Introduction

The idea of public reason, as I understand it,[1] belongs to a conception of a well ordered constitutional
Democratic society. The form and content of this reason—the way it is understood by citizens and how it interprets their political relationship—is part of the idea of democracy itself. This is because a basic feature of democracy is the fact of reasonable pluralism—the fact that a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of its culture of free institutions. Citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines. In view of this, they need to consider what kinds of reasons they may reasonably give one another when fundamental political questions are at stake. I propose that in public reason comprehensive doctrines of truth or right be replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens.

Central to the idea of public reason is that it neither criticizes nor attacks any comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, except insofar as that doctrine is incompatible with the essentials of public reason and a democratic polity. The basic requirement is that a reasonable doctrine accepts a constitutional democratic regime and its companion idea of legitimate law. While democratic societies will differ in the specific doctrines that are influential and active within them—as they differ in the western democracies of Europe and the United States, Israel, and India—finding a suitable idea of public reason is a concern that faces them all.

§ I: The Idea of Public Reason

1. The idea of public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government’s relation to its citizens and their relation to one another. In short, it concerns how the political relation is to be understood. Those who reject constitutional democracy with its criterion of reciprocity will of course reject the very idea of public reason. For them the political relation may be that of friend or foe, to those of a particular religious or secular community or those who are not; or it may be a relentless struggle to win the world for the whole truth. Political liberalism does not engage those who think this way. The zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reason that belongs with democratic citizenship.

The idea of public reason has a definite structure, and if one or more of its aspects are ignored it can seem implausible, as it does when applied to the background culture. It has five different aspects: (1) the fundamental political questions to which it applies; (2) the persons to whom it applies (government officials and candidates for public office); (3) its content as given by a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice; (4) the application of these conceptions in discussions of coercive norms to be enacted in the form of legitimate law for a democratic people; and (5) citizens’ checking that the principles derived from their conceptions of justice satisfy the criterion of reciprocity.

Moreover, such reason is public in three ways: as the reason of free and equal citizens, it is the reason
of the public; its subject is the public good concerning questions of fundamental political justice, which questions are of two kinds, constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice; and its nature and content are public, being expressed in public reasoning by a family of reasonable conceptions of political justice reasonably thought to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity.

It is imperative to realize that the idea of public reason does not apply to all political discussions of fundamental questions, but only to discussions of those questions in what I refer to as the public political forum. This forum may be divided into three parts: the discourse of judges in their decisions, and especially of the judges of a supreme court; the discourse of government officials, especially chief executives and legislators; and finally, the discourse of candidates for public office and their campaign managers, especially in their public oratory, party platforms, and political statements. We need this three-part division because, as I note later, the idea of public reason does not apply in the same way in these three cases and elsewhere. In discussing what I call the wide view of public political culture, we shall see that the idea of public reason applies more strictly to judges than to others, but that the requirements of public justification for that reason are always the same.

Distinct and separate from this three-part public political forum is what I call the background culture. This is the culture of civil society. In a democracy, this culture is not, of course, guided by any one central idea or principle, whether political or religious. Its many and diverse agencies and associations with their internal life reside within a framework of law that ensures the familiar liberties of thought and speech, and the right of free association. The idea of public reason does not apply to the background culture with its many forms of nonpublic reason nor to media of any kind. Sometimes those who appear to reject the idea of public reason actually mean to assert the need for full and open discussion in the background culture. With this political liberalism fully agrees.

Finally, distinct from the idea of public reason, as set out by the five features above, is the ideal of public reason. This ideal is realized, or satisfied, whenever judges, legislators, chief executives, and other government officials, as well as candidates for public office, act from and follow the idea of public reason and explain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable. In this way they fulfill what I shall call their duty of civility to one another and to other citizens. Hence, whether judges, legislators, and chief executives act from and follow public reason is continually shown in their speech and conduct on a daily basis.

How though is the ideal of public reason realized by citizens who are not government officials? In a representative government citizens vote for representatives—chief executives, legislators, and the like—and not for particular laws (except at a state or local level when they may vote directly on referenda questions, which are rarely fundamental questions). To answer this question, we say that ideally citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact. When firm and widespread, the disposition of citizens to view themselves as ideal legislators, and to repudiate government officials and candidates for public office who violate public reason, is one of the political and social roots of democracy, and is vital to its enduring strength and vigor. Thus citizens fulfill their duty of civility to one another and to other citizens. Hence, whether judges, legislators, and chief executives act from and follow public reason is continually shown in their speech and conduct on a daily basis.

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2. I now turn to a discussion of what I have labeled the third, fourth, and fifth aspects of public reason. The idea of public reason arises from a conception of democratic citizenship in a constitutional democracy. This fundamental political relation of citizenship has two special features: first, it is a relation of citizens within the basic structure of society, a structure we enter only by birth and exit only by death; and second, it is a relation of free and equal citizens who exercise ultimate political power as a collective body. These two features immediately give rise to the question of how, when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake, citizens so related can be bound to honor the structure of their constitutional democratic regime and abide by the statutes and laws enacted under it. The fact of reasonable pluralism raises this question all the more sharply, since it means that the differences between citizens arising from their comprehensive doctrines, religious and nonreligious, may be irreconcilable. By what ideals and principles, then, are citizens who share equally in ultimate political power to exercise that power so that each can reasonably justify his or her political decisions to everyone?

To answer this question we say: Citizens are reasonable when, viewing one another as free and equal in a system of social cooperation over generations, they are prepared to offer one another fair terms of cooperation according to what they consider the most reasonable conception of political justice; and when they agree to act on those terms, even at the cost of their own interests in particular situations, provided that other citizens also accept those terms. The criterion of reciprocity requires that when those terms are proposed as the most reasonable terms of fair cooperation, those proposing them must also think it at least reasonable for others to accept them, as free and equal citizens, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position. Citizens will of course differ as to which conceptions of political justice they think the most reasonable, but they will agree that all are reasonable, even if barely so.

Thus when, on a constitutional essential or matter of basic justice, all appropriate government officials act from and follow public reason, and when all reasonable citizens think of themselves ideally as if they were legislators following public reason, the legal enactment expressing the opinion of the majority is legitimate law. It may not be thought the most reasonable, or the most appropriate, by each, but it is politically (morally) binding on him or her as a citizen and is to be accepted as such. Each thinks that all have spoken and voted at least reasonably, and therefore all have followed public reason and honored their duty of civility.

Hence the idea of political legitimacy based on the criterion of reciprocity says: Our exercise of political power is proper only when we sincerely believe that the reasons we would offer for our political actions—were we to state them as government officials—are sufficient, and we also reasonably think that other citizens might also reasonably accept those reasons. This criterion applies on two levels: one is to the constitutional structure itself, the other is to particular statutes and laws enacted in accordance with that structure. To be reasonable, political conceptions must justify only constitutions that satisfy this principle.

To make more explicit the role of the criterion of reciprocity as expressed in public reason, note that its role is to specify the nature of the political relation in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship. For this criterion, when government officers act from it in their public reasoning and other citizens support it, shapes the form of their fundamental institutions. . . . The criterion of reciprocity is nor-
mally violated whenever basic liberties are denied. For what reasons can both satisfy the criterion of reciprocity and justify denying to some persons religious liberty, holding others as slaves, imposing a property qualification on the right to vote, or denying the right of suffrage to women?

Since the idea of public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic political values and specifies how the political relation is to be understood, those who believe that fundamental political questions should be decided by what they regard as the best reasons according to their own idea of the whole truth—including their religious or secular comprehensive doctrine—and not by reasons that might be shared by all citizens as free and equal, will of course reject the idea of public reason. Political liberalism views this insistence on the whole truth in politics as incompatible with democratic citizenship and the idea of legitimate law.

§ 2: The Content of Public Reason

1. A citizen engages in public reason, then, when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens might also reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse. Each of us must have principles and guidelines to which we appeal in such a way that this criterion is satisfied. I have proposed that one way to identify those political principles and guidelines is to show that they would be agreed to in what in Political Liberalism is called the original position. Others will think that different ways to identify these principles are more reasonable.

Thus, the content of public reason is given by a family of political conceptions of justice, and not by a single one. There are many liberalisms and related views, and therefore many forms of public reason specified by a family of reasonable political conceptions. Of these, justice as fairness, whatever its merits, is but one. The limiting feature of these forms is the criterion of reciprocity, viewed as applied between free and equal citizens, themselves seen as reasonable and rational. Three main features characterize these conceptions:

First, a list of certain basic rights, liberties, and opportunities (such as those familiar from constitutional regimes);
Second, an assignment of special priority to those rights, liberties, and opportunities, especially with respect to the claims of the general good and perfectionist values; and

Third, measures ensuring for all citizens adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their freedoms. [21]

Each of these liberalisms endorses the underlying ideas of citizens as free and equal persons and of society as a fair system of cooperation over time. Yet since these ideas can be interpreted in various ways, we get different formulations of the principles of justice and different contents of public reason. Political conceptions differ also in how they order, or balance, political principles and values even when they specify the same ones. I assume also that these liberalisms contain substantive principles of justice, and hence cover more than procedural justice. They are required to specify the religious liberties and freedoms of artistic expression of equal citizens, as well as substantive ideas of fairness involving fair opportunity and ensuring adequate all-purpose means, and much else. [22]

Political liberalism, then, does not try to fix public reason once and for all in the form of one favored political conception of justice. [23] That would not be a sensible approach. For instance, political liberalism also admits Habermas’s discourse conception of legitimacy (sometimes said to be radically democratic rather than liberal), [24] as well as Catholic views of the common good and solidarity when they are expressed in terms of political values. [25] Even if relatively few conceptions come to dominate over time, and one conception even appears to have a special central place, the forms of permissible public reason are always several. Moreover, new variations may be proposed from time to time and older ones may cease to be represented. It is important that this be so; otherwise the claims of groups or interests arising from social change might be repressed and fail to gain their appropriate political voice. [26]

2. We must distinguish public reason from what is sometimes referred to as secular reason and secular values. These are not the same as public reason. For I define secular reason as reasoning in terms of comprehensive nonreligious doctrines. Such doctrines and values are much too broad to serve the purposes of public reason. Political values are not moral doctrines, [27] however available or accessible these may be to our reason and common sense reflection. Moral doctrines are on a level with religion and first philosophy. By contrast, liberal political principles and values, although intrinsically moral values, are specified by liberal political conceptions of justice and fall under the category of the political. These political conceptions have three features:

First, their principles apply to basic political and social institutions (the basic structure of society);

Second, they can be presented independently from comprehensive doctrines of any kind (although they may, of course, be supported by a reasonable overlapping consensus of such doctrines); and

Finally, they can be worked out from fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a constitutional regime, such as the conceptions of citizens as free and equal persons, and of society as
a fair system of cooperation.

Thus, the content of public reason is given by the principles and values of the family of liberal political conceptions of justice meeting these conditions. To engage in public reason is to appeal to one of these political conceptions—to their ideals and principles, standards and values—when debating fundamental political questions. This requirement still allows us to introduce into political discussion at any time our comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, provided that, in due course, we give properly public reasons to support the principles and policies our comprehensive doctrine is said to support. I refer to this requirement as the proviso, and consider it in detail below.

A feature of public reasoning, then, is that it proceeds entirely within a political conception of justice. Examples of political values include those mentioned in the preamble to the United States Constitution: a more perfect union, justice, domestic tranquillity, the common defense, the general welfare, and the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity. These include under them other values: so, for example, under justice we also have equal basic liberties, equality of opportunity, ideals concerning the distribution of income and taxation, and much else.

The political values of public reason are distinct from other values in that they are realized in and characterize political institutions. This does not mean that analogous values cannot characterize other social forms. The values of effectiveness and efficiency may characterize the social organization of teams and clubs, as well as the political institutions of the basic structure of society. But a value is properly political only when the social form is itself political: when it is realized, say, in parts of the basic structure and its political and social institutions. It follows that many political conceptions are non-liberal, including those of aristocracy and corporate oligarchy, and of autocracy and dictatorship. All of these fall within the category of the political. We, however, are concerned only with those political conceptions that are reasonable for a constitutional democratic regime, and as the preceding paragraphs make clear, these are the ideals and principles expressed by reasonable liberal political conceptions.

5. . . . A view often expressed is that while religious reasons and sectarian doctrines should not be invoked to justify legislation in a democratic society, sound secular arguments may be. But what is a secular argument? Some think of any argument that is reflective and critical, publicly intelligible and rational, as a secular argument; and they discuss various such arguments for considering, say, homosexual relations unworthy or degrading. Of course, some of these arguments may be reflective and rational secular ones (as so defined). Nevertheless, a central feature of political liberalism is that it views all such arguments the same way it views religious ones, and therefore these secular philosophical doctrines do not provide public reasons. Secular concepts and reasoning of this kind belong to first philosophy and moral doctrine, and fall outside of the domain of the political.

. . .
§ 3: Religion and Public Reason in Democracy

2. . . . How is it possible—or is it—for those of faith, as well as the nonreligious (secular), to endorse a constitutional regime even when their comprehensive doctrines may not prosper under it, and indeed may decline? Here the answer lies in the religious or nonreligious doctrine’s understanding and accepting that, except by endorsing a reasonable constitutional democracy, there is no other way fairly to ensure the liberty of its adherents consistent with the equal liberties of other reasonable free and equal citizens. In endorsing a constitutional democratic regime, a religious doctrine may say that such are the limits God sets to our liberty; a nonreligious doctrine will express itself otherwise. But in either case, these doctrines formulate in different ways how liberty of conscience and the principle of toleration can cohere with equal justice for all citizens in a reasonable democratic society. Thus, the principles of toleration and liberty of conscience must have an essential place in any constitutional democratic conception. They lay down the fundamental basis to be accepted by all citizens as fair and regulative of the rivalry between doctrines.

Observe here that there are two ideas of toleration. One is purely political, being expressed in terms of the rights and duties protecting religious liberty in accordance with a reasonable political conception of justice. The other is not purely political but expressed from within a religious or a nonreligious doctrine, as when, for example, it was said above that such are the limits God sets on our liberty. Saying this offers an example of what I call reasoning from conjecture. In this case we reason from what we believe, or conjecture, may be other people’s basic doctrines, religious or philosophical, and seek to show them that, despite what they might think, they can still endorse a reasonable political conception of justice. We are not ourselves asserting that ground of toleration but offering it as one they could assert consistent with their comprehensive doctrines.

§ 4: The Wide View of Public Political Culture

1. Now we consider what I call the wide view of public political culture and discuss two aspects of it. The first is that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, may be introduced in public political discussion at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons—and not reasons
given solely by comprehensive doctrines—are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines introduced are said to support. This injunction to present proper political reasons I refer to as the proviso, and it specifies public political culture as distinct from the background culture. The second aspect I consider is that there may be positive reasons for introducing comprehensive doctrines into public political discussion. I take up these two aspects in turn.

Obviously, many questions may be raised about how to satisfy the proviso. Yet the details about how to satisfy this proviso must be worked out in practice and cannot feasibly be governed by a clear family of rules given in advance. How they work out is determined by the nature of the public political culture and calls for good sense and understanding. It is important also to observe that the introduction into public political culture of religious and secular doctrines, provided the proviso is met, does not change the nature and content of justification in public reason itself. This justification is still given in terms of a family of reasonable political conceptions of justice. However, there are no restrictions or requirements on how religious or secular doctrines are themselves to be expressed; these doctrines need not, for example, be by some standards logically correct, or open to rational appraisal, or evidentially supportable. Whether they are or not is a matter to be decided by those presenting them, and how they want what they say to be taken. They will normally have practical reasons for wanting to make their views acceptable to a broader audience.

3. Public reasoning aims for public justification. We appeal to political conceptions of justice, and to ascertaintable evidence and facts open to public view, in order to reach conclusions about what we think are the most reasonable political institutions and policies. Public justification is not simply valid reasoning, but argument addressed to others: it proceeds correctly from premises we accept and think others could reasonably accept to conclusions we think they could also reasonably accept. This meets the duty of civility, since in due course the proviso is satisfied.

§ 5: On the Family as Part of the Basic Structure

[Omitted]
§ 6: Questions About Public Reason

I now turn to various questions and doubts about the idea of public reason and try to allay them.

1. First, it may be objected that the idea of public reason would unreasonably limit the topics and considerations available for political argument and debate, and that we should adopt instead what we may call the open view with no constraints. I now discuss two examples to rebut this objection.

(a) One reason for thinking public reason is too restrictive is to suppose that it mistakenly tries to settle political questions in advance. . . . [discussion omitted]

(b) Others may think that public reason is too restrictive because it may lead to a stand-off and fail to bring about decisions on disputed issues. A stand-off in some sense may indeed happen, not only in moral and political reasoning but in all forms of reasoning, including science and common sense. Nevertheless, this is irrelevant. The relevant comparison is to those situations in which legislators enacting laws and judges deciding cases must make decisions. Here some political rule of action must be laid down and all must be able reasonably to endorse the process by which a decision is reached. Recall that public reason sees the office of citizen with its duty of civility as analogous to that of judge with its duty of deciding cases. Just as judges are to decide cases by legal grounds of precedent, recognized canons of statutory interpretation, and other relevant grounds, so citizens are to reason by public reason and to be guided by the criterion of reciprocity, whenever constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are at stake.

Thus, when there seems to be a stand-off, that is, when legal arguments seem evenly balanced on both sides, judges cannot resolve the case simply by appealing to their own political views. To do that is for judges to violate their duty. The same holds with public reason: if, when stand-offs occur, citizens simply invoke grounding reasons of their comprehensive views, the principle of reciprocity is violated. From the point of view of public reason, citizens must vote for the ordering of political values they sincerely think the most reasonable. Otherwise they fail to exercise political power in ways that satisfy the criterion of reciprocity.

