

Book Reviews

Massimi, Michela, *Perspectival Realism*.
New York: Oxford Academic, Oxford University Press, pp. 3-369.

Understanding the relation between science and the concrete world in which science works is an ongoing issue in contemporary debates. Often, specific situations, with their political and cultural settings, act as a boost for scientific research, as in the case of developing RNA vaccines during the COVID pandemic. *Perspectival Realism* by Michela Massimi perfectly captures this aspect of scientific research, enriching how we think philosophically (and not) about science. Her book is not only an outstanding contribution to the traditional debates in the epistemology of science, but it also gives readers an understanding of how science is something that operates within a broader and more complex context.

Perspectival realism is divided into two parts, bridged by the detailed consideration of three case studies. The first part of the book, “Perspectival Modelling”, offers an overview of the motivations and approaches to perspectival realism (3-84). “Three Case Studies”, presents “tales from three sciences” to illustrate and motivate the account (85-180). This intertwining of the illustrational and motivational components works particularly well as it offers concrete examples that allow us to see the different perspectives in action. The last part of the book “The World as We Perspectivally Model It” offers philosophical considerations and presents some implications of the account (181-368).

The first part represents the core to understand the scope of the work. Science as a discipline *per se*, according to Massimi, can only be understood if we consider its nature as a deeply social and cooperative inquiry into the world. This is captured by the two motivations that Massimi finds for her book (9-11). The first reason she offers is *historical*. She believes in the importance of taking into account the history of science when considering the epistemic aspects of it. This is because scientific knowledge has to be seen as inevitably historically situated: it happens in specific places and times and with concretely situated contexts. The second motivation is based on what she identifies as ‘*multiculturalism*’, and this represents also one of the interesting features of her book. The idea is that as much as being historically situated, the claims of scientific theories are also *culturally* located and proceed as a plurality of intersecting scientific perspectives.

These preliminary notes should be seen as the very foundations of *Perspectival Realism*. Science produces reliable knowledge about the world because it results from an interlacing of *perspectival scientific representations*. In this regard, there are two notions of perspectival that need to be taken into account (73-75). The first is *perspectival 1*, that is a scientific representation is situated from a vantage point, a particular historical and cultural angle. This also shows how not only there is “the situatedness of the representation” but also how such situatedness “affects the representational content” (34). While this first consideration might be believed almost trivial for concrete case studies from the history of science, a second notion of *perspectival* brings in more interesting considerations. According to *perspectival 2*, scientific representations are directed towards one or more “vanishing points” of the relevant modelled system, opening up “windows on reality” on how the world could be. Once we consider different scientific models, these are offering a robust modal characterisation of the target system allowing inferential reasoning on what is possible for a system to undergo. These possibilities are the “windows

of reality” that each perspective opens. Another informative image used by Massimi is “inferential blueprints” (141). Scientific models deliver modal knowledge by allowing scientists to conceive physical possible scenarios and allowing, semantically, a particular kind of epistemic conditionals, those with a suppositional antecedent. The plurality of these different models allows then the rich and varied communities to navigate what is *possible* by leaving “blue traces” beyond. In this way, science is also able to build reliable knowledge about how the world *could possibly be*, grounding a realist view of science. This brings a form of “*modal robustness* as a secondary quality that has to do with how a plurality of historically and culturally situated communities are able to tease out the network of inferences from a variety of datasets to the stable event in question” (16). Moreover, this modal robustness adds a different flavour to the “old” view that we can observe the same thing from different perspectives by adding the modal aspect to the inferential blue prints that are left by the different perspectives.

These considerations allow us to comprehend the notion of *scientific perspective*. A scientific perspective has to broadly include any scientific practice that resulted in reliable knowledge claims that have been cross-perspectival retained, that is maintained across different cultural and historical settings. Moreover, it allows us to see how the account of Massimi is *realist* too. The realist commitment towards science lies in accepting that we can get reliable knowledge about the natural world, considering the historical and cultural context of such knowledge, and this is maintained in the intersection of the different perspectives (10,15). This also allows to see how scientific practices are dependent upon “the experimental, theoretical, and technological resources available to any scientific community at any time to reliably make those scientific knowledge claims; and second order (methodological-epistemic) principles that can justify the reliability of the scientific knowledge claims advanced” (183).

