

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING AT VARIANCE<sup>1</sup>

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What is at stake in our enduring debate over ethical and political issues? What can philosophy learn by putting the all-pervasive experience of conflict over morals and norms at the centre of its concerns? Roberto Frega’s beautiful book is an attempt to answer these and similar questions from the vantage point of pragmatism. At the same time, it is an attempt to define this very category—pragmatism—in a way that prompts us to better appreciate its crucial relevance to the questions above. The core of the project lies in John Dewey’s account of practical reasoning. But Frega also keeps a steady and keen eye on Peirce; and overall, his strategy is nicely dialogic. Indeed, he turns the very term “pragmatism” into the protagonist of a conversation with diverse interlocutors chosen, with very few exceptions, from today’s English-speaking philosophical debate. In a number of well-structured chapters, this conversation winds among representatives of communitarian and perfectionist ethics (Michael Walzer, Charles Taylor, Stanley Cavell) and political theory (Rawls, Habermas, Nancy Fraser), as well as the neo-pragmatist tradition.

The ambition to conjoin interpretive issues about Peircean and Deweyan epistemology (the first part) with political and moral questions (second and third parts) constitutes the distinctive character of the book. But its most urgent preoccupations lie specifically in the latter aspect. In the words of the preface, what matters most to Frega is to put forward a viable notion of “practical reason” (vii) that avoids both hyper-rationalistic stances (deontic and Kantian ethics; foundationalist or epistemic approaches) and anti-intellectualist drifts. And the path he chooses to reach this goal is, indeed, typically pragmatist. Frega conceives reason as that component of agency which aims at fixing beliefs; and as such, as tantamount to *inquiry*. He then develops a number of implications that try to strike a balance between

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moral realism and relativism, by advocating the possibility of *rational disagreement* in normative issues, as well as presenting an understanding of objective inquiry which avoids a realist conception of moral truth.

This broader project, however, would be unattainable without the pages Frega devotes to his interpretation of Dewey's epistemology; so let us start from there. Following in the path laid out by Peirce, Frega argues, Dewey provides us with a compellingly naturalistic account of rationality in terms of inquiry: that is, as a specific trait of human agency, which has evolved out of the need to cope with the challenges posed by the environment. This basic intuition is then reflected in the way Dewey defines the two correlative terms upon which his epistemology hinges: the notions of *judgment* and *situation*. Through a series of contextualist moves, emphasis is laid on the holistic nature of these two notions, and on their ability to overcome or mediate the traditional contrasts of epistemology.

With regards to judgments, Frega highlights the way in which Dewey conceives them, not as the expression of "general rules or beliefs", but as *acts* embedded in, and responding to, "specific problematic situations" (51). Rather than being the abstract or "punctual utterance of a propositional content" (58), a judgment is first and foremost an *action within a situation*; one, however, which is at the same time liable to be "singled out from the rest of human actions in virtue of its logicity" (51). Its nature is thus dual and relational, in a number of ways. First, it can be defined only by reference to both the agent and the situation to which it belongs. Second, it always enjoys the double status of logical object on the one hand, and concrete trait of agency on the other. Even more importantly, a judgment is necessarily *extended in time*; which amounts to saying that it can be detached neither from the gradual process of its formation, nor from the concrete output that it brings about within the situation.

At the same time, situations, too, must be conceived holistically. They are not something to which agents are abstractly confronted—something "already given" that kicks off inquiry in an empiristic fashion. Rather, they are the "universe of experience" which encompasses both objects and agents, and sets the stage for the mutual relationship between them. Situations thus assume a double role vis-à-vis the knowing agent, which closely dovetails with the "double standing" (77) of judgments: they constitute both the point of departure of thought and its point of arrival, or final object.

This complex dynamic is also reflected in the two fundamental stages of Dewey's theory of judgment, which Frega turns into the very linchpin of his whole argument: namely the notions of *articulation* and *transformation*. By transformation is meant the idea that judgments necessarily have *practical consequences* within the situation, which is accordingly conceived as the output of inquiry. Articulation is the complementary aspect: the process "through which the mind faces a totally new situation and tries to grasp it" (53). From this angle (which Dewey has explored in his famous reflections on "qualitative thought"), a situation is not the final object of thought. Rather, it is the *unitary whole* from which thought takes its bearing, and which, "in spite of its complexity", is held together by a qualitative trait that pervades it. At first inchoate, such pervading quality is then apprehended and conceptualized through the gradual institutions of "distinctions and relations" which let the actual and distinct objects of knowledge emerge.

Two remarks need to be made at this point. First, articulation and transformation should not be imagined as two distinct "phases" of thinking. Rather, they are two sides of the same

process, the unitary character of which Dewey himself expresses well when he defines the transformative moment as a “conversion of an indeterminate problematic situation into a determinate resolved one” (55). The aspects of active transformation and determination are welded together. It is through one seamless, *ongoing articulative process* that one first recognizes the problematic situation as such, then conceptualizes and reorganizes it in a less problematic way.

Second, in virtue of the holistic and relational nature of judgment, both the articulative and the transformative aspects of thinking are always directed towards two different foci: the situation on the one hand, and the knowing and acting agent on the other. Differently said, every act of cognition triggers a process of reorganization and construction of sense through which *both* the self *and* the object of cognition change, and are changed. Herein lies the core of that conception of rationality as a transformative and reflexive activity which, in the domain of morality, Frega calls *expressivism*—thereby referring not so much to the acceptance normally assumed in analytic philosophy, but rather to the broadly “Hegelian” idea (as he rightly says) that “the activity of the self [is] constitutive of its identity” (92n).

In this expressivist (although, with a word that Frega never uses, we might also say *externalist*) notion of rationality lies the paramount reason why Deweyan epistemology is so crucial to Frega’s project. And yet it is noteworthy that the first, long chapter of the book is devoted not to Dewey, but to Peirce. Why is this so? An initial answer is interpretive and historical. Frega is rightly concerned with restoring an image of pragmatism that gives full justice to Dewey’s debts towards Peirce, while also avoiding the often shallow tendency to pit Peirce and Dewey against one another as the representatives of two opposite pragmatisms—scientist and realist the first, tendentially relativist the second. That said, the decisive reason is in fact something else: namely his being on the lookout for a set of normative criteria which enables decisions about the *objectivity of judgments* in a way that does not necessarily lead to moral realism. Peirce’s classical *The Fixation of Beliefs* comes to his aid here, for it famously points to two equally indispensable constraints that make beliefs more stable and, therefore, rational. On the one hand, we need “intersubjective agreement”. Beliefs are only rational when they lead to consensus among well-informed inquirers; “logic is rooted in the social principle” (24-25). On the other hand, experience is always able to give “answers” to our questions, providing our inquiries with “some sort of objective grounding” (25).

Here, Frega has the sense to show very clearly that many of the traditional schisms within pragmatist epistemologies (and in particular the one I have hinted at above, between realists and relativists) depend in good part on how we interpret this “objective grounding” that we accord to experience—and hence, in a sense, on how we read *The Fixation of Beliefs*. The traditional Peircean answer is well-known: rational investigation works on a realist presupposition. It is the “Outward Clash” of external reality (as Peirce says), and the idea of truth as *telos* of inquiry, which guarantees the objectivity of judgments. What happens, though, when by inquiry we mean one based no longer upon facts, but upon norms and values? Can this strongly realistic model of science be simply transposed into moral inquiry, or should we leave the latter to less committing forms of fixing beliefs? We stumble here upon the crucial dilemma of all attempts to develop a Peircean account of practical and social issues. While Dewey is adamant that moral thought is rational in a strong sense, Peirce repeatedly states that, unlike scientific inquiry, practical matters must be left to instincts,

traditions and “sentimental conservatism”. And yet not only is Dewey’s epistemology unthinkable without Peirce; the latter’s philosophy, too, seems often to invite more Deweyan scenarios.

