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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ‘A habitual disposition to the good’: on reason, virtue and realism

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Amidst the crisis of instrumental reason, a number of contemporary political philosophers including Jürgen Habermas have sought to rescue the project of a reasonable humanism from the twin threats of religious fundamentalism and secular naturalism. In his recent work, Habermas defends a post-metaphysical politics that aims to protect rationality against encroachment while also accommodating religious faith within the public sphere. This paper contends that Habermas’ post-metaphysical project fails to provide a robust alternative either to the double challenge of secular naturalism and religious fundamentalism or to the ruthless instrumentalism that underpins capitalism. By contrast with Habermas and also with the ‘new realism’ of contemporary political philosophers such as Raymond Geuss or Bernard Williams, realism in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle can defend reason against instrumental rationality and blind belief by integrating it with habit, feeling and even faith. Such metaphysical–political realism can help develop a politics of virtue that goes beyond communitarian thinking by emphasising plural modes of association (not merely ‘community’), substantive ties of sympathy and the importance of pursuing goodness and mutual flourishing.

**Keywords:** rationality; faith; habit; post-metaphysical politics; realism

#### Introduction

In the Western tradition, reason has been at the heart of politics since Plato suggested that knowledge of the forms through rational argument is necessary properly to order relations within the polity. Of equal importance is recognising that the human soul requires cognition of the Good – the form of all forms and the ‘author of all things’ (*Republic* 508 E, 511 B, 516 B, in Plato 1937, 769, 772, 775) – in order to lead a virtuous life in the pursuit of both individual and mutual flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Of course, this vision is not limited to ancient Greek political thought. As Karl Jaspers (1953) first argued in his seminal work on the Axial Age (*Achsenzeit* or ‘axis time’), the great metaphysics of East and West are of a single birth with the main world religions: the strangely coincident fusion of philosophy with theology in the period from around the eighth to the second century BC (Bellah 2011; Bellah and Joas 2011). Arguably, this Axial Age witnessed the emergence of similar patterns of thinking that have underpinned the civilisations of the West, Persia, India and China ever since. The fusion of religious belief with rational enquiry centred on a theoretical and practical critique of predominant norms of absolutist power underwritten by gods who were not believed to be on the side of ordinary human beings. Thus, the advent of critical thought and political resistance was from the outset

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inextricably intertwined with an appeal to religious transcendence – whether in Plato, Buddha or Confucius.

Linking these traditions born during the Axial Age is the idea that the correct exercise of reason involves a pre-rational trust (*pistis* or faith) in the reasonableness of reality – that the universe and all rational beings therein are subject neither to a deterministic fatalism nor to the indeterminacy of random flux but can be ordered harmoniously. Based on a new synthesis of personal liberty with universal *telos*, agency in the immanent order of being was for the first time in human history seen as compatible with a transcendent outlook. The key difference of pre- and post-axial thought is the notion that flourishing requires some form of salvation by a benign deity that refuses sacrificial practices to appease divine wrath and instead represents the ultimate guarantee for the dignity of the person (Taylor 2011). In this manner, divinity is reconfigured as the supernatural foundation and finality of goodness that all human beings desire naturally (as for Plato and Aristotle) – a good that exceeds complete comprehension but is still amenable to reason.

In recent decades, the axial legacy of shared substantive finalities such as notions of the good has once again come under attack – this time by the twin forces of secular naturalism and religious fundamentalism (Habermas 2005, 2010). According to naturalism, physical matter is the foundational substance of the whole universe, and both the intellect and human rationality have emerged as part of a natural evolutionary process (Goetz and Taliaferro 2008). If material nature is the source of everything, then it follows that the mind is essentially the same as the chemical processes which make up the physical brain. In turn, this has led some materialists to conceive of reason as the most efficient means to achieve an end without critically reflecting on the meaning or value of that end. In this manner, reason is reduced to the instrumental rationality that serves the overriding purpose of problem solving (Popper 1994). By extension, the body is but a series of atomic cells that belong to the individual, defined not as a political animal but rather as a self-proprietor whose power is constrained by the legal prohibition not to harm others (Moreland 2010). As Habermas (1968, 1995) has argued, the instrumental rationality that underpins both capitalism and secular naturalism is concerned not only with understanding the natural world but also with manipulating laws of nature that supposedly apply to the economy and society. Reason becomes a mere tool to achieve individually chosen goals, not a faculty to comprehend or prescribe the ultimate ends that might bind together individuals and groups such as the common good or mutual flourishing.

Here one can go further than Habermas to suggest that instrumental rationality is linked not just to capitalism but also to the state bureaucracy that removes obstacles to market expansion and compensates for market failure via centrally provided state welfare (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). If so, then liberal democracy may strengthen the forces of rational calculation and commodification rather than resist them. Crucially, without shared substantive finalities that might mediate between individual human wills which can clash with one another, the exercise of instrumental reason replacing the creativity of *Homo faber* with the calculative reflexivity of *Homo oeconomicus*. In this process, citizens are increasingly defined in terms of their pursuit of economic utility as consumers and spectators (Debord 1967; Edelman 1988; Wolin 2008).

Like secular naturalism, religious fundamentalism also threatens the integrity of reason and its role in politics. Across different world religions, fanatics appeal to a blind faith that is divorced from rationality. In different ways, they claim to know the will of God and to act on divine injunctions to which they give their unquestioning assent (Juergensmeyer 2000). The mark of extremist religion is the sundering of will from intellect, and the sheer act of volition that underpins fideism. Not only does this stance

reject any rational corrective of absolute, unmediated belief; it also seeks to legitimise a theological politics that is puritan, messianic and apocalyptic (Gray 2003, 2007; Northcott 2004). In doing so, fanaticism distorts both reason and faith, dismissing the former as contrary to divine intention (God's *Logos*, for example) while instrumentalising the latter in the service of egoism or absolute power.

In other words, religious extremism denies any mediation between belief and rationality, and it rules out the possibility that each might have cognitive relevance for the other. It denies that just as rationality can act as a controlling organ that binds belief to knowledge, so too faith mediated by knowledge can save 'pure reason' from being manipulated by ideology or applied in a partial way that ignores the complexity of the universe beyond laws of nature. Without each other's corrective role, religion and reason can fall prey to distortions and pathologies: either the secular, totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century that legitimised genocide and total warfare, or else the religious extremisms that have used faith as a vehicle for hatred and terror. Arguably, the separation of reason from faith is at the origin of both rationalism and fideism.