After this introduction, the book presents a “*Tale from Three Sciences*”, which supports and illustrates perspectival realism. The first tale considers how the discovery of the atomic nucleus between 1930-1950 resulted in an interplay of perspectives coming from geochemistry, cosmo-sciences and earth sciences (88). The second tale considers climate modelling and how in order to inform policy recommendations regarding the prediction and nature of global warming, climate scientists build a variety of models. In particular, they consider various subsystems of the Earth’s system as “ocean temperature (which is part of the hydrosphere), sea ice (which is part of the cryosphere), land surface (which is part of the lithosphere), and carbon cycle (which is part of the biosphere)” (111). The last tale considers language development in children, where the interlace on behavioural, educational, neurobiological and developmental perspectives are intertwined for modelling dyslexia in children (126). The detailed consideration of these case studies operates within the framework identified before, showing how successful science is able to produce modally robust knowledge thanks to an interlacing of different epistemic perspectives and settings. Specifically, in these three cases, it is the very intersecting of scientific perspectives that made it possible to establish that there was a modally robust phenomenon about the given target system, not only allowing for knowledge of the actual behaviour but also of how the system could possibly behave. The interlace of perspectives left “blueprints” that allowed us to gain reliable knowledge while leaving open “windows of reality” on how the target system could possibly be.

The second part of the book provides further details about perspectival realism and considers the implications of the account for how we think about science. In particular, *Perspectival Realism* is further defined as a form of realism that moves “bottom-up”, that is from data to phenomena and then to natural kinds (183). This bottom-up approach is set within the plurality implied by different lines of inquiry, experimental evidence, data sets and then the usage of perspectival models to make modally robust inferences about the target system.

This impacts also how we consider natural kinds, which are seen to be “with a human face”: the models about the natural phenomena and the kinds that we deem natural are necessarily coming from the perspective of a specific historical, cultural, and scientific tradition (219-248). The suggestion is then to move from other accounts of natural kinds to a more culturally and historically located one, while equally distancing essentialism and conventionalism (273). This makes natural kinds defined as “historically identified and open-ended groupings of modally robust phenomena, (ii) each displaying lawlike dependencies among relevant features, (iii) that enable truth-conducive conditionals-supporting inferences over time” (277, 289, 306) or “Spinozian sortals” (305). The identification of the properties of the kinds allows for kinds-realism (*contra conventionalism*), while the contingency of the properties clustered together in the kind allows the kinds to be flexible and have changing properties that change with the relevant discoveries (*contra essentialism*). This interlace of the perspectives allows the ‘window on reality’ within *perspectival 2*.

This part and the book conclude by considering how perspectival realism can affect the direction that science should take. This is the topic of the last chapter of the book, which I take to be the most innovative one. Massimi explores her “original question” that is how are “wonderfully diverse human beings—occupying a plurality of historically and culturally situated perspectives—able to form reliable knowledge of the natural world?” (333). The very nature of scientific knowledge being perspectival supports a non-classist, non-elitist form of scientific cosmopolitanism. First, scientific perspectives “do span over time and stretch beyond specific geographical, sociocultural, and even national boundaries” (337). Second, scientific knowledge is by nature cosmopolitan as it is based on exchanges, trades and cultural encounters. Massimi in her analysis of scientific cosmopolitanism is aware of historical moments in which such interplay has not happened, and communities and minorities have been excluded from the scientific endeavour. Accordingly, the suggestion she brings forward is that future scientists will consider and include different communities by acknowledging successful science as by nature *perspectival*. This should also encourage scientists to embrace the perspectival nature of science and move towards a science based on collaborations between different communities and the reciprocal recognition of the different components.

The book thus starts and ends on the same note: science has political and social implications, and a perspectival view of science can lead toward a more inclusive approach to science and the support to the human right to science. In this framework, we should stop seeing scientific discoveries as individualistic achievements and move towards a consideration of science as a human activity, keeping in mind the “rights and obligations” that we owe to others (past, present, and future) in “sharing scientific knowledge, its advancements, and its benefits” (368).

A short review cannot do justice to the amount of interesting content and implications that this book contains. Accordingly, I will focus on two metaphysical issues or aspects and a more general one. The first comment relates to the

realist and epistemic nature of the account, mostly elaborating on the idea that the interlacing of different perspectival models provides reliable knowledge about the *possibilities* of the target system. As suggested in multiple passages of the book, *Perspectival Realism* wants to be an epistemic book about science, focusing on how scientific knowledge works rather than on the metaphysical implications of the account. While the epistemic analysis of multiple concrete case studies is conducted with philosophical and historical precision, the combination of realism and knowledge of the *possible* together with the identification of *natural kinds* opens two *irresistible* metaphysical philosophical questions.

First, perspectival realism could be complemented by an investigation of the modal space implied by the reliable “modally robust” knowledge about how the target systems could possibly behave. In this regard, one can also ask whether the perspectives are irreducible, possibly opening different modal spaces that are incommensurable. To my understanding, the author seems to maintain that the perspectives could be seen as different methodologies that interlace actually offering *one picture* of the world in *all its modal shades*. This would allow us to maintain the different perspectives, as they offer different modal aspects of the phenomena, while accepting the arrival at a unique focal point, the world. However, I want to suggest that the view presented could be complemented by a perspectival theory of modality that further develops what pertains to the knowledge of the possible and its metaphysics of modality. An account that wants to pick up on this suggestion, exploring the modality implied by perspectival realism, would also allow us to assess the realist import of the account and the domain of the reliable knowledge of science.

A second similar metaphysical concern can be made regarding the nature of *natural kinds*, which, if they remain historically located categories—without any metaphysical ground—, might end up being just *human categories*, saying it with Muhammad Ali Khalidi¹ and not have enough basis in reality to be a basis for stronger inferences. Massimi suggests that the answer to these metaphysical questions might be linked to “lawlike dependencies” or “truth-conducive conditionals-supporting inferences over time” (301). This recalls a causal or a homeostatic view of natural kinds, but the details regarding what are the metaphysical features that allow for such lawlike underpinnings are beyond the scope of the book. This leaves open the question of what a metaphysical picture of *perspectival natural kinds* might look like and whether it can be complemented to other views of kinds present in the literature. These metaphysical questions do not come as criticisms to the account, but rather as suggestions for future metaphysical developments for those that want to complement a perspectival epistemology of science with a perspectival metaphysics.

The second comment regards the broader implications of seeing science within Perspectivalism, which I think represent the most interesting aspect of the book. The idea that science provides knowledge about the world thanks to the interlacing of different perspectives brings in a reflection on how scientific knowledge should be considered and offers directions and new inputs. In this respect, there are two notions that are introduced and worth more work and development in the future. The first is the one concerning the notion of epistemic injustice in science. Massimi introduces two new notions, epistemic severing and

¹ Khalidi, M.A. 2013, *Natural Categories and Human Kinds: Classification in the Natural and Social Sciences*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

epistemic trademarking.² The first relates to cases in which relevant epistemic communities and their import are excluded from contributing to science. The second is when, in order to present (trade) a given scientific theory, a particular view is taken, and the others excluded. For instance, the presentation of classical mechanics as Newtonian, or Newton's, mechanics excludes the contribution provided by other scientists to the field. These kinds of epistemic injustices might happen if one does not consider the perspectival nature of science and the interplay of perspectives that comes with it. The suggestion that there are epistemic injustices typical to science is worthwhile in itself, and future research on the notion of epistemic injustice should take these kinds into account. Moreover, it opens considerations on whether the study of epistemic justice and injustice and epistemic virtues can be applied to institutions and not only to individuals. This comes in with the suggestion that science should move towards a non-classist and non-elitist form and one that considers the scientific endeavour as community-based rather than individual-based. This implies a needed acknowledgement of all the epistemically relevant perspectives as equal in exploring a given target system. Massimi's suggestion is not isolated and has also been explored under the label of "intellectual humility in science" as in a recent work by Nancy Cartwright.³ Applying the same methodology, we could take the contribution of *Perspectival realism* to suggest an important mind shift: we should move from one-scientist-one-science-perspective to a multi-perspective of different cultures, agents and angles, which will allow for the consideration of different perspectives without doing epistemic ranks based on non-epistemic parameters.

This latter implication of the account represents, to me, one of the greatest and most exciting inheritances of this book. It is one that is worth exploring in the future in both the philosophy and the metaphysics of science and that scientists themselves might consider precious for how they approach their own work.

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² Also in Massimi, M. 2023, "Epistemic communities and their situated practices: Perspectival realism - a primer", *Annals of the New York Academic of Sciences.*, 1523 (1), 5-10.

³ Cartwright, N. 2022, *A Philosopher Looks at Science*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dorato, Mauro, *Science and Representative Democracy: Experts and Citizens*. London: Bloomsbury Academics, 2023, pp. 1-208.

While watching TV programmes, listening to the radio, or browsing social media platforms, it is easy to realize how opinionated and prejudiced most of our fellow citizens are and how uninformed and narrow-minded most of the policy-makers. And we apply this to ourselves when we care to be honest. Most citizens lack basic knowledge as to who is in power or what the people for whom they vote have the power to do. Political decisions that are presumed to be legitimate and authoritative are not competently produced by competent political bodies, as they suffer from a vicious circularity. It is indeed a serious problem that people choose their leaders based on poor knowledge, and that these leaders have no interest in fostering it. This is a nail in the coffin for political regimes that are founded on elections and political representation.

It should come as no surprise that there are scholars who claim that the virtues of democracy are grossly overestimated. For example, Jason Brennan sings the praises of epistocracy,¹ a type of government where political power is allotted based on skill and knowledge. Brennan makes an instrumentalist case: epistocracy works better than democracy because it evades the heap of human flaws that make democracy as flawed as humans are. Voters are ill-informed about historical and scientific facts, and this jeopardizes the quality of their collective decision-making. They are usually moved by passions that have little to do with the rationality that proper electoral procedures require. If this were not enough, cognitive biases and fake news pollute electoral campaigns and insinuate more and more the public debate. The solution, Brennan concludes, is to confer power on those who can manage a good wealth of knowledge and are rational enough to employ it when they make political choices.

Mauro Dorato's book *Science and Representative Democracy: Experts and Citizens* shares Brennan's and other epistocrats' concerns but offers a more credible, and certainly less disruptive, alternative. It makes no sense, this book recommends, to do away with the existing representative system. It makes much more sense to add the philosophy of science to all educational curricula. As his case is robust, I would like to summarize Dorato's view of the problem and then briefly go over such an interesting way out.

The mainstay of the book is thought-provoking enough for academics: the internal structures of democracy and science are comparable to the extent that the former could and should model its methods and procedures on the methods and procedures of the latter. Put otherwise, scientific practices offer a blueprint for reforming representative systems. In saying so, Dorato invites readers to separate direct democracy from representative democracy both conceptually and practically. For him, it is a misjudgement to think that direct democracy is a fairer or more complete democratic regime. On the contrary, the juxtaposition of science and democratic politics places arrows in the quiver of democrats who are in favour of indirect participation.

A major methodological assumption of the book—one that will need a more detailed discussion later in this short text—is that “problem-solving represents the essential aim of both scientific knowledge and democratic institutions” (1). Accordingly, the notion of democracy at work in the book takes it that democracy is better than other political regimes because it presupposes comprehensive will-formation processes and therefore the amelioration of social knowledge. Based on this assumption, a well-functioning representative democracy is one in which citizens, with the best possible understanding of social, political, and economic issues, choose their representatives based on trustworthy manifestos or platforms outlining policy positions, goals, and plans if elected.

Based on this notion of representative democracy, Dorato puts forward two central theses. The first is that, because dealing with today's social, political, and economic issues requires a wide variety of competencies and skills, parliamentary representation is preferable to the direct expression of people's will on the huge number of problems that governments deal with. The second thesis is that a well-functioning democratic system should be based on the highest possible level of scientific literacy, which is indispensable to instructing electors when they assess their prospective representatives and those in office based on what the latter say

¹ Brennan, J. 2016, *Against Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

and promise. While the first thesis is justified by the self-evident “fact” of the increasing specialisation of scientific knowledge, the second finds justification in the less evident “fact” that the relevant role of technology within contemporary Western societies calls for more than some familiarity with the history and philosophy of science along with some basic notions of scientific methodology.

Fact one was at the heart of the famous controversy between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s, which is explored in chapter one of *Science and Representative Democracy*. Lippmann expressed serious doubts about the epistemic skills of the informed masses. He was worried about the biased stereotypes used by journalists and their readers to marshal growingly complex knowledge and to obtain coherent interpretations out of this knowledge. While this led him to espouse an epistocracy of statisticians, Dewey pinned hopes in a new type of journalism, which might improve ordinary people’s knowledge of their problems.² For he thought democracy had to do as much with the education of policy-makers and officials as with the education of the public. What was to be reformed, therefore, was the education system. It had to be recentred on that kind of problem-solving that was best expressed by scientific methods.