Several authors have posed an escape from this dilemma. Frega’s own solution is challenging and insightful but, I believe, partially problematic. He submits that Peirce has failed to disentangle two different notions of rationality, which are conflated together in his writings (and most clearly in *Fixation*): a wider, more decidedly naturalistic one, which comes very close to Dewey’s account; and a much narrower one, which instead reduces the scope of rationality to scientific inquiry proper. Failing to keep the two separate, Frega goes on, Peirce ends up overlooking the potentialities of the first, thus giving unjustified primacy to scientific rationality and leaving normative issues to non-rational ways of fixing beliefs, such as sentiments, instincts or traditions.

According to Frega, this situation has specific foundations that are rooted in Peirce’s view of reasoning as a combination of three kinds of inferences (deductions, inductions, abductions). Such a view, he believes, is unable to account for the expressive dimension of reasoning; that is, its articulative and transformative momentum towards both the self and the situation. Peirce’s inferences cannot “contribute to the articulative process”; they rather “presuppose” the accomplishment of the latter “to obtain the material [...] upon which they will operate” (56). In the same vein, they are unable to account for the transformative aspect of judgment: namely its creative nature, its ability to trigger processes of self-control, while also interacting practically with the situation at hand. In sum, articulation and transformation cannot be reduced to inferences, and yet neither can they be imagined as wholly non-cognitive or intuitive faculties (57). They must, thus, constitute a sort of intermediate stratum, whose autonomy we should preserve, for only in this way will we be able to account for the specific kind of rationality that is at play in practical situations: the ability to analyze and assess them, to choose and discriminate between conflicting values, and so forth.

The problem with this interpretation is, I believe, that it keeps Peirce’s view on inferential reasoning too far apart from Dewey’s articulation-transformation dynamics. The two accounts are in fact closer than Frega wants them to be. It is, consequently, not on this level that the (undeniable) differences between the two thinkers need to be located. The crux of the problem is, of course, Peirce’s notion of inference; now this is in fact much less narrow than Frega maintains. As though anticipating this objection, Frega writes that even stretching the notion of inference “far beyond their common usage” (56) would not help solve the problem, for “the result would be that the specifically articulative nature of reasoning would be lost” (69n). Yet this observation risks begging the fundamental question, which is whether or not it is possible to account for the articulative/transformative dynamics within Peirce’s inferential framework.

I think we should answer yes. To begin with, for Peirce there are no non-inferential cognitive faculties. Indeed his famous critique of Cartesianism (his denial of intuition and introspection) is tantamount to equating intellectual phenomena with semiotic, *hence* inferential, ones. Even beyond human cognition, all phenomena partaking of rationality should be accorded such an inferential status. This is surely a dramatic enlargement of the commonsensical notion of inference; one, however, that should not necessarily be frowned upon, for it has noteworthy consequences. Frega himself implicitly recognizes them when he

praises Peirce's "naturalistic" view that even the reflex movement of a frog's leg is a form of "reasoning" (42). But he seems to think that this is a path that Peirce has not followed to the end. Here we touch upon a much more general problem of Peirce scholarship, namely that his immense *Nachlass* often allows for a number of astonishingly conflicting interpretations. On the whole, however, I do not think that the dynamics of abduction, induction and deduction can be interpreted, as Frega does, as being restricted to the "formal mastery of logical techniques and the application of professional methods" (38). In fact, the reality is almost the contrary: Peirce thinks that the latter (which he calls *logica docens*) are not sufficient, and sometimes not even necessary, for sound scientific reasoning.

What is necessary, instead, is the *logica utens*: the set of implicit rules of inference that govern not only our logical thinking as strictly construed, but also our everyday reasoning (38)—up to the basic phenomena of perception. I cannot go into this thorny issue here; but it should be recalled that at least as far as its cognitive dimension is concerned, Peirce's perceptual judgment is in fact the result of an inferential process. More generally, abductions, inductions and deductions are not "technical" skills, but the three all-pervasive facets of the interplay between the self and the world. They should be conceived of as the components of a unitary, spiral-like process, which hinges upon the crucial mediation of habits. While *abductions* preside over the formation of new cognitions, the latter then trigger a set of reactions through *deductive* mechanisms. In turn, the effects that such reactions bring about are able to "feed back" into the very same cognitions under the form of *inductions* that gradually "strengthen" them into habits proper (see, for instance, Peirce 1931-1958, par. 6., 144-147).

This latter step is particularly significant, for it depends upon the fact that there is a physical or manipulative, indeed *transformative* relation between men and world. Only as embodied beings that interact with their environment can subjects attend to the "clash" of external reality. What is more, such answers also modify our habits. Thus, we find in Peirce the same duplicity of the transformative dimension (towards both the self and the situation), and the same centrality of self-control upon which Frega insists.

As for *articulation*, it is to abduction that we should turn. The latter is similar to Dewey's qualitative thought at least in the minimal sense that both conceptions aim to find equilibrium between inferential reasoning proper and a purely intuitive dimension. This accounts for their ability to bring about the very objects of analytical knowledge. Indeed, Peirce's rejection of intuition does not altogether erase this hybrid nature of abductions; and Frega addresses precisely this issue when he writes that, at least at some points, "abduction is conceived by Peirce as being at once instinctive *and* rational" (42). As with the example of the frog, however, Frega presents this view as a sort of sound alternative that Peirce has not thoroughly developed. But this is misleading. The primary task of abduction *in general* is not simply to "reorganize" already given data into new hypotheses; but indeed, to *create new cognitions*.

This in turn raises a problem of considerable scholarly debate: how can an inferential process create something that was not already in its premises? Now whether the answer Peirce gives to this question is successful or not, it is important to recall some of its traits, for they bring to light more clearly the articulative nature of Peirce's abduction. In particular, the role played by *iconicity*—that is, by the *qualitative dimension* of semiosis—is worth emphasizing. Abductions can create new knowledge because they dwell upon the *iconic quality* of the situation at hand, thus seizing upon the "demiurgic" property of icons (as

Peirce describes it) to always contain more information than that needed to determine its construction (on this point see Stjernfelt (2007)).

At the same time, the examination of the situation as an icon is no detached contemplation, but an active and creative *manipulation* of it. From this angle, Peirce's well-known conception of mathematical thinking as *creation, observation and experimentation upon diagrams* turns out to be both the model of his whole theory of reasoning, and the best evidence of its articulative/transformative dimension.

In one of the most important philosophical works on articulation to have recently appeared (*Der bewusste Ausdruck. Anthropologie der Artikulation* 2009), Matthias Jung defines it as the basic phenomenon by which men transform "experienced qualities and motoric impulses" into "articulated [*gegliederte*] sequences of actions and syntactically structured symbolic chains" (Jung 2009, 12; emphasis mine).

Now, this is precisely what Peirce's naturalistic theory of reasoning aims to do. In semiotic terms, it corresponds to the fact (which Jung rightly stresses in his chapter on pragmatism) that Peircean symbols cannot be defined without reference to icons and indexes—that is, to both the *qualitative* and the *existential* dimensions of semiosis. More generally, it relates to the fact that Peircean rationality can be detached neither from the "muscular" relation to the outer world, nor from the pre-rational or qualitative apprehension thereof. With regard to the latter, Dewey himself already drew attention to the similarities to his notion of qualitative thought when he noted that "Considered in itself, [Peirce's] quality is that which totally and intimately pervades a phenomenon or experience, rendering it just the one experience which it is" (Dewey [1935] 1987, 90).

I am not implying, of course, that Dewey's and Peirce's notions of articulation and quality are identical. Even less do I want to minimize the contrasts between the two regarding the role of rational inquiry in practical issues: Frega is perfectly right to underline them. In this respect, his remarks on Dewey's and Peirce's different notions of *habit* (particular the first, general the second) seem to me very valuable and definitely worthy of further investigation. But it would be a mistake to explain such differences by underplaying the potentialities of Peirce's theory of reasoning. Peirce's failure to draw from it more interesting consequences for moral philosophy should rather be explained through a multi-layered answer, which may take into account his strong scientific bias, his ingrained political convictions, as well as biographical matters. Most importantly, we must remember that between instincts (the unwitting or ingrained habits that govern everyday and moral reasoning) and beliefs (the conscious and self-controlled ones, which govern scientific thought) there is no watertight boundary, but a "synechistic" continuum. We can, at least in part, bring instincts under the umbrella of scientific rationality through the progressive control of our habits. If I am not wrong, this entails that my observations on Peirce's theory of reasoning, far from undermining Frega's overall project, may even reinforce it; for Peirce's stress on instincts and sentimentalism, rather than being a move against Deweyan accounts, may be read as a beneficial counterweight thereto, in particular with regards to the at times excessive optimism of Dewey's meliorism. We do not need to espouse Peirce's conservatism to develop such implications.

With the reference to the duality between instincts and reason, we come to another aspect of the book that deserves a few words of comment. One objection Frega raises

against Peirce is his inability to free himself from the “traditional dualism between theory and practice and between scientific and ordinary inquiry” (40). By excluding the latter from rational inquiry as strictly construed, Frega maintains, Peirce actually makes an allowance for two symmetrical mistakes regarding normative issues: on the one hand, the excessive irrationalism (or “sentimentalism”) that he himself lapses into; on the other, the hyper-rationalism of subsequent Peircean thinkers—like Cheryl Misak or Robert Talisse—who have tried to apply Peirce’s strong notion of scientific reasoning to political thought. And yet, Frega seems to recreate within his own conception of rational inquiry a dualism quite similar to the one he ascribes to Peirce, when he sharply distinguishes the kind of rationality that is fitting for normative issues from what he calls “science-like inquiries”. The two kinds of reasoning pursue “different aims” (207). While the latter are more or less aptly described by the Peircean model, the first should rather follow the Deweyan one. Practical reason does not aim at “getting things right”, but at “getting things done”. Its goal is not to find “the best solution in an indefinite time but a solution good enough, for the time being” (162-3).

The reasons leading to Frega’s insistence in making this distinction are quite sharable: his aim is to put forward a realistic notion of objectivity in moral or political inquiry that does not force him to accept moral realism or a strong notion of truth. Rather than on the latter, the objectivity of normative inquiries should be grounded upon a notion of *warranted assertibility* that leaves room for a positive role of disagreement. Yet the risk of this otherwise very sensible strategy is to expose itself too much on the other side, paving the way for an overly scientific or positivistic account of so-called “science-like inquiries”. The same “fact/value dichotomy” that Frega is at pains to reject within moral reasoning (133) would then be reintroduced on a different level. What is more, such a neat dichotomy becomes particularly problematic when it comes to all kinds of “intermediate” inquiries, which, while not falling within the realm of moral reasoning proper, certainly do not have the same epistemic status of the hard sciences either (history and the social sciences are the most obvious examples). Now, it is worth noting that such a strategy is, at least in part, supported by precisely the rationalistic construal of the Peircean view of inferential reasoning that I have discussed above (for Peirce’s notion of science, in fact, is implicitly taken as the paradigm of “science-like inquiries”). This suggests that if we instead moved (as I have proposed) to a view that conceives of the articulative/transformative dimension of reasoning as being already embedded in the spiral of abductions, deductions and inductions that make up Peirce’s theory of the mind, we would better understand that intertwining between “argumentative” and “expressive” dimensions of thinking for which Frega himself wants to allow (118).

Whatever answer we may want to give to this open problem, it will not impair the philosophical staple of the book’s last two parts, which send “science-like inquiries” to the background to focus instead on the implications of the expressivist conception of reasoning for ethics and politics.

The crucial point of these last chapters is the notion of *rational disagreement*. In moral or political discourse, Frega argues, difference of opinion is not reducible to purely epistemic reasons, such as insufficient information. The gist of disagreement relies rather on that pre-cognitive ground of judgments which, as we have seen, Dewey’s notion of qualitative thought helps us to conceptualize. Our opinions mainly differ because they rely upon different assumptions (individual or collective), different ways of articulating the objects of thought,

and different ways of ranking values that do not lend themselves to univocal classifications. Contrary to what rationalistic authors think, this plurality of “forms of life” (168), and the discordance of opinion which ensues, cannot be wholly overcome or dispelled by rational argumentation. This is the sense in which we should speak of *rational* disagreement; and it is this simple fact, deeply rooted in the observation of our ordinary life, which Frega, paraphrasing Rawls, suggests calling “the fact of relativism” (150).

