
Public Reason and Political Autonomy

This book advances a novel justification for the idea of “public reason”: citizens within diverse societies can realize the ideal of shared political autonomy, despite their adherence to different religious and philosophical views, by deciding fundamental political questions with “public reasons.” Public reasons draw upon or are derived from ecumenical political ideas, such as toleration and equal citizenship, and mutually acceptable forms of reasoning, like those of the sciences. This book explains that if citizens share equal political autonomy—and thereby constitute “a civic people”—they will not suffer from alienation or domination and can enjoy relations of civic friendship. Moreover, it contends that the ideal of shared political autonomy cannot be realized by alternative accounts of public justification that eschew any necessary role for public reasons. In addition to explaining how the ideal of political autonomy justifies the idea of public reason, this book presents a new analysis of the relation between public reason and “ideal theory”: by engaging in “public reasoning,” citizens help create a just society that can secure the free compliance of all. It also explores the distinctive policy implications of the ideal of political autonomy for gender equality, families, children, and education.

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Introduction

Within a legitimate political society, Jean-Jacques Rousseau asserts in *The Social Contract*, “the words ‘subject’ and ‘sovereign’ are identical correlatives, the meaning of which is brought together in the single word ‘citizen’” (Rousseau 1968, 138).¹ Rousseauian citizens possess what later philosophers such as John Rawls refer to as “political autonomy.” Leaving aside the idiosyncrasies of Rousseau’s account, the general idea of political autonomy is that citizens are politically autonomous insofar as they are subject to laws that are justified by reasons that are acceptable *to* them and moreover are authorized *by* them—collectively on the basis of freedom and equality—via their political institutions.

An obstacle to the realization of political autonomy within contemporary liberal democratic societies is the plurality of religious, moral, and philosophical views endorsed by citizens: views such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics.² This pluralism cannot be eliminated without the exercise of politically oppressive power, something that liberalism’s commitment to the principle of toleration rules out. Yet accommodating this pluralism seems to prevent the realization of all citizens’ political autonomy. This is because decisions regarding certain fundamental political issues—for instance, what the laws concerning abortion, marriage, education, physician-assisted suicide, and property rights should be—can involve citizens *imposing* political positions justified in terms of their respective worldviews upon others. If this is so, then not all citizens can be politically autonomous: many will be subject to laws that are justified by reasons that they cannot accept.

Despite citizens’ disagreements over which worldview is correct, “political liberalism”—the account of legitimacy and justice developed most

1 On Rousseau’s account of a legitimate political society, see Cohen 2010.

2 These views each contain multiple variants. Consider, for instance, the many denominations of Christianity. They also may overlap and combine in multiple ways: for example, different kinds of theists can endorse versions of utilitarianism. (I discuss this point further in Chapter 1.)

famously by Rawls (2001, 2005)³—claims that there *is* a form of political autonomy that is realizable within pluralist societies. Citizens can be politically autonomous if they enjoy (roughly) equal political power and justify the exercise of that power when deciding fundamental political matters with “public reasons.” The “ideal of public reason” (Rawls 2005, 444)—an ideal that is realized through the use of public reasons when justifying decisions concerning fundamental political matters—thus purports to harmonize the principle of liberal toleration (and the pluralism that invariably follows from respect for that principle) with a robust version of the ideal of democratic self-government, the equal political autonomy of citizens.

This book proposes that the idea of public reason is best justified by the ideal of political autonomy. And it defends the novel thesis that *shared* political autonomy should be understood as part of this ideal. I call this view the “civic people” account of political liberalism. Citizens within pluralist societies, as equal members of a civic people, can be both subjects and co-sovereigns. After outlining and defending the civic people account of political liberalism, I apply it to issues concerning gender equality, families, the interests of children, and citizenship education. My overarching aim is to show that the ideal of a civic people is one that we—the citizens of existing flawed liberal democratic societies—should attempt to realize in our shared political practices and institutions.

