

Nicola Riva, Ilaria Madama, Giulia Bistagnino

THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE
ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF
THE WELFARE STATE

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Nicola Riva is Research Fellow at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan. His research focuses on the political ideas of equality and fundamental rights, and on the principles of political morality that inform, or should inform, legislation and public policy in such fields as market regulation, social and fiscal policy, and the regulation of medical practice and research, and criminal law (with special focus on liberty and its restriction). He has published two books in Italian, one on equality of opportunity in 2011 and one on the Italian regulation of IVF and other forms of reproduction in 2012. He has recently written a paper on “Equal Chances and Equal Options: Two Conceptions of Equality of Opportunity” (in *Ratio Juris*, 28/2, 2015) and a paper on reciprocity and fiscal policy (forthcoming in a book on fiscal policy).

e-mail: nicola.riva@unimi.it

Ilaria Madama is Assistant Professor at the Department of Social and Political Sciences, University of Milan. Her research interests focus on comparative welfare state research and in particular on social inclusion and labour market policies. She has recently published “Understanding convergence and divergence: old and new cleavages in the politics of minimum income schemes in Italy and Poland” (with M. Jessoula, J. Kubisa, M. Zielenska, in *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, 30/2, 2014); “Minimum income: the Italian Trajectory. One, no one and one hundred thousand minimum income schemes” (con M. Jessoula e M. Natili, in *Working Paper LPF*, 1, 2014); “Beyond continuity? Italian social assistance policies between institutional opportunities and agency” (in *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 22/1, 2013).

e-mail: ilaria.madama@unimi.it

Giulia Bistagnino is a Post-doc at the University of Milan and the Center of Research Luigi Einaudi of Turin. Her main research interests concern the problem of disagreement; the justification of moral and political principles; metatheoretical issues, in particular the relation between normative philosophy and metaethics; theories of democracy and political legitimacy. Her publications include: “Gerald Gaus and the Task of Political Philosophy” (*European Journal of Analytical Philosophy*, 9/1, 2013); “Sincerità e affidabilità nel discorso pubblico: un problema del liberalismo giustificativo” (*Biblioteca della libertà*, 48/208, 2013); “*A Dangerous Method*: Rawls e la metaetica” (*Biblioteca della libertà*, 48/206-207, 2013); “Let’s Play Democracy! Developing multicultural education and the case study of young immigrants in Italian schools” (*Notizie di Politeia*, 99, 2010).

e-mail: giulia.bistagnino@unimi.it

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The underlying idea is that implementing forms of “civilized” politics is desirable as well as feasible. And, as far as the Italian political system is concerned, it is also urgently needed, since the system appears to be poorly prepared to deal with the challenges emerging in many policy areas: from welfare state reform to the governance of immigration, from the selection criteria in education and in public administration to the regulation of ethically sensitive issues.

In order to achieve this end, LPF adopts both a descriptive-explanatory approach and a normative one, aiming at a fruitful and meaningful combination of the two perspectives. Wishing to foster an informed public debate, it promotes theoretical research, empirical case studies, policy analyses and policy proposals.

LPF • Centro Einaudi
Via Ponza 4 • 10121 Torino
phone +39 011 5591611
segreteria@centroeinaudi.it • <http://www.centroeinaudi.it>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION	
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE ON THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE WELFARE STATE	5
Foreword	6
Democratic Political Morality and Redistribution. A Philosophical Investigation on the Foundations of the Welfare State • <i>Nicola Riva</i>	7
1. Introduction	7
2. The Democratic Conception of Justice	10
3. Justice and Redistribution	13
4. Beyond Justice: Reciprocity, Solidarity and Redistribution	16
The Welfare State and Redistribution. Remarks on the Policy and Politics of the <i>Robin Hood Principle</i> at Work • <i>Ilaria Madama</i>	20
1. Welfare State(s), Social Policies and Redistribution: An Overview	20
2. Facts and Figures: Capturing the Redistributive Effort of European Welfare States	24
3. The Politics of Redistribution: Preliminary Insights	29
Why Objectivity Matters? A Methodological Question for Political Philosophers • <i>Giulia Bistagnino</i>	34
1. Introduction	34
2. Starting from Where We Are	35
3. Reconstruction or Objectivity?	37
4. Evaluative Philosophy vs. Therapeutic Philosophy	38
What If There Is No (Practical) Objectivity? A Very Short Reply to Bistagnino • <i>Nicola Riva</i>	40
References	48

KEYWORDS

Political Morality, Justice, Redistribution, Welfare State,
Objectivity in Practical Philosophy

ABSTRACT

THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION
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THE WELFARE STATE

The contributions to this working paper explore the foundations of the Welfare State, in particular of redistributive policies, from the perspectives of both practical philosophy and empirical political science. Nicola Riva attempts to provide a “philosophical reconstruction” of the democratic conception of political morality, that is, the conception of political morality underlying redistributive policies in contemporary Western democracies. Ilaria Madama integrates such a reconstruction by providing an insight on those policies and on the political logic that informs them from the different perspective of political science. The contribution by Giulia Bistagnino challenges Riva’s conception of practical philosophy as a reconstructive practice, by arguing for the importance of practical objectivity. Finally, in his reply to Bistagnino, Riva tries to defend his conception of practical philosophy by arguing that objectivity in practical philosophy is neither possible nor necessary.

FOREWORD

This working paper collects four contributions about the foundations of the Welfare State, in particular of redistributive policies, and about the status of practical (or political) philosophy. The contribution by Nicola Riva attempts to provide a “philosophical reconstruction” of the conception of political morality underlying redistributive policies in contemporary Western democracies. The contribution by Ilaria Madama integrates the first one by providing an insight on those policies and on the political logic that informs them from the different perspective of political science. The contribution by Giulia Bistagnino challenges Riva’s conception of political philosophy (and practical philosophy more generally) as a reconstructive practice, by arguing for the importance of objectivity in political philosophy. In his reply to Bistagnino, Riva tries to defend his conception of practical philosophy by arguing that objectivity in practical philosophy is neither possible nor necessary.

The contributions by Riva and Madama to this working paper were presented and discussed during a seminar held at the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan in May 2013. The Authors would like to thank all the participants to that seminar.

**DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL MORALITY AND REDISTRIBUTION.
A PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION ON
THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE WELFARE STATE***

NICOLA RIVA

1. INTRODUCTION

In a democratic political community¹ a redistributive public policy² can be publicly supported, with some chances of being adopted, in two different ways. It can be supported by claiming that its adoption – or the adoption of one of a set of alternative policies with a similar impact, to which that policy belongs – is required by justice: that is, that it is necessary to redress an existing injustice,

* This paper is a result of a philosophical investigation still in progress aimed at providing a systematic and reasonable reconstruction of the democratic conception of political morality. Previous drafts of this paper have been presented and discussed at a workshop on the Normative Justification for the Welfare State at the MANCEPT Workshops in Political Theory 2012 held in Manchester in September 2012 and at a seminar of the Department of Social and Political Sciences of the University of Milan in May 2013. I thank Antonella Besussi, Giulia Bistagnino, Alessandra Facchi, Maurizio Ferrera, Stephen Hood, Karsten Klint Jensen, Xavier Landes, Ilaria Madama, Nicola Pasini, and Francesca Pasquali for their remarks in those occasions, and Konstantin P. Konstantinov for his assistance as an English editor.

¹ By “democratic political community” I mean a group of people subjected to a common sovereign authority that is exercised in the name of all the people subjected to it and in their exclusive interests. Existing political communities are, at best, only approximation to the ideal of a democratic political community, because the common sovereign authority is too often exercised in the interests of the people controlling it rather than in the interests of the people subjected to it.

² By a “redistributive public policy” I mean an action by public actors – the State or other public actors operating at the national, the regional, the supranational or the transnational level – consisting in the provision of goods or services to people not as a reward for received goods or services and for free or for a cost lower than the market cost of those goods or services. The provision of goods or services a redistributive public policy consists in is direct if those goods or services are provided by the public actors themselves, while it is indirect if public actors pay (or contribute to pay) for goods and services provided by non-public actors. Alternatively a redistributive public policy can take the form of a monetary transfer from individuals to public actors or from public actors to individuals, which is not a payment for provided goods or services. As far as the taxes one pays doesn’t correspond to the cost of the goods and services one receives by public actors, a fiscal policy is a redistributive public policy.

to compensate the victims of a past injustice, or to prevent a future injustice. Alternatively, it can be supported by claiming that, while not strictly required by justice, its adoption will be efficient in a just way, that is, that it could be reasonably expected to promote, in a way compatible with justice, that is, without violating any principle of justice, the welfare of the political community, conceived as a function of the welfare of all of its members³ (on the assumption that only individuals can be primary subjects of welfare, what a community can be only derivatively, being constituted by individuals⁴).

Such a circumstance – the fact that two strategies for supporting a redistributive public policy are available – shows something about *the democratic conception of political morality*, a phrase I use to refer to what I take to be a reasonable theoretical reconstruction of some ideas concerning the scope and the limits of the action of the State (and of other public actors) which characterizes our democracies.⁵ I think of philosophy as a reconstructive and critical activity, aimed at providing reasonable systematic reconstructions of our beliefs and values.⁶

³ In a democratic political community all the people permanently subjected to the sovereign political authority should be regarded as full members of the democratic community on the basis of the basic democratic idea that authority should be exercised in the name of people subjected to it. As far as a democratic political community claims to have ultimate political authority on a territory (that is, as far as authority is exercised according to a principle of territoriality), by “the members of the democratic political community” I mean all the people who reside legally and permanently on the territory on which it claims to exercise its authority. Also under this respect existing political communities at best approximate the ideal of a democratic political community, because many people legally and permanently residing on the territories under their control are denied full membership to those communities.

⁴ Such an assumption qualifies contemporary democracies as individualistic.

⁵ The conception I propose is not necessarily the only possible theoretical reconstruction of those ideas, nor it claims to be able to account for all the ideas about the scope and the limits of the action of public actors which are present in the political culture of contemporary democratic communities. Such a culture is characterized by a plurality of ideas not always consistent with each other. Each philosophical reconstruction picks up a subset of those ideas and try to account for them. While the conception I propose aims at accounting for ideas that I take to be able to gain the support of a majority of the members of contemporary democratic communities, other conceptions can focus on ideas that are minority or marginal within those communities. The dimension of the consensus that some ideas, and the theories that account for them, are able to gain is by no way a measure of their absolute and/or objective validity. Indeed, I doubt there is any absolute and/or objective standard to compare the validity of alternative conceptions of political morality.

⁶ Such a reconstructive activity is critical in two senses. On the one hand, because in order to articulate our beliefs and values into a systematic conception it could lead to the revision of those of our beliefs and values that are contradictory or that, subjected to a close inspection, result to be unwarranted. On the other hand, because the result of such a reconstruction can be used to criticize our actions and our institutions as far as they don't meet our beliefs and values. Ultimately, the task of philosophy is to enhance our awareness, as individuals and as collectivity.

In this paper I will introduce a tentative reconstruction of the democratic conception of political morality, a systematic conception that tries to articulate basic ideas about political morality that seem to me to be widely supported within contemporary democratic communities. The conception isn't fully determined: it is characterized by some uncertainties reflecting important disagreements internal to those communities.

Let me note, first of all, that not every conception of political morality would allow the two strategies to argue for a redistributive public policy I identified. Take right-wing libertarianism and welfarism (collectivist or egalitarian). On the one hand, right-wing libertarianism will admit only the first strategy: its conception of justice is so strict that there won't simply be any possibility for public actors to promote the welfare of the members of the political community without producing injustice by infringing on individual (autonomy or ownership) rights.⁷ On the other hand, welfarism won't distinguish between the two strategies. According to welfarism justice simply consists in maximizing the aggregate (collectivist welfarism) or the individual (egalitarian welfarism) welfare of the members of the political community or of all the people: in order to claim that a redistributive public policy is just, it is necessary to argue that it would contribute to achieve such a goal.

