

# Maria Paola Ferretti, The Public Perspective. Public Justification and the Ethics of Belief

---

**Cerovac, Ivan**

*Source / Izvornik:* **Croatian Journal of Philosophy, 2019, 19, 628 - 632**

**Journal article, Published version**

**Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:985762>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-01-23**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



*Maria Paola Ferretti, The Public Perspective. Public Justification and the Ethics of Belief, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, 196 pp.*

Ever since John Rawls published *Political Liberalism*, political justification has been one of the central topics in political philosophy. How can citizens, endorsing substantively different and often incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines acknowledge the same laws and political decisions as legitimate? In other words, how can citizens recognize the authority of some laws or decisions when they simultaneously see them as morally wrong or epistemically incorrect? Almost all scholars, following Rawls, solve this problem by ascribing some form of legitimacy-generating potential to the decision-making procedures that have produced these contestable results. The procedure, they claim, has some moral or epistemic qualities that all qualified (or reasonable) citizens can recognize and affirm, and it is because of these qualities that citizens can endorse laws and decisions even though they find them substantively wrong or incorrect. Maria Paola Ferretti's *The Public Perspective. Public Justification and the Ethics of Belief* follows this line of thought but introduces an innovative and original approach. Namely, Ferretti claims that the practice of political justification is possible only where people endorse a common ethics of belief, a cluster of epistemic and moral norms that guide formation and reformation of the beliefs that inform our public perspective (1). Her position thus departs from many existing accounts of public justification (particularly those presented by Rawls and Gaus) and focuses on (i) common epistemic rules and (ii) a shared commitment to a regulative, non-dogmatic idea of truth as necessary components of the process of public justification.

The book introduces or brings into focus many important and under-discussed ideas. For example, most authors assume there is an inherent gap between our factual beliefs and our values and normative claims. Ferretti challenges this sharp division and asserts that our factual beliefs often shape our normative claims—some of the worst failures in citizens' normative deliberation (e.g. The Holocaust and genocide of indigenous peoples) had to be supported by corrupt science and pseudoscience (e.g. Nazi eugenics). Furthermore, most authors, following Rawls and Gaus, endorse the idea that we have a moral (and not epistemic) reason to abide by the constraints of public reason, i.e. to abstain from introducing the arguments that other (qualified) citizens cannot affirm or recognize as intelligible in the public deliberation. Ferretti, on the other hand, argues that there is a strong epistemic reason not to introduce some contestable claims in the public deliberation, and differentiates between epistemic commitments we have when justifying some belief to ourselves and when justifying the same belief to the public. These thought-provoking ideas, paired with imaginative and resourceful argumentation, are alone a good reason to give the book a thoughtful consideration.

However, apart from addressing some of these interesting questions, Ferretti's book undertakes a far more demanding task—it aims to establish a link between our moral requirements and epistemic commitments, thus offering a mixed account of political legitimacy. The book draws on

a tradition that goes back to Locke and his ethics of belief as developed in *An Essay on Human Understanding*. Locke postulated that we have an ‘alethic obligation’ to regulate our beliefs so that they track truth (or what is most probably true) and recommends rationally revising all beliefs that are sources of conflict or debate. Ferretti’s goal is to draw on Locke’s lesson in order to answer some contemporary questions about public justification. The ethics of belief for citizens of a liberal democratic society is based on logic, factual evidence and the state of the art in sciences. These epistemic rules do not ensure that citizens reach consensus in all situations, but that they can meaningfully talk to each other in a way that is adequately public (3). The ethics of belief thus represents an integral part of the ethics of citizens living together in a plural society as free and equal moral and epistemic agents.

The book is divided in seven chapters. The introduction presents the main aims of the book, but also displays the central motives that urged Ferretti to complete the manuscript. Namely, the declining trust in experts and the rapid increase of fake news in the media have started our transition to “post-truth societies” (2, 170), where ethics of belief and the aspiration towards right or correct laws and decisions has been disregarded, and the only hope for public justification rests in purely-procedural (and non-epistemic) qualities of a decision-making procedure. This shift can have disastrous impact on the quality of our political decisions but can also distort the democratic process and turn it into a simple majority rule characterized by domination of one group over the other. Ferretti sees the ethics of belief as a regulating principle that can improve our decision-making process, but also define the proper role of science in a democratic society.

Second chapter frames the discussion by setting the idea of public reason as a regulative ideal that determines the kind of reasons that can be introduced in the process of public justification. Political authority thus has to be justified by reasons available to all reasonable (qualified) citizens—we respect others as free and equal moral agents by justifying coercive laws and policies through public (and only public) reasons. Ferretti distinguishes her own position from the two dominant alternatives: consensus view defended by John Rawls and convergence view defended by Gerald Gaus. Both positions, Ferretti claims, have serious flaws. Rawls’ conception of public reason, based on *shared agreement* on the premises in the justification process, is too conservative (20) since it precludes new considerations and inputs (e.g. new scientific discoveries, insights from the perspectives of minority groups) from entering the public deliberation and challenging the commonly accepted premises. Gaus’ view, based on *joint agreement* on laws and policies (rather than reasons supporting them), lacks publicity (28): citizens are unable to see the agreement as a *joint* endeavor since they cannot critically evaluate laws and policies from the perspective of all others. Ferretti believes her position, based on Lockean social epistemology, can successfully avoid these objections.

After a somewhat unnecessary sketch of a debate between foundationalism and coherentism, where the author ends up endorsing a moderate version of foundationalism, Ferretti introduces *alethic obligation*, Locke’s claim that each epistemic agent should strive to believe what is true. Strength

of our beliefs should be proportionate to the degree of probability that the proposition in question is true (44). Furthermore, the required degree of probability depends on what is at stake: if we are going to make coercive laws that will affect others around us, we need to ground them in well-regulated and very probable beliefs. Ferretti's view proceeds to embrace a conclusion similar to that suggested by Robert Talisse, Cheryl Misak and other proponents of pragmatist account of epistemic democracy—very probable beliefs are those produced by an epistemically reliable procedure. If we see other people as free and equal moral and epistemic agents, we have both moral and epistemic obligation to show respect for their autonomy by adhering to such an epistemically reliable procedure when we make collective decisions.

The fourth chapter brings a comprehensive overview of the use of the term 'reasonable' in contemporary liberal philosophy. Ferretti rejects distinction between reasonable and non-reasonable people, as well as counting only the former as participants in public justification (75). We should focus on reasonable beliefs rather than on people as reasonable. As noted in the third chapter, only very probable beliefs—those that can be publicly justified—should be used to ground laws and public policies. One might thus have reason to hold onto her belief that cannot be publicly justified, but she cannot use such a belief in the collective decision-making process. For example, Galileo had good reasons to personally believe that the Earth moves, yet the available evidence was insufficient to present a public justification for such a claim (it become available in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Therefore, founding laws and policies (e.g. calendar reform) on heliocentric thesis could not be done publicly, though Galileo was justified in following Copernicus' view. Following Locke, Ferretti claims that we have freedom to believe what appears true to us, and we have a duty to justify those beliefs when we want them to have impact on decisions that have public relevance (88, 92).

Some might remain unpersuaded regarding the Locke's method and its ability to solve complex disagreements and conflicts in a world characterized by reasonable value pluralism. However, Ferretti holds that many value disagreements are fueled by disagreements on facts, often caused by epistemological and political asymmetries (100). Citizens often overestimate their own expertise or the credibility of evidence in support of their favorite (descriptive) beliefs (e.g. debates on dioxins, GM food, hormone-containing beef, nuclear waste storage, the greenhouse effect and cloning), which in turn shape their normative attitudes. Locke's ethics of belief can help us resolve disputes on many of these (descriptive) issues, and can thus prevent some value disagreement from emerging. Furthermore, author claims, Locke's method for belief reformation can help us in ranking the desirability of political aims (104) we want to achieve, thus resolving some of the value conflicts. Of course, Ferretti is well-aware that, even when appropriately applying an ethics of beliefs, logic and consistency, people do not always reach conclusive agreement.

