Mathias Risse, *On Justice: Philosophy, History, Foundations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 436 pages. ISBN: 9781108680875 (online).

Mathias Risse’s *On Justice: Philosophy, History, Foundations* is an expansive treatise on one of the biggest concepts in political philosophy. In earlier work, Risse contributed to our understanding of different aspects of justice. The widely cited *On Global Justice* makes the case for the pluralist internationalist approach to global justice, while the more recent *On Trade Justice* seeks to integrate trade into the pluralist internationalist approach in virtue of trade being one of the possible, what Risse calls, “grounds of justice” which refers to the “different contexts or settings where respectively different principles of distributive justice apply” (p.4). While these works were noted for their scope and ambition (see, for instance, Christian Barry’s review of *On Global Justice* in the *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/on-global-justice/>), *On Justice* has the widest scope and is the most ambitious yet.

Articulating and defending a theory of justice is no small task. Risse advocates for one that is “about making sure each individual has an appropriate place in what our uniquely human capacities permit us to build, produce, and maintain, and that each individual is respected appropriately for their capacities to hold such a place to begin with” (p.1). There is a lot to unpack in this formulation, perhaps most importantly how to understand the notion of an “appropriate place” and what it is for an individual to be “respected appropriately”. While we don’t get direct answers, we do get something like a framework for thinking about distributivejustice.

Risse presents his framework in three parts. Part I seeks to do two things. First, it reflects on the role of the political philosopher. Risse surveys seven approaches and arrives at the conclusion that the political philosopher should be, domestically, a theory-providing citizen-discussant and, globally, a proposal-making global discussant. What this means is that the political philosopher is not the middleman between the *hoi polloi* and political truth, but rather is an unprivileged co-equal contributor on matters of public justification. Second, world society analysis, which holds that ideas are causally efficacious and can play a role in global change, is introduced and defended. Risse does so to make possible global public reason that will not be undermined by the absence of a global public sphere that parallels a domestic public sphere. I have questions about world society analysis and its ability to play the justificatory role Risse gives it. This is not because I am a proponent of one of the “various types of large-scale historical dialectics” that Risse criticizes, but because I am not convinced that enough has been done to establish the existence of a world society (at least one robust enough to be “the foundation” for global public reason) (p.85).

Supposing, however, that a world society exists, Part II commences with an extensive historical overview of justice theorizing. The Great Tale of Humanity, as Risse calls it, suggests four major points of orientation for thinking about justice. The first – *globality* – is that justice has a global dimension which is part of a “narrative about expanding its *scope* (people covered) and *reach* (topics covered)” (p.126). The second – *complexity* – is that difference principles of justice will be appropriate in different contexts because of there being a multiplicity of grounds. The third – *stringency* – is that justice is the most stringent moral value. The fourth and final – *reasonableness* – is that the reach of justice is determined by public reason.

For this argumentative strategy to get off the ground, Risse needs the answer to the following four questions to be yes. First, does it make sense to talk of a general narrative of humanity? Second, is Risse’s tale of humanity the right one? Third, if it is, are these the right orientation points to be extracted? Fourth, are these orientation points the ones that a conception of justice should aim to satisfy?

I, for one, am tempted to get off the bus at the first question. While I find some plausibility in thinking about my own life as a narrative, I find it much less intuitive to think of the evolutionary story of humanity as an extended narrative. This may work for something like, say, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but I am less moved at the species-level. And, even if it does, I suspect it actually favors a Lockean view requiring extensive rectification of past injustices like that of A. John Simmons (see *Boundaries of Authority*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, especially Ch.7 “Rights Supersession”). Though considerably more than I have space for here would need to be said to adequately defend such a suspicion.

Another resistance point would be whether reasonableness should be an orientation point (Risse discusses this in greater detail in Ch. 16). As a historical matter, it wasn’t clear to me how reasonableness falls out of the narrative told by Risse. As a philosophical matter, there are powerful reasons against thinking that the reach of justice is determined by public reason. David Estlund has made the case in recent work that the topics covered under justice may extend beyond what is publicly justifiable (*Utopophobia*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). Indeed, it may extend entirely beyond what can be known to us in the present.

Part II concludes with a fuller discussion of Risse’s preferred conception of justice *pluralist internationalism* which holds that there are different grounds of justice – such as “shared membership in a state, shared membership in the world society, common humanity, humanity’s collective ownership of the earth, and shared involvement with the global trading system” – which “are associated with respectively different principles of justice” (p.246). On this view, states have “special significance from a standpoint of justice” (p.269). One particularly compelling aspect of this discussion is how Risse prefers to finance the cause of justice which is by “inheritance taxes, aggressively tackling tax evasion and measures against rent seeking.” (p.264-265). This approach fits with the broadly public choice economics framework and has serious (and, in my estimation, under-explored) potential for issues of nonideal and transitional distributive justice.

Finally, Part III dives into deeper philosophical waters. In it, Risse defends his view from lingering objections and fleshes out the contours of his position. Substantively, Part III is broadly about the *nature* of justice. Risse aims to show both that his conception of justice is appropriately broad and that the demands of justice are the most stringent of the moral demands. He does this by situating it as a sort of goldilocks view that has advantages over the views of both Kant and Tugendhat. In aligning closer with Tugendhat, Risse rejects Kant’s overly narrow account, but admits Kant is in the vicinity of being right about the demandingness of justice.

Risse proceeds to argue that justice is a political value; specifically, “the value of giving each their own with this frame” with the relevant frame being the “frame of human life” (p.295). This frame is, notably, a global public reason framework. The principles of justice that emerge from the various grounds are (1) membership in a state; (2) common humanity; (3) collective ownership; (4) membership in the world society; and (5) trade (p.309-310). While one may press on the particular principles put forth, I will not do so here. Rather, there is a general challenge – often called *the empty set objection* – to public reason methodology that is worth considering in light of Risse’s extension of it from the domestic to the global. The crux of the objection is that there is too much diversity amongst the views of the justificatory-relevant persons for there to be consensus or convergence, depending on one’s preferred style of public reason, on the object of justification (e.g., principles of justice). If this objection has teeth at the domestic level, it almost certainly does as well at the global level in which there is even greater diversity of reasons. One way this objection gets dealt with at the domestic level is to restrict the set of justificatory-relevant persons, say, by categorizing dissenters as unreasonable. So, to get agreement on something like Risse’s preferred principles of justice, a sizable portion of the global population may have to be deemed not justificatory-relevant. Even if this is not the line of response Risse would offer, it would be beneficial to hear more about why we should think that there will be overlap on *anything*, let alone these specific principles.

I will close by noting what I take to be perhaps the greatest virtue of the book: its interdisciplinarity. PPE (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics) is a burgeoning field. Some have added a ‘L’ for law, but Risse shows us the relevance of ‘H’ for history throughout the book, especially in Part II. Furthermore, the discussion of world society analysis draws from sociology. As a believer in an interdisciplinary methodological approach to doing political philosophy, I see it as a great achievement to incorporate not one, but two additional disciplines in such an illuminating and relevant manner.

Jeffrey Carroll

Department of Philosophy

Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, OH, USA

[jcarro@bgsu.edu](mailto:jcarro@bgsu.edu)