Practical Rationality in Political Contexts
Facing Diversity in Contemporary Multicultural Europe

edited by

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Politics and the Relevance of Cultures

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1. Introduction

Most countries have invested – and are still investing – a huge amount in sustaining the study of cultures and heritages, as a means of building towards their futures. The presupposition is that cultures and heritages matter for our choices. In this essay, I would like to consider and address some objections against this presupposition, which might emerge in the face of recent developments that are changing the shape of our societies. Globalization processes seem to have accelerated in the past few years, and we inevitably live in societies which are much more diverse than we could have expected only few years ago. Does it still make sense to try to know and understand traditional cultures, when we have to cope with everyday problems where the challenge is to build a future together, not to worry about the past? Wouldn't it make more sense to find technical solutions to the practical problems opened by the need to live together, than trying to understand each other? For example, should we not struggle to find the best possible procedures to deal with practical problems, rather than spending time investigating our different heritages?

I will try to show that there are reasons to keep worrying about cultural heritages and to try to understand and compare different cultures. Such endeavours,

I will claim, are not just exercises for academic life, but guide the actual, practical processes of development that our multicultural societies need to go through. In the next section, I will consider a common conception of politics, i.e. the social contract tradition, which seems to tell against the stance I want to defend. I will argue that this conception of politics opens up several problems concerning practical reason. In the third section, I will discuss the nature of practical reason and argue that it has some universalistic features, but also some features which link it to particular cultures. In the fourth section, I will show how the account of practical reason I have proposed can be used to argue that the study of cultures should matter for our current practical problems in the domain of politics.

2. The social contract tradition and the political role of cultures

The idea that attention to cultural heritages should be avoided in political contexts is typically supported on social-contract grounds. The social contract tradition contends that political communities are established through an arbitrary act of individuals, who initially live independently one from the other and who, at some point, decide – based on what their reasons suggest – that living together is to the best advantage of each of them. Hence, they subscribe a contract and give rise to a political society. In recent times, this view received a sophisticated and incredibly well thought out formulation by John Rawls in his *Theory of Justice* (1971).

Rawls' account is founded on a conception of practical reason, according to which reason is universal, i.e. it can choose according to criteria that apply to anyone, anywhere, and at any time. His claim is that we can understand what is best to do if we imagine what one would choose to do while standing behind a veil of ignorance, i.e. without knowing the contingencies of one's own life. Imagine that you do not know anything about yourself, e.g. race, level of instruction, wealth, social sanding, job, accepted values, all sorts of preferences, and so on. In Rawls' view, from behind the veil of ignorance, we all would consider best a social setting which assumes two fundamental principles: the existence of a system of equal liberties for everyone, and a principle of redistribution of the available goods that he called Maxmin. According to Maxmin, it is rational to choose the outset which grants the highest possible share (max), to those who occupy the lowest levels of society (min). For Rawls, a just political system is one in which the institutions and legal settings respect the two fundamental principles. Since the two basic principles are universally rational and are acceptable to anyone, any political system which satisfies them should also be acceptable to anyone.

From this point of view, a political system is universally acceptable, since it is neutral, i.e. is not committed to any particular view of the good or of truth. Let us

recall that the two basic principles are chosen behind the veil of ignorance, where one does not even know what one's conception of the good is. That means that the principles are chosen regardless of what one's conception of the good might be. This is what makes the principles universal.

Social-contract theory offers the premises needed for an argument for proceduralism. Proceduralism is a legal and political theory according to which the establishment and the respect of right or fair procedures are sufficient for the legitimacy of a legal system or a political power. The word 'sufficient' is crucial. Any reasonable theorist would recognise that procedures are necessary. A very simple argument seems very compelling in this sense: without procedures, we could not apply the law in a consistent way, and this would be unacceptable for any reasonable understanding of the nature of justice. Proceduralism wants to claim more: the point is that when the right procedures are implemented and followed, a law or a decision is always legitimate, no matter what its content might be.

The outlook of politics offered by the social contract tradition can furnish the premises for an argument to the conclusion that cultures and heritages should not matter in the political arena. The basic principles of a just society, as we have seen, are chosen behind a veil of ignorance, and that means that the person choosing them has no idea of what her or his cultural affiliations are. Any political system respecting those basic principal will be neutral when it comes to differences in metaphysical outlooks, value-choices, or cultural heritages. Institutional and legal procedures will be correct if they respect neutrality and follow the basic principles. Hence, the cultural differences among people will be politically irrelevant, as far as a state can implement just procedures and people will generally adhere to them.

