

Review of Federica Liveriero's *Relational Liberalism: Democratic Co-Authorship in a Pluralistic World*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2023, xvi + 291 pp.

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Liveriero's analysis stems from an objection against ideal theorizing within liberal frameworks. Liberal theories face a justificatory dilemma: a) providing normative arguments in support of a specific political conception, and b) guaranteeing the actual endorsement of political principles and social norms by real-world individuals. While liberal theorists have traditionally prioritized the former aim, the latter has been partly disregarded. Given the pervasive disagreement that characterizes real-world societies, ideal theorizing—Liveriero argues—can hardly account for the real circumstances of justice and thus non ideal theorizing should be given an *ad hoc* space.

Liveriero highlights Rawls' awareness of this issue, particularly in the transition from 'A Theory of Justice' (TJ) (Rawls 1971) to 'Political Liberalism' (PL) (Rawls 1993) and in his reply to the criticisms raised by Habermas (Rawls, 1995; see Habermas 1995). Despite Rawls's attempt to address this issue, Liveriero argues that he was not able to show why real-world citizens should accept the priority of political principles over their preferences and moral beliefs. To move "beyond Rawls" (Liveriero 2023, 49), Liveriero proposes a framework that satisfies both aims of the justificatory dilemma sequentially: a loose normative framework of liberal ideals and standards grounded in an ideal level of analysis, followed by a second step with the function of advancing procedures and more concrete proposals grounded in the ideal normative framework but that are supposed to be politically efficacious by taking into account "the point of view of reasonable citizens here and now" (Liveriero 2023, 37).

How can this be achieved? Liveriero's book has the merit of illustrating the limits of the Rawlsian account and proposing a theoretical

framework that addresses these limits convincingly and with clarity. In chapter 2, Liveriero focuses on the illustration of the dilemma. Rawls, in PL, contended that his theory was capable of overcoming the impasse between the ideal and the non-ideal level of justification. According to Rawls, this impasse could be resolved through three levels of justifications and particularly through the tool of the overlapping consensus. At the first level, ideal citizens identify a set of principles that should be valid regardless of their personal doctrines and beliefs (i.e., the original position). At the second level, thanks to the tool of the overlapping consensus, reasonable citizens can reconcile the same set of political principles endorsed in the original position with their individual systems of beliefs. Finally, we get to the non-ideal level: *here and now* citizens should effectively be capable of interacting with their fellow citizens and institutions using public reason. Liveriero identifies three difficulties in the third Rawlsian level of the justification: (1) *here and now* citizens are not necessarily reasonable; (2) the third level of justification seems redundant compared to the second, (3) the tool of the overlapping consensus induces a “deliberative schizophrenia” (Liveriero 2023, 45), as citizens must accept the priority of political principles, and at the same time, remain loyal to their personal beliefs.

The author begins to address these three difficulties in Chapter 3. As Raz (1990) had already argued, one weakness of the Rawlsian theory is the *epistemic abstinence strategy*: if we aim to provide a full¹ justification of a certain political conception, we cannot overlook what it means “to justify a belief, a principle or a proposition” (Liveriero 2023, 52). Thus, Liveriero argues, we should rescue epistemology. To do so, we must pinpoint the epistemic non-ideal circumstances of the *here and now*—which include the acknowledgment of pervasive disagreement, a general fallibilist epistemic outlook, and a coherentist paradigm of justification in political settings. According to Liveriero, this epistemic strategy can overcome the problems associated with Rawls’s account: in order to motivate citizens to accept the priority of political principles and to engage in public deliberation, every citizen must attribute some epistemic credibility to others².

¹ Here, ‘full justification’ can be interpreted in the Rawlsian sense: a justification of political liberalism is *full* when it takes into account the perspective of an idealized constituency of citizens (Liveriero 2023, 37).

² Note that this strategy aligns with the title of the book, “Relational Liberalism”, suggesting that the author’s intention is to argue that liberalism should establish principles and procedures that allow people to relate as equals. The epistemic analysis of Liveriero

To allow citizens to converge on a loose normative framework based on liberal ideals, the non-ideal phase of Liveriero's theory (which opens in chapter 4) has the aim of including as many members of the constituency as possible, whether they are reasonable or not. To achieve this challenge, two methods are identified: 1) establishing processes that legitimize political decisions to as many citizens as possible; 2) establishing a public justification that supports the loose background framework of political liberalism.

In chapter 5, Liveriero explores the role of public reason in the justificatory strategy. Public reason is a regulative idea that requires that citizens respect the constraint that they should not interact with their fellow citizens defending reasons they know others would find inadmissible. Therefore, this practice requires the endorsement of the ideal of equal respect. In line with the non-ideal critique advanced in the book, Liveriero argues that assuming a too demanding interpretation of the ideal of public reason leads to a lack of resources to address the challenge posed by unreasonable and illiberal citizens. Instead, citizens should have a duty of civility inspired by the ideal of equal respect. If we assume the fact of pluralism and adopt an epistemic reading of reasonableness—on which Liveriero insists throughout the book—it follows that, in order to deal with conflicts, citizens should display the capacity to respect others, engage in constructive dialogue, show a general attitude of epistemic humility, and welcome compromise-based solutions to conflicts.