In this paper I will propose an analysis of the democratic conception of political morality and consider its implications as regards redistribution, focusing on three issues: (a) whether redistributive policies should take the form of *in kind* rather than *in cash* transfers; (b) whether they should be *universal*, that is, provide an equal formal opportunity to accede to an equal benefit (subsidy, good or service) to all members of the relevant political community who have equal needs (benefit's related), rather than *targeted*, addressed to special groups defined by such features as sex, age, health, ability, employment status, family or caring responsibilities, or by what people have done in the past; (c) whether they should be *selective*, that is, treating differently people who differ in their economic capacities possibly evaluated taking into account their family or caring responsibilities; (d) whether they should be *conditional*, that is, addressed only to people that accept to do something, rather than *unconditional*, addressed to everyone, no matter what s/he accept to do.

⁷ Of course, according to right-wing libertarianism people are free to associate to promote the welfare of each other or even of third parties but no one can be forced to do that against her/his will, and – what is even more important – the political community as a whole doesn't own resources of its own to be used to promote its members' welfare. See Nozick (1974). What distinguishes coherent left-wing libertarianism from right-wing libertarianism is the idea that each person, no matter what generation s/he belongs to, has a right to an equal share of unowned resources. See Steiner (1994).

2. THE DEMOCRATIC CONCEPTION OF JUSTICE

Justice does not exhaust political morality (not according to the democratic conception of it), but it certainly has a primary role in it.⁸ Of all the possible ways of supporting a public policy, claiming that it will realize justice (or promote it) is the strongest one. Of course, justice seldom requires the adoption of one specific public policy. There could be many different ways of achieving justice. What justice normally requires is the adoption of one in a set of public policies (or, better, one in a set of combinations of public policies) equally capable to realize justice. Therefore, to argue that a public policy will realize justice is to give a very strong reason to adopt it, one that should prevail, unless it can be demonstrated that another public policy could reach the same result in an equally or in a more efficient way. In this section I will provide a sketch of the principles I think distinctive of the democratic conception of justice.

In my reconstruction, the democratic conception of justice articulates in two sets of principles. The first set of principles includes three principles that together express a general idea of respect for every single person. The second set of principles includes three principles expressing an idea of fairness. According to my reconstruction, then, justice results from the combination of respect and fairness. Principles of respect have a certain priority over principles of fairness what implies that: a) it is not possible to violate principles of respect in order to promote fairness; b) the principles of fairness should be specified in a way consistent with the principles of respect.⁹ By saying that the democratic conception of justice *articulates* in principles of respect and principles of fairness I do not mean to say that those principles derive from a more general principle of justice: I mean to say that those principles provide the content of our idea of justice, its meaning.

Principles articulating the idea of respect include: (a) a principle of *respect for every person as a distinct subject*, conceiving of her-/himself as her/his own end and not merely as a mean for other ends, and primarily concerned with her/his own well-being (what doesn't exclude that a person's well-being, while distinct from other people's, may be sensitive to it); (b) a principle of *respect for every person as an embodied subject*, who not simply has a body and needs it to do all s/he can do, but who is, exists as, a body and experiences all what happen to his/her body in a special way (think of the experience of being touched, even if in an harmless way, and of what it can mean for us); and (c) a principle of *respect for every person as a reasoning subject*, able to form and revise (not necessarily true) beliefs about the world, about what is good and what is right, able to form and revise desires on the basis of those beliefs, and willing to act in the way s/he thinks more likely to lead to the satisfaction of her/his desires.

⁸ In the words of the well-known *incipit* of Rawls (1971): "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions".

⁹ Cf. Rawls (1971), for the idea of a hierarchy among principles of justice.

By further specifying the principles of respect one arrives at the principles of *self-ownership*, *individual autonomy*, and *public actors' neutrality*. The principle of self-ownership justifies the assignment to every single person of a basic right¹⁰ to the exclusive control on her/his own body, that is to the formal and social freedom to exclude other people from its use.¹¹ The principle of *individual autonomy* justifies the assignment to every single person of exclusive control on her/his own life, through the conferral of a basic right to the largest freedom to use her/his property (including her/his body) compatible with the promotion of political morality.¹² Finally, the principle of *public actors' neutrality* assigns to public actors the duty to remain as neutral as possible towards controversial metaphysical doctrines (religious and not) and ideas about (non-political) values, as far as they do not contrast with the principles of political morality, and a correlative basic right to every single person.¹³

Within the democratic conception of justice there is some deep disagreement on the limits of those principles. Among the controversial issues there are the issues whether the rights that depend on them are alienable or not (e.g. by voluntarily reducing oneself into slavery, temporary or permanent, or by alienating parts of one's body), and whether some kind of public (paternalistic or parentalistic) intervention aimed at preventing self-inflicted harm is compatible with them.¹⁴ Special problems are raised by the principle of public actors' neutrality,

¹⁰ As I understand them, basic or fundamental rights are more or less general rights against the State, as the ultimate political authority, that the State should grant through the conferral to their holders of more specific (as specific as possible) liberties, rights, powers and immunities. Basic rights defines the scope and the limits of the action of the State.

¹¹ The fact that I include a principle of self-ownership among the principles distinctive of the democratic conception of justice doesn't mean that I understand that principle as having all the implications right-wing libertarians (and to a certain extent even leftist ones) assume it to have. In particular, I exclude that such a principle has any implications as regards ownership of external resources, while I include some issues concerning the scope and the limits of a person's rights on her/his own body (depending on the principles of self-ownership and individual autonomy) among the disputed issues within the democratic conception of justice. Both things will be briefly discussed in the following text.

¹² The principle of individual autonomy justifies a presumption in favor of the freedom to use one's own property: it establishes not only that all uses of one's own property that are not explicitly prohibited by a legal norm are legally permitted, but also that each restriction to that freedom should be justified by demonstrating that it is required by political morality, that is, that it is needed to protect or to restore justice (by preventing or punishing torts) or to promote political solidarity.

¹³ While public actors can be – and should be – neutral towards controversial metaphysical doctrines and ideas about values and virtue, obviously individuals cannot be: they will have their own opinions about those doctrines and ideas. For that reason, individuals are subjected not to the principle of neutrality but to a correspondent principle of toleration.

¹⁴ Some would object that admitting the possibility of limitations to the freedom to use and to dispose of one's own body is inconsistent with the very idea of self-ownership. Such an objection is wrong (and expresses a right-wing libertarian understanding of ownership): just as the idea of ownership of things is consistent with the existence of limits to what a person can do

with some arguing that, possibly, it should be understood substantially, and procedurally only as a second best, and others arguing that it should be understood procedurally, even in those cases when substantial neutrality is possible¹⁵ (what opens the door to majorities trying to promote their own values through public policies in ways consistent with self-ownership and individual autonomy, and so to some soft form of political perfectionism).

The second set of principles of justice includes three principles expressing an idea of fairness. The first principle is a principle of *impartiality* or *non-discrimination*, establishing three things: (a) that no one can expect from another person more than what s/he would be ready to do for her/him, were their positions reversed; (b) that public actors should accord an equal weight to the equal interests of different people; (c) that the only differences among people that can justify exceptions to (a) and (b) are differences in their needs, deeds or capacities.¹⁶ The second principle of fairness is a principle of *merit* or *non-exploitation*, establishing that the distribution of the fruits of cooperation should reflect people's contribution to it. Finally, the third principle of fairness is a principle of *fidelity to promises and contracts* establishing that just promises and contracts (that is those promises and those contracts not resulting in the violation of other principles of justice) should be observed.

Also about the precise scope and limits of the principles of fairness there is some deep disagreement within the democratic conception of justice. People disagree about which is the best interpretation of the idea that the equal interests of different people deserve equal consideration.¹⁷ They deeply disagree

with the things s/he owns, so there is no inconsistency between the idea of self-ownership and the existence of limits to what a person can do with his/her body. That means that just as there are different "degree" of ownership, so there are different "degree" of self-ownership. Yet, there is a right that is at the core of the very idea of self-ownership: the right not to be intentionally infringed upon even if in a harmless way (and *a fortiori* in a harmful way) unless that is necessarily to prevent harms to others or to oneself. Such a right is a right that every plausible conception of self-ownership should include.

¹⁵ Briefly, the supporters of substantial neutrality claim that, as far as it is possible, public actors, should abstain from directly supporting controversial metaphysical doctrines and ideas about values (for instance, by abstaining from funding religion), while the supporters of procedural neutrality claim that in deliberative procedures each person's opinion should receive equal consideration. The supporters of substantial neutrality admit that in those cases when substantial neutrality is impossible, procedural neutrality is a reasonable alternative.

¹⁶ A corollary of the principle of impartiality or non-discrimination is the idea that no other difference – of sex, ethnicity, sexuality, identity (including but not limited to gender), political or religious opinions, family background, birthplace and social origin – can justify differential treatment by public actors. If some of those differences, or others (e.g. differences depending on personal relationships) can justify differential treatments by private people is controversial. To some extent they certainly can (for example, in the choice of friends or partners), but it is not clear to what extent (what about, for example, the choice of employees or customers?).

¹⁷ Utilitarians claim that the best implementation of the idea of equal consideration for the (equal) interests of all is the maximization of social utility, measured by aggregating the utility

about which differential treatments could be justified by differences in people's needs, deeds and capacities. Furthermore, people disagree on how to measure the contribution to a cooperative venture of each participant to it (her/his individual merits) in order to establish the share of the fruits of cooperation s/he deserves (her/his individual deserts) and distribute those fruits in a non-exploitative way. Finally, people disagree on whether the principle of fidelity to promises and contracts applies to those promises and those contracts compliance with which would result in an injustice only for the promising or contracting parties.

The principles distinctive of the democratic conception of justice – both the principles of respect and the principles of fairness – are deontological principles, that is, principles establishing duties and their correlative rights (I assume that according to the democratic conception of justice there is perfect correlativity between duties and rights). As deontological principles, those principles constrain the way in which people could justifiably pursue their own aims, individually or collectively. What, according to my reconstruction of the democratic conception of justice, distinguishes the principle of respect from the principles of fairness is the fact that, while the principles of respect should govern the interaction between people even in the absence of cooperation between them, the principles of fairness presuppose the existence of cooperative ventures between people: they define under what conditions the terms of cooperation are fair to all the participants.

3. JUSTICE AND REDISTRIBUTION

Let me now consider which are the implications as regards redistribution of the principles of justice described in the previous paragraph. Let me start with the implications of the principles of respect for every person as a distinct, embodied and reasoning subject. I said that those principles could be further specified into principles of self-ownership, individual autonomy and public actors' neutrality. The principles of self-ownership and individual autonomy play a very important role in right-wing libertarian theories of justice, who are

each person derives from social assets and policies. Rawls claims that the best implementation of that idea is *leximin* (subjected to a requirement of reciprocity that admits to the benefits of cooperation only people contributing to it). While I believe that classic utilitarianism is inconsistent with the democratic conception of political morality, because it doesn't satisfy the requirement of respect for every person as a distinct subject (cf. Rawls 1971, par. 5), I admit that the democratic conception of political morality could be sensitive to utilitarian consideration while not reducing political morality to those considerations. Furthermore, within the democratic conception of justice, there is deep disagreement about which interests deserve consideration and which consideration they deserve: it is by no way clear that all interests are equal and that, being equal, they deserve equal consideration.

strongly opposed to redistribution. Yet, according to the democratic conception of justice, in my reconstruction of it, those rights have not the implications right-wing libertarians assume them to have, that will exclude the possibility of redistributive interventions by public actors. According to the democratic conception of justice, those rights do not imply that everything people produce through their work or get through voluntary market exchanges justly belongs to them.¹⁸

First, the principle of self-ownership confers control only on one's own body, not on the external resources one generally needs to produce goods and provide services. If people appropriate external resources they owe other people (collectively) a compensation. Second, what a person is able to produce through her/his own work depends to a relevant extent on the social context within which s/he is inserted: no one leaving alone (on a desert island) could produce what a person can produce as a member of a society organized according to specialization and social division of labour; therefore, society as a whole has a right claim on (a large) part of what its members produce. Third and most important, the market is far from being able to reward people for their merits, because the distribution of wealth resulting from the market reflects the impact of undeserved inequalities in natural talents, social circumstances and luck: not everything a person can get from the market is something s/he deserves.

The principles of fairness – in particular the principle of impartiality and the principle of merit – have a more direct impact on which forms of redistribution could be justified and adopted. The principle of impartiality, on the one hand, allows the justification of all those redistributive policies needed to provide equal life-prospects to people with similar capacities (including natural talents), by compensating for disadvantages depending on social circumstances such as a person's birthplace and social origin.¹⁹ Such a principle could justify public policies aiming at granting to every child up to adulthood equal access to the means of subsistence, healthcare and education. Other public policies that could be justified on the base of such a principle are policies aiming at eradicating (or compensating) discrimination in access to housing, jobs and other benefits that would render (or that as a matter of fact renders) unequal the life-prospects of people with similar capacities.

The principle of merit or non-exploitation, establishing that the fruits of social cooperation should be divided among its participants in a way reflecting the contributions of individuals, could justify other forms of redistribution aimed at redressing market failures in allocating the fruits of social cooperation in proportion to merit. As I have already said speaking of self-ownership and

¹⁸ For a defense of such an implication see Nozick (1974).

¹⁹ This is precisely what Rawls's principle of fair equality of opportunity requires. See Rawls (1971, par. 12).

individual autonomy, the market, with all of its positive aspects, is a very imperfect mechanism for allocating wealth according to merit. The allocation of wealth by the market surely reflects individual contributions, but it does not reflect *only* them. Among the other factors the allocation of wealth by the market reflects there are factors such as the effects of differences in natural talents and social circumstances, therefore such an allocation points in a direction contrary to merit. Redistributive policies (in kind or in cash) could be justified as needed to redress market failures.

How about the implications of the principles of justice just considered for the four questions central to the contemporary debate on public policies I listed above? As regards the first issue (in kind vs. in cash transfers), the principle of impartiality seems to favour in kind policies aimed at realizing equality of opportunities for people with similar capacities: such a principle would justify those special policies that are strictly needed to grant equal life-prospects to people with similar natural talents. On the contrary, the principle of merit or non-exploitation seems to favour in cash transfers: since the aim of the redistributive policies supported by that principle is to redress unfairness in the way market allocates wealth, those policies should take the form of monetary transfers, respecting people right to decide how to use their wealth. Otherwise the victims of market failures will be deprived of the freedom of choice enjoyed by other people.

As regards the issues of universal versus targeted policies and of selective versus non-selective ones, the principle of impartiality or non-discrimination and the principle of merit or non-exploitation seem to favour targeted and/or selective forms of redistribution rather than universal ones. As I explained, the point of those policies is to redress or to prevent injustices that are produced or would be produced by existing societal institutions (in particular the family and the market): normally injustice isn't impartial, it doesn't affect equally every person; therefore, remedies for injustice should be targeted to people suffering it. Nevertheless, considerations of efficiency or of feasibility can favour public policies that are universal in form, but targeted and/or selective in their aims (because their intention is not to promote welfare generally but to mitigate the effects of injustice), as far as those public policies could reduce administrative costs and/or obtain larger public support.

Finally, as regards the fourth issue, conditionality versus unconditionality, the principle of impartiality establishes that what is needed to grant equal opportunities to people with similar capacities should be provided unconditionally, because the point of those policies is to provide to every child, at the same conditions, some opportunities that some children receive unconditionally from their families. The other principles of justice have no direct implications as regards this fourth issue. It is true that the principle of merit establishes that the fruits of social cooperation should be distributed among its participants in

a way that reflects their contributions, but since the contribution of society as a whole to social cooperation can't be reduced to individuals contribution to it, society as a whole deserved a share of the fruits of social cooperation, that it can decide to allocate among people unconditionally without violating any principle of justice.²⁰

4. BEYOND JUSTICE: RECIPROCITY, SOLIDARITY AND REDISTRIBUTION

Justice doesn't exhaust morality. The principles of justice fix some aims for the action of public actors (e.g. the protection of individual liberties; the realization of some form of equality of opportunity) and set some constraints to the way they can pursue other aims but do not predetermine all the aims of a democratic political community. The realization of justice is but one of the aims of such a community. Of course, there are some conceptions of political morality that assume that it is the only one,²¹ but that is not the case, it seems to me, of the democratic conception of political morality. At the core of the democratic conception of political morality there is the idea that by cooperating with one another, everyone will benefit, that is, each one could pursue her/his own interests in a more efficient way. Among the aims of a democratic political community, therefore, there is direct or indirect promotion of the welfare of all of its members.

Public actors *indirectly* promote citizens' welfare by creating an environment favourable to their pursuing their own welfare. They *directly* promote citizens' welfare through policies granting access to intrinsic and/or instrumental goods, where intrinsic goods are those goods that are constitutive of welfare, whereas instrumental goods are those goods that are necessary or useful to accede to other goods, intrinsic or instrumental (some goods, such as health are both intrinsic and instrumental). Even if justice does not requires public actors to act in order to promote directly citizens' welfare (but by realizing some form of equality of opportunity to pursue their own welfare), if a democratic political community decides to take action to such an aim, all the actions public actors adopt to promote citizens' welfare are subjected to the principles of justice and in particular to the principles of respect and of impartiality that I have considered.

The third basic right whose justification depends on the principles of respect, the basic right to public actors' neutrality, has a direct impact on how it is pos-

²⁰ Furthermore, it could be argued that not every good is produced by social cooperation, but that is only a partial truth because, if it is true that some natural resources are not produced, nevertheless, their extraction and collection require some activity. Not every good is produced, but human activity is necessary to take advantage of every good.

²¹ That is the case of right-wing libertarianism. See Nozick (1974).

sible to argue for welfare policies and on which welfare policies could be justified and adopted. If one understands neutrality in a merely procedural way, what neutrality requires is simply that every person should count equally in deliberative procedures for deciding which welfare policies should be adopted. The more deliberative and decision procedures are respectful for differences in people's beliefs and desires, the better those procedures are. Understood procedurally neutrality does not rule out any welfare policy. If it is understood substantially, on the contrary, neutrality allows only those welfare policies that provide goods whose value does not depend on controversial metaphysical doctrines nor on controversial ideas about value. This would rule out many welfare policies, because it is not easy to find goods on whose value everyone could agree.

As regards the principle of impartiality, it establishes some requirements that welfare policies should satisfy, by establishing that in deciding which welfare policies to adopt equal consideration should be accorded to the equal interests of every single person (the only relevant interests being those compatible with the other principles of justice). As I said, there is no agreement within the democratic conception of justice on what it means to accord equal consideration to the equal interests of every single person. If we understand that idea as utilitarians do, the welfare policies that could be justified are those that could maximize aggregate welfare. If we understand it as egalitarians do, the welfare policies that could be justified are those that would benefit equally every person unless a policy that would provide unequal benefits to different people could be accepted even by those that would be less advantaged (the principle of maximin).²²

If everyone would benefit equally or as much as possible from a public policy aimed at enhancing welfare, it would be rational for everyone to support it.²³ People do not need to be especially altruistic in order to do so. To such a claim it could be objected that, as far as people contribute differently to the financing of welfare policies, it is hard to say that people benefit equally from them. A very rich person paying high taxes to finance public health care could probably get better health care for herself/himself by spending less than what s/he pays in taxes. This objection can be dismissed, because it assumes that taxation deprives people of what justly belong to them. That would be true only if market

²² Different understandings of what it means to accord equal consideration to the equal interests of every single person result in different conceptions of efficiency. Not all the conceptions of efficiency are compatible with the democratic conception of justice. The Pareto conception of it, for instance, is not, because it applies only to the redistribution of benefits and not (also) to their first distribution. Note that the egalitarian conception of efficiency would exclude those redistributive public policy that would benefit *only* the worst-off members of society.

²³ I am here thinking to a redistributive public policy satisfying the egalitarian conception of efficiency.

could reward merit, what it cannot, and only if there were no social contribution to individual economic achievement. A just taxation would take from people what do not justly belongs to them and would leave them what they justly deserve.²⁴

The principle of justice are not the only principles a public policy aimed at advancing citizens' welfare is subjected to. According to the democratic conception of political morality, as I understand it, welfare policies are subjected to a further principle that while very close to justice is not properly a principle of justice. I am referring to a principle of *reciprocity* establishing that to take part in the benefits of social cooperation a person should give her/his own contribution. The principle of reciprocity doesn't require that everyone contributes equally to social cooperation, as far as the fruits of social cooperation are not shared equally among the participants but in a way that reflects differences in their contributions. What the principle of reciprocity requires is that people able to contribute to social cooperation do it in a minimal way (what should count as a minimal contribution should be collectively established).

It is sometimes believed that the principle of reciprocity is a principle of justice, but I think that it is not. If I help a friend in need, by borrowing her/him some money, s/he has a duty to give me back the money I borrow her/him as soon as s/he can, but s/he has no duty to help me back, if in a subsequent time I am in need, even if many among us will judge her/him to be wrong in not helping me, given what I did for her/him in the past. That, I think, demonstrates that reciprocity is not considered a matter of justice. Similarly, I do not commit any injustice if I benefit someone that won't ever benefit me back, even if I am not required (by justice) to do it. The principle of reciprocity applies only to policies that are not strictly required by justice. If I am entitled to something as a matter of justice, I have an unconditional right to it. That is not the case of those benefits whose provision is not strictly required by justice.

There is a special class of welfare policies that are justified (that is, that are consistent with justice) even if they do not benefit equally every single person. It is the class of those welfare policies that are expression of solidarity. Solidarity is a form of benevolence toward those people that find themselves in bad situations as a consequence of events they cannot be held responsible of (crimes, torts, illnesses, accidents, disasters, inequalities in natural talents etc.). The disposition to help people out of solidarity is stronger the less they can be held responsible for their conditions and the worse those conditions are. Solidarity has a very important part in the democratic conception of political morality. It could justify welfare policies targeted to special social groups (that would benefit certain people and not others or some people more than others) and even to people that are not able to contribute to social cooperation.

²⁴ Cf. Murphy and Nagel (2002).

Also welfare policies expressing solidarity are subjected to the requirements of neutrality, impartiality and reciprocity that apply to other welfare policies. They should provide goods whose value should be widely recognized. Furthermore, while targeted to special social groups those policies cannot be targeted to single people and should apply impartially to all the members of a social group identified by the possession of some character which is relevant given the policy at issue (e.g. illness if the policy aims at restoring health). The only characters that can be used to distinguish people into groups are people's needs, deeds and capacities. What solidarity doesn't require is that the risks solidarity insures against be risks that could in theory affect every single person. On the other hand, eligibility to solidarity could be conditional to the willingness to contribute to the social cooperation resulting in solidarity, if one is able to do it and to the extent that s/he is able to.

As regards the four issues I identified as central to the debate on public policies, reciprocity clearly favours conditionality. Being subjected to the principle of impartiality, welfare policies aimed at advancing welfare should in general be as universal as possible. The only admissible exceptions are welfare policies based on solidarity, that could treat differently groups of people who find themselves in the same condition but who differ in their degree of responsibility for that condition. Finally, as regards the first issue – in cash vs. in kind –, it is possible to make a distinction between those welfare policies that aim at providing goods whose value is widely recognized as not depending on controversial ideas of the good, that could get the form of in kind provisions, and those welfare policies that aim at promoting citizens' welfare more generally, that would preferably get the form of in cash transfers, because people have different preferences and don't derive the same welfare from the same good.

**THE WELFARE STATE AND REDISTRIBUTION.
REMARKS ON THE POLICY AND POLITICS OF THE *ROBIN HOOD*
PRINCIPLE AT WORK***

ILARIA MADAMA

This short note is aimed at dealing – from an empirical political science perspective – with some of the issues addressed in Riva’s paper. More in depth, Section 1 discusses the redistributive potential of social protection measures, as strictly tied to their institutional design. Section 2, relying on spending data and poverty outcomes, overviews in comparative terms the varied redistributive effort of European welfare states. Finally, Section 3 concludes providing some remarks about the *politics of redistribution*.

**1. WELFARE STATE(S), SOCIAL POLICIES AND REDISTRIBUTION:
AN OVERVIEW**

Although redistribution is commonly conceived as one of the most distinctive traits of modern welfare states, the redistributive flavour of social policy results very nuanced, not just across countries – as extensively highlighted by comparative welfare state research – but also *within* national welfare systems across social protection schemes.

With reference to cross-national variation, a rich strand of comparative institutional analyses showed that very diverse (re)distributive logics might inform public intervention in the social protection sphere, just poorly captured by differentials in the overall size of social spending (for a review, cf. Arts and Gellissen 2010). Most prominently, Esping-Andersen (1990, 58) argued that welfare states “may be equally large or comprehensive, but with entirely different effects on social structure. One may cultivate hierarchy and status, another dualisms, and a third universalism. Each case will produce its own unique fabric of social solidarity”. Accordingly, in his seminal *Three Worlds’* classification (Esping-Andersen 1990) he contrasted three different welfare regimes according to their logic of functioning and distinctive social stratification outcomes: the conservative regime, whose primary goal was of preserving status differen-

* I thank Maurizio Ferrera, Matteo Jessoula and Marcello Natili for their valued comments.

tials; the liberal regime, which mainly responded to free market imperatives thus nurturing social dualism; and the social-democratic regime, where sounder inputs in terms of redistributive social policy were meant to foster de-stratification and higher equality. As notably spelled out in the late 1920s by Per Albin Hansson,¹ the social democratic welfare state was expected to be the ‘people’s home’ (*folkehemmet*), fostering equality through solidarity:

“In a good home there prevails equality, thoughtfulness, cooperation, helpfulness. As applied to the larger peoples’ and citizens’ home this implies a breaking down of all social and economic barriers which now divide citizens between the privileged and the forgotten, the rulers and the dependent, the rich and poor, the satiated and the utterly destitute, the plunderers and the plundered. [...] The foundation of the people’s home is community and solidarity. The good home knows no privilege or neglect, no favourites and no step-children.” (Koning 2013, 255, originally quoted and translated by Heclø and Madsen 1987, 157).

In their turn, also social protection measures may be informed by very diverse distributive aims, embedded in their institutional designs. More generally, within the social policy toolkit *social insurance*, *social security/universal* and *social assistance* policies display three very different operational logics, inspired by distinct redistributive goals (Ferrera 2012). Ranking those three types of intervention according to their redistributive effort, social assistance schemes classify first, being the ones in which the net redistributive effect per unit of money spent is higher. The key features of social assistance schemes are in fact of being selective measures targeted to the worse-off, and to be funded via public revenues. Eligibility is based on the situation of need to be proven through a means-test, and no previous contributions are required. Those schemes therefore do not foresee strong reciprocity ties as in the case of social insurance ones. Further, since the financing of social assistance schemes relies on general taxation, resources are meant to flow from the better-off to the worse-off, envisaging a pure vertical redistribution among income groups.

Although social assistance is typically conceived as a marginal area within the overall social protection system of a country – because of lower spending and coverage if compared to core welfare sectors such as insurance-based pension and health care schemes –, its role in the architecture of the welfare state is anything but minor, since it is intended to represent the bottom rung of the social protection system. In other words, social assistance measures are called upon to be the *last resort safety net*, setting the lower threshold below which no one is in principle allowed to slide.

¹The social democratic leader and Prime Minister of Sweden for several years between 1932 and 1946.

All those features together make therefore social assistance crucial in relation to the structure of constraints and opportunities available to the most disadvantaged members of a community. Recalling the concepts used in Riva's paper (from now on *DPMR*) to define the *notion of justice*, social assistance policies can be defined as *just*, as "they redress an existing injustice" and might be *efficient in a just way*, since they promote the welfare of the political community intended as a function of the welfare of all its members. They in fact enhance the *life prospects* of the worse-off, compensating for personal, social and economic disadvantages, and in doing so they do not violate any principle of justice. Precisely because so strongly characterized in terms of solidarity, some scholars highlighted that social assistance is somewhat a very fertile ground for understanding the very essence of the welfare state model of a country and to test the *substance and the very limits of social citizenship* (Leibfried 1992 , 139).

In western welfare states, social assistance measures have taken several forms, ranging from income support to child-care services, from disability benefits to pension supplements. Typically, a key role within this policy field has been played by general schemes to combat poverty, in the form of *Minimum income schemes* (MIS). The origins of such schemes date back to the post-war period, during the golden age of welfare state expansion, when income support schemes dropped the discretionary and *ad hoc* nature that had characterized them until then, to more and more resemble fully fledged enforceable social rights (Ferrera 2005). Despite different institutional designs and scope, those schemes shared the vocation to serve as residual layer of the welfare state, mending the protection gaps left by upstream core social insurance programs, the access to which was subject to contribution requirements and to expiry (Clegg 2013). The United Kingdom was the pioneer country, as it introduced in 1948 a scheme of income support intended to provide sufficient resources to meet basic life-course needs of the worse-off in society; and was later followed by Germany (1961), Denmark (1974), Belgium (1974) and Ireland (1975). Some countries opted instead for categorical schemes, directed to specific target groups, primarily the "elderly poor". This way did Italy, that in 1969 introduced the social pension, but also France (1956) and Belgium (1969), and later Portugal (1980) and Spain (1988). It should however be noted that almost all the countries that originally chose that solution in the following decades expanded their safety nets to cover all poor citizens. Currently, almost all EU countries have a Minimum income scheme aimed to guarantee sufficient resources to those who have insufficient means of subsistence (Tab. 1).

Table 1. Minimum income schemes in EU member states, 2013

Country	Social assistance scheme
AT	<i>(regional schemes)</i>
B	Leefloon
BG	Месечни социални помощи
CZ	Hmotná nouze
DE	Arbeitslosengeld II
DK	Kontanthjælp
EE	Toimetulekutoetus
ES	<i>(regional schemes)</i>
FI	Labour market subsidy
FR	Revenu de solidarité active
HU	Foglalkoztatást helyettesítő támogatás
IE	Jobseeker's allowance
IT	<i>(regional/ local schemes)</i>
LT	Socialinė pašalpa
LU	Revenu Minimum Garanti
LV	Pabalsts garantētā minimālā ienākumu līmeņa nodrošināšanai
NL	Wet Werk en Bijstand
PL	Temporary social assistance benefit
PT	Rendimento Social de Inserção
RO	Legea Venitului Minim Garantat
SE	Ekonomiskt Bistånd
SI	Denarna socialna pomoč
SK	Pomoc v hmotnej núdzi
UK	Job Seekers Allowance (Income based) – Income support

Source: Van Mechelen and Marchal (2013, 9)

Envisioned as purely residual schemes at the time of their introduction, during the last three decades the role of minimum income schemes within the overall welfare state architecture has been profoundly challenged by diverse mutually reinforcing processes. In several countries, in fact, the emergence of new social risks (cf. Taylor Gooby 2004; Bonoli 2005), with which core insurance-based social protection schemes are ill-equipped to deal, in conjunction with the retrenchment of upstream social protection schemes and the weakening of family ties, resulted in an increase of the poverty risk and consequently also a growth in the functional salience of social assistance measures, especially for working-age individuals. Poverty has in fact gradually become less and less a condition of some well-defined groups at the margins of society (such as the “homeless”), to become an event that may have a variable duration and affect wider and diverse groups of individuals (Giampaglia and Biolcati Rinaldi 2003), being associated not only to ascriptive characteristics, but also to other factors, such as the presence of young children, low pay or precarious jobs, the state of

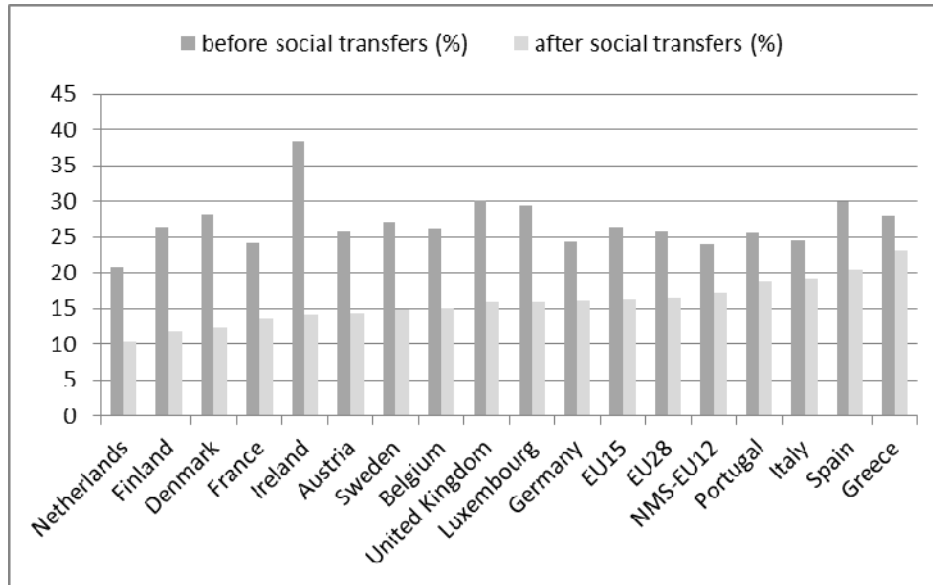
persisting unemployment and physical dependence. In the post-industrial scenario, social assistance has then overcome its traditional boundaries restrained to people suffering severe social marginality, and started to represent in a number of countries a key response for people facing rather common social needs and risks (Clegg 2013). That however doesn't mean that convergence occurred across EU member states with respect to the in depth institutional design of the very last tier of social protection regimes, as it will be shown in Section 2.

2. FACTS AND FIGURES: CAPTURING THE REDISTRIBUTIVE EFFORT OF EUROPEAN WELFARE STATES

Although several methodological challenges arise with regard to the measurement of the redistributive strength of welfare provision, a first rough indicator that allows to capture the diversity among European welfare models is represented by the effectiveness in terms of poverty risk reduction of social protection benefits. Statistics show that the ability of European welfare states to contrast poverty does differ in a significant way, either considering the standard poverty threshold, and lower poverty thresholds reflecting more severe degrees of deprivation.

More in depth, Figure 1 highlights that – notwithstanding the fact that the poverty risk before social transfers (excluding pension benefits) is not too dissimilar among EU countries, typically ranging between 24% and 28% – the extent to which the income distribution generated by the market is altered and the poverty risk is reduced by social benefits shows a much wider variation, extending from 5 percentage points (in Greece) to 16 percentage points (in Ireland). The other side of the coin is that the effectiveness of welfare provision (excluding pension benefits) in reducing poverty varies from above 55% – in Ireland, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands –, to 43% in France, 34% in Germany, and about 20% in Italy and Greece (Fig. 2). Not surprisingly, extensive heterogeneity occurs despite the presence of not too dissimilar overall welfare budgets in relative terms (cf. Fig. 3), therefore suggesting that it is the institutional design of social protection measures which makes the difference.

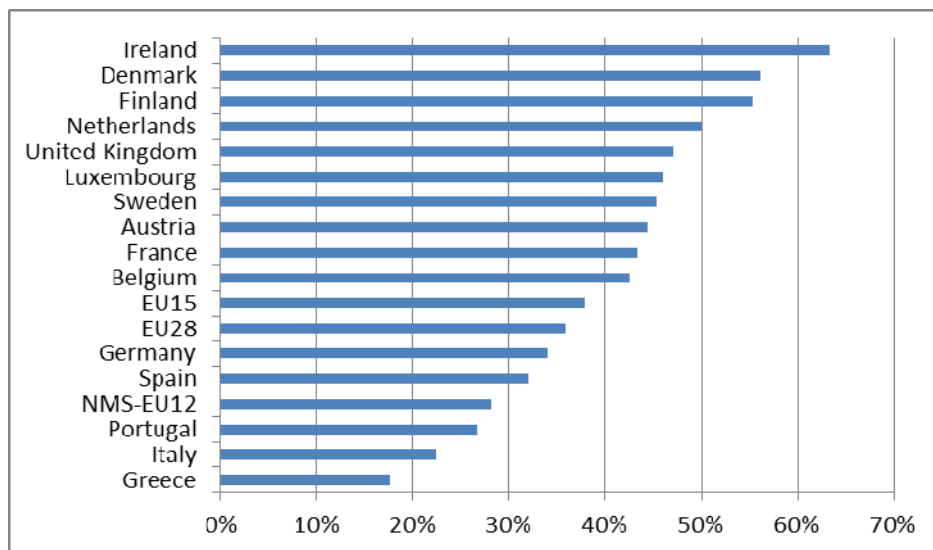
Figure 1. Poverty risk before and after social transfers other than pensions, EU countries, 2013



Note: poverty threshold set at 60% of median equivalised income. Pensions excluded from social transfers.

Source: Eurostat database online

Figure 2. Poverty risk reduction through social transfers other than pensions, EU countries, 2013

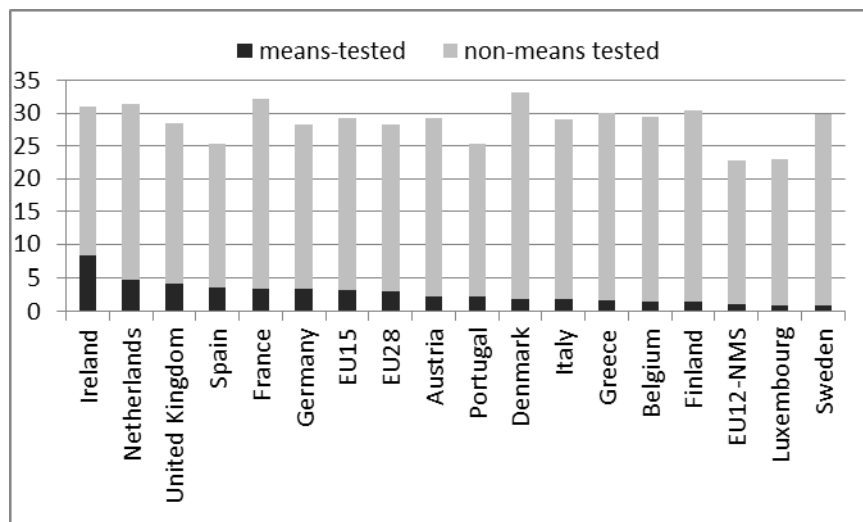


Note: Percentage reduction measured as the gap before and after social transfers. Poverty threshold set at 60% of median equivalised income. Pensions excluded from social transfers.

Source: Eurostat database online

Another indicator, that can be telling about the magnitude of public effort in terms of vertical/income redistribution, is represented by the weight of social assistance measures (i.e. selective programs) as a proportion of GDP. Figure 3 sheds light on the total size of mean-tested benefits: in the European context, Ireland locates at the top of the ranking, with means-testing spending reaching 8.3% of GDP, followed by the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Noteworthy, those countries fall in the group of best performers with regard to the anti-poverty effectiveness of overall welfare provision, as seen in Fig. 2. Despite this, the United Kingdom still displays comparatively high poverty rates and inequality. At the other end of the distribution several countries exhibit a means-tested social spending below 2%. In the latter (quite large) cluster, however, low spending on selective measures is associated with very diverse outcomes in terms of poverty and inequality. In countries such as Sweden and Finland, the low percentage of spending absorbed by means-tested programs is in fact associated with very low poverty and inequality rates and high welfare effectiveness in reducing poverty, suggesting that poverty prevention is guaranteed by other means, i.e. through the upper tiers of the welfare system, being the social protection system overall markedly redistributive (cf. Fig. 1 and 2). Quite the opposite, in Greece, Italy and several new member states low means-tested spending combines with high poverty and inequality rates and low effectiveness of welfare budgets, therefore revealing a low poverty prevention capacity of upper social protection layers, associated with not very inclusive social safety nets of last resort.

Figure 3. Social spending on means-tested and non-means tested benefits, EU countries, 2012 (% on GDP)



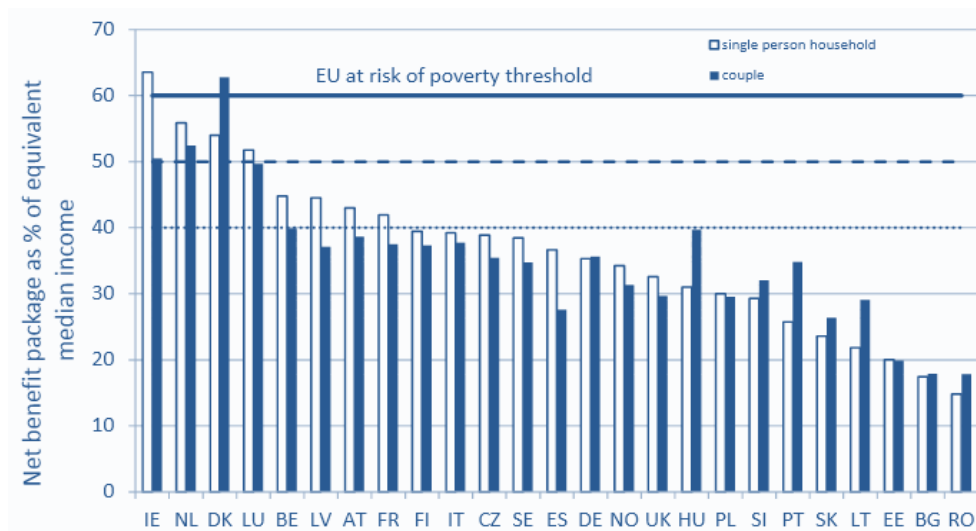
Source: Eurostat database online

Comparative evidence allows to raise two main remarks. The first is that in order to investigate the redistributive effort of a welfare system it is important to focus not just on the lower layers (i.e. selective measures) but also on upper social protection schemes, since also social insurance earnings related and universal flat-rate schemes - depending on their concrete institutional design - can embody very different redistributive flavours and thus generate very diverse outcomes in terms of both poverty reduction and redistribution across income groups.² As noted by Korpi and Palme, also “social insurance institutions are of central importance for redistributive outcomes” (1998, 661).

Closely connected to the first, the second remark is that social assistance spending, in order to be telling about the redistributive effort of a social protection system, is to be read in conjunction with outcomes – i.e. overall poverty rates –, and issues related to the institutional design of the measures, including their benefits’ adequacy and coverage gaps (cf. Nelson 2009; Figari, Matsaganis and Sutherland 2014). In this direction, Nelson (2010) showed that wide variation exists across EU member states with reference to the adequacy of social assistance packages (measured as the generosity of social assistance benefits relative to median incomes), with increasing divergence over time. Even though their significance cannot be undervalued thanks to their ability to reduce the intensity of poverty, MISs are in fact in most cases insufficient to lift people out of poverty (Fig. 4). Van Mechelen and Marchal (2013, 9) noted that “social assistance benefit packages are inadequate in protecting against poverty almost everywhere”. Benefit levels are in fact above the European poverty line only in Ireland and in Denmark. Although large cross-country variation occurs, in the rest of the EU benefits are below the poverty line. If in the Netherlands and Luxembourg benefit levels lie between 50 and 60 per cent of equalized median household income, in the majority of EU member states social assistance payments are below 40 per cent of median income. In some cases, such as Bulgaria, benefits drop below 20 per cent of median income. Further, Cantillon *et al.* (2015) revealed that in most countries the gap between disposable income of working age families with children relying on social assistance and the poverty thresholds – instead of declining – has become increasingly bigger since the 1990s.

²These being closely linked to the technicalities of the measures, i.e. the presence or absence of upper ceilings for social benefits, social contributions disregards for low income workers and/or benefits taxation.

Figure 4. Adequacy of net social assistance benefit packages for able-bodied working age household in EU countries, 2009



Source: Marchal, Marx and Van Mechelen (2013, 16)

On the issue of coverage gaps, a recent study pointed that – remarkably – sizeable proportions of the extremely poor are not entitled to minimum income benefits in several countries – such as France, Austria, Sweden, Germany, the UK, Estonia, Denmark and The Netherlands (Figari, Matsaganis and Sutherland 2014). This is primarily due to eligibility rules, too strictly declined, as they limit access either by introducing categorical conditions that exclude potential beneficiaries, or by setting very low income threshold. As a consequence, reciprocity rates are consistently below the poverty rate in all EU countries.

A final key point with reference to adequacy and coverage is that the two indicators are not positively correlated with each other. Quite the opposite, Figari and colleagues found evidence of a sort of implicit trade-off: “while some countries have opted for narrowly targeted but relatively generous MIS, others have chosen the exact opposite” (2014, 213). That finding heavily contrasts with the common belief according to which countries might be placed on a continuum, where the one pole is represented by rudimentary models and the opposite one by inclusive and generous social safety nets (Figari, Matsaganis and Sutherland 2014).

What clearly emerges from this brief overview is that EU welfare states experience highly heterogeneous redistributive efforts and outcomes. In this respect, the last resort safety net, representing the lower layer of social protection systems, is a crucial component of broader redistributive welfare systems, whose effectiveness however is deeply affected by its overall institutional design. Table 2 offers a first inventory of the main dimensions of variation across EU

countries. Along these lines of variation, inductively, country-specific configurations of minimum income schemes can be very evocative about the normative foundations behind them and the notion of solidarity they pursue, as addressing in a non-neutral way key concerns about who are the poor, who deserve to be assisted, in what forms and by whom.

Table 2. The institutional design of MISs, main dimensions of variation

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Key issues</i>
Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - poverty thresholds to be eligible to the benefit and income disregards; - categorical fragmentation of benefits vs. wide general schemes; - inclusion/exclusion of social groups from assistance, i.e. able bodied people; nationals/non-nationals; - degree of discretion on the side of social workers in assessing eligibility and deservingness;
Adequacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gap between the benefit and the poverty line(s) and/or median income; - social benefits packages to deal with diverse needs; - benefits' length and maximum duration;
Reciprocity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - conditional vs. unconditional benefits; - workfare vs. social integration emphasis of activation programs;
Benefit type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - in kind vs. in cash or mixed packages;
Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - institutional competence (national, regional, local level); - role played by civil society organizations in the governance and/or provision of benefits.

3. THE POLITICS OF REDISTRIBUTION: PRELIMINARY INSIGHTS

The principle of social justice undoubtedly represents a very robust argumentative reason for the adoption of a public policy. As argued in Riva's paper: "in a democratic political community a redistributive public policy can be publicly supported, with some chances of being adopted in to different ways: they are required by justice or are efficient in a just way" (*DPMR*, 1). Despite this, welfare state research has extensively illustrated that strong political obstacles arise with regard to the adoption of policies primarily based on solidarity. As a matter of fact, purely redistributive measures informed by the Robin Hood principle – *take from the well-off and give to the poor* – typically result politically very constrained.

The declining adequacy of minimum income benefits in Europe during the last decade and the evolution of means-tested entitlements (cf. § 2) – despite very tough functional pressures linked to poverty trends – are highly symptomatic of this status quo and uphold the old claim that welfare for the poor risks to become *poor welfare*. From a power resources perspective, this can be seen as a consequence of the fact that the cluster of the non-poor has higher political

resources, since the well-off tend to be politically more active and actively engaged than those in poverty, who suffer high fragmentation and lower political mobilization (Beramendi and Anderson 2008). The electoral costs of redirecting resources from them to the poor through selective anti-poverty policies is then expected to be considerable. This holds particularly true in the current scenario of permanent austerity (Pierson 1998), in which different claims (and social groups) compete for scarce resources, then further exacerbating the political weakness of social assistance clientele. A further refinement of the power resources argument was provided by two prominent scholars in the late 1990s, Korpi and Palme (1998, 681), who developed the so called *paradox of redistribution*, according to which “the more we target benefits at the poor [...] the less likely we are to reduce poverty and inequality”. In brief, the explanation of the paradox is that means-tested measures generate a zero sum conflict of interests between the poor and the better-off, who pay for the benefits without receiving anything. This line of conflict between net-contributors and net-beneficiaries is expected to have far-reaching political consequences as it severely undermines the emergence of a broad pro-welfare interest coalition, whose existence is needed in order to support, politically, larger redistributive budgets. When the poor stand alone, according to the Authors, smaller welfare budgets are likely to have just limited impact on poverty and inequality.

Beside the readings primarily based on *powering* dynamics, some scholars shed light on the relevance for the destiny of social assistance policy of diverging public as well as political preferences. Public and political attitudes towards minimum income and anti-poverty policies have in fact proven to be more nuanced and ambivalent than expected on the grounds of social justice principles. In general, notwithstanding the strength of the so called “fairness issue”, means-tested and selective programs are by far less popular than broader insurance-based social protection programs (Korpi and Palme 1998; Clegg 2013).

On the political demand side, two main factors seem relevant in affecting public attitudes towards anti-poverty policies and minimum income schemes: the low degree of reciprocity they embody; and the perception of un-deservingness that affects some groups of potential beneficiaries.

With reference to the first factor, as argued by Clegg (2013, 22) “public support for the norm of reciprocity remains very high in Europe, and its perceived absence in minimum income transactions weakens their popular support. Social assistance is based on a logic of pure redistribution, and unlike social insurance does not mimic and incorporate market logics of exchange, which in capitalist societies tend to be more legitimate”. In line with this analysis, even though the principle of reciprocity doesn’t necessarily imply that everyone contributes equally to social cooperation (cf. *DPMR*, 13), in several European welfare regimes activation measures and increased benefit conditionality represented a way to counterbalance weak reciprocity and therefore to increase their

public and political legitimacy. The outcome of that attempt, however, is not unquestioned, as in some countries the emphasis on workfare conditionality of otherwise unconditional cash transfers “appears to have only served to make the electorate more suspicious of the deservingness of working-age benefit claimants” (Clegg 2013, 22).

Public perceptions of deservingness represent the second key political constraint making MIS an unlikely candidate for increased benefit generosity and coverage. As argued in Riva’s paper, “the disposition to help people out of solidarity is stronger the less they can be held responsible for their conditions and the worse those conditions are” (DPMR, 14). The extent of public sympathy towards the worse-off, redistribution and anti-poverty policy, however, is not given and steady. Normative judgements about solidarity vary across countries and can be highly heterogeneous with reference to diverse groups of social assistance claimants, widely ranging from children – typically conceived as the higher ranking deserving cluster – to childless able-bodied long-term unemployed. In this respect media campaigns about the un-deservingness of lone-mothers – i.e. the “black welfare queens” in the US and its “white” version in the UK – are very telling about how public perceptions of poverty and its causes/remedies can be influenced and shaped (cf. Larsen and Dejsgaard 2013). As showed by Larsen (2008), public perceptions of deservingness are in fact largely mediated by public (media) representation and political discourses, as well as by the institutional architecture of the welfare regime, due to the diverse policy feedback mechanisms at play. Much less investigated in this respect is the role played by civil society actors in mediating/filtering public perceptions about poverty and anti-poverty schemes. In particular the existence of a powerful ‘poverty lobby’ might be crucial in shaping public debates and in sensitizing public opinion to the benefits/costs of measures improving/worsening the position of poor people, or of particular sub-groups.

Turning to the political supply side, parties also have embodied very distinctive views and preferences about anti-poverty policies. Overall, welfare state research has documented that right/left ideological commitments and policy preferences towards the welfare state are – comparatively and historically – not as clear-cut as classical partisan politics’ arguments would suggest. On this point, Jensen (2014) claimed that taking seriously the partisanship theory requires “a more nuanced approach to preferences than simply presuming that the left invariantly wants more and the right invariantly wants less government” (Jensen 2014, 127). This consideration holds particularly true with reference to certain social policy areas, and especially with regard to the anti-poverty domain. Left and right attitudes towards last-resort safety nets may be in fact more heterogeneous than expected and dissimilar to those concerning more far-reaching social protection schemes (e.g. insurance-based pension schemes and health care protection), due to the fact that they may trigger deep-rooted value-oriented conflicts within both the left camp and the right one.

On the left side, despite the overall pro-welfare attitude, poor-relief schemes might generate conflicting sentiments: they might be framed either as an essential component of the social protection system, or as the most visible sign of the failure of properly functioning inclusive welfare states. Further, the internal differentiation of the working class and leftist parties' core constituencies has resulted in several countries in increased party fragmentation thus generating new competition/coalition dynamics within the left camp. In the age of retrenchment this contributed to bring to light novel distributive dilemmas, with some left parties hard-pressed about protecting the social rights of the so-called *insiders* rather than sponsoring the introduction of more generous and far-reaching means-tested income support programs for the *outsiders* (Rueda 2005).

On the right side of the political spectrum, the claim that the right cannot be simply conceived as the welfare sceptical counterpart of the left (Pierson 1994; Jensen 2014) is closely intertwined with the acknowledgement that several *rights* exist (cf. Rémond 1982) – with diverse political constituencies grouping segmented interests, demands and welfare attitudes. In particular, right-wing parties may embody very diverse policy preferences regarding social assistance and minimum income protection on the basis of different grounds. For example, the liberal-right might support MISs as a less expensive type of state intervention to aid those affected by market failures. Similarly, means-tested schemes may be in line with the notion of the residual welfare state shared by conservatives, as these schemes can be designed to serve as a springboard for workfare activation. The Catholic right and Christian democratic parties, by contrast, might exhibit a less favourable attitude towards MISs, understood as detrimental to self-organized family and community arrangements. Further, the populist right, which has spread in several countries since the 1980s attracting shares of working class voters (Kriesi *et al.* 2008), can be expected to support, in a welfare chauvinist vein, the last-resort safety net, but only for nationals. Similarly, the regionalist right, in its turn, is expected to oppose a national MIS, especially if it implies intense territorial redistribution, but might be favourable to regional/local schemes to combat poverty.

To conclude, despite the existence of highly differentiated conceptions and preferences about MIS, the actual adoption and its institutional consolidation in almost all EU countries suggest that the very last layer of social protection systems can be the *loci* of an overlapping consensus (cf. Murra 2014). At the same time, however, the far-reaching heterogeneity occurred in terms of institutional design and poverty outcomes – just very briefly reviewed in Section 2 – reveals that anti-poverty policies originate from complex and country-specific deeply-rooted political and institutional dynamics. In a nutshell, last resort safety nets are shaped by the interplay of a multiplicity of factors – including functional pressures, public attitudes, actors' constellations and political preferences/conceptions regarding social assistance – that in mature

welfare states are mediated by powerful institutional filters. In this respect, European countries represent for comparative welfare state scholars a very rich and challenging setting to investigate the empirical field-level realization of solidarity.

WHY OBJECTIVITY MATTERS? A METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION FOR POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS

GIULIA BISTAGNINO

1. INTRODUCTION

In his paper “Democratic Political Morality and Redistribution. A Philosophical Investigation in the Foundations of the Welfare State” (from now on *DPMR*), Nicola Riva defends what he calls *the democratic conception of political morality*. Such formulation frames the boundaries of what he takes legitimate democratic state action to be, in particular with reference to redistributive public policies. Riva considers two possible argumentative strategies on the issue: redistribution is required by justice; redistribution is necessary insofar as it promotes the welfare of a political community, intended as a function of the welfare of each individual member of such community. Within this discussion, rejecting right-wing libertarianism and welfarism as reasonable basis for a conception of political morality, he proposes a set of normative principles, embodying the ideas of respect for persons and fairness, apt to articulate a *democratic conception of justice*, meant to govern and articulate the redistribution of social goods in contemporary democratic societies.

In defending his view in the paper, Riva tackles various topics and problems, including whether redistributive policies should take the form of *in kind* or *in cash* transfers; whether such policies should be *universal* or *targeted*, in the sense of being addressed to special groups defined by specific features, such as sex, age, ability, and so on; whether redistributive policies should be *selective*, *conditional*, or *unconditional*. In what follows, I leave these interesting and stimulating discussions aside and I concentrate on Riva’s conception of political philosophy. Indeed, at the beginning of the paper, Riva briefly sketches what he takes the scope and method of political philosophy to be. Although his main goal is to defend a particular view on justice, redistribution and the welfare state, he retains and proposes a strong perspective on the matter, claiming for philosophy to be a *reconstructive* and *critical* activity (*DPMR*, 2).

Here, I challenge such conception by not only casting some doubts upon Riva’s approach to political philosophy, but also raising some questions about the

aims of the discipline in general. In particular, my intent is to highlight the importance of objectivity when it comes to normative matters, and to point out the dangers of a reconstructive and practical approach to political philosophy. In this sense, my arguments draw from Riva's, but my purpose should be more broadly conceived: I take that of Riva's paper as an opportunity to consider and (hopefully) better understand the role of political philosophy and how its endeavour should be appreciated.

2. STARTING FROM WHERE WE ARE

One of the merits of Riva's paper is to present what he takes the enterprise of philosophy to be in a clear and explicit manner: "I think of philosophy as a *reconstructive* and *critical* activity, whose main task is to provide a reasonable systematic reconstructions of *our* beliefs and values" (*DPMR* 2-3, italics mine). According to his view, political philosophy has a job to perform in the sense that it serves the function of uncovering and revealing the values and beliefs shared within a democratic society. To political philosophy is assigned the task of reconstructing the normative web and ideas upon which a conception of political morality, intended as the principles governing political and social relations, is built on. In this sense, the role of the political philosopher is not to propose a set of normative principles that are true, rational, or reasonable to endorse, but to account for ideas that can constitute the basis for a majoritarian consensus among citizens because already embedded in the society. Political philosophy is a kind of reconstruction because its goal is to bring to citizens' attention existing values and normative beliefs that otherwise may remain obscure and confused.

However, the reconstructive function of political philosophy is not intended as an end in itself. Indeed, reconstruction for Riva needs to be critical, in the sense that it helps and enables individuals to examine their own convictions and beliefs and evaluate them, by pinpointing when such beliefs and convictions are not consistent with each other, or appear unwarranted and unjustified. Reconstructive political philosophy is not only a self-directed activity for its function does not only aim at assessing one's own convictions. Rather, it retains an important public role in permitting citizens to evaluate and criticize political institutions and social practices when these are in contrast with those convictions and beliefs held and shared in the society. "Ultimately, the task of political philosophy is to embrace our awareness, as individuals and as collectivity" (*DPMR* 3, fn. 6). The role of political philosophy is to make people conscious and attentive about their values and beliefs in order to check the legitimacy of political action and institutions.

It is possible to think of Riva's approach as somehow resembling that of John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* (1993). Not only both works focus on the

justification of norms apt to legitimately govern democratic societies, but they are also framed within a contextual perspective. As for Riva, Rawls's starting point is historically situated: not only political liberalism addresses the problem of stability of democratic societies characterized by reasonable pluralism and it assumes that a liberal democratic society is more just than alternatives, but also the *political* conception of justice is framed in terms of democratic values and ideas that are part of the public political culture of the society Rawls wants to focus on. Indeed, Rawls's idea of *freestanding* is based on the conviction that, in order to achieve an *overlapping consensus*,¹ a conception of justice must be political in the sense of being self-standing, namely independent of any concepts, values, and principles of comprehensive moral, philosophical, and religious doctrines. For Rawls, a political conception of justice is worked up from "certain fundamental political ideas" that are implicit in the public culture of a democratic societies.

Despite this common emphasis on a society's actual values and ideals, it is important to understand that Riva's position radically differs from the one of Rawls. If, for the latter, political values are those that are *justifiable* to each and every reasonable citizen living under the rules and laws of a political community, for the former, they represent values and ideas present in the culture of contemporary democracies and apt to "gain the support of a majority of [their] members" (DPMR 2, fn. 5). The fact that both authors rely on some sort of consensual model should not give a false impression. Although rejecting any claim of truth in the political domain, Rawls is interested in justify the validity of a liberal conception of justice. On the contrary, Riva's attempt is of a different kind: he is interested in simply reconstructing ideas that are present in a democratic society and apt to gain the support of the majority of individuals living under its rules. In this sense, there is no question of validity that exceeds the boundaries of actual consensus. Rawls's argumentative strategy is based on an idealizing device, according to which the set of people whose consensus is relevant is restricted. Rawls aims to achieve the (limited) consensus of reasonable citizens, for principles of political justice are those that reasonable people would consent to. Differently, Riva does not look for a qualified form of consent, nor does his account require the actual consensus of all citizens subjected to the political authority. Indeed, given that real-life people deeply disagree about almost all relevant issues, it would be, at best, unrealistic to claim actual consent of all as a

¹ In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls tries to lay out the conditions of possibility for liberal democratic societies characterized by pluralism to be stable over time. In particular, his hope is to secure the possibility of an overlapping consensus, in which citizens affirm the same conception of justice from their different perspectives. Since the political conception is freestanding, it constitutes a module that can fit into any number of worldviews that citizens may have. So, in an overlapping consensus each reasonable citizen accepts and affirms this common "module" from her own point of view. According to Rawls, an overlapping consensus grants *stability for the right reasons* (Rawls 1993, 133-172).

necessary condition for legitimacy. Rather, his idea is that, to be of use in the justification of public policies and laws, philosophical reconstructions are to gain the support of the majority of citizens. But what if the majority consents to a philosophical reconstruction fostering public evils? In the next section, I tackle this question and try to show why Riva's idea of philosophy as a reconstructive activity should be considered problematic.