Overview of the Book

Below are brief summaries of the book’s five chapters. Together they provide an overview of the account of public reason that I develop and defend herein.

The first chapter (“Political Liberalism and Public Reason: The Main Elements”) sets the stage for the subsequent discussions. In it I outline the main elements of political liberalism and its idea of public reason. Central to my understanding of public reason is the ideal of “full political autonomy.” Full political autonomy has three elements: institutional autonomy, justificatory autonomy, and shared autonomy. Institutional autonomy requires robust democratic institutions and rights. Justificatory autonomy is realized when fundamental political decisions are decided via public reasons. Shared autonomy involves citizens making decisions together, as free and equal members of society, using public reasons. I also respond to some criticisms of the role of “ideal theory” in political liberalism. And I introduce a couple of new ideas—namely the conception of “civic respect” and the notion of the “political liberal well-ordered society” (“PL WOS”)—that

³ Similar accounts of political liberalism are advanced in Cohen 1994, 2008a; Larmore 1987, 1999, 2008, 2015; Lister 2013a; Nussbaum 2011; Quong 2011; Schouten 2019; and Watson and Hartley 2018. For a helpful interpretation of Rawls’s view, see Krasnoff 1998.

I think are helpful for improving the overall coherence and plausibility of the idea of public reason. The chapter concludes with a list of the main ideas of political liberalism.

The second chapter (“The Idea of a Civic People: Shared Political Autonomy and Public Reason”) focuses on the ideal of full political autonomy, specifically the shared autonomy component of that ideal. I draw upon an amended version of Michael Bratman’s theory of shared intentions (Bratman 2004, 2014) to defend an account of shared political autonomy, the “civic people” account. Citizens realize full political autonomy as members of a civic people. The members of a civic people share a “policy,” an ongoing intention, to decide fundamental political questions by means of public reasons. I then consider two alternatives to the civic people account of shared political autonomy. The first alternative is what I call the “constrained proceduralist” account. According to this account, citizens can be politically autonomous if they share a commitment to respecting basic liberal rights and fair democratic procedures; however, fundamental political decisions made via these procedures need *not* be justifiable to all citizens (such decisions, for instance, can draw upon reasons that presuppose the truth of a particular religious view). The second alternative draws upon the “convergence” account of public justification, according to which political decisions must be justifiable to all “members of the public” (unlike the constrained proceduralist account) but such justifications need not employ mutually acceptable public reasons. Neither of these alternatives, I contend, can realize citizens’ *full* political autonomy. I conclude the chapter by explaining that citizens committed to realizing the *ideal* of full political autonomy must employ public reasons when deciding fundamental political questions. This “conception-based” justification for the idea of public reason, I claim, is superior to the alternative “respect-based” justification.

In Chapter 3 (“Public Reason and Ideal Theory: Acceptability, Compliance, and the Pursuit of Justice”), I discuss the relation between the ideas of public reason and ideal theory. I explain that these ideas are not easily separated. According to what I take to be the “standard account” of the relation between public reasoning and ideal theorizing, citizens should first outline or apprehend a political conception of justice at the level of ideal theory. This involves an account of what Rawls calls a “well-ordered society”: a society in which the main political and economic institutions conform to the requirements of a reasonable political conception of justice and all citizens freely support and comply with those institutions. Citizens *then* draw upon this political conception of justice and its associated model of a well-ordered society when making public reason arguments for or against particular political proposals in “non-ideal” circumstances with the aim of eliminating or at least reducing the injustices that confront them. Although I find this account plausible, some theorists maintain that these ideas can be severed; they contend that it is possible, and perhaps

even preferable, to engage in public reasoning *without* drawing upon ideal theory. In this chapter, I propose an alternative account, according to which ideal theorizing emerges *out of* attempts to engage in public reasoning within non-ideal circumstances. Even if public reasoners begin with political deliberation in non-ideal circumstances, the nature of public reasoning itself pushes public reasoners to engage in ideal theorizing. The ideal theorizing that public reasoners engage in, according to this alternative account, emerges out of critical reflection and deliberation concerning the non-ideal circumstances within which they find themselves. The upshot of my argument is that irrespective of whether one thinks that political philosophy should focus primarily on addressing specific injustices or instead on identifying first what “full justice” requires, a commitment to the idea of public reason entails a role for ideal theory.

Chapter 4 (“Political Liberalism and Families: The Basic Structure, Gender Equality, and Children”) concerns what Rawls calls the “basic structure of society.” The basic structure is the subject of reasonable political conceptions of justice: it is the system of institutions to which principles of justice directly apply. This idea has been the subject of considerable debate over the past three decades. I propose that the basic structure should be understood, roughly, as the system of institutions, including *aspects* of certain institutions, necessary for the adequate realization of all citizens’ freedom and equality over their lifetimes. This system must be maintained through the exercise of coercive political power. But because it is authorized and regulated by shared public reasoning, this power ultimately belongs to the citizens subject to it (according to the civic people account advanced in Chapter 2). In regard to households, aspects of families, I explain, should be understood as belonging to the basic structure and hence *directly* subject to principles of political justice. Construing the basic structure in this way enables political liberalism to realize overall gender equality among citizens. This account of the basic structure also delineates the legitimate scope of parents’ authority to raise their children in accordance with their particular worldviews (including religious doctrines). I then address the question of whether political liberalism can adequately realize citizens’ interests in having good childhoods. I explain how political liberalism’s “basic needs principle” should be modified so that it includes a right to adequate leisure time *throughout* citizens’ lifetimes, including their childhoods.

The fifth chapter of the book (“Citizenship Education and Public Reason: Political Autonomy and Non-Domination”) explores the educational implications of the idea of public reason. A central aim of a political liberal educational system would be to ensure that all students can become politically autonomous citizens. This involves teaching students how to effectively exercise their democratic rights and how to engage in public reasoning when evaluating proposals concerning important political questions. I

explain how an education for political autonomy differs from an education for “comprehensive” (or “ethical”) autonomy. I then consider the relation between political liberalism and what is known as “republican liberty” or “freedom as non-domination.” Political liberalism, I propose, is committed to a “political” conception of non-domination. Moreover, the kind of education for citizenship that political liberalism mandates for all students would impart the skills and knowledge necessary for them to realize political non-domination in relation to their political institutions, their workplaces, and the various associations to which they might belong. I conclude that an education for political autonomy *also* is an education for political non-domination.

Some Notes on Terminology

For readers already familiar with the idea of public reason and some of the main debates concerning it, I note here some terms that I will *not* be using in this book. (Readers new to the idea of public reason should feel free to skip over this section.)

Many theorists associate the idea of public reason (and political liberalism more generally) with commitments to “anti-perfectionism” and “neutrality.”⁴ Anti-perfectionism, roughly, holds that a liberal state should *not* exercise its authority and power to promote particular ideals or notions of human excellence (say, by subsidizing or publicly promoting ways of life or activities that are deemed “valuable,” such as certain kinds of religious practices or the exercise of personal autonomy). The closely related idea of liberal neutrality maintains that the state, in justifying its various actions, should remain “neutral” with respect to citizens’ diverse “conceptions of the good” (so long as those conceptions are compatible with respect for the free and equal status of all citizens).⁵ In short, anti-perfectionist liberalism contends that the state, if it is to exercise its power in a morally legitimate way, must provide neutral justifications for its actions—that is, justifications that do not aim at the promotion or discouragement of particular conceptions of the good or ways of life.⁶

Whatever the merits of the ideas of anti-perfectionism and neutrality, I refrain from employing them in my discussion here. This is for two reasons. The first is simply that I do not think that they are necessary for explaining the idea of public reason (or at least the version that I defend

4 For an influential defence of this relation, see Quong 2011. (See also Lecce 2008; Schouten 2019.) For a prominent “perfectionist” account of liberalism, see Raz 1986.

