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Is the Demand for Reasonableness Unreasonable?

Abstract

The paper starts with a consideration of Rawls' ideal theory in the background of the criticisms that has received. Both the realist and the critical theory objections to ideal are analyzed, but the latter is the focus of the argument. While the author rescues ideal theory from the accusation of ideology, she remarks that a well-developed analysis of non-ideal theory is needed to account the persistent inequalities and injustices of present democracy. Then she tests her argument on the issue of reasonableness that is so important in Rawls' *Political Liberalism*. Reconstructing reasonableness in the context of ideal theory and then moving to the non-ideal conditions, enables one to perceive a specific kind of injustice, namely epistemic injustice linked to the diminished epistemic authority attributed to citizens from oppressed groups. Once detected, we can turn back to ideal theory and see which resources can be made use of for uprooting this kind of injustice: fair equality of opportunity, and a focus on the primary good of the social basis of self-respect to remedy unequal epistemic standing – whatever the social basis of self-respect implies in terms of political action. Overcoming epistemic injustice would make the civic virtue of reasonableness attainable.

Keywords: ideal/non-ideal theory, realism, critical theory, societal culture, reasonableness, epistemic injustice.

1. Introduction

In the wide discussion of Rawls's work, a prominent issue is the distinction between ideal and non-ideal theory. Ideal theory provides the picture of a perfectly just society, constructed not just on abstraction but on idealizations and on the assumption of perfect compliance with

the principles of justice. By contrast non-ideal theory considers actual non-compliance and the unfavorable social circumstances of real societies and develops arguments meant to overcome the actual obstacles to justice in social reality. With the exception of the second parts of *The Law of Peoples (LOP)*, Rawls's work almost exclusively focused on ideal theory regarding distributive and political justice, meant to provide an ideal to which actual societies should aim.

This way of doing political theory has been at the center of a heated debate among scholars both in the Rawlsian tradition and belonging to different traditions. Among the latter, two main lines of criticism can be pointed out: the realist critique, and the critical theory critique. Both realists and critical theorists find fault with the abstract normative level of the analysis; but while the realist critique is basically methodological and in favor of a direct examination of the empirical reality, doing away with any idealization, the critical theory literature contends that Rawls's ideal theory is indeed a form of ideology. According to this view, the idealization makes it impossible to perceive and deal with actual social injustice. Whether this is a crucial defect of ideal theory or a disguise for social injustice induced by the interests of a specific section of the population, namely the white-man section, it does not change the fact that ideal theory is unfit to promote effective justice in real society.

I will especially focus on this second line of critique. While I share the view that certain forms of injustice are not grasped from the ideal theory perspective, I shall instead attempt to rescue the latter from the accusation of ideology. I hold that the ideal level of the normative theory is important and provides us with an ideal model of a just and well-ordered society toward which we should tend. The ideal theory, however, is not enough, and the non-ideal theory cannot simply consist in adding empirical complications to which normative principles should contextually apply. I shall argue for a non-ideal theory that can make sense of why the basic principles and values of political liberalism, though *prima facie* widely shared in liberal society, nevertheless come to be twisted in the life of actual democracies, allowing unjustified inequalities and constant instances of misrecognition.

In order to illustrate how ideal theorizing can be rescued from these criticisms, I shall test my proposal focusing on another fundamental Rawlsian concept, namely reasonableness. The notion of reasonable-

ness, the attitude of reciprocity among citizens, represents one of the grounding tenets of the political version of liberalism, crucial both in the justification of *Political Liberalism* (PL) and in the civic relationships between citizens of a well-ordered society. I shall ask whether reasonableness as a civic virtue turns out to be an unreasonable request in the actual circumstances of our society, being on the one hand too unrealistic, and on the other possibly too demanding. In societies riven by deep asymmetries of status, race, gender and so on, reciprocity and mutual trust seem to be scarce commodities and not simply because of bad will.

My paper will thus proceed as follows: section 1 will take up the ideal/non-ideal theory debate, considering especially the realist critique. section 3 will focus on the criticism of the ideal theory as an ideology and will argue against it, notwithstanding the acknowledgement of useful remarks from critical theory. In section 4, I shall propose the non-ideal level of analysis of the societal culture as the actual context where certain injustices are produced and maintained and where the principles and values of the ideal theory are twisted by contextual understandings and distortions. In this way I should be able to rescue ideal theory from the charge of ideology, while suggesting an independent line of non-ideal inquiry into actual societies. In section 5, I shall exemplify my argument focusing on reasonableness, which plays such a crucial role in the complex architecture of PL, as a moral and epistemic ability of the idealized agent. After a brief rehearsal of the multilayered meanings of reasonableness, in section 6, I would ask how the civic virtue of reasonableness might fare in the circumstances of actual societies, where epistemic injustice is present and the ability to advance one's reasons so unequally distributed. In the final section 7, I conclude arguing that reasonableness can help to address and overcome epistemic injustice, which, in turn, will make the pursuit of the civic virtue of reasonableness a possible and desirable aim.

2. Ideal/Non-ideal theory and the realist critique

As is well known, ideal theory not only employs ideals, as all normative theories do, and not only makes use of abstraction, as all theorizing does, but also considers components of the theory, viz. persons, under an idealized description, thus doing away with all the complications of empirical

variations and contextual characteristics. Yet, the idealized description must not be arbitrary, for it should take stock of known facts about individuals, so as to propose the well-known realistic utopia (*LoP*). Dispensing with the actual circumstances is precisely required by idealization. Beside idealization, ideal theory imagines full compliance with justice requirements: in other words, ideal theory depicts a just and well-ordered society the fulfillment of which depends on citizens fully complying with justice. Non-ideal theory, instead, concerns conditions of non-compliance in actual society, which not only makes society less just, but also may require different duties of citizens.¹ More generally, non-ideal theory deals with the actual circumstances of the empirical reality of ongoing liberal democratic society, and tries to propose guidelines to rectify injustice and moving society towards the ideal. According to Rawls, ideal theory is required to provide non-ideal theory with an aim, the aim of moving towards a perfectly just and well-ordered society, which would be lacking if the model of a perfectly just structure was not available (*PL*, 285). Yet, how ideal theory fares in the actual circumstances of real democracies is an open question. The assumption of citizens as rational and reasonable, for example, seems contradicted by the findings in cognitive science, showing that human reasoning is prone to all kinds of biases and prejudices. A normative conception of agency ignoring such findings has been argued to undermine Rawls's very project of the realistic utopia (Ancell 2019).

