Practical Rationality in Political Contexts
Facing Diversity in Contemporary Multicultural Europe

edited by

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Europe, Philosophy and Cultural Diversity: An Introduction

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We live in communities where people from very different geographical, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds must coexist. This constitutes a challenge for our institutions, for individual members of our communities, for intermediate bodies, such as families, schools, businesses, professional associations, and so on. People from different backgrounds have differences in expectations and sensitivities. These differences tend to be greater than those existing among people from the same background. These differences can make individual and collective choices difficult, they can make understanding of others' intentions problematic, and they can jeopardize our ability to foresee the actions and the reactions of others. This condition puts our practical reasons under considerable stress and we need to face this question: how can we best deploy our cognitive and volitional capacities, in order to overcome the challenges that we need to face?

A dominant way of answering this question contends that, in our practical deliberations, we should bracket all aspects of reality and all considerations that are individual and pertain only to the deliberating subject. By 'bracket' we do not mean "completely ignore", we just mean that we are called to give priority to what is universal and can be accepted and recognised by everyone. This conviction depends on a conception of practical rationality which postulates that

the good is wholly subjective, i.e. relative to either individuals or societies (Rawls 1971/1998; Habermas 1981). This leading framework of practical rationality hopes to show that, by assuming a subjectivist view of rationality, clashes between the diverse positions upheld in complex contemporary societies may be prevented. Discussions about policy-making and public decisions in multicultural societies normally start from the assumption of this notion of rationality (Kymlicka 1996, 2007). This perspective, however, proves to be deficient from the point of view of fostering convergence of identities into unified and harmonious communities. It leads namely to fragmented communities, instead of providing the conditions where people may gradually converge on a shared view of what is worth achieving as a community. One might suppose that the defect of this conception depends on the assumption of an anti-realist view of reason, including practical reason, which is now widely criticised. The view also overlooks the fact that empirical sciences (evolutionary psychology, ethology, etc.) suggest that some moral capacities are deeply rooted in our biological nature (Boniolo and De Anna 2006; De Waal 1998; Illies 2006; Hösle and Illies 2005).

The limitations of the mentioned, dominant conception of practical reason, and the relevance of current debates on realism and on the biological roots of ethics for overcoming those limitations were discussed as part of a project entitled "Moral realism and political decisions: a new framework of practical rationality for contemporary multicultural Europe". The project was funded by the *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst* (DAAD) in the scheme "Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa 2013" and was carried out in 2013-2014 by a group of scholars from the Universities of Bamberg (Germany), Trieste (Italy) and Udine (Italy). The results of the research work were published in a volume of collected essays entitled *Moral Realism and Political Decisions. Practical Rationality in Contemporary Public Contexts* (De Anna and Martinelli 2015).

The essays in *Moral Realism and Political Decisions* aimed at outlining a framework of practical rationality for public discussions and political decisions, capable of bringing together the diverse perspectives coexisting in current multicultural societies, especially in Europe, and at helping to develop shared solutions, values, and institutions. The main idea was grounded on achievements attained in two current debates in philosophy: the debate on "new realism" and the debate on the ethical relevance of recent achievements in biological sciences.

Debates on "new realism" ensue from the work of contemporary philosophers such as Hilary Putnam (1999), John McDowell (1998, 2004), Thomas Nagel (1986), etc. Unlike the old, naïve versions of realism, "new realism" rejects the possibility of an absolute perspective on reality, while maintaining that our cognitive efforts are at least partly constrained by objective reality. The moral upshot is that the good is not merely a subjective or social construction, but

it is the result of typically human responses to the demands of a reality that is structured in a certain way, and, due to its structure, has built-in possibilities of perfection. There is no absolute conception of the good, but features of reality can still be criteria for practical rationality and for the aptness of human subjective responses in difficult decision-making situations (Putnam 2002, 2004; Nagel 1979; McDowell 1998). In Italy, these debates have recently taken an original direction, which is now contributing to the wider international scientific community (De Caro and Ferraris 2012; Ferraris 2012; Possenti and Lavazza 2013).

