



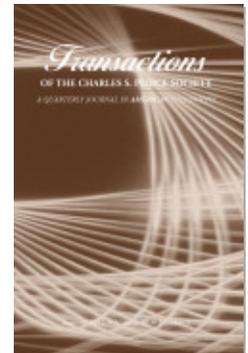
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Practice, Judgement, and the Challenge of Moral and Political Disagreement: A Pragmatist Account by Roberto Frega (review)

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Reviews

ROBERTO FREGA

Practice, Judgement, and the Challenge of Moral and Political Disagreement: A Pragmatist Account

Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. 238 pp. Index.

Roberto Frega's *Practice, Judgement, and the Challenge of Moral and Political Disagreement* is exegetically, as well as systematically, ambitious: it explores several key texts of Charles Peirce and John Dewey in order to develop a pragmatist conception of practical rationality in the context of contemporary moral and political philosophy. Frega's book differs from other recent comparable contributions, such as those of Cheryl Misak, Eric MacGilvray, and Robert Talisse, by drawing most heavily on Dewey's works. Yet, similar to Misak, MacGilvray and Talisse, Frega puts pragmatism to the test by applying it to deep moral disagreements in modern societies and does so without relying on facts about American cultural and political history in particular. What is thus proposed is a pragmatist conception of practical rationality that is relevant well beyond the American context and beyond the 19th and 20th century.

The book has three parts, and the first turns to Peirce's and Dewey's theories of inquiry. Frega explores how Peirce's classical text "The Fixation of Belief" may serve as the starting point for what he calls "a practice-based conception of rationality", and for the naturalistic account on which such conception rests, viewing rationality's 'evolutionary aim' to be 'control over action' (23). The reading strategy is thus to take Peirce's notion of inquiry as a valid starting point, with its emphasis on action control, but without taking on board Peirce's priority of science's search for truth as the privileged form of belief fixation. It is in Dewey's theory of inquiry, however, that Frega finds the most satisfactory, naturalistically based idea of practical rationality. The essentials of the theory, Frega points out, is presented already in Dewey's 1915 essay "The Logic Judgement of Practice" where *judgement* is taken in a non-representational and holistic sense to concern a 'situation as a complex whole that includes the agent and his deeds' (51). Frega shows how judgement cannot be reduced to 'canonical forms of analysis and synthesis' (52) but has 'an *articulative* and *transformative* nature', involving a '*self-expressive and*

self-transformative dimension' (52). Reasoning has a role to play, but is now seen as 'the controlling factor that qualifies human agency' (56) through articulation of a situation, and accomplishing a "(self)transformation" through forming 'a standard of valuation' (63) adequate for the situation at stake. The evaluative aspect of judgement, instituting, not merely applying, standards, further concerns how actual or possible consequences of action are assessed: consequences are not simply assessed according to fixed or given ends, interests and desires; ends, interest and desires are rather (re)shaped through reflecting on, and articulating, practical consequences (62–3).

In the second part of the book, the author develops his conception of practical rationality by complementing Dewey's contribution through current thinkers such as Stanley Cavell and Charles Taylor. Dewey's account of the holistic, articulative nature of judgement is thus developed in terms of *expressive inquiry*: a process of expressing one's moral beliefs and attitudes which is typically occasioned by moral disagreement. Articulation and self-expression in a situation of moral disagreement may be qualified as rational since, as Cavell's analysis shows, agents may succeed in articulating 'a shared system of presuppositions' (84), or, in less happy cases, be lead to 'accept disagreement as the result of a difference in forms of life' or go on to 'critically revise' their moral attitudes and beliefs (85). In the last section of part two, in chapter four, the author makes a bold transition to the political sphere: the conception of expressive inquiry is adapted and applied to normative conflicts that emerge on a larger scale and that concern relations between groups or sections of society. This move facilitates a return to Dewey's work and to *The Public and Its Problems* in particular. Through a sweeping yet pointed comparison Frega defends a Deweyan understanding of "public reason" against the influential positions of Rawls, Habermas, and recent Critical Theory (Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young). Briefly, as an alternative to current accounts of public reason in terms of neutrality or universality, Dewey's account of "the public" in terms of enduring, indirect social consequences of action and interaction enables a practically based, contextual construal of public reason. On this account, public or political inquiry arises from indirect, enduring consequences of interaction, and from how the significance and seriousness of such consequences are, or may be, perceived. Moreover, contrary to current positions, Dewey makes effective political membership depend on inquiry; by inscribing Dewey in the expressivist paradigm Frega brings out how the Deweyan public is constituted through articulative or "expressive inquiry": 'political inquiry, by way of an articulative inquiry of courses of action, brings about transformations in the political constitution of a collectivity' (96). Frega holds that the distinctive pragmatist focus on consequences of action enables a preservation of epistemic requirements that he finds lacking in recent Critical