5 The idea of “conceptions of the good” is explained in the next chapter.

6 On why neutrality must be limited to the justifications for—as opposed to the consequences or effects of—state action, see Rawls 2005, 191–194. (This is what Rawls terms “neutrality of aim.”) Aside from this brief discussion, Rawls generally does not make use of the term “neutrality.”

in this work). Since political liberalism already introduces numerous terms of art (as will be manifest by the end of Chapter 1), I see no reason to add any further terminological clutter. The second reason why I avoid references to neutrality and anti-perfectionism is that it is not entirely clear to me that the theory of political liberalism, at least as I understand it, *must* be committed to these ideas. There may be forms of perfectionism that are “political” in nature and hence compatible with (some version of) the idea of public reason.⁷ Although this question is interesting, I take no stand on it at present and will not engage with it here.

In recent years, some theorists have taken to referring to “consensus” and “convergence” accounts of public reason.⁸ The consensus view refers to the account of public reason advanced by Rawls and other political liberals. The “consensus” in question has to do with the claim that the terms of public reason—particular public reasons—should be in some sense acceptable to all “reasonable citizens.”⁹ Public reasons, that is, either are reasons that reasonable citizens all accept (e.g., citizens’ equal right to vote) or are derived from ideals and methods of inquiry that reasonable citizens all accept (say, the conception of citizens as “free and equal,” the rules of logic, or the scientific method). According to the consensus view, then, public reasons are (in some meaningful sense) *mutually acceptable* among all reasonable citizens—there is a “consensus” among them that such reasons are the correct ones to be used when fundamental political questions are to be decided, even if reasonable citizens do not all agree on the decisions themselves.¹⁰ The “convergence” account, in contrast, does not require any such agreement among citizens on public reasons; instead, what political legitimacy requires, roughly, is that citizens (the “members of the public”) all “converge” in judging particular political decisions (laws) to be justified by their own lights—that is, justified by reasons drawn from their different, typically incompatible, systems of beliefs and values (including religious and moral views).¹¹ Hence, the convergence view

7 See, for example, Tahzib 2019. With respect to the connection between the idea of public reason and anti-perfectionism advanced in Quong 2011, see Lister 2014 and Quong 2014a.

8 The origin of these terms is D’Agostino 1996, 30f. (For further explanation, see Quong 2018; Vallier 2018.)

9 The idea of “reasonable citizens” is explained in the next chapter.

10 Because reasonable citizens can disagree on the *conclusions* of public reasoning (as I explain in the next chapter), this version of the consensus view—which is Rawls’s and is the version that I defend in this book—is termed the “weak consensus” view by Quong (2018, §5). (I leave aside any discussion of the “strong consensus” view.)

11 See Gaus and Vallier 2009; Gaus 2010, 2011; Vallier 2014, 2019. (I discuss the convergence view in Chapters 2, 3, and 5.)

asserts that legitimate laws can be supported by diverse, incompatible justifications.¹²

In this book, I reserve the term “public reason” exclusively for the consensus view and employ “convergence public justification” when referring to the convergence view. I do this for the sake of brevity and clarity. Most of my discussion focuses on the political liberal account of public reason; continually inserting “consensus,” I believe, would be gratuitously cumbersome. In addition, I find the use of the term “public reason” to refer to the convergence view to be infelicitous.¹³ A central element of the convergence view is that it *eschews* any necessary role for distinctly “public reasons” in its account of justification. Citizens’ judgements concerning political proposals can draw upon *any* of their “non-public” reasons (so long as such reasons are at least “intelligible” to other citizens). Although the reasons that can be used in convergence justifications are the reasons *of* the members of the public, they need not be “public reasons.” Because of this, I think it is more apt to refer to the convergence view as an account of public *justification* rather than an account of public reason.