Discussions about the ethical relevance of recent findings in biological sciences suggest that there are many homologies between human and animal behaviour, to the extent that it can hardly be denied that morality is deeply grounded in our animal nature, contra many subjectivist claims. On the other hand, transcendental considerations suggest that human reasoning can justify the normativity of ethically guided action in humans. Again, this suggests a notion of ethics which is objectivistic and anti-absolutistic at the same time (Illies 2003, 2006; Nagel 1986, 2012).

The political upshots of these converging revolutions in epistemology and in ethics are still the object of discussion. Most importantly, the recognition that human practical rationality is ruled by what agents conceive as good has important implications on the notions of political authority and consent. On the one hand, against subjectivist views of the good, the new framework purports that arguments about what is good can have a justificatory and legitimating role in the practices of political decision-making and in the formation of consent. On the other hand, against old-style realist views, the new framework denies that there is an absolute conception of the good, and is thereby sensitive to the subjective positions of those who have to consent to political authority: this sets limits to political authority. Breaking those limits would constitute a violation of the humanity of those subject to authority, would progressively undermine their consent, and hence destroy the both the very strength of authority in question, as well as the community itself (De Anna 2012a, 2012b; Besussi 2012, 2013). This outlook also implies a critical reassessment of many post-Enlightenment assumptions that characterise European identity, and of the diverse modalities with which the encounter between different cultures was dealt with in the long history of Europe. The Enlightenment helped to overcome theological arguments for the objective nature of the good and to recognize the legitimacy of different cultures within a wider anthropological, rather than metaphysical perspective. Yet, this ended by fostering idealistic (i.e. strongly anti-realistic) world-views (Martinelli 2004, 2010). Nevertheless, it can be argued that cultural pluralism does not necessarily imply idealism and that realism does not necessarily deny the legitimacy of cultural diversity.

The essays in *Moral Realism and Political Decisions* contributed to this debate, by focusing on the consequences of the realist outlook of practical rationality in the arrangements and methods of public and political discussions in contemporary multicultural societies. The ensuing framework of practical rationality can be summarised as follows. Firstly, practical rationality does not necessarily involve general moral statements, or metaphysical statements about the underpinnings of morality, but it does necessarily involve reasons for action which an agent can recognise as compelling in a practical situation. Secondly, metaphysical considerations might be relevant in a practical context when one tries to justify an action or to make a choice, even if they are not a necessary prerequisite of practical rationality. Thirdly, knowledge about states of affairs subsistent in reality might be practically relevant, since such states of affairs can become propositional contents of reasons for action. Fourthly, practical rationality is limited by the epistemic standpoint of the agent, but also by his/her defects in reasoning and in habits. Fifthly, practical rationality is shaped also by pragmatic conditions: moral language and institutions built by the linguistic community contribute to our practical agency. Sixthly, the upshot of the above considerations concerning practical rationality is that practical argumentation in multicultural settings is a fallible but reliable possibility when parties try to explain each other the states of affairs that constitute their reasons for action. Argumentation is possible and reliable, since reasons for action have an objective content (point 3) and practical rationality is not about underlying world-views (point 1), but it is fallible since practical rationality is limited by the shortcomings of individual agents (point 4) or groups (point 5). When different groups within the same society attempt to share their purposes, it is also possible that a theoretical agreement is found by rational means (point 2).

This summary attempts to draw a common denominator among the different voices which found expression in *Moral Realism and Political Decisions*. Although the voices maintained their individuality, discussions and attempts to reach shared solutions led to a convergence, which the proposed summary attempts to capture.

Moral Realism and Political Decisions is not an isolated case: the practical consequences and the public significance of a moderately realist conception of the good have recently become a common topic of discussion. The American philosopher Melissa Lane, for example, has recently argued that we cannot face global challenges, such as the environmental crisis, unless we recognize that there are goods which humans can recognize and share (Lane 2011). The French philosopher Jean-Marc Ferry has also contended that contemporary multicultural Europe faces challenges which require a re-evaluation of the leading paradigms and of their subjectivist assumptions about freedom, action and normativity (Ferry 2011, 2012a, 2012b).

The framework proposed by *Moral Realism and Political Decisions*, hence offers timely and original contributions to a growing current debate.

Encouraged by these considerations, the editors of that volume decided to continue the investigation in a new project aimed at considering how the framework of practical rationality outlined in *Moral Realism and Political Decisions* could be applied in current practical quarrels among diverse traditions facing each other in European communities. Hence, they (together with Professor Salvatore Lavecchia, of the University of Udine) applied for and obtained a new grant from DAAD in the scheme "Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa 2014-2015". The project was entitled "Practical rationality in political contexts: facing diversity in contemporary multicultural Europe", and included the researchers involved in the previous project, with the addition of some new entries. The research work culminated in a workshop which took place at the University of Trieste, 18-21st December 2014. The essays here collected contain the result of that work. This is not a collection of conference contributions, but a collection of original essays which were written after the workshop, as a consequence of the discussions held at that occasion.

The essays focus on various sorts of cultural diversities concerning Europe: diversities within Europe (among different European traditions, among European heritage and the heritages of new inhabitants of Europe) and diversities concerning the relation between Europe and other regions of the world. How can the conclusions about practical rationality in the public sphere arrived at in *Moral Realism and Political Decisions* change our traditional ways of approaching those diversities? This question was addressed by paying attention to the anthropological and pragmatic presuppositions of attempts to seek practical agreement across different cultures, by reflecting on the pragmatic role of institutions in fostering the deliberative processes required for addressing issues related to cultural diversity, and by considering cases of clashes among diversities, both within Europe and in the relations among different world regions.

In "Some Critical Questions about Critical Questions", Thomas Becker discusses one of the main problems of argumentation theory: the evaluation of arguments in practical contexts. Unlike theoretical contexts, in which the mere appeal to hidden premises can be sufficient to highlight the validity or invalidity of arguments, practical contexts require that the efficacy of an argument also be measured in terms of the appeal that the premises, both explicit and implicit, may have on the addressee(s). In his paper, Becker argues that the Critical Questions analysis of argumentation by Walton, Reed and Macagno is a valuable tool with which to access an argumentation in a practical context. He also contends that the practical relevance that the critical questions might have calls for differentiation among different kinds of critical questions and different roles that they can

play in the evaluation of the practical efficacy of an argumentation. The present article is a draft that Professor Becker had already completed by the end of August 2014, in view of the workshop, which was meant to take place in Trieste in September 2014, and which was subsequently rescheduled in December of that year. His sudden and tragic decease did not allow him to complete his work and to present and discuss it at the workshop. The draft had nonetheless already a complete and conclusive structure. Furthermore, it takes on and develops some of the topics that Professor Becker had already discussed with the other members of the research group in the workshop of the previous year. These reasons fully justified the inclusion of the draft in this collection. The draft has been edited by Sebastian Krebs, who was Professor Becker's assistant at Bamberg University.

Sebastian Krebs, in "Does Truth Really Matter? On the Irrelevance of Truth", acknowledges a huge gap between traditional inconclusive theorizing about truth and the need for solutions to fundamental practical challenges, which seems to require a commitment to truth. Krebs tries to overcome the gap by appealing to Thomas Becker's position on truth, a position that Krebs calls *relevantism*. The point is that philosophical truth is not the concept that we appeal to in addressing our practical concerns: we *de facto* prefer a relevant sentence to a true sentence. Krebs addresses the objection that relevantism entails relativism and offers some examples aimed at showing how Becker's relevantist program can be employed to address practical issues in multicultural contexts.

In his essay "On the Philosophical Significance of National Characters. Reflections from Hume and Kant", Riccardo Martinelli addresses the problem of how to cope with national differences *philosophically*. The topic is undoubtedly thorny, there being a number of reasons to distrust the notion of national character altogether. Talk about national characters, in fact, may appear to roam below the threshold of any respectable philosophical argumentation. What is worse, folk beliefs concerning national characters have been occasionally steered to foster hostility or prejudice against foreign nations. Nevertheless, Martinelli argues, the philosophical significance of national characters can be defended, in the wake of Hume and Kant. Interestingly, both great thinkers did not shy away from explaining what makes up a national character. Typically, they dealt with this topic within the context of a broader analysis of the concept of "character", which is a widely debated philosophical issue. Taking the existence of some general differences among collective entities (such as nations) for granted, and yet sticking to the moral principle of individual responsibility, Hume and Kant developed different philosophical explanations for national characters, illustrated and discussed by Martinelli.

The essay "Individual actions and shared actions: an interactional framework" by Marianna Ginocchietti deals with implications of multiculturalism for shared

actions. The essay discusses the notion of individual action and claims that an interactional framework is needed in order to understand both individual and shared actions. Ginocchietti contends that we need a notion of individual action which must be consistent with the agent's concrete exercise of her agency and with the ways which agents attribute agency to others. Such a notion must be non-reductive and can lead to an understating of shared action in terms of "joint commitment".

In the essay **"Rationality in linguistic interpretation: from charity to cooperativeness"**, Paolo Labinaz deals with two principles that have significant consequences on discussions about multiculturalism and the possibility of a universal reason: the principle of charity and the principle of cooperation. The Author criticizes the role that the many versions of the principle of charity accord to rationality and proposes an alternative view based on Paul Grice's cooperative principle and his argumentative conception of rationality. According to the principle of charity, assuming that people are rational is a necessary condition of the possibility of interpreting their linguistic behaviour successfully: we could not understand other people's utterances without assuming a certain degree of rationality on their part. By contrast, Labinaz rejects the principle of charity, since it cannot specify how much rationality speakers have to be granted. Following Grice, Labinaz claims that the rationality of speakers does not need to be conceived in terms of conformity to certain norms, but emerges from the linguistic practices as a concern for the justification of the speaker's own utterances.

Multiculturalism raises the problem of the extent to which cultures can differ if they have to coexist. Recently, some theorists (including Regina Schwartz and Jan Assmann) have contended that religious differences represent a serious danger for the coexistence of cultures. The essay "Nicholas of Cusa. Natural Law, Religions, and Peace: facing Diversity through Philosophy in Pre-Modern Europe", which is authored by Marko Fuchs, challenges that position. Fuchs shows that Cusa made room for the possibility of different religions peacefully coexisting, without having to give up their differences. In order to make his point, Fuchs discusses the notion of 'peace of faith' and offers an interpretation of the main arguments that Cusa set forth in his *De pace fidei*. Fuchs argues that Cusa's solution can be effectively employed against contemporary objections to religious pluralism.

The essay entitled "The challenge of multiculturalism: universalism and particularism in Alasdair MacIntyre's ethics", written by Ines Potzernheim, puts Alasdair MacIntyre's ethical theory, as laid down in *After Virtue*, towards a proof of the conditions of a multicultural society. Potzernheim examines the particularistic and universalistic aspects of MacIntyre's approach and analyses the implications that arise for multiculturalism. The essay argues that MacIntyre has

an implicit universal notion of virtue ethics, which includes certain universal ideas concerning the nature of human beings (especially those aspects related to human thinking and acting). However, the essay contends that, in relation to the challenges to ethical systems in a multicultural society, MacIntyre's cultural or historical particularism does not provide a satisfying perspective.

John Stopford, in his essay entitled "Reason, Recognition, and Diversity", starts from the recognition that liberal democracy is currently faulted – both by communitarians and by postmodernists – for ignoring indigenous cultures and postcolonial peoples while embracing schemes of economic development that disrupt traditional values and ways of life. In his view, liberals must respond to such challenges by re-examining the role of culture in liberal political theory. Traditionally, political economists could assume social and political institutions to be culturally homogenous, all diversities among citizens being reducible to matters of preferential rationality. The acknowledgement of current pluralism must be a new starting point for liberal political philosophy. Liberal democracy can recognize the objectivity of different beliefs about value and reject the use of political power to shape citizen's conceptions of the good, while also recognizing the need for political integration. Political integration, however, according to the author, is only possible if citizens also assume the burdens of reasonableness when the realization of public policies presupposes sustained public commitment over time. Citizens "must be prepared to assume these burdens if they are to play their role in sustaining and defending democratic institutions".

In "Politics and the Relevance of Cultures", Gabriele De Anna contends that an engagement in the study of cultural heritages and traditions is essential in constructing a shared future in current multicultural societies. De Anna highlights that traditional debates between liberals and communitarians have not solved the problem of the dichotomy between universalism and cultural-relativism of practical reason. Attempts to find practical solutions to the issue, such as traditional multiculturalism based on liberal and individualist assumptions, also seem to misrepresent the nature of practical reason. The results of recent debates on practical reason, which were revised also in De Anna and Martinelli (2015), open new possibilities concerning the possibility of a transcultural employment of practical reason. On the basis of recent developments in the field, De Anna contends that the notion of a universal human nature is presupposed in the judgements of practical reason, although the features of human nature are always thought through from the point of view of a particular culture. De Anna concludes that the study of cultures is fundamental for learning how to recognise what is really universal in human nature, and, therefore, in coping with the challenges of multicultural societies.

Antonella Pocecco, in "The Everyday Multiculturalism: Individual Experience of Cultural Diversity", discusses current approaches to the problems arising

in our contemporary multicultural societies. She distinguishes two opposing approaches, which polarise current public debates: the ideology which sees multiculturalism as a good to seek and foster, and the ideology which proclaims the need to establish and defend individualities and cultural specificities. She argues that both extreme ideologies share a common misunderstanding on the notion of "culture": they assume a monolithic view of cultures, whereas each culture is manifold by its very nature. She identifies the visibility of multicultural features as the characteristic trait of our age, and she deals with the practical problems that the current situation raises, the issues of an everyday multiculturalism. The notion of a universal conception of reasons, through which all must become self-critical and open to receive the good, which may come from others, seems the only possible solution to current critical features of society.

The essay "Facing differences and indifference in Mexico: suggestions concerning the discursive dynamics of morality in *2666* by Roberto Bolaño and "El principio del placer" and *Las batallas en el desierto* by José Emilio Pacheco", by Arndt Lainck, offer an interdisciplinary perspective on the issue of multiculturalism and practical reasoning. With the help of literary examples, Lainck suggests an insight into how discourses on morality shape our conceptualization of moral behaviour and have far-reaching pragmatic consequences. In search of a moral compass, literary examples presented in the essay pose questions from opposite ends of the spectrum. Bolaño's *2666* is characterized by the manifest absence of morality and is set in a post-apocalyptic landscape of a very contemporary modernity. In the short story "El principio del placer" and in the novel *Las batallas en el desierto* by Pacheco*,* on the other hand, the narrators try to establish self-developed points of reference against the daunting imposition of conflicting moral codes in the adult world. The antithetical examples used are meant to convey a sense of how difficult it is to arrive at moral criteria against the backdrop of societies which strongly antagonize moral deviance beyond established practices.

In the essay "The Moral Fable", Brunello Lotti raises some important issues concerning the way in which multiculturalism is interpreted by current political institutions, in particular in the European Union, under the assumption of an ideological understanding of human rights, which hides, rather than discloses, problems concerning the governance of complex societies. On the basis of some reflections about the development of liberal and democratic ideals in Europe, Lotti laments that the current lack of policies of integration in Europe, in spite of massive immigration trends, is due to the neglect of three basic truths, which were well known throughout the history of European multiculturalism. Firstly, multiculturalism cannot be stretched to the point of denying itself. Secondly, dialogue is impossible with those who are not open to it. Thirdly, a political institution loses its authority if it fails to protect the members of the community.

Only the recollection of these truths, according to Lotti, could lead to a politically efficacious form of multiculturalism, capable of securing the values that ground Europe and that make it so appealing to those who want to come and live in it from other regions.

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