Theory: not only a subjective dimension pertains to this pragmatist focus, concerning shared awareness of being affected, but an objective dimension regarding ‘events that produce the consequences affecting the agents’ (105). Moreover, pragmatist inquiry can study various ways in which consequences bring about issues among opposing parties, and Frega points to recent Science and Technology Studies (Bruno Latour, Noortje Marres) that have taken inspiration from Dewey’s conception of the public in studying how controversies have emerged as consequences of science and technology, and become politically significant (119–22). Yet, Frega’s ‘*issue-centered approach to politics*’ (101) applies rather demanding epistemic requirements to an inquiry which “articulates” a political collective; he should, perhaps, have considered the need for some kind of social division of cognitive labour between lay agents and social scientists along the lines suggested in chapter 6 of *The Public and Its Problems* and elaborated on recently by James Bohman. Moreover, such consideration would be consistent with Frega’s own interpretation, taking Dewey’s view to be that improvement in moral, social and political life depends on ‘advancement in the human and social sciences’, as well as on ‘extensive diffusion of the inquiring attitude in human affairs’ (50).

The third and last part of the book goes on to qualify a pragmatist conception of practical rationality by taking a stand on issues of relativism, objectivity and justification. The author wants to defend a particular kind of relativism: the relativism is normative in the sense that it takes account of practical contexts and conditions of moral experience, but it is normative also in a more demanding sense by suggesting that normative disagreements may be seen as rational. Frega sets out to tackle the challenge of John Rawls’ “fact of pluralism” by rejecting variants of moral realism and Peircian assumptions of epistemic norms of belief (Talissee) or Peircian moral truth (Misak). Instead he stresses the embeddedness of moral judgements in ‘systems of practice’ (141) (traditions, cultures, socio-economic statuses) evolving over time; but he also takes prospectively into account that agents on both sides of a moral disagreement may come to acknowledge the dependence of their moral commitments on such contingent practical facts. Such embeddedness further defines how practical rationality may unfold through disagreements and how relativism may be practically “overcome”: we are thus urged to consider ways in which ‘both belief and reality can undergo processes of transformation’ (143). How? Frega uses as an example a practice that has been met with moral aversion across Western societies: female genital mutilation. In approaching the example the strategy is first, by withholding moral judgement, to understand such a practice by locating it in its social and historical context, and further, through an evolutionary reflection, to consider that its ‘aim is to control reproduction and maximize evolutionary fitness’ (147). This

reflection provides a reason for qualifying and rejecting the wrongness of the practice such that one avoids arguments from universalistic morality, as well as the dogmatic relativistic view that the practice 'is wrong in our own culture but may be good in others' (148). Hence, from the perspective of socio-cultural evolution, the control practice at stake has become increasingly 'ineffective and impose[s] useless suffering on women' (148) and has been superseded by more effective control practices (contraception and legal abortion). Frega is prepared to qualify this rejection as internal cultural criticism on the consideration that the practice at stake 'is incompatible with some of the overarching principles shaping the culture that supports it' (150). Yet, this consideration as well, I think, would have to be supported through some kind of cognitive division of labour.

Frega then turns to objectivity and justification. The project is to dissociate objectivity in moral and political contexts from the notion of truth: Frega revisits his critical interpretation of Peirce's theory of inquiry but now in a systematically updated form in Cheryl Misak's account of moral and political inquiry. Misak's "science-like" approach to moral problems is criticised as inadequate: the aim of moral inquiry is not "to get things right" or to produce moral knowledge, but 'making decisions in conditions of moral uncertainty' (161). Inquiry needs to be responsive to the practical contexts of moral judgement; and search for moral objectivity must attend to 'changing needs of varying situations while remaining sensitive to the processes of self-transformation affecting inquiring agents themselves' (163). Concern for moral objectivity, Frega thinks, is thus better handled through the inclusive Deweyan understanding of justification as "warranted assertibility" than with Peircian Truth (170–5). Yet, issues of justification receive separate, extended consideration through further criticism of Misak and Talisse. In particular, as Frega convincingly points out, since the justifications Misak and Talisse offer of democratic institutions in terms of "thin" epistemic commitments do not distinguish between *internal* and *external legitimation* (180), their justifications fail to meet the different epistemic requirements that would apply in relation to those who share certain democratic values (internal legitimation) and in relation to antidemocrats of various kinds (external legitimation). As for the former, justification should be geared to actual challenges for existing democratic institutions, and would amount to criticism and improvement of institutions (184–5); whereas for the latter, antidemocrats would rather be receptive (if at all) to comparative considerations of the different 'practical consequences' on our lives of democratic versus illiberal regimes (186), in similar ways as in the case against female genital mutilation. Frega also distinguishes his position from Eric MacGilvray's Jamesian account of justification. He finds that MacGilvray's "Will to Believe" inspired approach leaves out of account rational means otherwise available for

‘expressive inquiry’ (193); MacGilvray’s “narrative framework” is left without resources for meeting epistemic requirements of external legitimation of democratic institutions, and thus ‘dogmatic relativistic consequences’ ensue (200). Yet, what further justification for democratic institutions has Frega to offer in place of the criticised alternatives?

