

Dissertation report

Vladimir Lukic: The Narrative Procedure of Moral and Political Deliberation

The central goal of Vladimir Lukic's dissertation, as I see it, is to develop an account of moral and political deliberation that, on the one hand, acknowledges that individuals' moral outlooks are fundamentally shaped by the traditions and historical narratives that they find themselves in while they become mature moral agents, and that, on the other hand, is capable of providing support for broadly liberal political principles as sound and applicable across a broad range of historical and cultural traditions. In other words, one way to understand its aim is to see it as attempting to reconcile a communitarian account of persons as essentially embedded in particular practices and social narratives with a broadly speaking liberal political morality. The attempt at reconciliation is conducted at two different levels. At the metaethical level, the dissertation defends a version of constructivism that is cognitivist in the sense that it accepts the truth-aptness of moral statements (moral statements are capable of being true or false), but which insists that the truth conditions of moral claims involve some beliefs or attitudes of the relevant moral agents (with one notable exception, as we will see). This contrasts with (robust) realism, which holds that the truth conditions of moral claims are all mind- (or belief- or attitude-) independent, and with various forms of moral skepticism that deny the truth-aptness of moral claims. The idea, broadly speaking (and assuming that I have understood the central claims of the dissertation correctly) is that it is possible to identify a procedure of reasoning and deliberation that, starting from the raw material of historically given narratives and concomitant self-understandings informed by them, will lead reasoners to endorse liberal political principles as objectively correct, of course, in the constructivist sense of correctness as being the result of a deliberation and reasoning procedure that enjoys a privileged status in some sense (epistemic, normative, or both).

On the first-order normative level, the dissertation argues that the preeminent moral value or property that will enable the reconciliation is reasonableness in something very much like the Rawlsian sense. The features of Rawlsian reasonableness that are of relevance here are the following: recognizing reasonable pluralism, or the fact that under free institutions, reasonable individuals will endorse different "comprehensive worldviews" or conceptions of the good life; recognizing the burdens of judgment, or the fact that disagreements among reasonable persons need not be the result of ignorance, mistakes in reasoning, or ill will, but rather, some moral disagreements are intractable no matter how open to evidence and reasons the participants are; and finally, a willingness to offer fair terms of cooperation to each other, irrespective of our disagreements. The dissertation

asserts (appropriately, in my view) that the notion of reasonableness is what holds the project together and which may hold out the promise of successful reconciliation with our inescapable embeddedness in different historical traditions and the possibility of justifying liberal political principles to all. More intriguingly, from a theoretical point of view, the author asserts that reasonableness is the only 'objectively true' moral value. (I would phrase this claim differently, because there is a perfectly *bona fide* sense in which constructivism acknowledges the possibility of objective moral truth. Therefore, I would paraphrase this quite central point of the dissertation as asserting that reasonableness is the only normative property whose value can be shown to be true in a non-constructivist, robust realist sense). The 'truth' of reasonableness does not depend on it being the outcome of a suitable reason-giving procedure but is prior to and independent of it. Reasonableness is thus the Archimedean point that allows reconciliation between a communitarian moral epistemology and liberal political morality. Reasonable people, who by hypothesis accept the burdens of judgment and the need to offer fair terms of cooperation to each other despite their disagreements will arrive, in a deliberative procedure that abides by reasonableness, to a commitment to basic liberal principles.

This is an admittedly selective and simplified summary of a complex dissertation that touches on a large variety of additional themes, but which I think does justice to its core aims and main argumentative structure. The dissertation is theoretically ambitious, and among its many strengths is the thorough engagement by the author with a broad range of problems that go significantly beyond political theory, from metaethics to the cognitive status of emotions and beyond. There is no doubt that the author has processed an impressive scope of readings in various subfields of philosophy and is capable of surveying and discussing philosophical positions in these subfields in a competent manner. The overall view that emerges from the whole body of the dissertation is coherent and has a suitable degree of plausibility. It is clear that its author has a strong philosophical vision and is capable of developing arguments in support of it through sustained engagement with the relevant philosophical literature. As a political philosopher, I have relatively little to say about those aspects of the dissertation that are further away from my own field, therefore, below I will raise some questions and point out what I take to be gaps in the reasoning on issues that are more closely connected to Rawlsian reasonableness. However, before that, I would like to mention a couple of more general ways that I think the dissertation could be further improved.

First, it seems to me that the dissertation unnecessarily burdens itself by taking on issues and engaging with bodies of literature that are not immediately relevant for its argumentative purposes. For instance, the dissertation discusses, at considerable length, issues related to hedonism, weakness of will, metaethical naturalism (to name just a few)

that do not obviously advance the main argument, or even contribute to clarifying the main stakes in the project. While I admire the philosophical appetite shown by the breadth of the dissertation, this also comes at a cost. For this reader at least, it was only rather late in the process of absorbing the work that the main contours of the project became clear.

Second and relatedly, the structure of the dissertation is not as tight and clear as it could have been. It would have been definitely helpful for this reader to outline the main logical structure of the argument at the beginning of the dissertation (and not just its goals), and to continually signpost where the reader is in that structure. This is a long and complex dissertation, so even practiced readers could use some roadmapping.

Third, and surprisingly given the amount of reading that went into the project, the dissertation's characterization of some prominent debates and views in moral and political philosophy are somewhat inaccurate or at least misleading. On page 3, the dissertation asserts that liberals (without qualification) identify the content of the right prior to and independent of the good. This is true of many but not all liberals—compare liberal perfectionists. On the same topic (p. 4), it is claimed that the theory of the good is associated with Aristotelianism and Utilitarianism. These are certainly two prominent conceptions of the good, but there are other ones, among them prominent liberal ones (Mill, Raz, Dworkin, to name just a few, have non-Utilitarian and non-Aristotelian accounts of the good life or of living well). On page 183 and elsewhere, the author equates Rawls' account of the 'reflective equilibrium' with his commitment to constructivism. This I think is a mistake, as these are related to different aspects of the Rawlsian project. Reflective equilibrium is about the process of justification, and not about the nature of truth. It endorses a coherentist view of justification, but such an account of justification is compatible with a robust realist account of moral truth. Constructivism (and realism) is about the kinds of facts that can make moral claims true, while coherentism about justification is about how we can learn or show that a moral claim is true. On page 212, the author equates the distinction between explanatory reasons and normative reasons with that between epistemic and practical reasons, if I read it correctly. If so, this is clearly a mistake. The second distinction (between epistemic and practical reasons) is about what a reason is a reason for: a belief or an action. If you tell me that it is raining outside, that's a reason to believe that it is in fact raining (other things equal). The fact that my cloths will get wet if I go out in the rain without an umbrella is a reason for me to take an umbrella. So practical and epistemic (or theoretical) reasons are distinguished by their object. By contrast, the distinction between explanatory and normative reasons cut across this divide. The first are about facts that explain why someone believes or does something, whether or not they have good reason to do so, while the latter tell us what it is that people have good reasons to believe or do, whether or not they realize it and act on them. For

example, if I think that Hell exists, then this may explain why I refrain from doing immoral acts, but this is in fact a bad reason to refrain from immoral acts, because Hell does not in fact exist (let's assume so). My watching lots of deceptive videos may explain my belief that the world is run by a secret cabal, but since the world is not run so, I have no normative reason to adopt this belief. By contrast, if the world is in fact (contrary to what I now believe) ruled by a secret cabal, then this fact constitutes a good (normative) reason to believe that it is so ruled, even if I as a naive liberal refuse to accept that. So, the distinction between explanatory and normative reasons is orthogonal to the one between reasons for belief (epistemic) and reasons for action (practical). Normative reasons apply to us whether or not we recognize them or are motivated by them, while explanatory reasons necessarily play some role in the causal chain that explains our beliefs and actions, whether or not they are good reasons in the normative sense.

I now turn to some more specific questions regarding the argument of the dissertation about the capacity of reasonableness to vindicate liberal principles within a constructivist framework. I take it that one of the central challenges of all constructivist accounts of deliberation is to explain the moral significance of the properties that purportedly account for the unique capacity of the deliberative procedure to construct correct answers or principles. For example, if the Habermasian "ideal speech situation" requires participants to be situated symmetrically and to be on an equal footing, then the significance of symmetry and equality cannot be explained with reference to their being the upshot of the ideal deliberative procedure, because they *define* what the ideal deliberative procedure is. In other words, pure constructivist accounts of ideal deliberation either implicitly and contrary to their core theoretical commitment assume some pre-deliberative moral truths that explain the significance of the properties that make the procedure epistemically or normatively special, or they are hopelessly circular, appealing to some outcomes of the ideal deliberative procedure to explain the properties that make the procedure ideal. An important virtue of the dissertation is that it appears to realize this difficulty and suggests a way around it: the solution is that the significance of reasonableness is prior to and independent of the deliberative procedure and thus its value is not accounted for with reference to it. It is, in the author's words, the one and only objective moral truth, or as I would say it, the one normative property whose value is to be explained in robust realist rather than constructivist terms. So, the account is only partially constructivist, because it allows that the value of one (and only one) normative property is true in a robust realist sense.

In one way, this solution distinguishes the author's approach favorably from other constructivists, because if the value of reasonableness is grounded in procedure- and deliberation-independent facts, then the reasoning can avoid circularity, and it might be

possible to explain, in a non-question-begging way, why the specified deliberative procedure has in fact normatively privileged status and hence the capacity to generate correct principles. In another way, however, this solution may undermine the theoretical coherence of the project. Constructivism and realism are entirely general and mutually exclusive accounts of the truth conditions of moral claims, and they apply to all moral claims or to none of them. It is hard for me to see how realism could be true about one and only one single normative property and not others. I would be very pleased if we could discuss this issue during the defense.

A second point is that I would like to hear more about how reasonableness (supposing that the worries about its standing can be diffused) can, on its own, deliver everything that the author expects it to deliver. Reasonableness as the author describes it (very much in line with Rawls) is a fundamentally formal or procedural value. The willingness to justify oneself, to offer reasons, and to offer fair terms of cooperation, say precise little about what terms will be deemed fair or acceptable. It would seem that the outcome could be very much dependent on the original inputs, i.e., the substantive views that reasonable participants start with, assuming (a big assumption) that there is sufficient overlap between them. But I see no guarantee that the outcome will always include some basic liberal principles, as the author argues. To be fair, this criticism is not specific to this dissertation but applies to the whole project of public reason liberalism. However, I was hoping that perhaps the dissertation could point to some novel solutions in this regard.

I am looking forward to discussing these points during the defense. It should be clear that despite my worries about certain points, I consider this a rich and insightful dissertation that is ready to be defended.



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