This phrase contains *in nuce* one of the book’s central and most original contentions. Frega seeks to overcome the traditional wedge between realists and relativists, by maintaining that the crucial mistake of both is, in fact, their abstract and purely analytical nature: their forgetting that what is at stake in the first place is not the demonstration of a set of static propositions, but the justification of our practices and beliefs. This is the reason why both positions get stuck in the well-known blind alleys. While endorsing opposing views, relativists and anti-relativists traditionally agree in viewing the debate as one based on whether it is possible to formulate propositions about morality whose validity transcends their original context. Coherently with his overall pragmatist stance, Frega instead suggests taking as seriously as possible the practical and living aspect of disagreement, by imparting to the whole debate a resolute descriptive and contextualist turn. The fundamental intuitions of relativism can only be rescued if we stop taking it as the result of a conceptual analysis, and construe it instead as the description of an “irreducible fact of experience” (134)—namely the proven impossibility to wholly overcome disagreement over moral questions.

One, I think, absolutely crucial reason that this kind of descriptive relativism (Frega prefers the terms “mild” and “modest”) differs, much for the better, from more popular formulations is its absolute lack of acquiescence vis-à-vis the fact of disagreement. Differences among opinions and life-forms are not something to shrug off as inevitable, but constitute, to use Dewey’s words, a *problematic situation*: a challenge to our moral conscience which calls for an *objective resolution*, as much as this can be attained. This, however, cannot be done by dint of a purely argumentative procedure (disagreement is indeed *rational*); but must hinge upon the *expressivist* potentialities of the articulation/transformation dynamics inherent impractical judgments.

It is at this point that the pragmatist thread followed by Frega inextricably entwines with the works of thinkers such as Stanley Cavell or Charles Taylor. In fundamental agreement with the tradition represented by Dewey or Mead, these authors have seen that the first step in *actually* overcoming disagreement is to recognize its rootedness in the pre-cognitive backgrounds of actors, by making explicit and *articulating* the assumptions upon which they tacitly rely. But as we have already noted, this articulative dynamic cannot but go hand in hand with a transformative one, which is directed towards *both* the problematic situation itself *and* the actors’ backgrounds. Moral disagreement may then be ultimately overcome not by “discovering” a moral truth, the inherent force of which will be imposed on agents, but by creating a new ground of consensus which is capable of undermining and reshaping the existing differences. Paraphrasing G. H. Mead, “to find new bases of agreement we have to create a new community” (84).

One of the most appealing aspects of Frega’s analysis of disagreement is the fundamental symmetry that he detects between moral debates on the one hand, and political “controversies” on the other. While explicitly relying on Dewey’s *The Public and Its*

*Problems*, Frega's analysis of the latter also betrays a Peircean overtone, in its tendency to subject individual and super-individual agents to the same logic. What he proposes, in fact, is to expand to the very notion of "the public sphere" the same "expressivist conception of the self" (76), as being constituted through its activities and interactions with the environment, which is at play at the level of individuals. What counts as "the public" regarding a given issue cannot be established a priori as though we faced a preconstituted and unchanging entity. A public is rather a temporally evolving entity, whose extension can be identified by the sum total of the people affected by those consequences of a given set of actions, which go beyond the agents most immediately engaged in them. Differently said, the public does not precede action but is shaped by it; "public action is expressive in the same way in which agency was said to be expressive with respect to the self" (101). At the same time, inquiry is itself, as we have seen, a trait of agency. *Public* inquiry is thus in turn definable as the process that shapes a public through the definition of public issues, and through which new possibilities for consensus are explored.

