

## Philosophy in Review



# Daniel A. Dombrowski, "Pre-Liberal Philosophy: Rawls and Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas"

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Volume 44, Number 1, February 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110358ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110358ar>

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### Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

### ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Hreno, T. (2024). Review of [Daniel A. Dombrowski, "Pre-Liberal Philosophy: Rawls and Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas"]. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(1), 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1110358ar>

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**Daniel A. Dombrowski.** *Pre-Liberal Philosophy: Rawls and Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas.* Brill 2022. 177 pp. \$138.00 USD (Hardcover 9789004520240).

In *Pre-Liberal Political Philosophy: Rawls and Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas*, Daniel Dombrowski addresses the dearth of attention paid to John Rawls's historical influences, particularly from pre-modern political philosophers. Despite the extensive secondary literature on Rawls, there has been a tendency, argues Dombrowski, to neglect the historical context of his political philosophy in favor of an ahistorical interpretation of Rawlsian theory. One of Dombrowski's central goals in writing this book, therefore, is to demonstrate how the currently favoured ahistorical analysis of Rawls is misguided and misinformed, by tracing and outlining the influences (both positive and negative) of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and other pre-liberal political philosophers on Rawls' ultimate conclusions regarding his theory of justice. Rawlsian political theory ought not be viewed as founded on the abstract and ahistorical, according to Dombrowski. Rather, considering Rawls's pre-political influences, a more nuanced perspective reveals such Rawlsian concepts as the original position to be productive tools in negotiating the real-world, practical requirements of a just society within the context of a democratic, pluralist society.

Dombrowski's overall objective is to provide a more accurate historical reading of Rawls, shedding light on his relationship with both the history of philosophy in general and the history of political philosophy in particular. His goal, therefore, is not to analyze or deconstruct what Rawls has to say about these pre-modern thinkers, so much as it is to explore how a close study of these philosophers can illuminate aspects of Rawls's thought that he himself may not have explicitly addressed, and have heretofore gone unacknowledged. Overall, *Pre-Liberal Political Philosophy: Rawls and Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas*, is a positive contribution to current Rawlsian study and scholarship and provides a highly nuanced view of Rawls's political philosophy by considering its historical dimensions, contexts, and influences in a way that has heretofore gone unaddressed in the literature.

The book focuses on four pre-liberal philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas Aquinas – who are considered major figures in the history of philosophy and influential in the development of Rawls's mature political philosophy. The chapters are organized chronologically, exploring the relationship between Rawls and each of these thinkers.

In the first chapter, Dombrowski explores Plato's connection with, and influence on Rawls,



emphasizing both the differences and similarities between Plato's *Republic* and Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. The chapter begins with the early Rawls's criticisms of Plato, underscoring his apprehensions about Plato's naturalism and mysticism. The critical focus of this chapter is the examination of the noble lie in Plato's political philosophy, a theme that drew skepticism and critique from Rawls. Dombrowski analyzes and critiques various perspectives on the moral standing of the noble lie by Popper, Crossman, Fite, Emerson, Toynbee, Ferguson, and Rawls, staunchly defending Plato against accusations of totalitarianism. Dombrowski instead posits Plato's use of irony and the potential educational function of the noble lie as the proper lens with which to view this Platonic device. Dombrowski reserves much of his criticism in this chapter for the Straussian interpretation of Plato's noble lie, questioning Strauss's seemingly indifferent stance toward the morally problematic nature of the lie. The chapter ends with Rawls's perspective on Plato's noble lie. Dombrowski here underscores Rawls's emphasis on truthfulness in public reason, contrasting it with Plato's notion of philosopher-kings being truthful among themselves but deceptive to the public. Despite this, Dombrowski emphasizes that a deep resonance exists between Rawls and Plato, stemming from their shared repugnance toward *Realpolitik* and a mutual commitment to just standards of right and wrong in politics. His overall conclusion: the nascent pluralism in Plato's political philosophy paved the way for Rawls's later political liberalism.

In the second chapter Dombrowski focuses on Rawls's relationship with the philosophy of Aristotle. The discussion revolves around Rawls's method of reflective equilibrium, which Dombrowski traces back to Aristotle's dialectic. The chapter highlights the similarities and differences between the two philosophers, including their views on primary goods, *pleonexia*, and the balance between the liberties of the ancients and the moderns. Dombrowski here also explores some practical implications of Rawls's political theory, relying on insights from Dworkin and Wolterstorff. In addressing the latter's claim that Rawls's theory rests on natural rights, for instance, Dombrowski argues for a more nuanced approach, asserting that natural rights play a role within the broader framework of Rawls's theory of justice rather than being its cornerstone. Dombrowski here also discusses how Rawls's endorsement of the Aristotelian Principle adds depth to understanding his vision of a just society. The principle, or a version of it, functions for Rawls as a guiding ideal in crafting a just political order, according to Dombrowski. It is also in this chapter that we find Dombrowski's defense of Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach as a synthesis of the best elements from both Rawls and Aristotle. This approach emphasizes overall well-being, critiques utilitarian measures, and underscores the relevance of justice in quality-of-life

considerations and thus reinforces the deep connection of ideas between Rawls and Aristotle. The chapter concludes by emphasizing that, while there are significant and substantive differences and disagreements between the political views of Rawls and Aristotle, there is, nevertheless ‘much in Rawls that is derived from Aristotle, especially the overall method of reflective equilibrium itself, even if Aristotle and Rawls apply this method in different ways (71).’

The third chapter explores Rawls’s connection with St. Augustine, exploring the dramatic evolution in Rawls’s assessment of Augustine from early in his career to his mature views. The discussion includes an exploration of Augustine’s influence on Rawls’s views on sin, original sin, and issues such as just war theory and abortion. A key theme in Rawls’s evolving views, according to Dombrowski, is his consistent *anti-Pelagian* stance on the issue of sin, evident despite the significant transformation in his overall assessment of Augustine. Dombrowski explores the reasons behind Rawls’s changing views, focusing on Rawls’s critique of Augustine’s assumption about the goal of political philosophy determining the good for humans. Dombrowski also discusses some connections, parallels, and differences between Augustine and Rawls regarding their views on abortion and just war theory. Dombrowski, for instance, argues that Augustine’s moral opposition to abortion is grounded on similar concerns that justify, for Rawls, the role of public reason in political discourse, and, for Rawls, support a woman’s right to abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. They end up in different spots, but they rely on the same map, as it were. Once again, Dombrowski demonstrates through scholarship and argumentation that the current ahistorical, *sui generis* analysis of Rawls’s political philosophy is misguided and incomplete.

The fourth chapter delves into the relationship between Rawls and St. Thomas Aquinas. Despite Rawls’s initial critique of Aquinas’s ‘naturalizing’ of the good, Dombrowski here argues for the compatibility of their views when adapted to the pluralism of contemporary societies. The chapter touches on natural rights, natural duties, deliberative rationality, and the role of love in Rawls’s philosophy. Dombrowski begins by acknowledging Rawls’s admiration for Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* as a magnificent achievement, setting the stage for a nuanced analysis of their philosophical and theological similarities. Rawls’s evolving views on naturalism are also a focal point of this chapter, with Dombrowski contrasting his initial opposition to philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas with his later recognition of the compatibility between his justice-oriented philosophy and Aquinas’s political ideas. The relationship between Aquinas and Rawls on human nature, optimism, and embodiment is also explored in Chapter 4, with particular attention to the impact of Aquinas’s hylomorphism on Rawls’s views. Dombrowski further

connects Rawlsian philosophy to theistic metaphysics, highlighting positive connections between Rawlsian justice and the social goals of religious thinkers like Aquinas. The importance of discernment, rational deliberation, and the duty of civility within political autonomy can be found in both, he argues. The chapter concludes by emphasizing both the similarities and differences between the two philosophers, acknowledging the potential for dialogue and the positive contributions that followers of Aquinas can make to a just society within the framework of political liberalism.

Chapter 5 is devoted to exploring the perceived ahistoricism in the philosophies of Plato, Kant, and Rawls, with an eye to challenging the prevalent notion that these philosophers are overly abstract and detached from the concrete, historical world. The primary focus is on John Rawls, with Dombrowski's aim to situate his philosophy in a deeply historical context. Contrary to the view that Rawls's morality of citizenship is entirely disconnected from historical processes, Dombrowski contends that the historical character of Rawls's philosophy is rooted in processes like moral education and maturation. The emphasis on the social basis for self-respect in Rawls is best seen, he argues, 'as a kind of politics of recognition (144)'. Despite certain transcendental and aprioristic aspects to Rawls's thought, Dombrowski argues that the primary good in Rawls is deeply tied to historical processes. The concept of reflective equilibrium, for instance, which Dombrowski argues is akin to Kant's historical sense, involves a wide-ranging process where the concept of justice aligns with a historical past and future aspirations. Chapter 5 succeeds in its challenge to the claims of ahistoricism in the philosophies of Plato, Kant, and, particularly, Rawls. Dombrowski provides a more nuanced understanding of these theorists, emphasizing their engagement both with the historical world and the significance of historical processes in shaping their philosophical views.

*Pre-Liberal Political Philosophy: Rawls and Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas*, significantly contributes to the scholarship on John Rawls by providing a novel approach and nuanced analysis of his engagement with, and influence from, classical and medieval philosophy. It sheds light on the evolution of Rawls's ideas, offering insights into the intellectual influences that shaped his political philosophy from his earliest writings to his most mature and developed publications. Dombrowski's challenge to the ahistoricism prevalent in many contemporary accounts of Rawls will no doubt prove to be significant to the broader academic discourse on the relationship between historical context and political philosophy. Dombrowski's scholarship in this regard demonstrates the continued relevance of classical and medieval ideas in contemporary political theory. In

summary, Dombrowski provides a comprehensive examination of Rawls's intellectual engagement with classical and medieval philosophy, and contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the intellectual traditions that inform modern theories of justice in general, and Rawls's political philosophy in particular.

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