

Rawls and the Rediscovery of Liberal Hope

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In his last finished work, *The Law of Peoples* (1999b), John Rawls wrote repeatedly of “our hope for the future.” In recent decades hope has become a recurrent trope in the politics of Anglo-American liberal democracies. Yet its appearance in a major work by the most influential political theorist of the postwar era has attracted little notice. Rawls’s discovery of the need for hope in liberal society represents a major development in his thought and a little-noticed departure from his previous thinking about moral psychology, stability, and theodicy. Situating this episode in the evolution of Rawls’s thought and the context of intellectual history sheds light on the wider issue of the ambivalent relationship between hope and liberalism.

The need for...assurance is a feature inherent in the liberal conception.


John Rawls (1999b, 10)

In his last finished work, *The Law of Peoples* (1999b), John Rawls wrote repeatedly of “our hope for the future” (6, 11, 22–23, 29–30, 124). In recent decades hope has become a recurrent trope in the politics of Anglo-American liberal democracies. Yet its appearance here, in a major work by the most influential political theorist of the postwar era, has attracted little notice. What made this moment all the more remarkable was both the resonant religious vocabulary with which Rawls articulated his hope and the abruptness of hope’s irruption into his thought. In his previous reflections on the problem of the future and the underlying conditions of his political philosophy—from *A Theory of Justice* (1971) to *Political Liberalism* ([1993] 2005a)—Rawls did not portray hope as a virtue so much as a passion or emotion with the potential to become a political vice. Nor is hope much discussed in Rawls’s earlier work on international relations (1993a; 1993b). In his unfinished *Justice as Fairness* (2001), by contrast, the language of hope is nearly ubiquitous, marking a significant shift in Rawls’s self-understanding (4, 15, 28–29, passim). What could have persuaded him to reposition hope at the vital center of his political philosophy?

The dominant interpretation of *The Law of Peoples* depicts it as a “narrow,” “modest,” and even “conservative”

retreat from the egalitarian ambitions of Rawls’s earlier work (Beitz 2000; Martin and Reidy 2006; Wellman 2012). Although commentators influenced by Rawls’s methods have scrutinized his concepts of “ideal theory,” “reconciliation,” and “realistic utopia,” none have yet accounted for the book’s distinctive emphasis on hope and the arresting language with which Rawls elucidates it (Leopold 2012; Simmons 2010; Stemplowska and Swift 2012). The few who have drawn attention to Rawls’s interest in hope tend to smooth over significant shifts in his attitude over time, ignoring his previous works’ warnings about the dangers that hopeful desire may pose to liberal stability and overlooking the distinctively liberal properties of the hope that Rawls did eventually endorse (Howard 2019; McKean 2017; Wenar 2012; 2021).

A similar oversight persists among readers outside the Rawlsian camp. Despite deepening historical scholarship on Rawls, as well as increasing skepticism of his claim to have lost his faith, the question of hope and its spiritual articulation in Rawls’s thought remains neglected (Bejan, Smith, and Zimmerman 2021; Bok 2017; Forrester 2019; Gregory 2007). Investigations into Rawls’s conception of the future have largely passed over his idea of hope (Abbey 2021; Forrester 2018; 2019, 172–203). Instead, commentators have overwhelmingly situated his work in the discourse of theodicy (Eich 2021; Fletcher 2023; Forrester 2019, 5; Geuss 2008, 89; Gregory 2007, 195–97; Müller 2006, 336; Neiman 2002, 310–14, 335 n. 25; Nelson 2019; Reidy 2010, 340; Weithman 2010, 8, 14, 362–69; 2016, 239–41). But as we shall see, Rawls’s initial embrace and eventual disaffection from theodicy can only be understood in light of his long-standing preoccupation with hope.

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Liberals have often worried that hope is too divisive and otherworldly to sustain toleration and stability in a pluralistic society. A conventional opposition between hope and liberalism has become entrenched under the influence of both anti-utopian “Cold War liberals” (Cherniss 2021; Moyn 2023; Müller 2008; Shklar 1989) and theorists of the “liberal virtues” who consistently disregarded hope (Galston 1988; 1989; 1991; Gutmann 1989; 1993; Macedo 1991; Sabl 2005). In recent vindications of hope as a civic virtue, commentators have widely assumed that hope is not liberal and sought inspiration from nonliberal traditions instead (Goldman 2022; Lamb 2022; Mittleman 2009). Even Samuel Moyn, who has advocated for a more hopeful liberalism, does so in departure from Rawls and his legacy (2018, 146–72; 2023, 40). If Rawls’s path *from* resignation *to* hope was not an arbitrary one, there is reason to question this consensus and Rawls’s place in it. Hope and liberalism *do* belong together, and I explain here how Rawls came to perceive their interdependence in *The Law of Peoples*. Yet liberal hope’s strangely reflexive and paradoxical character—the fact that it is a “hope against hope,” as Rawls also apprehended—makes it as difficult for liberals to articulate to others as to justify for themselves.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, I examine the basis of Rawls’s ambivalent attitude toward hope in *Theory* and trace its persistence through his subsequent works. Second, I turn to Rawls’s use of theodicy in *Theory* and *Political Liberalism*, showing how it provided the liberal subjects envisioned by his theory with assurances about their societies’ fate without recourse to hope. Third, inverting the standard narrative, I argue that *The Law of Peoples* reflects a significant shift in Rawls’s understanding of the ethos of liberalism, from a negative conception emphasizing moderation and resignation to a positive conception in which hope takes precedence—and acquires a spiritual significance. In looking outward, beyond the domestic sphere to which his previous works were carefully limited, Rawls was also compelled to look inward, to revisit and considerably revise his account of liberal subjects’ moral psychology. To strengthen their self-assurance in the face of dispiriting challenges to their security and identity, Rawls appealed to hope as the virtue that sustains active commitment and finds lasting satisfaction in the penultimate goods of liberal society, over and against illiberal hopes for more comprehensive fulfillment. Yet in taking this hopeful turn, Rawls raised as many questions about liberal hope and its likely political effects as he laid to rest doubts about liberalism’s need for it.

The Problem of Hope

In “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” (Rawls [1997] 2005b), published only months prior to his “final reworking” of the manuscript for *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls reaffirmed the methodological shift he had

first undertaken in *Political Liberalism* ([1993] 2005a, 438–39; 1999b, v). He now regarded the well-ordered society of *Theory*, in which all members affirm the same “comprehensive liberal doctrine,” as “impossible,” and he reconceived justice as fairness as merely “one...political conception among others” ([1997] 2005b, 489–90; [1993] 2005a, 439). Yet in another respect, Rawls’s new outlook exhibited a deep continuity with his previous thinking: He cautioned readers against a certain kind of hope, warning them of the dangers it posed to liberal society. “We must each give up forever,” he wrote, “the hope of changing the constitution so as to establish our religion’s hegemony, or of qualifying our obligations so as to ensure its influence and success. To retain such hopes and aims would be inconsistent with the idea of equal basic liberties for all...citizens” ([1997] 2005b, 459–60).

That the content of these hopes should conflict with Rawls’s liberal vision is unsurprising. What is remarkable is his identification of *hope*—which contemporary liberal vernacular esteems a virtue, but here becomes a vice—as the source of such antagonistic aspirations. Rawls was far from engaging the concept of hope systematically in either *Theory* or *Political Liberalism*. His use of the word was often unreflective or colloquial, as when he expressed “hopes” for the success of his own arguments (1971, viii, xi; 1999c, xi). Nor did he cast hope solely in a negative light (e.g., 1971, 512, 517, 551). Yet Rawls never elaborated on his choice of vocabulary in these passages, declining to explain, for instance, why it matters that “a well-ordered society is as stable as one can hope for”—rather than wish for, aspire to, anticipate, expect, or simply achieve (1971, 398–99). Given Rawls’s later conceptualization of hope and the central position it claimed in his political theory, it is worth asking whether any insights can be gleaned from his prior casual usage. Posing the counterfactual—how Rawls *might* have conceptualized hope *if* he had developed a more robust account early on—can shed valuable light on his subsequent hopeful turn. With the introduction of some basic philosophical distinctions, we can perceive how in *Theory* and *Political Liberalism*, Rawls was preoccupied with doubts and anxieties about the politics of hope that would later fall to the wayside. He saw hope primarily as a potential *problem* for liberalism, propelling liberal subjects toward the pursuit of goods other than or beyond those that liberal society can provide and undermining the stability of constitutional orders.