While Dorato sides with Dewey on education, he is much more cautious when it comes to Dewey’s ideal of democracy as a system that is designed to transform a society into a community. The anonymized conditions of social life and its complexity make it unlikely that “we construct a very large community of traveling people that interacts in a communitarian and constructive way” (21). In a sense, Dorato advocates a toned-down Deweyism pivoted on “those values that are shared by human beings as such. Aims like preserving life on our planet, avoiding destructive world wars, achieving a degree of social justice, ensuring a cooperative society, defending human and animal rights, cultivating enthusiasm for truth-seeking enterprises, and artistic beauty” (21-22). This minimal substantive core, Dorato submits, can be universally shared even without face-to-face interactions. And as far as these values are concerned, he continues, it would be nonsensical to state that only scientists and experts should have a say. To produce stable forms of cooperation, the preferable option remains the scientific education of the public.

Once he has demonstrated that parliamentary representation pursues the democratic ideal better than the two mutually conflicting options of epistocracy and direct democracy, Dorato sets the stage for his more ambitious argument—that is, showing that democracy should be as effective as science is. To this end, in chapter two, he goes to great lengths to show that science works and works well. This is of course not a descriptive but a normative enterprise, as he acknowledges. This parallelism looks particularly ambitious in the way it is articulated by the author:

To claim that a hypothesis is *scientific* entails affirming that it is *rational* (in a normative sense) to accept it so that we *ought* to endorse it by preferring it to competing claims that are regarded as uninformed or pseudoscientific by the scientific community. Analogously, to judge an institution as *democratic* ‘usually’ means to prefer it to other forms of governments, like dictatorships or autocratic regimes, which, for example, systematically kill or torture political opponents and forbid freedom of thought and a free press (25-26).

² On the limited results of this renowned debate, see Friedman, J. 2019, *Power without Knowledge: A Critique of Technocracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

In all evidence, it is the language of “ought” that prevails in the book. Even more importantly, this normative parallelism entails that the “ought” whereby one is expected to accept a scientific hypothesis *is the same as* that whereby one is expected to prefer democracy to tyranny. The justificatory basis for this is the key notion of “controllability”. Just as a scientific hypothesis needs verifying on the part of fellow scientists, so does a political decision need verifying on the part of those who will be affected by its implementation. Controllability is that which bridges the gap between hypothesis and evidence and ensures that impartially tested results may advance science as a shared practice. A scientific hypothesis becomes accredited not because scientists persuade other scientists and in so doing create majority groups, but because empirical results can be scrutinized, criticized, checked, and eventually confirmed or refuted.

Therefore, as far as science is concerned, “a quick elimination of a false belief is advantageous” and this explains why “the epistemic attitude that characterizes a scientific community is the openness to criticism and doubts” (33). To ensure that this virtuous system is not poisoned by scientists who counterfeit results, Dorato offers an accurate description of the scholarly peer review to determine the suitability for publication of academic papers (36-38).³ This is meant to prove that science as a shared practice structurally benefits from mutual control and open criticism. Dorato submits that if citizens were exposed to the theoretical virtues and practical advantages of these methods, this knowledge would rub itself off on the general political culture. On his account, this serves as a robust vindication of the second fact that I summarized above—the one that I qualified as less evident—concerning the key role of the history and philosophy of science as reliable vehicles for the scientific method.

Unfortunately, as Dorato urges, today’s situation looks even worse than in the 1920s. The public debate is infested by adherents to all sorts of conspiracy theories, while a growing number of citizens accept as true fake news without checking the source. Most worryingly, though, people who think they can question scientific theories with unscientific means are being given more and more floor in TV programmes, social media, and newspapers. More than anything, Dorato shows concern about swindlers’ ability to outsmart scientists when they take part in televised debates (89). Here is a difficult choice to make: “On the one hand, scientists should not accept the practice of public debates with incompetent people; on the other, there is the professional duty and commitment to defend and argue for the truth” (89). This predicament, he continues, is worsened by the mushrooming of scientific frauds, especially in biomedical sciences, where mendacious scientists and improvised shamans have people believe that they can easily heal diseases that conventional medicine cannot cure.