In chapter 6, Liveriero focuses on compromises. She argues that compromises are the best tool for political deliberation given the actual epistemic circumstances that characterize the non-ideal world. The reason is that compromises require qualitative intersubjective exchanges, i.e., citizens must respect one another, granting each other concessions, thus seeing one another as co-authors of political decisions, even if that would mean compromising on one's normative considerations.

We find Liveriero's book fascinating as it addresses the liberal justificatory dilemma and provides a detailed solution. In chapter 7, Liveriero illustrates how her approach would work in a real-world scenario, and we believe her analysis allows us to advance the discussion concerning real circumstances of justice.

However, we must notice that Liveriero's framework *is* itself a compromise. Firstly, it is a compromise between a continuist and a

aims at creating the conditions for establishing respect for agential autonomy *vis-à-vis* deep disagreement and, thus, to promote the ideal of co-authorship.

discontinuist political strategy. Continuists (e.g., Dworkin 1995) argue that liberalism should be developed starting from a normative ideal of justice derived from a specific moral doctrine, while discontinuists (e.g., Ackerman 1983) argue that liberalism should not take any epistemic, metaphysical or ontological position. On this matter, Liveriero says: “I believe that both these strategies shed a light on something true about political justification, yet both are too extreme in their conclusions” (Liveriero 2023, 28). The author’s idea is that we do not want to impose homogeneity; however, we need to aim at having stability for the right reasons. Thus, Liveriero proposes a middle ground between the two stances by using different levels of analysis to fulfill the central aims of both positions. In practice, this means that the loose normative framework is based on specific liberal values that cannot be denied (i.e., a continuist strategy), while the rest is left in the hands of the citizens (i.e., discontinuist strategy). While her approach is clear, the implications that follow are not. Liveriero does not specify how large the set of basic liberal values is, or at what point exactly continuism stops and discontinuism starts. Leaving such questions open is in line with her pragmatic and non-ideal approach; however, this causes ambiguity in her position.

Secondly, there is a compromise between ideal and non-ideal theory. Liveriero acknowledges that ideal theory plays a role in the analysis of political liberalism. However, ideal theory can only provide a freestanding justification for it.³ What Liveriero considers essential is that real world citizens should be able to accept those very principles. However, she does not specify how the two levels interact. If the citizens are not able to endorse some of the liberal principles allowed by the freestanding justification, how much room do we have to modify those principles? Wouldn’t this invalidate ideal theorizing and largely subordinate it to non-ideal theorizing?

While these problems may remain unsolved, this book gives us the tools to spell out these difficulties. A vivid representation that may allow us to analyze these issues is presented by Liveriero in Chapter 4 (Liveriero 2023, 168): an upside-down pyramid resting on its tip. The tip of the pyramid symbolizes the ideal circumstances of justification achievable through the tool of overlapping consensus. According to Liveriero, this stage is necessary, as any plausible liberal framework will be constrained by its normative dimension. However, we can hold that this phase

³ A freestanding justification is one that is not sensitive to the doctrines held by citizens and corresponds to the original position.

occupies only the tip of the pyramid, and it is therefore thinner than in the Rawlsian account. The pyramid's width widens upwards throughout the second and third levels of justification, where the real epistemic circumstances are included in the justificatory process. The second level symbolizes the *pro tanto* justification, namely the perspective of the parties in the original position: in Liveriero's construction, the principles emerging from the original position are driven by normative inputs from the stage of the overlapping consensus. Unlike the Rawlsian account, the third phase serves a crucial purpose: it symbolizes the non-ideal level of the justification, that encourages citizens in deep disagreement to deliberate together thanks to the fundamental regulative ideal of public reason. This approach encourages inclusivity and flexibility in engaging with both liberal and illiberal, reasonable and unreasonable, positions. Importantly, at the non-ideal level, citizens' comprehensive sets of beliefs should not necessarily be normatively or epistemically subordinate to political principles. Therefore, citizens can deliberate on the basis of their personal interests.

The compromises within Liveriero's approach inevitably lead to uncertainty, yet this uncertainty appears to be an integral part of the author's approach to political liberalism. The analogy of the upside-down pyramid vividly illustrates its efficacy by emphasizing a fundamental structural issue: as Liveriero stresses, the higher we climb the pyramid upwards, the greater the instability of the political enterprise becomes. Focusing on the non-ideal phase of the justificatory process entails acknowledging the idea that citizens may hold beliefs that are in stark contrast with each other. Thus, ultimately, the aim of political liberalism should be to find a way to cope with conflicts in real-world democracies.

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