

**Johan Elfström. *Reconceiving Public Reason: Neutrality, Civility, and the Self-Defeat Objection*. Uppsala: Uppsala University. 2024. 209 pp.**

Given all the different views on what constitutes a good life, whether Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist answers, or conservative, Marxist, or liberal answers, or feminist, queer, or post-colonial answers, how could or should we all live together? Could there be anything, besides all that divides us, that we all could agree upon? A fundamental question, one of the most debated questions. This is the starting point for Johan Elfström in his doctoral dissertation. One can say that he is not focusing on nonsense.

Elfström's point of departure is the most influential political philosopher of the twentieth century, John Rawls (1921–2002). No one studying political philosophy, or even philosophy in general, after 1971 can do it without having to get in close contact with Rawls. He is one of those thinkers that becomes a node or reference point for all others. Elfström's focus is more specifically on the concept *public reason* and I will of course come back to that, but first I want to contextualize the concept within Rawls's theory.

Why is Rawls so influential? First and foremost, it has to do with his book *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. It is often referred to as only *Theory*. In this book, Rawls asks the same question as Elfström: how should we think when we form the principles and rules that should and could form the foundation of our society? Rawls's answer and his theory, and this is of course part of its success, is rather easy to understand. Let me give you an example (which is not taken from Elfström's thesis or Rawls's theory but my own experience). When I was a child, my younger sister and I, rarely but sometimes, got the opportunity to share a soft drink. For the younger readers, it may be difficult to imagine having to share a soda, but those in my generation know exactly what I mean. How did we do it? Well, one of us

were pouring the soda in two glasses and the other got to pick first. The one that poured the soda, what was he or she aiming for? As fair a division as possible in order to get the maximum of the good, but at the same time accepting and wanting fairness. The divide should be fair.

Rawls's theory is a little more sophisticated than that, but in principle he is arguing the same thing. If we were to choose principles and rules that would guide the society that we will live in together with others, how should we go ahead? How should we think? According to Rawls (and Elfström), we should place ourselves in an original position, behind the veil of ignorance. In this situation, what principles, what rules would we want for the imagined society we are creating?

If we do not know if we will be Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or even atheists, we would like our future society to grant us freedom of religion and freedom of thought. If we did not know the colour of our skin or our hair, we would want a society that was not racist. We would, according to Rawls, want a society guided by justice, by principles and rules that were not guided by racism or one specific faith. And if we did not know at all how fortunate we would be, how much education we would be able to get, and how much money we would earn, we would also want some kind of principle to grant us at least a (fair) part of what the rich would get.

Rawls argues for "justice as fairness". If we go with Rawls, that will mean two principles. The first one is centred around basic rights and freedoms, much in line with human rights. Besides these human rights, we would also, according to Rawls, construct an equality principle. Besides granting equal (and effective) opportunities for all, Rawls is also arguing for a (less important) difference principle, where wealth "diffuses up", so that it is alright for rich people to become richer as long as those worst-off, the poorest, also receive improvements.

Rawls starts out from an understanding of people having an idea of what they want (as much as possible), but also a sense of justice: it should be fair. This is the original Rawls, the 1971 version. He argued back then that the principles we choose in the original position, behind the veil of ignorance, would be valid “sub specie æternitatis”, from the point of view of eternity. This is not where Elfström starts out. He works with later versions of Rawls, after what is often called his “political turn”. There is, however, a thorough discussion on how much of a turn Rawls actually took when he published his “other” book in 1993, *Political Liberalism*. How major were the changes? Is it a completely new theory or should it rather be seen as a continuation of the original theory? Elfström seems to argue the latter, whereas I, until now, have seen it as a new theory. The reading, opposition, and discussion of Elfström’s dissertation has started to change my mind.

The main concept of Elfström’s dissertation is part of this “political turn”: public reason. Elfström defines public reason in his thesis, in close relation to Rawls, as “a conception of democratic decision-making suitable for a democratic society, understood as a system of fair social cooperation between reasonable and rational persons” (p. 79). It is a *reason* because it has to do with deciding on which ends to pursue and how, and it is *public* because all citizens have an equal share in it. As stated above, Elfström relates first and foremost to Rawls after his “political turn”. It means that Elfström’s over-arching context is *political liberalism*. In short, the ambition is to make liberalism a political doctrine without depending on any specific comprehensive commitments, other than those needed for social cooperation between members of a political society.

According to Elfström, this Rawlsian understanding of public reason stands on three legs, or consists of three components. First, the exercise of political power must be neutral. Second, that the idea be justifiable by

reasons that *all* citizens can endorse. And third, that it must be in accordance with principles and ideals acceptable to reasonable and rational persons. In his thesis, Elfström elaborates on and discusses some critique against this “Rawlsian puzzle”. In doing so, he focuses on these three components based on three concepts: neutrality, civility, and the self-defeat objection. In dealing with this critique and discussions, Elfström leans towards three different authors and their (direct and indirect) dealing with Rawls’s understanding of public reason and their critical understanding of Rawls.

It should be said that the understanding of public reason in Rawls, its three components, which is not self-obvious, is Elfström’s own. The same goes for the three concepts and the three authors. It is a strength and a sign of the independence of Elfström that he formulates and constructs this hypothesis himself. It, however, also creates problems when the construction is not equally strong in relation to all concepts and authors. I will get back to this.

Besides these three central components, Elfström also structures public reason based on four elaborations. The first point of elaboration is what it means for a reason to be public. The second point of elaboration is the bounds of public reason. The third point of elaboration is the relation between public reason, its components, and its rationale – the reasons for exercising political power in harmony with the bounds of public reason. The fourth elaboration, which Elfström is not focusing primarily on, is the outcome of one’s conception of public reason. These four elaborations, especially the first of course, but also the second and third, are being dealt with throughout the dissertation (without any clear focus on them) and also to some extent the fourth elaboration. The connection between, on the one hand, the three components, concepts, and authors, and, on the other hand, the four elaborations, is not always crystal clear. A minor problem that could be solved in future work by the author.

At the centre, though, are the three components. The first component, neutrality, is dealt with in Chapter 2, “State Neutrality and Minimal Secularism”. Elfström elaborates on Rawls’s understanding of public reason using Cécile Laborde’s analysis of egalitarian liberalism and the relation between state and religion as a starting point. In short, Laborde’s critique of liberalism’s treatment of religion is centred around the fact that liberalism does not pay sufficient attention to different dimensions in which religion engages with the state. She suggests a disaggregation approach in which different situations are being met with different understandings of neutrality. Otherwise, according to Laborde, egalitarian liberalism will end up being too rigid and defending the *status quo*.

Elfström argues, to some extent in line with Laborde, that neutrality does not fit into the rationale of public reason within the framework of political liberalism. Elfström is not, however, satisfied with the solutions that she offers in relation to religion. According to Elfström, Laborde’s theory, or perspective, lacks principles for deciding on when which principle of neutrality is applicable and how to prioritize principles if more than one is applicable. He also points out that the special treatment of religion in relation to the state is complicated. To a large extent, this has, according to Elfström, to do with the efforts in relation to neutrality and he proposes instead a focus on equality within the frame of political liberalism.

The second component of public reason is problematized in Chapter 3, “Social Cooperation and the Duty of Civility”. In dealing with this component, Elfström uses Jeffrey Stout’s theory or perspective as it is elaborated in his book *Democracy and Tradition* from 2004. Elfström focuses on the duty to civility and connects this to Stout’s “larger”, or more profound, critique on Rawls and his foundation in social contract theory. Stout questions the whole starting point where the goal is to agree on common principles that

are not dependent on more comprehensive worldviews of the good life.

For Stout, these comprehensive worldviews are the only possible starting points and from them could possibly stem common principles. But it is not, according to Stout, the starting point but rather a possible end point of lived traditions. Elfström acknowledges Stout when he argues that the search for common ground runs the risk of drying out the public sphere and that instead it should be enriched by our various points of view. Yet Elfström also argues that there is still use for a principle of duty of civility or similar in order to uphold a conception of political legitimacy and authority. Stout’s conception is not, according to Elfström, sufficiently stable.

When comparing the use of Laborde and Stout, it becomes obvious that Laborde relates her writing directly to Rawls, while Stout has a much weaker connection to Rawls. The components and concepts formulated and chosen by Elfström are, as I see it, well suitable for discussing Rawls’ concept on public reason, but it is questionable if especially Stout is the best representative of the potential critique against Rawls.

The third component of public reason is discussed by Elfström in Chapter 4, “The Self-Defeat Objection”. In this discussion, Elfström relates to Steven Wall and have him present the “self-defeat objection” against Rawls’s understanding of public reason. According to Wall, since Rawls’s principle of liberal legitimacy cannot meet the conditions that itself raises, the principle defeats itself. Wall argues that in order to achieve a legitimate coercive political authority, it is necessary that each person subjected to it finds it reasonably acceptable. Elfström argues that the argument of self-defeat, in its form presented by Wall, is not applicable to Rawls’s theory of public reason. Elfström argues that Wall’s critique of Rawls misses its mark because it misinterprets the structure of Rawls’s principle and the way it fits into his (larger) political liberalism, where the

focus is not on personal ends, but rather on the freestanding principles that forms the foundation of political liberalism.

Elfström, in a good academic manner, improves Wall's (two) arguments and makes them applicable to Rawls's version of public reason. He then dismisses also these two versions. One can question, however, the interest Wall has in Rawls's concept of public reason. Wall is not concerned with improving Rawls's theory. He is, as a liberal perfectionist, not in favour of public reason at all. Making him a critic of public reason is not totally relevant, since he dismisses the idea as such.

In the final chapter of the thesis, Chapter 5, Elfström comes up with "A Revised Theory of Public Reason", or at least some sketches of a theory of his own. Out of the three components of public reason (and the four elaborations that were introduced in Chapter 1), Elfström gives his own version of a revised and improved Theory of Public Reason. His suggestion is that the concept of neutrality should be abandoned. It could, according to him, be replaced by the concept of equality. While largely agreeing with Stout's criticism against duty of civility, Elfström argues that the concept should be kept, but he elaborates on a revised account of the bounds of public reason and a less strict conception of the duty of civility, that he thinks meets the arguments Stout makes. Finally, in relation to Wall's argument on self-defeat, Elfström argues that his argument fails. Therefore, Elfström argues that the liberal principle of legitimacy should be endorsed without any revisions.

Elfström's dissertation is well-written and well-argued. But the role of the author is not always clear. This is problematic for two reasons, one minor and one major. The minor is that the front seat is occupied by both Rawls and Elfström. This is a common and almost unavoidable problem in academic writing, and especially so in doctoral dissertations. Elfström is presenting but also interpreting the work of Rawls. He makes Rawls more

clear and solid than the original. The back-seat passengers, Laborde, Stout, and Wall, have been squeezed into this situation without it always being clear how voluntarily they are there. That is a minor problem. For the most part, Elfström does the back-seat passengers and his co-driver (more than) justice.

The major problem is that the actual driver, Johan Elfström, does not get enough credit for his impressive work. He is defending Rawls to the bitter end and makes him shine. I hope Elfström in the future gets the opportunity to present a theory of public reason of his own. That will also be an interesting book to read.

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**Justine Esta Ellis. *The Politics of Religious Literacy: Education and Emotion in a Secular Age*. Leiden: Brill. 2022. 249 s.**

På listan över inlämningsuppgifter på kursen "Bridges to Just Peace" är det en som sticker ut: "Hitta någon som du uppfattar som 'other' och umgås med denne 45 minuter i veckan under hela terminen. Prata om de ämnen som kursen tar upp: klimatförändringar, fattigdom bland vita samt Black Lives Matter. För dagbok över hur det går. Är det för känsligt att ses? Skriv brev." Kursledare är Diane L. Moore, ansvarig för Religious Literacy and the Professions Initiative vid Harvard Divinity School, och en tongivande röst i arbetet med religiös läskunnighet.

Religiös läskunnighet är inte ett utbrett fenomen i Sverige, men i USA och Storbritannien finns en betydande marknad för kurser som syftar till att öka förståelsen för "religiösa" sätt att tänka. Ledande personer inom fältet är också delaktiga i arbetet med att utforma riktlinjer för hur religionsundervisning ska ske i skolan, och kurser i religiös läskunnighet riktar sig till en bred publik, från lärare och sjukvårdspersonal till medarbetare på privata företag.