



## BETWEEN NEUTRALITY AND PERFECTION: RAWLS' LIBERALISM UNDER SCRUTINY

### ENTRE NEUTRALIDADE E PERFEIÇÃO: O LIBERALISMO DE RAWLS SOB ESCRUTÍNIO

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### Resumo

O artigo examina criticamente a tensão entre a neutralidade política e o perfeccionismo moral no interior do liberalismo contemporâneo, com especial atenção à proposta de Denis Coitinho (2024) de conciliar ambas as tradições por meio do que ele denomina *liberalismo-perfeccionista moderado*. Partindo de uma breve reconstrução do debate entre Rawls (1993), Raz (1986) e outros intérpretes do liberalismo, o trabalho busca mostrar que a coerência interna da teoria liberal depende de uma fundamentação ética mínima. Argumenta-se que a tentativa de Rawls (1971; 1993) de sustentar a legitimidade política sem recorrer a concepções substantivas de bem conduz a um enfraquecimento de sua própria normatividade, pois a neutralidade, quando compreendida como abstinência epistêmica em relação à verdade moral, torna-se autocontraditória. Ao distinguir entre consenso político e verdade moral, o texto sustenta que o liberalismo só preserva sua inteligibilidade quando reconhece que valores como liberdade, igualdade e respeito possuem força normativa independente do mero acordo procedimental. A partir desse diagnóstico, o artigo afirma que o projeto hibridista de Coitinho oferece uma alternativa promissora ao afirmar a complementaridade entre ética e política e conceber a razão pública não apenas como um espaço de deliberação imparcial, mas como uma prática moral de reconhecimento mútuo.

**Palavras-chave:** liberalismo; perfeccionismo; neutralidade; razão pública; Denis Coitinho.

### Abstract

The article critically examines the tension between political neutrality and moral perfectionism within contemporary liberalism, with particular attention to Denis Coitinho's (2024) proposal to reconcile both traditions through what he calls *moderate perfectionist liberalism*. Based on a brief reconstruction of the debate between Rawls (1993), Raz (1986), and other interpreters of liberalism, the paper argues that the internal coherence of liberal theory depends on a minimal ethical foundation. It is claimed that Rawls' (1971; 1993) attempt to sustain political legitimacy without appealing to substantive conceptions of the good leads to a weakening of its own normativity, since neutrality, when understood as epistemic abstinence regarding moral truth, becomes self-contradictory. By distinguishing between political consensus and moral truth, the paper maintains that liberalism preserves its intelligibility only when it recognizes that values such as freedom, equality, and respect possess normative force independent of mere procedural agreement. From this diagnosis, the article contends that Coitinho's hybridist project offers a promising alternative by affirming the complementarity between ethics and politics and conceiving public reason not merely as a neutral space of deliberation, but as a moral practice of mutual recognition.

**Keywords:** liberalism; perfectionism; neutrality; public reason; Denis Coitinho.

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## Introduction

The tension between individual liberty and the pursuit of objective goods occupies a central place in contemporary political theories. Since John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and *Political Liberalism* (1993), proposed a separation between the concepts of “just” and “good,” liberalism has become widely identified with a stance of state neutrality regarding substantive conceptions of the good life. According to this view, the liberal state should not promote any specific conception of human flourishing, but only guarantee equitable conditions so that citizens could pursue their own ideals. However, this idea set the philosophical agenda for much of the debate that followed the publication of these works. This is because the possibility of sustaining a normative political theory without resorting, explicitly or implicitly, to a particular conception of the good began to be questioned. Or, more specifically, whether a liberal theory of justice could remain neutral in relation to certain substantive ethical values.

It is within this dispute that Denis Coitinho situates his proposal for reconciliation between liberalism and perfectionism. In Chapter VIII of *Contract & Virtues III: Epistemological-Moral and Methodological Problems* (2024), Coitinho seeks to find a middle ground between two of the most important versions of contemporary liberalism. On the one hand, Rawls's *anti-perfectionist liberalism* (1971; 1993), whose objective is to sustain political legitimacy based on a procedural conception of public reason. On the other hand, Joseph Raz's *comprehensive perfectionist liberalism* (1986), for whom the legitimacy of the State depends on the promotion of objective goods that confer moral content<sup>1</sup> to our autonomy. Against both, Coitinho advances in defense of what he calls a *moderate perfectionist liberalism*, that is, a conception that recognizes the importance of the formation of virtues and the realization of certain objective goods, but which rejects the idea that the State should act paternalistically to impose them on citizens. Instead, he proposes that the State encourage the realization of these goods through educational and cultural policies that favor the autonomous exercise of our moral capacities. The result, then, is a hybrid normative theory that combines the grammar of virtues (characteristic of ancient ethics) with the grammar of rights (characteristic of liberal modernity), articulating them through a pedestrian conception of moral agency.

Without attempting to offer a general analysis of Coitinho's work (2024), the objective of this article is to critically evaluate the scope and internal tensions of this attempt to reconcile liberalism and perfectionism. The hypothesis guiding this investigation is that the success of Coitinho's proposal

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this text, I should note that I will use the terms "ethics" and "morality" interchangeably, although recognize that certain philosophical traditions establish conceptual distinctions between the two.

ultimately depends on a revision of the very principle of liberal neutrality, an idea that, as I will seek to show, is philosophically untenable. To do this, I will initially reconstruct the general theses of Coitinho's *moderate perfectionist liberalism*, emphasizing how he sees in Mill a historical sample of his own position (section 1). Next, I will discuss the ideal of neutrality as formulated by Rawls (section 2) and then problematize its limits and metaethical assumptions (section 3). Finally, I will assess to what extent the rejection of neutrality and the recognition of the inevitable ethical dimension of politics can reinforce the plausibility of Coitinho's hybrid project (section 4).

## 1. Coitinho's *moderate perfectionist liberalism*

In my view, the underlying thesis of the philosophical project that Coitinho (2016; 2021; 2024) has been developing over the last decade stems from a fundamental methodological observation, namely: the failure of monistic theories to explain the complexity of moral reasoning and practical life in general. By reducing normativity to a single principle (e.g., duty, utility, or value maximization), these theories produce a spurious and biased image of the moral phenomenon. They ignore that the experience of human action involves plural contexts and forms of normative authority. Instead of treating morality as an “all or nothing” structure, Coitinho proposes that it be understood in terms of degree and according to the normative authority of each reason considered.

Thus, in place of this monistic image of practical normativity, Coitinho (2024, p. 240) defends what he calls a contractualist theory of virtues, whose theoretical core lies in the attempt to

to reconcile the criterion of reasonableness and justice of neo-contractualist theories, which also takes into account the consequences of actions, with the criterion of virtues, such as prudence, integrity, autonomy, humility, etc., but within a liberal framework, that is, one that respects the pluralism of values.

This statement by Coitinho expresses his thesis that there are different sources of moral obligation for our actions. The private sphere is characterized by a *first-person* normative authority, in which the agent is the source of the moral requirement. In other words, he himself must be able to establish coherence between his beliefs, values, and actions. The public sphere, on the other hand, is governed by a *second-person* normative authority, which involves relationships of recognition, reciprocity, and public justification among citizens. In this sense, except in cases of genuine normative conflict, public morality does not override private morality, but complements it, since both are constitutive dimensions of the idea of rational agency.

This conception leads to a broader view of practical rationality itself. For Coitinho, the method of *reflective equilibrium* is not merely an instrument of moral justification, but the very way in which

reason operates in plural normative contexts. Through it, agents continually adjust their moral intuitions and normative principles, producing coherence between different levels of justification. This coherence is both epistemological and ethical. On the one hand, it expresses the rational effort to revise our own beliefs; and, on the other, the virtuous disposition to act in accordance with them. Reflective equilibrium, therefore, establishes the conceptual link between virtue and deliberation, allowing the ethics of virtues to be reinterpreted from a neo-contractualist perspective (Coitinho, 2021, p. 127).

It is precisely this theoretical structure, founded on the distinction between two sources of normative authority, that serves as the backdrop for Chapter VIII of *Contract & Virtues III* (2024). Here, Coitinho shifts the focus of analysis from moral theory to political philosophy, seeking to test the fruitfulness of his hybrid model in the field of social institutions. The problem that seems to guide him in this discussion is whether the same type of normative duality that characterizes morality also manifests itself in the domain of politics. The hypothesis he puts forward is that the debate between liberalism and perfectionism is merely a political manifestation of this deeper and more general tension concerning the foundations of practical normativity. *Anti-perfectionist liberalism* emphasizes the public dimension of morality and, therefore, tends to neutralize the substantive ethical goods that structure a certain conception of the good life. *Comprehensive perfectionist liberalism*, on the other hand, starts from a list of objective goods and values in order to guarantee the realization of the liberal ideal of autonomy, but risks endorsing a paternalistic view of the functions of the State. Faced with this impasse, Coitinho (2024) seeks to find a logical space between these two positions based on a version of perfectionist liberalism that he calls “*moderate*,” which, according to him, is capable of sustaining the legitimacy of the State without unconditionally assuming the ideal of neutrality or incurring a robust form of state paternalism.