As noted above, the Deweyan qualification of political rationality attends to issues and publics arising from indirect, enduring consequences of (inter)action. Frega further focuses on the institutional outcomes of socially and politically significant consequences, or more specifically, the historical persistence of democratic institutions that have emerged in response to social and political issues in Western societies. A Deweyan alternative would thus consider the normative force of a ‘socio-historical explanation’ of democratic institutions (212), including consideration of the persistence of institutionally embedded values, such as liberty, dignity, and solidarity (218). Yet, history is not only to provide complementary or secondary evidence for (external or internal) legitimation of present institutions: Frega goes on to ascribe rationality directly to the historical processes as such (*‘history is in itself a vast process of experimental inquiry’*, 217). Although such ascription is supposed to work in the context of external legitimation, it is not quite clear what such legitimation would amount to: different from the evolutionary reflection on “action control” in part two, ascription of rationality to institutional development would stand in need of some further sociologically robust account of how norms change and knowledge is transmitted. Frega’s “socio-historical explanation” seems more promising for modes of internal legitimation, and could perhaps be developed along the lines suggested by Colin Koopman’s recent explorations of a common ground between Deweyan “reconstruction” and Foucauldian “genealogy”. These explorations would anchor historical inquiry in *the present*: historical inquiry shows how the development of political institutions is laden with problems we still have to face, and it shows what in our present institutions is still in need of criticism. In fact, such view does not seem foreign to Frega’s qualification of his historical account of institutions in so far as it is to provide ‘criteria enabling the criticism of the present situation on the ground of a *broader experiential frame of reference’* (216).

The latter qualification gives occasion for a final comment: in so far as the basis for rational criticism of present institutions is internal to their own development, Frega’s Deweyan justification takes on features of an immanent cultural criticism located at a more concrete cultural level than the “internal cultural criticism” suggested by his evolutionary reflection. Frega’s Deweyan account is thus comparable to varieties of Critical Theory that have professed and practiced immanent social critique, from Horkheimer to Honneth. For this reason, Frega’s book

could perhaps be seen as involved in fruitful dialogue with Critical Theory, rather than as a distinct alternative to Critical Theory.

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MATTHEW FOUST

Loyalty to Loyalty: Josiah Royce and the Genuine Moral Life

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In *Loyalty to Loyalty: Josiah Royce and the Genuine Moral Life*, Matthew Foust richly examines the nature of a controversial virtue: loyalty. It is well known that for Royce loyalty was not only a fundamental moral concept but an anthropological one since, in his view, loyalty to a cause allows individuals to become selves, creatures with unity of purpose in life. However, this ground level of loyalty is not the only one existing for him. Simultaneously to a particular cause one must adhere to loyalty to loyalty, a universal cause that is a moral obligation for each human being. Foust attempts to recover this dual aspect of the Roycean conception of loyalty with the purpose of defending his contemporary relevance and making a comparison between Royce’s philosophy and the traditional versions of ethics: deontological, consequentialist and virtue ethics.

Accordingly, the seven chapters of the book are grounded in the idea that Royce’s conception of loyalty is relevant to the present. Taking the words of McDermott’s introduction to Royce’s *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (McDermott conceives loyalty as a treacherous and ambivalent virtue) Foust sustains that “if treachery connotes a lack of security and ambivalence connotes a lack of clarity, we should indeed be impelled to pay close attention to this virtue.” (2) Thus, denying that treachery and ambivalence are vital features of loyalty is a necessary task for Foust’s project. To carry out this task, in Chapter 1 he focuses on loyalty in contemporary debates, particularly in the contraposition between loyalty as partial and justice as impartial. Chapters 2 and 3 refer to the nature of loyalty and to the Roycean idea of loyalty to loyalty respectively. Meanwhile, in chapter 4 Foust argues that learning loyalty, the psychological aspect of morals, is relevant to Royce’s philosophical conception against the recent statements of Dwayne Tunstall. After that, chapter 5 deals with the relationship between loyalty and community, emphasizing Royce’s idea of wise provincialism. Chapter 6 analyzes the vital conception of disloyalty and links it with the Roycean conceptions of grace and atonement. In chapter 7 Foust entertains the idea of