In this contemporary crisis of instrumental reason, a number of political theorists including Jürgen Habermas (2008, 2010) have sought to rescue the project of a reasonable humanism from the twin threats of religious fundamentalism and secular naturalism. In his recent work, Habermas insists that the instrumentalist logic of capitalism is producing a growing immoral ruthlessness, one driven by the revived social and philosophical Darwinism evident in the naturalism of Richard Dawkins and many others. And faced with the global religious resurgence and spreading fanaticism, he wishes to reinstate a renewed Kantian distinction between discursive reason and ineffable faith.

In what follows I contend that Habermas' post-metaphysical politics rests on a certain metaphysical gesture, namely the undemonstrated assertion that the realm of pure natural immanence is ontologically separate from the realm of supernatural transcendence, not a historically contingent invention that abandoned the axial legacy of shared substantive finalities. As Charles Taylor has argued, 'one of the great inventions of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms' (2007, 15). Moreover, for Habermas only discursive natural reason, which is divorced from ineffable supernatural faith, can defend Enlightenment humanism against both instrumental rationality and blind belief. In other words, Habermas' post-metaphysical politics is grounded in a metaphysical conception that uncritically accepts the Kantian separation of immanence from transcendence and of reason from faith (Muralt 2002; Taylor 2007; Gillespie 2008; Milbank 2013).

This conception of reason underpins Habermas' defence of the public sphere, defined as a 'society engaged in critical public debate' (Habermas 1962 [1989, 52]) that can chart a 'third way' beyond the capitalist market and the authoritarian state. In his recent work in which he seeks to integrate resurgent faith into the public sphere, Habermas claims that belief can offer certain moral intuitions and thereby enrich reason, even though faith is ultimately either a-rational or even irrational. My argument is that Habermas' attempt to translate faith into a secular idiom fails to provide a robust alternative to the twin threats of naturalism and fundamentalism or to the ruthlessness of rational instrumentality that governs capitalism. Habermas views faith as divided from moral sentiment and the precepts of belief as incompatible with those of rationality. His post-metaphysical politics tries to shore up the primacy of reason by mobilising the moral intuitions of religious traditions but it is unable to integrate faith and reason on shared terms.

I also argue that realism in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle can defend reason against instrumental rationality and blind belief by reconnecting it with habit, feeling and

even faith. By contrast with the ‘new realism’ of Raymond Geuss (2008) or Bernard Williams (2004, 2007), Platonist–Aristotelian realism conceives of reason as originating from a universal transcendent source and seeking the universal transcendent Good. The latter is reflected both in internal goods that are specific to different human activities and in the ‘external’ common good in which all the individual, internal goods share. This version of realism is metaphysical because it connects reason to the pursuit of the transcendent Good – beyond instrumental rationality and the search for formal principles and procedures of fairness (as for Rawls’ theory of justice [1971]). Reason so configured also exceeds the idea that political rationality is the sole filter for translating the moral intuitions of religious traditions into neutral and secular norms, as in the notion of ‘public reason’ in Rawls’ political liberalism (1993) or discursive reason in Habermas (2005, 2010). Platonist–Aristotelian realism is both metaphysical *and* political because it seeks to shape the city (*polis*) in line with substantive notions of goodness, which are accessible to reason and which can be pursued through the practice of virtue. Metaphysical–political realism can help develop a politics of virtue beyond communitarian thinking through a threefold emphasis: first, on plural modes of association (not merely community); second, on substantive ties of sympathy; and third, on the pursuit of the natural desire for goodness and mutual flourishing. Such a politics differs markedly from the quest for subjective self-fulfilment that characterises much of modern political thought according to Taylor (1989, 1991).

The first section examines modern reason, with a particular focus on economic, moral and historical rationality, and it explores the ways in which different types of reason shape both politics and ethics. The second section turns to the work of Habermas, contrasting his conception of rationality with alternative conceptions in which reason is not separated from habit, feeling and also faith in the sense of a pre-rational trust in the reasonableness of reality. The third section develops two themes that are connected with the ontological link between reason and reality: the case for metaphysical–political realism and the case for a politics of virtue beyond communitarianism. The final section presents some concluding reflections.

### Modern rationality in question

Distinguishing between economic, moral and historical rationality is useful in charting the course of contemporary political theory from the utilitarian thinking of J.S. Mill and G.E. Moore to rights-based deontological theories such as John Rawls’s (1971, 1993) theory of justice and political liberalism, and then to the ‘new realism’ of both Bernard Williams (2004, 2007) and Raymond Geuss (2008). Common to all three approaches, however, is an attempt to provide a non-metaphysical account of rationality that excludes cosmological or metaphysical mediations which exceed the boundaries of reason (as defined by Kant, for example). The implicit assumption is that rationality is disconnected from the emotive, the aesthetic and the linguistic, and that reason is not primarily concerned with reflecting on the possibility of transcendent ends of human action. However, if such ends are excluded, then what could be the principles that might govern politics, the economy or society? One possibility is a number of foundational values (e.g. liberty, equality and fraternity, or life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness), while another possibility is a series of formal rules and procedures of fairness. Either way, foundational values or the ground rules that determine particular procedures are not subject to critical questioning or public debate. Rather, they are assumed to be universally valid and applicable. As Zygmunt Bauman has remarked, this conception of modern rationality in politics may well promote

greater equality or freedom of choice but ‘the conditions under which choices are made are not themselves a matter of choice’ (Bauman 2008, 72).

But when rival values (say freedom and equality) clash, it seems that people can only ‘agree to disagree’ and must settle for formal rules and procedures (Gray 2000). Faced with a clash of values, which is as much the result of real diversity as it is the outcome of enforcing certain norms, both economic and moral rationality are largely concerned with laying down rules for ‘fair play’ between independent human beings. At the same time, this conception of reason proscribes any substantive debate about goodness or justice, whose meaning has been reduced to non-metaphysical or legal equality and political fairness (Rawls 1985). At the heart of Mill and Moore’s utilitarian ethics and also Rawls’ political liberalism is a metaphysical agnosticism, which denies substantive finalities. Some sense of fairness is shared by ‘all decent peoples’ across the globe, but it does not prescribe inherently desirable goals for social and economic activities (Rawls 2001). This a-social and an-economic theory of politics involves as its concomitant an a-political theory of the social and the economic.