The sixth chapter discusses the limits in the application of the ethics of belief. Ferretti has already argued, in fourth chapter, that demanding requirements of the ethics of belief should not be applied on beliefs one does not use in the process of public justification. We are not required to justify

to the others why we hold a specific belief, unless we want to ground some coercive law or public policy on such a belief. Ferretti discusses the value of freedom of thought, rejecting some instrumental justifications (e.g. J. S. Mill) and endorsing the idea that protection of a sphere of personal freedom enjoys a certain priority in our political reasoning (138). Her justification of the priority of (equal) freedom follows Rawls (and Quong) and is based on citizens' equal moral status.

The final chapter introduces several challenges to Ferretti's position. Our beliefs are formed within a culture and are often influenced by a cultural tradition. When different cultures coexist within a single state, their members might find it impossible to collectively practice ethics of belief since they have substantively different assessments of probability of some key beliefs. Ferretti claims that, in some instances, there are good reasons not to press with too demanding constraints of the ethics of belief—some cultural communities should be left to arrange some aspects of their public life. The reason for this, however, is not in the value of particular cultures, but in the equal moral status of citizens endorsing different moral doctrines and cultural practices (164).

Ferretti's book is undoubtedly an important contribution to the ongoing debate on public justification. Her focus on Locke's *alethic obligation* and the ethics of belief represents a novel and underexplored approach that tries to unite moral and epistemic considerations in the process of collective justification of laws and policies. However, I would like to stress two minor difficulties that need to be addressed. First, some might argue that Ferretti misinterprets Rawls when she criticizes his consensus approach to public reason as too conservative. Emancipatory ideas, but also new scientific discoveries, challenge the commonly accepted ideas and rules that they support. Rawls' account is criticized to be too rigid to appreciate these new perspectives. Namely, it seems that Rawls addresses idealized citizens in idealized conditions and is thus unable to accommodate new discoveries or shifts in public perspective that happen in the real world. However, Rawls' four stage sequence can be used to tackle this worry. He clearly states that the political decision-making process consists of four stages: first we determine principles of justice (in idealized conditions, behind the veil of ignorance), and then we proceed to draft a constitution, form appropriate legislation, and finally, we implement this legislation on particular cases, through public administration and courts. Only the first stage takes place in idealized conditions—constitutional changes can be motivated by the electorate, as was the case in "the three most innovative periods in American constitutional history: the founding of 1787–91, Reconstruction and New Deal" (PL, 406). Rawls indicates that the purpose of an amendment is to adjust basic constitutional values to changing political and social circumstances, or to incorporate into constitution a broader and more inclusive understating of those values (PL, 238). The three amendments related to the Civil War all do this (abolition of slavery), as does the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the vote. These changes were, at least in part, conducted after widespread false factual beliefs (regarding the inferiority of women or African Americans) were disputed. It seems that Rawls' public reason is not so conservative. Except for the first stage (principles of justice), when we

consider idealized citizens behind the veil of ignorance, all other are (to a certain degree) performed by real citizens in a real world and can take into account new scientific discoveries and shifts in the public perspective.

Second, it is important to emphasize that Ferretti and scholars she addresses (e.g. John Rawls) often write about substantively different things. Rawls refers to public justification through shared reasons as a precondition for political legitimacy. Liberal principle of legitimacy specifies the minimum that has to be met in order for the exercise of coercive political power to be fully proper—this power has to be exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason. (PL, 137). Ferretti, however, does not address the question of political legitimacy. She focuses on the ethics of belief as political ethics, thus setting a more demanding set of constraints than Rawls does. Considering they are writing about different things (what makes a procedure legitimate / what makes a procedure morally justified), it seems that Ferretti's contribution does not represent an alternative to Rawls' account, but a completely new contribution in a separate discussion.

IVAN CEROVAC

*University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia*