowledge is relevant to governance. Plato believes that the statesman must be educated, whereas in the United States of America, the only formal requirements for the presidency are majority election, and that the candidate must be 35 years of age, born an American citizen, and residing in the country for the 14 years preceding the election.

Finally, political theorists are in turmoil regarding the nature of political deliberation. Is reasoning contextual, or is it universal in nature? Are critical thinking and informal logic rooted in a mathematical universalism as exemplified first by Kant and later by the Analytic philosophers of the first eighty years of the twentieth century? The early Rawls seems to accept this view, but the late Rawls, along with Hobbes, seems to accept the opposite claim. They suggest that there is no universal nature of deliberation, and, as a result, there can be no objectivity or normativity in moral decision making.

The essays in this issue of *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* seek to examine the nature of our contemporary views of agency, tolerance and deliberation. First Charles Blatz and Tapio Poulmatka examine the notion of political agency. Second, Thaddeus Metz and Polycarp Ikuenobe focus on the role of context in deliberation. Finally, Trudy Govier focuses on the role of tolerance in pedagogy and dispute.

Rather than offer brief summaries of each of the articles herein, I offer the reader only a word of preparation. The essays that follow should be understood as continuing a long and complex tradition of political theory. When Ken Aman reminded us of Isaiah Berlin's comment regarding the shift in the importance of political thinking, he was reminding us of a shift of awareness, as opposed to a shift of activity. As a discipline, nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy may not have actively highlighted political theory until recently, but in examining epistemology and logic it was always engaged in political inquiry. What I have tried to do in this introduction, and what I believe Ken Aman's life and work has shown us, is that despite our claims to the contrary, we have been doing political philosophy all along.

Endnotes

I am grateful to Robert Hoag and Eric Pearson of Berea College for their suggestions regarding an early draft of this paper. As always, Mark Weinstein bore the burden of being the first person to see my work and had to suffer through my late night phone calls and extended debate regarding my somewhat underdeveloped ideas. Yet again, his insights and patience were invaluable.

The community of inquiry is one possible structure in which interlocutors can engage in group-assisted critical thinking but its priority is far from an established fact. The social aspect of critical thinking is still only one of many possible preconditions for CT. However, given this journal's recent emphasis on the community of inquiry—two recent issues have focused on debate regarding its nature—I have made an explicit attempt to include CI in my discussion. I feel it is helpful to highlight the fact that numerous political theorists have not regarded social interaction as an essential part of critical thinking.

¹ *Statesman* 266e-267c.

² *Statesman* 297a. A nice example of this is found in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, in which much discussion is placed on *reading* the river. According to Twain, no matter how many times the captain of a steamboat travels the waters, he or she knows that the path taken will be different. One learns how to read a river in advance, but one pilots the ship by reading only the river that exists at the moment with little emphasis on how river was previously. One cannot accurately anticipate the path the steamboat must follow beforehand.

Laws 639b-c.

Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 and died in 1679. René Descartes was born eight years later in 1596 but died much earlier in 1650. It is said that although the two did correspond regarding philosophical issues, they probably did not meet in person until late in Hobbes' life. Descartes was living an underground life in exile for much of Hobbes' early career.

³ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1983), 65.

⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 13.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 13.