

# Études Ricœuriennes / Ricœur Studies

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### Book Review

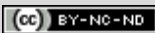
Molly Harkirat Mann, *Ricoeur, Rawls, and Capability Justice* (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2012), pp. 232.

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## Book Review

Molly Harkirat Mann, *Ricoeur, Rawls, and Capability Justice* (London and New York: Continuum Books, 2012), pp. 232.

With this book, Molly Harkirat Mann makes a fresh and welcome contribution to the controversial issue of what is required for a political society to be just. The proximate stimulus for her work is the array of systemic deficiencies found in what she calls “free range capitalism.” In such political systems a person’s ability to participate productively in a market economy is the primary, if not the sole, determinant of his or her moral worth. People with vulnerabilities or disadvantages that adversely affect their productive participation in the economy suffer a loss of the respect and dignity that is their due by reason of their very personhood. But Mann’s work is by no means simply a critique of these systems. It is a well-developed argument for a positive conception of what constitutes an ideally just society.

Mann adopts a fundamental Rawlsian objective, namely, that of determining the most appropriate conception of justice for specifying what he calls “the fair terms of social cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal and as fully cooperating members of society over a complete life, from one generation to the next” (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 3). Starting from the two basic principles that Rawls proposes, Mann shows in detail the fruitfulness of interpreting them in light of Paul Ricoeur’s political thought. In the course of doing so, she shows the relevance of her interpretation to some other prominent present day theories of justice.

Taken together, Rawls’s principles call for both the recognition of the rights of citizenship and the fair distribution of these rights and the means necessary to make them effective for every citizen. They require both (a) that all legally established social and economic inequalities be “attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity” and (b) that these inequalities be “to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society” (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 6). To implement these principles in an ongoing society, one in which both the available resources and the constraints on their utilization undergo change, citizens need access to relevant information and opportunities to engage with one another in free and public discussions of political questions (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 224).

Mann’s contribution consists in her detailed argument for interpreting these Rawlsian principles in terms of the goal or aim of “civic inclusion.” This goal prohibits the exclusion of anyone “from the distributive institutions of health, education, housing, and social transfers. This principle of civic inclusion is embodied in the development of the interventionist state” (Mann, 1). She finds the grounds for her interpretation in Ricoeur’s anthropology. An especially attractive feature of Mann’s interpretation is its emphasis on both the Kantian and the Hegelian influences on Ricoeur’s reflections on political justice. Like Kant, Ricoeur insists upon the distributive demand that no person be sacrificed for any supposed general good. And like Hegel, he recognizes the communal, institutional character of all social life.

With Ricoeur, Mann focuses on the basic capabilities that are constitutive of each person, each self. Selves have the capabilities to speak, to do or make things, to articulate a narrative identity both of themselves and of others, and to impute actions to their authors as either

praiseworthy or blameworthy. These capabilities are fragile. That is, they are always in some jeopardy of being distorted or thwarted, even to the point of being destroyed. In short, these capabilities are inseparable from their vulnerabilities.

No less important for Mann's argument is what Ricoeur identifies as the fundamental "ethical intention." This intention, which amounts to a basic "sense of justice," orients a person's exercises of his or her capabilities. However misguided or perverse some of these exercises may be, they all aim "at the good life with and for others in just institutions" (Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 180). Having these capabilities and this aim gives rise both to esteem and respect for oneself and for other people.

In actual political societies we find some members who have handicaps that interfere with the exercise of their constitutive capabilities. They suffer from disadvantages such as illness, or poverty, or deficient education. There is a tendency in these societies, as free-range capitalist societies illustrate, to treat these disadvantages as part of the very makeup of those who suffer from them. Thus we find some people classified as "the sick," or "the poor," or "the illiterate." Those who are classified as suffering from these and similar disadvantages are viewed as inferior, precisely because of their handicaps. They are treated as second-class citizens and deprived of some of the basic rights, liberties, and opportunities afforded other citizens.

To forestall discriminations based on them, Mann argues for a "demoralization" of these disadvantages. To protect every citizen's right to participate freely and equally in their state's social, economic, and political life, a society must refuse to treat disadvantages as constitutive features or defining characteristics of a person. The moral status of each person must be acknowledged as inviolable, a status that no one can lose or forfeit no matter what his or her handicaps may be.

We cannot, of course, simply close our eyes to handicaps and disadvantages. But neither ought we think of them as conditions that affect only the individuals who suffer from them. Rightly construed, Mann argues, its citizens' disadvantages affect society as a whole. The responsibility for dealing justly with them is one that all its members share somehow. This joint responsibility extends even to the way a society deals with crime. A just criminal justice regime has to include in its penal programs and policies provisions for rehabilitating criminals.

At bottom, Mann's position rests on the fact that there are no wholly discrete actions, just or otherwise. All actions take place in institutional settings established and maintained by the actions of predecessor agents. And all actions bear somehow on future actions. Thus all actions are interactions in two respects. Each action is contextualized by other actions. And the author of any action is responding in some way to prior actions performed by other authors. Indeed, actions would be neither meaningful nor efficacious apart from the institutionalized practices in which they occur.

Institutions, as Anthony Giddens has pointed out, provide both resources that make possible or facilitate the performance of actions and rules that govern them. Hence Mann rightly sees that it is a society's set of public institutions that is the prime determinant of its quality of justice. In a just society, these institutions protect the rights of each citizen to participate in its public life, regardless of the vulnerabilities or disadvantages that may handicap him or her. Among other things such as health care, they also provide all citizens with access to the training and information they need to participate in what Mann calls "civic phronesis," the public deliberations that fashion public policies. If, for example, some citizens in a modern economically

developed state have no practical way to access the internet and much of the information needed to function well in the society is available only in that form, then the society's relevant public institutions ought to remedy this deficiency. The properly interventionist state is ultimately responsible for insuring that the other public institutions shoulder their proper part of this responsibility.

Mann deserves much applause for her account of what is required for an ideally just political society. She effectively shows the merits of drawing on Ricoeurian resources to interpret Rawls's theory of justice and, with this impressive work, she sets the stage for the future significant contributions to political thought that one has good reason to expect of her.

One line of investigation that I would suggest to her and her readers has its roots in Ricoeur's recognition of the inherently paradoxical character of all intellectually defensible political societies that we have any knowledge of. At their best, they display a concern for what Ricoeur calls, power-in-common, power in which all its members share as equal partners. But these political societies also all display what he calls power-over, the exercise by some citizens of domination over other citizens. This paradox is evident both within each of these societies and in the interactions among them.

All too often, this domination is exercised unjustly and with some indefensible violence. And all too often some of these exercises have become embedded in the society's practices and institutions. Following Karl Jaspers, Ricoeur calls this kind of domination a political evil, one that all citizens who in any discernible way benefit from have an obligation to try to rectify. Accordingly, every actual political society needs not only the commitment of its citizens to pursue "the good life with and for others." It also always needs their critique of its practices and institutions, particularly of the "interventionist state." This ethical aim is a persistent aspiration that with equal persistence, as the historical record attests, has proven to be beyond definitive fulfillment. Hence, determining how society ought to cope with this irresolvable political paradox is a large part of the ongoing task of genuine civic phronesis.

With *Ricoeur, Rawls, and Capability Justice* Mann shows that she has much to contribute to the always challenging and always evolving work of shaping the public institutions without which there can be no genuine "good life with and for others."

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