If this is a pragmatic circumstance that *prima facie* makes his case more difficult, Dorato is adamant that it reinforces his normative argument: it is the logic of social media that sets the fake scene of a conflict between experts and does not institute any controllable methods to test hypotheses. Like postmodernists at war against science in the 1980s, social media blur the distinction between fact and values and reduce tested scientific truths to interpretations among others. He does

³ While Dorato is certainly alert to the limits of the peer review process, I think his book underestimates them and their inherently political nature. Though I will not discuss this in this review, the wide academic movement “Reviewer 2 Must Be Stopped!” raises a series of concerns that deserve scrutiny.

not deny there being conflicts, in certain circumstances, between non-epistemic values that affect scientific experiments. However, a moment of objectivity persists—which is to say, the objective difference between hypotheses and evidence, which cannot be given the same foothold.

According to Dorato, raising awareness of the difference between hypotheses and evidence, along with trustworthy methods to measure the former against the latter, turns into instructing people on what to trust and why, and how to distinguish the words of experts from those of swindlers. As far as I understand it here, this is one of his major claims. For sure, it is impossible to make people scientifically literate on the wide range of scientific issues that politics must regularly deal with. Nevertheless, what counts the most is people's ability to sense when assertions and theories are supported by empirical evidence or by fraudulent concoctions:

A higher level of scientific literacy would make manipulation of opinion due to disinformation less likely to take place. It would be the best solution to one of the most pressing problems of our society, namely discriminating between the pseudo-experts and the real experts (121).

The last chapter of the book, one of the densest, is entirely devoted to illustrating how the history of philosophy of science can percolate public culture. By canvassing theories and case studies, Dorato makes it plausible to believe that common sense can in the long run be replaced with scientific awareness, one that is expected to kindle citizens' desire to rely on objectivity even in the much less exact field of politics. And yet, this conclusion begs the question: Why on earth should people call for objectivity in politics? Dorato's hypothesis is bold: "The desirability of objective knowledge is justified by the fundamental fact that any practice that has to do with justice in a representative democracy presupposes scientific objectivity" (154).

Here I think is where I cannot bring myself to accept his view of politics, and maybe where the parallelism between science and politics begins to falter. Dorato's proposal is entirely conditional on two presuppositions that lack ultimate demonstration. The first is that politics is a problem-solving device and the second is that representative democracy has basically to do with justice. Unfortunately, this is far from the case. Not only because people are generally prone to irrationality, especially when it comes in handy, but because politics is called upon to decide on areas that can hardly be governed by scientific protocols.

What counts as justice, what is the common good, or what are the values that should be at the basis of our constitutional order; or what counts as life and death, who can impinge on others' life and death as well as their freedom, why we should pay taxes, or even why the state should have authority over one's religious group: these are by no means problems that can be solved with appeals to empirically tested truths. Nor can one send out for peer-reviewing decisions on those issues.

Sure enough, people becoming accustomed to how scientific knowledge is steadily ameliorated, as well as some familiarity with fallibilism, would be beneficial to the electoral system. Citizens would hopefully become less inclined to express their preferences based on false beliefs and would pick up their representatives with greater care. By the same token, well-selected politicians would be

likely to cherish rational decision-making and the common interest. In this sense, *Science and Representative Democracy* is philosophy at its best.

Yet, the fact remains that politics is just as well the field of irrationality and self-interest, and most probably these amendable but indelible aspects structurally belong to human life. Politics is the arena where these features of humanity become manifest and try to gain the upper hand. I believe that political theory, no matter how normative, cannot neglect this feature of human life. This is why the parallelism with science only applies when the most relevant political issues on the basic form of the political existence of a population have been sorted with other means than the methods of hard sciences.

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Relational Liberalism. Democratic Co-Authorship in a Pluralistic World.

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A lot of ink has been spilled to discuss the case for extending marriage rights to same-sex couples. The U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges* has attracted the attention of legal and political theorists, activists, and politicians. Much less has been written on the 2016 institutionalization of civil unions for same-sex couples in Italy. However, as Federica Liveriero demonstrates in her important and welcome book *Relational Liberalism. Democratic Co-Authorship in a Pluralistic World*, the Italian way of formally recognizing same sex-couples has something to say to philosophers working on democratic legitimacy and public justification. It can be seen as an example of principled compromise that expresses the work-in-progress character of democracy (276).

For a long time, it was customary among normative political theorists to dismiss compromises as second-order and unattractive outcomes. Compromises, we were told, express the dirty face of politics, the gifts of guileful and deceptive politicians.¹ Those were the old days, though. A rich and colorful debate on the nature and justification of principled compromises has in fact gained momentum.² Vis-à-vis the messiness of day-to-day political practices, where consensus-based agreements are more and more out of reach, there is room for a more unprejudiced evaluation of compromises as valuable goals for democratic settings. According to Liveriero, for instance, compromised-based political arrangements are welcome outcomes that can assure a minimal standard of reciprocity among the parties involved (217). But not all compromises are like that. Much depends on how we get there. Decent compromises, or, with Liveriero's own words, normatively characterized compromises, "can be defined as those collective decisions that are freely supported by all the parties involved, even though no party considers this decision to be the optimal one" (218). And how can we know that a policy

¹ Cf. Fumurescu, A. 2013, *Compromise: A Political and Philosophical History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Cf. Weinstock, D. 2013, "On the possibility of principled compromise", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 16(4), 537–556. See also, Rostbøll, C.F. 2017, "Democratic respect and compromise", *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20(5), 619–635.

is actually supported as a suboptimal decision by all the parties involved? It is naïve to presume that all relevant parties are always heard. It is better to follow an alternative route: justify some fundamental normative parameters, develop processes in which citizens can be heard for what they say (221), show that those processes have value because they make citizens “recognize one another as sources of valid claims” (119). This is what Liveriero does in *Relational Liberalism*.

The argument on principled compromises comes at the end of a journey across many debates in analytic political philosophy and epistemology that rewards the reader with a revised version of political liberalism—a conception of liberalism primarily concerned with the institutional background of a society, and presented as a view that is independent of metaphysical and religious pre-commitments—that Liveriero, as the book title suggests, names “relational liberalism”. This type of liberalism is “relational” because it revolves around several normative considerations that, taken together, tie the justification of democratic institutions’ claim right to rule with the quality of deliberative interactions between citizens who find themselves in situations where they need to reach some form of agreement over public policies (156). On this account, if we want people from different walks of life to coexist under sufficiently stable political organizations, decision-making processes should ensure that citizens can treat each other “on an equal standing—both morally and epistemically” (287).

This fundamental proposition is built on a new conceptualization of justification as a process with ideal and non-ideal stages. One of the main goals of the book is therefore to develop an original justificatory framework. In the ideal stage, it justifies a normative structure of norms and intersubjective standards. In the non-ideal stage, the framework explains why we can anticipate widespread acceptance of such a normative structure among citizens of actually existing democratic societies (5-7). Specifically, in the ideal stage, reflective equilibrium—a method of reasoning that consists in going back and forth between our considered judgements or intuitions—makes idealized members of a liberal and democratic society agree on the centrality of a series of fundamental organizing ideas like the ideal of a well-ordered society as a fair system of cooperation and the notion of citizens as free and equal (152-155). This step sets the points of reference for the justification of a normative structure that, grounded on such general pillars, can govern processes of “raising and contesting claims and moral intuitions while deliberating as a collective body” (153).

In the non-ideal stage, which concentrates on existing political institutions and individuals who are already members of a democratic society, political philosophers should acknowledge the actual circumstances of politics—social and economic disparities, the risks of inconclusive decision-making processes and indeterminacy, deep and widespread disagreements on issues of shared concern, structural and historical forms of injustice, cognitive shortcuts and biases (86)—and establish whether it is plausible to expect a majority of real-life citizens to agree on a specific interpretation of the normative intuitions at the core of the background framework (159).

In moving around from one chapter to another, one gets the sense that this is a very plausible expectation. This is so because real-life democratic citizens already participate in some practices that mirror the ideal of citizens as co-authors who share both practical and epistemic authority. Despite entrenched disagreements, the regular tendency to align with such practices (as well as the informal norms that tend to shape social and political interactions) supports a bottom-up

legitimation for the liberal background framework (162). Obviously, this is not to say that just out of habit, all democratic decisions are legitimate. In assessing the legitimacy of laws and policies, Liveriero writes, we should also evaluate how political institutions and procedures express their commitment to a conception of political equality as co-authorship.

With this sequence of ideal and non-ideal stages in mind, one may wonder what the book is about: establishing what a well-functioning democracy would look like; or, at a time of increasing skepticism towards democracy as a form of political organization that can address big and complex issues effectively, vindicating the liberal democratic model against alternative political arrangements. In reality, Liveriero follows the lead of John Rawls in thinking that these goals are interconnected. Political philosophy can show how a just society “be like under reasonable favorable but still possible historical conditions”. It can also enable us to understand ourselves as having a certain status that affects our relationship with the social world.³

Liveriero’s idea of political equality as co-authorship, I think, is central to the attainment of the two goals. Political equality as co-authorship motivates constraints to the types and forms of acceptable democratic institutional arrangements. In this way, it helps us to visualize what norms such arrangements should embody. Political equality as co-authorship also inspires judgements on solutions to pressing social and political problems. In particular, Liveriero argues that laws and policies are legitimate when all the individuals subjected to them can be described as authors of those decisions. This is also the ultimate ground for evaluating the 2016 institutionalization of civil unions for same-sex couples in Italy as an instance of principled compromise.

