

A Response to Eunsook Hong

Scott Johnston

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Eunsook Hong's thesis is that there is an "opposite spillover" problem in Korea. As she puts it, Koreans "have an opposite problem of 'personal connectionism,' a way of action to follow the nonpublic norms based on personal relationships in the public domain." This, says Hong, "reveals the neglected factor in [Tomasi's] analysis. Tomasi's analysis of the spillover of public norms to nonpublic domains is not context-free. His analysis assumes certain background cultures of a society: it assumes a society where liberal norms and the ideal of individualism are rooted as a way of life." Hong concludes that Tomasi's conception of civic education "could not be directly applied to Korea," though the basic framework of Tomasi's, that is, his construal of the spillover problem, at least as it is found in Western liberal nations, seems acceptable to her. I agree with Hong when she says that "spillover," serves as a useful metaphor to describe the phenomenon of the values of public or private domain carrying over into the other. Tomasi's thesis, on the other hand, troubles me. This is so for two reasons. First of all, I think that Tomasi gets it exactly backwards when it comes to where the spillover takes place. Second, I think (along with Hong) that Tomasi is confused about what counts as "ethical background culture." Since these two complaints run together, I shall address them as such.

It strikes me as odd that Tomasi would concern himself with the spillage of public, procedural, values, and norms over and into, the nonpublic realm. For it is just the opposite case that Rawls is concerned about; to wit, the spillage of nonpublic values into political liberalism's deliberative and procedural means used to make decisions about social institutions. For Rawls, this spillage is tantamount to a sabotage of the very mechanisms that keep social institutions from privileging any one conception of the good, the (non-neutral) procedural means notwithstanding. The consequence here is, of course, that this one conception of the good hostile to other conceptions of the good has the opportunity to lay claims against these, with dire consequences for other's opportunities to practice their conceptions of the good. This seems not to concern or interest Tomasi, though. He seems much more inclined to worry about the rather thin, procedural means of justice (think of Rawls's "original position") as foisting its norms and values on the very "thick," private conceptions of the good that these procedural means are designed to protect.

Part of this may have to do with what Tomasi considers "ethical background culture." Tomasi thinks that political liberalism has a thicker sense about it than Rawls might want to claim, and that this thicker sense includes norms that spill over into peoples' nonpublic lives.¹ What counts as political liberalism, here? From Tomasi, Hong notes "accepting the principles of political liberalism, appreciating the concept of the person as a free and equal person with respect to rights, and accepting the corresponding concept of society." So what is "thick" about political liberalism is the baggage that goes along with choosing to act as a political liberal. While I think that this is largely correct, nevertheless, I think it uninteresting. For

what Tomasi is ultimately telling us is that “background ethical culture” consists, for political liberals of the Rawlsian persuasion, of a sense of fair-mindedness with respect to the rights of others. To suggest that this then encroaches on the nonpublic domain to me seems tantamount to concluding that, not only is a vast segment of the public not fair-minded when it comes to the rights of others (which is, in any event a debatable claim), but that the liberal regime cannot accommodate these publics that are inimical to such a view. Not only does this assume that a small amount of spillover entails widespread and grave corruption of others’ ethical goods, but that somehow liberals and liberalism shouldn’t be so fair-minded.

I doubt that civic education must diminish the spillover problem as Tomasi suggests, at least in the direction that he thinks the spill flows: If anything, the opposite spillover problem, the one of comprehensive private conceptions of the good spilling over into the procedural means of political liberalism, needs to be further stemmed.² I agree with Tomasi where he says that we need to teach non-public norms to our students so that he or she may “play her socially constructive role in making her society flourish as the type of society it is.”³ But I am not sanguine about the prospect of this occurring if political liberalism worries excessively about whether its norms are somehow flooding the dam of the nonpublic realm when it is this very dam that is choking off the water supply to those who are least fortunate in our society—those that have had a long history of marginalization and disenfranchisement. It seems to me, for example, that liberal social institutions need not place undue restrictions on teaching about nonpublic goods—provided it is done in such a way that the goods of others who do not share those goods being taught are not somehow marginalized in the process: so, for example, Hong says, “communitarian we-feeling and racial spirit could be used pedagogically as a platform for justifying and teaching the principles of justice.” Indeed, I can’t see how this could be done otherwise. But Hong’s point about Rawlsian political liberalism denying the teaching of religion if religion is construed, for example, to mean the history, doctrines, dogmas, and theology of religions, is simply mistaken. True enough, this is the case in most school districts in the nation: but there is nothing in Rawls to suggest that this is proper procedure and nowhere to the best of my knowledge does Rawls suggest that this cannot be done.

I’ll say a few words, mostly in ignorance I’m afraid, about Western Liberalism and Korea in closing. Neither Rawls’s, nor Tomasi’s, nor for that matter Habermas’s, Sandel’s, or Walzer’s, nor anyone else’s theory, seems to, as Hong correctly says, “apply directly to Korean civic education.” Hong seems right to suggest that, if we want these theories to work outside of the cultures that they were constructed in and for, much ‘adaptation’ will have to take place. Hong suggests that the spillover problem, as a means of noting that the public/private split is ever so tenuous, is a useful metaphor and I concur. And with Hong’s suggestion that children be taught in a public language that allows them “the right of exit or the right to equal treatment,” I am in full agreement. But I’m not sure about Hong’s advocacy of the tasks presented to overcome this, though. She notes that bilingualism or multilingualism is one possible answer. I agree that teaching different languages helps to lead children to value the comprehensive notions of others’ goods, in Rawls’s terms.

But I also have heard from my Korean colleagues that there is much criticism and confusion in Korea right now over the teaching of English. I have even heard that parents are going to such drastic (and fashionable) lengths as having their children's tongues surgically altered to make English less difficult to pronounce. Add to this the ever-present skepticism about the homogenization of (Korean) culture by global interests with less than savory prospects for its economy and people, and I begin to get concerned that more, much more, deliberation needs to be done before any one recommendation can be put forth — the kind that can only be done properly in the public realm.

1. John Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 112. Hong is right to note that Rawls nevertheless thinks that a fair-minded or “just” person has about her a substantive ethical framework. But this is not the same as saying that all of what goes in to making that person just or fair, needs to be on the table, so to speak. Rawls, for example, is a Kantian. But he does not think that political liberalism ought to operate on Kantian law-like principles, such as the Formula of Universal Law, the Formula of Humanity, and so on. That is, even though Rawls's Kantianism is part of his ethical make-up, and has surely influenced his liberalism, he does not and cannot expect that others will also follow suit. Of course, Rawls recognizes this to some extent, and this was part of the reason for writing *Political Liberalism*: Rawls was concerned that his concept of justice as fairness was too comprehensive as it stood, and would not be stable in the face of a markedly pluralistic society. So the conception of “overlapping consensus”; a consensus of what all members of society, regardless of their comprehensive notions of the good, would accept, became in part, the basis for justice as fairness as political, as opposed to metaphysical.

2. I think of lobbyists and other private interests intent on making nation-wide policy, in the case of the United States.

3. Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice*, 86.