Realism, Human Action and Political Life.
On the Political Dimension of Individual Choices

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1. Realism and Political Philosophy

Discussions about realism are a characteristic trait of the last few decades of philosophical debate in the analytical tradition.[1] These debates have opened the way to a return of realism in many areas of philosophy and in different philosophical contexts.[2] Starting in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology and theory of cognition, discussions about realism have reached into philosophy of cognition, theory of action, theory of normativity (Dancy 2003) and ethics (Brink 1989; Smith 1994; Audi 2013).

The fields of theory of action, theory of normativity, and ethics are closely linked to political philosophy. Hence, discussions about realism should have important implications for political philosophy. These implications, however, are generally overlooked, with a few recent exceptions (Audi 2011; Groff 2013). In political philosophy, the leading paradigm is still dependent on the social contract tradition, and on the conception of human action which goes with it. According to this conception, human action is directed towards ends set by our psychological makeup, and reason has a purely instrumental role in reaching those ends. The political implication is that we can be free in a negative sense: i.e., to the extent that we have no internal or external constraints jeopard-

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[1] Brock and Mares (2007) offer an overview of the debate. A paradigmatic example of the centrality of problems related to realism in contemporary philosophy is the work by Hilary Putnam. See De Anna 2001.

[2] Maurizio Ferraris has spoken of a "new realism" as a characteristic feature of contemporary philosophy at large (2012). His claims opened an interesting debate in Europe: cf., for example, Ferraris and De Caro 2012 and Gabriel 2012 and 2013.

izing the attainment of our ends.[3] Political power is hence always a burden to our freedom, although it might be a necessary one. These views about individual freedom and political power have important implications concerning the reasons which keep us together in a political community and, hence, on the ontological consistency of the political community.

This conception of human action has marked the social contract tradition from the times of Hobbes and is rooted on the naturalist metaphysics underpinning that tradition: it accounts for human action without the need to introduce "queer" properties in the world, e.g. values, norms, *teloi*, goodness, ideas, etc. This view still prevails in the contemporary leading paradigm of political philosophy due to the great influence of the work of scholars such as John Rawls.[4] It still recommends itself in the political arena, since it promises to grant political neutrality and to avoid all conflicts: it grants to each individual the possibility of acting according to his or her conception of the good, by trumping any attempt to offer an objective characterization of the good, which might have a claim to be imposed on everyone. On this view, the implication is that discussions about the good in political contexts (and by that I mean both in political philosophy and in political practice) should be avoided. Any claim about the good – it is said – would have disastrous, totalitarian implications, if brought into the political arena. Debates about realism, hence, are acceptable all the way up to moral philosophy, but should not be allowed to enter the realm of political discourse. The point is that political life is meant to bring about peace and agreement, by mediating among different perspectives of the good. In order to do this – it is usu-

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[3] On this acceptation of the term 'negative freedom' and on its role in the social contract tradition see (Castellano 1993, 25-43; Ferry 2002).

[4] The claim that Rawls is committed to a negative conception of freedom could seem dubious. He openly claims (1971, 201 and ff.), indeed, that he wants to remain neutral about what freedom is, and that he accepts both conceptions of freedom (negative and positive) described by Benjamin Constant. However, Constant redefines the classical terms 'positive freedom' and 'negative freedom' from the political point of view, on the basis of assumptions about a conception of action and of practical reason (one typical of his time) which takes individual freedom to be merely the absence of internal or external constraints. Rawls follows Constant in this, as it is clear from the pages which immediately follow the reference to him.

ally thought – references to the good should be limited as much as possible, in order to avoid the possibility that theoretical disagreement might result in practical disagreement and ultimately in social conflict.

In this essay I would like to counter this implication, by making some considerations about the relevance of realism in action theory and in ethics for political philosophy. I will claim that the premises which are normally taken to ground the above implication are not warranted: considerations about action theory and normative theory suggest that – contra the leading paradigm – our practical reason is not purely instrumental (section 2) and political power is not necessarily a constraint to our freedom (sections 3). In my view, this calls for a revision of the ontological status of political communities (section 4), and suggests that discussions about the good are not only innocuous, but even required for the sake of social peace (section 5).

2. Human Action, Reasons and Normative Realism

What is a human action? By action I mean the control over one's causal powers which one can be understood to own and be held responsible for. As Elisabeth Anscombe (1957) famously noted, an action is such if there is a person who owns it. For someone to own an action means that there is someone who may respond by giving a reason to the question "why did you do that?" For example, a person gives some money to a beggar on the street and we ask him "why did you do it?" He can answer, for example, "because he's hungry." I say that he *can* answer so, because sometimes the person interrogated could lie and hide the reasons that she had.

We can grasp the full meaning of this definition of action if we think of cases where one does something, but that doing cannot be said to be, strictly speaking, one's action. Suppose that, without realizing that there is a friend of mine behind me, I turn around and accidentally slap her on her face. "Why did you slap her?," someone might ask. "I did not *slap* her," I would answer, "I just bumped onto her accidentally." In these cases, we would also refuse responsibility for what happened: to the question "why have you hurt her?" we would answer "It was not my

fault." Further, the person affected could not be angry to us, at least as far as she is rational.

It follows that a human being does what he does as human being (and not as a mere body that occupies space and moves) because he is guided by reason, and, therefore, is rational. Of course the amount of rationality that we need to claim that one owns certain actions and is responsible for them is pretty minimal, to use a term introduced by Robert Audi (2001, 50). Rationality is minimal in this sense: When we say that a person is rational in order to stress that she is "in herself," that she does not do things that are out of control, as when, for example, she acts under the causal influence of narcotics. We can imagine in such a case that when she wakes up – someone else can ask "is she rational *now*?". Rationality, in this sense, admits of weaker or stronger degrees to which a person or a belief can be rational. This definition of rationality can simply involve consonance with reason, or it can involve a stronger commitment to finding out truth and doing good. This distinction between degrees of rationality intersects with my argument to follow, but I will not have the space to discuss these intersections here. I am persuaded, however, that the notion of reason for action that I am employing applies across the board, even in the case of minimal rationality.

Reasons for actions have an objective side and a subjective side. The objective side depends on the fact that reasons purport to give a description of states of the world. In the example above: "he is hungry," i.e. a description of a state of the world is given as a reason to explain an action. This state of the world is not by itself a reason, however, and – besides other things – it must be *seen as a reason* by a subject in order to be such.

A key feature of the instrumentalist view about practical reason which underpins the leading paradigm of political philosophy, as mentioned in section one, is that it takes this subjective facet of reasons as proof that a reason is the conjunction of an objective element – a belief about states of affairs – and a subjective element – typically a desire concerning the relevant states of affairs (Davidson 1963). This leads to the view that our reason can rule our beliefs, without thereby being necessarily able to affect our agency: only if a relevant belief is also in place,

can reason affect our agency. This is why reason is only instrumentally relevant in satisfying desires, which are set independently from it.

The desire-belief analysis of reasons is particularly appealing to naturalistically oriented philosophers, since it seems to account for many morally relevant aspects of our experience, without committing one to the existence of moral facts or normative features of reality. Desires – i.e., perfectly natural features of our psychology – would explain normative features of our behaviour. Hence, this account of reasons is normally accompanied by some form of moral anti-realism. This view is now far from gaining a large consensus (Dancy 2003, Vogler 2002), however, there are still important grounds for complaint, as follows: If the view were correct, one could have a certain belief about a moral judgment, e.g. that "action *a* is mandatory," and not have a reason not to do *a*. Indeed, reasons – under these assumptions – would be conjunctions of beliefs and desires, and one could lack the desire to *a*. This finds itself in tension with a feature of our moral discourse, namely that moral beliefs give us reasons to act even when we lack the corresponding desires.

The shortcoming of the desire-belief account of reasons for action seems to me to suggest that the fact that reasons have subjective and objective facets should not lead to an analysis which breaks reasons for action into an objective and a subjective part. Rather, in analyses of reasons for action, subjective and objective aspects should be kept together. Let us see how this can be done.

The fact that a reason for an action has a content and, then, describes states of the world, entails that reasons for actions can, on the one hand, be adequate or inadequate, and, on the other hand, are objective. They may be adequate or inadequate, since their contents can be true or false: things can be as they suppose or not: "Why have I given him some coins? Because he was hungry." But the beggar could have not been hungry, and in this case the propositional content of the reason would be false. Furthermore, reasons are objective: whether the beggar was hungry or not does not depend on the feeling or the beliefs of the agent who thought he had those reasons for acting, but on how things were in reality. Even if the fact of wanting something is given as a reason by an agent, that wanting is a reason only in so far as that agent really had that

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want, and this is an objective state of the world, no matter how questionable grounding a reason on that fact might be.

