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REASONABLENESS: OLD VIRTUE FOR A NEW ERA
GUEST EDITORS' PREFACE

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ABSTRACT
This special issue examines how the Rawlsian notion of reasonableness is strained by the epistemic and technological dynamics of digital democracy. Digital environments, defined by features such as echo chambers, misinformation, and fragmented public discourse, foster increasingly superficial and reactive forms of political engagement through social media and reduce citizens' willingness to shoulder the burdens of judgment required by public reason. The contributions explore pedagogical strategies grounded in civic virtue ethics, culturally situated or weakened models of reasonableness, and non-ideal approaches introducing asymmetrical epistemic and civic duties. Together, they show why reasonableness remains normatively significant despite the pressures it faces today.

KEYWORDS
Reasonableness, political liberalism, digital democracy, burdens of judgement, epistemic Injustice.

Reasonableness is a key concept in political liberalism. It is supposed to provide the standard for dealing with the "fact of pluralism" and for reasoning together on political issues, including issues of justice. Following John Rawls, reasonableness can be interpreted both as a "willingness to recognize the burdens of judgement", i.e., as a source of reasonable disagreement, and as a willingness to

cooperate with others on terms that everyone can accept (Rawls 1993, p. 50 ff.). People's recognition of the burdens of judgement entails a virtue of epistemic modesty: they show themselves ready to recognize their own limitations and the limitations of everyone else. Based on this awareness, people can adopt a moral attitude towards others: because of the diminished confidence in one's own capacity to know and beliefs, we should be open and tolerant towards others (Badano and Nuti 2018; Giovanola and Sala 2022). This implies that reasonable people should be able to adhere to a kind of democratic epistemic ethics that requires considering others as political equals (Leland and Van Wietmarschen 2012).

Coming to the present, it is pretty evident that the virtue of reasonableness in both related epistemic and moral meanings is deeply threatened by the digital transformation and its crosscutting impact on the democratic life. In particular algorithmic intermediaries (Lazar 2025) often nudge individuals to lock themselves in echo chambers and filter bubbles and to be less and less available for the exchange of reasons and democratic deliberation. Democracy itself is under attack, as it is increasingly turning into a democracy of the click, in which there is little room for debate or even argumentation, but only for the dry yes-or-no choice.

As we have concluded elsewhere (Sala 2013; Giovanola and Sala 2022), *reasonableness* is among the Rawlsian categories particularly challenged by present society's epistemic, social, and technological features. Reasonableness as a civic virtue proves to be an unreasonable demand in the current circumstances of our digital society (Galeotti 2022).

A reflection on reasonableness in the new era is therefore more urgent than ever and our special issue aims at prompting this reflection, trying to reply to a key question: How to reframe reasonableness?

In his paper in this special issue, Croce highlights that digital society makes communication vulnerable to unique epistemic effects such as echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, misinformation, and disinformation. He suggests responding to these challenges by drawing on Aristotelian civic virtue ethics, highlighting the latter's pedagogical potential, which appears remarkably apt in an age of increasing vulnerability of the younger generation to social media (Croce in this issue).

Cíbik and Hardoš push forward, arguing that contemporary pluralism is characterised by a blatant *default* on the classic Rawlsian notion of reasonableness. Keeping in mind that, in Rawls, one of the aspects that makes a doctrine reasonable is the willingness to recognise the burdens of judgment and to adopt the perspective of public reason, the authors diagnose that contemporary society is, instead, characterised by the "increasing unwillingness to take the burdens of judgment into account", and instead increasingly based on inconsistent and impermanent "vibes", which shifts "the issue of political disagreement one level up – in effect politicizing the burdens of judgment themselves". Cíbik and Hardoš

propose to weaken the standards of reasonableness to keep the concept viable in the face of today's pluralism. First, they fragment the referent of "reasonableness" from intellectualised and coherent "doctrines" (such as in Rawls) to single acts and speeches; second, they 'tribalize' and de-intellectualized reasonableness by referring to a broader notion "public culture" composed of certain values or modes of mutual engagement. However, in the attempt to make reasonableness viable, Cíbik and Hardoš drastically reduce its analytical and normative purchase, as their public culture does not guarantee that reasonable doctrines or reasonable individuals will have a special role in it vis-à-vis the 'unreasonable' ones.

In light of these difficulties, challenges to reasonableness seem overwhelming. Therefore, Galeotti and Liveriero (in this issue) attempt a bolder theoretical move, asking whether the stubborn insistence on holding to an ideal-theory notion such as Rawlsian reasonableness, as a universal and symmetrical democratic value, might be *part* of the problem of the crisis of reasonableness and social trust itself. Therefore, Galeotti and Liveriero consider that, in the non-ideal conditions of contemporary democracy, reasonableness requirements might have to be radically redefined as *asymmetrical* epistemic and civic duties between the elites and disadvantaged or disenfranchised people. Given the existing consensus on the epistemic effects of injustice and discrimination. Galeotti and Liveriero's move bears notable potential to recognise that the task of defending the "democratic ethos" is unequally distributed on the dominant groups, minorities, and the excluded, with the former bearing stronger duties to reasonableness and to be intellectually humble to accommodate the demands of social and material inclusion from below. In this light, the point for theorists and policymakers (likely to belong to the privileged category) is how to accept that some social demands from below may be *expressed* in somewhat unreasonable forms (e.g., conspiracy theories, fake news) while still representing noteworthy issues which undermine social, political, and epistemic trust (see also Giovanola and Sala 2022; Galeotti 2022). This is also what Loginov (in this special issue) denotes as the 'surplus' of recognition ("hyper-recognition") arising specifically from those groups whose identities have been previously negated or discriminated against (see also Liveriero 2020) – a diagnosis that grounds, in his reading, the enduring preference for the paradigm of modern tolerance vis-à-vis theories of recognition.

Last but not least, Furlanis and Cerovac's contribution on human-AI *political* symbiosis (see also Coeckelbergh 2023) highlights that digital society makes communication vulnerable to unique epistemic effects such as echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, misinformation, AI-misuse, disinformation, and conspiracy tendencies. However, while AI poses unprecedented dangers to democracy, including risks of misuse, disinformation, overreliance, and responsibility, on top of accountability issues concerning the ownership of AI technology, the authors suggest, there might not be other way out than "staying with the trouble" and embracing a responsible but radical introduction of AI in democratic settings –

bearing in mind that doing otherwise might as well be nothing more than a misrecognition of the already high level AI's penetration in everyday social life.

Now, comparing, for example, Galeotti and Liveriero's to Cíbik and Hardoš's essay in this special issue, we encounter a parallel albeit inverted strategy to 'save' reasonableness's ideal-theory backbone from contemporary hyper-pluralism and fragmentation. The former does it by exposing inequalities and asymmetries backing up the crisis of social trust, thus leaving the criteria of (un)reasonableness untouched but shifting its referents; the latter attempts to be more inclusive, distributing the possibility of being reasonable more evenly across the social body. However, both have possible practical shortcomings, as the former approach may be refused by the dominant classes, while the second triggers a collapse of the epistemic and normative standards of reasonableness, which may render the notion ineffective. In front of this conundrum, Croce's proposal might be construed as an effort to avoid both strategies and entrench reasonableness in pedagogy.

However, rapidly evolving information technologies might also switch sides. From representing merely risks to political liberalism and democracy, they might as well be turned into powerful allies to overcome the present challenges, granted that society is able to accommodate such a radical paradigm shift, such as Furlanis and Cerovac suggest.

To conclude, this special issue sheds light on the evolving significance of reasonableness in the digital age. We recognize that reasonableness continues to be debated as both an epistemic and moral virtue, even as some view it as a relic of an earlier democratic ideal. The figure of the democratic citizen is undergoing transformation in a world shaped by digital technologies, prompting a re-examination of the virtues that should support modern citizenship. Trust between political actors faces new challenges in digitally mediated environments, yet it remains a crucial element of constructive political engagement. Ultimately, reasonableness stands as both a contested and necessary aspiration, one that must be reconsidered and redefined in light of contemporary realities. This issue contributes to deepen the understanding of these dynamics and to explore how reasonableness can continue to inform democratic life today.

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