3. RECONSTRUCTION OR OBJECTIVITY?

In his paper, Riva is very clear that objectivity is not what he is chasing. He is well aware that employing an actual consensus model to select what philosophical reconstruction to enact amounts to leave aside any consideration of objectivity. And he explicitly doubts that “there is any absolute and/or objective standard to compare the validity of alternative conceptions of political morality” (*DPMR* 2, fn 5). If Rawls's idea of political liberalism aims at reaching some form of modest objectivity by rejecting truth as a condition for political principles,² it seems that Riva is sceptical about the possibility of any kind of objectivity when it comes to moral and political matters. Instead, he shares Richard Rorty's firm conviction that political philosophers should abandon any quest for objectivity or truth, and “accept the fact that we have to start from where we are” (Rorty 1989, 176). And this is the reason why the dimension of consensus is so crucial. As for Rorty (2000, 2), Riva seems to think that when it comes to politics, objectivity and truth are useless for we can only aim at justification.³ The point is that, although there exists no objectivity, it is possible to understand when a certain belief or value is justified.

² Throughout “political constructivism”, a shared public perspective, from which all citizens can understand what principles and judgments are reasonable to endorse, is established. Rawlsian objectivity is, thus, modestly conceived, for principles cannot be considered or claimed to be true, but they are nonetheless valid, in the sense of being reasonable (Rawls 1993, 89-130).

³ I am not here claiming for Riva to embrace a complete Rortian perspective on political philosophy. Indeed, for Rorty objectivity is not something that does not exist. Rather, objectivity is a misleading term, which should be dropped because it is counterproductive towards the aim of pragmatist philosophy, namely that of fostering the value of solidarity (see Rorty 1989). Such view of objectivity is coherent with Rorty's approach to philosophy in general: philosophical problems and concepts such as those of truth, right reason, rationality, validity, and so on are myths human beings would be better off without. Indeed, Rorty is convinced that the history of modern philosophy has been dominated by certain misleading metaphysical and epistemological ideas that brought us to think philosophy as a kind of successor to theology in its foundational aim. Philosophy has been considered the search for a neutral standpoint, a place out of all contexts from which to judge and understand reality, a “view from nowhere”, to put it with Nagel. According to Rorty, such a picture of philosophy now dried out and, in exchange, he proposes a vision prompting to “break down the distinction between knowing things and using them” (Rorty 1990, 50).

Justification is thus intended in terms of consensus, which is something we can recognize and even measure.

Riva's approach to justification and objectivity is minimal. According to his view, what seems right to a certain community (or its greatest part) determines what is right to be implemented in form of policies or rules. His radical rejection of objectivity cannot help to appear problematic because the fact that a majority of individuals, within the context of a democratic society, praise and agree on some ideas does not tell us much about the normative status of these ideas. Indeed, leaving objectivity aside of the picture means to assume some form of subjectivism, or relativism according to which it is impossible to tell why a certain value, or conviction should be supported and whether it is of value – except from the fact that it is shared among others. Indeed, the problem with Riva's approach is that, in normative terms, it is satisfactory only insofar as we are part of the majority sharing the reconstructed values, and we consider the ideas present in the society as valuable. In this sense, giving up objectivity amounts to asking individuals to have faith that those ideas already present in a democratic society and, thus, apt to gain the consensus of the majority, are of value. However, without resorting to any kind of objectivity, such a faith seems completely unwarranted. To put in another manner, the problem with this kind of relativism – or *ethnocentrism* if we are to follow Rorty's terminology – is that, if we can only start "from where we are", our values need to be considered culturally oriented, driven only by the development of history. But if philosophy cannot provide any philosophy of history apt to explain how our values are correct, given that the quest for objectivity is useless and bankrupt,⁴ then we can only say that our values are valuable because are ours – which seems a form of fallacious reasoning. Moreover, it seems difficult to think that each person living in a democratic society would bite the bullet like Rorty and say: "I am lucky to be have raised within [the Western] culture. But I am well aware that my barbarous ancestors thought themselves lucky to have been raised within their culture, that my cousins in Germany thought themselves lucky to be able to enrol in the Hitler Youth" (2000b, 62).

4. EVALUATIVE PHILOSOPHY VS. THERAPEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

At the beginning of *Sphere of Justice*, Michale Walzer distinguishes two different methodological standpoints political philosophers can assume when they go

⁴ Some scholars have claimed for Rawls's political liberalism to be in need of a sort of Hegelian flavoured philosophy of history apt to explain why starting from certain "fundamental political ideas" implicit in the public culture of a democratic societies can function as a solid normative basis for principles of justice. For such criticisms, see Kukathas & Pettit 1990, Pasquali 2012.

about theorizing: “One way to begin the philosophical enterprise – perhaps the original way- is to walk out of the cave, leave the city, climb the mountain, fashion oneself [...] an objective and universal standpoint. Then one describes the terrain of everyday life from far away so that it loses its particular contours and takes a general shape. But I mean to stand in the cave, in the city, on the ground” (Walzer 1983, xiv). If, on one hand, political philosophy is intended as an abstract activity, meant to construct an ahistorical Archimedean point, from which to judge the political world, on the other, there is the idea that political philosophy is a contingent project focused on practice. Another way to put these differences in method among political philosophers is to distinguish between what I call a “therapeutic” and an “evaluative” approach. Within the former outlook, the role of the philosopher is seen as that of a medical doctor, someone whose job is that of identify a cure to a specific disease. In this case, a theory is determined and judged by the results it can achieve. Moreover, if a medical doctor’s duty is to provide patients with cures apt to make them feel better, so the therapeutic political philosopher’s job is to tackle and solve contingent problems, as for example that of justifying the legitimacy of some welfare policies. Therapeutic political philosophy is a practical activity in its having a problem-solving attitude. The evaluative approach, on the contrary, considers the quest for objectivity as a fundamental tool for providing evaluative standards apt to critically consider the normative problems we struggle in our political lives. The evaluative political philosopher seeks objectivity not in an attempt to outline an ideal picture of a just, but practically unachievable society governed by universal but unrealistic principles. Rather, trying to provide objective normative principles amounts to furnish considered criteria concerning how things should be, which can function as means to assess how the current world we are living works, and to evaluate it. The evaluative project is a project of understanding: the political philosopher is not here pressed by the urge to dissolve political and social problems, but to provide new intellectual understandings to comprehend such problems.

It is clear from this discussion that, in his paper, Riva follows Walzer into the city and takes a therapeutic approach to political philosophy. However, it is important for me to clarify that I do not think that, when it comes to normative theorizing, there is only one possible and correct method to embrace. Indeed, I think political philosophers should feel free to choose the method they feel most appropriate to reach their aims and goals, let them be practical or theoretical. However, such a choice cannot be taken naively: the minute a method is picked out, theoretical consequences, which may also be problematic, are driven. In this sense, I strongly feel that political philosophers should not only be rigorous in proposing their arguments, but also aware of the limits and problems of their respective approaches.

WHAT IF THERE IS NO (PRACTICAL) OBJECTIVITY? A VERY SHORT REPLY TO BISTAGNINO*

NICOLA RIVA

I would like, first of all, to thank Giulia Bistagnino and Ilaria Madama for their very interesting contributions to this discussion. The contribution by Madama integrates mine, describing redistributive public policies in Europe from the perspective of empirical research on those policies, pointing to some convergence between our different perspectives. In particular, what Madama explains in the third and final part of her paper, about the political obstacles to politically justifying redistributive policies by invoking solidarity (rather than social justice) seems to me to confirm what I argue about the principle of solidarity: that is, that it finds a limit in the principle of reciprocity, so that the more a person could be held responsible for her/his condition the less other people would feel compelled to help her/him out of solidarity, the idea being that they don't deserve it. Thus said, I have nothing more to add to Madama's reconstruction, that seems to me – as far as a philosopher can judge – convincing.

As regards Bistagnino, in her comments to my paper she raises some important epistemological and methodological objections to my – or what she takes to be my – understanding of practical philosophy (Bistagnino talks of political philosophy; I take political philosophy to be a part of practical philosophy), thus inviting me to further clarify and defend my position, in order to correct some misunderstandings. For this reason, in this very short reply I will exclusively deal with her comments. I don't think that what I will say will lead her to abandon her position about the status of practical philosophy to endorse mine. I just hope to make our disagreement clearer. Let me point out, first of all, that our disagreement is not a disagreement *within* practical philosophy. It is rather a disagreement in epistemology, or philosophy of knowledge, *about* the status of practical philosophy, that probably depends on different ontological assumptions, that is, on different assumptions about what there is.

Bistagnino claims that objectivity matters for practical philosophy¹ or, better, she defends an idea of practical philosophy for which objectivity matters.² But

* I want to thank Konstantin P. Konstantinov for discussing with me ideas I present in this reply and for his assistance as an English editor.

what if objectivity is impossible for practical philosophy? The first – even if not the only – reason why I reject the idea of objectivity in practical philosophy is simply that I think objectivity in that field to be impossible. I think that among the basic practical concepts – *the good, the right, and the useful* – the only one that has some link to objectivity is the last one. I believe that among practical beliefs – beliefs about how we should act (or live) and about the norms that should govern our actions – only beliefs affirming the usefulness of some action(s) for (a) given end(s) can be (objectively) true or false. I don't believe in the existence of something with the property of making true or false our judgements about what is (fundamentally) good or (fundamentally) right, be that a realm of mysterious non-natural entities or a divine will.

I believe that people's beliefs about the good and the right – their *practical* beliefs – reflect their preferences: they are the expression of practical attitudes and sensibilities that develop within social contexts and are deeply influenced by culture. In fact they are part of human culture. Of course, as cultural items, practical beliefs can be the object of descriptions that can be more or less accurate, more or less true. Describing that kind of beliefs is the task of cultural studies and the social sciences, not of practical philosophy.³ But the issue raised

¹ By “objectivity” as applied to practical standards of behaviour I mean the idea that those standards can be justified in a way that doesn't ultimately depend on people's practical attitudes or preferences.

² This reformulation is important, because the rejection of objectivity in practical philosophy forces us to revise our idea of practical philosophy as an intellectual enterprise: we cannot simply reject objectivity and think that everything else can remain unchanged. Traditionally practical philosophy has been conceived as the intellectual enterprise aimed at providing objective – true – answers to such questions as: “how should we act (or live), individually and collectively?”, and “what norms should govern our actions?”. Such a traditional epistemological or meta-theoretical understanding of practical philosophy assimilates it to other branches of philosophy and of knowledge in general. The rejection of ideas of truth and/or objectivity in practical philosophy implies that practical philosophy as traditionally understood is an enterprise that looks for something that doesn't exist: an enterprise doomed to fail. As a consequence, either we reject practical philosophy – what leaves some space for a theoretical critique of that branch of philosophy, aimed at uncovering its ideological functions – or we try to defend a different account of practical philosophy, claiming that even if there is no true answer to such questions as “how should we act (or live)?” and “what norms should govern our action?”, it still makes sense to look for answers to those questions or to similar ones. I try to do that. One could ask: why calling this admittedly revisionist conception of practical philosophy “practical philosophy”? My answer to that question is that practical philosophy as I understand it – as a reconstructive practice – is what, in fact, practical philosophy has always been: an attempt by practical philosophers to provide a systematic and reasonable reconstruction of *their* practical beliefs. The traditional conception of practical philosophy is the product of an *epistemological* or *meta-theoretical* misunderstanding of what the *practice* of practical philosophy consists in.

³ One can object that to understand practical philosophy as a reconstructive practice – as I do – means to understand its tasks as descriptive. But a reconstruction is not a description. In providing a philosophical reconstruction of a set of practical beliefs a practical philosopher

by Bistagnino doesn't concern the objectivity of propositions describing practical beliefs. It concerns the objectivity of practical beliefs themselves. It is a fact that many people think their practical beliefs to be true in a way that does not depend on their personal attitudes or preferences. But by itself this fact does not demonstrate that those beliefs really are true:⁴ people could simply be wrong. Indeed, I think they are.

Thinking to the advantages people, or some groups of people – the ones in positions of power, whose interests practical beliefs often tend to favour –, could obtain by thinking, or by inducing other people to think, their practical judgments to be objectively valid reinforces my conviction that practical objectivity is a human invention. The fact of believing her/his practical standards to be objectively valid could lead a person to feel authorized to impose those practical standards – and a conduct that accords with them – to other people, or to act without taking into consideration other people's objections to her/his conduct when it conforms to those practical standards. Objectivity seems to have this authorizing power. The fact that the belief in the objectivity of practical

subjects those beliefs to a rational scrutiny and to a revision aimed at producing an account that is, at least, internally coherent and, ideally, consistent with our other beliefs (including beliefs about the world and human beings). Such a practice can produce a revision of those beliefs, as far as, subjected to a close inspection, they appear to be incoherent or inconsistent with our other beliefs.

⁴No more than the fact that a lot of people believe in (some) God demonstrate that (some) God exists. In fact I think that the belief in the existence of something that could make some practical judgments objective is very similar to a belief in (some) God: something depending on an act of faith. Just as it is not possible to demonstrate the falsehood of the more refined religious beliefs, the only argument against those beliefs being negative, that is, pointing to the fact that we have no evidence of their truth, I would concede that it is not possible to demonstrate the falsehood of the belief in the existence of something that could make some practical judgments objective. That is typical of beliefs based on valid acts of faith, where valid acts of faith are those acts of faith that lead people to believe to be true something there is no evidence for nor against. But in the same way we could believe in the existence of unicorns: the fact there is no reliable evidence of the existence of unicorns doesn't demonstrate that they do not exist. In matters of religion and morality people employ concepts of truth and falsehood that they would reject when discussing other matters. While normally people would consider false (in any case not true) something they don't have any evidence for and true only something they have evidence for, when they discuss matters of religion or morality they tend to assume that something is false only when there is evidence against it and to take for truth beliefs there is no evidence for nor against. It is possible to object that also our belief in the existence of the external world or of other minds similar to ours is a matter of faith. That is probably true. Solipsism or the hypothesis of our being brains in a pool cannot be demonstrated to be false. Nevertheless, I believe in the existence of the external world and of other minds similar to mine, and on the truth-capacity of propositions describing them. The fact is that the hypothesis affirming the existence of the external world and of other minds proves to be very useful in explaining our empirical evidence, what is not at all true of our belief in the existence of objective practical standards. To the contrary, what is closest to empirical evidence regarding practical standards, that is, the revealed opinions of people, seems to count against their objectivity.

standards is self-interested is proved by the fact that ordinary people don't simply tend to believe practical standards to be objectively valid, but tend to believe *their own* practical standards to be objectively valid.⁵

Furthermore – this is the second reason why I reject the idea of objectivity in practical philosophy –, we don't need objective practical standards. Suppose that those standards exist and we can recognize them. Either they accord with our practical attitudes and preferences or they don't. In the first case, those standards don't add anything to our practical attitudes and preferences as reliable guides for conduct. In the second case, we should ask why we should submit ourselves to those standards, instead of following our practical attitudes and preferences? After all, if we have free will,⁶ it consists precisely in the possibility to decide which standards to follow. In order to convince us to act according to objective practical standards that conflict with our practical attitudes and preferences, someone should appeal to some higher order preference of us to act according to those standards. But why should we have such a preference, that would lead us to act against our practical attitudes and preferences?

Up to this point I have identified practical objectivity with independence from people's practical attitudes and preferences. But objectivity is sometimes conceived in a different way. The objectivity of objective practical standards is sometimes identified not with independence from human beings but with dependency on a common human nature. This conception of practical objectivity identifies objectivity with the universality of some practical attitudes and preferences. I prefer to call this different conception of practical objectivity “universalism”, but as far as many people that speak of *objective* practical standards seem to think of *universal* practical standards I think useful to add some comments on this idea. Universalism is consistent with practical subjectivism: it is possible to claim that there are some practical attitudes and preferences that are common to all human beings and would lead them, in some ideal circumstances, to recognize as valid a common set of practical standards.⁷

⁵ This generalization doesn't apply to practical philosophers, in particular to those philosophers mostly interested in epistemological and/or methodological issues.

⁶ In fact I think we don't have free will and cannot abstain from acting according to our practical attitudes and preferences, but that's a different issue. My argument doesn't rely on free will.

⁷ Theories that identify the validity of practical standards with the possibility that those standards be the object of a universal consensus in ideal circumstances can be distinguished in two classes depending on how they explain the possibility of a universal consensus in ideal circumstances. On the one side we have objective consensus theories of practical validity that explain the possibility of a universal consensus by arguing that in ideal circumstances people could reach a proper understanding of those realities, independent from their practical attitudes or preferences, that confers to those standards their validity. On the other side we have subjective consensus theories of practical validity that explain the possibility of a universal consensus by arguing that in ideal circumstances people could reach a proper understanding of how some set of practical standards fit well with their “true” or “rational” practical attitudes or

I think that, among the approaches that try to defend the universality of practical standards that are not *de facto* the object of an universal consensus, those that appeal to a common human nature are the most promising ones. Suppose that we could prove that the very natural constitution of human beings in the absence of distorting factors would lead every human being to judge good or right the same patterns of conduct. Couldn't we say in that case that those judgements about the good and the right would be universally valid, even if, due to the existing distorting factors not universally believed to be so? Maybe. The point is that a theory describing those judgements and the norms that if followed would produce them would be a reconstructive theory, describing common human practical attitudes and preferences: precisely the kind of theory I think practical philosophy should aim to produce. In that case the ultimate standard of practical validity would be a fact: a fact about human nature; the psychological constitution of human beings.

Thus said, I doubt that we could look for a foundation of universal practical standards in a common human nature. Probably we would be disappointed. Ideas of goodness and rightness have much more to do with culture than with nature. Of course our biological nature is that of an animal able to have a culture, but our practical attitudes and preferences are cultural products, they are shaped by our cultural context. And it is quite clear that we don't have a common culture or common ideas of goodness and rightness. Of course, there could be some overlap among cultures and among cultural ideas about the good and the right. Indeed, one of the consequences of the fact that, thanks to technological developments, communicative exchanges among people belonging to different cultures become more and more frequent, cultures tend to contaminate each other, distances between cultures tend to reduce, and the areas of overlap among them tend to extend. It is even possible, that one day we would share a common human culture.

It is often possible to explain why certain cultural beliefs tend to spread in certain circumstances, and why cultures have taken the form they have. For instance, we can explain the spread of the belief in the equal moral status of human beings by pointing to the fact that that belief provides a good point of

preferences. Subjective consensus theory typically relies on some implicit or explicit theory of human nature and rationality. A part from the fact that it is often quite difficult to establish what people would agree to in ideal circumstances, even if we agree about what circumstances would be ideal – and of course we don't –, the main problem with this kind of approach to practical validity is that it is unable to justify what it presupposes, that is, the basic practical standard establishing that “it is right what will be agreed upon in (the specified) ideal circumstances”. Of course the validity of that principle cannot depend on the fact that it will be agreed upon in ideal circumstances. Each attempt to defend that basic practical standard should either refer to existence of some independent reality that could be perceived in ideal circumstances or to the existence of a common human nature that would express itself in ideal circumstances.

departure to come to an agreement among human beings on how to live together peacefully once that those worldviews, mostly religious ones, that had provided a justification for (moral and/or social) hierarchies among human beings lose their convincing force. For a very similar reason it is possible to argue that there is a tendency to develop a common human culture, and a common set of practical standards, that would facilitate peaceful interaction between human beings and the resolution of conflicts, precisely as a common set of legal rules is useful to solve conflicts and maintain a social order. But the fact that the emergence of some beliefs can be explained doesn't mean that those beliefs can be (practically) justified.

In her comments Bistagnino seems to attribute to me the belief that the fact that a majority of people thinks some practical standard to be valid makes that standard superior to different standards: superior from some impersonal point of view, not just superior for that group of people. I never said that nor I think that it is implied by anything I said. As I said in a footnote to my paper, I do not believe that there is some standard to compare the validity of different coherent systems of practical beliefs. That means that I do not think that consensus – or its dimension – could provide such a standard. The fact that a belief is the object of a broad consensus demonstrates that a lot of people think that belief to be valid or even true, not that it is valid or true (what it cannot be). Of course, I think that some beliefs could be demonstrated more useful to reach certain aims, but that doesn't confer to those beliefs a practical superiority independent from our subjective aims.

Practical philosophers could decide to provide a philosophical reconstruction of majoritarian values and beliefs or of minoritarian ones. Both things could contribute to the reinforcement or to the transformation of either set of beliefs. It would be reinforced if the provided philosophical reconstruction shows it to be coherent and attractive when closely inspected. It would be transformed if the philosophical reconstruction shows it to be incoherent or not attractive. The minoritarian beliefs of our days could be the majoritarian beliefs of the future and practical philosophy can contribute to make them become that. Furthermore the practical philosopher could be her-/himself a supporter of the set of beliefs s-/he tries to reconstruct – in that case with his/her reconstruction s-/he will aim at reinforcing that set of beliefs – or a detractor of that set of beliefs – in that case with her/his reconstruction s-/he will aim at weakening it.

If in my paper I tried to provide a philosophical reconstruction of ideas about redistribution that I think to be the object of a broad consensus within democratic political societies, it is because I share those ideas at least in one of their possible specifications. Indeed, my reconstruction of those ideas stops at a very general level. Trying to specify those ideas would probably lead me to some more controversial position. My supporting ideas about redistribution that I

consider quite common within the society I live in (even if very badly implemented) doesn't mean that I support all the practical ideas that are the object of a majoritarian consensus within that society. If I were concerned with treatment of non-human animals I will probably choose to reconstruct minoritarian beliefs (those of animalists) rather than majoritarian ones and if I would choose to reconstruct majoritarian beliefs it would be to show their weakness and the necessity of a revision of those beliefs.

A practical philosopher brings his/her own subjective practical sensibility in her/his work. That is not a problem, as far as the academic community of practical philosophers is as pluralistic as our society is, and more tolerant than it is. What is important is to recognize it: it helps to redimension the supposed authority of philosophers, the influence they could exercise in virtue of their supposed expertise and social positions. This is needed to reduce the risk of a philosophical tyranny and to remember that to the last instance it is up to every person and to every group or community to decide how to live. Practical philosophy can help, by increasing people's awareness about how they want to live. Ultimately, I think that the fundamental questions for practical philosophy are not "how *should* I live?" or "how *should* we live together (and treat each other)?" but "how *do I want* to live?" and "how *do we want* to live together (and treat each other)?".

Let me conclude by saying something about the practical implications of the position I defended. The idea that the validity of our practical standards is subjective and at best inter-subjective doesn't mean that everything goes, that we shouldn't criticize the way other people behave because this would mean to impose to other people practical standards whose validity they could reject. This position, commonly referred to as practical "relativism", but that I think it will be better to call practical "indifference", lacks every appeal on us. The principle affirming practical indifference, as every other practical standards, lacks objective validity. Furthermore, it contrasts with our deepest practical attitudes, that are judgemental and for good reasons as far as how other people behave has an impact on our own lives. It is a part of subjectively affirming a practical standard the fact of using that standard to judge other people behaviour: there is no external point of view that could provide a foundation for practical indifference.

Our practical standards can be more or less tolerant, but each of us has some ideas about what can't be tolerated. Consider an example. If my practical attitudes lead me to support sex equality, I will judge wrong discrimination against women. That means that I *want* to be the kind of person that treats women and men equally, that I *want* to live in a social context where women and men are treated equally, and that I will do all what I can (consistently with my other practical standards) to impose standards of sex equality on others. That means that living in a society that respects sex equality is more important to me than

living peacefully with people that would like to discriminate against women because their practical standards allow or even require that. The fact that I can't objectively justify those standards doesn't mean that I shouldn't live according to them and make my interaction with others conditional to them. In fact, if practical objectivity is a useless chimera – as I think it to be – I have no better alternative.

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