

**Krista Lawlor.** *Being Reasonable: The Case for Misunderstood Virtue.* Harvard University Press 2026. 224 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover 9780674297470).

It would be great if readers turned to this book in search of well-considered answers to the question: what does it mean to be reasonable? Lawlor follows an excellent path of reflection in constructing a response. She explores the thesis that being rational is not the same as being reasonable, engaging with a rich array of relevant references, drawn from legal cases, history, and academic literature.

In a commentary on a study of the current usage of these terms, Lawlor concludes that the terms reasonable and rational are used in the following ways: “[r]ational people are more frequently described as ‘systematic,’ ‘unemotional,’ and ‘analytical,’ while reasonable people are more frequently described as ‘empathetic,’ ‘respectful,’ and ‘listening’” (17). For Lawlor, being reasonable “[i]s about identifying which things in a situation have importance or value” (9). In her own conception, being reasonable is especially relevant in social situations, knowing how to guide oneself through the landscape of value. Here is how she defines the landscape of value: “[f]rom the moment we wake up, we constantly register good things and bad things in our environment. We continually map the landscape of value” (9-10).

In order to clarify the differences of being reasonable and rational she offers the following example: “consider the owner of the roofing business who told his young employee that if he fell off a roof, he should lie about it, and that the owner would take him to the hospital, where he should tell everyone he was hit by a car. (...) the owner also fails to register that his plan for employees injured on the job had none of the guarantees that would come with a proper insurance policy (money for a hospital stay, and recuperation time). Might the owner be rational to play the system this way? Maybe. But he is not reasonable” (10). She is saying that being rational means successfully pursuing individualism, while being reasonable means successfully seeking the common good? She says the owner, in that case “is getting it wrong about the landscape of value—a landscape that includes the very bad things that happen to others, not just the good thing that happens to him when he saves money on insurance premiums” (p.10). In other words, “A reasonable person is concerned to register value and disvalue—all of it, including the value and disvalue others see” (10).

There must always be *reasonable others* with whom we can reason in her theory. Lawlor did not write a guide for situations that demand violent, large-scale change. She wrote a book to help people communicate better, by understanding that a person can be highly rational without being particularly reasonable, and that knowing how to distinguish these traits can help us communicate with others, judge others, understand ourselves, and identify the qualities that enable different people, reasonable and rational alike, to coexist more effectively. Lawlor points to good reasons for exploring human communication, understanding that in doing so, it would be possible to make the world more reasonable. Here is a reason she picked: “Just as we evolved to have thumbs for grasping things, tongues for speaking, and big brains for making inferences, we also evolved cognitive, emotional, and social capacities for tracking value together” (11).



In his recent book *Rationality* (2021), Steven Pinker suggests that rationality is "the ability to use knowledge to attain goals" (Pinker apud Lawlor, p. 11). Could we use this definition to judge a political regime? Could any political model (monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy) then be considered rational? Pinker's definition is too broad, too comfortable. For Lawlor, being reasonable means knowing how to communicate with the collective. The political regime capable of doing this would be a better regime. She is very clear about this, especially when she comments on liberal democracy in Chapter 8.

An excellent point of debate in the book is the connection between being reasonable and being rational. Lawlor distances the concepts of rational and reasonable, placing the following aspects under being reasonable:

we draw on an array of cognitive, emotional, and social capacities to map and navigate the complex world of value. We develop our sensibilities (a sense of humor tells us about what's funny, a sense of tact tells us about what's appropriate). We use our emotions (fear alerts us to danger, quiet contentment tells us about homeostasis). We use our judgment to decide what matters more than what. We are social creatures, and we argue with others and learn from them about value (11).

She places these aspects under being reasonable for good reason. She understands that we should not be so solipsistic, that we ought to "create maps of value that are sharable" (11). Emphasizing the importance of communication in the exercise of reasonableness is one of the book's greatest achievements.

There could still be other conceptions of being rational and reasonable, but her book is not about abstract concepts in public disuse. Lawlor observes that the public does make distinctions between rational and reasonable, and she works from this ongoing distinction. There may be other ways of connecting the two, but the public is not making those connections. Lawlor reflects on this connection whenever she calls attention to the importance of communication and trust for every human being.

The reader can benefit both from adopting Lawlor's reasoning and from the debates and reflections she incited. She writes, "[a] reasonable person will tend to seek reasons, or evidence, or justification for their beliefs about what matters" (65). A rational person won't? As she herself notes, the more people we have concerned about what it means to be reasonable, the better.

Another excellent point of the book is the weight of common sense in the case of the murder of exchange student Yoshi Hattori, who knocked on the wrong door looking for a Halloween party and was shot by a frightened American homeowner in 1992. If shooting strange visitors is common sense, is it okay to abide by this sense even when the danger is not real? Here we can have a clear understanding of Lawlor's take on this matter: "In real life we confront situations where we think, 'If we both trust each other, things will work out well, but if I trust you, I might get hurt.' What Grossmann's studies show is that in some cases, anyway, real people are quite ready to applaud the trusting decision, even if it is "unsafe." And we have a term for the trusting decision: *being reasonable*" (26).

At the beginning of the book Lawlor discusses whether Americans should treat strangers better,

as when she examines the Hattori case. Her answer is yes. In Chapter 9, she turns to a more abstract question: should they treat strangers as well as they possibly can? A society where everyone is good to everyone, or at least does so more often, is that a reasonable society? She concludes that an extremely generous society may be considered rational, but not necessarily reasonable. She writes, “Giannulli’s principle — something like act to promote my kid’s interests above everyone else’s interests — might be rational, but it is not reasonable. His principle fails to promote mutual respect, which is a key ingredient in his having important relationships with others” (149). It’s as if, in such an overly generous society we would be absurdly selfless. People would be treated like empty concepts with a number tag on them. She calls this society rational rather than reasonable. Being reasonable, on the other hand, stands as an excellent concept for dealing with different people with different objectives and even, I would say, with unclear, nuanced, or changing objectives. Being reasonable therefore seems like a powerful trait. So why does “unreasonableness [flourish] (167)”? she asks. Every society can work as long as it is contradictory. Authoritarian regimes create an economy of authoritarianism that won’t necessarily end the regime. But that doesn’t mean it’s making humanity flourish. It’s making authoritarianism flourish.

The last chapter poses an even more difficult question: what about polarization? It would be a lot easier if people simply thought: “Vote and make the best of it, regardless of who wins” or “Want change? Engage in politics.” This way of thinking means no harm to anyone. Quite the contrary. It opens politics to those who have something to say about the common good, and frustration with the outcome becomes motivation for better forms of communication. In polarized times, however, politics is hardly about communication, and it’s hardly about being reasonable.

**Pedro Barbalho**, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro