

## John Rawls on the Idea of Public Reason: an Enquiry into a Philosophical Response to Political Absurdity

Author: Alex Masangu

St. Augustine University of Tanzania,  
P.O. Box 307, Mwanza – Tanzania  
Email: [masanguag@hotmail.com](mailto:masanguag@hotmail.com)

### Abstract

*A striving for a conception of reasonable political organisation presupposes an excellent understanding of the idea of public reason. Yes, such an idea concerns the fact of reasonable pluralism. Because such an idea is founded on political conceptions of justice, in its acquisition, the role of philosophy appears to be indispensable. Indeed, the question of what justice is, belongs distinctively to the realm of philosophical enquiry. This article examined the view that where the rule of political absurdity is ascertainable, a consideration of the idea of public reason proves to be a powerful rational device for identification of philosophical neediness, a necessary condition for acknowledgement of philosophy's irreplaceable role in human development. Structurally, the argumentation begins with an introduction which briefly states the significance of Rawls' account of the idea of public reason in any rigorous effort to enforce philosophy in human society. The introduction is followed by disclosure of Rawls' account of the idea of public of reason. The article concludes that, for a formation of the rational political body, the advocacy of philosophy is plausibly mandatory.*

**Keywords:** *public reason, political absurdity, introduction to philosophy, political philosophy, philosophical education*

### 1. Introduction

Plausibly, any attempt to enforce philosophy in human society should start with the question of addressees' receptiveness to philosophy. Precisely, vigorous advocacy of philosophy must begin with a rational enquiry into necessary conditions for addressees' acceptance of philosophy. That occasions a look at Rawls' account of *the idea of public reason*. With it, he strives to show how best a reasonable pluralism is achievable. This article is an attempt to extend the affirmation that *identification of philosophical neediness* is one of the necessary conditions for addressees' understanding of philosophy's unique role in human advancement, and such identification is at best attainable by disclosure of *the rule of absurdity* (Masangu, 2020). That rests on the conviction that where *the rule of political absurdity* is ascertainable, a consideration of *the idea of public reason* seems to be a powerful rational device for addressees' acknowledgement of the permanent role of philosophy in human life.

Undoubtedly, human development presupposes not merely a political union, but a reasonable political union. Hence, as for political settings of human society, the striving for the best *idea*

*of public reason* expresses an effort to avoid *the rule of political absurdity* or escape from it. For either end, one must admit to the urgency of an ascent of the human mind. To be sure, an excellent idea of *public reason* springs from rigorous thinking, in which philosophy plays a unique role.

Structurally, this introduction is followed by the exposition of Rawls' account of the idea of public reason. Four main issues constitute the exposition of *Rawls on the idea of public reason*: Threefold introductory remarks, the details Rawlsian account of *the idea of public reason*, closing remarks, and an emphasis on philosophy's role in the rational conception of social justice. The last section is the conclusion, according to which the role of philosophy in any serious concern for the fact of reasonable pluralism is irreplaceable.

## 2. John Rawls on the idea of public reason

### 2.1 Introductory remarks

#### 2.1.1 Concerning Mlingano Philosophical Advocacy Programme (MPAA)

Concerning the importance of philosophy, as a field of teaching and research, in the advancement of human lives, Makumba (2005, p. 14-15) asserts the following: "The relevance of philosophy is not always obvious to everyone. The role of philosophy in the development of human civilisation in general and for the realisation of the human individual in particular has on many occasions been questioned, ridiculed and sometimes even met with outright rejection altogether." Those statements suggest that a rigorous philosophical enterprise must always start with an enquiry into the problem of addressees' receptiveness to the philosophical mode of thinking. Corresponding to Makumba's view, the American philosopher, Nicholas Rescher (2007, p. vii), writes, among other things, the following: "Metaphilosophy is philosophy's poor and neglected cousin. Philosophers are on the whole too busy doing philosophy to take time to stand back and consider reflectively how the project itself actually works. And they tend to produce texts without too much consideration of how this looks from the standpoint of the consumer."

*Mlingano Philosophical Advocacy Attempts* (MPAA) is a research programme which deals with the problem of addressees' receptiveness to philosophy. Two reflection aspects constitute MPAA's studies: *Construction of foundational introductions to philosophy* and *Construction of human philosophy*. The two aspects are a reaction to two reasons responsible for the obscurity of understanding the role of philosophy in human self-realisation, namely, the misconception of inner nature of philosophy for which philosophy itself is blameless, and the philosophy's self-alienation through its stubborn refusal to speak to real people's lives (Makumba, 2005). While a foundational introduction reacts to the misconception, a human philosophy answers philosophy's self-alienation.

With a particular focus on Tanzanian intellectual context, MPAA seeks to uncover necessary conditions for addressees' rational acknowledgement of the irreplaceable role of philosophy in human development. In that regard, MPAA's inaugural study, which investigates into elements of a foundational introduction to philosophy, holds an *identification of philosophical neediness* as one of the necessary conditions. According to that study, such identification is at best attainable by disclosure of *the rule of absurdity* (Masangu, 2020).

### 2.1.2 *The story of post-truth politics restated*

MPAA's opening study uncovers, as a self-display of the rule of absurdity in Tanzanian intellectual context, amongst others, people's distrust of politics. *The story of post-truth politics* is the title given to the section which uncovers the named distrust. It is the story about people's everyday conception of the content of the term politics in Tanzania (Masangu, 2020).

Viewed from everyday people's understanding in Tanzania, the term *politics*, which should mean a desirable knowledge-centred public orientation, communicates mainly a public betrayal of truth, and as a result, a setback of public welfare. So, today in 2020 AD, the Swahili (the national language of Tanzania) phrase '*Ni siasa!*' (Translation: It is politics!) "expresses meaninglessness as viewed from something significant to the community" (Masangu, 2020, p. 95). The phrase also refers to public triviality. Indeed, people's day-to-day interactions in Tanzania accommodate a strong negative understanding of politics. Admittedly, the expression '*siasa ni mchezo mchafu*' (Translation: Politics is a dirty game) is integral to people's everyday understanding of the term politics.

Moreover, the Swahili term '*mwana-siasa*' (Translation: a politician) is frequently employed to refer, for instance, to a public hypocrite, a public liar; a person who says what he or she does not mean or intend. In short, in day-to-day people's interactions in Tanzania, the designations *political*, *politics* and *politician* are heavily loaded with negative connotations (Masangu, 2020). That is a story of post-truth or post-facts politics; an expression of the distrust of political bonds, and an account of a human social situation in which political arrangements seem to be disconnected from principled rational guides to actions. That is indeed an account of *the rule of political absurdity*.

To be sure, *the rule of political absurdity* in Tanzanian human societies has existential consequences, including political frustration, disorientation, disinterestedness, tiredness, and remoteness, to mention but a few (Masangu, 2020). Those are different names of manifestations of *a political stagnation* which is undoubtedly a threat to the political well-being of the nation. Nyerere (1966, p. 120) says: "A society like everything else must either move or stagnate – and in stagnation lies death." But what would a *political death* mean to a self-conscious nation? In truth, a political stagnation implies a stagnation of human development, and so, a political death would mean the destruction of human civilisation. In that regard, it must be said that the fact of *political vitality* corresponds to the fact of reasonable pluralism.

### 2.1.3 *Justice as the basis*

Among many possibilities of social-political organisation, a thinking person would undoubtedly wish, love and choose, above all, to live in *a just society*. Yes, "justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought" (Rawls, 1971, p.3). Hence, "a theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust" (Rawls, 1971, p. 3). Those assertions seem to reasonably affirm that, the

rational conception of justice is an excellent basis for the establishment of the best idea of public reason. That fact is adequately attestable in the intellectual efforts of the US American moral and political philosopher John Rawls. Rawls, best known for his intellectual defence of egalitarian liberalism in his famous work *A Theory of Justice* (1971), discloses the idea of public reason which is wholly founded on the political conception of justice.

In his *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls presents namely “a theory of justice that works out a reasonable and practical political philosophical conception for just constitutional democratic society” (Lehning, 2009, p. 16). Centrally, Rawls conceives *justice as fairness*. For him, “the most just basic structure for a society is the one you would choose if you did not know what your particular role in that society’s system of cooperation was going to be” (Lovett, 2011, p.19). That expresses what Rawls refers to as *the original position argument*. That is about an envision of *the initial background* against which persons will reasonably and freely choose such and such conceived social-political arrangements (Rawls, 1971). It deserves note that, the designations *the basic structure of society* and *system of cooperation* are two essential conceptual building blocks of the Rawlsian conception of *justice as fairness*. The former refers to how “the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls, 1971, p. 7). For Rawls, the major social institutions are “the political constitution and the principal economic and social arrangements” (Rawls, 1971, p. 7). Rawls holds the basic structure of society as *the primary subject of justice* (Rawls, 1971). Also, as a further conceptual building block of *justice as fairness*, Rawls conceives society as a system of cooperation; a cooperative venture for mutual advantage (Rawls, 1971).

In Rawls’ view, the *conflict of interests* is inherent to a human system of cooperation. Therefore, to settle or to avoid social difficulties arising from such conflict, principles of social justice are required. So, he uncovers two principles. The first principle states that: “Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others” (Rawls, 1999b, p. 58). The second principle of justice states that: “Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone’s advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all” (Rawls, 1971, p. 60).

Regarding the merits of Rawlsian conception of *justice as fairness*, one can listen, for example, to the following striking remarks: “John Rawls is the most significant and influential political and moral philosopher of the twentieth century. His work has profoundly shaped contemporary discussions of social, political, and economic justice in philosophy, law, political science, economics and other social disciplines” (Freeman, 2008, p. i).

Later, in his other major work *Political Liberalism* (1993), Rawls essentially updated ideas of his theory of justice. In *A Theory of Justice*, he holds a *well-ordered society* as being stable and somewhat homogenous in its fundamental moral convictions and in the understanding of what the good life is. On the contrary, in *Political Liberalism*, he sees the coexistence of a plurality of incompatible and irreconcilable doctrines within the framework of democratic institutions as being the defining feature or permanent condition of modern democratic society. A rising question for Rawls is how stable, and just society of free and equal citizens can live in harmony when divided by reasonable but incompatible doctrines? Accordingly, he employs *overlapping consensus* as a device for answering that question.

Admittedly, *Political Liberalism* is a vital addition to the high esteem of Rawls' conception of justice. Concerning its reception, the following example review remarks are worth listening: "Rawls's great achievement in international thought was to restore the notion of justice to its proper place at the center of arguments about politics, the place that it had occupied at the very beginning of theorizing in Plato's Republic. Justice is a necessary virtue of individuals both in their day-to-day conduct and in their personal relations, and it is the principal virtue of institutions and the social order" (Hampshire, 1993, August 12).

On such a highly valued conception of social justice, Rawls founds his conception of the idea of public reason. In truth, with such greatly esteemed basis, Rawls' idea of public reason plausibly appears to be an excellent companion to a striving for the best idea of the public reason within varied social-political contexts across the globe. It is in *Political Liberalism* (1993) that Rawls first developed his idea of public reason. In 1997 he released an updated version as an essay titled *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*. Thus, this article follows the updated version.

For Rawls (1999a, p. 573), the public reason is "the fact of reasonable pluralism." The political organisation is a constant encounter of differing worldviews resulting from varying citizens' religious, social, educational and economic backgrounds, to name but a few. Those differences are indeed a foreseeable blockage of agreement or an approach of mutual understanding among the citizens. Because of that, citizens concerned "need to consider what kinds of reasons they may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake" (Rawls, 1999a, p. 574). To adequately accomplish that, citizens indisputably need explicit knowledge of what the idea of public reason entails.

## **2.2 Details of Rawls' account of the idea of public reason**

Four issues constitute the disclosure: The aspects of the idea of public reason, the public character of the idea, public reasoning, and ideal of public reason.

### **2.2.1 The aspects of the idea of public reason**

Rawls conceives the idea of public reason as concerning how the political relation is to be understood. For him (1999a), such idea stipulates at the deepest level the fundamental moral and political values that should determine the relation of a constitutional democratic government to its citizens and their relation to one another.

Rawls puts forward five aspects which constitute the idea of public reason. The fundamental political questions to which the idea applies form the first aspect. For him (1999a), *the subject of public reason* is explicitly the essential political questions; the questions about fundamental political justice. The second aspect is the persons to whom such idea applies, namely, governmental officials and candidates for public office. According to Rawls (1999a), the idea of public reason does not apply to all political discussions of fundamental questions; it is limited to what he refers to as public political forum. He divides the forum into three parts: the discourse of judges in their decisions; the discourse of governmental officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and lastly, the discourse of candidates for public office and

their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements. Distinct and separate from the public forum is what he calls the background culture or the culture of civil society. For Rawls, therefore, the idea of public reason does not apply to background culture (Rawls, 1999a).

The third aspect of the idea of public reason is its content as given by a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice. For Rawls (1999a), *the content* of public reason is given a family of political conceptions, not by a single one. In his terms, there are many liberalisms and related views, and therefore many forms of public reason specified by a family of reasonable political conceptions. Of these, *justice as fairness*, whatever its qualities, is but one (Rawls, 1999a). Consequently, for Rawls (1999a, p. 581), “a citizen engages in public reason when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens, might also reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse.”

Accordingly, for John Rawls (1999a), the idea of public reason springs from a conception of democratic citizenship in a constitutional democracy. This fundamental political relation has, according to him, two features. The first feature is a relation of citizens within the basic structure of society. The second feature of democratic citizenship in a constitutional democracy is “the relation of free and equal citizens who exercise ultimate political power as a collective body” (Rawls, 1999a, p. 577). In Rawls’ view (1999a), those two features immediately lead to the question of how, when constitutional essentials and matters of fundamental justice are at stake, citizens related in that manner, can be bound to honour the structure of their constitutional democratic regime and abide by the statutes and laws enacted under it. For Rawls (1999a, pp. 577-578), “the fact of reasonable pluralism raises this question all the more sharply since it means that the differences between citizens arising from their comprehensive doctrines, religious and nonreligious, may be irreconcilable.”

Moreover, Rawls (1999a, p. 578) asserts that, “citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice; and when they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that the other citizens also accept those terms” The guiding norm here is what Rawls refers to as *the criterion of reciprocity* according to which citizens must reasonably suppose that all citizens can reasonably agree to the enforcement of a particular set of basic laws. For Rawls, the criterion of reciprocity requires that when the terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also believe that others will accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not, for example, due dominated or manipulation (Rawls, 1999a). Of course, Rawls (1999a) admits to difficulties inherent in the citizens’ striving for a common position. For him, citizens will indeed differ as to which conceptions of political justice they consider the most reasonable. Still, they will have the same opinion that all are reasonable, even if barely so.

The fourth aspect of the idea of public reason is the application of those *reasonable political conceptions* in the discussion of coercive norms to be enacted in the form of legitimate law for a democratic people (Rawls, 1999a). For Rawls (1999a), on the matter of fundamental justice, the legal enactment is legitimate law, if that enactment expresses the opinion of the

majority of proper government officials adhering to public reason, and of all reasonable citizens who consider themselves ideally as if they were legislators following public reason.

The fifth aspect of public reason is citizens' checking that the principles derived from their conception of justice satisfy the criterion of reciprocity (Rawls, 1999a). Once more, according to *the criterion of reciprocity*, citizens must reasonably suppose that all citizens can reasonably agree to the enforcement of a particular set of basic laws. For Rawls, the criterion of reciprocity underlies the idea of political legitimacy which says their exercise of political power is proper only when they sincerely suppose that the reasons they would offer for their political actions – were they to state them as government officials – are sufficient, and they also reasonably believe that other citizens might also reasonably agree to those reasons (Rawls, 1999a).

### 2.2.2 *The public character of such reason*

Rawls unveils three ways which define the public feature of such reason. Firstly, as free and equal citizens accept the reason, it is the reason of the public. Secondly, its focus is the public good concerning questions of fundamental justice. Those questions are, in Rawls' view, of two kinds, that is, about constitutional fundamentals and matters basic justice. Thirdly, such reason is public since its nature and content are public. That is, it is being expressed in public reasoning by a family of reasonable conceptions of political justice reasonably believed to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity (Rawls, 1999a).

### 2.2.3 *About public reasoning*

Public reasoning refers to rational engagement with the fact of reasonable pluralism. According to Rawls (1999a), the objective of public reasoning is public justification. Public reasoning expresses citizens' appealing to political conceptions of justice – to their ideals and principles, standards and values –, and to ascertainable evidence and facts open to public view to reach conclusions about what citizens think are most reasonable political institutions and policies. For him (1999a), public reasoning is not merely valid reasoning, but argument addressed to fellow citizens. It proceeds correctly from premises citizens accept and suppose fellow citizens could reasonably agree to conclusions they think other citizens could also reasonably accept.

In Rawls' view (1999a), then, a characteristic of public reasoning is that it proceeds entirely within ideals and principles, standards and values of political conceptions. For him, examples of political values include those disclosed in the preamble to the Constitution of the United States: a perfect union, justice, domestic tranquillity, the common defence, the general welfare, and the blessings of liberty for our posterity and us. Additionally, he asserts that those values include under them other values, namely, for example, under justice equal liberties, equality of opportunity, ideals concerning the distribution of income and taxation and much more. Furthermore, according to him, the political values of public reason differ from other values in that they are realized in and characterise political institutions. Of course, Rawls is aware that other analogous values can characterise other social forms. Hence, for

him, value is strictly political only when the social form is itself political; that is, when it is realized, say, in parts of the basic structure and its political and social institutions.

For Rawls (1999a), three features define political conceptions. First, their principles apply to the basic structure of society. Second, they can be presented independently from comprehensive doctrines of any kind. Of course, he admits that the comprehensive doctrines can support political conceptions through a reasonable *overlapping consensus* of such doctrines. The third feature of political conceptions is that they can be derived from fundamental ideas seen as embedded in the public political culture of a constitutional regime, for example, the conception of citizens as free and equal persons, and society as a fair system of cooperation.

Among many ideas of democracy, Rawls (1999a) considers a well-ordered constitutional democracy, also known as deliberative democracy, as a notable manifestation of *public reasoning at work*. For him (1999a), in the deliberative democracy, citizens believe that a discussion with fellow citizens may revise their political opinions. Hence, those opinions are not an unchanging result of their existing private or non-political interest. He sees that as the point where public reason is crucial, for it characterizes such citizens' reasoning concerning constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice.

#### 2.2.4 *The ideal of public reason*

The fact of reasonable pluralism should eventually be the fact of sensible active political leadership. Distinct from the idea of public reason, as defined by the five aspects above, is what Rawls refers to as *ideal* of public reason. According to Rawls (1999a, p. 576), the ideal of public reason "is realized, or satisfied, whenever judges, legislators, chief executives, and other government officials, as well as candidates for public office, act from and follow the idea of public reason and explain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable." In that way, they fulfil what Rawls (1999a) calls their duty of civility to another and other citizens. In his view, whether there is an ideal of public reason or not is continually ascertainable in the everyday's speech and conduct of the government officials.

Furthermore, Rawls enquires into the question of whether citizens who are not government official can realize the ideal of public reason. For him (1999a, p. 577) "to answer this question, we say that ideally, citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact." That applies especially to a representative government where citizens vote for a particular representative – chief executives, legislators and the like – and generally not for particular laws (Rawls, 1999a). Rawls (1999a, p. 577) emphasizes that "the disposition of citizens to view themselves as ideal legislators, and to repudiate government officials and candidates for public office who violate public reason, is one of the political and social roots of democracy, and is vital to its enduring strength and vigor." In that regard, "the citizens fulfill their duty of civility and support the idea of public reason by doing what they can to hold government officials to it" (Rawls, 1999a, p. 577). For Rawls (1999a), the duty of civility, like other political rights and duties, is an inherently moral obligation. For him, the moral status of the duty of civility must be emphasized, since to regard it as legal duty will be incompatible with freedom of speech.



### ***2.3 Closing remarks on Rawls' conception of the idea of public reason***

Given the broad details of Rawls' account of the idea of public reason, an extensive presentation of it will surely go beyond the scope of this article. Hence, a limitation to some points was inescapable. Nevertheless, I believe that the given exposition underscores satisfactorily what an excellent idea of public reason is. I further suppose that the explanations provided for choosing Rawls' conception of the idea public reason as the best companion to a striving for a reasonable conception of such idea are sensibly acceptable. Once more, Rawls founds his idea of public reason on a highly esteemed theory of justice.

Undoubtedly, the doctrines underlying basic structure of societies across the globe are manifold. Still, all converge in the fact of the urgency of a useful idea of public reason. That urgency arises sharply, in Rawls' view (1999a), when it is about a striving for a reasonable conception of democratic citizenship in a constitutional democracy. But more generally, such urgency arises vigorously where *the rule of political absurdity* is ascertainable.

From the presented Rawls' account of the idea of public reason, it should be apparent that any rational concern with the idea of public reason, must quickly lead to the question about its foundation: the reasonable political conceptions of justice. To emphasize, authentic engagement with the idea of public reason presupposes the availability of not merely political, but *rational* political conceptions of justice. But how are they achievable? It is precisely about this question that philosophical thinking is crucial.

### ***2.4 Philosophy and the reasonableness of political conceptions of justice***

Expressing his deep dissatisfaction about the situation of the political regimes of his times, one of the philosophers of all times, Plato, declares: “*At last I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed and the condition of their laws practically incurable, without some miraculous remedy and the assistance of fortune; and I was forced to say, in praise of true philosophy, that from her height alone was it possible to discern what the nature of justice is, either in the state or in the individual, and that the ills of the human race would never end until either those who are sincerely and truly lovers of wisdom come into political power, or that rulers of our cities, by grace of God, learn true philosophy*” (Plato, Letter VII, 326a-326b).

Accordingly, it is remarked: “In 399 when a democratic court voted by a large majority of its five hundred and one jurors for Socrates' execution on an unjust charge of impiety, Plato concluded that all existing governments were bad and almost beyond redemption” (Korab-Karpowicz, 2019, August 14). In Plato's view above, a non-philosophical or anti-philosophical striving for a reasonable conception of justice is illusory, or precisely, it is absurd. For him, the conception of the nature of justice must grow, without exception, out of philosophical thinking. In that regard, the question worth answering is: What is that without which it is impossible to discern what nature of justice is? That question seeks principally to know a foundational meaning of philosophical thinking or philosophising. That is at best achievable by enquiring into defining features of philosophical thinking.

Rescher (2012, p. 2) asks: “What is it that makes someone who thinks, talks, and writes about matters of human interests a philosopher? And what is it that defines a body of discourse as philosophical?” According to Rescher, four features define philosophical thinking. The first thing which characterises philosophical thinking is the thematic engagement with what Rescher refers to as *the big questions or issues*. For him (2012, p. 2), “it is one thing to *deliberate* about human affairs, and something different and rather distinctive to *philosophize* about them. The political theorists, the economist, and the theologian all discuss matters of importance for what we humans think and do. But their deliberations do not thereby belong to philosophy as such.” A philosophical deliberation must “be reliable to resolving those big questions of man’s place in the world’s scheme of things – matters which – like the nature and requisite of truth, knowledge, beauty, goodness, justice etc. – are of fundamental concern for intelligent beings who live in social interaction” (Rescher, 2012, p. 2).

Of course, for Rescher, philosophical discussions should not always deal with those *big issues* directly or explicitly. What is required, however, is *means-ends connectivity*. That is, a philosophical discussion must deal with issues whose resolution facilitates answers to questions which deal with problems whose answer facilitates etc. until at least one reaches issues that deal explicitly and immediately with those big questions themselves. In Rescher’s view (2012), many times a philosophical discussion does not appear to be such, but it has this status only obliquely and non-explicitly. It is not directed at those *big issues* directly but only via a chain of means and filiation. For what it fulfils is to deal with a question whose answer is needed in its turn to resolve as a still further question, till finally a linkage to those big questions is achieved.

It deserves note that philosophy’s commitment to big questions meets its unique role in the rational explanation of human realities. That uniqueness is best attestable, for example, by contrasting it with empirical sciences (*natural sciences*: e.g. physics, chemistry, biology, theoretical medicine, astronomy; *humanities*: e.g. history, religion, language and arts; *social sciences*: e.g. economics, political science, sociology, human geography). So, while empirical sciences answer questions like how quickly do bodies fall? At what temperature does copper melt? Philosophy answers questions like: What is a moral good? What is a human being? What is justice? The empirical sciences seek to explain empirical reality by empirical reality. On the contrary, philosophy seeks to uncover the ultimate conditions, causes and presupposition of the empirical reality. Those conditions, causes and presuppositions, which philosophical thinking seeks to disclose, are non-empirical because something empirical cannot explain something empirical ultimately. As a result, philosophy is referred to as fundamental science (Masangu, 2020).

Besides engagement with *big questions*, the other three defining features are its commitment to rational evidence, the normative concern, and the engagement with the tradition of philosophical thinking. It deserves note that, whereas *the engagement with big issues* is a subject-based feature, the other three are about *modus operandi* of philosophical thinking. Concerning the rational evidence, Rescher (2012, p. 2) asserts that “rational deliberation is crucial to philosophizing: merely giving opinions or proclaiming individual or alternative preferences or condemnations will not qualify as philosophical. The provision of supporting considerations for one’s judgements is crucial to the enterprise.” On normative concern, Rescher (2012, p. 3) says: “*Philosophy, properly coordinated, deals not with what people*

have said in the past or maintain in the present. Its concern, rather, is with what people should think and maintain with regard to these issues. The key concern of the enterprise is with cogent answers to the questions and good reasons for proposing them. [...] The philosopher must provide rationale for his claims – a manifold of good reasons why anyone, anywhere should accept them. The methodology of philosophy is the impersonal reason.” Regarding that, one must admit to the necessity of the universality of reasons. For Rescher (2012, p. 3), “philosophy cannot be grounded on individualized predilections or personal preferences. Only what can and should be seen to make sense for anyone in the circumstances will carry philosophical weight.” That explains why the scope of philosophical thinking is strictly unaided human reason; a feature which distinguishes, for example, philosophy from theology. Indeed, both theology and philosophy seek to answer big questions by the use of human reason. But while the theological reflection proceeds strictly within the context of divine revelation, the scope of the philosophical thinking is unaided human reason. That is the essential dissimilarity between philosophy and theology (Masangu, 2020).

According to Rescher (2012, p. 3), a good follow-up question is: “Why is it that philosophy pivots on reasoned inquiry?” He (2012, p. 3) says: “*The answer is that we are Homo sapiens, a rational animal. We do not want just answers to our questions, but answers that can satisfy the demands of our intelligence – answers that we can in good conscience regard as appropriate, as tenable and defensible. We are not content with answers people would like to have (psychologism) nor with answers that are theoretically available (possibility mongering). What we want is cogent guidance regarding which answers to adopt – which contentions are correct or at any rate plausible. And reason affords our prime standard in this regard.*”

The fourth key feature of philosophical thinking is engagement with the tradition of philosophical deliberations. Rescher (2012) reports that, for one to qualify as lying with the field of philosophical enquiries, one’s discussions must have some enmeshment within the wider discussion-setting of the field. In Anzenbacher’s view (2002), one learns to philosophise in dialogue with earlier philosophers. In truth, what Anzenbacher and Rescher take here is one of the different views regarding the question of the linkage between philosophy and its history. Note that some see no difference between philosophy and its history. And others overemphasize the actual conditions of the field (Rescher, 2012). So, for Anzenbacher and Rescher, “the history of philosophy is hermeneutically crucial for philosophizing. It is an indispensably useful resource for philosophical work” (Rescher, 2012, p. 4). In meeting normative concern, that is, “for determining what position one *should* take on a philosophical issue requires knowing what positions one *can* take and history of philosophy is an immensely useful resource here a treasure house of ideas and possibilities” (Rescher, 2012, p. 4).

### 3. Conclusion

Addressees’ rational acknowledgement of the irreplaceable role of philosophy in human development is the first requirement for rigorous advocacy of philosophy. Thinking about how that can be achieved is thinking about the necessary conditions. Accordingly, from the exposition above the significant role of Rawls’ account of the idea of public reason in reaffirming one the necessary conditions for addressees’ receptiveness should be evident,

namely in reaffirming the *addressees' acknowledgement of their philosophical neediness*. In truth, Rawls' conception of *the idea of public reason* is an adequate 'tester' of rational conditions (reasonableness and absurdity) of political settings within a society. It is further a useful device for an establishment of reasonable pluralism. To be sure, an ascertainment of political absurdity is for a thinking person strong evidence of neediness of reasonable consideration of political issues.

Central to the Rawlsian conception of the idea of public reason is that such an idea is essentially founded on the political conceptions of justice. Therefore, the nature of political conceptions of justice determines the rational status of a particular political body. Hence, striving for a useful idea of public reason requires a well-thought idea of social justice. It is at this point that the unique role of philosophy should be acknowledged. Once more, the question of what justice is, belongs distinctively to the realm of philosophical thinking. Admittedly, the exposition of Rawls' account of the idea of public reason is a noteworthy declaration that an earnest striving for reasonable political arrangement, the advocacy of philosophical mode of enquiry, for example through a well-planned philosophical education, is plausibly mandatory.

## References

- Anzenbacher, A. (2002). Einführung in die philosophie. Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany: Herder Verlag.
- Copper, J.M & Hutchinson, D.S. (Eds.). Plato: Complete Works. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Freeman, S.R. (Ed.). (2008). The Cambridge Companion to Rawls. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Hampshire, S. (1993). "Liberalism: The New Twist." New York Review of Book, August 12.
- Lehning, P.B. (2009). John Rawls: An Introduction. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Lovett, F. (2011). Rawls's A Theory of Justice: A reader's guide. London, England: Continuum Press.
- Makumba, M.M. (2005). Introduction to Philosophy. Limuru, Kenya: Kolbe Press.
- Masangu, A. (2020). Constructing a foundational introduction to philosophy: an investigation into the elements. Berlin, Germany: Scholars' Press.
- Nyerere, JK (1966). Freedom and Unity / Uhuru na Umoja: A Selection from Writings and Speeches, 1952-1965. Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania: Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1973). A Theory of Justice. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice* (Revised version). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *Collected papers*. Edited by Samuel Freeman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rescher, N. (2007). *Interpreting Philosophy: The Elements of Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, Inc.
- Rescher, N. (2012). *On the Nature of Philosophy and Other Philosophical Essays*. Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, Inc.
- Korab-Karpowicz, W.J. (2019, August 14). *Plato: Political Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/platopol/>