A crucial consequence of this change of perspective, upon which Frega puts much emphasis, is the shift "from a justificatory to a transformative conception of public reasoning" and political philosophy (104). Communities and political institutions are not static entities that can be talked about or justified in a foundationalist manner, but the locus and outcome of the transformative processes through which agents seek agreement. It is precisely on this point, Frega argues, that theorists like Habermas and Rawls fail: through different strategies, both assume that the goal of political philosophy is to make explicit by discursive means the possibility of the universal consensus that the public may attain regarding the justification of a given institution or practice. And analogous considerations hold for Peircean authors such as Misak and Talisse, who advocate an epistemic and external conception of political justification, as aiming at universal validity irrespective of the situations of departure of agents. On this approach, disagreement can only be explained *away* as failure on the part of at least one agent to attain sufficient information or to abide by the standards of rationality. The possibility of political consensus thus rests upon what Frega calls "the presupposition of reality"—this time, however, meaning not the external reality that grounds natural science, but a much shiftier *moral* one. Moral objectivity rests upon moral realism.

While strongly criticizing this approach, however, Frega is equally unsympathetic with those positions that counter universalism by overly relaxing the criteria of what should count as public rationality. He thus rejects the neo-Jamesian narrativism of Eric MacGilvray; but above all, he voices his dissatisfaction with the whole galaxy of thinkers who, influenced by critical theory, have read liberal consensus as the illegitimate mask of generality worn by dominant factions (thus denying its universal validity). Justly wishing to give full political citizenship to the plurality of voices that make up our world, he maintains, such authors have ended up weakening "the epistemic boundaries separating reason from other, non-rational, expressive forms" (115). Now to take up again the objection that I have already raised, I tend to think that Frega's choice to speak about *non-rational* forms of expression proves unfortunate on precisely the pragmatist ground that he so much helps us to consolidate. As he himself grants, in fact, all forms of expression finding output in a community (from narrative and art to political statements) also have their share in the process of articulation

and transformation of moral judgments. But if this is true, we are already moving *within* the domain of rationality: we need not, and should not, underplay this fact when we resist—as we surely must—the skeptical attempts to erase the differences with objective inquiry as strictly construed.

This observation aside, the line along which Frega goes about answering to the antinomies of anti-relativists versus relativists, or universalists versus particularists, is the final and perhaps most promising achievement of his book. Between the stress on consensus of the first group, and that on conflict of the second, his choice falls on the more complex and dynamic notion of *controversy*. Definable as the political extension of the notion of moral disagreement, controversies are those temporally extended processes through which agents come to terms with the discordance of their opinions, and which they try to overcome by deploying the articulative and transformative resources of moral reasoning. As such, they represent the optimal context in which to highlight once again the practical nature of public inquiry, critique, and political justification: activities for which Frega coins the fortunate name of *normative practices*, meaning indeed the “double standing” of those human activities that also play by the criteria of rationality. The foundationalist paradigm thinks of objective justification as a rational argument that moves, as it were, in the void, and that must be accepted by all agents irrespective of their standpoint. On Frega’s account of public reason, conversely, justifications and critiques of an institution are always immanent; but this by no means amounts to saying that they give up objectivity. Rather, they seek a form of agreement that is attained not through conceptual analysis but through the reflexive articulation and transformation of agents’ assumptions and forms of life.

A final point about this notion of immanent justification is that it opens up an extremely interesting scenario regarding the relationship between philosophical reflection on the one hand, and empirical and historical work on the other. Once the universalist paradigm is rejected, the only way to objectively criticize norms and institutions is to refer to their greater or lesser soundness *relatively to the process that has brought them about*. In other words, the normative strength of values cannot be analytically deduced once and for all, but it can be derived from considering values themselves as the answers that intelligent experience has been giving to the challenges encountered over time. Indeed, this is the only possible way to conceive of normativity in Frega’s pragmatist framework. Denying the transcendent nature of norms does not necessarily mean reducing them to regularity: practices themselves can be value-laden, insofar as they are intelligent, self-corrective, and “responsive to experience” (215). But this holds true also at the level of super-individual or historical phenomena. A given historical institution may be justified by reflecting on its validity as the outcome of a *historical process* of collective reflexive experimentation. Historical work thus accomplishes the fundamental function of providing “criteria enabling the criticism of the present situation on the ground of a broader frame of reference” (216). Also, it helps us to *articulate* the steps that have brought us to the position whereupon we now stand and from which we now judge.

Disagreement is an inevitable product of history, and without history it cannot be clarified. It is a considerable merit of Frega’s book to have forcefully insisted on this all too often forgotten rule.

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