

Reviews

Public Reason and Political Autonomy: Realizing the Ideal of a Civic People by Blain Neufeld (Routledge, 2022).

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To ground political decisions in public reason is to justify them based on arguments that are acceptable to all reasonable persons, despite all their disagreements about religion, what a flourishing human life looks like, deep philosophical issues, and other so-called ‘comprehensive’ matters. The idea that political decision-making should be governed by public reason is a popular one that goes back at least to John Rawls (1993). However, it is also a complex one. Therefore, to defend and make sense of it, its supporters need to settle a great many questions. Among other things, those questions concern what, if anything, justifies the ideal of public reason, the scope of issues of law and policy that public reason applies to, what the structure of authentically public arguments looks like, and what the normative implications of the best account of public reason are when it comes to tackling specific political problems.

The number, complexity, and interconnectedness of such questions explain why in the last decade or so, many competing book-length treatments of how we should understand public reason have appeared. Blain Neufeld’s *Public Reason and Political Autonomy* constitutes an original addition to this line of work, providing interesting answers to all the questions I mentioned in the previous paragraph and entering debates with other public reason liberals as well as critics of public reason.

Neufeld frames his book’s argument primarily around the issue of what the correct justification for public reason is, which dominates Chapters 1 and 2. His agenda is similar to that of Andrew Lister’s *Public Reason and Political Community*, which is associated with the important argument that public reasoning is necessary to create a relationship of civic friendship through which fellow citizens can make decisions as one despite wide-ranging comprehensive disagreement (Lister, 2013). Neufeld’s own position is not far from Lister’s; its novelty lies in the attempt to develop an ecumenical justification that brings together civic friendship with other traditional arguments for public reason, drawing on autonomy and respect for persons.

This justification relies on Neufeld’s analytical work distinguishing three different senses in which a Rawlsian account of public reason represents an ideal of autonomy. First, it calls for ‘institutional autonomy’ in that deciding constitutional essentials based on public reason involves assigning to every person in society the right to vote,

run for office, and otherwise participate as equal contributors to political decision-making. Second, it requires that at least the most important political decisions be made based on arguments that all reasonable persons can accept, protecting their ‘justificatory autonomy’. Third, a society where citizens obey public reason also secures their ‘shared autonomy’, because they all share and acknowledge in each other a commitment to make decisions that can be reasonably accepted by all (pp. 27–29). According to Neufeld, this third generally overlooked element makes public reasoning into the reasoning of a collective agent in Michael Bratman’s sense of the term, creating a ‘civic people’ with shared intentions (pp. 51–56). In turn, this strengthens the view that public reason is justified by its ability to create a strong relationship of togetherness, or civic friendship, despite comprehensive disagreement. For Neufeld, this relationship is intrinsically important. Moreover, given that public reasoning expresses respect for every person decision-makers justify themselves to, the civic friendship it creates also has the instrumental value of being conducive to self-respect (pp. 71–78).

Public reason has many critics. Therefore, part of justifying it is pushing back against public reason’s foes. For instance, one of the main purposes of Jonathan Quong’s highly influential *Liberalism without Perfection* is to criticise liberal perfectionism, i.e., the idea that liberal democratic institutions are justified not because they are generally acceptable among reasonable persons but because they enable individuals to pursue the good life (Quong, 2011). Interestingly, Neufeld does not believe that public reason should be defined in terms of neutrality and therefore pays little attention to the long-standing debate with liberal perfectionists (pp. 5–6). However, he builds on his civic people account of public reason to add to the many objections that broadly Rawlsian public reason liberals have levelled at another classical opponent of theirs, i.e., the framework of ‘convergence’ public justification. This framework posits that to be legitimate, political decisions should be widely acceptable in society. However, different individuals are allowed to support a decision based on completely different idiosyncratic reasons that each can derive from their religious or otherwise comprehensive doctrine (Gaus, 2011). In contrast, Rawlsian public reason liberals call for reasons that build on shared ground among reasonable persons. Among other things, Neufeld argues that convergence public justification is an ideal for ‘subjects’ to political power, not ‘co-sovereigns’. Indeed, given how demanding it is to check that every political decision one contributes to can be justified based on a convergence of all comprehensive doctrines in society, most citizens

Reviews

will have to be relegated to a passive role in the democratic process (pp. 68–71).

More distinctively, Neufeld addresses several classic objections to the Rawlsian idea that examining how an ideally liberal ‘well-ordered’ society would function is essential to understanding what we should do (and how we should reason about political issues) in non-ideal real-world societies (pp. 39–43). This is linked to Chapter 3’s positive effort to explain what the inner structure of public reasons looks like specifically when those reasons are voiced in non-ideal circumstances by actors striving to stop an injustice. This focus on the interaction between ideal and non-ideal levels of thinking represents one of the most characteristic elements of Neufeld’s approach to public reason, which he has already explored in some of his previous works (see, e.g., Neufeld and Watson, 2018).

Here Neufeld’s argument is that surely ‘local ideal theorising’ and in some cases ‘full ideal theorising’ follow from any attempt to fight any present-day injustice based on public reason’s commitment to only supporting reforms that every other reasonable person can find acceptable. Local ideal theorising is unavoidable because political actors will have to imagine and pitch to others an improved version of their society that is reformed so as to ameliorate the unjust situation in question. Moreover, if the fight is fought in accordance with public reason, they will imagine that version of their society to secure the free compliance of reasonable persons with the change that is being sought, given that reasonable persons can be expected to find it acceptable (pp. 83–87). Turning to full ideal theorising, provided that the actors in question are interested in improving multiple aspects of their society, they will have to check the mutual compatibility of all their proposed reforms, leading, at the limit, to an ideal picture of a fully just society (87–89). Part of Neufeld’s argument is that even staunch opponents of ideal theory like Elizabeth Anderson and Gerald Gaus effectively already accept local ideal theorising. This, however, seems like a double-edged sword for him, reinforcing the suspicion that a way of reasoning about political change that steers so clear of the well-ordered society should not count as ideal theory at all.

In the last few years, feminist approaches to public reason liberalism have constituted one of its most important growth areas. Exemplified among others by Lori Watson and Christie Hartley’s *Equal Citizenship and Public Reason* and Gina Schouten’s *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labour*, such approaches aim to show (among other things) that working from within a public reason framework leads to surprisingly gender-egalitarian

normative recommendations (Watson and Hartley, 2018; Schouten, 2019). Chapters 4 and 5 of Neufeld's book discuss many characteristic issues of this literature. For instance, he argues that some, but not other, 'aspects' of the institution of the family are part of the basic structure of institutions that are subject to justice and should therefore be shaped as required by public reason through coercive state power (p. 105). This is a mid-way approach that is meant to enable the liberal state to push for gender equality in the family while leaving families enough freedom to pass (within certain limits) their favoured comprehensive doctrines on to their children. Relatedly, Neufeld investigates what sort of citizenship education students should receive, arguing that it should limit itself to socialising younger generations into strictly political virtues like reasonableness. In contrast, it should let individuals free, e.g., to take their church's word for important matters about their personal conduct, given that those matters fall in the comprehensive realm (pp. 128–36).

To conclude, *Public Reason and Political Autonomy* provides a stimulating addition to the tradition of wide-ranging books about public reason. However, there are some argumentative moves that I do not find fully convincing. For instance, I am somewhat sceptical of Neufeld's choice of giving pride of place to the question of the justification of public reason. In my view, there is room to argue that public reason liberals simply should not worry about identifying the single best justification for their framework. At the end of the day, public reason liberalism is centred around bracketing all foundational questions of value that reach any deeper than widely acceptable reasonable political ideas. Moreover, I do not think that Neufeld's civic people justification for public reason does much work in linking together (and with the rest of the book) Chapters 3, 4 and 5's important discussions about ideal and non-ideal theory, the family, and education. Indeed, it seems to me that such discussions could stand independently of Neufeld's preferred approach to justification.

I believe that Neufeld's book will be an interesting read for anyone working on public reason. In the future, however, public reason liberals might want to consider building their book projects around slightly different centres of gravity. For instance, taking inspiration from Neufeld's current research, political activism in non-ideal circumstances might well turn out to work better than the old problem of how to justify public reason to the unconvinced (Neufeld, *forthcoming*).

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Reviews

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The Anscombean Mind by Adrian Haddock and Rachael Wiseman (eds.) (Routledge, 2022). *Routledge Philosophical Minds* series.

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