To carry out this project, Coitinho follows an argumentative itinerary that involves the critical reconstruction of the main formulations of the contemporary debate. He begins with an analysis of the famous § 50 of *A Theory of Justice* to show how liberal anti-perfectionism emerges as a reaction to the Aristotelian tradition. Rawls (1971) understands that political justice should be independent of any ideal of human perfection, limiting itself to establishing procedural principles that make possible an *overlapping consensus* among citizens who endorse different conceptions of the good. In examining this position, Coitinho argues that the result is an “impoverished” conception of liberal normativity. Far from guaranteeing impartiality, neutrality ends up emptying the ethical content that motivates agents' adherence to the principles of justice. Next, Coitinho also analyzes the theory of Jonathan Quong (2011), whose version of political liberalism attempts to reinforce the

separation between the just and the good. Quong argues that any appeal to substantive moral values would compromise the impartiality of liberal institutions, which is why the State should remain epistemically neutral in the face of various competing conceptions of value. However, Coitinho believes that this strategy is unsustainable, since a political theory cannot completely abdicate ethical foundations without losing its normative force. The result of Quong's "neutralism" would therefore be a formalism incapable of explaining why citizens should feel morally bound to the institutions they inhabit.

In contrast to this view, Coitinho (2024) examines the contemporary versions of perfectionist liberalism by Raz (1986) and Joseph Chan (2020). Both reject the supposed ideal of liberal neutrality and affirm that political legitimacy rests on a list of objective goods (such as autonomy, rationality, and human flourishing) that confer intrinsic value to freedom. Specifically in the case of Raz, this thesis takes on a comprehensive and substantive form. In *The Morality of Liberty* (1986), he argues that autonomy is a good only when exercised towards valuable ends, so that the very idea of freedom can only be understood in the light of an objective conception of the good. The State, therefore, should not be neutral with regard to the values it upholds, but has a duty to create and preserve the social and institutional conditions that make a genuinely autonomous life possible. This requirement implies an active role for institutions in promoting the capacities and opportunities that enable the meaningful exercise of rational choice.

It is in this specific context that Coitinho takes Mill (2005) as a paradigmatic figure who illustrates the possibility of overcoming the dilemma between neutrality and state paternalism. Coitinho's reading of *On Liberty* is, above all, an interpretative dispute. Mill is taken as the first thinker to conceive of freedom not only as the absence of coercion, but also as a genuine good insofar as it enables the improvement of the rational and moral faculties of agents. In this sense, Mill's liberalism would not be neutral in relation to the good. He would be guided by a certain conception of human excellence that would give content and meaning to freedom.

Thus, Coitinho finds in Mill a theoretical model that embodies his own proposal for a *moderate perfectionist-liberalism*. Like Mill (2005), he understands that freedom and the cultivation of virtues are not antagonistic spheres, but complementary dimensions of our moral life. The State can legitimately promote goods (such as education, culture, and public participation) that favor the moral flourishing of citizens, without, however, imposing on them a single ideal of the good life. In my view, Coitinho's idea (2014, p. 226) in resorting to Mill is to highlight that liberalism is only a coherent position when it recognizes, at its base, a set of "agency goods and prudential goods" that constitute the very conditions of intelligibility of liberal normative discourse. The conciliation

that Coitinho proposes is not one of contingent political compromises, but of normative structures that are reflected in both ethics and politics. Based on this reading, in the next section I will turn to the analysis of the principle of neutrality in Rawls, in order to show why it becomes the decisive turning point for the debate and how its epistemological limitations philosophically favor the type of position defended by Coitinho.

## 2. Rawls' ideal of neutrality

Rawls's reading of liberalism constitutes, perhaps, the most influential formulation of the ideal of neutrality in contemporary political thought. His starting point in *A Theory of Justice* is the refusal to base state legitimacy on any substantive conception of the good. Rawls (1971) advances in defense of a contractualist position in which the principles of justice would be chosen under a condition in which the contracting parties do not know what their social position, religious beliefs, or particular moral convictions will be. This methodological abstraction does not aim to deny the value of the good, but to preserve the impartiality of deliberation on the fundamental principles of social cooperation. Justice takes logical and normative precedence over any conception of the good, serving as a formal criterion for regulation among different comprehensive moral doctrines.