The concern for the lack of realism is in fact widespread both among critics of Rawls (for example: Farrelly 2007; Horton 2010; Bellamy 2018) and among Rawlsian scholars and those who are sympathetic to the Rawlsian approach (among others: Robeyns 2008, Stemplowska 2008, Valentini 2009; Hamlin and Stemplowska 2012). This concern can be further specified as the *feasibility question*, namely the risk of proposing unattainable ideals (Valentini 2012, 659). In turn, the feasibility question may refer either to Rawls's exclusive focus on justice, at the expense of other political components, or to the ideal-theorizing approach to justice which may produce inapplicable principles. In the former case,

¹ This non-compliance aspect of non-ideal theory admittedly has not been dealt with by Rawls, but rather it has emerged in later discussions especially in R. Jubb (2012, 234 ff).

important political ideals such as peace and security are disregarded, actually missing out the *raison-d'être* of politics as the management of conflict (Galston 2010; Horton 2010). In the latter case, the ideal theory would turn out to be practically useless, given that the point of political theory is to inform political reality with its principles (Valentini 2012).²

Following the thread of the feasibility criticism of ideal theory, it would seem that the realist approach would basically consist in pursuing a non-ideal level of theorizing, responding to political reality as it is, doing away with idealizations and impossible objectives. However, that is not exactly the case. The realist criticism of the ideal/non-ideal theory divide regards a methodological disagreement about how political theory should be developed. *First of all*, realists such as Robert Jubb (2012), Enzo Rossi (2019) and Matt Sleat (2016) stress that the realist approach cannot be equated to non-ideal theory; the realist approach is a different way of conducting the political theory enterprise, based on the autonomy of politics, that is, on a clear separation between politics and morality, and advocating a non-moralized approach to politics. While a moralized approach translates moral ideals, such as respect, reciprocity, fairness into political theorizing, a non-moralized approach makes use of distinctively political ideals, such as peace, war, conflict, disagreement, and tries to solve the issue of a peaceful coexistence in given circumstances. In that respect, realist theory is also normative, but employs a specific type of normativity different from moral normativity. According to the realist, the problem with ideal theory does not lie in its abstractness from political reality, but in the moral ideals it embodies. By contrast, realistic theories assume the reality of pervasive conflict and not of a moralized view of human beings as its starting point.³ *Secondly*, ideal theory is interpreted as full compliance with the principles of justice, while non-ideal theory must unravel the duties people have in a

² Among Rawlsian scholars, the concern for the feasibility question is intertwined with the concern that the introduction of too many real-life considerations in the circumstances of justice may produce principles which lean too much to the status quo (Robeyns 2008; Stemplowska 2008; Valentini 2009).

³ The distinction between abstractness and moralized idealization is exemplified by considering the theories of Hobbes and Locke: the first abstract but realistic, the second idealized and moralized.

society characterized, at best, by partial compliance with justice (Jubb 2012). In this respect, non-ideal theory turns out to be undetermined, for it does not allow singling out well-defined duties to individuals in the circumstances of non-compliance, nor how to transition from an unjust society to a just and well-ordered society. In other words, if subscribed to, the critique by realists should lead a student out of the ideal/non-ideal theory view towards an altogether different perspective to look at political reality where the concern for justice is far from been predominant and where political ideals concern the solution of conflict and of coordination problems. Since I do not share this altogether different perspective of doing political theory, as I hold that political theorizing should deal with ideals such as freedom and equality which are moral as well as political, I leave the realist critique of ideal/non-ideal theory and turn to the critical theory critique.

3. Ideal theory as an ideology?

If the realist criticism of the ideal/non-ideal theory is methodological, the critique of critical theorists points to more substantive defects in ideal theory, above all that of obscuring many forms of social inequalities and corresponding injustices. This criticism develops from an earlier position by Onora O'Neill on abstractions and idealizations that, though not referring to Rawls's ideal theory, has later become used in its discussion (O'Neill 1987). In O'Neill's argument, normative theory cannot avoid the recourse to abstractions, but must do away with idealizations. While abstraction means bracketing a certain empirical messiness in order to construct the theory, by idealization O'Neill means picking certain traits and characters of an object, at the expense of others, thus idealizing the object represented. For example, the representation of the human agent as fully rational, making choice after reflection and deliberation, is an idealization which stresses some aspects of agency that a) do not correspond to how individual agents actually behave in daily life, hence it is false as general model of agency, and b) imposes an ideal model unattainable by people who have suffered oppression and domination, hence contributing to the persistence of that oppression. This remark is precisely what made O'Neill's view of idealization so interesting for criticizing Rawls's ideal theory by crit-

ical theorists, feminists and race-theory scholars (among others: McCarthy 2004; Mills 2005 and 2017; Schwartzmann 2006). In general, critical theory is concerned that ideal theory does not seem to properly contemplate forms of injustice different from economic inequalities, and pluralism different from religious pluralism and philosophical disagreements. Consequently, ideal theory does not address, and actually disguises, the issues of gender, race, ethnicities, sexual orientation, that is, all those inequalities derived from ascriptive social differences, and causing an impairment of the equal status of citizenship, generally linked to groups with a history of oppression and discrimination.⁴