Linking these separate spheres is an ontological atomism that views reality as the sum of its individual parts and supports a political theory based on the primacy of individual substances, which are related to other individual substance by formal ties such as subjective rights and unilaterally defined contracts. Thus, Mill and Moore’s utilitarian ethics, and even Rawls’ theory of justice, rest on a form of instrumental reason that focuses on formal, procedural and abstract standards of validity such as cost–benefit analysis, utility maximisation or the formal principle of equal liberty for all. This reduces rationality to a general means of attaining and reconciling individual ends. In this way, it brings about its own assumption of an atomised world in which the apparently autonomous subject becomes an isolated spectator of other isolated individuals. Habermas diagnoses this well:

A gaze that objectifies and examines, that takes things apart analytically, that monitors and penetrates everything, gains a power that is structurally formative for [modern] institutions. It is the gaze of the rational subject who has lost all merely intuitive bonds with his environment and torn down all the bridges built up of inter-subjective agreement, and for whom in his isolation, other subjects are only accessible as objects of observation. (1990, 245)

But here one can go beyond Habermas’ critique and suggest that a philosophy based upon instrumental rationality undermines both politics and reason itself even more than he recognises. This is because utilitarian logic exacerbates the lack of shared ethical goals in liberalism that is its own presupposition (Manent 1987; Michéa 2007). But this does not thereby *prove* that presupposition, because it is only the *really existing* utilitarianism and liberalism that have produced in practice the circumstances, which they originally and arbitrarily assumed in mere theory. Thus, they generate the ‘war of all against all’ and the need to police natural anarchy through state coercion and market competition, as exemplified by Hobbes’ ‘leviathan’ and Smith’s ‘invisible hand’.

For its part, although historical reason rightly rejects the logic of necessity that underpins utilitarian and liberal thought and insists on the radical contingency of context (Williams 2004, 2007; Geuss 2008), it mistakenly suggests that claims to moral universality are an ideological mask for material interests. What is supposed to be the positive recourse after one has subjected the quest for power or wealth, or even utility, to ideological criticism? What it might possibly involve, on a ‘realist’ view, would be the

unleashing of all forms of power, wealth and utility in their greatest possible – though contingently given – diversity (Geuss 2008).

Besides defending the contingent nature of reality, the theorists of historical reason and the ‘new realism’ confine themselves to critique, genealogy and certain virtues such as truth – defined in terms of accuracy and sincerity. But far from offering an alternative to the formal standards of economic or political liberalism, these conceptions of truth are in reality quasi-formal and abstract criteria that focus on validity and intentionality, not on the possible relation between what is true and the wider order of being (Williams 2004). As with Habermas, the ‘new realist’ claim to provide a post-metaphysical account of politics is itself based on a hidden metaphysical argument. One cannot posit a relationship between human intentionality and the way things are without making metaphysical assumptions. Put differently, ‘new realism’ lacks a rationally intelligible view of why human reason exceeds instrumental rationality and how it can have knowledge of reality – the world beyond calculation based on knowing the laws of nature.

Thus, regardless of whether it rests on economic, moral or historical rationality, contemporary political theory precludes shared ethical goals that might bind individuals and groups together. Without such shared ends, reason is either self-grounded or else it entertains some arbitrary connection with the natural world. An example of the former is Kant’s conception of regulative reason that Habermas develops in the direction of discursive rationality. An example of the latter is the correlation between reason and nature that risks lapsing either into a dualism between reason and reality (as for Descartes) or into a monism of the mind or of nature (as for Leibniz and Spinoza).

The implications for rationality in politics are far reaching. If reason is seen as essentially separate from reality rather than an integral part of the universe, it lacks direction and is debased: it becomes either the sort of instrumental, a-historical rationality that is used for the most efficient calculation of the means to attain some chosen end like utility or happiness or equal liberty (as in Mill and Moore’s utilitarianism or Rawls’ liberalism), or else a purely context-specific form of reason that is powerless in the face of power (as in the ‘new realism’ of Williams and Geuss). Either way, modern reason is sundered from any transcendent, substantive finality and therefore from the pursuit of human flourishing that is interpersonal and views humankind as embedded in a wider natural and even cosmic order (as in metaphysical–political realism). Taylor sums up the crisis of modern reason as follows:

From some Romantics in one way, from Nietzsche in another, down to the Frankfurt School which borrowed from both, the notion has been developed that rational hegemony, rational control, may stifle, desiccate, repress us; that rational self-mastery may be self-domination or enslavement. There is a ‘dialectic of Enlightenment’, in which reason, which promises to be a liberating force, turns into its opposite. We stand in need of liberation from reason. (1989, 116)

All this is a consequence of bracketing the good out of the picture and reducing substantive justice to formal, procedural fairness. Arguably, modern political thought in general and liberalism in particular invert the primacy of the good over evil (as in Augustine’s definition of evil as privation of the good [*privatio boni*]). Based on the idea of an originally anarchic and violent ‘state of nature’ (as in Hobbes and Kant), the claim is that evil is prior to goodness and a necessary condition that reflects both perennial human weakness and the particular conditions of human bondage – not least the constricting shackles of religious superstition, absolutist monarchical rule and feudal



exploitation. In the historical context of civil strife and the ‘wars of religion’ in which modern political philosophy and the liberal tradition emerged, rival notions of the good were understandably associated with violence and war.

However, subordinating goodness to evil is connected with a profoundly pessimistic anthropology at the heart of modern political thought, including liberalism. As Jean-Claude Michéa has suggested, this anthropology takes one of two forms: either the Hobbesian view that the natural human condition is one of selfishness, greed, distrust of the other and inclination to violence or the Rousseauian view that when human beings abandon their original freedom to live in society, the vice of egoism arises from mutual comparison, rivalry and competition (Michéa 2007). Rousseau, it seems, transfers Hobbes’ pessimism about the individual to a new pessimism about human association.

According to Michéa, it is this double pessimism that underpins the belief that liberalism is the realm of lesser evil (*l’empire du moindre mal*) – the best of all possible realities in a world of necessary evil. Without substantive shared finalities, modern moral and political philosophy substitutes rights for goods: moral philosophy focuses ‘on what it is right to do rather than the nature of the good life; and it has no conceptual place left for a notion of the good as the object of our love and allegiance or as the privileged focus of attention or will’ (Taylor 1989, 3). The problem is that when rival rights and incommensurable values clash, instrumental rationality has no means of adjudicating the ensuing conflict (Gray 2000). Procedures and formal principles of fairness are necessary but not sufficient conditions to resolve such conflicts, which would require substantive guiding principles. Rawls posits principles that are either so general and vague as to lack any substantive content (such as decency) or so specific and particular as to lack universal application (such as ‘overlapping consensus’): as Rawls writes, in conditions of pluralism there can be no agreement other than on ‘the *same* basic rights, liberties and opportunities as well as the *same* all-purpose means such as income and wealth, all of which are secured by the *same* social bases of self-respect’ (Rawls 1988, 454 [emphasis added]). So neither instrumental rationality nor Rawls’ ‘justice as fairness’ is in a position to resolve the clash of rival rights and incommensurable values.

### Metaphysical mediations between reason, habit, feeling and faith

Amidst the crisis of instrumental reason, Habermas seeks to rescue the project of a reasonable humanism from the twin threats of religious fundamentalism and secular naturalism. In defence of reasonable religion and a rational respect for faith, he now argues that reason should use the moral resources of religious traditions. However, what is problematic about his proposals is the sharp divide that he assumes between faith and reason, on the basis of a presumed ultimacy of the post-metaphysical era inaugurated by Kant (Milbank 2013). For Habermas (2005), who seeks to situate his thinking ‘between religion and naturalism’, these two poles equally exceed the ‘limits of discursive reason’. This applies in identical measure to the argument for a metaphysical mediation between reason and faith advanced by theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger, who in 2005 was elected Pope Benedict XVI (Habermas and Ratzinger 2004) and the ontological naturalism of philosophers like Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou or Daniel Dennett (not to mention Richard Dawkins). Against both positions, Habermas defends a critical philosophy of the public sphere as well as forms of political discourse that combine democratic contestation with respectful debate between people of all faiths and none.

But Habermas views reason in too Kantian a manner and ignores the ways in which rationality is tied to habit, feeling and even faith. In particular he fails to acknowledge that

his account follows Kant's project of the self-foundation of reason, which cuts off it from affective intuitions concerning the nature of reality. As Milbank (2013, 324) argues, reason is always conjoined with feeling and can even be considered a reflexive intensification of feeling: passions become more distanced and yet more constant and stable. This does not imply pure subjectivism, because in contrast to the solipsism of abstract reason, feeling is always feeling *of* or *about*. Its rootedness in our body alone ensures also its radically ecstatic, external object-reaching intentionality. Equally, its subjective dimension as experience of irreducible 'things' (both material and immaterial) ensures that mind as feeling cannot be reduced to any unconscious equivalence. By contrast, coldly regular and formally rational procedures of the kind that Habermas recommends might be reducible in principle to impersonal forces of the capitalist market and the bureaucratic state that are beyond anyone's control.

Feeling is at once subjective and objective in that it links a particular body to universal reason instantiated in individual human beings. Moreover, both reason and feeling are characterised by their tendency to develop specific habitual dispositions based on natural desires for knowledge and goodness, as Taylor suggests. Such habitual dispositions by far exceed the formalism of a procedural rationality that is concerned with policing the boundaries of 'negative liberty', individual consent, no-harm to other and utility maximisation. This matters to political pluralism, as a richer and embedded reason can be more tolerant of individual and group practices. That is because a narrower reason cannot prevent the clash of individual wills or else needs to appeal to a higher power in order to keep the peace – hence the notion of *raison d'état*, the rule of law or constitutional-legal authority. In principle, the rule of law and constitutional legal-authority can mitigate possible conflicts between individual wills, but as the work of the Frankfurt School (of which Habermas is a prominent member) and more recently that of Agamben (1998) and Foucault (2004) has demonstrated, law can be an integral part of a bio-political mode of government – domination over human beings through forms of mass surveillance and systematic social control. Up to a point this also applies to Rawls' Kantian conception of law as essentially formalistic and procedural because the ground-rules for fairness (determined behind the 'veil of ignorance') are not open to critical debate.

Crucially, feeling is key to the metaphysical mediation between reason and reality because it helps to secure not only a more substantive situatedness of human beings in the world but also a more positive freedom that enables individuals and groups to perfect their talents and pursue shared goals. In fact, feeling is not merely about subjective interiority but links us to other individuals, groups and the world at large because moral sentiments such as sympathy, benevolence and justice (in Hume and Smith) are primarily affective and concretely physical connections to other things, persons and the whole of reality. This involves both apprehension and trust, which are always thoroughly entangled and thus provide a model for positive freedom and practice that takes account of this entanglement (Milbank 2013). By contrast, separating reason from faith has the effect of divorcing rationality from will. Without the mediation of reason, will is increasingly viewed as pure 'choice', or else a will only of willing itself (as with Kant). Therefore, to recover a 'broader' and not finitely limited reason, it seems necessary to insist upon the non-foundational character of reason and to defend the embedding of the rational in the emotive, the aesthetic, the linguistic, the social, the historic and the natural (as do MacIntyre and Taylor, for example).

Moreover, Habermas' attempt to accommodate faith within 'the boundaries of discursive reason' also ignores the metaphysical mediation between faith and rationality: religious faith cannot be reduced to a blind belief in God or some vague moral intuitions.