That Rawls was convinced of the centrality of hope in the human condition is evident in some of the earliest statements of his political philosophy. In a 1963 essay, he described justice as a system of social rules governing persons’ “expectations” (1999a, 80–86). Such language became pervasive in *Theory* when Rawls posited “expectations” as the basic unit of social analysis from which to construct his account of justice. He aimed for a solution to problems of “coordination, efficiency, and

stability” that would enable “the plans of individuals... to be fitted together so that...they can all be carried through without anyone’s legitimate expectations being severely disappointed” (1971, 6). What Rawls meant by “expectations”—and what rendered them “legitimate”—lies at the heart of his early thinking.

While all hopes may be expectant, however, not all expectations are hopeful. Philosophers have commonly defined hope as the expectant desire for a future good that is believed to be possible but not inevitable.¹ Yet hope needs to be further differentiated from ordinary desire, whose objects are not remote or arduous to obtain like those of hope (Eagleton 2015, 47–61; cf. Blöser 2019, 209–10), and ordinary belief, which is necessary but not sufficient for hope because it lacks hope’s affectivity and its futural intentionality (Calhoun 2018, 72–74, 86–87; cf. Blöser 2019, 210–11). Hope in its central or paradigmatic case is an existential disposition that sustains active commitment to the good even in the face of temporal difficulty and uncertainty.²

Although hope in this philosophical sense may seem remote from ordinary expectations, Rawls makes clear in *Theory* that even the most mundane instances of the latter are founded on a more basic and comprehensive vision of life’s trajectory. “Expectation,” he postulates, “indicates [individuals’] life prospects as viewed from their social station” (1971, 64). Rawls refers almost incessantly to these “life prospects” and the “plan[s] of life” that persons formulate in light of them because he regards a future orientation as inextricable from personal identity (64, 92–95, 407–16, 548–54, passim). This conviction lends weight to his declarations that “a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan” (92–93) and that “a man is happy when he is more or less successfully in the way of carrying out this plan” (408). When Rawls assembled his theory from “expectations,” he was not referring solely to ordinary desire for the proximate goods of everyday business but also to the more remote and difficult goods of hope. For Rawls, persons are beings who hope, and any attempt to legitimate their expectations by reconciling them politically must take their hopes into account.

Yet hope—as philosophers have stressed—can also go wrong. Although it need not contradict reason in venturing beyond what reason immediately authorizes, it may do so if the hopeful subject fails to hope well. This possibility of false hope suggests a further distinction between the *passion* and the *virtue* of hope (Eagleton 2015, 55–61; Mittleman 2009, 24–66). Hope belongs among the affects and emotions because it has clear noncognitive features: We feel it on the pulses. Yet if human beings are to hope in a way that advances their purposes and their flourishing, it must be brought into harmony with the rational faculty through the formation of virtuous habits and dispositions. The art of hoping well, and avoiding

false hope, is the virtue of hope (Huber 2022, 6–8; McGeer 2004, 102ff.).

The distinction clarifies Rawls’s occasionally disparaging references to hope in *Theory* and *Political Liberalism*. They are not directed against hope as such but rather hope as a passion and the false hopes it engenders when it is not methodically regulated or excluded from public life in accordance with the principles of justice as fairness. Hope is related to fear and anxiety, classified as “natural” rather than “moral feelings” (1971, 481, 485–87). Of course, Rawls also objects to purportedly virtuous hopes whose misplaced objects do not satisfy his standards of reasonableness. Yet it is easy to misread his argument by overlooking the fact that he refers to both these false hopes *as hopes*. It establishes, at minimum, an ambivalence in his attitude. Whether there is a “right” kind of hope for liberalism, the “wrong” kinds of hope must be excluded. Ignoring Rawls’s criticisms of hope run amok, as some commentators have done, gives the misimpression that Rawls saw hope as a virtue only (Howard 2019; Wenar 2012; 2021). Such a misreading also undercuts the moral and theological stakes of the argument in *Theory*, which—without the divisive and destabilizing potential of false hope—might appear to exaggerate humanity’s natural goodness and overlook the problem of evil (Fletcher 2023). The presence of evil and the demand for theodicy in *Theory* are located precisely in humanity’s misplaced hopes and their tendency to sow civil discord.

Rawls’s wariness toward hope in *Theory* emerges most clearly in his explication of two of its central pillars: basic structure and primary goods. In each instance, by identifying a desire opposed to justice as fairness as a “hope,” Rawls implicitly concedes that some of humanity’s most deeply held hopes are either unattainable or morally repugnant. The basic structure “define[s] men’s rights and duties and influence[s] their life prospects, what they can expect to be and how well they can hope to do” (1971, 7). Elsewhere he emphasizes how it “limits people’s ambitions and hopes in different ways” (1999a, 257–58; [1993] 2005a, 269–71; 2000, 367). These observations are more suggestive than commentators have appreciated. They implicitly naturalize hope, singling it out among the passions and depicting it as pervasive in a hypothetical prepolitical condition, while insisting that its reduction or restraint is a prerequisite to the achievement of social order. Nor is the situation altered by introducing justice as fairness, which only establishes new constraints on hope in accordance with the difference and efficiency principles (1971, 70, 75; [1993] 2005a, 281–82). What Rawls’s principles of justice purport to achieve is not the emancipation of this pre- or even antisocial hope but rather the *legitimation* of its social bonds. His underlying anxiety is that persons are predisposed to a libertarian longing for individual gain without reciprocal obligations. Refusing such false hopes and learning to live without them are thus

necessary first steps toward the constitution of a stable social order. Rawls goes on to argue in Part III of *Theory* that these false hopes ultimately run contrary to human nature, providing crucial reassurance that they will not win out in the end. But he does not deny their existence, and he does not deny them the name of hope.

To ensure that the basic structure is just, Rawls proposes a social contract that weighs and compares the expectations of “representative persons” solely in terms of the “primary goods” of “rights and liberties, powers and opportunities, income and wealth” (1971, 62–64, 92–95). Only these—the means or resources, rather than achievements or ends—can become objects of reasonable consensus in the original position (92, 137). Although Rawls’s reduction of social expectations to the primary goods has proven controversial for other reasons (Nelson 2008), his position is odd in at least one obvious yet unremarked respect. Why shouldn’t individuals’ expectations be defined in terms of their *fulfillment*? “After all,” he grants, “it is in the fulfillment of these plans that men gain happiness” (1971, 94). If some social expectations have the character of hopes, shouldn’t an “ideal theory” like Rawls’s reflect on what we hope to attain at the outer limits of possibility?

Rawls anticipates the objection yet frames his reply in curiously negative terms. Justice as fairness “does not look behind” the use of means because doing so would require “evaluat[ing] the relative merits of different conceptions of the good,” which can only end in intractable conflict. Persons in the original position will adopt an “agreement to compare [their] situations solely by reference” to the primary goods because they perceive that reconciling their expectations is not “feasible” otherwise (1971, 94–95). Here Rawls echoes his defense of the priority of the right over the good, in which he likewise opposes to utilitarianism the insistence of justice as fairness on certain “limits,” “restrictions,” and “constraints” on human “desires and aspirations” (31). Rawls’s argument in both places is principled, not pragmatic: Utilitarian conceptions of the common good disrespect individual autonomy. But his presentation implicitly acknowledges the prior existence of countervailing hopes for something *other* or *more* than justice as fairness can realize or permit. Some of these may be egoistic hopes to dominate others or surpass them at their own expense. But other hopes—for social concord, solidarity, and moral consensus—Rawls recognizes as genuine, albeit subordinate. Here, immoderation is the problem, and Rawls calls for their limitation to goals that are either more realistic or less likely to generate conflict with other non-negotiable goods. Rawls acknowledges that many (perhaps most) will find this liberal settlement unfulfilling on some level. Yet he insists that the lowering of social expectations along this dimension—their restriction to means alone—is as integral to liberal theory as procedural neutrality or equal basic liberty. Hope has a tendency to raise provocative questions about the overall

trajectory of human existence that cannot easily be accommodated within a liberal framework which tries to avoid conflicts between rival accounts of the good.

In drawing this connection between lowered sights and liberal consensus, Rawls gave expression to an idea with deep roots in the liberal tradition that his work self-consciously tried to revive and revise (Rawls 1999a, 390, 395, 412–13, 424–25, 434n.; [1993] 2005a, xv–xxx, 303–4; 2001, 1–4; 2007, 11, 240, 309–10; Bejan 2021). He underscored this debt in his *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, drawing attention to passages in Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651) that echoed his own anxieties about the dangers of false hope. Hobbes singled out the passion of hope as a primary driver of conflict in the state of nature (1994, 6.13–14; 10.1, 16–17, 37–40). As long as there is “equality of hope in the attaining of our ends,” people will be drawn into competition yet refuse to abandon their natural condition (13.3). It is only humankind’s *loss of hope* or *despair* of attaining “ease” by their own power that leads them to institute civil power (11.4). In his gloss, Rawls twice observes that “equality of hope” under conditions of scarcity “puts people in competition with one another and makes them potential enemies” (2007, 49, 52). Drawing an analogy between the Hobbesian state of nature and a prisoner’s dilemma game (a situation Rawls considered synonymous with political failure), he also highlights how an excess of hope leads to a worse outcome for both parties than if they were able to resign themselves to the “reasonable course of action” and cooperate (74–75, 88–92; see also 1971, 269–70, 497–98; Weithman 2010). Rawls does not rely on the “penal devices” of a Hobbesian sovereign to intervene when immoderate hopes conflict (1971, 240, 576–77). Yet his formulation of the *problem* that hope poses for liberal stability, if not the solution, remains Hobbesian. The passions of hope sow dangerous vices that degenerate into conflict; what conduces to civil society and collective prosperity is not so much hope as the repudiation of false hope. This is not necessarily to cast aspersions on hope as such—only to acknowledge that *when* persons hope, there is always a risk of their being misled into attitudes that liberals must consider politically perilous. For Hobbes and for Rawls, too, at least initially, the antidote for these pathologies had to be purgative.

Rawls’s reflections on Hobbes date to the same years he was assembling *Political Liberalism*, with its emphasis on the historicity of the liberal tradition and democratic cultures (2007, ix; Bejan 2021, 1060; Müller 2006). After reproducing his account of the basic structure originally aired in *Theory* and repeated in his 1991 lectures on Hegel (1971, 7; 1999a, 257–58; 2000, xiv, 367; [1993] 2005a, 269–71), Rawls added a parallel argument about the relationship between hope and overlapping consensus. Just as justice as fairness sets up a procedural rule over individuals’ hopes for the sake of equal opportunity and shared prosperity, so too political liberalism finds it necessary to

limit, direct, and manage the diverse hopes of individual citizens. Rawls gives two examples. The first hope his new theory cannot abide is the hope for establishing political unity *on any other basis* and *to any greater degree* than overlapping consensus:

Some will think that...the idea of political unity founded on an overlapping consensus must still be rejected, since it abandons the hope of political community and settles instead for a public understanding that is at bottom a mere *modus vivendi*. To this objection, we say that the hope of political community must indeed be abandoned, if by such a community we mean a political society united in affirming the same comprehensive doctrine. (Rawls [1993] 2005a, 146)

Rawls does not consider political liberalism to be a mere *modus vivendi*. But his answer to the objection from hope is not immediately to correct that mistake, because someone who holds out “hope of political community,” which Rawls implicitly acknowledges as natural or at least widespread, is unlikely to accept the distinction. The expectations for political unity on the interlocutor’s part are so high that the distinction between an overlapping consensus and a *modus vivendi* becomes insignificant. Rebuking such immoderate hopes must take priority.

Yet the problem of hope is not limited to those whose objects directly contradict liberal principles. Rawls also suggests that individual hopes for personal advancement *of any kind* can threaten the stability of constitutional order if not subordinated to a set of rigid legal norms:

Liberal principles meet the urgent political requirement to fix, once and for all, the content of basic rights and liberties, and to assign them special priority. Doing this takes those guarantees off the political agenda and puts them beyond the calculus of social interests. ... To regard that calculus as relevant in these matters leaves the status and content of those rights and liberties still unsettled; it subjects them to the shifting circumstances of time and place, and by greatly raising the stakes of political controversy, dangerously increases the insecurity and hostility of public life. The refusal to take these matters off the agenda perpetuates the deep divisions latent in society; it betrays a readiness to revive those antagonisms in the hope of gaining a more favorable position should later circumstances prove propitious. (Rawls [1993] 2005a, 161)

The passage implicitly recommends a set of civic virtues to counteract the vices of hope that threaten to antagonize and divide liberal subjects. They should be moderate and stoically self-controlled, disciplining their desires and accepting without rancor that pursuing “a more favorable position” is not always in their or others’ best interests. They should resign themselves to the limited goods of a fixed, rules-based order, rather than expect the optimum out of every social arrangement. And they should be skeptical of hopes for a better social world than liberal principles can guarantee, refusing to be taken in by charlatans who will not let basic rights and liberties come “off the agenda.”

Hope versus Theodicy

In *Theory* and *Political Liberalism*, Rawls was chiefly concerned with how liberals should *not* hope. He worried that hopeful passions tend to become irrational and self-destructive, leading individuals to behave in ways that militate against their own collective prosperity. The ethos of stoicism, moderation, and resignation that he recommends to counteract such tendencies was of a piece with his long-standing “method of avoidance,” by which liberals try “neither to assert nor to deny” any comprehensive doctrine but work to “bypass” controversies over the whole truth that obstruct the way to a freestanding political conception of justice composed of partial truths only (1971, 214–15, 243; 1999a, 95, 329, 384–85, 395, 404n., 429–30, 434–37, 447; [1993] 2005a, 29n., 62–63, 150–52; 2001, 36). To achieve stability under this rule, the immoderate and otherworldly hopes that make persons dissatisfied with the partiality of the political conception and cause them to long for something more—pervasive though they may be—must be prevented from poisoning the public sphere.

Rawls was usually optimistic that this ethos could be sustained without invoking any “comprehensive liberal doctrine” ([1997] 2005b, 489), thereby maintaining the distinction between avoidance and skepticism. But at times he was less sanguine, and in his occasional reckonings with the limits of liberalism before *The Law of Peoples*, there is evidence of latent dissatisfaction with his negative solution to the problem of hope. When Rawls acknowledges exceptions to his rule of avoidance, he also makes surprising reference to a counter-hope that liberals *can* and *should* hold. In a notorious passage from *Political Liberalism*, he admits that liberals “may eventually have to assert at least certain aspects of our own comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine” in the face of antiliberal intransigency ([1993] 2005a, 152; see also 1999a, 436; Tan 1998, 283; 2006, 88). Elsewhere Rawls summons the menace of “views that would suppress altogether the basic rights and liberties affirmed in the political conception.” He suspects that “there will always be such views,” but he clings to a “hope”—for “there can be no guarantee”—that they will “not be strong enough to undermine the substantive justice of the regime” ([1993] 2005a, 65). Yet in neither passage does Rawls go on to explain what is entailed by this hope that makes the success of the method of avoidance, and its rejection of false hopes, into an object of hope in its own right. To what does this hope ultimately aspire? How is it sustained? Can it be reasonably justified?

In *Theory* and *Political Liberalism*, Rawls does not answer such questions. Although his anticipation of states of exception that threaten liberal society with despair of its own ideals suggested the existence of a gap in his political theory that hope might fill, Rawls only rarely broached this possibility, casting hope in a positive light in just a few

scattered places. For the time being, this hope that emerges where stoic moderation gives way to liberal self-assertion remained inarticulate, as well as tentative and untrustworthy. In general, Rawls seems to have relied less on hope than on the completeness of his theoretical system for self-assurance. He tried to “frame the institutions of the basic structure so that intractable conflicts are unlikely to arise” ([1993] 2005a, 156; 1999a, 438), and the arguments he made to demonstrate the strength of this solution took the form of a theodicy.

The concept of “secular theodicy” originated in the Löwith–Blumenberg debate over the legitimacy of the modern age. If theodicy is a justification of God’s providence to humanity in light of the reality of evil, then secular theodicy (or “anthropodicy”) is a justification of humanity to itself: demonstration of the rational in the actual and reconciliation with human nature or history (Blumenberg 1983, 53–61, 142–43). Commentators have debated whether Rawls’s theodicy in *Theory* and *Political Liberalism* is truly “secular” in this sense. Some have insisted on a persistent “religious aspect” in Rawls’s thought or its essential “post-Protestant” character (Bok 2017; Weithman 2010, 8, 14, 361–69; 2016, 230–41), while others are more inclined to accept the secular translation of theological terms as valid while leveling objections elsewhere (Eich 2021; Fletcher 2023). Yet an explanation for Rawls’s conspicuous silence about the virtue of hope in these works lies less in the secularity of his theodicy than the fact that it *is* a theodicy at all. The term needs to be approached with greater historical sensitivity.

Overlooked in the debate on Rawls and theodicy is the fact that premodern theologians saw no need for theodicy in its original Leibnizian sense. Aquinas, as contemporary Thomists have stressed, did not respond to the problem of evil by seeking to rationally explain and justify but by pointing out a category error in the formulation of the problem: God is not a moral agent in the world. Aquinas (1920, I, q. 22, a. 2; q. 48–49) thus viewed the dual reality of transcendent goodness and worldly evil as an irreducible mystery approachable only via theological dogma (Davies 2006, 154–72; 2011; McCabe 2010). Leibniz (1951, 98, 134–36), by contrast, dismissed all previous responses to the problem of evil as failures and forged another path in his 1710 *Théodicée*. He set out to prove demonstratively not only that God and evil are compatible but also how and why worldly evils work out for the best from an immanent point of view (Rateau 2014, 111). By subjecting God to secular reason, as Susan Neiman (2002, 21–28) has observed, Leibniz also “gave us a God created in *our* image”—and made himself vulnerable to Voltaire’s Panglossian satire.

What is significant about this distinction between modern and premodern responses to the problem of evil is that only one leaves open the possibility of hope. Hope arises from and is predicated on the fact that the human

being is *homo viator* not *comprehensor*, en route and not arrived. Virtuous hope patiently upholds the fact of ongoing possibility against the tendency to anticipate prematurely and without warrant either fulfillment or nonfulfillment before their time. Hope is thus a form of realism (Eagleton 2015, 37–38; Lear 2006, 113; Marcel 1951, 38–40). Modern theodicies, by contrast, are a species of *optimism*. Optimism betrays human experience through an elision of its incompleteness, taking possession of the good for granted as a foregone conclusion. Whereas hope is a “strenuous commitment...underpinned by reasons” that continues to motivate in the face of adversity, optimism takes the alternative gambit of denying that the obstacles to human desire are real, dismissing them as transient and illusory, at most merely epiphenomenal (Eagleton 2015, 1–3). Likewise, a successful theodicy is able to account in rational terms for any apparent counter-evidence that might arise to contradict the wisdom of divine providence or the teleological progress of history. Theodicy renders unnecessary any recourse to a virtue of being-on-the-way that looks beyond what immanent reason can authorize.

It should therefore come as little surprise that hope, which Scholastic theology deemed a theological virtue, is mostly absent from the classic modern theodicies. Leibniz (1951, 50, 128, 160–61, 422–25) refers to hope primarily as a passion in need of rational conditioning; he comes close to mocking it as a superstition, only to replace it with an optimistic mentality that the future will be, because it must be, as good as it possibly can be: “the best of all possible worlds.” Likewise, Hegel (1956, 16, 21, 72) described his philosophy of history as a “theodicy” while classifying hope as a feature of the naïve pre-philosophic attitude toward history that he was trying to correct. Kant is a more complicated case, since his opinion of theodicy wavered over time. He presented hope to attain the highest good as a transcendental concomitant of practical reason in the First Critique (1998, A805/B833–A819/B847). As he developed a theodicy in his progressive political essays of the mid-1780s, however, hope receded from the picture proportionally (1991, 41–53, 221–34). Only after Kant (1996, 24–37) renounced theodicy as incompatible with morality in a 1791 essay did hope return to his thinking. The *Religion* of 1793 contains no theodicy—none is possible, because radical evil cannot be accounted for in immanent terms—and once again derives its hope from practical-transcendental reason alone (1996, 95, 130, 182–83, 191; Duncan 2012; Eich 2021, 993–95; Goldman 2022, 51–52, 58–60; Neiman 2002, 68–70). For Kant, then, the need for hope and the prospects for a successful theodicy were inversely related. His later works on politics and progress are predicated on the new assumption (“authentic theodicy”) that moral faith and hope must dictate terms to God, not vice versa (1996, 31–33, 161, 202; Fletcher 2023, 7; Goldman 2022, 34 and fn. 90).

Rawls followed a similar trajectory and espoused in *Theory* an optimism grounded in theodicy. Although he admits to an anxiety about the fate of the ideal in a non-ideal world, alluding to a “day of reckoning” that might arrive if his ideal theory were ever to prove inadequate to “the more extreme and tangled instances of nonideal theory,” he quickly pivots to resist it: “We must try to postpone [it] as long as possible, and try to arrange society so that it never comes” (1971, 303). How can liberal subjects be motivated to carry out such a daunting task? How can they be dissuaded, in the face of inevitable reversals, from despairing of its success? Hope is one possibility—but Rawls does not yet develop an account of virtuous hope for liberalism. Instead, *Theory* discovers grounds for optimism in historical and biological processes whose outcomes tend to strengthen liberal virtues and weaken antiliberal vices over time, rendering hope unnecessary for liberal subjects by providing them with unshakable confidence in the long-term stability of their society. Theodicy thus serves as the ultimate grounding for Rawls’s moral psychology, both enabling liberal subjects to resist otherworldly false hopes (which is essential to their identity as liberals) and affording them assurance against doubt and despair.

In *Theory*, Rawls frames the problem in terms of the “social bases of self-respect” (1971, 62). He worries that liberal subjects whose social expectations are defined solely in terms of the primary goods may lack “confidence” in their capacity to formulate a life plan and bring it to fulfillment—that is, to lead a comprehensively good human life—even if they possess ample means to do so. As a result, they may be “plagued” by “self-doubt” and driven into despair, where “apathy and cynicism” reign (440). Despair is a problem for Rawls, because it suggests that there is no “congruence between a commitment to justice...and a desire to lead a good human life” (Wall 2014, 19). His solution is to develop a theory of moral psychology grounded in epochal grand narratives that point toward a better future. Recent studies in evolutionary psychology and the new discipline of ethology furnished him with support for the “Aristotelian Principle” that human beings prefer the exercise of more complex capacities to simpler ones and take pleasure in their own self-development, as well as that of others (1971, 424–33). This biological mechanism confirmed, on the basis of natural selection, that human beings are likely to experience the greatest satisfaction with their lives in the well-ordered societies envisioned by Rawls’s theory (442). It proved that “principles of justice are closer to the tendency of evolution” than any alternative (503).

Another potential threat to self-respect for Rawls was envy (530–41). He feared that the difference principle might permit economic inequalities extreme enough to “wound” the self-respect of the worse off and arouse in them such “rancorous feelings” that they would withdraw their support for principles of justice (534). Yet Rawls argued that this was unlikely and speculated that, in a just

society, envy would eventually disappear. His reasoning was that justice as fairness provides bases for self-respect in other domains sufficient to “reduce the visibility, or at least the painful visibility, of variations in men’s [economic] prospects” (536–37). As Katrina Forrester and Stefan Eich have shown, this view was predicated to a great extent on an expectation of endless economic expansion drawn from Bretton Woods-era “growth economics” (Eich 2021, 996–1002; Forrester 2019, 178–81; see Rawls 1971, 143–44, 286–87, 530–41). If growth were to grind to a halt, economic inequalities might become suddenly and dispiritingly visible. Buoyed by the optimism of contemporary economists, however, Rawls forecasted that in a future just society, citizens would be “not much affected by envy and jealousy” (1971, 544; 511–12).

In both cases, biological and economic, Rawls assumed that history and theory had to reinforce one another before his case could be put to rest. Only with the aid of telltale glimpses into history’s long-term trajectory did he feel justified in claiming at the end of *Theory* that he had gained a new summit: a perspective on human affairs “*sub specie aeternitatis*” from which “the totality of conditions” according to “all temporal points of view” could be comprehended (1971, 587). For Rawls, the success of this theodicy solved the psychological problem of doing *without* hope by giving authoritative reason to believe that the limited possibilities of life in liberal society provide a surer path to fulfillment than any alternative. In his foreordained mastery of every future contingency, Rawls rendered hope unnecessary for liberal subjects by replacing it with rational optimism.

In the subsequent reassessment of his thought that culminated in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls had to concede that this omniscient perspective was only one view among many in a pluralistic society. Another difficulty, as Forrester and Eich have emphasized, is that Rawls seems to have lost confidence in *Theory*’s economic expectations (Eich 2021, 988–90; Forrester 2019, 140, 180, 272ff.). If Rawls were to persist in his negative solution to the problem of hope, then his response to the psychological difficulty of doing without hope would have to be adapted. *Political Liberalism* rose to the occasion by recasting *Theory*’s view from above in translated theological terms as a “reasonable faith” in the mere *possibility* of a just society (Rawls [1993] 2005a, 101, 171–72; 1999a, 448; Eich 2021, 995; Weithman 2016, 239–41). In a passage from his preface to the 1995 paperback edition, subsequently adapted in *The Law of Peoples*, Rawls described such reasonable faith as the only acceptable worldview, after the Holocaust, for those who have neither despaired of humanity as “largely amoral, if not incurably cynical and self-centered” nor ceased to believe that “it is worthwhile for human beings to live on the earth.” Following Kant (though he did not specify which), Rawls now reasoned *from* the possibility of the society envisioned by his theory

to a reasonable faith in humanity's "moral nature"; that is, its capacity to perform the tasks his theory requires ([1993] 2005a, lx; 1999b, 128). Only the future actualization of this capacity could one day justify all the suffering of human history up to that point. Yet there is a remarkable omission from these passages in *Political Liberalism*: Unlike the later Kant, Rawls does not allude to hope.

If successful, Rawlsian theodicy and the reasonable faith it authorizes would demonstrate humanity's inherent capacity for self-correction. It might even establish how and why the ideal must be affirmed in a non-ideal world—as a timeless proposition. But it does not and cannot establish that human beings dwelling here and now, in the phenomenal not-yet, have any *hope* for attaining that ideal, because they may still despair of it. Hope and faith are related in that both look to an object somehow distant or difficult to attain. Faith is even in one sense prior to hope: Because one cannot hope for what cannot be, it follows that the objects of hope must first be proposed as possible, and this is what faith does. But without hope to propel a person forward in active commitment to the future good, faith's assent to an unseen truth would amount to little more than a cognitive dissent from reality, an impotent gesture to a potential that is not actual (Eagleton 2015, 41–42, 48–49, 68, 80–81). In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls had not yet learned this lesson. The opposition he contrives between reasonable faith and despair of the ideal overlooks hope's crucial service of sustaining motivation despite setbacks and reversals, without denying the reality of temporal evils or minimizing the challenge they present. That Rawls's theodicy succumbed to this temptation becomes clear in his insistence on analyzing conflicts between liberal and nonliberal values solely under "normal conditions" and "reasonably favorable circumstances," where liberal principles would "normally" win out (1971, 577; [1993] 2005a, 156–58). Where should liberal subjects turn in the states of exception that Rawls acknowledges are possible, when resistance to liberal ideals can no longer be dismissed as ephemeral and optimism falls victim to unexpected signs of contradiction? This difficulty is only compounded by the fact, which Rawls acknowledges, that liberals themselves are likely to find something dissatisfying about liberalism's repudiation of otherworldly hope. In such a scenario, liberal faith may be shaken, and the temptation to despair of liberal ideals may prove stronger than theodicy's speculative proofs. This is the tragic scenario that Rawls wrote *The Law of Peoples* to address.

Hope against Hope

Rawls's work before *The Law of Peoples* offers little more than an occasional glimpse of concepts that would soon claim center stage in his thought. Only rarely had he come up against the temporal barriers to system-building that suggest a need for hope, and his gestures in this direction were invariably inarticulate. When Rawls wrote "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," he still largely took the

Hobbesian view that hope is a dangerous antisocial passion that must be methodically controlled ([1997] 2005b, 459–60). Still confined within the domestic political unit, he remained confident that seemingly intractable conflicts which "set citizens at odds" could be overcome through political liberalism's usual strategies. He did not perceive such differences as substantial threats to his theoretical construction of a society sufficiently resilient to overcome them. Hence, he still spoke of "attempting to realize [the] ideal [of public reason] to the fullest extent possible" ([1997] 2005b, 487–89). Not even his affirmation of theodicy opened room for hope, because its outlook was timeless rather than temporal and the limits to judgment it sought to overcome were epistemic rather than historical.

As he worked to revise *The Law of Peoples* from an earlier pair of essays, however, Rawls came to believe that negative counsels were not enough and that the success of political liberalism depends not only on *renouncing* false hope but also on *instilling* and *strengthening* hope in liberalism's own future. There were subtle premonitions of the coming change. In the 1995 preface to *Political Liberalism*, he began to speak of certain "limits to reconciliation," subsequently a key theme in *The Law of Peoples* ([1993] 2005a, lviii; [1997] 2005b, 487; 1999b, 126–27). Likewise, in his 1993 essays on the "Law of Peoples," Rawls suggested that nonliberal societies' possession of ideas of justice compatible with liberal international order is something he "would hope" for (1993a, 230 n. 54; 1993b, 65 fn. 53). Yet the shift was nonetheless abrupt. Except for this brief allusion buried in a footnote, the language of hope was largely absent from Rawls's initial sketches on international relations, with which he professed to be "never satisfied" (1999b, v), as well as from "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited." Rawls believed the latter piece complemented *The Law of Peoples* and specifically requested they be published in the same volume (1999b, vi). Yet as Murad Idris (2021b, 1034–35) has documented, Rawls also confessed in letters to colleagues that the manuscript was "a bit crazy" and even "loony." This admission, together with many contemporary political philosophers' appalled reaction to the book, suggests that Rawls did not fully appreciate the extent to which it introduced new possibilities in his theory or felt himself unable to control them. The "already well-developed expectations or predictions of many careful readers of Rawls's earlier works" were not met, and this led to "much consternation and disappointment" (Martin and Reidy 2006, 7). Rawls's former student Thomas Pogge (2006, 210) even accused him of obfuscating the distinction between the "highest ideal" and a "stopgap model." Perhaps Rawls and his critics were both right. His shift away from a negative liberalism of avoidance to a positive conception in which hope takes precedence was indeed seismic. Yet the problem for which Rawls finally offered hope as the solution had been there all along.

The Law of Peoples locates “our hope for the future” in the possibility of an international order that permits and protects the existence of liberal societies while providing grounds for their tolerant coexistence with “decent” non-liberal societies (1999b, 4–5, 59–60, 89–90, 122–23). For Rawls, such an order constitutes a “realistic utopia” that “extends...the limits of practicable political possibility and...reconciles us to our political and social condition” (11). How does this “Law of Peoples” stand in relation to the constructs of Rawls’s earlier theories? On one view, Rawls simply adapts and reapplies the principles of political liberalism as practiced domestically, where every citizen respects each other’s comprehensive doctrines on the condition of their compatibility with public reason, to the international sphere of relations between societies, where every people respect each other’s basic political institutions provided that they act in accordance with a reasonable conception of justice for the “Society of Peoples.” In the non-ideal realm, social welfare and legal coercion in the domestic theory become analogous to foreign aid and just war in the international theory. *The Law of Peoples* establishes principles of engagement for liberal societies’ conflicts with aggressively antiliberal “outlaw states” and lays down duties of assistance to guide their relations with internally repressive “burdened societies” (9–10, 59–60, 81, 89–90).

Yet this initially straightforward elevation of political liberalism onto a more universal plane, carrying Rawls’s theory beyond the “self-contained” and “closed system” of his previous work (1971, 8; [1993] 2005a, 12; 1999b, 86), also confronted him with problems that had not arisen previously or that he had not perceived with such clarity before. His endlessly repeated claim to have merely “extended” his political philosophy into the international realm (1999b, vi, 4–6, 9–11, 18–19, passim) is belied by his numerous modifications of its background conditions. First, although Rawls retains some of the strictures on “ideal theory” laid down in his previous works, such as the assumption of “reasonably favorable conditions” (11, 33), he also weakens them by acknowledging that “the fact of reasonable pluralism is more evident within a society of well-ordered peoples than it is within one society alone” (18). Second, he puts the historical community depicted in *Political Liberalism* at stake as he never had before. Those holding nonliberal or antiliberal doctrines are now conceived of as foreign aliens rather than fellow citizens; they do not share the formative historical experiences of liberal peoples in which Rawls had previously placed so much trust (59–60; Müller 2006). Whereas the domestic problem of unreasonable doctrines could be resolved through disciplinary norms and law enforcement, societies in conflict on the international stage have no recourse to these tools. As Rawls puts it, a “police force to keep domestic order...is very different from an army” (1999b, 26). If legal coercion in the domestic theory is equivalent to war in the international theory, then the analogy must also raise new questions—and anxieties—

about the extent of liberal societies’ resources and resolve in the face of foreign aggression. Finally, the perpetrators of injustice in *The Law of Peoples* are no longer portrayed as selfish egotists pursuing their interests at the expense of others but as “evil,” “perverse,” and “demonic.” Nowhere else in his oeuvre does Rawls state so bluntly that the greatest challenge facing his theory—which must be overcome or else all is for naught—is the persistence of iniquity in history, from the Wars of Religion and the Holocaust to “oppression,” “persecution,” and “poverty” in our own time (6–7, 19–23, 89, 99, 126; Neiman 2002, 335 n. 25). *The Law of Peoples* recognizes that on the limitless stage of world history, where there are no guarantees, the threat of tragic reversals is ubiquitous and potentially crippling for liberal subjects. Carrying Rawls’s system into unknown territory, the book asks whether and on what grounds liberals should be expected to abide by their principles in an environment that constantly destabilizes all reasonable expectations for the endurance of their way of life. From the most comprehensive vantage point, at the highest level of abstraction, Rawls now began to interrogate not only the underlying conditions of his political theory but also the conditions of the conditions, and so on, and to ask whether it is reasonable to hope for their fulfillment.

All this suggests a new turn in Rawls’s thinking. Why, if *Theory*’s biological and economic mechanisms were still working in their favor, should liberal subjects experience any disillusionment in the face of temporal setbacks and even disasters? Why, if *Political Liberalism*’s theodicy were sufficient, should the “great evils of the past and present” now threaten to “undermine our hope,” forcing us to “support and strengthen” it through an exercise in philosophical introspection and reflection on world history (1999b, 22)? Rawls’s adaptation of the language of “assurance” previously employed in *Theory* and *Political Liberalism* tracks with his shifting outlook (1971, 240, 267–70, 336; [1993] 2005a xlvi, lv, 16–17, 49, 75, 86). Whereas the sense of justice, self-respect, and the rule of law—backed by biology, economics, history, and theodicy—were seen in these earlier writings as sufficient guarantees of reciprocity between diverse citizens (1971, 494–95; [1993] 2005a, xlii, 19, 52), in *The Law of Peoples* such factors fade into the background. War is costlier and more perilous than law enforcement; the ineliminable threat of radical evil renders the sense of justice an inadequate guarantee. To mitigate against the risks of complacency and despair, Rawls now speaks of “assurance” not as something found in the world but as something liberal subjects must “achieve” (1999b 10, 58). His audacious claim in *The Law of Peoples*, which departs from his previous thinking not least in adopting the first-person point of view, is no longer that the assurance of liberal subjects depends on history taking a certain course or on the redemptive potential of human nature, but that history’s course and the dignity of humanity *depend on our*

hope. “The idea of a realistic utopia,” he writes, “establishes that such a world can exist somewhere and at some time, but not that it must be, or will be” (127). Turning from theodicy to Kant’s “authentic theodicy,” which is “only tenable on the assumption that humans take it upon themselves to realize [the] progress” they hope for (Goldman 2022, 34), Rawls continues to affirm the goodness of human nature and the historical possibility of progress, but he now recognizes the need for hope to motivate action that makes the potential actual.

The Law of Peoples, in sum, sets out to develop an ethic of virtuous hope in and for political liberalism. This is not to say that Rawls abandoned his earlier critique of passionate hopes gone awry and devolved into false hopes, which remains essential to liberal identity, only that he now perceived the inadequacy of his former negative attitude and saw a need to further develop its implicit “hope against hope” (to borrow St. Paul’s phrase if not his meaning, Romans 4:18) into a positive ideal. Rawls’s hope is for the perpetual success of the liberal project of keeping otherworldly hopes at bay and for finding fulfillment in that success—a liberal hope in and for the things of *this* world. The all-encompassing and comprehensive character of this hope, seemingly detached from any concrete object, has exposed Rawls to criticism that his philosophy is too “unworldly” (Rawls [1993] 2005a, lx; Fletcher 2023, 17). Yet that cannot be quite right or is at least only half the story, because the purpose of liberal hope’s striving and the object of its aspiration, on Rawls’s account, are precisely to deflect and deflate otherworldly longings. Although Rawls recognizes that hope often tends to eclipse and outstrip liberal society, at which point it becomes false hope and must be resisted, what he tries to develop in *The Law of Peoples* is a counter-hope of another kind: not an arrow shot from a bow and flying out of sight, but an anchor that fastens in safe harbor, sheltered from the storms of humanity’s spiritual restlessness. The difficulty for Rawls is that he has no ground in which to plant this anchor firmer than the world itself.

An important conceptual distinction underlies the startlingly speculative character of Rawls’s hope. Virtuous hope may take more proximate or ultimate forms, often called “particular” and “fundamental.”³ Specific hopes have a concrete object in mind; for example, one hopes to win the race or find something that is lost. But people do not always hope this way—sometimes, especially in the face of disappointment, hope “transcend[s] the particular objects to which it at first seems to be attached” and looks instead to “the bare idea *that something good will emerge*...which transcends the understanding” (Lear 2006, 94–95, emphasis in original; Marcel 1951, 32, 44–45). Fundamental hope emerges from the reflective activity through which virtuous hopes are normally justified against the standard of reason and the experience of disillusionment. Its dissatisfaction with the merely conditional suggests that it cannot be

contained within the realm of immanent possibility, and this explains why hope has often been regarded as the province of mythology and religion. Fundamental hope looks to complete fulfillment at the end, the universal making good of all things at the “furthest and brightest horizon” (Bloch 1995, 1:75, 112–13).

Like other forms of fundamental hope, Rawls’s hope in *The Law of Peoples* is largely detached from particular objects. Because its aim is not to provide liberal subjects with an exhaustive picture of where they are headed but to accompany them along the way, it holds steadfastly to the potential that something good may emerge and sustains active commitment to that end without pronouncing on all it may entail. It also knows that its object, to be genuine, must be in some sense universal. Given these criteria, what is surprising about the fundamental hope that Rawls proposes as normative for liberal subjects is not that its justification and elucidation call for the use of religious vocabulary (it is difficult to imagine how he could have avoided that), but rather the distinctly liberal paradox at its heart: Its aim is to motivate and sustain an ethos of this-worldliness *over and against* otherworldly hopes, at the same time as it takes on spiritual significance in its own right.

Rawls’s recognition of this paradox launched a cascade of further changes in his thinking. Whereas he had previously inveighed against the “zeal to embody the whole truth in politics” ([1997] 2005b, 442, 447), he now endorsed a virtue of hope for liberal citizens that he frankly admitted “affects our attitudes toward the world as a whole” (1999b, 128). Whereas he had previously stated that liberals “do not put forward more of our comprehensive view than we think needed or useful for the political aim of consensus” ([1993] 2005a, 153), he now authorized holding nothing back. Whereas he had once dismissed *Theory*’s model of a society in which citizens share the same “comprehensive liberal doctrine” as “impossible” given the domestic “fact of reasonable pluralism” ([1997] 2005b, 489), he now held that liberals confronted by pluralism on a global scale must make recourse to their comprehensive doctrine almost constantly or else despair. The only way to avoid a contradiction here is to assume that when Rawls wrote *The Law of Peoples*, he did so entirely from within the perspective of the state of exception—in which liberals turn from avoidance to self-assertion—that he had previously acknowledged only as a remote possibility. Rawls was no longer trying to persuade the unconverted. Instead, *The Law of Peoples* explains to an audience of committed liberals racked by self-doubt that the future of their way of life depends on their capacity for otherworldly this-worldliness, or hope against hope.

In the book’s crescendoing conclusion, Rawls finally makes explicit the “limits to reconciliation” that compel liberal societies to turn to hope as the instrument of their salvation. The first is the possibility that “fundamentalist” adherents to unreasonable comprehensive doctrines may

perceive liberalism's social world as a "nightmare of social fragmentation and false doctrines, if not positively evil" (1999b, 126–27). Their fear may or may not lead them to lash out destructively. Either way, fundamentalists' intransigent resistance poses an objective threat to the potential universality of liberal principles, which may induce despair in liberal subjects. What is needed to bolster liberals' mettle and moral resolve in the face of threats to their identity is some sign that the realization of their ideals remains within reach. *The Law of Peoples* conjures such a sign through the hybrid category of "decent" societies that are nonliberal but govern in accordance with a conception of justice compatible with the liberal international order (63–67). Although Rawls's introduction of one such "decent hierarchical people" living in an "idealized Islamic" society called "Kazanistan" is well known, Idris's archival research has demonstrated that Rawls had Muslims in mind throughout the book's treatment of nonliberal states (75–78; Idris 2021a; 2021b). The plausibility of Kazanistan was crucial, for without any hope of mutual accommodation and cooperation between liberals and Muslims, the duty that Rawls imposes on liberal societies to make war against outlaw states and assist burdened societies would begin to look not only endlessly taxing but also, in a word, intolerant (1999b, 60–63, 81). Without Kazanistan on their horizon, liberals would face the Sisyphean prospect of unending struggle for the sake of an unachievable end. Kazanistan makes liberal societies a little less alone in the world by opening the possibility of conversion for their enemies and giving them allies (or at least neutrals) in their fight for survival against the forces of "evil." It also vindicates the universality of liberal ideals by demonstrating—against the immediate empirical evidence—that they are "reasonable from a decent nonliberal point of view" (10, 58).

Yet the evidence Rawls summons to defend the plausibility of this hypothetical state is highly ambiguous. As Idris (2021a, 7) has shown, when Rawls stipulates that Islamic theologians in Kazanistan interpret *jihad* "in a spiritual and moral sense, and not in military terms," something he claims was "once common in Islamic countries," he actually reverses his source's view. The argument of historian Bernard Lewis, to whom Rawls's footnote refers, was that spiritual interpretations were an exceptionally *late* development in Islamic theology (1999b, 76 and fn. 18, 156 and fn. 46). Rawls's selection of sources for his interpretation of Islam generally betokens an anxiety that the principles he wished Muslims to affirm were not present in their tradition: He does not refer directly to the Qur'an, hadith, or Islamic jurisprudence, relying exclusively on commentary by academics in western universities. Hence his identification of Kazanistan as "the most we can realistically—and coherently—hope for" given the "limits of liberalism" can also be read as a backhanded compliment (78). Amicable relations between liberal and Muslim societies are an article of hope for Rawls

—rather than ordinary expectations—because he considers them exceptionally unlikely to be achieved under any conditions presently foreseeable but nonetheless necessary if liberal principles are not to be disproven. Theodicy is no help here, because there is no basis for metaphysical proofs. The conditions for this achievement need to be brought about by liberal subjects living and acting in hope.

To point out that Kazanistan's existence is only posited as a condition of liberal hope is not necessarily to condemn it as fanciful. But the fact that Rawls's account tends to become untethered from the reality of the nonliberal others he is describing, despite his donning of the realist mantle, does raise doubts that liberal hope's horizons are too limited. Like the medieval legend of Prester John, a Nestorian patriarch ruling over a Christian kingdom in the distant Orient, Rawls's image of Kazanistan reaches beyond immanent possibilities to summon and express an aspiration that does not take its cues from the rise and fall of worldly fortune. There is nothing objectionable about this moral operation in itself, but it is laden with risk. The hopes of the Europeans who expected Prester John's discovery were misplaced: Clinging to this illusory hope inhibited them from fostering peaceful relations with non-European peoples and coming to a more profound understanding of their own aspirations. The promise of a windfall around the corner blinded them to the potential for incremental gains here and now and shielded them from a disappointment they should have faced head-on. Similarly, the introduction of Kazanistan into Rawls's theory doesn't so much promote dialogue between cultures in conflict as perpetuate an ongoing monologue in the minds of liberal subjects (Idris 2021b, 1057). The "assurance" that Kazanistan is posited to provide is *self-assurance*, and the hope its prospect sustains is "*our* hope." The encounter between liberalism and Islam in the pages of Rawls's text does not lead to a moment of realist circumspection (as Rawls's liberal critics have complained) but to doubling-down on liberalism's core premises and above all its this-worldly hope. The tendency of this hope to become self-justifying is evident in Rawls's oddly truncated retort to his hypothetical Muslim critics, who view the Law of Peoples as "ethnocentric":

[The] Law of Peoples [is] universal in its reach ... because it asks of other societies only what they can reasonably endorse once they are prepared to stand in a relation of fair equality with all other societies. They cannot argue that being in a relation of equality with other peoples is a western idea! In what other relation can a people and its regime reasonably expect to stand? (Rawls 1999b, 121–22)

For Rawls, Kazanistan summons a hope that religious fundamentalists will not be victorious because their worldview suppresses a truth that liberal subjects hope for. Only this self-assurance of the universality of liberal principles enables them to give the lie to prophecies of liberalism's

imminent demise. Yet it may also reduce them to a state of stammering inarticulacy when confronted by those who hope to avoid being brought into the liberal fold.

The second of the “limits to reconciliation” Rawls mentions in the conclusion of the book is that those who go along with his liberal program may “suffer considerable misfortune and anguish, and may be distraught by a spiritual emptiness” leading them to despair of liberalism (1999b, 127). Here Rawls sets aside the objective problem of universality and gives voice to the inner anxiety of his liberal subjects, the possibility of unbearable discontent with life in liberal society that he first acknowledged in *Theory*. This is the demon that *The Law of Peoples* ultimately aims to exorcise, and for Rawls it presents at least two grim aspects. The first (“misfortune”) is a corollary of the resistance posed by fundamentalists. In the face of external threats from nonliberal societies, liberal subjects may despair and feel compelled to undertake defensive measures or emergency initiatives that violate liberal norms, relinquishing their identity to the enemy for the sake of survival. Or they may simply be defeated and absorbed into nonliberal cultures. In either case, liberalism has no future because its present is hopelessly insecure. Responsive to these anxieties, Rawls provides arguments to reassure liberal peoples that their wealth and military strength will be sufficient to resist outlaw states and intervene on behalf of others when necessary (89–113). He also defines a “Supreme Emergency Exemption” to the ordinary rules of just war that permits the killing of enemy civilians in cases where liberal defeat would portend “incalculable moral and political evil for civilized life everywhere” and the end of liberalism itself (98–99). Rawls is unclear what threats would meet these criteria other than Nazism, but the logic of his argument for granting liberals permission to slaughter is chilling.