The idea that a political system can be neutral in the suggested sense was widely criticised and Rawls himself revised his own view at a later stage (1993). The main stream of criticism came from the outlook which became known as communitarianism. Philosophers including Michael Sandel (1982), Charles Taylor (1989) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) complained that practical reason does not quite match the description provided by Rawls. The main point is: what is left of a self when we have hidden most of its features behind a veil? On what grounds can that self make choices at all, without knowing what its criteria really are? Communitarians generally stress the importance of communities, in building the subjectivity of agents and thereby in furnishing them the rational and emotion tools that they deploy when they make their choices. The upshot is that cultures, conceptions of the good and values are not politically irrelevant and political systems cannot be neutral. The practical reason of each person would be totally dependent on the culture of that person. One cannot escape the heritage of one's tradition, since that heritage furnishes the very criteria that one uses to make choices.

Someone could object that conversions are a counterexample, but communitarians reject this move: they claim that events that are commonly considered conversions are either led by the criteria of the original culture, and thus they are not really conversions, or they are irrational leaps.

Communitarians brought a new emphasis to the notions of tradition and community, but they did it at the expense of reason: trans-cultural judgements are ultimately irrational. The argument between liberals and communitarians can be seen as a new version of an older debate, namely that between supporters of the idea of a universal reason and those who support the thesis that practical reason is culturally relative.

Communitarian objections to the liberal conception of reason have well made, but their alternative view of reason is also unsatisfying. We have a normative intuition according to which certain actions are wrong for everyone, apart from distinctions of cultures. An example might be gratuitously killing an innocent person. If someone says that one's culture allows this, we would think that there must be something wrong with that culture. Furthermore, these deeds are usually evaluated in similar manners in cultures which are very different from one another. This suggests that we can nurse more hope in the possibility that reason might achieve universal consensus than communitarians recognise. There must be something wrong with their view of practical reason too.

A rejoinder to both these positions is found in the *mixed proposal*, i.e. a group of views, which support the importance of cultures on liberal grounds, the paradigmatic example being the thought of Will Kymlicka (1995, 2001). These views develop Rawls' position in a direction which is meant to recognise the importance of cultures. These positions accept Rawls' conception of practical reason and his view that politics is mainly committed to granting the maximum possible expansion of everyone's liberty (let us recall that Rawls' first principle of a just society calls for a system of equal liberties). At the same time, however, these views suggest that cultures and values are politically relevant. The argument starts from the recognition that in order to effectively exercise one's liberty, one must be able to find, in the social environment, the resources that one needs. However, one's wishes are largely culture-dependent, and therefore there could be no protection of liberty without the protection of forms of life which make the exercise of the relevant wishes possible. One could not chose to engage in competitive chess playing, for example, if there were no chess community, no chess tournaments, etc. The very protection of individual liberty, hence, calls for the protection and the empowerment of the cultural forms in which individuals want to exercise their choices. This concession to cultures does not risk the relativistic consequences of communitarianism: following Rawls, the mixed position suggests that a well-formed political system

will only allow in its domain those cultures which are compatible with the protection of the freedom of all.

The mixed position attempts to reconcile the universal and the culturally relative conceptions of reason. It manages to acknowledge the importance of cultures, without giving up the possibility that reason reaches a universal perspective. The proposal, however, has some problems and I will mention here two. Firstly, it does not really address the objection about the nature of practical reason that communitarianism raised against Rawls, i.e. the objection that when all criteria are hidden from her view, the subject isn't in a position to make a choice. Secondly, the proposed reconciliation is problematic: the importance of cultures is granted, but the only cultures acceptable from this point of view are those which share the same conception of the good and the same values of the liberal perspective, i.e. those which would rank the protection of a system of equal liberties as the most fundamental principle. The problem is that neutrality does not seem an achievable political target. The claim that the most important goal of society is to put as far as possible all individuals in the position where they can do what they desire depends on a particular conception of what is valuable and good. Cultures which do not share this priority cannot simply be ruled out as unreasonable: a suitable conception of practical reason should be able to engage these perspectives too.

3. Rethinking practical reason

In recent years, debates on practical reason have made much progress, due to philosophers such as Elizabeth Anscombe (1957), John McDowell (1998), and Thomas Nagel (1986), to mention only a few names, which lie behind the reflections which follow. The results of these discussions offer a solution to the problems that both sides face in the debate between communitarians and liberals. In this section, I will try to show why this is so, by summarizing an account of practical reason which I have argued for previously (De Anna 2015).[1] In the next section, I will suggest that the ensuing view of practical reason can account for the importance of cultures and heritages in politics, while taking into account the normative intuition and explaining how reason can have a universal value.

Practical reason has to do with choices in practical situations, hence with human action. An action is a doing which belongs to the agent. Not all doings belong to agents. If someone pushes me and I hit someone else, the hitting is

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[1]   The essay in which I lay out this account more fully is included in a previous volume of the same research project to which the present volume also belongs (De Anna and Martinelli 2015).

something my body does, but it is not my action. Actions are doings for which an agent can give a reason as the answer to the question: "Why did you do it?". "Why did you give money to that beggar?" Answer: "Because he is hungry."

What are reasons for actions, then? They certainly involve facts. "Because he is hungry" offers a fact as a reason. But that is not enough. They are facts concerning an object that the agent must see as valuable (in the example: the human person who is begging); those facts must involve some deficiency in the valuable object (the beggar is hungry); the agent must have the power to make the valuable object better off (I have no reason to do anything, if there is nothing I can do). All this suggests that reasons have an objective side (a fact) and a subjective side (the way in which the subject responds to the fact).

I mentioned above that we share a normative intuition. That intuition is now relevant again, since it suggests that not all ways of responding to a situation by a subject are equally acceptable. I could give the money to the beggar or offer him a sandwich. We would consider both these ways of responding as good. However, I could ignore him, and be insensitive to his starvation. Or I could respond to the starvation by killing him. Both these two latter responses would be wrong. Now the problem is: what constrains the range of viable responses to a situation?

Let us remember that we are talking about practical reason, i.e. reason at work in action. That means that we have to consider how normative constraints shape action from the point of view of the agent. From that point of view, the question about what the right ways of responding to a situation are takes the following form: "The fact f seems to me a reason to do action a, but is it really such?" Raising this doubt amounts to asking how a well-functioning human being would respond in the same situation. That means that normativity arises from the consideration by an agent of how a well-functioning human being should be and how she would respond to the facts of the situation.

The result we reached accounts for two features of practical reason that we considered above: its universality and its dependence on culture. When an agent wonders how a well-functioning human being would react in the situation, she asks a question about human nature, about what all humans are and how they should be. On the other hand, the agent has no other way of conceiving how a well-functioning human being would respond than considering examples of humans whom she has encountered and who were flourishing, happy, respected and appreciated by others. That means that the agent's judgements about human nature are concretely shaped by her experience of humanity and human flourishing.

It is important to stress that the judgements about flourishing and about what counts as successful realisations of human life that an agent gives, depend on the kind of human being the agent is. They depend on her way of responding to surrounding facts, and therefore they depend on the form of life she is engaged in.

Ultimately, they depend on her "culture". The upshot is that there is no absolute point of view on human nature or on the good that we can access *a priori*. We form and shape our appreciation of the good through our engagement in our lives. This does not mean that judgements are completely subjective or agent-relative: they are objective to the extent that they concern facts. To the extent that humans share a common nature, we can hope to be able to find shared views on what the best way of responding to practical situations are.

The view of practical reason that we have acquired acknowledges the importance of cultures for practical reasons in a similar way to communitarians. It claims, indeed, that only through the experience of humanity that an agent has in her culture, can she form a notion of a flourishing life to be employed in practical reasoning. At the same time, however, the proposed view follows Rawls in endorsing a universal conception of reason: given our common humanity, it is possible that we comprehend the ways that others respond, even if they are culturally very different from us. We can also hope that mutual recognition and dialogue can lead us to overcome conflicts between views, even if, of course, we can have no guarantee that an agreement can be reached in all situations. The proposed view also overcomes the failure of the mixed proposal to achieve neutrality: it recognises that neutrality is impossible, and at the same time it does not exclude *a priori* all cultures that do not share the liberal view on the priority of liberty. Liberals can hope that members of cultures which are very far from theirs can see the point of their values and recognise that their perspective opens better chances for human flourishing.

4. Practical reason and the significance of cultures

The perspective on practical reason that we have reached highlights the importance of individual features of subjects for practical reason. One responds to situations in ways which are shaped by one's sensitivity, and one's sensitivity is in its turn shaped by one's education, by one's habits and by the examples of successful and unsuccessful human life that one encountered in one's social environment throughout one's life. This means that cultures have a prior role in shaping the practical sensitivity of their members. In what follows, I will construe some arguments that assume this premise and, by joining it with various consideration about the nature of cultural studies, conclude that pursuing cultural studies is important in the practical situations in which current social conditions set us.

The importance of history. Very often our sensitivity to practical situations is shaped by strong dislikes or strong predilections for kinds of situations that are inherited from our cultures. Sometimes these dislikes and predilections depend

on features, which are not essential for the relevant kinds of situations, but depend on contingencies of those kinds which were typical of our past and which are the result of our historical evolution. Studying history may help us to recognise the contingency of some of the features of these kinds of situation, which are relevant in triggering our responses. Hence, it is important to study history, in order to tune our sensitivity in practical situations. Let us consider an example. I will use a trivial one, in order to bypass possible interferences of disagreements in the evaluation of real historical cases. Suppose that someone dislikes philosophy since philosophers are excessively narcissistic and they always talk about things which are only interesting for themselves. Suppose also that one is justified in having this sensitivity, given the state of philosophy in one's society. By looking at the history of philosophy and reading the works of great philosophers of the past, however, one might realise that some great philosophers of the past were relevantly different from those common in one's own time. This may lead one to recognise that one's response to philosophy has to be more finely tuned, and that one can be open to forms of philosophizing different from that typical of one's culture, which might contribute to a rich and flourishing life.

The importance of literature. Literature, as a form of art, offers idealised representations of life which highlight the fundamental values of the culture which produced the work and offer deep insights into universal features of humanity. In this way, literature offers representations of the practical sensitivity typical of its background culture. Such representations can highlight the profoundly human aspects of particular cultural forms of life, but they can also point to weaknesses and other dangers to human flourishing. Consequently, studying literature can be important for improving our practical sensitivity, for various reasons. Firstly, through literature we take a distance from ourselves and from our forms of life, and become capable of seeing them as though from outside. This experience is sometimes very strong and effective in pointing to what goes wrong with our lives, and how we should change them. Secondly, by reading literature from cultures different from ours, we can engage enlightening representations of those cultures and appreciate what aspects of human flourishing can be grasped through them.

The importance of comparative cultural studies and human sciences. Cultural studies and some human sciences, e.g. anthropology, seek an objective outlook on different cultures. Objectivity remains only an ideal, but attempting to reach it lets scholars and students of these disciplines to reach a position above different cultures, from which those cultures can be compared. Of course that position is still subject-dependent, i.e. it depends on the sensitivity of the scholars who outline it, but there is no escape route from this role of subjectivity in any science. However, cultural studies and human sciences can find ways to interpret different cultures from superior points of view, and to evaluate - from their own positions

– the practical sensitivities that those cultures produce. This means that these forms of studies make a universal exercise of practical reason possible, according to the account of practical reason that I offered above.

5. Conclusion

The three cases I outline above suggest that, if practical reason is what I claimed, cultures and heritages should still be studied, even in face of current, rapid processes of globalization. Purely procedural solutions to our practical problems will not be sufficient, since humans, being endowed with practical reason, seek with their actions what seems good to them, that is: what they take to have reasons to do. There will be no peace in society, no stability, unless most members of society can share a good deal of their reasons for action. Sharing reasons for action, however, requires akin sensitivities. Reflection on human life, on what human flourishing is, on how humans can become and develop is necessary in order to achieve a harmony of sensitivities. This kind of activity, however, is precisely what the study of culture, in all its forms, does. If we want to have a peaceful and prosperous future, we need politicians and administrators who have both technical expertise and the cultural background needed to understand other cultures and to engage in debates about ways of human flourishing. Therefore, the policy followed by those countries, which invest on the study of cultures and heritages, is reasonable.

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