This effort to ground justice in a *public* and *non-metaphysical* way is deepened in *Political Liberalism* (1993). Rawls starts from an observation that would become emblematic in this debate: the famous “fact of reasonable pluralism”. In modern democratic societies, he says, the use of reason inevitably leads to profound disagreements about religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines. This pluralism is not a kind of defect of practical reason, but the result of its application in contexts where individuals are free to choose the ends of their actions. Even under equitable conditions, *reasonable* citizens (*i.e.*, willing to act according to principles of reciprocity) may disagree on their comprehensive conceptions of the good. Therefore, the plurality of ways of life makes any public judgment about what would constitute a good life for all unnecessary. Moral diversity among individuals is interpreted as a constitutive aspect of the human condition and not as an obstacle to social cohesion. Each person defines something as their good in different ways, so political philosophy should not seek consensus on a particular substantive definition of the good, but only guarantee the institutional space for different comprehensive conceptions to flourish freely. Thus, far from being a problem, the fact of pluralism becomes the very normative foundation of the principle of neutrality. It expresses confidence in the rational capacity of individuals to autonomously determine their ends and shows that the political legitimacy of the State depends on it respecting this diversity. For Rawlsian-based anti-perfectionist liberalism, intervening in this

domain would be equivalent to violating the equal moral authority of citizens over their own lives, since it would imply replacing individual deliberation with state tutelage regarding what is valuable or worthy of being pursued.

Thus, the principle of neutrality takes the form of a normative ideal according to which the State must remain impartial in the face of competing conceptions of the good, justifying its political decisions only through public reasons that all citizens could, in principle, accept. Political liberalism, writes Rawls (1971, p. 411), must reject the Aristotelian conception of perfection and renounce the idea that the function of institutions is to promote human excellence, replacing it with a conception of citizenship founded on reciprocity and a sense of justice. Society is not an instrument for achieving human good, but an equitable structure of cooperation among free and equal persons. It is for this reason that Rawls (1993, p. 190) makes a historical clarification that reinforces the structural character of the principle of neutrality: “Historically, a common theme of liberal thought is that the state should not favor any overarching doctrine or the conception of the good associated with it.” With this observation, Rawls inscribes his theory within the continuity of a long liberal tradition, from Locke to Kant, which understands the separation between the just and the good as a necessary condition for civil liberty. The State cannot favor any overarching doctrine (philosophical, moral, or religious) without corrupting the very basis of its legitimacy. In this context, neutrality is not merely a pragmatic expedient, but a normative imperative stemming from the idea of mutual respect between free and equal citizens, which manifests itself as the moral self-limitation of political power. By refraining from promoting a substantive conception of the good life, the State recognizes the moral equality of all individuals in defining their own ends.

I believe that the theoretical consequence of this requirement is the distinction between political values and comprehensive moral values. The former (e.g., liberty, equality, reciprocity, etc.) are understood as principles of public morality, justified in the light of common reason. The latter (associated with philosophical, moral, or religious doctrines) do not belong to the public domain and, therefore, cannot underpin coercive policies. The role of *reason* is precisely to mediate this difference, delimiting which reasons can be legitimately presented in the public space of deliberation. Of course, the State can protect and even promote certain goods (e.g., freedom of thought, public education, or the development of moral faculties), but only as long as they are necessary conditions of democratic citizenship and not expressions of a particular conception of the good life. According to Rawls (1993), political liberalism does not deny the value of the good, but only shifts the discussion about it from the plane of coercive politics to the plane of individual deliberation and private moral formation.

This movement produces a conception of legitimacy that does not depend on a shared ethical ideal, but rather on an *overlapping consensus*, a mechanism by which reasonable doctrines, even if divergent from each other, can converge on a set of basic political principles that ensure the stability of social cooperation. Such convergence, however, is political and contingent, since what sustains the stability of justice is not a common moral truth, but the reciprocal recognition of the limits between the public and the private. In Rawlsian terms, politics is understood here as the space of rational deliberation without any metaphysical commitment to a previously given reality. It is a domain in which practical reason manifests itself in the form of reciprocity and not the imposition of values predetermined by a will.

In summary, the Rawlsian ideal of neutrality seems to rest on three fundamental commitments: (a) the priority of the right over the good, which prevents the State from acting in the name of a comprehensive moral conception; (b) the centrality of public reason, which establishes the criteria for justifying political decisions; and (c) reliance on the 'fact of pluralism' as a condition of democratic legitimacy. This triad structures Rawls' attempt to separate the political from the ethical domain. However, it is precisely at this point that a difficulty in his position seems to arise. In seeking to safeguard pluralism from comprehensive moral doctrines, Rawls seems to establish a rather rigid distinction between the right and the good, which, to some extent, weakens the very ethical foundations of the liberalism he seeks to defend. Therefore, I believe it is legitimate to question whether it is truly necessary to adhere to the principle of neutrality in order to defend the liberal ideal.

### **3. The limits of neutrality and the ethical foundation of liberalism**

Contrary to what much of the specialized literature (Barry, 1965; Dworkin, 1985; Nagel, 1987) tends to assert, my answer to this question is "no"! My general point is that the very normative intelligibility of the liberal position requires the acceptance, at least implicitly, of a moral foundation. It is not possible to understand the internal normativity of liberalism without recognizing that it rests on values whose validity transcends mere procedural consensus. However much Rawls (1993) sought to formulate a *political* theory of justice, the coherence of his vision seems to depend on moral commitments that it itself attempts to reject. Rather than being a theoretical virtue, neutrality risks becoming a self-destructive principle.

I must acknowledge that this problem is not new. In “Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence,” Raz (1990) had already shown that every attempt at *epistemic abstinence* regarding moral truth leads to a contradiction. Liberalism, in attempting to justify itself without resorting to any substantive conception of the good, ends up relying on values that it itself considers politically neutral, but which are, in fact, morally dense. The idea that free and equal citizens should deliberate based on public reasons, for example, presupposes that freedom, equality, and reasonableness are normative goods that possess objective validity. Even if Rawls (1971) refuses to call them “true,” these values function as moral criteria of justification.

Basically, Raz (1990) formulates his critique in metaethical terms. He argues that all political theory inevitably makes validity claims, which commit the theorist to a specific view on the moral status of relevant values. To say that freedom is a fundamental political value is not only a pragmatic statement, but also epistemic in nature. It implies the recognition that freedom is *indeed* valuable. In doing so, liberalism abandons its supposed neutrality and assumes a cognitivist position<sup>2</sup> in relation to values. But by denying this commitment, Rawlsian liberalism seems to fall into what Raz (1990, p. 14) calls the *paradox of “justice without truth.”* A theory that renounces the truth of the values that underpin it cannot claim any normative authority over agents. At most, it can propose a kind of strategic agreement between different competing doctrines. However, this does not seem compatible with our ordinary image that a just society is not reduced to a mere arrangement of convenience.

As far as I can see, this criticism presents a difficulty to the Rawlsian project. This is because if the idea of overlapping consensus is sufficient to guarantee political legitimacy, then it is not clear why certain values should be widely accepted. However, it must be said that the problem is not in Rawls rejecting a *metaphysical thesis* about the existence of objective values. Rather, it lies in the fact that, in doing so, he also abandons any claim to moral truth, limiting himself to a criterion of public acceptability. And it must be emphasized that accepting a principle because it is “reasonable” is something different from accepting it because it is “true.” Reasonableness concerns the cooperative disposition of agents who mutually recognize each other as free and equal. Moral truth, on the other hand, deals with the normative content of the values that make such recognition possible. When Rawls (1993) states that citizens offer each other reasons that can be accepted by all as reasonable, he fails to realize that the value of reciprocity is itself a moral value. The same applies

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<sup>2</sup> Broadly speaking, metaethical cognitivism argues that certain evaluative judgments can be true or valid independently of mere social acceptance.

to the concept of “moral person,” whose idea that the individual possesses an “inviolability founded on justice” is a normative thesis about the value of the person (Rawls, 1971, pp. 15, 23).

According to Raz's argument (1990), there is always a kind of structural dependence of theory on the truth of certain values. Even if a view seeks to restrict itself to the domain of the “political,” these values act as implicit normative assumptions that give meaning to the very idea of legitimacy. The attempt at epistemological abstinence is not a viable alternative for a political conception, since maintaining that certain principles are normatively binding already implies a metaethical position regarding the status of morality (Couto, 2011). In this case, the principle of neutrality is not merely an illusion. In fact, it is logically inconsistent. All political theory, in justifying why certain values should be respected, inevitably reintroduces ethical questions within itself. This means that acceptability does not create value, but presupposes it. If a certain principle is accepted, it is because we believe it to be just, and not the other way around. The very deliberative practice presupposed by public reason already involves prior normative commitments. Therefore, any version of liberalism that refuses to commit to an idea of the good becomes incapable of answering the normative question: why are freedom and equality valuable?

If all this makes sense, then I think the idea of overlapping consensus becomes problematic in Rawlsian theory. This is because if political stability depends on the rational adherence of agents to values that are sustained by their own moral force (e.g., freedom, equality, respect), then it acquires a normative robustness that mere consensus does not offer. Rawls himself conceives of public reason as a space in which citizens offer mutually acceptable reasons, excluding those based on particular doctrines. And the step of exclusion already implies a value judgment. It presupposes that certain reasons (e.g., religious, sectarian, or authoritarian) violate the ideal of mutual respect that sustains the democratic *ethos*. In terms of Raz's critique (1990), this implies that what confers legitimacy to public reason is not its neutrality, but its moral dimension. It is the public exercise of ethical virtue that requires the recognition of the other as a rational and free subject.

Before moving on to the next section, I must just say that, while I am not offering a defense of perfectionist liberalism here, I believe that Raz's objection allows us to reinterpret the very foundations of the liberal view. On this point, I deeply agree with him. Far from being a “valueless” theory, I understand liberalism to be a theory about which values can be universally defended without implying doctrinaire violence. It is not morally neutral in the sense that Rawls (1971; 1993) seems to assume, given that it rejects certain conceptions of the good because they are incompatible with the moral equality of people. In a sense, the point of liberalism is to translate the most fundamental content of values such as dignity, respect, and autonomy into terms compatible with

the “fact of pluralism.” Therefore, the opposition between liberalism and perfectionism seems to rest on a misunderstanding. The problem does not lie in choosing between neutrality and perfection, but in identifying the point at which commitment to certain goods (e.g., freedom and autonomy) ceases to be a moral imposition and becomes a condition of possibility for political life itself.

#### **4. The plausibility of Coitinho's normative hybridism**

Be that as it may, if epistemic abstinence is not a philosophically viable option, then it seems inevitable that we must conclude that liberalism, in order to preserve its own normative intelligibility, must recognize its moral foundation. This realization modifies the starting point of the debate. The question is no longer whether liberalism can be neutral, but how it should deal with the inevitable presence of moral values in its justificatory structure. It is precisely here that Coitinho's project in defense of normative hybridity gains strength.

In my view, Raz's critique of the principle of neutrality provides the metaethical backdrop that makes Coitinho's hybridist proposal philosophically more solid. If every political theory ends up making claims of moral validity, which I believe Coitinho would agree with, then the attempt to completely separate the ethical from the political is self-contradictory. It is precisely this separation that hybridism intends to overcome. The thesis that moral authority and political authority are complementary gains consistency when we recognize that political justification cannot dispense with ethical justification. In this sense, Coitinho's approach is not only a conciliatory attempt between liberalism and perfectionism, but rather a theoretical consequence of Raz's diagnosis (1990). Hybridism allows us to recover the structuring role of “agency goods and prudential goods” within liberalism without transforming the State into a moral tutor of citizens (Coitinho, 2024, p. 218). Values such as freedom, equality, and mutual respect become expressions of moral truths whose validity grounds the legitimacy of institutions.

But as should already be clear, Coitinho does not endorse Raz's comprehensive perfectionist liberalism. Normative hybridism does not correct Rawls through perfectionism, but rather through the awareness that all public reason ultimately rests on a moral conception of the person. In proposing a contractualist theory of virtues, Coitinho shows that public duties and personal commitments are not opposed, but rather express complementary dimensions of the same practical rationality. He views the distinction between the public and private spheres as a functional

distinction between areas of exercise of moral agency. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, I believe that, just as there is an interdependence between morality and law, there is also an interdependence between morality and politics, and this latter point is precisely Coitinho's objective in Chapter VIII of *Contract & Virtues III*.

In short, my aim in resorting to Razian critique of epistemic abstinence was to strengthen the existing link between these two domains in Coitinho's theory. Political legitimacy depends on the moral integrity of deliberative practice; and this integrity, in turn, requires public virtues that make shared moral life possible. As I argued before, liberalism can only claim authority if the values of freedom and equality are more than contingent conventions, that is, if they are recognized as goods endowed with genuine normative force. And I believe that this is the horizon that Coitinho's hybridism seeks to recover: a liberalism morally conscious of its own foundations, capable of sustaining citizenship as an ethical practice of mutual recognition and not merely as a procedural contract between individuals. Without this foundation of virtue, political justice loses the power to guide practical judgment and to form citizens who act in the name of reasons they truly recognize as *their* own.

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<sup>3</sup> See Dalsotto (2025).

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