So far I have claimed that the reasons which explain our actions can motivate us, and have truth-evaluable contents, i.e. they are in a way objective. This does not imply that all we do is rational, since our practical rationality can fail in two primary ways. Firstly, agents do not always know the truth values of the contents of their reasons: one may have a partial view of the situation, and thereby believe true contents to be false, or the other way around. In cases of this sort, one's reasons may turn out to be inadequate. For example, one might think one has a normative reason to do what one does, but in realty, is not justified. Secondly, the reasons which explain one's action and moves one's will might fail to really justify one's choices: one's explanatory reasons may be motivating but fail to be normative (Audi 2010). Indeed, the justification one gives for one's actions may be bad reasons, and so may not really justify these actions. "Why did you steal the bag from the lady?" Answer: "The lady seemed quite rich; I was hoping to find a rich haul." All this suggests that an agent is an agent only if she is rational (if she is guided by reasons, and therefore the effects of her movements are not purely random), but also that the rational capacity of a human agent is in many ways limited.

Above, I said that reasons may be adequate or inadequate, and that this depends on the fact that their content can be true or false. This assumes that the reasons are not simply their contents. What are they? The above example shows that a person can express her reason to act by uttering a sentence as an answer to a why-question. This suggests that a reason is a function of its content determined by the particular situation in which a sentence expressing that content can be uttered (although, the sentence does not *have to be* uttered: often we have reasons to do what we do, even if we do not express them verbally, either aloud or in an introspective form). The content of a reason represents a state of affairs, which, in the eyes of the agent, justifies her action. This fact justifies, I believe, considerations about the conditions of its possibility, both on the subjective and on the objective side. A state of affairs can be seen as a reason by an agent, since that state of affairs is recognized as having some order – i.e., as something positive and good – but it is seen as an

order or an asset that is deficient in some ways and that can be improved by the agent herself. A reason for an action, then, expresses a way in which that action realizes a good, the possibility of which is recognized by the agent in reality. In our example, the utterance of 'he is hungry' can be seen as giving reason if these conditions are met: (i). There is an individual, i.e. a human, which is recognized as having an intrinsic order (e.g., being a living organism, with a digestive apparatus needing food) and being worthy as such; (ii). The individual is recognized as being deficient in his order (e.g., lacking the food he needs); (iii). The agent realizes that he has the power to complete the lack of order in that individual.

To say that the end of human action is a good is not to support an overly optimistic outlook on human nature, but only to recognize a feature of our agency which is compatible with our fallibility: the good sought by the agent is such in his view, but he can fail in the recognition of the good for the two kinds of limitations of our rationality seen above. The claim that the agent seeks a good by recognizing and completing an order which is already partially realized in reality can help us explain better the sources of our limitations. Indeed, the information on the basis of which an agent recognizes an order in reality and a way of improving it may be defective in ways which undermine the normative reasons one thinks that one has. For example, I believe that something is a living organism which needs food, but it is really just a sophisticated robot which only needs electric charge. Similarly, one might be defective in their subjective response to the lack of order to be found in reality and to the possible ways of improvement. So one might recognize that someone else needs food, and see providing him some spirits as the best way to make up for that. In both cases, one does not have the normative reasons one thinks one have.

So far I have highlighted connections between reasons for action, goods, and normativity. These notions can be interpreted in a moral and in a non-moral sense. There might be reasons, goods to be achieved, and normative grounds for incompatible directions of action. We have reason to follow, achieve and consider only *all things considered* reasons, goods, or normative grounds, respectively. Furthermore, not all *all things considered* reasons are moral: I may have a reason to go for a walk (e.g., it

may be just that I desire it), without that being a moral reason. A moral reason is one that is seen by the agent as requiring an obligatory response from him, as from any other rational agent who happens to be in a situation similar in relevant ways. Where the border between the realm of non-morally relevant and morally relevant reasons lies depends on what the agent sees at good, and, consequently, it might or might not be justified.

The conclusion we have reached shows that human action is in a sense intrinsically normative: not in the sense that it can be always explained by reasons which are normative, but in the sense that it can be explained only by reasons that the agent fallibly beliefs to be normative. This leads to a form of normative realism: the grounds of normativity – a partial order and ways of implementing it – can be found in reality. However, this is an epistemically moderate sort realism: the good as such can only be recognized from the point of view of an agent and practical rationality of agents is fallible, as we have seen. Let us now look at practical fallibility in further depth.

"Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor," as Ovid wrote: our practical fallibility is a common human experience of all times. The point is that our practical rationality is limited, and the study of its limitations is one of the major contributions of contemporary moral philosophy. Firstly, there are the epistemic limitations we have already considered above: an agent always has a practical vision of the situation in which she acts, and facts which elude her recognition could be relevant for her choices. Secondly, our practical reason is not just a form of reasoning, but it is a network of cognitive and volitional capacities which include both reasoning and insight. Often, we just see what is good or bad, without having to reason about it. The interaction between these faculties offers several occasions for failure. Thirdly, we often have different reasons suggesting different courses of action and must choose between them. Our choice can be less than fully rational because of our epistemic limitation, but also because of the influence that our desires and our habits exercise on our deliberative processes. Virtue theory is relevant in this connection: our habits are virtues when they enable reliable rational deliberative processes in us, and shape the structure of our desires in ways which are conductive to recognizing and following good reasons for action. Habits

are also important in shaping our insights about good and evil, and in establishing the weight we give to different reasons in our deliberative processes. Fourthly, and finally, we are free to act against our best judgments, even if our tendency to rationalize our bad deeds suggests that thus acting violates and forces our nature in important ways.[5]

3. Politics as Something We Do

The limitations of our practical rationality suggest important ways in which our agency is connected to, and depends on, the communities to which we belong. First, communities contribute to the constitution of our moral identity; second, communities can help our moral flourishing; third, communities can be burdens to our flourishing. Let us consider these points in turn.

Communities contribute to the constitution of our identity in two main ways (De Anna 2012b, Chs. 3 and 4). First, our practical rationality depends on our linguistic abilities, and our linguistic abilities are shaped by community-based linguistic norms. Furthermore, pragmatics has shown many ways in which our community-normed language can create rituals and social facts which are both contents of our practical deliberations and grounds for our practical judgments. Second, our habits, our virtues and our vices, are largely influenced by the education we received and, even as adults, by the social environment in which we live. However communities *shape* our moral identities, they do not *determine* them: our practical rationality and our freedom are constitutive of us in ways that a community cannot change.

Communities can help us to improve our practical rationality for at least two reasons. First, they furnish us with rules for interpreting moral reality which are the result of long traditions and often survived because they were good-conducive. This puts us in a better position than we

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[5] This fourth point is only available to compatibilists and libertarians about free will. I think that an acceptable conception of free will must lay in one these two families of positions, since I believe that deterministic conceptions of action fail to account for our experience of freedom and for our moral experience: two sections of our experience which are too basic to be bracketed away. I will not argue for this point here, however.

would be in if we had to start moral reasoning from scratch. Second, in communities we have to confront views of the good different from our own, endorsed by others: this forces us to press our epistemic limits and to improve our outlook of reality, and pushes us to develop our reasoning abilities for the sake of being able to justify our choices to others (Mill 1859, Ch. 1).

Communities can, however, also be burdens to us: if we grow up in an abusive context we might develop quite distorted conceptions of what is good, and even in adult life, by being embedded in vicious social contexts, we might end up acquiring habits which put our capacity to recognize and respond to good reasons at risk.

The political community has a special role – among other communities – in shaping moral individuality. We can distinguish various kinds of community, depending on the purpose for which they exist and for which humans form or remain in them. The political community is different from other communities, since it does not exist for a particular purpose: the family is formed for the sake of everyday life (procreation and mutual support), an entrepreneurial society for the sake of a certain business, a sports club for practicing a certain sport. The political community, however, has no particular purpose of this kind. Why does the political community exist? We can note that by being in the political community we can do, at our best, anything we want to do. The political community helps us to excel in what we want to do. This means that it helps us to be better agents. The purpose of the political community, therefore, is to help us to develop our practical rationality, and it survives and keeps existing to the extent that, at least in a limited way, it fulfils this function (De Anna 2012a, Ch. 2).

These claims are relevant both at the descriptive and at the normative level. What the political community does, and what it must do, is perfecting us. This is not a conceptual confusion, but it is a necessary consequence, once we have abandoned the Humean assumption that human action is reducible to the combination of a desire and a belief. Since the political community is the result of our actions, it can only be understood as a good, a reason we have to stay together. The aim of perfecting its members in practical rationality is therefore what causes a political community to be what it is, and what allows us to identify it as an "ob-

ject." Being a functional object, the political community has an end which is both the principle of identity and the normative ground for the choices that the community needs to make. Hence, its aim is also a criterion for assessing a community.

This account of the political community also explains a fact of our experience: the political community is superordinate to other communities, since it assesses whether and how they carry out their tasks, and rules them. All communities are outputs of our actions. Since the political community aims at allowing us to do what we do at our best, it will also help us to make the most of the actions with which we constitute other communities. Hence, the political community also perfects other communities. To do this, it will have to take a stand about what is good for each of them, and it will have to rule them.

Authority is the mode through which the political community achieves its end (Green 1990). By "authority," I mean that the political community cannot use mere power, contra a common assumption of the social contract tradition: its ability to act is based on the recognition, on the part of its members, that it pursues a good and that it is reliable. Hence, authority is based on consent, seen as a rational recognition of a good, not as an option for any project whatsoever. This does not mean that every individual will agree with any decision of the authority. Rather it means that, although we can often be critical of the institutions and their decisions , we continue to think that, for the role they have taken in the course of their history, they are still worthy of our trust and that it is more rational to follow their prescriptions than to ignore or dismantle them. Authority is therefore not followed because it uses force (although sometimes it will also have to do that) and its exercise is always morally qualified, the criteria being whether it achieves a good that the community can share and whether there is a normative reason for its decisions. The choices of authorities can be good or bad.

To say that the political community should help its members to recognize and pursue the good does not mean that it should always enforce what seems good on those who have a decision-making function, for two reasons. First of all, even those who are in a position to make a decision that has political significance have limited practical rationality. For this reason, they should always doubt their understanding of what is true

and good. Second, those who hold political decision-making roles should not fully enforce all the goods that they recognize, since they must also consider the beliefs and expectations of the members of the community in which they have a role of authority, for three reasons. First, they shall only impose those goods that can be recognized as such, at least by a (non-necessarily numerically) significant section of the community, otherwise authority collapses. Second, if an objective good radically transcends the possibility of recognition of the members of the community, given their epistemic level, imposing it would de-humanize those on whom it is imposed. Human action is based on the ability to act freely and rationally. To impose an end on someone's action when one genuinely cannot recognize that good as such, despite one's sincere efforts, would amount to forcing one to act against what one sees as good and that kind of action would be to treat them as non-human. Third, even in the case of agents who want to do what they recognize as evil – i.e., who want to use their freedom in dubious ways, political authority must sometimes tolerate evil, in matters of no great moral weight: the growth of moral identity can sometimes require the experience of pain and the sense of defeat or loss that follows from moral failure. Accepting minor evils can lead to greater goods.

These observations on the nature of the political community suggest that the community is something we do, and something we have a reason to do, i.e. something which we see as good for us, since it helps us to reach a practical good which is such for all of us, i.e. the common good. The recognition and the pursuit of that good cannot be decided in the abstract, but only in the historical circumstances of the life of a community, i.e. from the point of view of the agents who give rise to the community or keep it existing by consenting to it. The upshot is that a certain plurality of visions of the good can and should be accepted, according to the concrete historical circumstances of the community. The structure of the community, i.e. the features of all the individuals who constitute it and the arrangement of the kinds of humans that thereby shape it, define the range and the scope of the common good which a political community can recognize and seek.

4. Moderate Political Realism

We have seen that the notion of a good is fundamental in shaping the choices of individual agents and in constituting the communities that individuals give rise to, including the political community. This epistemically modest moral realism marks a considerable distance from the leading paradigm of political thinking, according to which political societies are aimed only at peace, seen as the end of conflict, i.e. at allowing people to satisfy at the highest possible degree their desires – or whatever pro-attitudes they might have – under the assumption that those desires are the rulers of reason, and are not ruled by it. By contrast, the role that I have attributed to the good in human action suggests a quite different outlook concerning the relation between individuals and political communities. Political communities turn out to be more ontologically consistent than the leading paradigm suggests. Moral realism leads to a form of political realism.

Given the role of the good in shaping individual action and, hence, political consent, when political authority takes a position on a certain issue, such a commitment is seen as a moral judgment by the members of the community, and, thereby, it will influence their perception of the good and their moral reasoning. Similarly, when authority does not take a stand about a certain moral issue, even its silence will have a moral role, since it will be read – for example – as the statement that all alternative courses of action are morally on a par with this one. The silence of authority, then, is not neutral, but it has moral significance.

This conclusion indicates that there is a quite strong tie between the political sphere and the individual sphere. The nature of the political community suggests various ways and different forms in which individual choices can influence the political sphere. In general it can be observed that, if, as we have seen in the last paragraph, the end of the political community is the good and the true, and if, as we have seen in the second paragraph, the goal of the individual is the good, then every human action is, in principle, politically relevant and therefore has a political dimension. This does not mean, of course, that every human action must conform to a political decision or, still less, that it must depend on one: it just means, on the one hand, that each action can be evaluated by

political authorities and, secondly, that the mere fact that an action is performed calls for a public, political recognition of its legitimacy.