On the contrary, it can encompass a pre-rational trust in the reasonableness of reality that is nevertheless amenable to reason and that the exercise of reason ultimately seems to involve (such as certain forms of stability and regularity beyond natural laws like gravity). In fact, a number of philosophical traditions and world religions that trace their origin to the Axial Age share the idea that the divine *logos* is the foundation of the human mind and that reason can have some knowledge of salvation even if the reality of transcendence exceeds rational comprehension. Thus, a broader conception of rationality is open to a transcendent outlook that affirms the human capacity for reasoning, *precisely* because human knowledge and judgement are ordered towards higher principles that exceed the Kantian boundaries of pure nature and self-founded reason. For politics this means that human rule and political authority do not (and perhaps should not) command absolute loyalty or obedience because the state is ultimately provisional – if I may venture a paradox. The question, then, is whether constitutions and the rule of law are sufficient in upholding notions such as freedom of conscience or the dignity of the person.

Habermas is certainly critical of modern statehood and the way in which it can be captured by the instrumental logic of global capitalism. He argues, however, that the discursive reason embedded in the constitutional framework of a proper ‘rule of law’ state (*Rechtsstaat*) is best positioned to save reason from both secular naturalism and religious fanaticism by integrating the moral intuitions of religions into public, political debate. However, he is still far too Kantian in claiming that faith is essentially irrational (or a-rational) and threatens the autonomy of reason. Here two texts are key: first, Habermas’ seminal debate with the then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 2004 (Habermas and Ratzinger 2004); second, Pope Benedict XVI’s controversial Regensburg address in 2006 (Benedict XVI 2007), which argues that the separation of natural immanence and supernatural transcendence divided faith from reason and accordingly impoverished both. Faith is either ‘positivised’ as an inner impulse or ‘transcendentalised’ as a blind, irrational creed. Meanwhile, reason is either enthroned as the sole transcendental absolute or reduced to the instrumental rationality of calculus and scientific experimentation. Ratzinger attributes this to the Reformation and the Kantian project that Habermas seeks to carry forward:

The principle of *sola scriptura* [Luther’s injunction of ‘Scripture alone’] ... sought faith in its pure, primordial form, as originally found in the biblical Word. Metaphysics appeared as a premise derived from another source, from which faith had to be liberated in order to become once more fully itself. When Kant stated that he needed to set thinking aside in order to make room for faith, he carried this programme forward with a radicalism that the Reformers could never have foreseen. He thus anchored faith exclusively in practical reason, denying it access to reality as a whole. (Benedict XVI 2007, 95–96)

Instead of securing their respective specificity and integrity, Habermas’ secular conception pits faith and reason against one another. He does not acknowledge that the ensuing opposition between fideism and rationalism fuels the clash of religious fundamentalism and secular extremism that has characterised so much of national and global politics in recent years (e.g. Juergensmeyer 2000).

By contrast, Ratzinger’s metaphysical mediation has the potential to offer a synthesis through which reason and faith are mutually corrective and augmenting. Without each other both are distorted and instrumentalised in the service of egoism or state power. As he remarked in a September 2010 London address on the relationship between politics and religion, ‘distortions of religion arise when insufficient attention is given to the purifying and structuring role of reason within religion’. Likewise, ‘without the corrective supplied

by religion, though, reason too can fall prey to distortions, as when it is manipulated by ideology, or applied in a partial way that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person'.<sup>1</sup> Just as rationality acts as a controlling organ that binds belief to knowledge, so too faith can save reason from being manipulated by secular ideology or applied in a partial way that ignores the complexity of the world beyond the empirically falsifiable.

Without each other's corrective role, distortions and pathologies arise in both religion and 'secular politics'. For example, fanatical believers use faith as a vehicle of hatred and seek to refashion the whole world in their own puritanical image – whether Christian evangelicals who advocate the 'neo-conservative crusade', or radical Wahhabi sects in Sunni Islam that want to create a global caliphate, or Hindu nationalists who argue for nuclear warfare against Muslims, or indeed certain strands of Zionist supremacism that see the Palestinian people as sub-human (Juergensmeyer 2000; Gray 2003; Northcott 2004). Similarly, the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century legitimised genocide and total war in the name of an exceptionalism that was driven by neo-pagan ideas, radicalised versions of social Darwinism or eugenic racism (Juergensmeyer 1993; Froese 2008).

Against naturalism and fanaticism, Ratzinger seeks to promote a synthesis of reason and faith that binds them together in mutually beneficial ways. Faith can reinforce trust in the human capacity for reasoning and trust in the reasonableness of reality. Likewise, rationality can help religious belief make sense of its claims and give coherence to its intuitions (Benedict XVI 2007). Crucially, reason and faith can assist each other's search for objective principles and norms that govern personal and political action. What binds rationality to belief is a shared commitment to universal standards of truth, even if these are never fully known and always deeply contested (Habermas and Ratzinger 2004). Like Habermas, Ratzinger suggests that instrumental rationality lacks depth, but beyond Habermas he seeks to defend the 'grandeur of reason' by linking it to notions of substantive truth – at the very least, to debates in the public square about standards of truth.

This argument challenges the widespread assumption that rival standards are incommensurable and that truth is therefore a matter of imposition. Ratzinger's contention is that no argument can ever be neutral and that even impartiality involves a certain measure of substantive truth, notably a concern for accuracy and balance. Truth for Ratzinger is plural precisely because no single finite mind can be in full possession of it and because it involves discernment and constant interpretation. For believers, faith may reveal and confirm certain truths but in conversation with non-believers the claims of faith still require arguments that are accessible to reason – as Rawls suggests in his work on public reason (1993). Only a reason that is broader than instrumental rationality and open to other sources of cognition (such as intuition, moral sentiments or judgement, for example) can provide the basis for a debate in the public square that can be described as tolerant and fair.

Habermas is acutely aware that the instrumental rationality underpinning contemporary capitalism is indifferent to substantive common ethical foundations and matters of truth (Habermas 1968, 1985). Instead, it operates largely on the basis of mass preference, manipulating natural desires for certain goods and fabricating fake desires. Arguably, a proper synthesis of faith with reason offers a more robust defence of the market economy than Habermas' appeal to 'deliberative, discursive' reason (Pabst 2012b). The capitalist system might benefit from the contribution of religious traditions, which may save it from its own worst excesses. By integrating faith into the shared public sphere, a more metaphysical account seeks to correct both secular–naturalist intolerance vis-à-vis religion in politics and religious–extremist opposition to democracy. Since political and economic decisions involve ethical choices and have moral consequences, both those in authority

and other participants in public debates should be allowed to express themselves freely in their own terms and to reflect critically on the principles guiding decisions.