The idea that political equality entails equality of authority or status is not without precedents. There is now a wave of scholarship engaged in demonstrating that democracy derives its authority from the way members of the political community treat one another, inside and outside formal procedures.⁴ For instance, in his *Democratic Equality*, a book that pairs nicely with *Relational Liberalism*, James Lindley Wilson argues that political equality entails something like sincere consideration of citizens’ judgments throughout the entire decision-making processes.⁵ Liveriero follows this wave. But she reads the literature with a rare pair of epistemic lenses. For this reason, her conception of political equality as co-authorship implicates that in a well-functioning democracy, citizens recognize one another as putative authorities, no privileged position is granted to any agent or opinion, procedures treat all citizens as equally relevant members of the community of epistemic trust, and democratic decision-making incorporates valid claims and offers justifications when claims are rejected.

To substantiate her conception of political equality as co-authorship, Liveriero writes seven analytically rigorous and meticulously crafted chapters and a concise conclusion. Chapter 1 introduces the argument, its rationale, goals, and

³ Rawls, J. 2001, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2-4.

⁴ Cf. Kolodny, N. 2014, “Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 42 (3), 195-229. See also, Motchoulski, A. 2021, “Relational Egalitarianism and Democracy”, *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, 18(6), 620-649.

⁵ Wilson, J.L. 2019, *Democratic Equality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

assumptions. Chapter 2 argues first that a full justification of a conception of justice should have a clear and recognizable epistemic method. Then, it demonstrates that Rawls' approach to justification has coherentism—a theory of justification according to which “there are no foundational beliefs, because all justified beliefs are inferentially justified” (53)—as its implicit epistemic background. It is against this backdrop that Liveriero builds her epistemic interpretation of justification in the ideal stage: an idealized discursive back-and-forth determines relationships of dependence between beliefs and the most plausible points of reference for what can count as a properly justified normative framework. Chapter 3 lists the “epistemic nonideal circumstances” of justification. It also gives details on the epistemic understanding of co-authorship. To do so, Liveriero defines epistemic authority. People have epistemic authority, she writes, when what they claim to be true “provides others with sufficient reasons for believing the same themselves” (102). By drawing upon the literature on peer disagreement, she also elucidates her conception of equal standing. In deliberating with one another, we, as epistemic agents, are equally fallible (109-10). Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 spell out the different stages of her justificatory framework. Chapter 4 explains how the ideal and non-ideal stages of justification relate to one another. Chapter 5 engages with debates on the practice of public reason and its scope. On her view, decision-making and democratic processes should be “open to citizens' private reasons” and “compromise-based resolutions to conflicts are welcomed as valid outcomes” (207). It is against this backdrop that Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 can advocate a conception of principled compromise as a justifiable way to solve conflicts in liberal societies marked by pervasive disagreements.

Liveriero's framework is inventive and conceptually sophisticated. Yet, it seems that the non-ideal stage plays only a confirmative, and, perhaps, redundant role. Liveriero's terminological choices support this feeling: the justificatory framework is presented as a sequence of stages (162), but this sequential view excludes the possibility that contextual references to ongoing practices will inform a new cogent normative structure. The non-ideal stage does not add much to the general construction. It is simply one of the possible ways to validate what philosophers have already found in the ideal stage.

I am very sympathetic to the non-exclusionary ambition of Liveriero's account. On her view, a commitment to co-authorship entails that citizens are treated as putative epistemic authorities. In virtue of this fundamental condition, they are entitled to have the same impact on decision-making processes that affect them directly. Here, I disagree. Co-authors of papers and books do not always impact equally on the outcome. And this is not such a big deal. What matters is that they have shared responsibility for the result. Shared responsibility, though, does not require equal impact.

This being said, there is no doubt that Liveriero has succeeded in setting the agenda for future philosophical thinking at the intersection between epistemology and normative political theory. *Relational Liberalism* deserves to be warmly received by scholars of political liberalism, democratic legitimacy, and public justification.