We could say that the moral identity of an agent is shaped (though not determined) by his membership to a community, and primarily to a political community. Moral individuality is politically significant because the actions to which it gives rise, in their individuality and particularity, question, challenge and test the notion of the good that is recognized by the political community through the functions of its legitimate authority.

This link between the individual and the public or communitarian dimension is also realized in other forms of community. Think of the linguistic community at large. The linguistic act with which one makes a promise is effective if it follows a certain ritual: for example, the person who performs it should pronounce the words with a serious tone, looking at his interlocutor in the eyes, without laughing or making strange gestures in the meantime. Now suppose that I want to accomplish effective speech acts in order to produce a promise, but I do not follow the ordinary ritual. Of course, my actions will not deviate too much from the original ritual because otherwise my gestures would be ineffective. But suppose that I begin to perform acts that are intended to be valid only if, while I utter certain ritual words, I jump up and down. Among my friends, the rumour might spread that I give that meaning to this kind of acts and they may begin to use the same ritual. My new ritual might eventually be accepted by the entire community (and thereby acts which follow it will be accepted in the eyes of all members of the community) only if my new rule is universally accepted, that is if it gives birth to a recognized alternative of the rite of promising. My claim that one can promise in a certain way, in short, cannot be limited to my actions, but must have a "public" recognition.

The case of the political community is different from that of other communities, due to the specific features of the political community: its direction to a good pertaining to all. An action done by a member of a political community has a claim to be recognized as good or at least neutral by the whole community. We have seen that political authority may have to tolerate evil actions for the sake of avoiding greater evils. This silence can be read in an ambiguous way by the members of the community. Nevertheless, when one wants to do X, one thinks that X is good

or neutral, and one cannot therefore be satisfied if the authority lets someone do X for the sake of *mere tolerance*: she expects the recognition of the goodness or neutrality of X. For this reason, the acceptance of a plurality of mutually incompatible positions about the distinction between what is morally neutral, what is morally obligatory or permissible, what is tolerable and what is not tolerable will always be an unstable position, which calls for a solution to the epistemic and social problems which sometimes justify it. In short, political authority cannot but compromise itself about truth and about the good.

The upshot of this is that by deciding to regulate a certain kind action or not to regulate it, authority cuts spaces of privacy from the realm of the public. The realm of privacy is then defined by the range of actions which are considered morally indifferent or tolerable. The realm of the public is that concerning matters in which authority judges that actions of members must be regulated. The sphere of moral indifference is filled with reasons that an agent is not obliged to respond to. The sphere of the tolerable is filled with reasons that an agent is obliged to respond to, although political authority judges that it is not reasonable to impose that obligation. The sphere of the public is filled with reasons that every rational agent has an obligation to respond to and such that authority judges necessary to enforce a response to them.

As we have seen at the end of the second section, the border between the domains of morally relevant and morally neutral reasons depends on the perception of the good of each individual agent. Given that the political community is something done by individual members in the ways considered in section three, the border between what is permissible, what is tolerable, and what must be publicly enforced cannot be set *a priori*: it depends on the perception of the good of the members of the community, on their shared traits – that is, their shared character and habits, and on the notion of a common good that they, as a political community, have reached at a certain point of their historical trajectory. This is not to say that such a distinction has no criteria of correctness: as we have seen, authority can persist and strengthen itself to the extent that it can reliably conduct its members to the good. The point, however, is not trivial. It suggests that we cannot expect that communities with different existential trajectories recognize the same borders between the

private and the public, between what is morally indifferent or at least tolerable, and what is to be ruled. Like the good, an explanation of an action can only be recognized from the point of view of the agent, and just as an agent's response depends both on his rationality and on the features of his moral identity, so the common good of a community can only be practically recognized from the point of view of the community, i.e. from the point of view of its members. The moral identity of the members, however, is shaped, although not determined, as we have seen, by the political community in which they live. We can now add that habits and moral individualities are not homogenous within a community: any community has an internal articulation of groups and sub-communities which is the result of its historical development. In a way, the articulation of a community constitutes its individuality. Just as human individuals can recognize the goods to reach towards with their actions only from the points of view of their moral individualities, so a community can only recognize the common good which can be accessed from the point of view of its articulation.

The conclusion we have reached constitutes a sort of moderate political realism: it takes political communities to have a certain degree of ontological consistency. The tie which binds the community together is the fit between the habits and the moral individualities of its members and the articulation of the community. This marks an important difference from the view of society supported by the leading paradigm: according to that view, individuals are independent atoms united only by the need for protection and by the desire to maintain the highest possible degree of independence. Virtually any set of rational beings can be bound together in that way. By contrast, my view purports that only humans suitable for a certain community can find a place where they fit in its articulation.

The suggested realism, though, is moderate. By this I mean that the unity of the political community cannot be overstated. The bond is not such that it can ontologically determine its members. One is what one is – i.e., a rational agent with certain individual features – even if one does not remain in one's community. According to the point of view that I am suggesting, a strong form of an organic conception of political entities, such as Hegel's, makes the opposite mistake to the leading paradigm.

An example is useful here to illustrate the half-way ontological status of political bonds that I propose. In our current multicultural societies, we often encounter people who have experienced abandoning their motherland and starting a new life abroad, very often in remote parts of the world. The very existence of migrants shows that the ontological status of a person is not determined by her motherland(s). Migrants can go somewhere else and live a rich and fulfilling life, a life which is very often – and this is usually what they hope when they leave – much better than the life they could have expected in their motherland(s). However, no matter how well integrated they are in their new countries, many experience the feeling that they cannot be fully understood by their new fellow citizens, and that they cannot fully understand them either. Often they search for ways of socializing or living a public life which remind them the typical modes of their homelands. It is as if their habits and their ways of responding to situations of life were tuned for a certain form of social and political life, and they keep looking for it. As is typical for human affairs, this is not universally true, and there are cases of people who cannot fit in their homeland and find relief in other political communities. But as usual, in human affairs, generalizations hold statistically, not absolutely. Furthermore, the very fact that someone does not fit in one's homeland and has to flee shows that a fit is required for a functional and successful relation between individuals and political institutions. Hence, even if we are not ontologically made to be in our communities, in a sense we are shaped by them and for them.

5. The Good in Political Discourse

I started off by pointing out that, according to the leading paradigm, talking about the good in political contexts should be avoided, because it can fuel disagreement, whereas politics should seek the end of conflict. This normative implication is normally grounded – among others – on two premises: (i). That the ends of human actions are not ruled by reason, but by desires which are potentially divergent and irreconcilable across different people; (ii). That political societies are formed for the sole sake of maximizing desire satisfaction. In the above sections I have

supported a view of human action and the political community which denies the views of practical reason and political society proposed by the leading paradigm. This takes the ground from under the feet of the normative implication about talking of the good in politics. My points, however, set the stage for two other steps, one descriptive and one normative: I would like to claim that talking about the good in political discourse is both unavoidable and, further, welcome.

Ought implies can. So, we ought not to speak about the good in political contexts only if this can be avoided. However, the points I have made above about individual action and the political community suggest that we cannot avoid speaking about the good in political contexts. Hence, it is not true that we ought not to speak about the good in political contexts. This means that the normative implication of the leading paradigm on which I have been focusing from the beginning of this essay is not only ungrounded, it is also false. One might wonder: why do the points I made above about individual action and the political community suggest that we cannot avoid speaking about the good in political contexts? Well, recall that individual human agents aim always at what they see as good, and political communities aim always at what they can see as the common good. This implies that even if we do not use the word 'good' – or one of its derivatives or analogues – we still speak about the good when we speak about human action, individual or political. By not using the world 'good' – or one of its derivatives or analogues – we do not avoid really speaking about the good, but we speak about it in disguise.

An apt example can be found in the leading paradigm itself. That paradigm promises to be neutral about the conceptions of the good that individual citizens embrace, and affirms that political discussions should focus on other issues. At the same time, however, it cannot really allow that all conceptions of the good which can possibly be held by citizens be equally acceptable, since those which deny equal respect for the opinions of all should be ruled out from the spectrum of reasonable, acceptable positions. This claim, however, conceals a commitment toward a certain conception of the good, according to which a certain good is ranked as the highest, and as setting criteria for the evaluations of actions: this is the conception according to which the human will, or hu-