Although Habermas recognises the limitations of instrumental rationality, his project fails to provide a truly plural politics. Despite inflecting his long-standing Enlightenment stance that is hostile to religion, he still claims that faith is a-rational or even irrational and that the gulf separating post-metaphysical, secular rationality from religious revelation cannot be bridged (Habermas 1995, 2010). Furthermore, he assumes that only reason separated from faith can preserve state neutrality vis-à-vis rival and conflicting religions: ‘the domain of the state, which controls the means of legitimate coercion, should not be opened to the strife between various religious communities, otherwise the government could become the executive arm of a religious majority that imposes its will on the opposition’ (Habermas 2008, 28). Thus, Habermas’ vindication of the secular state is much more concerned with the clash of fanatical faiths than with the violent wars of secular utopias – a conception that seems to confirm his bias in favour of Kantian reason.

It is true that his argument for translating the moral sentiments of religious believers into the discourse of secular reason encourages a measure of mutual learning between religious and non-religious traditions. However, for Habermas the common language in both public debate and political deliberation must be free of references to transcendent principles and governed by secular reason alone. As a result, post-secularity does not transform the secularist terms of debate and engagement between religions and other perspectives. Faith is not permitted to make any substantive or critical contribution to public discussion that could undermine the primacy of formal, procedural reason (Habermas and Ratzinger 2004, 19–52). Paradoxically, the post-secular argument uses religion to compensate for an instrumental rationality whose shortcomings are the result of divorcing faith from reason in the first place.

Habermas’ proposed procedure of translation therefore remains residually secularist. He convincingly contests the liberal public–private divide and the exclusion of faith from politics, but rather like Rawls he defends the hegemony of the secularist settlement and the post-metaphysical outlook of the Enlightenment legacy. The transcendent is now permitted within the public sphere, but merely as a source of morality and strictly limited to informal communication among citizens (Habermas 2010). In contrast, formal deliberations at the level of the state and its agencies must be protected from religion by an institutional filter which suspends metaphysical questions and reduces religious belief to a private decision:

Every citizen must know and accept that only secular reasons count beyond the institutional threshold that divides the informal public sphere from parliaments, courts, ministries and administrations. But all that is required here is the epistemic ability to consider one’s own faith reflexively from the outside and to relate it to secular views ... Given that they [religious citizens] may only express themselves in a religious idiom under the condition that they recognise the institutional translation proviso, they can, trusting that their fellow citizens will cooperate for accomplishing a translation, grasp themselves as participants in the legislative process, although only secular reasons count therein. (Habermas 2006a, 9–10)

In this manner, Habermas draws a line between the public sphere and the state, on the one hand, and communities and groups, on the other – a line that religious arguments are not allowed to cross (Habermas 2006a, 2006b).

The overriding reason for rejecting metaphysics is to secure immanent, secular values without appealing to transcendent religious principles. This leaves unresolved the conflicts between rival values like freedom, equality or security that cannot be reconciled by

reason alone. Beyond discursive deliberation or the respectful listening to difference, Habermas has little to offer by way of mediating conflict. He will not allow that shared substantive finalities, such as the common good or human flourishing, can be publicly adjudicated. This takes no account of the current revival of the claims of virtue ethics (by MacIntyre, Taylor, Sandel and others) and in fact rules them out of the court of public discussion. And since ‘something always rules’ (as Gramsci suggested), the lack of substantive values makes discursive reason even more vulnerable to the triumph of powers such as globally mobile capital.

To restrict rationality to regulative reason, as Habermas does, is to impose a limit on what is reasonable to desire and to will. Such a limit means that a natural desire for knowledge and goodness beyond the boundaries of natural immanence, as emphasised by Plato and Aristotle and by contemporary virtue theorists, is dismissed as a purely private instinct that should be banished from the public sphere. In turn, this appears to imply that for Habermas everything is to be negatively tolerated, but nothing is to be positively allowed. So without shared ends that can bind individual and groups together and direct their action to a common end, Habermas’ pluralist politics turns out to be much closer to Rawls’ political liberalism than is at first apparent.

The overriding reason is that Habermas’ post-metaphysical politics brackets substantive values and shared ends out of the picture, as I have argued throughout this paper. Yet it is precisely the natural desire for goodness which seems to animate human beings – to know the good and to do good because the good exercises a sort of ‘lure’ and appeals to both the senses and the mind. For all ideas and all practices are governed by certain internal goods, which share in an overarching reality of the good, as both Plato and Aristotle suggested. And according to MacIntyre, Taylor and Sandel, human activities involve the pursuit of specific goods that are internal to each activity and that share the common quality of goodness, which taken in all its diversity and plurality constitutes the common good. Moreover, the inclusion of feeling and habit (and possibly faith) broadens rationality in such a way as to generate openness to the transcendent horizon of the good that combines with an enhanced capacity to act virtuously – an argument that I develop in the following section.

### **Metaphysical–political realism and the politics of virtue**

Arguably, modern politics emerges and evolves in large part as a reaction against the axial idea of a transcendent, divinely ordained order that promotes flourishing by directing human action towards some form of supernatural salvation offered by a benign deity (Taylor 2011), as I indicated in the ‘Introduction’ section. The modern separation of immanent nature from supernatural transcendence (Taylor 2007) has had the effect of reducing shared goals to individual choice or collective imposition – or indeed both at once, as in the order of sovereign states and markets (Pabst 2012a).

Another way of making the point is to suggest that modern politics comes fully into being in the eighteenth century with the invention of the triad ‘liberty’, ‘equality’ and ‘fraternity’, proposing the novel idea that political societies are held together by abstract values rather than the pursuit of virtues embodied in practices. In his restatement of political realism, Geuss (2008) makes the argument that Marx rejected both the cult of equality and the refusal of hierarchy precisely because they produce new forms of inequality and oppression. Geuss is right to say that abstract ‘moral’ ideals are less important than a greater flourishing for most people in the places, roles and functions that define them and which they may not want to give up for the sake of greater freedom of choice or formal equality.

A problem with Geuss' 'new realism' is that it is bound up with an amoral materialism that is entirely compatible with the moralistic idealism that he rejects. Insofar as material interests are divorced from ethical ends, the pursuit of ever-greater diversity paradoxically leads to ever-more abstract equalisation as people distinguish themselves by having more of which others have less – wealth, power or status. Thus, the real alternative to both amoral liberalism and amoral realism might be metaphysical–political realism allied with a politics of virtue beyond communitarianism (as I will suggest below). For both the liberal focus on 'negative liberty' and the realist pursuit of individual flourishing are, in reality, consequences of the denial that virtuous ends are naturally intrinsic to human activity: the criterion of all specifically human performance is performing well by fulfilling a certain goal, which combines excellence with ethos (Macintyre 1981). For Aristotle, the capacity for virtue enables human beings to preserve and extend the goods that are internal to human activities while also recognising that all goods share in a transcendent, common good: 'every art and every enquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is thought to aim at some good' (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1,1, 1094<sup>a</sup>1–2 [1984, Vol. II, 1729]). Accordingly, human beings have the ability to discern what is good combined with the capacity to attain a measure of goodness.

A corollary of this argument is that objectives, if they are to be moral, need to be realisable by some known kind of activity – not just an abstract claim. For this reason Geuss' contrast of 'the real' with 'the ethical' is contradictory, coupled with his refusal to acknowledge that all valuation has an ethical dimension because it seeks to specify 'the excellent' or 'the good' that is to be aimed at in different human activities – including politics. From the perspective of metaphysical–political realism, this means that politics is both about *episteme* and *techne* in the sense of theoretical knowledge and practical art or craft (as for Plato and Aristotle), which is expressed in the notion of *phronesis* or practical wisdom – a virtue of practical thought (Planinc 1991). Both virtue and craft require inquiry and deliberation, but *phronesis* is about the correct use of our faculty of reasoning – which Aristotle terms 'right reason' – in order to avoid the twin extremes of deficiency and excess. For example, courage charts a middle course beyond cowardice and recklessness. Crucially, Aristotle connects 'right reason' with what he calls habitual disposition (*hexis*), the naturally given capacity of human being for virtue and excellence that constantly needs to be perfected in practice. That is why he ascribes equal importance to both theoretical and practical wisdom through education. In his words,

moral excellence comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word 'habit' [ethics and ethos]. From this it is also plain that none of the moral excellences arises in us by nature ... Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do excellences arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them and are made perfect by habit. Again, all of the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity ... excellences we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 2,1, 1103<sup>a</sup>16–35 [1984, Vol. II, 1743])

The emphasis on 'right reason' and virtuous action is in marked contrast with the rationalist logic at the heart of both Rawls' political liberalism and Habermas' attempt to develop a cosmopolitan politics based on discursive reason.

It could be objected that appeals to virtue and the good are illusory because they fail to recognise the clash of incommensurable values and presuppose the obsolete cosmological

vision that underpins teleological ethics. However, this objection rests on the presupposition that in conditions of diversity we can merely agree to differ, as I have already suggested. In turn, such objections assume either that shared substantive goods do not exist or else that we can merely posit certain goods based on individual preference. Either way, they fail to address the argument made by Geuss (2008) that the pursuit of individual and mutual flourishing is more enduring than the quest for abstract principles such as individual liberty or collective equality.

Beyond Geuss' 'new realism', metaphysical–political realism suggests that a more universal flourishing can be obtained when individuals and groups continuously seek to define the goals of human society as a whole and then the variously different, and in themselves worthwhile, roles required to achieve these goals. The respective freedoms of these roles and their rewards will be variegated, not literally equal in terms of wealth, power or command and yet equitable and therefore capable of sincere general acceptability. It can even be the case within such a 'metaphysically realist' approach to social justice that rewards of honour and prestige for some may be balanced by surprisingly high material rewards for relatively humble but crucial contributions on the part of others. Thus, metaphysical–political realism would expect to achieve a far more equal society (though one that falls short of an impossible and undesirable equality of outcomes) than is obtainable either by Rawls' liberalism or by Habermas' cosmopolitanism.

By supplementing the generic universality of procedure with a variegated universality of substantive purposes, metaphysical–political realism inverts the subordination of relationship to transaction, emphasising reciprocal rights and mutual obligations instead of 'negative liberty' and individual entitlement (Thompson 1971, 1991; Polanyi 2001). It is only through active relations of give and take that citizens can share fairly the benefits and burdens of common membership in a polity. Here the fundamental difference with Rawls' liberal project and Habermas' cosmopolitan politics is that they oscillate between individual rights and responsibilities on the one hand and state policing and coercion on the other – without any mediation that can direct both towards a shared substantive finality such as the common good.

Far from being necessarily intolerant or oppressive, the common good promotes the plural search for shared ends. The common good is *not* the total, mathematically measurable good, as the Italian 'civil economist' Stefano Zamagni (2010) explains. That notion refers to utilitarian happiness as measured by some artificial index like national output – or people counted one by one, not in their real relationships. But the total wealth of a community, understood as an aggregate, may accrue more to some than to others, to a small minority rather than to the vast majority. For example, total national output as measured by GDP is evidently *not* the common good of any one nation or country. On the contrary, the common good is the good of each and every one of us as we are concretely assembled in our families, workplaces, communities (Bruni and Zamagni 2007). It is interpersonal, relational and grows 'organically' from the bottom up, in various forms of relationship and association which Rawls' liberalism either views in predominantly individual terms or else dismisses as violation of personal consent and 'negative liberty'.

From a realist perspective, perennial principles of dignity, justice and loyalty are embedded in cultures of reciprocity, honour and ethos and transmitted to us through traditions of thought and practice. But an ethos can develop only over time. That is why – beyond communitarianism – this realism calls for a new recognition of the role of tradition and the 'moral economy' of shared customs and mores that govern relationships between elites and the populace as well as across the generations (Thompson 1971, 1991; Scott 1999). Instead of being synonymous with oppression and deference, these traditions



can uphold the dignity of the person, virtuous leadership and fair treatment of subordinates – subordinated only to learn or to be guided in their sub-expertise, which possesses its own relative autonomy, towards a commonly agreed-upon outcome. The latter need not be imposed by a single authority or a dominant group, but can emerge as part of a plural debate based on a broader conception of reason – whether in specific localities, in the workplace or even regionally or nationally.

The argument on which metaphysical–political realism rests is the primacy of virtues (defined as universal principles embodied in particular practices) over values that risk being abstract and disembedded from traditions and relationships. Virtue is primary for at least two reasons: first it is democratic because practising virtue is open to all, especially practising the supreme virtues of trust, hope, reconciliation and courage which are both perennial but in their diverse forms particular to specific cultures and periods. But, second, virtue is also benignly non-democratic because the practice of virtue requires guidance through time by the already virtuous, skilled, generous and wise at all levels of society. Education into virtue means that those who are taught by some will, in time, teach others in such a way that hierarchy is not necessarily static (based for example on hereditary privilege) but dynamic (concerned with ethos and standards of excellence).

Fundamentally, the metaphysical–realist defence of virtue ethics that this paper offers does not simply repeat communitarian arguments. Though building on the communitarian critique of Rawls (*inter alia*, Macintyre 1981; Sandel 1981), my account accentuates the role of free and newly shaped associations beyond merely ‘given’ communities. Metaphysical–political realism and a politics of virtue beyond communitarianism involve linking the admittedly important ‘ineffable’ and indefinable nature of given community in place and time (Agamben 1993; Nancy 2004) with a more purposive and pluralist shaping of association around shared aspiration and ideal purpose, which seeks to integrate different human roles. This is more in line with the tradition of Tocqueville and the political pluralism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hirst 1993; Nicholls 1994) than it is with communitarian thinking.

Moreover, communitarian thinking is ineffective on the key issue of resistance to capitalism, either wrongly seeing community as an arrangement of ‘embedding’ the market in communal relations or else appealing to the state as tempering its ravages (Sandel 2012). Neither view seems in a position to challenge the logic of capitalism to disembed the economy from society and to re-embed social relations in economic transactions (Polanyi 2001). Arguably, the real alternative to the logic of capitalism is not simply a stronger state, a more regulated market or (as for Habermas) a more independent public sphere. Rather, it is an economy embedded in democratically self-governed associations and interpersonal relationships of virtue (Bruni and Zamagni 2007).

Equally, communitarianism lacks a real political dimension, confining itself to a sometimes nostalgic appeal to group rights, autonomy and national sovereignty. A renewed political realism combined with a renewed virtue ethics refuses this approach, which at worst can expand into nationalism and atavistic ethnocentrism, as well as the usual demand for more freedom and equality. Instead, it argues for a novel fusion of hierarchy (in the sense of a dynamic pursuit of excellence through the guidance of the virtuous) with participation (in the sense of the mutual sharing in power and prosperity).

How so? Indissolubly linked to the vertical need for virtuous leadership is the other aspect of a general ‘moral economy’ of the social order, which is horizontal mutual obligation or the principle of solidarity. In the pluralist tradition of Hirst (1993) and Nicholls (1994), the notion of solidarity is intertwined with the issue of work because pluralism regards human beings as workers in one crucial aspect of their humanity: their

capacity for artifice and free creativity (*Homo faber*). It is with respect to work that we see the *personal* origin of society and culture, the manifestation of individual and unique characters. Yet work as the free expression of personhood also involves temporality and sociality. It takes time because it requires learning from the past and induction into inherited lineages of good craft as well as initially submitting to leadership if one is eventually to lead in one's turn: the self-cancelling aspect of verticality. It involves virtues and moral sentiments such as patience and sympathy because it requires relating and cooperation with fellow workers as well as with managers, administrators, suppliers and consumers along the horizontal plane.

The same consideration applies to notions of equality. How can we decide to own some things in common and to divide other things equitably if we do not know what constitutes a good and what broad ends human beings should agree to pursue? Of course we have no fixed or final knowledge of such things. But it is precisely the inherited wisdom of tradition that gives us some intimation of their nature, something to begin to debate about. And it is education that allows us critically to refine and debate this intimation. Without a concern for formation and virtue, which is not in itself democratic – because the genuine good remains the good even if all voted against it – we lack the precondition of well-informed discussion. Only such a discussion enables a true 'republican', participatory democracy, which will not degenerate into mass manipulation through propaganda wielded by the powerful and amoral (including religious fundamentalists). The paradox here is that democracy depends vertically and temporally on a hierarchy of virtue. Yet at the same time, virtue is *also* horizontal and democratic in the sense that virtuous practices are open to all, and universal education provides one form of such access.

In short, metaphysical–political realism and virtue ethics seek to fuse greater economic justice with social reciprocity by promoting both individual virtue and public honour. This means seeking intrinsically worthwhile ends and manifestly appearing to do so – exactly as justice must both be done and be seen to be done.

### Concluding reflections

Rawls' liberalism and Habermas' cosmopolitanism divide reason from faith, feeling and habit. They exclude shared ethical ends from public debate and political decision-making, in particular any notion of a substantive, transcendent, universal good that we can know at least in part and that can direct political action to purposes higher than the pursuit of power, wealth, utility or equal liberty. By contrast, this paper has argued for a broader account of rationality and politics by rethinking both in relation to the wider natural and even cosmic order and by connecting them with the notion of a 'habitual disposition to the good' (Aristotle). In turn, such an approach can help renew the tradition of metaphysical–political realism. Far from wallowing in nostalgia, this perspective recognises that the spread of economic and political liberty dislodged unjust hierarchies and impermeable tyrannies at different levels. Yet at the same time, there was loss as well as gain: with the passage of time the 'disembedding' of the economy from society (Polanyi 2001) engendered new forms of exploitation and oppression such as the 'satanic mills' of the Industrial Revolution or inequalities and entrenched poverty in many societies today.

We might yet achieve a balance between community and contract through a fluid cognition of the importance of reciprocal 'free association' and just political (re-)distribution of power. The aim of this paper is to show that metaphysical–political realism and a politics of virtue beyond communitarianism can achieve this

in a manner that would respect group feeling and the common good, and yet *also* advance the authentic creative reach of individual liberty – given that it lacks any real scope if pursued in isolation or solely on the basis of contractual ties.

### Note

1. The text of Pope Benedict XVI's address is available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20100917\\_societa-civile\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile_en.html).

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