The sharpest example of this criticism is the argument developed by Charles Mills (2005) who maintains that ideal theory is indeed an ideology. Mills, referring back to O'Neill's distinction between abstraction and idealization, starts with disambiguating two possible meanings of ideal theory: in the first 'ideal' is used as an exemplary descriptive model of an object, roughly corresponding to the Weberian ideal-type; in the second case instead 'ideal' means 'idealized model'. "Ideal theory either tacitly represents the actual as simple deviation from the ideal, not worth theorizing in its own right, or claims that starting from the ideal is the best way of realizing it" (*ibidem*, 168). Consequently, the ideal approach leads to an idealized social ontology and to idealized human capacities concurring to silencing social oppression and instead projects ideal social institutions that would work only under strict compliance. More specifically, the idealized agent is tailored on a special type of citizen, namely the white and well-educated male, while it excludes other types of human beings such as non-white and women, for example, and such specific idealization, while making these different groups invisible to the ideal theory analysis, also prevents people from seeing certain types of injustice. In other words, Mills sees ideal theory as germane to *German Ideology* (Marx and Engels 1967), and, like Hegel's idealism, it needs to be turned upside down in order to provide

⁴ That distributive justice is insufficient to repair the inequality of status has been the focus of many works starting with Iris Marion Young (1990; 2000) and going on with Nancy Fraser (1995; 2000; Fraser and Honneth 2003) up to Charles Mills (1997; 2005; 2017) and race theory (for example: Boxhill 2003; Darby-Rury 2018; Zach 2003).

guidelines to bring about justice. Thus, far from being the best way of conducting normative thinking, as Rawls contends, ideal theory is a form of ideology in the pejorative sense of false consciousness, that is, a complex of distorted ideals, beliefs and values corresponding to the interests of a small section of the population, namely the well-to-do white males who are overrepresented in the academic world. Such distortion need not be an intentional manipulative product, but simply reflects the social position of privilege resulting in a specific experience of the social world confused as the social world tout court. In sum, ideal theory not only is useless for the pursuit of social justice across race, gender, ethnicities etc., but, moreover, is complicit in perpetuating social inequalities and injustices. In the alternative, normative theory should be non-ideal and take off from actual oppression and from the perspectives of those who experience oppression.

Mills's extreme criticism is however not shared by all thinkers sympathetic to critical theory. For example, James Boettcher (2009), referring to the more detailed analysis of ideology by Shelby (2003), contends that the idealizations of citizens as free and equal endowed with the two moral powers is not an ideological representation since it does not follow from it that ideal theory reinforces existing structures of racial power. Take the example of color-blind/color-sensitive policies. Certainly, in Rawls's ideal theory racial discriminations are barred, hence there is no need of color sensitive policies such as affirmative action at that ideal level of theorizing; but this does not imply that non-ideal theory, considering racial discrimination in actual society, is prevented from recurring to color-sensitive policies. In this respect, ideal theory provides the theoretical tool for dealing with such injustice, in Boettcher's view: the principle of fair equality of opportunity, for example, provides the theoretical resources for justifying color-sensitive policies. Boettcher acknowledges that ideal theory does not provide an account for persistent racial (and gender) injustices; yet he holds that this lacuna cannot be imputed to an ideological evasion but rather to the division of labor between the ideal theorizing which is a normative construction of how a just society would work in ideal circumstances, and non-ideal theory which has the task of considering persisting injustice in real society. Nevertheless, he agrees with Mills and other critical theorists that ideal theory is objection-

able with reference to the assumption of 'basic' facts, taken for granted by any normative theory, but which are never innocent. As McCarthy extensively argues (2004), facts are always seen through the lenses of preexistent views, conventional wisdom, tradition. Hence, when citizens are discussing political matters in the light of the public conception of justice, unexamined facts, say about gender or race differences, may surreptitiously distort judgment of race and gender. As a result, though political justifications may satisfy the requirement of public reason, they may nevertheless embody unwarranted judgments about race or other forms of oppression (Boettcher 2009, 255). In sum, critical theory holds ideal theory defective and inherently obscuring actual conditions of injustice, and for some scholars the defect amounts to ideological distortion properly.

I think it is uncontroversial that ideal theory does not directly address many kinds of social injustice, mostly linked with ascriptive differences of groups with a history of subordination, yet I do not agree that this amounts to ideological evasion. Rather, the open question is whether ideal theory can provide some useful normative grip to face injustice in the non-ideal theory. I shall criticize the ideology view of ideal theory and then take up the open question.

My interpretation of the gap that critical theorists have detected between ideal theorizing and non-ideal social circumstances is not due to the distortion of the facts, concepts and values constituting the basic bricks of theory construction caused by the objective social interests of a privileged class and consequent perspectival perceptions of society. Viewing ideal theory as an ideology in this sense implies that ideal theory is not only useless (not addressing urgent matters and not action-guiding), but in fact misleading and false, hence a theoretical enterprise to be disposed of, if we want to gain a normative grip on social injustice in the appropriate and accurate way. Instead I claim that that there is nothing wrong with ideal theory, as well as with the ideals and principles on which it is grounded. What is problematic is rather the way in which normative ideals, grounding the political conception of liberalism, actually become embodied and twisted in the societal culture of ongoing societies, that is the network of social norms, conventions, social standards and practices sustaining social coordination in a specific

historical moment of a society.⁵ While the supporters of ideal theory as ideology see the values and idealizations as distortions embedded in the situated privileged perspective of the philosopher, representing the objective interests of a privileged section of the population, I argue that the principles and values of the ideal theory are not distorted, yet come to be twisted in their encoding in the prevalent system of norms, conventions and meanings of the societal culture and to that twisting the persistent social inequalities and injustices are to be imputed. In brief, I think that ideal theory is alright, but that it should be supplemented by work from below, so to speak, that is, by a non-ideal theory providing an interpretive-normative analysis of the gray area of the societal culture.

