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Autonomy, Community, and the Justification of Public Reason

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Abstract

Recently, there have been attempts at offering new justifications of the Rawlsian idea of *public reason*. Blain Neufeld has suggested that the ideal of *political autonomy* justifies public reason, while R.J. Leland and Han van Wietmarschen have sought to justify the idea by appealing to the value of *political community*. In this paper, I show that both proposals are vulnerable to a common problem. In realistic circumstances, they will often turn into reasons to *oppose*, rather than support, public reason. However, this counterintuitive result can be avoided if we conceive of autonomy and community differently.

Keywords: public reason; political autonomy; political community; reasonableness; John Rawls

1. Introduction

In his later work, John Rawls advanced the idea that fundamental political questions should be settled on the basis of *public reasons*. The idea is, roughly, that decisions on issues of fundamental importance should be made on the basis of reasons that are, in a certain sense, acceptable to all citizens. However, since citizens of modern democratic societies have different and incompatible worldviews, or comprehensive doctrines, reasons that depend on such doctrines will not be acceptable to everyone in the required sense. Therefore, such reasons should be set aside, and we should instead make our decisions on the basis of public reasons; reasons that are acceptable to all citizens, and not only to those who affirm some particular comprehensive doctrine (Rawls, 2005, pp. 216–217, 445–447).

How to best understand this idea is far from settled and subject to ongoing debate among advocates as well as critics. There are, for instance, different views on what distinguishes public reasons from non-public ones, and on the range of political questions that the idea applies to.¹ More fundamentally, it even remains unclear what explains the normative significance of settling political issues on the basis of public reasons. That is, it remains unclear what justifies the idea in the first place. In recent years, however, there have been some attempts at offering new justifications of the idea of public reason. Here, I will critically examine two such attempts.

The first attempt is provided by Blain Neufeld (2022, p. 2), who has recently suggested that “the idea of public reason is best justified by the ideal of political autonomy.”² The second is due to R.J. Leland and Han van Wietmarschen (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 144), according to

¹For an overview of the literature that deals with these topics, see Quong (2022).

²For Neufeld’s original statement of this view, see Neufeld (2019).

whom public reason can be justified by an appeal to “the value of political community.”³ These two suggested justifications—one *autonomy-based*, the other *community-based*—differ in important respects from each other. The most obvious being, of course, that they appeal to what appears to be completely different ideals or values. But despite this difference, these two suggestions have a lot in common. They share certain core features which, I will go on to argue, make these proposed justifications vulnerable to a common problem.⁴

My claim is that these two justifications are, in a sense to be explained, *too weak*. The source of this weakness is that the proposed conceptions of political autonomy and political community are only contingently connected to public reason. If we focus our theorizing on well-ordered societies, or on those close to being well-ordered, it is easy to overlook that this is a problem. Because if we assume that most citizens will be reasonable, public reason might seem an effective means to the realization of political autonomy as well as political community. But this is not the case when we consider how these proposals fare in our current, far from well-ordered, circumstances. In such circumstances, it turns out that they, surprisingly enough, actually justify the direct opposite; that is, they justify practices of political decision-making on the basis of non-public reasons. Hence, they even provide us with reasons to *oppose* public reason.

There are some parallels between this critical argument of mine and Paul Billingham and Anthony Taylor’s (2023) recent criticism of the community-based justification of public reason. They have argued that since an appeal to the value of political community cannot determine with whom we should realize community, it cannot help us decide between different conceptions of public reason. Hence, it cannot deliver what we should expect from a justification of this idea. However, while my argument is related in that it also draws on the observation that it appears possible for very different groups of people to realize political community together, it goes well beyond what has been argued by Billingham and Taylor. For one thing, my analysis is more general, in that it covers not only the community-based justification, but the autonomy-based as well; it shows that despite their differences, these distinct justifications suffer from a common flaw. More importantly, by developing my argument in terms of what these proposals imply in our current non-ideal circumstances, it reveals that the problem goes deeper than acknowledged by Billingham and Taylor. The really serious problem is, as stated above, that these suggestions run the very real risk of ending up justifying the opposite of what they were intended to. And that is *much worse* than not providing a way of deciding between different conceptions of public reason.

In [Section 2](#), I will provide brief characterizations of the two justifications of public reason that I am here concerned with. I then proceed, in [Section 3](#), to explain why these views will often turn out to justify practices of non-public reasoning instead. In [Section 4](#), I consider some possible replies to my argument, only to find them insufficient to rebut the charge that these suggestions offer justifications of public reason that are too weak. But importantly, and in contrast to Billingham and Taylor, I do not claim that this establishes any far-reaching skeptical conclusions. My claim is not that neither political autonomy nor political community can contribute to the justification of public reason. Though the two proposals here considered are unsatisfactory, my analysis identifies not only the source of the problem, but also how it can be overcome. There are thus constructive lessons to be learned from the failures of these suggested justifications of public reason, and in

³This kind of justification of public reason was first suggested by Lister (2013). Here, however, my primary focus will be on the more recent formulation of this justificatory strategy by Leland and van Wietmarschen. I believe, but will not defend that claim here, that the problem that I identify is one that arises for Lister’s view as well.

⁴I understand these suggestions as proposed justifications of the Rawlsian account of public reason (or a version thereof). Therefore, I shall not be concerned with the rival, so-called “convergence”, or “diversity,” account of public reason developed by Gaus (2011) and Vallier (2014). As even the proponents of that view have now come to recognize, it differs from the Rawlsian view to such an extent that it can properly be described as a fundamentally different project (Vallier & Muldoon, 2021). Indeed, given that the project is so very different, it might be questioned whether the term “public reason” should be used to refer to it (Neufeld, 2022, p. 7).

