



BOOK REVIEW

Maria Paola Ferretti

***THE PUBLIC PERSPECTIVE: PUBLIC JUSTIFICATION
AND THE ETHICS OF BELIEF***

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In her book, *The public perspective: public justification and the ethics of belief*, Maria Paola Ferretti discusses in an interesting and original way the question of how moral and political rules can be made justifiable to all individuals living in pluralistic societies, where each person has a potentially different notion of the good life. This is a fundamental question in a free and pluralist society. Ferretti adheres to the idea that government activities must be justified to all citizens for public purposes, so that those who are subject to them can freely assent. This refers to the philosophical concept of public justification. Ferretti contributes to the debate by supporting the idea that public justification is only conceivable if people agree on a shared ethics of belief. Through this concept, she refers to a collection of epistemic and moral principles that lead to the reshaping of the beliefs that form our public worldview. Ferretti claims that Locke's concept of the ethics of belief is firmly founded in the liberal tradition and it might be revitalized to address important aspects of contemporary liberalism.

The book is divided into six chapters. After the introduction, Ferretti launches a debate in chapter 2, Public Reasoning and Agreement, by contrasting two prominent models: John Rawls's and Gerald Gaus's, to examine the link between justification and agreement in liberal political theory. She moves to chapter 3, The Ethics of Belief and the Liberal Tradition, where she advocates John Locke's ethics of belief as a theory that may be useful in reducing conflict in situations where it cannot be eliminated and disagreement should be accepted rather than solved. In

chapter 4, *Having Reasons and Giving Reasons*, Ferretti proposes that, rather than focusing on people as reasonable, we should focus on reasonable beliefs. She illustrates the difference between beliefs that are apt for public justification and beliefs that are not. In chapter 5, *Facing Disagreement*, she discovers points of agreement between people who hold opposing views but live in the same community rather than in separate communities. She examines and assesses her ideas in the real world in chapter 6, *Equal Freedom*, where she explains that her concept of equal freedom restricts the types of justifications that can be used to justify proposals for public norms. When determining whether a proposal is justified, we must consider if it is compatible with others's equal freedom, or whether it respects them as moral agents. Ferretti finishes with chapter 7, *Liberal Multiculturalism*, and explores the idea of respect for people as free, which involves respect for the fact that people exercise their freedom in groups.

Ferretti introduces public justification as a debate that takes place on multiple levels, including epistemology, metaethics, institutional design, and tolerance. She tells her readers that not all sides of the argument will be considered, and that many questions will have to be overlooked. Ferretti focuses on the relevance of free moral agency and the idea that people do not reach the same reasonable conclusions while exercising free moral agency.

Ferretti begins the topic in Chapter 2 with a focus on the link between public reason, justification, and agreement in liberal political theory, with John Rawls's consensual model and Gerald Gaus's convergence model being discussed as two contrasting approaches to the use of public reason. The agreement on principles of public order, according to both Rawls and Gaus, must be guided by reasons that are recognized as such from the evaluative point of view of each citizen.

Ferretti criticizes Rawls's shared agreement. According to this conception, public justification is based on reasons that can be expected to be shared by reasonable people when entering public debates. Ferretti's objection is that it is not clear how we will create room for a new consideration that could indicate to us that generally accepted premisses are wrong to uphold the principles of justice, if we have to reason using a premiss that has already been accepted. Ferretti argues that Rawls's idea of consensus is conservative, given the fact that the reasons currently accepted do not provide the resources to address some of the ongoing irregularities. This suggests that we need new perspectives in public debates. Also, in the Rawlsian model, despite public justification being based on shared reasons, it is possible to support injustice against minorities, because

members of minorities often offer reasons that are not commonly accepted, but also reasons that are not ‘shared’ in the normative sense indicated by Rawls. Likewise, in Rawls’s view, a number of negotiations and vetoes on rule proposals can be dismissed as unreasonable and decisions that are challenged are declared to be justified, despite the challenges. This represents a case of undesirable exclusion of minorities.

Gaus considers it wrong to select reasons that may enter the public justification of a law and to establish that only some reasons are appropriate in public justification, in the way Rawls does this. Instead, the role of public debate is to articulate the values and reasons that a wide variety of people support despite their diverging worldviews. People should be able to express the reasons for their support, both in public debate and when voting on political issues. Justification is obtained when the variety of reasons employed by people with diverging worldviews converge on the same public decisions. When there is no convergence, a proposal is defeated and deemed unjustified in the process of public justification, by virtue of the opposition of some people. However, Ferretti claims that, in contrast to Gaus, she presents his model with idealized people, referred to as Members of the Public, rather than real-life people. Thus, we face the problem of what to do with real opinions that real people with all sorts of dubious, or, even flawed, epistemic engagements (rather than idealized members of the public), express for or against certain proposals. In a public debate, people sometimes cast doubt on very well-established concepts, for example by casting doubt on widely accepted scientific knowledge. We therefore seem to need some normative guidance to know when these objections have a place in public justification. In opposition to Gaus’s thesis that it is sufficient for a law to be justified from all perspectives, and that the common result counts as public justification, Ferretti emphasizes that the public justification of a law implies both epistemic and motivational reasons.

Thus, Ferretti dismisses both models, saying that Rawls’s concept of shared reasons is conservative and internally exclusive and, although the joint agreement reached by Gaus seeks to be more inclusive, it separates public reasoning from public justification. In both models, Ferretti argues, the critical role of public reason is threatened in certain key ways.

The theory of public justification offered by Ferretti is based on reconnecting public reasons with the actual beliefs of people about the reasons that they (and others) have, and the arguments that citizens exchange with each other to ensure that agreement is not static or passively accepted but open to the scrutiny of alternative evaluative perspectives. She aims to show how the reasons that we have, and the reasons that we

give others, are interconnected and influence each other by exploring the ways in which agreement and disagreement are both vital for a liberal society, and how the reasons that we have and the reasons that we give to one another are interconnected and exercise mutual influence (30). Thus, different notions of good can be a source of disagreement, but despite such disagreement, we recognize the fundamental importance of treating others as free moral agents, which, according to Ferretti, requires justice.

In chapter 3, she argues that a moderate interpretation of foundationalism is shown to be appropriate for a theory of public justification. She introduces Locke's ethics of belief, or belief governance, by stating that a well-grounded belief needs not to be indefeasible. The concept of the ethics of belief assumes that we may be held responsible for what we believe, which requires that we exercise deliberate control over our beliefs. This includes gathering information and deciding whether to accept or reject it. What individuals can be held responsible for are such actions in the process of belief formation. The focus of the discussion is on the rules that we use to convey evidence and weigh probability, rather than on the beliefs themselves.

In a morally pluralistic society, Ferretti argues for a rational examination of beliefs in which belief reformation and governance should be at the core of a project for public ethics. In her view, Locke's theory of beliefs and the idea of alethic obligation represent a valid approach to these ends. Locke asserts that each of us has an obligation to believe what is true, and thus presents the first rigorous formulation of what has come to be known as alethic obligation (from the Greek *aletheia*, truth) (44). Alethic obligation applies indirectly as a requirement to resist doxastic practices that do not have truth (or high probability) as a main criterion of inquiry. Through this, Ferretti provides a novel answer by combining moral and epistemic factors in a way that allows us to bear responsibility for our views. We must assert that the reasons we have are true. Citizens should be responsible believers and defer to experts, according to Ferretti, who are able to match their beliefs with those held by the scientific community.

Such a viewpoint, in my opinion, has a flaw. The issue that I want to highlight here is that Ferretti's theory does not respond to the demand that she has established for a theory of public justification. This is the requirement that those who are subject to a government can freely assent to its decisions. In fact, Ferretti does not specify what we should do about the problem of lay people not understanding the reasons of experts due to their lack of scientific terminology or because they have no political knowledge, which is why they turn out to be irresponsible and irrational. It appears that the value of the public's perspective and the justified

judgment of experts is limited to those who have previously done their homework on the subject. But most people do not have the ability to question experts (even when they are wrong or when there is no consensus in the scientific community). They cannot recognize experts or when someone is just pretending to be one, and then they turn to untrustworthy and easier to understand sources. An example of this could be the many conspiracy theories and video essays on the global pandemic currently going on. Thus, Ferretti's Lockean proposal does not satisfy the requirement that government activities must be justified to all citizens for public purposes.

Ferretti builds on Locke in chapter 4, pointing out that citizens have an alethic obligation to employ the method of probability when they want to convey their reasons to others. She starts with the concept of the ethics of belief, which assumes that we may be held responsible for what we believe, which requires that we exercise deliberate control over our beliefs. According to Locke's theory, the nature of beliefs contains an essential ambiguity, which provides answers to the question of how to approach different perspectives. This includes gathering information and deciding whether to accept or reject it. What individuals can be held responsible for are their actions in the process of belief formation. As a result, the focus of the discussion is on the rules that we use to convey evidence and weigh probability, rather than on the beliefs themselves.

She opposes the method of probability to a subjective approach, and she shows how conflict can develop if we understand the alethic obligation in a subjective way, using an example of Galileo's beliefs that did not derive from the probability method. This method selects the kind of beliefs that are properly employed in public justification. On the one hand, there are non-givable reasons based on intimate experience, and reasons that are contingently or necessarily un-givable, that are not properly employed in public justification. On the other hand, there are reasons that are considered in public justification. Such are beliefs that correspond to the shared ethics of beliefs.

Ferretti returns to this topic in the next chapter, *Facing Disagreement*, stating that it is difficult to decide which proposals or positive rules should be endorsed from a public perspective and how much personal freedom should be granted. Namely, justification, as defined by public reasoning, can resolve a wide range of issues, but it also has significant drawbacks. Thus, justified public laws and choices should be upheld strongly, but with a fallibilist mindset that permits us to perceive them as perpetually revisable and changeable.

In chapter 6, Ferretti advocates a view of freedom that is consistent with the idea that different people have different ideas about what is good. In such a conception, freedom is equal for all, which implies, too, that it is limited for each person. This, she believes, ensures or defends a certain degree of independence from outside pressures.

She continues with chapter 7, by stating that cultural claims can be described as claims to freedom in cases where others, or the government, claim interference with cultural practices (152). In this context, Ferretti argues that respect for people as free requires (i) respect for the fact that people exercise their freedom in groups and (ii) the limits of public justification when the matter is constituted by deciding what people in groups should be free to do.

She responds to Brian Barry's remarks in this section. He says that the liberal commitment to equality requires similar treatment for all people, irrespective of their sex, race, or culture, with no space for a 'politics of difference'. Ferretti agrees with Barry that some public norms must universally apply to cultural groups, irrespective of their differences, but she deems his expectations to be excessively strict. The reason for her view is based on the fallibilism and limitations of public justification, she argues in the previous chapters. Thus, when the matter is represented by cultural claims, Ferretti believes that a liberal conception of public life must not neglect the fact that people disagree about public issues, often in extreme ways. Consequently, the prevailing culture of society should not be used to justify broad norms that overlook such disagreements. Instead, the goal is represented by the harmonious coexistence of freedom and equality of citizens, which implies some restrictions on interference in inside group relations. As a result, she argues that the reasons for multicultural policies are grounded in an idea: (i) of respect for people as free, which requires respect for the fact that people exercise their freedom in groups and (ii) on the limit of public justification in relation to decisions that concern whether people should be free to exercise their cultural practices inside their communities.

I find (ii) problematic. Ferretti's strategy on the question of multicultural respect for communities seems objectionable to me. In particular, I think that in her view there is a hardly sustainable distinction between the private and the public sphere. This is problematic, on the one hand, because some multicultural claims are explicitly directed to the public domain. An example is the recent Vatican protests against a newly proposed law, called the Zan Law, that would punish discrimination and incitement to violence against the LGBT community, women, and people with disabilities. The Vatican claims the law will legally restrict the religious freedoms

guaranteed by the treaty between the Vatican and the Republic of Italy. According to the Vatican, with the protection of these groups, Catholics could also face legal action for expressing opinions on LGBT issues. However, the Prime Minister of Italy, Mario Draghi, rejected Vatican's complaint in the name of the secularity of the state. Here we have an illustration of the problematic distinction between the domains that are defined as public and those that are not. Thus, it is not sufficiently clear which space needs to be excluded from the interference through public justification and universal norms.

Some internal cultural practices, on the other hand, are completely unacceptable in terms of universal justice and universal rights. Here, we see the dubious sustainability of some cases of protection of the non-public sphere, because too important universal norms and values are at stake. Let me return to Barry's assertion that the liberal commitment to equality requires similar treatment for all people, irrespective of their sex, race or culture, with no space for a 'politics of difference'. Such politics include exemptions of parents from some forms of care of their children, like health care, based on cultural or religious reasons. A good illustration of this is a case of denial of treatment that happened in 2016 in Rijeka (Croatia). A nine-year-old was diagnosed with lymph node cancer, and when he arrived at the hospital, his neck was visibly swollen. But after a day in the hospital, his parents pulled him out of the hospital, despite the doctor's insistence that he should receive chemotherapy. They signed the outing explaining that they wanted a second opinion and subjected him to alternative methods of treatment because the child's father claimed that chemotherapy was 'war poison'. A further example is represented by the illustration Barry gives of the Jewish and Muslim traditions to slaughter animals in conformity with particularly cruel practices.

Ferretti criticizes Barry's argument as a harsh expression that prevents tolerance and the freedom of people, who, according to her, must have the opportunity to live according to the reasons that, in their views, justify practices. However, as expressed in the examples, allowing religious and other cultural reasons to justify practices in the public domain makes it difficult to establish a boundary of the legitimacy of these reasons and the practices that they justify. The question is important, because, by allowing free choices to members of a group with certain customs and principles, others are deprived of their freedom of choice, or other basic rights. Thus, even Ferretti's solution of multicultural policies and reasons does not meet the condition of a liberal state that all citizens be treated as equal and free.

To conclude, Ferretti's proposal has relevant merits. She has made a vital and creative addition to the debate on public justification with *The Public*

Perspective. She succeeds in reminding liberal theory of some of its foundations, with the original contribution, in the contemporary context, of revitalizing the Lockean probability method and the ethics of belief in such a way that they can be utilized as guidelines for contemporary liberal theories of democracy. Thus, her book offers an original proposal that inserts, in an interesting way, epistemological considerations into a public justification theory respectful of pluralism.