As to the question whether ideal theory comprises normative clues to be used in non-ideal theory, some scholars believe that, if properly stretched, Rawls's ideal theory can provide the lever to uproot actual social injustice, as Boettcher has proposed with reference to the notion of fair equality of opportunity. Others have pointed out that the social basis of self-respect, enlisted among the primary goods to be distributed, would imply a fight against discrimination, marginalization and exclusion which prevent people from being granted the proper basis for developing a sense of their own worth (Liveriero 2019; Schemmel 2019). I hold that the stretching can be done, at least up to a point, but that in order to do the stretching actual forms of oppression in real society must previously be detected and analyzed, and this is precisely the task of non-ideal theory. In other words, it is only by comparing non-ideal theorizing with the ideal theory toolkit that certain resources of ideal theory can be activated in the justifications of remedial policies for actual injustice. In this respect, the problem is the proper development of the non-ideal theory.

⁵ The term 'societal culture' comes from Will Kymlicka (1995), but in the Marxist tradition Gramsci's 'cultural hegemony' and Althusser 'State's ideological apparatus' point to the same social network where power relations are maintained by a block of norms and conventions (Gramsci 1971; Althusser 2006).

4. *Non-ideal theorizing and the societal culture*

I shall now explain 1) how the principles and ideals of the ideal theory come to be twisted in the societal culture, 2) how the analysis of the societal culture represents a fundamental dimension of the non-ideal theory which can supplement ideal theory; 3) how the non-ideal theory may activate theoretical resources from ideal theory to uproot actual social injustices.

As said, Rawls's ideal theory provides the normative reasoning grounding a well ordered and just society, developed under idealized conditions on the basis of two model-conceptions: a) the idea of citizens as free and equal and b) the notion of a well-ordered society as a fair system of cooperation. However, the consideration of citizens as free and equal and of society as a fair system of cooperation though entrenched in constitutional charts and in the political ideas of the vast majority of the population, do not deliver their promise in actual societies. The reason for the gap between ideal theory and actual society is not simply due to the complications and intricacies of empirical reality. As is well known, within ideal theory, such principles and values are considered as strictly political in order to avoid epistemic and metaphysical controversies and to provide a freestanding justification of political liberalism, that is, one that is independent from the many comprehensive doctrines present in contemporary pluralism. Keeping the focus of the ideal theory to a strictly political domain allows Rawls to address the problem of reasonable pluralism, by bracketing all the contentious comprehensive views in the justification of the liberal political order. In actual societies, however, the political values and principles on which the justification of the well-ordered society is constructed are not preserved from contamination by the wide area of social norms, cultural practices, customs, social standards, shared meanings and understandings that contextually regulate the interpretation and application of the political principles in a given society at a given time. I argue that it is precisely in this area where the gap between ideal and non-ideal is placed, and which critical analysis should bring to light. Only the interpretive-normative analysis of that wide area that I shall call the societal culture, after Kymlicka (1995), can explain how the principles of liberty and equality – embodied in constitutional norms and widely acknowledged by citizens as values – happen

to be twisted in the actual life of liberal democracy so that not all persons enjoy the equal status of citizenship and the equal respect which follows from it. In my reading, the twisting takes place not because universal ideals and principles are actually only a disguise for particular interests of a special class of people. Rather, in non-conspiratorial fashion, I think that the abstract concept of a person and of a citizen has been automatically filled with the familiar representative of the ruling class in the understanding of the people controlling the social norms and conventions of that moment. Think, for example, of the universal declarations of rights of the late eighteenth century: though framed in universalistic language, encompassing all humankind, they were actually understood as concerning not all human beings, but 'men' or better a special type of man, namely the gentleman, the white, Christian, well-educated representative of the ruling class. It is not universalism that is false and ideological, rather it is the twisting of universalism into a specific model of 'man', taken as the obvious and proper representative of humankind. As a result of the twisting, the persons to consider free and equal, entitled to citizenship rights, deserving equal consideration and respect had been originally a quite exclusive club, excluding ample sections of the population. In other words, the embodiment of the abstract idea of person in the 'gentleman' had reduced the scope of equal citizenry and explains why all groups whose appearance and outward behavior did not square with the model of the person, ideally embodied by the male member of the ruling class, had been excluded from equal rights as well as from full citizen-status: women, the poor, Jews, non-whites, homosexuals just to name a few. In other words, the universality is not a disguise for the particularity: rather, a specific particularity has infiltrated the universality; thus, the universal value of human rights has to be recovered from its twisted particular embodiment where it has been confined in actual society.

The societal culture is then the proper object of the non-ideal theory, for it is there that asymmetries of power, beyond economic inequalities, can properly be seen and grasped. From the perspective of the ideal theory that starts from the consideration of persons as free and equal members in the moral and political community, instead, only economic inequalities come to the fore when constructing the theory of justice, whereas other forms of inequalities linked to status, race, gender, ethnicities and sexual

orientation are dissolved in the very premises of the theory. It is clear to me that neither *Theory of Justice (TJ)* nor *PL* admit such inequalities; but, given that they are excluded from the very premises of the ideal theory, the latter is not equipped to perceive them. While the theory of justice is focused to deal with economic inequalities, it is silent when it comes to the injustices produced by racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and the like. It is silent pour cause, for those inequalities are *ex ante* done away with in the very normative premises of the theory. I would add that the premise of persons as free and equal is not arbitrary, nor unrealistic, for it is actually entrenched in liberal democratic constitutions, and I would say also widely shared as an abstract principle by the people, though not necessarily acted upon and translated into practices of reciprocity. Yet, such a shared and cherished political ideal comes to be polluted by the prevalent social norms, practices and standards, which are controlled by the ruling class and which simply discount some groups as full-blown citizens or as first-class citizens.

So far, I have argued that ideal theory is not an ideology, but that it needs to be supplemented by a critical analysis of the societal culture where ideals and values are distorted by prevalent norms, conventions and standards and where inequalities of various kinds, not just economic, but especially of status and social considerations are produced, thus impairing equal citizenship. I have also explained why ideal theory is silent on these kinds of injustice, given its premises. Certainly, ideal theory is not equipped *to perceive* certain inequalities, and, in a sense, this is not necessarily a fault for we must admit that it is not the task of a normative ideal theory to provide a detailed positive analysis of current injustices. My question is rather whether such a blind spot in arguing for principles of justice also implies that ideal theory *cannot provide normative resources* to fight actual injustice. As said before, I think that within Rawls's ideal theory there are actually tools that can help to construct arguments to fight actual injustice, yet such tools must be normatively activated thanks to the analysis provided by the critical non-ideal theory. I have already mentioned that the principle of fair equality of opportunity may be a building block in an argument in favour of color- and gender-sensitive policies; similarly, the social basis of self-respect as a primary good may be the grounding value for arguments about social recognition of equal status. The normative resources are present, at least up to a point, and

yet they require a sort of switching on via the critical (interpretive-normative) analysis of actual injustices. In this way the non-ideal and the ideal theory enter into a sort of reflective equilibrium where, on the one hand, the unfulfilled principles of the ideal theory guide the analysis of actual societies to detect injustices; on the other hand, the resulting critical analysis makes it possible to search for ideal normative resources to be activated; thus normative arguments based on the tools of ideal theory and on the critical analysis of non-ideal theory can be developed aiming at remedying injustices and approximating the ideal.

5. *Reasonableness*

As an example of the complex relation between ideal and non-ideal theory, I shall now take up reasonableness that is a crucial component of ideal theory, and see how it is affected by the actual circumstances of real society. I wonder whether this ideal should be dismissed when confronted with unjust circumstances or whether, after a critical analysis of the obstacles to its application, it may instead be useful both to address those injustices and to inform social reform uprooting inequalities. As is widely known, Rawls defines the reasonable as one of the two moral powers of persons, the other being the rational (*PL*, 48 ff). While the rational is the ability to find adequate means for a consistent set of ends, allowing individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good, the reasonable is the attitude for proposing fair terms of cooperation to others and the willingness to abide by them, provided that others will do the same. The moral component of the reasonable is thus the attitude of reciprocity, grounded on the consideration of all people as free and equal; yet reasonableness includes also an epistemic component derived from the acknowledgment of the burdens of judgement – that is, all the hazards and obstacles affecting the free exercise of human reason (*PL*, 56-57). Once reasonable agents acknowledge the burdens of judgment, they understand the fact of reasonable pluralism and are willing to adopt a tolerant attitude towards different views and opinions and, at the same time, they acquire the motivation “to support the idea of public reason”. Reasonable citizens, respecting others’ divergent views, are prepared to provide other citizens with reasons they can share, hence within the bound of public reason.

So far, Rawls's presentation of the reasonable is as an attribute of agents and as a component of practical reason (*PL*, 48-59). Moreover, 'reasonable' is also an attribute of doctrines, in so far as doctrines are the result of the exercise of theoretical as well as practical reason. Hence, we have reasonable comprehensive doctrines, making up reasonable pluralism, and unreasonable doctrines, which are instead outside reasonable pluralism. Reasonableness is what makes the political freestanding justification of *PL* possible, recommending the exclusion of comprehensive doctrines from the political justification, since they cannot be shared by all. Then, in the second stage of the justificatory strategy of *PL*, reasonableness plays a further role both as an agent's attribute and as an attribute of doctrines, for the overlapping consensus can be produced only by reasonable agents working out the justification, linking their own reasonable comprehensive doctrines with the conception of justice. In this way, Rawls shows that from a reasonable pluralism of potentially conflicting comprehensive doctrines it is nevertheless possible to find a political agreement on constitutional essentials and on a shared conception of justice or, at least, on a family of reasonable conceptions of political justice (Gaus and Van Schoelandt 2017).

It is precisely at this point that a first concern about reasonableness has been raised by Rawls's commentators. If the full political justification of *PL* is limited to reasonable people holding reasonable doctrines, it seems that the boundaries of the political justification are too restricted: what is the fate of people holding unreasonable doctrines? Are they excluded from liberal society? This problem has been extensively dealt with in the literature (Kelly and McPherson 2001; Quong 2004; Sala 2013; Colborne 2015; Liveriero 2020). Without getting here into the intricacies of this debate, I share Kelly-McPherson's view that a distinction must be drawn between philosophical reasonableness and political reasonableness. Doctrines or points of views may be unreasonable according to the standard rules of reasoning, but only political reasonableness, namely the attitude of those who are prepared to respect the greatest range of equal basic rights for all, should count for public justification and for a wider conception of toleration. If Kelly and McPherson's more inclusive justification still limits toleration to the politically reasonable, I would push toleration beyond the politically reasonable. Even though the full justification of political liberalism cannot appeal to political-

ly unreasonable agents, those who do not feel bound by fair terms of cooperation, nevertheless toleration should apply to them as well, as long as they refrain from acting violently. Toleration can be grounded not only for the right reasons, backed by respect and reciprocity, but also on prudential arguments which make toleration precisely a form of *modus vivendi*, as Rawls would put it, and yet worth pursuing for the sake of peaceful coexistence with unreasonable people (Galeotti and Liveriero 2021). On the same line, Giovanola and Sala (2021) have proposed to consider unreasonable people as representing a continuum going from the partially reasonable to the non-reasonable to the unreasonable and have proposed more inclusive terms of justification, addressed also to the partially reasonable and to the non-reasonable. In sum, with reference to the public justification of *PL*, sympathetic interpreters of Rawls have proposed to widen the boundaries of the constituency addressed by *PL* justification.