Section 5, I go on to offer a positive proposal. I provide the outlines of alternative conceptions of political autonomy and political community based on the Rawlsian idea of our shared status as, and interest in living as, free and equal citizens. Since these conceptions make public reason necessary for the realization of political autonomy and political community, they allow us to avoid the embarrassing result of instead ending up justifying non-public reasoning. They therefore, I suggest, offer a more promising path to the justification of public reason.

2. Autonomy and Community as Justifications of Public Reason

Consider, first, Neufeld's suggestion that public reason is justified by an ideal of *full* political autonomy. This idea has three distinct elements: *institutional* autonomy, *justificatory* autonomy, and *shared* autonomy. Institutional autonomy, which is realized when citizens are able to take part "as (roughly) equal contributors to their society's main political decision-making processes" (Neufeld, 2022, p. 51), is not the most significant for Neufeld's case for public reason. For that reason, and since I have no objections to it, I set this form of autonomy aside. In the examples that I will go on to provide, we may assume that all citizens enjoy institutional autonomy.

Of greater importance is justificatory autonomy, which citizens enjoy when "fundamental political decisions are made via *reasons that they find acceptable*" (Neufeld, 2022, p. 51, my emphasis). Importantly, this does not require that they agree with the decisions that are made. Even if they believe that some issues ought to have been settled differently, they nevertheless enjoy justificatory autonomy if they find the reasons upon which the decisions were made acceptable.

Now, assume that justificatory autonomy in this sense is valuable. Citizens have an interest in enjoying it, which gives us a reason to ensure that as many as possible are able to do so. This, in turn, makes it a task of paramount importance to identify the reasons that citizens find acceptable. It is here that the Rawlsian idea of *reasonable pluralism* comes into the picture (Rawls, 2005, pp. 36–37, 54–58). If we assume, along with Rawls, that the expected outcome of citizens freely exercising their powers of reasoning is not agreement, but rather a diversity of comprehensive doctrines, then settling political questions by recourse to reasons that depend on such doctrines will ensure that not everyone will enjoy justificatory autonomy. Based on this line of reasoning, Neufeld accurately notes that pluralism "seems to prevent the realization of all citizen's political autonomy" (Neufeld, 2022, p. 1).

Neufeld's case for public reason is, in essence, that it can provide a solution to this problem posed by reasonable pluralism. If citizens who hold different comprehensive doctrines commit to "a shared policy to decide fundamental political questions via public reasons" (Neufeld, 2022, p. 51)—reasons that are suitably freestanding from comprehensive doctrines—then their disagreement regarding such doctrines no longer stand in the way of everyone enjoying justificatory autonomy. This also brings us to the notion of shared autonomy. A shared policy of deciding political questions on the basis of mutually acceptable reasons constitutes citizens as a "self-governing civic people" who enjoy autonomy as a group; that is, they enjoy shared autonomy (Neufeld, 2022, pp. 54–55). The idea is thus that public reason not only makes possible individual justificatory autonomy for all, but also shared autonomy as a form of collective self-determination. Hence, according to Neufeld, public reason "is justified because it makes possible the realization of the ideal of full political autonomy in societies characterized by reasonable pluralism" (Neufeld, 2022, p. 49).

Next, let us turn to Leland and van Wietmarschen's community-based, and yet in key respects similar, justification of public reason. Political community, in their sense, is comprised of two distinct elements: *joint rule* and *civic friendship*. The idea of joint rule that they favor is a particular interpretation of the democratic idea of rule by the people. In their view, a robust sense of joint rule can be realized through "a shared activity of justifying political decisions" (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 149). This shared activity is one where citizens share a commitment to "deliberate about political issues together with their fellow citizens exclusively in terms of a particular set of considerations" (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 155). When there is

agreement on the kind of considerations that are properly appealed to in political deliberation, and it is common knowledge among citizens that each of them intends to treat only such considerations as reasons in their shared activity of justifying political decisions, joint rule is realized. It can then truly be said that the decisions made are the decisions of the people.

The second element of political community is, in the view of Leland and van Wietmarschen, civic friendship. This is a kind of relation between citizens, where they care about how things go for each other and share a common idea of what is in each other's interests. It is thus something that is realized "when citizens share a non-prudential concern to benefit one another through political means, on terms that each regards as genuinely advancing the interests of herself and her fellow citizens" (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 160). When citizens participate in joint ruling and have this kind of concern for each other, they enjoy political community.

In order to show how political community, in their sense, may justify public reason, Leland and van Wietmarschen provide an argument with the very same structure as the one offered by Neufeld. First, they note that "reasonable pluralism [...] threatens the realization" of political community (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 144). If citizens affirm different comprehensive doctrines and use reasons that depend on these doctrines in political deliberation, they will not realize joint rule. And insofar as their comprehensive views involve different and incompatible ideas of the good, it appears that they will lack a common understanding of what is in each other's interests. They will, therefore, also fail to realize the valuable relation of civic friendship. However, public reason may solve both problems, since it involves agreement on reasons, and on the good of people as citizens, that all can accept, even though they affirm different comprehensive doctrines. Public reason thus makes possible "joint rule and civic friendship despite the presence of profound disagreement about religious, moral, and philosophical issues" (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 144). That is, it makes political community possible.

