

191.

ROSS, W. D.

RAWLS TOOK VERY seriously the views of W. D. Ross (1877–1971), as representing two of the main traditions in moral and political philosophy that he sought to unsettle.

Pluralistic intuitionism is the normative view that there is a plurality of basic and conflicting values or principles that have to be weighed against one another on the basis of intuition to determine how we ought to act – Ross, for example, proposes seven prima facie duties that pick out features of acts that count for or against them but he also claims that there are no further principles, only bare intuitions, to help us decide what our duty is all things considered. Rawls regarded this view as the default position in moral and political theory because it captures core features of commonsense moral reasoning without oversimplifying the moral facts, so we ought to admit “the possibility that there is no way to get beyond a plurality of principles” (*TJ* 36). Yet he thinks that pluralistic intuitionism is “but half a conception” because “assignment of weights is an essential and not a minor part” of a moral and political theory (*TJ* 37). In addition to the philosophical drive for greater unity, Rawls thinks that a conception of justice is supposed to serve a social role in diminishing reasonable normative disagreement (*TJ* 79; *CP* 344). For example, the priority among different criteria of excellences is likely to be “unsettled and idiosyncratic” (*TJ* 290), the idea of a social minimum raises the question of how it is to be chosen given the many relevant reasons at stake (*TJ* 279); a conception of justice that seeks to promote well-being, liberty, and equality must address how they are to be weighed against one another (*CP* 348); and moral reasons about giving mutual aid and keeping promises must be reconciled (*TJ* 301). Although Rawls thinks normative theory cannot avoid appeals to intuitions, he claims that we should strive for greater structure, a task which Rawls takes up by arguing, for example, that justice takes absolute priority over efficiency and the liberty principle is lexically prior to the distributive one.

Ross also endorsed rational intuitionism, which is the meta-ethical view that there is an independent moral order that we know by intuition and that our beliefs about it in turn motivate us to act in virtue of our psychological nature as rational agents. Rawls contrasts this meta-ethical view with what he called “Kantian constructivism,” which he distinguished both from Kant’s own moral constructivism and from what he later calls “political constructivism.” Kantian constructivism is the view that certain moral and political principles are reasonable because they are the result of a procedure of construction that emphasizes practical rather than theoretical reasoning and relies on a more robust conception of the person that is more closely connected with “human beings’ needs, aims, and purposes” (*LHMP* 80; “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” in *CP*). If justice as fairness is presented as part of Kantian constructivism, then it denies the rational intuitionist meta-ethical view Ross endorsed. But if justice as fairness is cast as a standalone political (not metaphysical) constructivism, which does not deny the truth of any meta-ethical view, then a rational intuitionist can join a reasonable overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines (*PL* 95).

There are other aspects of Ross’s work that Rawls engaged with. He rejected Ross’s claim, for example, that justice involves distributing happiness in accordance with merit (*TJ* 273; *CP* 24); he drew on Ross in formulating his conception of goodness as rationality (*TJ* 351), and he used Ross’s objections to utilitarianism as examples of failing to distinguish between the justification of a practice and the justification of the actions falling under it (*CP* 29).

Adam Cureton

SEE ALSO:

Constructivism: Kantian/political

Desert

Goodness as rationality

Intuitionism

Precepts of justice

Rational intuitionism

Social minimum

Utilitarianism