Another response to the concern about the exclusion of unreasonable people and of unreasonable doctrines from full political justification consists in pointing out that Rawls's argument is located in the ideal theory: reasonableness applies primarily there and the assumption of reasonable pluralism and reasonable citizens represents the idealized description of society and persons. This line of response, however, is exposed to the question of how reasonableness, of people and of doctrines, fares in non-ideal circumstances. And, at this point, the problem of what can be done with unreasonable citizens resurfaces. In other words, we cannot simply confine reasonableness inside ideal theory, bracketing non-ideal circumstances out of our concern.

Besides grounding the justification of *PL*, reasonableness is crucial for the legitimacy of liberal democratic society, for reasonableness is the grounds for public reason. In other words, political discussions and political decisions in the appropriate political fora should refer exclusively to public reason for justifying political decisions in terms that can be understandable by all. If public reason pertains to the appropriate political fora, the attitude of reasonableness should inform the relations among citizens as well, when exchanging opinions and dealing with their different viewpoints. If citizens consider each other as free and equal and in a fair scheme of reciprocity, reasonableness, in the form of the exchange of reasons, is then required as a civic virtue for treating each other as equals.

Thus, so far, reasonableness's role is crucial at different junctures of the justification of *PL*, as well as crucial in granting the legitimacy of political decisions in the background of public reason. Finally, it plays a role in making civic relations respectful and in providing tools for dealing with disagreement. In sum reasonableness not only allows that persons with different comprehensive views can reach an agreement on the political basic principles regulating liberal democracy, but also provides the theoretical tools and the appropriate attitude to deal with disagreement among citizens, keeping their divergent perspectives in a framework of mutual respect and civic friendship.

At this point, another concern about reasonableness is raised, namely the dismissal of conflict as a crucial component of a healthy democracy. This criticism, derived from the perspective of agonistic democracy (Connolly 1995; Tully 1995; Mouffe 1999), is taken on board by realists who take issue with Rawls's idealization and considers *PL*'s approach to differences and disagreements as too conciliatory and consent-oriented.

I shall not discuss this criticism here, important as it is, for I intend to concentrate on a different line of concerns related to the fact that reasonableness would represent an ideal which is not neutral among the many social differences present in our society and which does not allow one to see and consider certain kinds of injustice.

6. *Is reasonableness fair?*

The point I want to raise refers specifically to the discussion on ideal/non-ideal theory considered in the previous sections. Given the shift that I have stressed in the passage from ideal to non-ideal theory, how would reasonableness fare in a non-ideal world where society embodies relevant inequalities of status? Would the ideal of reasonableness be applicable to citizens in the real world or would the actual inequalities make reasonableness unattainable or even futile? Is reasonableness a human power equally available to all, or, in the actual unjust circumstances, is hardly accessible to all? And in case it was not accessible to people situated in a disadvantaged position, is it then fair to posit reasonableness as the civic virtue that should inform citizens' relation?

As said above, Rawls speaks of reasonableness as one of the moral powers, as one component of practical reason, and as such as a human ability. We know, however, that not all humans can develop their potential in unfavorable circumstances: reasonableness implies reciprocity, which in turn refers to equality of respect among persons. In actual social contexts, where inequalities are abundant and often entrenched in ascriptive differences, the attitude of listening to and considering each other's argument seriously and of imputing putative epistemic authority to other citizens cannot be taken for granted as the ideal to which actual circumstances could tend and adhere.⁶ For in actual circumstances there are effective obstacles to even an approximate fulfillment of this ideal. Such obstacles have been the subject of a recently developed area of study, that of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Hookway 2010; Dotson 2011; Anderson 2012; Goetze 2018). Briefly, epistemic injustice is the case when someone is considered a less than reliable source of information and belief for the processes of the formation of knowledge and, moreover, she is lacking in the resources to account for her own experience and to claim justice in the face of her own misrecognition. Epistemic injustice induces asymmetrical relations in epistemic standing between citizens, and those who find themselves in a subordinate position suffer the following kinds of harms: a) the harm of feeling powerless and lacking a voice; b) the related damage to one's personal identity and self-respect, and c), the harm induced by being considered not worth being heard and believed. Since in order to raise a claim of justice, a voice is required, people suffering from epistemic injustice lack the very premise to advance such a claim, let alone to be listened and attended to, making such injustice invisible. In sum, epistemic injustice makes people feel themselves, as well as perceived by others, as epistemically unequal or, to put it bluntly, inferior, and this circumstance deeply affects the political equality of all citizens. We can in fact support a defi-

⁶ The concept of 'putative epistemic authority', spelled out by Liveriero's reading of a Rawlsian account of liberal legitimacy (2020), rests on the acknowledgment that reasonable disagreement is a likely outcome of collective-decision settings and that, therefore, reasonable citizens, in accepting the limits of their epistemic abilities, should be ready to share political and epistemic authority with their fellow citizens in decision-making processes.

nition of equal respect that demands individuals to reciprocally ascribe to each other the status of both practical and epistemic authorities, and that would not admit these asymmetries in epistemic standing.

Specifically, I want to stress that the misrecognition of people as putative epistemic authorities is not only due to the lack of educational opportunities of certain people, with the subsequent lack of self-reliance and self-confidence, derived from being undereducated. In fact, it is especially membership in certain groups with a history of oppression and subordination, and still targeted with prejudice and bias and implicit forms of discrimination, that is the main cause of, respectively, feeling and being treated as epistemically inferior. If members of certain groups, on the one hand, encounter serious obstacles to develop their own voice, and, on the other, their testimony is not taken seriously by other citizens and by representatives of political institutions (police, courts, politicians), then it seems that reasonableness is too remote an ideal in the actual circumstances of contemporary democracy. Moreover, it seems that the request for reciprocity, implied by reasonableness, may turn into condescension by those endowed with epistemic power, and, at the same time, is unavailable to those who are systematically discounted as reliable sources of information and knowledge. How can it be asked of those who are systematically disrespected to meet others half-way, when their reasons are not even attended to? Should we conclude that reasonableness, as the whole of ideal theory, is just an ideology in the pejorative sense, as has been argued by Charles Mills (2005)?

A Rawls' defender may respond that, in fact, the issues raised by the study of epistemic justice are actually taken care of in *PL*. Firstly, the consideration of the citizen as free and equal excludes the asymmetrical consideration of others as epistemically inferior, and secondly, fair equality of opportunity should provide each citizen with fair educational resources, so as to realize the ideal of political equality, allowing each person to be ascribed the status of putative epistemic authority along with the recognition of their autonomy and equal dignity. Hence, even if normative ideal theory does not specifically cover this injustice, on the one side, it prevents considering citizens on an unequal footing, and, on the other, it points out an ideal path to remedy unequal epistemic standing. This response is, however, unsatisfactory in two different senses: first, in order to make use of the ideal path to remedy epistemic

injustice, the latter must first be detected, acknowledged and properly analyzed. And this requires the development of a critical analysis of non-ideal conditions, lacking which the ideal remedy cannot be put to use. Second, as mentioned before, the lack of educational opportunity is not all there is to epistemic injustice. The issue of being acknowledged as a reliable source of valid claims cannot be solved by a fairer distribution of educational opportunities alone, given that it is linked with membership in certain historically oppressed groups. In order to address this problem, the burden carried by members of those groups must be lifted, and that, to my mind, has to do with providing the social basis of self-respect. Ideal theory mentions this as a primary good, however it does not elaborate the practical implications of the distribution of such a good, which should rather be dealt with in non-ideal theory. Translating the social basis of equal respect into political action would imply, among other things, reference to the symbolic politics of recognition, which admittedly, take us pretty far from ideal theory and from an index of goods to be distributed.

But let's go back to epistemic injustice. I am not saying that epistemic injustice obstructs the ability to be reasonable; I am rather saying that the pre-conditions to practice the virtue of reasonableness are lacking in circumstances characterized by epistemic asymmetries. The victims of epistemic injustice are in fact not treated as reasonable persons, with the likely effect of having their rights curtailed. Their testimony is discounted and their voice is not listened to with the attention it deserves. I am thinking, for example, of the attitude of suspicion with which women's reports of sexual assaults are received, especially if the reports come from vulnerable and powerless victims. This attitude of mistrust is perfectly depicted in the series *Unbelievable* (Netflix) for example. Here, the rape of a young woman is not believed by the police, given that she is 'white trash' hence unstable. From her discounted testimony, a number of bad consequences befall her, from the loss of her place in the community to the loss of her job, until a few years later when, just by chance, the truth surfaces with the apprehension of the serial rapist who did it. A similar story is the swift attribution of crimes to African-American or Latinos, after inaccurate investigation. Given these circumstances, I wonder how it is plausible to expect from such misrecognized citizens an attitude of reciprocity, and of reasonable management of disagree-

ments with others. In a way, being denied epistemic authority, the victims of epistemic injustice lack the very ground for being reasonable, for the relation of reciprocity among citizens is in such a case broken and while they are not considered reliable sources of valid information and knowledge, they are conversely pushed towards unreasonableness. I am thinking here of the rioting and looting following the murder by the police of George Floyd. Such enraged response may have being perceived by the black community as the only way to make their outrage seen and their sorrow considered, while by the white population it was perceived as an example of unreasonableness and unreliability. In fact, I tend to think that the unreasonableness of the privileged, while it pushes the oppressed towards symmetrical unreasonableness, makes the demand on them to be reasonable as utterly unreasonable and unfair.

In conclusion: 1) epistemic justice concerns the basic structure of society insofar as it affects the fundamental rights of citizens and their political and legal equality. 2) The unreasonableness displayed by parties in a position of power, who are guided by their prejudices, bias and stereotypes, instead of the fair and cooperative approach required by reasonableness, is likely to be reciprocated by a symmetrical unreasonableness of the powerless. It would actually be supererogatory for the powerless to practice the civic virtue of reasonableness from such a disadvantaged position of mistrust. At the same time, the expectation that victims of epistemic injustice should recount and denounce their story, becoming identified with their suffering, represents another unacceptable demand on them, close to a form of exploitation (Berenstein 2016).

7. Reasonableness re-established

What shall we do about this kind of injustice? The answer is not easy and simple, and, though it may be strong, the temptation to do away with reasonableness altogether, is misguided. The fact that power asymmetries nurture mistrust and suspicion toward powerless individuals, and, symmetrically, induces mistrust in them toward police, politicians, and powerful citizens, is not a reason to conclude that reasonableness is an impossible demand. On the contrary, it is a reason to question and to fight the actual circumstances of injustice that constitute the ob-

stacle to being reasonable citizens toward each other. The first step in that direction is to acknowledge that reasonableness, both in the sense of reciprocity and in the sense of epistemic modesty (Liveriero 2020), is a human disposition that requires nurturing for full-blown development. We know from cognitive science that human reasoning is affected by all kinds of distortive mechanisms, not only 'cold' such as biases and heuristics, but also motivational and emotional, such as motivated reasoning and in-group/out-group attitudes. Such inbuilt obstacles do not mean that we cannot be rational and reasonable, but rather that we must be trained to overcome these obstacles in due course. I will not get here into the political strategies aimed at fighting prejudices and biases, even implicit biases that will take us further away from what we have started with, that is reasonableness as a civic virtue. I shall rather ask a normative question: in such circumstances, is it reasonable to pursue reasonableness? From a non-ideal theory perspective, is it reasonable the attempt to establish fair terms of cooperation among citizens who have been divided by inequalities of standing and of consideration and respect? Is it not the case that a reciprocal attitude of cooperation first requires historical redress and compensation?