3. Reasons to Oppose Public Reason

These suggested justifications of public reason seem, at first glance at least, quite plausible. It might thus be thought that one of them, or perhaps a combination of the two (as they are not in principle incompatible with each other), will provide a compelling justification of the idea. In this case, however, appearances are misleading. There is a common flaw in these justificatory strategies, which makes them unable to provide a satisfactory justification of public reason.

In order to explain this flaw, let me start out by drawing attention to a quite significant limitation regarding *for whom* public reason makes political autonomy and political community possible. In order to enjoy these forms of autonomy and community, one must find public reasons acceptable and be committed to the idea of public reason as such. Hence, Neufeld holds that "the citizens to whom public reasons are addressed," and for whom those reasons must be acceptable, "are reasonable citizens" (Neufeld, 2022, p. 43). Such *reasonable* citizens are further characterized as being committed to justifying their political decisions on the basis of reasons that other reasonable citizens find acceptable. So, in Neufeld's view, those who are *unreasonable*—those who do not find public reasons acceptable, and/or who do not support the idea of public reason as such—will not be made politically autonomous. Similarly, in the view of Leland and van Wietmarschen, it is only the reasonable who will, together with other reasonable people, enjoy political community through public reason (Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, pp. 146–147, 149, 152).⁵

⁵Presumably, reasonableness is something that comes in degrees. But I do not mean to suggest that becoming politically autonomous, or enjoying political community, through public reason requires one to be *maximally* reasonable. The idea is, rather, that one must be reasonable to a certain degree. There must be some threshold of reasonableness, which I assume is quite high, that one must pass. The notion of "being reasonable" should thus be understood as "being reasonable to the required degree."

The limitation, then, is that while public reason may realize political autonomy and political community, it will only do so for those who are reasonable in this special sense. For those, like Neufeld, who primarily focus on the ideal case of a well-ordered society—a just society where there is agreement on what justice requires, and citizens are strongly motivated to act accordingly—this limitation may seem to be of little consequence.⁶ In such an imagined society citizens are, by definition, reasonable. And even if we introduce some realism by admitting, as Neufeld does, that there will most likely always be some “pockets” of unreasonable citizens (Neufeld, 2022, p. 56, n.10), there seems to be no alternative to public reason that would ensure a more extensive realization of political autonomy and political community in this kind of society. So, if we are primarily concerned with cases where the overwhelming majority of citizens are reasonable and reasonable pluralism obtains, this limitation does not seem to put the justification of public reason into question.

But without questioning the value of studying the case of a well-ordered society, we may ask ourselves what these suggested justifications imply for us, who find ourselves in societies that are far from well-ordered. If we are concerned with promoting political autonomy and political community in our non-ideal circumstances, should we do so by promoting public reason? When we consider this question, we must keep in mind how demanding the standards of reasonableness are. To be reasonable in the relevant sense, it is not enough to be a morally conscientious agent, to take the interests of others into account, and so on. Instead, one must be committed to some quite specific moral ideas, most importantly, the idea of public reason itself.⁷ The consequence is, as many have pointed out, that currently, there are not that many reasonable people around (Enoch, 2015, pp. 121–22; Lister, 2017, p. 155). When asking what we ought to do in our non-ideal circumstances, we must thus ask ourselves how to best promote political autonomy and political community in circumstances where it is *not* the case that the majority of citizens are reasonable. And when we ask that question, it turns out that the limitation described above is highly significant.

When considering this question, it is useful to have a concrete example to focus on. Therefore, let us imagine the following case:

The Divided Society: In this society, a majority of the citizens (60%) share a particular comprehensive doctrine. Those who belong to this group believe that fundamental political questions ought to be settled on the basis of reasons that depend on this doctrine, and they have a shared commitment to justify their decisions and actions by citing only such reasons. Being a majority and usually in agreement on what their doctrine implies, they successfully determine how political power is exercised in this society. The members of the minority (the remaining 40%) affirm other comprehensive views, and find the reasons that depend on the comprehensive view of the majority to be unsuitable for political decision-making. But being a minority, they constantly find themselves governed by laws and decisions made on the basis of such reasons.

In this example, it is clear that things are not going well for the minority. Since they do not find the reasons upon which decisions are made acceptable, they are not politically autonomous. And for the same reason, they are not participating in joint rule, and are therefore not enjoying political community. But things look a lot brighter for the members of the majority. They are, in fact, able to enjoy political autonomy as Neufeld conceives of it. Because in his view, whether justificatory autonomy is realized depends solely on whether citizens find the reasons upon which political questions are decided *acceptable*, and it is evident that the majority in this case do. And since they

⁶This is a simplified description of the idea of a well-ordered society. For a more complete statement, see Rawls (1971, pp. 453–454). See also Neufeld (2022, pp. 36–39).

⁷That this is a part of the relevant form of reasonableness is made explicit by Rawls (2005, pp. 48–50, 54), and it is commonly accepted by those who have defended Rawlsian accounts of public reason (Lister, 2013, p. 127; Neufeld, 2022, p. 20; Quong, 2011, pp. 143–144, 291).

are also committed to a shared policy of basing their political decisions upon these mutually acceptable (among themselves, that is) reasons, they not only achieve individual justificatory autonomy, but shared autonomy as well. The members of the minority will not, of course, be part of this shared policy. But just as the reasonable may achieve full political autonomy without including the unreasonable, the existence of this minority group does not render the majority non-autonomous.

Likewise, the members of the majority are able to enjoy political community in Leland and van Wietmarschen's sense. While the members of the minority are not participating in joint ruling, the members of the majority clearly are. They agree on the kind of considerations to be used in political deliberation and share a commitment to order their deliberations accordingly. Assuming that they also share a conception of what is in everyone's interests, they also stand in a relation of civic friendship towards one another.⁸ Hence, the majority group is able to enjoy political community. Once again, this case is just like one where we would have a majority of reasonable citizens, and a minority of unreasonable ones. In neither case will the existence of the minority group stand in the way of the members of the majority enjoying political community among themselves.⁹

With these facts in mind, let us now assume that the minority object to the way that the majority determines political questions on the grounds that it stands in the way of them enjoying political autonomy and political community. Can these proposed justifications of public reason vindicate their objection and provide a rationale for a practice of public reason in this kind of society? The answer to this question depends on which arrangement would be the most conducive to the realization of political autonomy and political community. This, in turn, depends on the number of citizens that are (or would become, if a practice of public reason were effectively publicly promoted) reasonable.

For instance, consider a version of The Divided Society where there are *no reasonable citizens at all*. In such a case, we would have a situation where *no one* would be made better off, in terms of political autonomy and political community, by adopting a practice of public reason. Since those who belong to the minority are unreasonable, their situation would not improve at all. Not only is it the case that no one would be made better off, but many would also be made significantly *worse off*. The majority, who previously enjoyed both political autonomy and political community, would no longer do so. So, we would go from a state of affairs where 60% of the population enjoyed political autonomy as well as political community to one where *no one* does.

In this version of the case, the complaint from the minority gains no support at all from the two justificatory strategies that we are here considering. The best option, if we are concerned with promoting political autonomy and political community, is clearly to allow the majority to continue their way of deciding political issues. So, rather than a justification of public reason, the result is the opposite; that is, a justification of a practice of non-public reasoning. Since imposing a practice of public reason in a society such as this would be highly detrimental to political autonomy as well as political community, a concern for these values even gives us good reasons to *oppose* the practice.

To assume that there are no reasonable citizens at all may seem like an overly pessimistic scenario. We may, therefore, also consider a more optimistic version of The Divided Society, where 50% of the population are reasonable people. Let us imagine that once citizens have been adequately

⁸I will assume that this is the case in the later variations of this example as well.

⁹It is at this point that there is an important parallel between my critical argument and the one offered by Billingham and Taylor (2023). They argue that since the appeal to political community "cannot tell us with whom we should aim to have this relationship", it cannot justify a specific conception of public reason (Billingham & Taylor, 2023, p. 34). But while there may be room for somewhat different accounts of public reason, the mere fact that some group have a common understanding of the kind of reasons appropriate for political decision-making does not make it the case that they have a conception of public reason (Freeman, 2007b, p. 383). That is why we should go further, and recognize that the problem is more serious; the appeal to political community cannot even show that some form of public reasoning is in general preferable to a non-public alternative. And it will, as I show below, in many circumstances favour the latter.

informed about the idea of public reason and its virtues, the end result is an even spread of reasonable citizens throughout the population (in the majority as well as the minority). Unfortunately, however, not even such happy circumstances will result in a justification of public reason. In short, the result would be that half of the minority (20% of the total population) would be made better off, while half of the majority (30% of the total population) would be made worse off. Some of those who previously did not enjoy political autonomy nor political community would come to do so if a practice of public reason were to be realized, which is an improvement. But, since a larger group of people would lose their political autonomy as well as political community, the end result would nevertheless be negative overall. Hence, we have still not arrived at a justification of public reason. The best option is, just as before, to allow the majority to continue their practice of non-public reasoning.

The cases here considered are, of course, highly stylized. But they are nevertheless of considerable significance for us in our present circumstances. This is so since assuming that half of the population is comprised of reasonable people is *very* optimistic. We are, I find it safe to assume, not even anywhere close to something like that in current (highly imperfect, and far from well-ordered) democratic societies. And even if it may be rare that 60% of the citizens in modern democratic societies adhere to one and the same comprehensive doctrine, the same result is reached in cases where several comprehensive doctrines overlap enough to make it possible for their adherents to agree on a shared policy on mutually acceptable reasons.¹⁰ The somewhat artificial nature of the examples should thus not be taken as evidence that these difficulties would not arise in the real world. Indeed, they most likely will.¹¹

What this shows is, I believe, that what initially appeared as two quite promising justifications of public reason turn out to deliver the desired outcome only in circumstances quite far removed from the situation that we find ourselves in. We are, unfortunately, far from realizing a well-ordered society populated by reasonable people, and achieving that end is most likely not within our reach (more on this point below). Therefore, we have to consider how to most effectively promote political autonomy and political community in these non-ideal circumstances of ours. And when we do, it appears very likely that the most effective means to realize these values is not public reason at all. Instead, it will most likely be a practice of non-public reasoning based on whichever comprehensive doctrine (or set of sufficiently similar doctrines) that currently commands the greatest allegiance.

This line of reasoning is not premised on a denial of the value of theorizing what a well-ordered society would be like. But we should, when evaluating suggested justifications of public reason, *also* consider their implications in less ideal circumstances. In the case of the two suggested justifications here under consideration, it turns out that they will often deliver the exact opposite of what they are supposed to deliver. They will provide reasons to support practices of non-public reasoning and to oppose alternative practices, which will, unfortunately, imply also opposing public reason. That they so easily turn into reasons to oppose public reason is the sense in which these suggested

¹⁰For instance, we could revise the example used in this section by imagining that the majority are Christians, who belong to different branches of Christianity. Though they have varying interpretations of their religion, their systems of belief may have a significant enough overlap so that they agree on which reasons are the most salient for determining fundamental political issues.

¹¹As an objection to this reasoning, it has been suggested to me that one could adopt a significantly less demanding understanding of reasonableness. And if one does, it may no longer be true that it would be overly optimistic to believe that half of the current population of a democratic society qualifies as reasonable. This is of course correct. And there are examples of philosophers, in particular Gaus (2011) and Vallier (2014), who have developed conceptions of reasonableness that are a lot less demanding than the Rawlsian one. However, I take it that a demanding notion of reasonableness is an essential feature of the Rawlsian account of public reason. Without it, the closely related idea that legitimacy requires that the exercise of political power is reasonably justifiable to all (or, as some would put it, that it is justifiable to all reasonable citizens) would not yield acceptable conclusions (for an especially clear expression of this line of thought, see Quong, 2011, pp. 140, 152–153; Quong, 2012, p. 55). Hence, this kind of reply is not available to those who want to defend a broadly speaking Rawlsian account of public reason. And since that is the kind of view that I am concerned with here (see footnote 4 above) I shall set this kind of reply aside. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this issue.

justifications are too weak. Proponents of public reason ought to find such a result highly troubling, as it would reveal that their view rests on *very* shaky ground.

4. Possible Responses

One way of responding to what I have argued is to claim that a practice of non-public reasoning cannot be justified since it fails to secure political autonomy and political community *for everyone*. Since securing these goods for everyone ought to be the ultimate aim, this reasoning would go, only the practice that secures the optimal outcome is justified. This response is unsuccessful, for the simple reason that what would be optimal is often unavailable to us. In order to realize political autonomy and political community for everyone through a practice of public reason, we would have to make everyone reasonable. But we often lack the kind of influence over what people believe that would be required for us to realize such a state of affairs. Therefore, ensuring the optimal outcome is not within our reach, and we must instead decide between the non-optimal options that are available to us. And as I have argued, the best of these options will quite likely be a practice of non-public reasoning.

This simplistic response is thus unsuccessful. But there is a related, and more sophisticated, way of responding that appears more plausible. This is a response suggested by Neufeld, and I shall, therefore, formulate it in terms of his view. In his book, he very briefly addresses the question of how we should think about promoting public reason in non-well-ordered societies. He proposes the following:

Within non-well-ordered societies, citizens should try to *promote* a shared policy to use public reasons, and thereby help *create* a civic people, by doing what they can to use public reasons to defend proposals concerning constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. (Neufeld, 2022, p. 58, n.20, emphasis in original)

This, he has further suggested,¹² can be understood as being similar to the idea of transitional justice. When we find ourselves in unjust circumstances, we should do our best to bring our society closer to the ideal of a completely just society. In this way, the ideal of a just and well-ordered society ought to guide our actions. Likewise, even if we currently may find ourselves in a society populated by a lot of unreasonable people, who are not committed to the idea of public reason, we should “help create a civic people”; that is, help create a reasonable people, with a shared policy of appealing only to public reasons.

Even if I am right, and it is not within our reach to create such a reasonable people here and now, we may still hope to realize such a people in the future. We should, therefore, Neufeld suggests, think about our situation as a transition period. During this period, it may be the case that promoting public reason results in decreased political autonomy. But this decrease in the short term can be justified by it being a necessary step in the realization of a future society where everyone is made politically autonomous. The reasons for opposing public reason that I have identified are thus, according to this suggestion, outweighed by the greater realization of political autonomy in such a future society.

This reasoning is surely more plausible than the simplistic response. But the claim that decreased autonomy for people now can be outweighed by greater autonomy for people in the future is not as straightforward as it might seem. If the transition period turns out to be a long one—something that, unfortunately, we have good reasons to believe—those who will have to endure decreased autonomy will not be identical to those who stand to gain in the future. And given that it is far from certain that the end goal will ever be achieved, we could end up demanding significant sacrifices of

¹²Personal communication. I am grateful to Neufeld for providing this response when commenting on an earlier draft of this paper.

the presently existing in the name of highly *uncertain* benefits for *other* people in the future. Establishing that this is justified is not, I believe, a simple task.

But while I have my doubts about this way of responding, it is difficult—especially in the absence of a fully worked out view to consider—to show that the reasons for opposing public reason are not outweighed by the greater realization of political autonomy in the future. I, therefore, instead want to claim that even if they can (in many cases at least) be so outweighed, the underlying problem has not been fully dealt with. This is the problem that the goal of realizing political autonomy, as Neufeld understands it, will often pull in the direction of non-public reasoning. And when it does, the realization of public reason will come at the cost of the political autonomy of those who are deemed unreasonable. Realizing public reason may thus be bad for a lot of people, which makes this case for public reason less appealing than it initially appeared. This may not show on its own that Neufeld’s justification of public reason is unsuccessful. But if there is some alternative justification that allows us to avoid this cost—one that does not imply that the realization of public reason will be bad for a lot of people—then that justification appears preferable. In Section 5, I will go on to suggest a conception of political autonomy that achieves exactly this. It is thus this drawback of Neufeld’s view, in combination with the existence of an alternative that avoids it, that ultimately gives us reasons to judge this response as insufficient.

Let me now turn to a different kind of response to my argument. This one has been suggested by Leland,¹³ and I shall, therefore, formulate it in terms of political community. Leland acknowledges that political community in his and van Wietmarschen’s sense is indeed, just as I argued above, realizable without public reason. But a political community based on some comprehensive doctrine, like the one that the majority in the case of The Divided Society could realize, is defective *for other reasons*. It is thus not the case that the majority, in this case, are not enjoying a valuable form of political community, but they are nevertheless guilty of some wrong; they “draw the lines of political community more narrowly than political liberalism does,” and in a way that is “objectionably exclusionary” (Leland, 2019, p. 84; see also Leland & van Wietmarschen, 2017, p. 149). The suggestion, then, is that the value of *inclusion* favors political community on the basis of public reason.

In order to evaluate this response, consider yet another version of The Divided Society. This time, assume that the majority is unreasonable, while the minority is reasonable. The members of the majority are firmly committed to their comprehensive view, and they will not change their minds and become reasonable. But despite their unreasonableness, they are able to realize political community within their group. The minority may be able to realize civic friendship, but not joint ruling in the robust sense, and hence not political community. In this case, then, the value of political community appears to favor allowing the majority to continue their practice of non-public reasoning. But according to Leland’s suggestion, the value of inclusion favors public reason, and hence the way of the minority.

Leland might be understood as suggesting that inclusion is a distinct and independent value and that the above situation is, therefore, one where two independent values pull in different directions. In order for the reply to work, the claim would then have to be that inclusion outweighs political community. But this would, as Billingham and Taylor rightly point out, invite the objection that political community becomes no more than a spare wheel (Billingham & Taylor, 2023, p. 40). The value of inclusion would justify public reason on its own, and there would be no point in appealing to political community.

A better interpretation of what Leland has in mind might be that inclusion is not to be understood as an independent and competing value. Instead, an inclusive form of political

¹³Personal communication. I am grateful to Leland for making me see the need to consider this way of responding to my argument.

community is, everything else being equal, a better form of community.¹⁴ The suggestion would then be that while the members of the majority are able to enjoy political community among themselves, this is, due to the lack of inclusion, an impoverished form of community. This is more plausible, but still not a convincing reply. The problem is that it is difficult to see in what sense it would, in this last version of *The Divided Society*, be more inclusive overall to insist on a practice of public reason. It would be more inclusive in one sense; it would allow those who do not share the comprehensive doctrine of the majority to also experience the good of political community. But it would, at the same time, be in a sense less inclusive; it would clearly not be inclusive towards the members of the majority, who would then be unable to enjoy political community. After all, it might be just as difficult for them to become reasonable, as it would be for the members of the minority to endorse the dominant comprehensive view. In that case, it is difficult to see why we should not judge public reason to be insufficiently inclusive as well. There might, of course, be good reasons for thinking that it is worse to exclude the reasonable than to exclude the unreasonable, but inclusion *as such* does not explain why that would be the case. Therefore, appealing to inclusion does not seem to solve the problem.

5. More Solid Foundations for Public Reason

By now, the limitations of these two suggested justifications should be clear. Absent some very specific—and, unfortunately, quite unlikely—circumstances, they easily turn into reasons to oppose public reason. The common feature of both justificatory strategies that leads to this problem is that the conceptions upon which they rely are only contingently connected to public reason. Public reason is not necessary for political autonomy and political community in these senses, and whether it is an effective means for their realization depends entirely on the circumstances. This suggests that other conceptions—conceptions that establish stronger connections to public reason—can do better. In what follows, I shall suggest that Rawls’s work provides us with alternative conceptions of political autonomy and political community, according to which adherence to public reason is necessary for their full realization. These conceptions thus provide a way of revising the views I have here scrutinized so that they would no longer be vulnerable to the argument presented above. Proponents of public reason would therefore do well to justify their view on the basis of conceptions such as these instead.¹⁵

5.1 Rawlsian Political Autonomy

In *Theory*, we find Rawls appealing to an account of autonomy that is very different from the one suggested by Neufeld. On the broadly Kantian view that Rawls suggests, “a person is acting autonomously when the principles of his action are chosen by him as the most adequate possible expression of his nature as a free and equal rational being” (Rawls, 1971, p. 252). For these principles to be the most adequate expression of our nature as free and equal rational beings, their content must not be distorted by factors unrelated to our status as such beings. Hence, they must not be adopted on the basis of contingent facts such as social position, natural endowments, the kind of society we happen to live in, or the particular things that we may happen to want. Since such facts are hidden behind the veil of ignorance in the original position, Rawls suggests that the parties selecting principles in that situation “arrive at their choice together as free and equal rational beings”

¹⁴I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

¹⁵Billingham and Taylor consider, and criticize, the possibility of pluralist views; views that combine the appeal to political community with an appeal to some additional considerations (Billingham & Taylor, 2023, pp. 38–43). In contrast, my approach here is to instead offer alternative and more substantive conceptions of political community and political autonomy. These conceptions certainly draw on other considerations, but they are not merely combined with them in the simple pluralist sense of Billingham and Taylor.

(Rawls, 1971, p. 252). When we act on the principles selected in the original position, we are thus acting on principles that reflect our nature as free and equal rational beings. The principles are such that we would give them to ourselves in our capacity as such beings, and therefore, acting on them enables us to realize autonomy.

In his later writings, and in line with the political reformulation of his theory, Rawls revised this account of autonomy by emphasizing that it is something that is achieved by us in our capacity as citizens.¹⁶ Political autonomy, in this version of Rawls's view, is realized by "citizens in their public life," when "they act from principles of justice that specify the fair terms of cooperation that they would give to themselves when fairly represented as free and equal" (Rawls, 2005, p. 77). Just as earlier in *Theory*, the idea is that the principles that we would give to ourselves as free and equal must not be influenced by contingencies. Therefore, Rawls claims that our autonomy is "modelled by how the original position is set up" and that the principles that the parties would select are those that we would give to ourselves in our capacity as free and equal citizens (Rawls, 2005, p. 78). Citizens thus realize their political autonomy by acting, in their public life, on these principles.¹⁷

We saw earlier that in Neufeld's view, a majority that affirms some comprehensive doctrine may realize full political autonomy by committing themselves to a shared policy of deciding political issues on the basis of reasons derived from this doctrine. But if we instead adopt an account of political autonomy like Rawls's, we will reach a very different assessment of this case. If the majority in *The Divided Society* accept some principles on the basis of their favored comprehensive doctrine, but these principles are not such that they would give them to themselves in their capacity as free and equal citizens—that is, when they are represented as such in the original position—then they will not realize political autonomy by acting on these principles. Since the principles are not an expression of their status as free and equal citizens it makes no difference that they accept them; acceptance is simply not sufficient for the realization of political autonomy.

But this does not force us to say that acceptance is completely irrelevant. Rawls's view is clearly not that we can be made politically autonomous simply by political decisions being made on the basis of the reasons that we would give to ourselves as free and equal, regardless of our own attitudes and convictions. Since Rawls holds that it is "in their public recognition and informed application of the principles of justice in their political life" that citizens realize political autonomy (Rawls, 2005, p. 77), his view appears to be that acceptance of these principles (and the reasons derived from them) is necessary for the realization of autonomy. But acceptance is far from sufficient, since the only acceptance that makes political autonomy possible is acceptance of principles of the right kind.¹⁸

Based on this Rawlsian account of political autonomy, we can now revise Neufeld's autonomy-based justification of public reason. Citizens' justificatory autonomy, rather than requiring mere acceptance, should be understood as requiring acceptance of reasons that are based on principles that they would give to themselves as free and equal. Since they would not give themselves a comprehensive doctrine, deciding political issues on the basis of reasons that depend on such a view does not realize justificatory autonomy. This implies that the members of the majority in *The Divided Society* are not, after all, able to realize full political autonomy. Therefore, they would not be

¹⁶Note that since this is a purely political conception of political autonomy, the way of defending the idea of public reason that follows below is fully compatible with political liberalism. Hence, even if, as Quong has argued, we "cannot ground a commitment to public reason in the role that autonomy plays in expressing our rational nature" (Quong, 2014, p. 271), we can ground it in the role that it plays in expressing our freedom and equality as citizens. I am grateful to Neufeld for pressing me to clarify this point.

¹⁷For a more thorough and detailed exposition of the Rawlsian account of autonomy, see Weithman (2017).

¹⁸An alternative, and very different, view would be to sever the connection to actual acceptance entirely. But apart from this not being Rawls's view, and a less plausible one, it would also mark a radical departure from the theory of Neufeld. Rather than prompting a significant revision of his view, it would require its wholesale rejection. The fact that the Rawlsian account proposed here preserves a limited role for actual acceptance thus makes it more closely related to the view of Neufeld.

made worse off, in terms of their political autonomy, by the adoption of a practice of public reason. Even if most of them remain unreasonable and reject such a policy, the value of political autonomy gives us no reason to allow them to continue their practice of deciding political issues on the basis of reasons that depend on their comprehensive doctrine. Political autonomy understood in this way gives us no reason to oppose public reason in non-well-ordered circumstances, and hence, the problem identified above is entirely avoided.

Finally, a significant advantage of this view is that it supports a highly plausible account of what public reasons are. Public reasons are not identified by looking for what happens to be common ground between citizens in some particular society. Rather, they are reasons that, as Rawls puts it, citizens “as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse” (Rawls, 2005, p. 137). What they could reasonably be expected to endorse, in a moral sense, is not determined by what they happen to accept on the basis of their various beliefs and commitments. All may reasonably be expected to accept—even if in fact they will not—the reasons that they would (or could) give to themselves as free and equal citizens.¹⁹ Actual acceptance is thus not sufficient for realizing autonomy, and it is neither necessary nor sufficient for a reason to qualify as public.²⁰

5.2 A Community of Free and Equal Citizens

The account of political autonomy described above crucially depends on the ideal of citizens as free and equal. One of Rawls’s most fundamental assumptions is that it is in our interest to realize this ideal in our lives. It is precisely because he assumes that we have such an interest that the parties in the original position are described as being moved, not only to secure the means necessary for citizens to effectively pursue their conceptions of the good, but also to “guarantee the political and social conditions for citizens [...] to exercise the moral powers that characterize them as free and equal” (Rawls, 2005, p. 76). Only so can it be ensured that citizens can live as, and hence realize the ideal of, free and equal citizens.

This interest in living as a free and equal citizen can, in the following way, provide the basis for an account of a valuable kind of community. Our interest in realizing the ideal of a free and equal citizen can, as Paul Weithman puts it, be described as “a desire to live our whole lives as such beings”, and therefore as a desire that is “fulfilled continuously in our deliberation and action” (Weithman, 2010, p. 105). It is by conforming to the standards of the ideal in one’s life that one can realize or express the ideal. But, importantly, one can only live up to the standards of the ideal in the proper circumstances. The nature of the ideal is such that one cannot realize it on one’s own. It is an essentially *social* ideal, in the sense that one can only succeed in living as a free and equal citizen together with others. Samuel Freeman expresses this point as follows:

Free and equal moral persons all have, in addition to their diverse ends and worldviews, a fundamental social interest (their sense of justice) in cooperating with one another on publicly justifiable terms that express their conception of themselves as free and equal. This

¹⁹However, a complication is this: if we say that public reasons are reasons derived from the principles that we would give to ourselves in the original position, it seems as if public reasons are too tightly connected to the two principles of justice as fairness. If we find such a result troubling we could, as suggested by Weithman (2017, p. 114), relax Rawls’s view so that it merely requires that we act on principles that we *could* (rather than would) give ourselves as free and equal. We could perhaps give ourselves any principles within a certain range, where this range is identified as those principles that are part of the Rawlsian family of liberal political conceptions of justice. In a slight modification of Rawls’s view, we would then not say that different political conceptions of justice result in “different contents of public reason” (Rawls, 2005, p. 451); rather, we would say that the content of public reason is fixed by the content of the political conceptions that are part of the family of liberal political conceptions of justice.

²⁰Understanding public reasons in this way is uncommon, but see Weithman (2010, p. 314) and Hartley and Watson (2018, p. 48, 63) for what I take to be similar views. For a related view, but one formulated in terms of the kind of justifiability to all citizens that is required for political legitimacy, see Andersson (2022).

interest is social, since it cannot be achieved by single individuals but requires coordination of activities. (Freeman, 2007a, pp. 33–34)

As I understand it, this social interest in cooperating with others is explained by the interest in realizing the ideal of a free and equal citizen. In particular, it is explained by the part of this ideal that involves our capacity to be reasonable. We “express” this part of the ideal in our actions by how we relate to others, and it is characteristic of a reasonable citizen to relate to others in a certain way; reasonable citizen “desire for its own sake a social world in which they, as free and equal, can cooperate with others on terms all can accept” (Rawls, 2005, p. 50). This aspect of our nature as reasonable citizens is something that we can only fully express in cooperation with others. Hence, it is only in that social context that we can, by acting and deliberating according to the standards of the ideal, *live as free and equal citizens*.

The interest in realizing the ideal of free and equal citizens thus gives rise to a social interest in realizing a certain kind of political community together with others. In such a community—a community of free and equal citizens, as we may call it—citizens treat each other as free and equal by cooperating on terms that all can accept as such citizens. These terms are, as explained in the previous section, those that they would give to themselves as free and equal. And in line with the account of public reasons I have suggested, a community of free and equal citizens would settle political questions on the basis of reasons that all can reasonably be expected to endorse as such citizens. If they fail to do so and instead make political decisions on the basis of their various comprehensive doctrines, they will not treat each other in the way necessary to realize a community of free and equal citizens.

We can thus see that the Rawlsian account of free and equal citizens implies that it is in our interest to realize a certain kind of community. Political community, in this sense, requires, not merely a practice of appealing to mutually acceptable reasons, but a practice of deciding political questions on the basis of public reasons. Therefore, this is a kind of political community that a majority cannot realize by a joint commitment to settle political issues on the basis of reasons that depend on their comprehensive doctrine. For them, just as for everyone else, the only way to enjoy this valuable form of community is by adhering to the idea of public reason. Hence, appealing to the value of this kind of political community—a value that is explained by our interest in living as free and equal citizens—as a justification for public reason completely avoids the problem that arises for Leland and van Wietmarschen’s view.

Finally, let me emphasize that my view does not imply that the value of political community must be explained *solely* in terms of our interest in living as free and equal citizens. Political community might, for all that I have argued here, be valuable for other reasons as well. But I have suggested that our interest in living as free and equal citizens is one of our most important interests, and that is what explains why political community on the basis of public reason is a more valuable form of community than the alternatives.

6. Concluding Remarks

I have argued that two recently proposed justifications of public reason—the autonomy-based one developed by Neufeld, and the community-based one provided by Leland and van Wietmarschen—are unsuccessful. Though they may appear promising at first glance, this impression quickly dissolves once we carefully consider how they fare in the kind of non-ideal scenarios here provided. Though they will perhaps offer justifications of public reason in highly ideal scenarios, the more likely outcome in our present circumstances is that they will provide reasons to oppose rather than to support public reason. Insofar as proponents of public reason find that conclusion difficult to accept—as I think that they should—they would do well to look elsewhere for a justification of their view.

But that they should look elsewhere does not imply that they should completely reject the idea of justifying public reason by appeals to political autonomy and political community. Indeed, as I have here suggested, I believe that Rawls's work provides alternative conceptions of both notions. These conceptions make public reason necessary for their full realization, which provides the significant advantage that no matter how unreasonable people are, it will still be the case that the value of political autonomy and political community gives us reason to promote public reason. To be sure, this does not mean that these conceptions will make it easier or more likely that a practice of public reason will be realized. But the distinctive advantage of my suggested view is that it explains why we should be concerned with realizing public reason even in conditions where most people are united in their acceptance of non-public reasoning; no matter how widespread the acceptance of it, non-public reasoning will not make political autonomy and political community, in the forms we should be concerned with, possible.

Of course, I have here not attempted to show that these alternative conceptions are the only ones that may enjoy this significant advantage. What I have attempted to do is merely to provide alternative conceptions that are, for the reasons explained above, preferable to the ones previously suggested in the public reason literature. Even if one doubts the soundness of these conceptions, one could nevertheless see them as providing useful examples of how we should understand the relation between public reason and the ideals or values that we think might justify it. By seeing the shortcomings of the earlier proposals and these examples of how to avoid them, we may reach a clearer vision of the general form that a successful justification of public reason should take.

But since these conceptions are based on ideas fundamental to the Rawlsian project, they should at least appeal to all proponents of public reason who view their work as being broadly speaking Rawlsian. For them, I hope that I have made it clear that I do not intend my arguments here as mere refutations. Rather, I think of them as friendly suggestions with regard to how these appeals to political autonomy and political community can be revised so as to contribute to a more robust justification of public reason.

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