The second aspect (“spiritual emptiness”) is psychological: Liberal subjects may be seduced and allured by nonliberal others and so abandon liberalism willingly. Consistent with his earlier work on false hope, Rawls argues that such a thing is possible as long as human beings continue to hold comprehensive doctrines susceptible to radical evil. That all such evil stems from a single cause, on Rawls’s account, is made clear in his insistence on Nazism’s theological character: “Hitler’s demonic conception of the world was, in some perverse sense, religious,” he claims. “The evils of the Inquisition and the Holocaust are not unrelated” (1999b, 20–22). Why insist on this speculative historical point? For Rawls, there is *something* in the inner constitution of human beings that renders them perpetually vulnerable to otherworldly hopes which liberalism cannot abide. Apostasy and betrayal are ever-present risks for liberal subjects who may become dissatisfied with their way of life. Rawls names this irrepressible attraction to nonliberal doctrines “religion” and its extreme manifestation “demonic.” He sees no

contradiction in this: The religious and the demonic are not contraries for Rawls, as they are in Christian theology, because he has invested liberalism’s hope against hope with its own spiritual significance.

Rawls exorcises the demons of religious and otherworldly false hope in *The Law of Peoples* by theorizing a virtue of liberal hope through which citizens individually and collectively resist the temptation to despair in the face of existential threats to their security, prosperity, and identity. Against these signs of contradiction, Rawlsian hope clings to the potential universality of liberal principles and the stability of liberal societies as ineradicable possibilities. Unlike theodicy, however, hope does not stop there, nor does it regard the demonstration of these possibilities as sufficient to “disprove” temporal evil. More fundamentally, Rawlsian hope commits liberal subjects to live and act as if the goods obtainable by their way of life—not ultimate goods but the primary goods or “all-purpose means” (1999b, 15, 49, 114) for seeking ultimate goods individually—*can be* sufficient for their happiness, no matter the duress of unfavorable circumstances. Rawls still rejects particular and passionate hope for anything more than this arrangement can provide, as well as purportedly virtuous but illusory false hopes that devolve into “baseless utopianism” (78). Liberalism does not guarantee anyone’s “spiritual well-being” but leaves “each citizen to decide for himself or herself” how “spiritual questions” should be pursued (127). Yet if this less-than-everything *must be enough* for liberal subjects, despite their religious constitution telling them it is not, then Rawlsian hope is the virtue of actively *making it enough*. It not only rejects false hope but also *hopes against hope* by investing the immanent meantime with the utmost spiritual significance. It commits citizens to act like liberals even when it seems reasonable not to. And nothing but hope could perform this function. With hope, unlike theodicy, human agency is actively involved in constituting the conditions for its realization. Rawlsian hope affirms that what is possible—if it is possible—cannot remain merely possible forever, as long as someone continues to hope for it (127–28).

Conclusion

While there is much to recommend reading Rawls’s work in terms of theodicy, its applicability to *The Law of Peoples* is limited. There, appeals to reasonable faith are abandoned. The rhetoric of reconciliation persists, but Rawls is now anxious to point out its limits. Finally, there is the bracing and pervasive language of *hope* that, as I claim, is ultimately incompatible with the theodical argument. Hope and theodicy offer divergent solutions to dissimilar problems: Theodicy is stated in the third person, tallying objective sums of good and evil and showing how they might be resolved in history, but hope is a virtue of the first-person subject. Theodicy adopts a view from above, *ex post*, whereas hope remains in the not yet, *ex ante*. Theodicy

deals in rational proofs and necessities, but hope is predicated on doubt and contingency. Theodicies never establish contact with the individual in her concrete temporal situation—only hope can do that. Insofar as Rawls embraced theodicy, his liberalism remained hope-less.

While the transition from *Theory* and *Political Liberalism* to *The Law of Peoples* was abrupt, it is worth noting that Rawls's hopeful turn significantly harmonized his mature views with those espoused in his undergraduate thesis (1942) and an unpublished autobiographical essay "On My Religion" (1997). On the theodicy question, at least, Rawls's thesis offered a broadly traditional analysis, rejecting it on the orthodox grounds that the attempt to pit divine transcendence against the reality of evil is internally incoherent (Rawls 2009, 137–52, 189–92, 218; Gregory 2007, 195–97; Nelson 2019). Fifty years later, in "On My Religion," Rawls claimed to have lost his faith, but he continued to reject theodicy (2009, 263). If the young Rawls dismissed the problem of evil as an improper formulation, an older Rawls came to see the problem as both valid and devastating for classical theism. Yet in neither case did he turn to theodicy (religious or secular) to assuage the anxieties that arise from living in a world of real and persistent evils without certainty of humanity's destiny. Only the Rawls of *Theory* and *Political Liberalism* was enamored with that idea.

Rawls's dalliance with theodicy persuaded him, for a time, that liberalism could do without hope. But as soon as he ceased (for a second time) to see theodicy as viable, hope came charging back. This is mostly a credit to Rawls, not a criticism. Hope was—and is—a problem for liberalism, and Rawls was right to recognize it. *The Law of Peoples* exceeds Rawls's previous work in its perception of the fundamental difficulties at the heart of any liberal political theory. Those features of the text that have most contributed to its reputation for eccentricity and speculative character are precisely those that speak most powerfully to the perennial situation of liberal society in relation to the moral psychology of its subjects and the nonliberal world beyond them. If Rawls's trajectory *from* resignation *to* hope is representative, then it may go some way toward explaining why recourse to hope remains a recurrent, if unarticulated and undertheorized, feature of liberal politics. The explanation is likely to disappoint proponents of both pessimistic (Shklar 1989) and optimistic (Moyn 2023) readings of the liberal tradition. Although liberalism needs to hold otherworldly hopes in check, it also needs to turn this-worldly prosperity into an object of hope in its own right. This hope against hope offers no vision of complete fulfillment and militates against the utopianism of Marxist and Christian traditions alike. Yet what little remains—the things of this world, the goods of liberal society—Rawls invests with almost mystical significance.

If *The Law of Peoples* offers an instructive account of liberalism's need for hope, it also illustrates the challenge of

defending it. The difficulty of elucidating and justifying liberal hope without contradicting the liberal norms that erect a separation between politics and religion may impose an *inarticulacy* about liberal hope on those who hold it, even as they find appeals to hope increasingly necessary in the face of illiberal opposition. If *The Law of Peoples* is any indication, giving grounds for hope in liberal ideals would seem to require the introduction of existential commitments in politics that go beyond what public reason normally allows. Even if this tension could be overcome by delineating states of exception, as Rawls seems to have thought, the paradox internal to the concept of liberal hope—its otherworldly this-worldliness, anti-utopian utopianism, or hope against hope—would remain. This is a virtue that cannot satisfy its own demand for secularity. By charging them with this hope, Rawls places a literally unspeakable burden on liberal subjects. Given that the demonstration of liberal ideals' reasonableness from a nonliberal point of view is exactly what Rawls set out to accomplish in *The Law of Peoples*, this is an ironic result indeed.

Notes

- 1 Some recent discussion and criticism of the so-called standard account can be found in Blöser 2019; Calhoun 2018; Eagleton 2015; Huber 2022; Martin 2013; McGeer 2004; Mittleman 2009; and Pettit 2004.
- 2 Calhoun (2018, 84–89) and Huber (2022, 3–4) follow Pettit (2004) in calling this "substantial" hope. Martin (2013, 14) prefers "hope against hope," a phrase I reserve for another phenomenon peculiar to liberal political theory.
- 3 Eagleton (2015, 62–75) provides an overview. Calhoun (2018, 74–75) distinguishes between "practical" and "basal" hope. Huber (2022, 16) prefers "propositional" to "particular."

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