Let me first clarify that here I am using reasonableness in two different senses and at two different levels. On the one hand, I am referring to reasonableness as a goal and, in that case, the latter means precisely the civic virtue allowing citizens a) to offer each other fair terms of cooperation, provided that others will do the same, and b) to face their disagreements, recurring to toleration for the right reasons. On the other hand, when asking whether the pursuit of such a civic virtue is reasonable, I use the term as a regulative ideal of normative analysis, which stands for 'appropriate' both in the epistemic and in the moral sense, and besides, in the pragmatist sense of assuming an accommodating attitude under the circumstances – what MacMahon (2014) has fancifully called the 'blueberry pie' sense of reasonableness.

Deeply entrenched inequalities such as racial inequalities have produced deep and persistent social scars, not easily mended. Thus, we have to ask what reasonable strategies are available to overcome such injustice, given the social divisions, the resentment and the scars. Charles Mills has invoked an inclusionary liberalism where the rectificatory ideal, based on an argument of historical justice, takes care of past racial and other op-

pressions. Rectificatory justice may seem in order for mending historical injustice, yet it is not easy to see how it can take place, and, moreover, there are different understandings of what it implies – whether material wealth transfer (Boxill 2003) or rather rectification of the present harms done by persisting prejudices and biases (Zach 2003). Bracketing the issue of which form reparation should take, I take that rectificatory justice represents a form of ideal theory, constructed on sound arguments for reparation of historical injustice. Yet, moving to the non-ideal theory, I think that we must be concerned with feasibility constraints, hence to act reasonably, in the second sense of reasonably, given the actual circumstance of social injustice. If the goal is to attain a just society where racial oppression and other forms of social inequalities are overcome, then the rectificatory ideal may represent an obstacle to attain the goal as argued by Darby (2019). Darby holds that justice as fairness is instead a more reasonable pursuit for reaching racial justice. His reasoning is focused on political strategy: in order to pursue the ideal of racial justice, the political fight cannot be left to oppressed groups only, but must take on board a vast majority of citizenry. Citizens from oppressed groups are understandably frustrated and angered at their persistent unequal citizenship, at their racial discrimination and disrespect. Among privileged sectors of society, many people are indeed sensitive to the injustice suffered by racial and oppressed groups, and are willing to undergo change and reform to undo the injustice at the expense of their present advantages and privileges. Yet, their willingness to give up their privileges for their sense of justice may lessen or dissolve if they are held responsible for the past oppression. As is well known, the issue of the collective responsibility for historic injustice is very complex, both theoretically and pragmatically, but while people may feel ashamed of their country's history of injustice, it is less likely that they feel individually responsible for the actions and practices of past generations with which they do not identify. Since the control of social norms, conventions, practices and standards is basically in the hands of the privileged sectors of the population, representing the society's cultural dominant groups, social reform cannot take place without the participation of at least a good portion of the majority's members. Unless we envision social change for a just society as brought about by a revolution led by a minority, it is necessary to involve as many people as possible in the reform process. Hence, not just the oppressed, but also those who derive advantages from the

oppression. If the goal is to remedy the persistent injustices of the present society, and to move towards a more just and well-ordered society, a vast majority of citizens from privileged as well as from oppressed groups has to join forces and meet half-way, as reasonableness predicates. The potential oppressors should give up their privileges, which implies giving up the control of social standards and of the related interpretation of equality as equal treatment. As has been argued over and over, equality of treatment may conflict with treating everyone as equals. In certain contexts, treating people as equals requires differential treatment, which can take different forms, from affirmative action to legal exemption for religious and cultural reasons. On the other side, the oppressed should focus on the goal of devising strategies to fight structural injustice here and now and advancing claims to that end, giving up the claim for historical redress. Taking that stance on either side means to adopt reasonableness as the pragmatic guide for a reform towards a just society, where reasonableness as the civic virtue regulating political and social relations among citizens can actually flourish.

In conclusion, I have argued that ideal theory is not implying distorted ideals, but rather that distorted ideals are the outcome of their interpretations within the dominant societal culture. Hence, even though non-ideological, ideal theory must be supplemented with a non-ideal critical analysis of societal culture detecting actual injustices. The understanding of how actual inequalities are reproduced over time, despite the universal ideal of liberty and equality embodied in liberal democratic constitutions, will help to activate the normative resources that ideal theory may yet offer for fighting actual injustice. The complex relation between ideal and non-ideal theory has then been exemplified by focusing on the ideal of reasonableness. Reconstructing reasonableness in the context of ideal theory and then moving to the non-ideal conditions, enables one to perceive a specific kind of injustice, namely epistemic injustice linked to the diminished epistemic authority attributed to citizens from oppressed groups. Once detected, we can turn back to ideal theory and see which resources can be made use of for uprooting this kind of injustice: fair equality of opportunity, and a focus on the primary good of the social basis of self-respect to remedy unequal epistemic standing – whatever the social basis of self-respect implies in terms of

political action. Overcoming epistemic injustice would make the civic virtue of reasonableness attainable. But what is the reasonable strategy to move towards a just society?

Non-ideal theory should take into account feasibility constraints. Hence, though reparatory justice is ideally a sound argument, it cannot constitute a reasonable goal for overcoming structural injustice here and now. If promoting justice here and now is the crucial goal, a reasonable attitude both from the privileged groups and from the oppressed groups is required to move towards the goal.

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