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Review of The Idea of a Liberal Theory: A Critique and Reconstruction

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The Idea of a Liberal Theory: A Critique and Reconstruction. By David Johnston. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 204p. \$29.95.

The flood of literature sometimes derisively referred to as the Rawls/Nozick industry shows no signs of slowing. David Johnston enters the lists to champion an unabashedly cosmopolitan view—*humanist liberalism*—that focuses on promoting human agency for any and all people in any and all societies. He concedes that he has in place only a rudimentary sketch.

A political theory, Johnston suggests, supplies the grounds of social criticism, not just a design for the state. It picks out what matters; like a picture, it foregrounds some considerations and obscures others. This suggestive image in hand, Johnston embarks on a hasty tour of recent theories of liberalism—Nozick standing in for a rights-based liberalism, Raz for a perfectionist liberalism, Rawls for political liberalism. Dworkin, Sen, Walzer, and others pop up along the way for less sustained treatments. In summarizing their views and generating rapid-fire lists of objections, Johnston tries to recover what he takes to be a valuable nugget that they are all getting not quite right, namely, that societies must provide people with the means to pursue their plans and projects, means ranging from mental and

physical powers through liberties and opportunities, income and wealth, and status and recognition (p. 161).

Sometimes the rhetoric of the book is distracting. It is odd, for instance, to be told that "only individuals count" (an unreconstructed liberal myself, I take this kind of methodological individualism to vacillate between a trivial or vacuous view and a misguided one) and at the same time to hear repeated appeals to the health of society, a concept at home with a strongly organic account of community (see, e.g., pp. 18, 127).

There are deeper worries about the view. Johnston insists that any political theory be informationally reasonable, that it not direct our attention to fine-grained evidence that we cannot get our hands on (pp. 28–29). The criterion plays a sometimes sharply critical role in his evaluation of others' views. Yet his own view seems open to very much the same objection. I do not know how we are to go about assessing every individual's share of mental and physical powers and the like. Johnston complains that Rawls tends to reduce his primary goods to wealth; but surely the motivation for doing so is precisely that, however caricatured an index of primary goods it is, we can at least measure it.

Johnston, again, wants a radically cosmopolitan or universalist liberalism. Local culture and history matters only in filling in the details of the theory: agency might require literacy or access to electronics in one society, in another, not. But the structure of the theory is always the same. Some will generate familiar, tired, and tiring worries about "relativism," whatever that is. That aside, I fear that Johnston is in the clutches of a resolutely antisociological picture here. Worrying that status might be a positional good yet one that he holds has to be available to all, Johnston says, "A society must be *socially pluralistic*: it must include a variety of different 'fields' in which people can try to excel and enable people to choose fields that seem to them congenial to their talents" (p. 184). But this is to presuppose not just the career open to talents, equal opportunity, and the rest but, especially, a highly differentiated society. It threatens to make nonsense or impotence of the claim that all societies ought to be liberal.

Carping objections aside, the book is almost always lucid, sometimes provocative, and occasionally just plain provoking. Avid consumers of the Rawls/Nozick industry will find it worthy and may well find it a useful teaching aid for undergraduates. Others—the kind who suspect that this industry is fast heading for the rust belt—will probably find nothing here to change their dour opinion.

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