

Article

# The “Original Position” as Public Performance: Liberalism, Pluralism, and Asceticism

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**Abstract:** John Rawls’ well-known device of representation (his terminology) that he names the “original position” is put into play by the veil of ignorance. This imaginative device, found in both his early and late works, is often dismissed because it is misunderstood as an exercise in moral geometry. This essay discusses in more detail the subjective mechanics of the original position; while sympathetic of Rawls’ application of the veil of ignorance, I distinguish between a thick and thin veil, whereby I promote the latter. The final section makes a connection between the simulation of the original position and the religious practice of asceticism.

**Keywords:** Rawls; original position; veil of ignorance; asceticism; public dialogue

## 1. Introduction

The eruption of theoretical works on identity in the last decade constitutes nothing less than an ascending trend in political philosophy and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> My text, *Political Theology and Pluralism*,<sup>2</sup> contributes to the cascade of monographs that make the topic of identity of central importance to the messy and complex exchange of reasons concerning policy and morality that unfolds in public life. The book, more precisely, touches on identity in the form of religious self-expression (and more specifically, Christian self-expression). While I explore the practical strategy of “public dialogue” in the vocabulary of ascetic mindfulness, and while I elect to exploit a certain key category in John Rawls (the vocabulary of “overlapping consensus”), I do not discuss in that book the subjective dynamics of the practice of employing the veil of ignorance, a stance adopted in the original position, a device of representation made so famous by Rawls.

In what follows I should like to explore more fully, and sympathetically, the Rawlsian idea of the original position. I do so specifically within the context of the Christian practice of ascetical denial. Is the original position a form of asceticism, in which I deny my own identity for the benefit of all? Is there a veil that covers or suspends my identity, is the veil so constituted a thick or thin veil? Is there at a minimum a metaphorical convention called a veil I can put on? In what follows I will suggest that such a “thin” veil exists, and that I can minimize my identity in the “original position.” Such a practice can serve as a symbol of public asceticism to be nurtured in a pluralistic liberal democracy (by one’s given religious tradition, Christianity in my case) that may permit non-theological voices to be heard on their own terms.

<sup>1</sup> See for example, only an indicative selection of available texts: (Fukuyama 2018; Deneen 2018; Appiah 2018; Laclau 2018; Lilla 2017; Habermas 2015; Nussbaum 2013; Gutmann 2004).

<sup>2</sup> (Rivera 2018).

## 2. The Subjective Circumstances of Justice

With the invention of the original position, Rawls intends to develop what he calls a “device of representation.”<sup>3</sup> As a device, it invokes the logic of a hypothesis or thought-experiment, insofar as the original position demands each of us imagine the individual (me or you) as a representative of the whole.<sup>4</sup> For the thought-experiment to gain traction with me as an individual citizen, I must release my personal identity from its particularities, from its cultural and religious contents. Unsurprisingly, theologians (among others) have felt threatened by Rawls’ proposal for obvious reasons: what Christian or person of faith wants to shed the deeply-held contents of that faith? In handbooks on political theology, Rawls is either not mentioned at all or wholly marginalized (literally mentioned once or twice).<sup>5</sup> Often the object of scholarly protest, and usually quickly dismissed as a form of late-modern atomism,<sup>6</sup> the work of Rawls does not receive the attentive reading in the subfield of political theology that it justly demands. I hope a more sympathetic reading here, however brief, may open up the prospect of fresh appraisals of Rawls in the field.

To achieve this goal (in part and modestly) I must devote more space than I have hitherto to the original position and its mindset. The kind of self-reflexive account of political representation made possible by the original position does not deny the self but rather roots it in a public identity, in what Rawls in a *Theory of Justice* describes as the “subjective circumstances” of justice. I enjoy a first-person perspective or possessive ownership of my irreplaceable subjective character in the face of other first-person perspectives, but there is a close link here between the subjective character and the objective conditions Rawls purports are necessary for social and civic existence at all. To get a clearer sense of the subjective dynamics of the original position, the objective versus subjective circumstances of justice shall be addressed briefly.

We need basic conditions in place if we are to survive as a species. These “objective” conditions are objective to the degree that they constitute crucial elements of our overall well-being. We need food, shelter, water, just as we need to avoid disease, sickness, attack. We band together to maximize our powers of survival in the face of these needs. The moderate scarcity of resources, therefore, often appeals to the basic desire we have to cooperate with each other. We automatically feel the need to belong to a group precisely because we as a species have engaged in cooperation as a necessary venture for mutual advantage for all involved. This, I would concur with Rawls, appears to be a set of objective circumstances that produce collective action, and those circumstances remain self-explanatory and uncontroversial.

Who can envisage such social cooperation to be free of conflict and interpersonal discord? While we all need to overcome scarcity, we do not always agree in our communities how such resources should be preserved, managed, or distributed. Mutually advantageous cooperation among the group (or between groups), moreover, does not yield forth similar religious or moral life plans.<sup>7</sup> While each of us may have similar needs and interests for our survival, the social benefits produced by our social cooperation shall evoke debate about how we understand and enjoy life as such. The objective

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<sup>3</sup> (Rawls 2001, pp. 17–18).

<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, Rawls’ social contract theory is less interested in deliberation among contrasting identities than the classical social contract theorists are, formulated in figures like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, and beyond. This is due to the fact that it appears Rawls legitimates in advance the conclusion at which any thoughtful citizen should arrive: the theory of justice that involves the normative conception of citizens as free and equal persons. Weithman offers a helpful critique of Rawls in this regard, one that would need more space than I have here to incorporate. He writes, “Rawls does say [in *Political Liberalism*] that the principle of legitimacy he favors would be adopted in the original position, but he says nothing about how the parties in the original position make their decision.” (Weithman 2016, p. 95). For more on the classical tradition of the social contract and the metaphysics of the state of nature, see the standard (Macpherson and Cunningham 1962). finally, see my engagement with Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, in (Rivera 2018, chp. 1).

<sup>5</sup> See for example the following handbooks, in which the absence of Rawls is glaring: (Cavanaugh and Scott 2019; Hovey 2015; Hinson-Hasty 2018; Rodríguez 2019).

<sup>6</sup> A standard dismissive reading of Rawls from a theological point of view can be found in the (Forrester 2001, pp. 113–30). The reading of Rawls here is exceptional in that it takes time to engage directly with Rawls’ early and later writings.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the subjective and objective circumstances of justice, see (Rawls 1999a, p. 110ff). see also (Rawls 2001, p. 84ff).

circumstances of justice obtain once survival is secure, but it cannot be said the subjective conditions give occasion for perfect overlap or the same level of cooperation.

To be clear, the subjective circumstances of justice reflect the individual's own pursuit of the good, the moral, the true, and the beautiful. These moral categories are judgments that consist of a set of doctrines that individuals abide by and thus also regard as worthy of recognition. They can evoke in us ardent ties of sentiment and affection, creating in the process genuine solidarity among groups who share the doctrine: Rawls will call these judgements "comprehensive doctrines." No doubt we have different and sometimes incompatible ends and purposes advanced by the subjective character of comprehensive doctrines we respectively adopt.

Let me recapitulate: the subjective circumstances of justice proliferate once the satisfaction of the objective circumstances affords us a decent standard of life. Once I have enough food and water, and my shelter is decent, not least educational opportunities are made available, I can now consider the meaning and ends of life itself. I may even practice a particular religion, such as Christianity or Hinduism. Certainly, I will celebrate other moral and cultural ties of sentiment.

In so doing, I mark off my subjective identity as a particular way of life that shall diverge from my neighbour's way of life, whose life diverges more or less from another neighbour's, and so forth. The urgent social problem, for a liberal democracy, is this: how can such subjective identities maintain a harmonious plurality even while each retains its distinct identity? Of course, in the past, nation states and kingdoms have eliminated the problem of pluralism and diversity by simply wielding the oppressive use of state power to establish a particular religion or moral code, which thus silences dissent.

But, as Rawls indicates, liberalism cannot support state-sponsored oppression. For "we take pluralism to be a permanent feature of a democratic society, and view it as characterising what we may call the subjective circumstances of justice."<sup>8</sup> If a politically liberal state should like to remain liberal, it must refrain from adjudicating between conceptions of the good or religious traditions. According to a liberal state, one subjective judgment is not superior to another. A liberal democracy, in other words, cannot in principle indulge in comparative theology or intervene in interreligious debate, as if to claim that one comprehensive doctrine is true or best or superior to any other. To do this would utterly destroy the subjective circumstances of justice.

The state thus guards such freedom and equality of opportunity, so that I may effectively pursue my conception of the good on fair terms with yours. The subjective mode by which I may well accomplish a sense of the other is a mode of critical introspection, whereby I block the selfish impulse to make my moral norm the universal norm of all. This subjective self-regulation (or self-management) is the *original position*.

Rawls admits we easily find precedents of the original position in Hume and Kant.<sup>9</sup> Surely the "disinterested spectator" in Hume's compelling and lucid discussion of sympathy in the *Treatise* lays the groundwork for the radical detachment from myself I try to enact in the original position (by force of the veil of ignorance).<sup>10</sup> Kant's categorical imperative also signifies as much: "*Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.*"<sup>11</sup> In earlier political writings, Kant shall describe the need for obedience to the laws of states to be combined with a spirit of freedom and opportunity. The place to begin such a dialogue between obedience and freedom is found in the corrective to aristocracies and plutocracies. For Kant, writing in 1785, declares that uniform equality legislated by the state means that one individual cannot coerce any other except

<sup>8</sup> (Rawls 2001, p. 84).

<sup>9</sup> See for example Rawls brief aside on Kant in this respect. "The veil of ignorance is so natural a condition that something like it must have occurred to many. The formulation in the text is implicit, I believe, in Kant's doctrine of the categorical imperative, both in the way this procedural criterion is defined and the use Kant makes of it." (Rawls 1999a, p. 118). His reference to Hume is in (Rawls 2005, p. 116).

<sup>10</sup> (Hume 2007, vol. I, p. 368).

<sup>11</sup> (Kant 2002, p. 37).

through the law. We are all without exception equal subjects before the law. Following from this general principle, as a forbear to the original position, Kant asserts “every member of the commonwealth must be entitled to reach any degree of rank which a subject can earn through his talent, his industry and his good fortune. And his fellow-subjects may not stand in his way by *hereditary* prerogative or privileges of rank and thereby hold him and his descendants back indefinitely.”<sup>12</sup> The unfair advantage gained by one because of one’s aristocratic lineage shall not count, in the eyes of a liberal state, as sufficient grounds for special treatment or privilege; nor shall a low class count as a sufficient grounds for discrimination. The subjective circumstances of justice are to be protected so far as is possible against such arbitrary vagaries and prejudices.

### 3. The Performance of the Original Position

How might such a thought-experiment, inspired by Hume, Kant and consummated in Rawls, be put into play? How is that I can make class, religion, ethnicity, or any other personal characteristic “not count” when I reflect on my place in civic life? This experiment is no small thing to put in practice (as the title of Kant’s essay points up!). For Rawls, one must assume the original position in the face of one’s native and primitive concern for self-advancement. To borrow some of the language from phenomenology’s invention of the reduction or bracketing, the original position in Rawls could be described in the following way: it consists of an inversion of the phenomenological reduction.

What might this mean more exactly? In phenomenology, the reduction is the operation by which one places between brackets an assumption usually made about the state of the world around us, in order to focus with single-minded attention on what is really given.

Imagine we think of the noise made by the water in a fountain (the Trevi Gardens in Rome for the sake of simplicity). In the naive attitude, given from the point of view of classical empiricism, when asked: what do you hear? one would say, I hear sound of a certain frequency, on a certain level on the decibel scale, etc. In fact, that is true only from a particularly abstract point of view. What we hear is the first-person givenness of the water, that is, we hear with pleasure and fascination an early modern “Roman fountain” just as it is given to me as I encounter it in the beautiful setting of Rome. The noise emitted from the fountain is heard in conjunction with the bright reflection of the sunshine and the happy bustle of the crowds. In most cases, what we perceive is not a sound; it is the thing itself just as it is given to me in its particular context, a givenness who impact unfolds in as dramatic a setting as Rome or otherwise (a fountain in a small rural town in Missouri will evoke an alternative experience).<sup>13</sup>

The original position is also an intentional adjustment of our attitude, but one of a wholly different kind than the one enacted by the phenomenological attitude. Rawls’ suspension of personal identity functions, in contrast to the phenomenological reduction just described above, as a controlled and deliberate abstraction from the realm of first-person givenness. Yet, it may not eliminate every mode of first-person experience. It decides to remove us specifically from what Rawls would call “first-person dictatorship,” an egotistical attitude that demands all citizens see and experience the world in just the way I do.<sup>14</sup> The original position corresponds to a “moral geometry,” insofar as the person behind the veil of ignorance transcends the particularities and contingencies of religion, culture, class, language, etc. Outlined first in *A Theory of Justice*, this fundamental moral axiom of the original position has undergone little change each time it reappeared in subsequent works, in books like *Political Liberalism*, *Law of the Peoples*, and the posthumous *Justice as Fairness*. In each volume, the original position, as a political device of representation assumed on behalf of liberalism, asks its readers to carry out a thought experiment in the face of pluralism, so that one may become reconciled with pluralism.

<sup>12</sup> (Kant 1989, p. 75).

<sup>13</sup> For a broad and accessible definition of the phenomenological reduction see (Husserl 1972, sct. 38–44).

<sup>14</sup> (Rawls 1999a, pp. 114–17).

We may agree here with Dana Villa who writes, “Like it or not, the world we inhabit as citizens is irreducibly pluralist, fragmented, and elusive. Civic reengagement begins not by denying or repudiating this situation, but by owning up to it.”<sup>15</sup> How may we, as responsible citizens (religious or otherwise), own up to pluralism? While one aim is to critique egoism of the worst kind (the dictatorship of the first-person account of the world), the original position also has no truck with free-rider forms of citizenship. As a free-rider, I abdicate from my duty altogether, so that I can withdraw from involvement in public life.<sup>16</sup> The original position says we must imagine we can abstract ourselves from our first-person selfishness, not to escape, but to engage with others fairly. In the original position we shall construct a society whose rule of law is sufficiently *universal* and *general*.

To be *general* means to have a law that does not privilege or single out a particular group for exceptional treatment. Because I am in the original position, and because I therefore do not know my personal identity or my situation. I cannot know how to tailor the principles of law and justice to my advantage (or to my enemy’s disadvantage).

A law, and a framework of political justice, must also be *universal*. Just so, political liberalism can be utilized as a moral framework for all persons as moral deliberators. Certainly, universality must be held in dialectical tension with generality, for a first-person dictator could elaborate a law that demands all people be Muslim or Christian, or whichever vision of the good one could adduce for the citizenry. True, this mandate would be universal, but it would not be sufficiently general, since a universal is to be a law that governs all persons in a manner befitting all persons, rather than befitting a dictator.<sup>17</sup>

What indispensable subjective mechanism which Rawls obligates his readers to follow if the original position is to meet both the demands of universality and generality? It is the “veil of ignorance.” This shift in perspective borne forth by the veil permits each citizen, as a moral agent, to deliberate about the broadest scope of social cooperation, so that a fair social contract can be drawn up and ratified. The veil shall not be unveiled until the deliberations have been completed and scrupulous attention paid to society at large. After, and only after the veil is lifted, can one’s individual instincts, desires, worldviews, talents, hardships, and strengths illuminate one’s future design in life.

For Rawls, the veil of ignorance is “thick”<sup>18</sup> in that it fully envelops and thereby conceals one’s identity: “It is assumed, then, that the parties do not know certain kinds of particular facts. First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism. More than this, I assume that the parties do not know the particular circumstances of their own society.”<sup>19</sup> Such is the thoroughgoing application of the veil of ignorance that it can place a citizen in a position that is “original” in the sense that it forces one to erase or suspend the particular contingencies of one’s life.

But is such an original position possible? Can the veil of ignorance make me ignorant of who I am to the degree that I forget completely who I am (becoming pure or original)? Perhaps there is a thin rather than thick veil? I think Rawls would certainly be able to accommodate a thin veil, given his own proposal of overlapping consensus that he discusses at length in *Political Liberalism*.<sup>20</sup> Yet, he denies the thin veil as a possibility explicitly.<sup>21</sup> I would like to emphasise (against Rawls) that in his more subtle remarks (which are brief and off-hand) he is emphatic that the original position

<sup>15</sup> (Villa 2008, p. 107).

<sup>16</sup> (Rawls 1999a, pp. 119–20).

<sup>17</sup> (Rawls 1999a, pp. 110–12).

<sup>18</sup> For a reference to thick versus thin veils, see (Rawls 2005, pp. 24–25).

<sup>19</sup> (Rawls 1999a, p. 118).

<sup>20</sup> For a lengthy and lucid discussion of overlapping consensus, see (Rawls 2005, lecture IV). also see (Rivera 2018, sct. 9).

<sup>21</sup> (Rawls 2005, p. 24).

resembles a “simulation” of the imagination, much like we imagine ourselves to be a character in story we are enjoying.

That is to say we can and often do exercise for a moment a suspension of belief in the empirical world so we can enter into the imagined world of the author (or the movie Director). When you watch Batman or Superman, or the Avengers, you suspend the idea that such characters are nothing more than figments of a rich Hollywood imagination. This has been called, at least since Wordsworth, a kind of “poetic faith,” in which we can suspend our disbelief (or belief) in whatever the author wants to simulate for us (a different world of superheroes for example).<sup>22</sup>

Rawls echoes the power of a romantic “poetic faith” when he invokes Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth: “When, in this way, we simulate being in the original position, our reasoning no more commits us to a particular metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self than the our acting a part in a play, say of Macbeth or Lady Macbeth, commits us to thinking that we are really a king or a queen engaged in a desperate struggle for political power.”<sup>23</sup> I wish here to use Rawls to challenge Rawls (using his own point about imagination against him): I cannot forget who I am when I watch a movie or recite a poem by Wordsworth or read a Jack Reacher novel (or Shakespeare), as Rawls suggests we can do once we step behind the veil of ignorance. To be enthralled by a fictional novel or to enjoy a science fiction film is not to divest myself of myself, as if it were requisite of role-playing that I become totally ignorant of myself.

What do I “do” when I perform the suspension of (dis)belief? In this subjective mechanism I demonstratively attempt to articulate my boundaries by way of growth and expansion. When I am enriched by a novel, I grow in my soul. I laugh and morn with the characters. I grow angry at them. I enjoy the movie because I empathize with the characters; I imagine how I might behave or what I might say in their stead. I can feel the loss and pain they experience on screen or in the pages. I can appeal to their joy with which they are overcome after victory. Hence I can identify with the characters precisely because I remember who I am and carry within me my life history, not because I place all that I am behind a veil of ignorance.

This kind of expansion of the boundaries of my personal identity could constitute something like the application of a thin veil, which only functions, once properly conceived, as a minimization of my particularity as this “me” who I am, so that I may welcome the “you” in your particularity. In the process of growth or dilation, I make room for the perspective of the other. Expansion as form of making room for the other does not necessitate an internal rupture of my identity. The other need not “negate me in my depth” thereby causing my personal identity to undergo existential “hemorrhaging.”<sup>24</sup>

Expansion, more precisely, resembles something more like the interpersonal act of sympathy. This interpretation, too, can make sense of the anthropology Rawls seems to endorse in the later chapters of *Theory of Justice*, namely: the sympathetic spectator who is detached from herself to the degree she can undergo real feelings of sympathy for others and their general welfare. Sympathy hardly means I conceal myself. It rather communicates the idea that I reduce myself so that I can enter into a state of “fellow-feeling” that enjoins deep solidarity between parties.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> I have found a reference to this expression “poetic faith” in the excellent essay, (Hurd 2011, pp. 166–84). Hurd encourages scholars of political theory to suspend their own disbelief in religion, in order to allow the shape of religious politics to be given a fair hearing. I suggest something similar, though in a more explicit theological key, concerning the power faith to “suspend” the hold of empiricism and scientism. See (Rivera 2016). The expression “poetic faith” itself is found in (Coleridge 2009, p. 314).

<sup>23</sup> (Rawls 2005, p. 27).

<sup>24</sup> For the other as a negation of my being in a political context, and a position as radical as it is nihilistic, see (Sartre 2004, vol. I, p. 102).

<sup>25</sup> Rawls writes, “A rational and impartial sympathetic spectator is a person who takes up a general perspective: he assumes a position where his own interests are not at stake and he possesses all the requisite information and powers of reasoning . . . Thus he imagines himself in the place of each person in turn, and when he has done this for everyone, the strength of his approval is determined by the balance of satisfactions to which he has sympathetically responded. When he has made the rounds of all the affected parties, so to speak, his approval expresses the total result. Sympathetically imagined pains cancel out sympathetically imagined pleasures, and the final intensity of approval corresponds to the net sum of positive feeling.”

I would suggest Rawls desires that his readers overcome and or at least manage the naïve attitude we have about public life, which is the default attitude most of us unreflectively occupy when judging the moral status of the broader citizenry. That is, we are as citizens inclined to see others only from our egoistical and uncritical perspective. Such naivety can lead to an unstable liberal society—an anthropology of selfishness Rawls isolates early on, but it is especially treated (and perhaps resolved) in his later *Political Liberalism*.<sup>26</sup> In the naïve attitude, I may assume that it is obvious that citizens should think just like me about the chief questions of meaning, such as the existence of God, the nature of the person and family unit, the legitimacy of contracting or expanding gender norms, the limits of freedom of speech, and the type of public education made available to children. I may well think the public realm should be legislated according to Christian or Muslim or Hindu principles because I identify personally with that particular faith tradition.

The original position prompts each citizen to take stock meticulously of such naivety. Overcoming the naïve attitude, I would argue, can even provoke not mutual disinterest (the expression Rawls uses<sup>27</sup>) but rather mutual love and compassion. Such mutual fellow-feeling constitutes a preliminary stage to dialogue, what I call its transcendental condition: the capacity to detach from my identity, so I can expand it. I thus experience myself as “me” only in relation to the “you” (and vice versa) in public space. The resonances here between the original position and the practice of religious asceticism are undeniable, a topic we shall address presently in outline form.

#### 4. Political Emotions: Asceticism

I sketch, in what space remains, the clear connection in my mind to be drawn between the original position and asceticism. Some have already mentioned there may be further work to be done here on the link between Rawls and ascetical denial, one rooted in the Christian doctrine of love, a claim found for example in Daniel Dombrowski’s excellent monograph on Rawls and religion.<sup>28</sup> This surely strikes some commentators in the field as a false connection to make. Some commentators have criticized political liberalism generally for lacking a clear emotive foundation and moral mandate. Liberalism thereby denies what makes us human: the capacity to love and be loved.<sup>29</sup> This critique of political liberalism illustrates an understandable interpretation of twentieth-century liberalism, and I am therefore sympathetic to it. The idea that a political conception of justice should correlate to “moral geometry” does recur in the early Rawls,<sup>30</sup> but such a straightforward assimilation of liberalism to secular, value-free neutrality recedes in the later (non-metaphysical) Rawls.

Rawls reconfigures liberalism in order to elucidate its necessary connection to pluralism. Publicity (Rawls’s term) accommodates people of faith, even if people of faith cannot help but justify liberalism from within the confines of the logic of their faith tradition. By integrating religious faith and religious modes of rationale into political theory, Rawls avoids perfectionist or comprehensive liberalism. For example, he writes, “The answer is that a liberal society with a constitutional regime does not, as a liberal society, have a *comprehensive* conception of the good. Only the citizens and associations within the civic society in the domestic case have such conceptions.”<sup>31</sup> The interpersonal dialogue that occurs between citizens, therefore, can involve passions, loves, fears, hopes and dreams, all of

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(Rawls 1999a, p. 163). The expression “fellow-feeling” as indicative of sympathy is derived from Max Scheler’s classic study, (Scheler 2008).

<sup>26</sup> For more on stability as a central concern of *Political Liberalism*, especially in light of religious identity, see the excellent Weithman (2016, p. 105ff).

<sup>27</sup> Rawls clearly connects the original position to a feeling of mutual disinterest (Rawls 1999a, p. 111). I shall suggest below that the original position could also foster a feeling of mutual love and respect, and that indeed, the Christian ascetical mindset demands this counterclaim to Rawls.

<sup>28</sup> (Dombrowski 2001a, p. 20). See also his excellent companion (Dombrowski 2001b).

<sup>29</sup> Two recent texts that attempt to fortify (to the point of exaggeration) this interpretation of liberalism as abstract and loveless, see (Deneen 2018; Mitchell 2018).

<sup>30</sup> The expression “moral geometry” is explicitly utilized in (Rawls 1999a, pp. 105, 109).

<sup>31</sup> (Rawls 1999b, p. 41).

which no doubt touch on religious and metaphysical meaning-schemes (for many of us). Should we step behind a thin veil of ignorance, we do not bracket or eliminate the deeply-held convictions that form the metaphysical heart of our personal identity. We may minimize them for a moment, with the application of the thin veil, so that those convictions can be enriched and sharpened, even expanded.

More recently, some have noticed how important public feelings, affections, and emotions can be in contributing to the overall stability of social cooperation and solidarity.<sup>32</sup> Fukuyama has belaboured the point in a recent volume: impassioned patriotism, of a moderate and thoughtful variation, can be healthy for the citizenry.<sup>33</sup> Even Rawls himself will say something similar (only in passing), when he states with John Stuart Mill that patriotism can be healthy; of course, if left unchecked (and uneducated), it can grow into a deeply exclusionary state of mind.<sup>34</sup>

But Rawls has downplayed the power of emotion and affect in politics. So much so has he abstracted us from it (with the thick veil of ignorance) that many have indicated he cannot account for important ethnic and cultural legacies of abuse and disenfranchisement.<sup>35</sup> Many have stated, from disparate quarters, that civic education can help each of us become more mindful of our personal prejudices, and thus, use our emotional capacities for sympathy.<sup>36</sup> I am inclined to acknowledge honestly the limits of Rawls on this score, and to reinterpret his “thick” veil of ignorance as a “thin” veil that functions on the plane of existential self-reflexivity; as such, it permits us to enter into the landscape of constructive political affections like humility, love, and courage, which contribute to an overall political emotion I would call ascetical self-management.

The Christian tradition, for those who adopt it as a comprehensive way of life, calls its disciples to be educated in the virtue of love. Very briefly, even New Testament invocations here can be brought forward to advance a subjective self-reflexivity necessary for political liberalism to thrive. Certainly, humility is no doubt a central political affection.<sup>37</sup> Christian asceticism, which I have covered elsewhere,<sup>38</sup> begins with humility, but it need not descend into an introverted escape from the world and broader public debate about policy and social goods.

Johann-Baptiste Metz, as is well-known, describes asceticism as an outward expression of the soul’s love of the world.<sup>39</sup> Often mischaracterized as the soul’s flight from the body and the world into the privacy of interiority, the ascetic impulse in Christianity need not lead to resentment of or contempt for the world, as Nietzsche claimed was a temptation for Christians in Europe.<sup>40</sup> Metz also describes this in a political context, “the deprivatizing of theology is the primary critical task of political theology.”<sup>41</sup> To be sure, worship, liturgy, contemplative delight in God, and tightknit communities of prayer each reflect crucial components of the internal work of the church, it nevertheless does not belong to the essence of the church to remain wholly within those practices (and thus remain only a private community). To put it another way, while Paul calls us not to conform to the world (Rom 12.2), such a renunciation of the world does not take its bearings from Gnostic flight but from the care we must take not to conform to the world’s sinful habits. To challenge the fallen world, Christians labor under the form of a deprivatized love and courage, to promote the “acceptance of painful conflict

<sup>32</sup> See recently, (Nussbaum 2013) and (Horder 2015).

<sup>33</sup> (Fukuyama 2018, p. 215ff).

<sup>34</sup> (Rawls 1999a, p. 206).

<sup>35</sup> See especially (Cavell 1990, p. 108ff; Lloyd 2011, p. 210ff).

<sup>36</sup> See (Nussbaum 2013, pp. 195–98; Taylor 1994, p. 65; Todorov 2001, chp. 2; Fukuyama 2018, pp. 116–22).

<sup>37</sup> For an accessible meditation on the importance of the virtue of humility, in both a religious and public context, see (Admirand 2019).

<sup>38</sup> (Rivera 2018, sct. 6–7).

<sup>39</sup> (Metz 1972, pp. 101–7).

<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche makes a compelling point about the otherworldly and thus non-public character of Christian *ressentiment*. Nietzsche shall even employ the rhetoric of Manichean as an adjective to describe Christianity. For a point of departure on this thesis in Nietzsche, see his (Nietzsche 2005, pp. 50–67). I have treated Nietzsche’s legacy in light of the work of Hans Blumenberg’s controversial claim that Christianity has not escaped the pull of Gnostic retreat from the world. For more on this, see (Rivera 2018, sct. 5).

<sup>41</sup> (Metz 1972, p. 110).



and self-sacrificing disagreement with the world, for readiness to challenge the present in the name of the promised future of God." Instead of flight from the world, Metz urges Christians to assume asceticism may cultivate an attitude of responsibility for the world in hope and love.<sup>42</sup>

To stay with St. Paul for a moment, the Christian virtue of love does not reduce to an "individualistic worldlessness." Our love for the other requires us to "consider the other better than ourselves" (Philippians 2). In his letters to the Corinthians, where love and humility feature prominently as chief subjective attitudes, it is the ascetic drive to make his body and life submit to the other that underpins the vocation of the gospel. It is freedom that Paul dwells on in 1 Corinthians 9, only to inform his audience that while he does not belong to anyone, and that he is free to be and do what he likes, he has made himself a slave to everyone. In his weakness, he is strong for the other. Abdication from the world does not take place, as if denial the world results in escapism, the flight of the alone to the alone. Emphatic denial the world, for Paul, in point of fact expresses a weakness in the form of the courage it takes to be self-disciplined, to be dedicated to strict training to achieve victory, to run for the prize (1 Cor 9. 25). Asceticism is often indebted to the vocabulary of training and sacrifice. This remains the case for Paul, for he calls Christians to "strike a blow to the body and make it slave." (1 Cor 9.27). We should imitate Paul, because he shall become a Jew for the Jews, weak for the weak; he shall become all things to all people.

Elsewhere in Paul's corpus, the way of love is precisely the way of Christ, God's example, manifest in sacrifice on the Cross: "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5.1-2). The way of love, shaped in the daily discipline of ascetic mindfulness, can enable us to exercise the freedom to use alternative vocabularies to express our faith in a public context.

As some have compellingly argued, in the famed Acts 17 encounter with the Greeks in Athens, the Lukan Paul employs the categories and vocabularies of their poets and philosophers to facilitate communication between Christians and Greeks. As the drama develops on the hill of Ares (Acts 17.16-34), Paul explicitly translates his religious language into a Greek religious idiom. While it is going too far to say that Paul or that we should translate any religious language into a neutral secular grammar, we can surmise that discussants must attempt mutual translation, a give-and-take learned over time in which slow communication advances once the second language is increasingly acquired, and even internalized. Given the necessary caveat that we admit the fact of radically different contexts between contemporary Christians and Paul in Athens, the Acts 17 passage could serve as a model or paradigm for public dialogue of the kind I have been considering: to interpret theological narratives and figures with which one is familiar in a manner that may be reasonably acceptable and understandable to other citizens.<sup>43</sup> Ascetic speech of this kind can be understood in the Christian tradition as a public expression of love, indeed, as the love of all things, characterized by a disciplined mindset, what David Jasper names the ascetic's "mettle and vigor."<sup>44</sup>

Ascetic speech can also find a restatement in Augustine, in the *City of God* in particular, whereby citizenship in the commonwealth or the saeculum involves a plurality of voices speaking in relationship with one another, but speaking with one another nonetheless. I have already explicated a fuller Augustinian proposal of this kind, rooted in his anthropology that grows out of the altercation of Cain and Abel, in my text *Political Theology and Pluralism*. Paul, and his great patristic interpreter, Augustine, can be read side by side, not least retrieved together, for a subtle political theology, for the Christian who affirms liberal democracy and who remains sensitive to late modern pluralism—a sensitivity made concrete under a thin veil.

<sup>42</sup> (Metz 1972, p. 102).

<sup>43</sup> See the very excellent essay for this point, (van der Ven 2015, pp. 170–94). For my own engagement with Augustine's conception of *saeculum*, where I argue that this conception signifies a pluralism of public perspectives, and is not a precursor of a neutral secular state, see (Rivera 2018, sct. 7), "Augustine's eschatological *saeculum*."

<sup>44</sup> (Jasper 2009, chp. 5).

## 5. Conclusions: Identity Performance

Let me conclude with a brief digression. While formally existing outside of the disciplines of theology, political theory, and philosophy, and the academy more generally, the incisive cultural commentary of Marilynne Robinson is apt here. Her work in non-fiction, released as a series of poignant essays that evaluate the spirit of the age, is often suffused with insightful reformulations of political theology, even if she does not admit her work lies within the remit of self-professed Christian political theology. One excerpt is necessary to reproduce in full here:

I have mentioned the qualitative difference between Christianity as an ethic and Christianity as an identity. Christian ethics go steadfastly against the grain of what we consider human nature. The first will be last; to him who asks give; turn the other cheek; judge not. Identity, on the other hand, appeals to a constellation of the worst human impulses. It is worse than ordinary tribalism because it assumes a more than virtuous *us* on one side, and on the other a *them* who are very doubtful indeed, who are, in fact, a threat to all we hold dear. Western civilization is notoriously inclined to idealize itself, so it is inclined as well to forget how recently it did and suffered enormities because it insisted on distinctions of just this kind. If the claims to Christian identity we hear now are rooted in an instinctive tribalism, they are entirely inappropriate, certainly uninformed, because in its nature the religion they claim has no boundaries, no shibboleths, no genealogies or hereditary claimants.<sup>45</sup>

Such identity performance mentioned in the excerpt above, if reduced to identity politics, and thus to ideology, withdraws from the its deprivatized ethic, the work of love. Christian identity and Christian ethics, as I have discussed in the forgoing, go hand in hand in the performance of the original position.<sup>46</sup>

The role I play when I appropriate the “thin” veil of ignorance does not deny my Christian identity (or any other identity a citizen may have), rather it adapts my identity to pluralism on the basis of the work of asceticism. And what is asceticism but an emphatic counter-identity to “instinctive tribalism” or first-person dictatorship that we so often unreflectively assume. I have argued, then, above that we must reflectively take up or simulate the original position (i) to be mindful of our metaphysical and moral imaginaries as relative to many others, since life plans proliferate in the subjective circumstances of liberal democracies and (ii) to expand vigilantly our identity to include the perspectives of others for the sake of the ascetic’s love of all things.

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<sup>45</sup> (Robinson 2015, p. 105).

<sup>46</sup> Identity politics may often refer to the style of right-wing or religious communitarianism one may see on display, for example, in the powerful field work of (Jeurgensmeyer 2008). Left-wing citizens can indulge with equal force in identity politics. For more on this see (Lilla 2017).

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