man freedom (seen as the possibility of realizing at the highest possible degree one's desires or pro-attitudes) is the highest good. My contention here is not that this conception is wrong, it is simply that it is a *conception of the good*, even if it is under disguise. My last, normative point is this: if commitment and reference to a conception of the good in political contexts is unavoidable, then political philosophy and political practice should openly discuss the good in individual and political action, rather than in disguise. There are at least three simple reasons which support this normative claim. First, as Mill pointed out (1850, Ch. 1), when a statement, a theory, or a worldview, albeit true, is passed through a processes of public scrutiny and discussion, the rational warrant and the conviction of those who hold it are strengthened. Openly discussing the good reinforces confidence in it. Second, when conceptions of the good belonging to different political stake-holders are not openly discussed, unwarranted alliances can be formed, and these are likely to lead to unexpected breakdowns, which are likely to ruin trust and cohesion among citizens. Third, when supporters of different conceptions of the good argue openly in favour of their views, they might eventually come to realize – when that is the case – that they lack knock-down arguments which might convince all fellow-citizens of their views. When this happens, members of the community can be more tolerant toward positions different from their own, since they are able to recognize that other people hold views different from theirs, and do so rationally , not as a result of bad faith or hidden agendas. Hence, trust and collaboration will increase.

The leading paradigm does not question the legitimacy of talking about the good in political contexts for mistrust of these reasons, but rather for the fear that such a talk could be dangerous and increase social conflict. I would like now to argue that this fear is totally unwarranted. Certainly, the fear would be warranted if the assumptions of the leading paradigm that we have discussed were true, i.e. if practical reason were just an instrument for the satisfaction of desires which are quite arbitrary and criterion-less, and if the political community only had the role to stop, through its power, the conflict which would certainly arise among citizens entirely guided by potentially irreconcilable desires. Indeed, in this case, if everyone were to bring their own personal concep-

tions of the good as objective and real matters that everyone else should recognize and approve, conflict would increase.

I have countered those assumptions, and the views that I have proposed in their place promise very different results. I have suggested that human reason is not just the instrument for the satisfaction of criterionless desires, but the capacity to recognize an already partially realized order in reality and to find ways to improve it. I have also contended that the political community is not just an expedient to anesthetize conflict, but it is a way to reach a common good sharable by all members of the community. If this is so, the political discussion of different perspectives of the good is not likely to increase disagreement, but to overcome it. Furthermore, disagreement would be overcome not by the imposition of arbitrary solutions to all parts through the exercise of mere power, but by the rational agreement on a sharable perspective on the good reached through a discussion concerning what is good.

The key point of the argument is that reasons have a content which presuppose the recognition of an order partially realized in reality and of possible ways of implementing it. Disagreement originates in the limitations of our practical rationality, which I mentioned in section 2. The partiality of the point of view of each individual, and the constraints which might bias our responses to the normative reasons which we might otherwise recognise, play the fundamental role in generating disagreement. Unlike desires which are deft to reason, however, our different perspectives on the good can, in principle at least, be reconciled through rational processes. The first step would be to reach a sharable description of the facts which constitute the landscape in which a decision has to be taken.

My point is not that once all the facts are spelled out properly practical disagreement will necessarily be overcome. Such a thesis would not be supported by my arguments. The account of practical reason given in section two is consistent with the possibility that two subjects might disagree about what reasons they have, even if they agree on all the relevant facts. Indeed, I claimed that there is a subjective aspect of reasons, and different subjects may respond in different ways to the same facts. If one could show that human subjects are all akin in their metaphysical structure such that they will respond in similar manners when facing the

same situations a stronger case for the possibility of agreement could be made. But I have not said anything to support that thesis in this essay. My argument here, however , does not rest on such a strong thesis. In order to reach my conclusion, it is enough to claim that discussions about the good increase the chances of overcoming disagreement in respect to strategies in which reference to the good is avoided.

My point is that if we do not try to rationally assess and compare our different perspectives on the good, the disagreement among our views will certainly be maintained, and all the sacrifices which will have to be made of the parties in order to give equal satisfactions to everyone, will be taken ultimately as unjust frustrations of one's desires. On the other hand, if we try to assess and compare our perspectives on the good, it is at least possible that some of us can correct our judgments about order in a direction leading to agreement. Even in less fortunate cases, when one does not revise one's own response to normative reasons which lead to disagreement with others, realizing that others have grounds for their reasons will make accepting this alternative reason as an obligation more tolerable. Hence, political practice *should* involve also a rational assessment and a discussion of the perspectives on the good supported by the members of the community.

It can be concluded that the debates about realism in epistemology, action theory, normative theory and ethics have important consequences on political philosophy too, and that a careful study of latter is needed.[6]

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[6] This essay ensues from discussions had during the workshop "Moral realism and political decisions: a new framework of practical rationality for contemporary multicultural Europe," Bamberg University, 19-22 December 2013. A previous version of the essay was presented at the workshop "Agency and Ethics," Third University of Rome, 16 June 2014. I am grateful to the participants to those two workshops for their comments.

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