Introduction to the Special Issue "Public Reason and Rawlsian Citizens: Of Truth, Virtues, and Vices in the Digital Age"

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The four articles in this special issue originated as contributions to a conference jointly organized by the Chair of Political Philosophy, Theory, and the History of Ideas (Prof. Dr. Odzuck, Dr. Strömel) and the Chair of the History of Philosophy (Prof. Dr. Eggers) at the University of Regensburg in March 2024. The conference took the problems of the digital age as a reason to (re)examine and flesh out the foundations and prerequisites of liberal democracies. Liberal democracies today seem polarized, radicalized, and, at the same time, petrified. The decrease in civility and the increase in hate speech, astroturfing, silencing processes, and Twitter wars in the digital age give us strong reasons to rethink the foundations and presuppositions of liberal, deliberative democracies to better understand and meet contemporary challenges.

If we accept the diagnosis of radicalization and polarization of the debate climate, of culture wars, an aggressive tone, and gestures of enmity, we can detect a certain coincidence of developments in the political culture

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of liberal democracies *and* in the academic subfield of democratic theory: Schmittian notions of politics that focus on hostility, war, and struggle seem to penetrate democratic theory via radical or economic theories of democracy. Does this coincidence prove that theories of democracy that focus on power, struggle, and enmity are right? Or is it the other way round—that problematic notions of what politics is (and can be) currently set the frame for the daily actions of its citizens and officeholders? If sound democratic actions presuppose sound democratic thinking, the recent developments in debate culture offer reasons to examine the foundations of liberal democracies.

Starting with the premise that it is time to think democracy differently, the conference aimed to rethink and revitalize a more Aristotelian notion of politics that can be found, among other things, in the democratic theory of John Rawls. Rawls states with utmost clarity that the core element of his deliberative theory of democracy is reciprocity and a particular notion of civic friendship—a notion of politics that is incompatible with a Schmittian friend-foe conception of politics, and that Rawls felt compelled to rediscover in consequence of the Holocaust and the Second World War:[1]

> Those who reject constitutional democracy with its criterion of reciprocity will of course reject the very idea of public reason. For them the political relation may be that of friend and foe … or it may be a relentless struggle to win the world for the whole truth. Political liberalism does not engage those who think that way … To make more explicit the role of the criterion of reciprocity as expressed in public reason, note that its role is to specify the nature of the political relation in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship.[2]

While Rawls has been harshly criticized for his detached rationality of liberal citizens,[3] he does talk about civic "virtues" and "duties" of civility—virtues and duties that require and express a distinct use of rationality and language

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[1]Paul Weithman, "John Rawls and the Task of Political Philosophy," *Review of Politics* 71, no. 1, Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century (Winter 2009): 115, argues convincingly that Rawls's move to the foundations of democratic theory and to rethink the political relation *per se* was motivated by the cruelties of the Nazi regime and the Second World War. As Rawls states in the Introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism*, "The wars of this century with their extreme violence and increasing destructiveness, culminating in the manic evil of the Holocaust, raise in an acute way the question whether political relations must be governed by power and coercion alone." (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), lxii.

[2]John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 442, 447.

[3]Michael J. Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1. (February 1984): 81–96.

and a distinct discursive behavior toward other citizens. In general, this requires a willingness to "explain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable."[4] This willingness to offer reasons, and to offer reasons of a special kind, goes with a willingness to provisionally accept the fictive public role of the legislator offering reasons for laws: "ideally citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact."[5] Being well aware that this rational and discursive behavior might be too demanding for the everyday behavior of every citizen, Rawls insists that citizens should at least "hold government officials to it" and thus control the official public-political discursive behavior.[6] For Rawls's concept of deliberative democracy, the discursive behavior and attitudes of the citizens are crucial:

> The definitive idea for deliberative democracy is the idea of deliberation itself. When citizens deliberate, they exchange views and debate their supporting reasons concerning public political questions. They suppose that their political opinions may be revised by discussion with other citizens; and therefore these opinions are not simply a fixed outcome of their existing private or nonpolitical interests.[7]

Since Rawls is an important representative of a deliberative conception of democracy, the conference aimed to reconstruct concepts of citizenship, civility, and the public use of reason developed in his deliberative conception, and to explore them in light of problems specific for, or aggravated in, the digital age. Established and next-generation Rawls scholars and scholars working on deliberative theories of democracy and digitization from the US and Europe met in Regensburg[8] to discuss how to reconstruct core elements of Rawls's theory of deliberative democracy and its contemporary

[4]Rawls, "Public Reason Revisited," 444.
[5]Rawls, "Public Reason Revisited," 444 ff.
[6]Rawls, "Public Reason Revisited," 445.
[7]Rawls, "Public Reason Revisited," , 448.
[8]Prof. Dr. S. A. Lloyd (University of Southern California), Prof. Dr. Paul Weithman (University of Notre Dame), Dr. Gabriele Badano (University of York), Prof. Dr. James W. Boettcher (Saint Joseph's University), Prof. Dr. Julian Culp (The American University of Paris), Dr. Valentina Gentile (Luiss "Guido Carli" University), Dr. Roberto Luppi (University of Palermo), Prof. Dr. Karoline Reinhardt (University of Passau), Prof. Dr. Aurélia Bardon (University of Konstanz), Daniel Beck (TU Dortmund University), Prof. Dr. Stefan Gosepath (Free University of Berlin), Dr. Lea Watzinger (University of Passau), Ricarda Wünsch (University of Regensburg). Three days of intensive academic discussion in the rooms of a medieval merchant's vault were kindly supported by the Regensburger Universitätsstiftung Hans Vielberth and the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung.

relevance in the digital age. We approached Rawls's work from the perspective of deliberating citizens and the public use of reason in the digital age.

The four articles selected by the organizers for the special issue focus on different aspects of Rawls's theory and provide innovative insights into his theory of the public use of reason, idea of political education, and concept of citizenship. James Boettcher concentrates on the underexplored topic of political vices. If we accept the premise that a well-functioning democracy is dependent on a certain discursive behavior of its citizens and that this required discursive behavior is challenged in the digital age in a special way, it makes sense to focus on the topic of discursive virtues. Boettcher claims that thinking about discursive virtues conceptually requires us to simultaneously think about discursive vices. He understands political vices as attitudes, feelings, and dispositions that systematically work against reasonableness or other cooperative or discursive goals of political virtue. He analyzes epistemic-political vices (along with practical-political vices that have epistemic elements) and shows how each of these vices corresponds to a characteristic failure of one of the Rawlsian "burdens of judgment."[9] His article thus deepens our understanding of Rawlsian public reason and our knowledge of the requirements of Rawlsian citizenship. It allows us to conceptually frame and better understand epistemic-political vices such as close-mindedness or gullibility— epistemic-political vices that are frequently visible and highly worrisome, especially in the digital age.

Paul Weithman takes up the question of truth and the much-discussed relation of truth and public reason. He claims that one can be deeply worried about the failure of some participants in public political debates (and we can add even some officeholders, in the US and elsewhere) to value truth. In an era that has been described as an era of "post-truth politics" by some scholars,[10] a clarification of the liberal caution concerning truth and a clarification of the relation between truth and public reason seems to be crucial. Is there a liberal duty to avoid any truth-claims? Is liberalism responsible for the disdain for truth and a resulting polarization of contemporary liberal democracies? While Rawls, having the religious wars of the seventeenth century and the Second World War in mind, clearly warns about the danger of comprehensive truth-claims in politics,[11] Weithmann argues that he cannot be accused of giving rise to an indifference to and disdain for truth. His article discusses interpretations that understand Rawls to avoid the idea of truth. Weithman challenges these interpretations by a close reading of passages

[9]See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 54–58.

[10]For references and a (critical) discussion of this term see Michael Hannon, "The Politics of Post-Truth," *Critical Review* 35, no. 1 (2023): 40–62.

[11]Rawls, "Public Reason Revisited," 442: "The zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reason that belongs with democratic citizenship."

these interpretations rely on. He ends with the claim that Rawls is badly misunderstood if his remarks are thought to give aid and comfort to the indifference toward, and contempt for, truth that are characteristic of much political discourse in the contemporary US.

Julian Culp addresses the question of how to educate citizens of liberal democracies in the digital age. He argues for a cultural turn, for broadening the perspective from the merely technical to a cultural focus in the debate on digital citizenship education. Since political culture is of fundamental importance for realizing and socially reproducing deliberative democracy, fleshing out the specifics and requirements of this distinct political culture seems necessary— especially in the digital age. Culp makes three educational proposals, based on three Rawlsian rationales—Orthodox, Nonideal, and Heterodox. Culp holds with Rawls that political elites have special obligations to safeguard their countries' democratic public political culture. He argues with Rawls that democratic citizenship education must train virtues such as fair-mindedness, reasonability, and a spirit of compromise, which are necessary to be able to fulfill the requirements of public reason—especially in digitized societies that are subject to cultural processes tending to undermine these virtues. Culp's Heterodox Rawlsian Rationale finally suggests that citizens should uphold public reason when addressing one another on fundamental political questions in the digital sphere, and that regulation should be put in place which would counter the digital social networking platforms' tendencies to support the hybrid culture.

S. A. Lloyd sheds light on Rawls's citizens and their motivational structure. Her article analyses the relation of self-interest and the aim to promote justice and asks what justice as fairness requires of citizens when making decisions about their labor or investment participation in their society's economy. The article refutes G. A. Cohen's critique of Rawls's allowance of productive incentives and argues that this critique reflects misunderstandings of Rawls's theoretical aims and the fundamental liberalism of his well-ordered society. By analyzing Rawls's ideas of advantage and legitimate ends and tracing the purpose and implementation of his difference principle, the article illuminates key concepts of Rawls's justice as fairness and the motivational structure of Rawlsian citizens. This enables a better understanding of these citizens but is relevant also for discussing contemporary questions such as how duties of civility and the permission to make decisions by appeal to self-interested aims and values are to be balanced when citizens consider lucrative investments in tech companies or digital social networking platforms that threaten public reason liberalism.

financial support of the conference. Finally, our thanks go to our two keynote speakers, Prof. S. A. Lloyd and Prof. Paul Weithman, who knew John Rawls well as a teacher and academic colleague and who agreed to give a short interview in which they spoke about Rawls as teacher and political philosopher and about the current relevance of his political philosophy.[12]

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[12]"Rawls's Relevance in the Digital Age, Interview with Prof. S. A. Lloyd & Prof. Paul Weithman" is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6iOtjZ8Lls.