12 The two dominant views, at least within the English-speaking academic world, of how to justify fairly political decisions within pluralist societies are the political liberal account of public reason and the convergence account of public justification. There are, however, important alternative views, such as that advanced by Jürgen Habermas (see Habermas 1996, 1998, 2006; for a helpful overview, see Chambers 2017). (Habermas discusses Rawls’s account of political liberalism in Habermas 1995; Rawls’s “Reply to Habermas” is reprinted in Rawls 2005.) Other novel approaches to public justification have been advanced in recent years that cannot be placed straightforwardly in either the political liberal or convergence camps (e.g., Laborde 2017). (For a view somewhat like the convergence account, see Muldoon 2016; for a critical evaluation of Muldoon 2016, see Southwood 2019.) Regrettably, I do not discuss these alternative views here. (On earlier, pre-Rawlsian views, see Gaus and Turner 2018.)

13 This is so despite the frequent use of the term by convergence theorists themselves (including in the title of Gaus 2011).

Conclusion

Why should citizens engage in public reasoning? The answer advanced in this book is that they should do so in order to be politically autonomous. Recall the passage from Rousseau's *The Social Contract* that I mentioned in the Introduction: "the words 'subject' and 'sovereign' are identical correlatives, the meaning of which is brought together in the single word 'citizen'" (Rousseau 1968: 138). The idea of public reason makes it possible for citizens to be both subjects and sovereigns within pluralist societies. If mutually acceptable public reasons are used by citizens, at least whenever they participate within their society's public political forum to help decide fundamental political questions, it is possible for them to be governed by laws that they give to themselves. A society in which citizens equally enjoy full political autonomy is a society in which citizens do not suffer from alienation or excessive strains of commitment vis-à-vis the political and economic institutions to which they are subject. It also is a society in which citizens are not subject to domination by others: the conditions of political non-domination are secured for all citizens through the realization of their full political autonomy. Moreover, when citizens share political autonomy, they can enjoy relations of civic friendship with one another despite their adherence to different comprehensive doctrines. Consequently, I propose that a society that realizes the ideal of public reason—a civic people—is one that we, the citizens of non-well-ordered societies, should try to bring about as best we can. The political liberal well-ordered society (PL WOS) is a realistic utopia.

In the first chapter of this book, I provided an overview of the main elements of political liberalism and its idea of public reason. I also introduced the conception of civic respect and the idea of the political liberal well-ordered society. The second chapter further developed the ideal of full political autonomy, focusing on the idea of shared autonomy. I explained how a form of shared political autonomy might be realized in pluralist societies via a shared policy to decide fundamental political questions by means of public reasons. Such a society is a civic people. In the third chapter, I explored the relation between public reasoning and ideal theorizing. I proposed that

public reasoning—even if focused on addressing particular injustices in non-ideal circumstances—leads naturally to ideal theorizing (i.e., consideration of a realistically utopian version of society). Consequently, the activities of public reasoning and ideal theorizing are not easily separable. The fourth chapter looked at the subject of reasonable political conceptions of justice: the basic structure of society. I proposed that *aspects* of families should be considered parts of the basic structure and hence directly subject to principles of political justice. Construing the basic structure in this way enables policies supported by public reasons to secure the free and equal status of women qua citizens throughout society. In addition, this account of the basic structure delineates the legitimate scope of parental authority with respect to the upbringing of children. The chapter also explains how public reasoning—by modifying political liberalism’s basic needs principle so that it includes a right to adequate leisure time—can justify policies that promote citizens’ interests in having good childhoods. The final chapter explored the implications of the idea of public reason for the education of future citizens. All students must be taught how to become politically autonomous citizens upon adulthood. Such an education for citizenship, however, does not require the promotion of a comprehensive form of personal autonomy. It does involve, though, the promotion and realization of a political form of non-domination.

I would like to think that at least some readers will have found the account of public reason and political autonomy that I defend in this book to be a compelling and attractive one. Perhaps the ideal of a civic people is one that they might accept upon reflection and consequently take up in their political lives. I hope that, at the very least, readers will find some of the positions that I have articulated and defended herein worthy of consideration. No doubt, disagreements over public reason will persist. May they be reasonable ones.