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# **Moral Realism and Political Decisions**


Practical Rationality in Contemporary Public Contexts

Edited by Gabriele de Anna and Riccardo Martinelli



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*To Prof. Thomas Becker,  
in memoriam*



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# Introduction

## Gabriele De Anna and Riccardo Martinelli

Realism has been a central object of attention among analytical philosophers for some decades. Initially focused on problems related to semantics, discussions about realism turned to problems in epistemology, in metaphysics, in theory of action and in ethics. In current debates we can observe a new return to realism, which seeks to overcome the anti-realist implications of representational theories of the mind typical of modern philosophy. The realist trend has become one of the most original contributions of analytical philosophy to contemporary thinking, a contribution which often also purports to offer a philosophical rehabilitation of more ancient ways of thinking (De Anna 2001). Starting from analytical philosophy, the return of realism has spread into other contemporary philosophical traditions and given birth to new trends in current discussions, as for example in the debates about “new realism” (De Caro and Ferraris 2012; Ferraris 2012; Possenti and Lavazza 2013).

The implications of recent debates for political philosophy and political practice have not yet been widely discussed. Generally, political theorists still rely on a framework of practical rationality which pre-dates recent discussions about realism and which postulates that the good is wholly subjective, i.e. relative to either individuals or societies (Rawls 1971 and 1993; Habermas 1981). The hope is 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 and 2007). This perspective, however, has proved to be deficient from the point of view of fostering convergence of identities into unitary and harmonic societies. It leads to fragmented societies, instead of constructing communities where people may gradually converge on a shared view of what is worth achieving together.

The subjectivist view of practical rationality originated in early modern philosophy and was significant in European history – since it helped to recognize the legitimacy of different cultures within a wider anthropological, rather than metaphysical, intellectual outlook. Yet this ended by fostering idealistic (i.e. strongly anti-realistic) worldviews (Martinelli 2004 and 2010). Nevertheless, it can be argued that cultural relativism does not necessarily imply idealism and that realism does not necessarily deny the legitimacy of cultural diversity.

The essays collected in this volume aim at discussing the framework of practical rationality for policy making which is usually assumed by current political theories, by considering the relevance for practical rationality in the political contexts of current debates on moral and epistemic realism, and on the ethical relevance of recent achievements of biological sciences.

Debates about realism ensue from the work of contemporary philosophers such as Hilary Putnam (1999), John McDowell (1998, 2004), Thomas Nagel (1986), etc. Unlike older, naïve versions of realism, the realism supported by recent analytical philosophers rejects the possibility of an absolute perspective on reality, while maintaining the notion 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 still features of reality can be criteria for practical rationality and for the aptness of human subjective responses to problematic decisional situations (Putnam 2002 and 2004, Nagel 1979, McDowell 1998).

Discussions about the ethical relevance of recent findings in the biological sciences have contended – among other things – that the results of empirical investigations 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 on our animal nature, contra many subjectivist claims. This suggests that some moral notions are deeply rooted in our biological nature (Boniolo and De Anna 2006; De Waal 1998; Illies 2006; Hösle and Illies 2005). On the other hand, tran-

scendental considerations suggest that human reasoning can justify the normativity of ethically guided action in humans. Again, this suggests a notion of ethics which is objective and anti-absolutistic at the same time (Illies 2003 and 2006; Nagel 1986 and 2012).

The political upshots of these converging conclusions in epistemology and in ethics are still object of discussion. Most importantly, the recognition that human practical rationality is ruled by what agents conceive as objectively good has important implications for 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 would hence destroy the very strength of authority and the coesion of the community (De Anna 2012a and 2012b; Besussi 2012 and 2013).

How do recent conclusions about epistemic and moral realism change our ways of conceiving practical reason? And how does the ensuing conception of practical reason change our ways of conceptualising politics, and affect our ways of practicing it? What are the normative implications of this reconceptualisation? These essays intend to address these questions and subsequent issues.

The first four papers of the collection focus on moral realism and jointly offer an account of realism which touch upon foundational issues (e.g. problems concerning the metaphysics of moral reality) and epistemological issues (e.g., problems concerning the character of practical rationality and the origins of normativity).

Riccardo Martinelli's essay, "Realism, Ontology, and the Concept of Reality," focuses on metaphysical realism and the problem of defining reality from within an historical perspective. Quite often, realists adopt a merely negative definition of reality, which is considered "independent of" our mental thoughts, conceptual schemes, or linguistic practices, etc.

This approach possibly overcomes old-style idealism, yet raises several problems. As an alternative framework, Martinelli discusses the traditional definition of reality as “capacity to act,” or effectiveness, an argumentative strategy that enables us to solve some of the difficulties with ontological realism.

Salvatore Lavecchia, in “Agathological Realism. Searching for the Good beyond Subjectivity and Objectivity or On the Importance of Being Platonic,” combines two aspects of Plato’s writings: the claims on the Demiurge made in the *Timaeus* and the analogy of the sun presented in the *Republic*. By explaining the analogy of the sun through the image of an intelligible sphere of light, Lavecchia suggests an interpretation of Plato according to which the idea of the Good is radically self-giving and self-transcendent, in a way that overcomes all dichotomies between subjectivity and objectivity, knowledge and morality, ethics and ontology. Building on Plato’s argument, he supports a form of moral realism which meets objections to which modern and contemporary varieties of moral realism are open.

Alexander Fischer and Marko Fuchs are co-authors of the essay entitled “‘Solidarity at the Time of the Fall:’ Adorno and Rorty on Moral Realism.” They deploy arguments by Theodor W. Adorno to suggest that Richard Rorty’s criticism of moral realism is not quite radical enough. In their view, Rorty’s very alternative to moral realism – according to which ethnic groups represent the ultimate measure of moral judgment without any possibility of critique – would be excessively naïve. Adorno’s proposal, instead, rejects moral realism in the traditional sense, while still allowing a radical criticism of communities and cultures. Such a criticism is entirely possible, via his negative dialectics which reject metaphysics on the ground that it would reduce to identity the non-identity of individuals. Fischer and Fuchs do not spend time looking at some of the contentious facets of Adorno’s negative dialectics, which are very relevant for current discussions on realism: e.g., the issue whether sense can be made of a radical non-identity, given the ways in which we deploy our concepts, which always seem to imply a certain degree of identification of different individuals. The problem, then, is whether metaphysics can be avoided at all. Fischer and Fuchs, however, do stress an important implication of Adorno’s arguments for moral realism: he is

committed to a form of moral realism to the extent that he encourages us to take into account that moral thinking is oriented to action and hence must be about particulars. The reality of single individuals, hence, cannot be overlooked by any realist account of morality. In this way, the authors contribute to a full understanding of moral realism, by challenging any account that concentrates solely on the existence of universal values or moral laws.

Mario De Caro and Massimo Marraffa, in their essay “Bacon against Descartes. Emotions, Rationality, Defenses,” review recent scientific literature suggesting that emotions are not a natural kind and that human reasoning is not a unitary, normatively regulated faculty. On that basis they claim that the old pyramidal conception of the mind, according to which reason rules the passions and other lower cognitive faculties, is no longer viable. By contrast they suggest that emotions and diverse rational capacities cooperate in constructing an image of reality which answers our pragmatic interests. The upshot of this, they claim, is that empirical reality, normative reality and social and political institutions are on the same level.

A discussion concerning the relevance of moral realism for politics involves a consideration of how practical rationality functions in public contexts. This opens the problem of explaining how pragmatic considerations are relevant to an account of practical reason. The issue emerged particularly in the essay by De Caro and Marraffa. Hence, at this point, the following question presents itself: How does moral realism affect the pragmatic aspects of practical rationality? A second group of three essays addresses this question.

Paolo Labinaz’ essay, “Reasoning, Argumentation and Rationality,” discusses recent “argumentative approaches” to the study of theoretical and practical reasoning. Philosophical reasons and empirical evidence suggest that reasoning is argumentative in nature, and recent argumentative approaches to reasoning rightly take this into account. However, in Labinaz’ view, such approaches fail to draw all the implications from that evidence. After reviewing the main argumentative approaches to reasoning, the author argues that they have a partial view of the connection between reasoning and argumentation, since they focus exclusively on the capacity of reasoning to produce convincing arguments. In this

way they mainly stress the persuasive and therefore instrumental function of reasoning. By contrast, Labinaz supports an alternative argumentative conception of rationality, outlined by Paul Grice and recently developed by Marina Sbisà, which underlines the reason-giving function of reasoning. Labinaz' conclusion suggests that reasoning – including practical reasoning – is intrinsically tied to the relations a cognizer or an agent has with other cognizers or agents, and this suggests that practical reason is inherently connected to the communitarian, political or otherwise, dimension of human existence.

The connections between the pragmatic conditions of social and political argumentation with moral realism are touched upon by Thomas Becker, in his chapter titled “Is Truth Relevant? On the Relevance of Relevance.” Becker argues that factual and evaluative statements are on a par with each other insofar as their relation to truth is concerned: in both cases, truth is to be construed as depending on “practical relevance.” The author suggests that the demand that an assertion must be practically relevant for the addressee is a precondition of the truth of the assertion and of the demand that the assertion must be based on knowledge held by the asserter. On the basis of this premise, Becker offers an account of the truth of normative statements, based on a realistic image of the world.

Marina Sbisà, in her essay entitled “The Austinian Conception of Illocution and its Implications for Value and Social Ontology,” discusses the importance of illocutionary uptake in Austin's theory of speech acts, and its theoretical implications, in particular for the distinction between facts and values, for moral realism, and for social ontology. In her view, illocutionary uptake is the basic source of deontic states and objects. One could expect that this might lead to a form of relativism, but Sbisà stresses that the distinction between the correctness and the incorrectness of verdictives is not merely a matter of intersubjective agreement. Consequently, the assessment of speech is not carried out on one level only, but on two: indeed, in Austin's terms, we can distinguish the felicity/infelicity assessment from the (objective) correctness/incorrectness assessment. Defeasibility concerns cases of infelicity, while error and injustice concern incorrectness, thereby opening the possibility of moral realism. However, since judgments about correctness still depend on our repeated efforts to adjust and improve our relations to the world we

live in, – Sbisà contends – the ensuing moral realism eludes the temptation of assuming that there might an absolute point of view.

The relevance of moral realism for practical rationality and the pragmatic consequences on the social and political level are the topic of the above essays. The next group of two essays turns to political philosophy and political practice, and discusses how the anthropological contentions so far outlined are relevant for our philosophical understanding of politics.

The essay by Christian Illies, “The Relevance of Anthropology and the Evolutionary Sciences for Political Philosophy,” address the clash between two opposite approaches to human nature which, in the past decades, have led to contrasting understandings of politics: that according to which our social dimension is totally culturally construed, and that according to which our social dimension is an output of our biological nature. Illies shows that the contrast is somehow artificial, and asks, on the one hand, how we can understand the relation between cultural development and the biological nature of humans, and, on the other hand, how consideration of the interplay between culture and biology may be helpful for political thinking, e.g., in understanding and improving institutions and political decisions. This opens the way to a form of moderate political realism, in that data coming from the natural sciences is given weight in normative discourse, although in a non-reductive form.

Gabriele De Anna, in “Realism, Human Action and Political Life. On the Political Dimension of Individual Choices,” draws on an account of human action according to which we are led by reasons, and on an understanding of reasons which is based on a partially realist model, to discuss current ways of seeing political communities and the role of institutions. At the foundations of his understanding of human action and reasons for action, he contends that reference to the good in political contexts is unavoidable. He further claims that reference to the good must be welcome, since an open discussion of different conceptions of the good present in society is the best way to achieve agreement and to attain a peaceful coexistence.

The last group includes two essays which focus on the relevance of realism in the domain of politics for related fields of knowledge: jurisprudence and economics.

The essay by Elvio Ancona, “Determining *Ius* according to Thomas Aquinas. A Realistic Model for Juridical Decisions,” focuses on the nature of law, and on its relations to reality and human rationality, by considering the contribution of Thomas Aquinas, who – on the topic of law – offered a comprehensive account built on the longstanding tradition of Roman law and natural law. Ancona highlights that, according to Aquinas, the determination of the *ius* (i.e., of what is right), which takes place in legal judgments, emerges from the comparison between the juridical positions of the parties and this gives it a realist connotation. The realist connotation has important methodological implications: dialectics can thereby be proposed as a particular method for legal decisions, i.e. a method which seeks the discovery of rules and principles that are common to different parties, in view of the identification of what is just in the claims of each of them. This method shows a practical way in which a realist understanding of normativity can be beneficial to societies where different conceptions of the good need to co-exist and cooperate.

In “Reason, Morality and Skill,” John Stopford draws on Ancient Greek economic thought, including Aristotle’s views on the natural limitation of wealth, to discuss the problem of human flourishing in ecologically challenged societies. Some economists have recently argued that current societies must address ecological emergencies by working out ways to live in situations of diminishing economic growth. However, societies with very low levels of growth face issues of social instability due to recessions, unemployment and the decrease of social benefits. Stopford considers the solution to this problem proposed by economic capability theorists, influenced by the work of Sen and Nussbaum: prosperity should be redefined as capability development “within limits.” Stopford argues that the new definition of prosperity calls for a reexamination of the role of skill in the development of capabilities. The marginalization of skill has become a typical trait of modern industrial and consumer societies. However, Stopford shows, certain kinds of skill, exemplified in the work of the autonomously productive craftsman, are necessary to a full development of the capabilities that low growth political communities should promote.

The essays collected here represent the result of a common work made by all the authors – together with other colleagues and with



students – during a workshop which took place at the University of Bamberg, in Germany, between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 2013. The workshop was part of the project *Moral Realism and Political Decisions: A new framework of practical rationality for contemporary multicultural Europe* (MULTIRATIOPOL), which was funded by the *Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst - DAAD*, in the context of the *Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa* scheme. The project was presented by the University of Bamberg (Germany) and the University of Trieste (Italy), and it involved also the joint Master Program in Philosophy between the Universities of Trieste and Udine. Students and Faculty members from the three Universities – together with some invited speakers – took part in the event, which included plenary talks, discussions in groups and round tables. The relations between moral realism, practical rationality and political decisions were addressed in many of their facets. The papers here collected are not papers presented in the workshop, but original pieces which were written after the workshop by some of the participants, on the ground of the common work carried out during the workshop. (One exception is represented by the paper by Christian Illies which had already appeared in a slightly different form somewhere else, in German, but which well represents the contribution given by Professor Illies at the workshop). We are grateful to *DAAD* for their financial support for this initiative.

While we were editing this volume, one of the contributors, Professor Thomas Becker, Chair of German Linguistics at the University of Bamberg, unexpectedly and tragically passed away. He had actively participated to the workshop, and showed an eagerness to discuss with philosophers which was uncommon. Philosophers profited much from his generous contribution. In his essay included in this collection, he had started new, interesting paths of investigation. He was looking forward to further develop these thoughts in collaboration with the research group which was formed during the workshop, and all the other participants to the project were counting on his valuable contribution. His tragic departure left an enormous emptiness among this group of researchers, as among his colleagues, his friends and in his family. We dedicate this collection to his memory.

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