In particular, when hotly disputed questions, such as that of abortion, arise which may lead to a stand-off between different political conceptions, citizens must vote on the question according to their complete ordering of political values. Indeed, this is a normal case: unanimity of views is not to be expected. Reasonable political conceptions of justice do not always lead to the same conclusion; nor do citizens holding the same conception always agree on particular issues. Yet the outcome of the vote,
as I said before, is to be seen as legitimate provided all government officials, supported by other reasonable citizens, of a reasonably just constitutional regime sincerely vote in accordance with the idea of public reason. This doesn’t mean the outcome is true or correct, but that it is reasonable and legitimate law, binding on citizens by the majority principle.

Some may, of course, reject a legitimate decision, as Roman Catholics may reject a decision to grant a right to abortion. They may present an argument in public reason for denying it and fail to win a majority. But they need not themselves exercise the right to abortion. They can recognize the right as belonging to legitimate law enacted in accordance with legitimate political institutions and public reason, and therefore not resist it with force. Forceful resistance is unreasonable: it would mean attempting to impose by force their own comprehensive doctrine that a majority of other citizens who follow public reason, not unreasonably, do not accept. Certainly Catholics may, in line with public reason, continue to argue against the right to abortion. Reasoning is not closed once and for all in public reason any more than it is closed in any form of reasoning. Moreover, that the Catholic Church’s nonpublic reason requires its members to follow its doctrine is perfectly consistent with their also honoring public reason.

2. Some of the considerations underlying the stand-off objection lead to a more general objection to public reason, namely, that the content of the family of reasonable political conceptions of justice on which it is based is itself much too narrow. This objection insists that we should always present what we think are true or grounding reasons for our views. That is, the objection insists, we are bound to express the true, or the right, as seen from our comprehensive doctrines.

However, as I said in the Introduction, in public reason ideas of truth or right based on comprehensive doctrines are replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens. This step is necessary to establish a basis of political reasoning that all can share as free and equal citizens. Since we are seeking public justifications for political and social institutions—for the basic structure of a political and social world—we think of persons as citizens. This assigns to each person the same basic political position. In giving reasons to all citizens we don’t view persons as socially situated or otherwise rooted, that is, as being in this or that social class, or in this or that property and income group, or as having this or that comprehensive doctrine. Nor are we appealing to each person’s or each group’s interests, though at some point we must take these interests into account. Rather, we think of persons as reasonable and rational, as free and equal citizens, with the two moral powers and having, at any given moment, a determinate conception of the good, which may change over time. These features of citizens are implicit in their taking part in a fair system of social cooperation and seeking and presenting public justifications for their judgments on fundamental political questions.

I emphasize that this idea of public reason is fully compatible with the many forms of nonpublic reason. These belong to the internal life of the many associations in civil society and they are not of
course all the same; different nonpublic reasons of different religious associations shared by their members are not those of scientific societies. Since we seek a shareable public basis of justification for all citizens in society, giving justifications to particular persons and groups here and there until all are covered fails to do this. To speak of all persons in society is still too broad, unless we suppose that they are in their nature basically the same. In political philosophy one role of ideas about our nature has been to think of people in a standard, or canonical, fashion so that they might all accept the same kind of reasons. In political liberalism, however, we try to avoid natural or psychological views of this kind, as well as theological or secular doctrines. Accounts of human nature we put aside and rely on a political conception of persons as citizens instead.

3. As I have stressed throughout, it is central to political liberalism that free and equal citizens affirm both a comprehensive doctrine and a political conception. However, the relation between a comprehensive doctrine and its accompanying political conception is easily misunderstood.

When political liberalism speaks of a reasonable overlapping consensus of comprehensive doctrines, it means that all of these doctrines, both religious and nonreligious, support a political conception of justice underwriting a constitutional democratic society whose principles, ideals, and standards satisfy the criterion of reciprocity. Thus, all reasonable doctrines affirm such a society with its corresponding political institutions: equal basic rights and liberties for all citizens, including liberty of conscience and the freedom of religion. On the other hand, comprehensive doctrines that cannot support such a democratic society are not reasonable. Their principles and ideals do not satisfy the criterion of reciprocity, and in various ways they fail to establish the equal basic liberties. As examples, consider the many fundamentalist religious doctrines, the doctrine of the divine right of monarchs and the various forms of aristocracy, and, not to be overlooked, the many instances of autocracy and dictatorship.

Moreover, a true judgment in a reasonable comprehensive doctrine never conflicts with a reasonable judgment in its related political conception. A reasonable judgment of the political conception must still be confirmed as true, or right, by the comprehensive doctrine. It is, of course, up to citizens themselves to affirm, revise, or change their comprehensive doctrines. Their doctrines may override or count for naught the political values of a constitutional democratic society. But then the citizens cannot claim that such doctrines are reasonable. Since the criterion of reciprocity is an essential ingredient specifying public reason and its content, political liberalism rejects as unreasonable all such doctrines.

In a reasonable comprehensive doctrine, in particular a religious one, the ranking of values may not be what we might expect. Thus, suppose we call transcendent such values as salvation and eternal life—the Visio Dei. This value, let’s say, is higher, or superior to, the reasonable political values of a constitutional democratic society. These are worldly values and therefore on a different, and as it were lower, plane than those transcendent values. It doesn’t follow, however, that these lower yet reasonable values are overridden by the transcendent values of the religious doctrine. In fact, a reasonable comprehensive doctrine is one in which they are not overridden; it is the unreasonable doctrines in which reasonable political values are overridden. This is a consequence of the idea of the politically reasonable as set out in political liberalism. Recall that it was said: In endorsing a constitutional democratic regime, a religious doctrine may say that such are the limits God sets to our liberty.
A further misunderstanding alleges that an argument in public reason could not side with Lincoln against Douglas in their debates of 1858. But why not? Certainly they were debating fundamental political principles about the rights and wrongs of slavery. Since the rejection of slavery is a clear case of securing the constitutional essential of the equal basic liberties, surely Lincoln’s view was reasonable (even if not the most reasonable), while Douglas’s was not. Therefore, Lincoln’s view is supported by any reasonable comprehensive doctrine. It is no surprise, then, that his view is in line with the religious doctrines of the Abolitionists and the Civil Rights Movement. What could be a better example to illustrate the force of public reason in political life?

4. A third general objection is that the idea of public reason is unnecessary and serves no purpose in a well established constitutional democracy. . . .

However, this objection is incorrect and sociologically faulty. For without citizens’ allegiance to public reason and their honoring the duty of civility, divisions and hostilities between doctrines are bound in time to assert themselves, should they not already exist. . . .

§ 7: Conclusion

1. Throughout, I have been concerned with a torturing question in the contemporary world, namely: Can democracy and comprehensive doctrines, religious or nonreligious, be compatible? And if so, how? . . . To answer it political liberalism makes the distinction between a self-standing political conception of justice and a comprehensive doctrine. A religious doctrine resting on the authority of the Church or the Bible is not, of course, a liberal comprehensive doctrine: its leading religious and moral values are not those, say, of Kant or Mill. Nevertheless, it may endorse a constitutional democratic society and recognize its public reason. Here it is basic that public reason is a political idea and belongs to the category of the political. Its content is given by the family of (liberal) political conceptions of justice satisfying the criterion of reciprocity. It does not trespass upon religious beliefs and injunctions insofar as these are consistent with the essential constitutional liberties, including the freedom of religion and liberty of conscience. There is, or need be, no war between religion and democracy. In this respect political liberalism is sharply different from and rejects Enlightenment Liberalism, which historically attacked orthodox Christianity.

The conflicts between democracy and reasonable religious doctrines and among reasonable religious doctrines themselves are greatly mitigated and contained within the bounds of reasonable principles of justice in a constitutional democratic society. This mitigation is due to the idea of toleration, and I have distinguished between two such ideas. . . .
2. Reasonable comprehensive doctrines do not reject the essentials of a constitutional democratic polity. Moreover, reasonable persons are characterized in two ways: First, they stand ready to offer fair terms of social cooperation between equals, and they abide by these terms if others do also, even should it be to their advantage not to; second, reasonable persons recognize and accept the consequences of the burdens of judgment, which leads to the idea of reasonable toleration in a democratic society. Finally we come to the idea of legitimate law, which reasonable citizens understand to apply to the general structure of political authority. They know that in political life unanimity can rarely if ever be expected, so a reasonable democratic constitution must include majority or other plurality voting procedures in order to reach decisions.

I noted in the beginning the fact that every actual society, however dominant and controlling its reasonable citizens may be, will normally contain numerous unreasonable doctrines that are not compatible with a democratic society—either certain religious doctrines, such as fundamentalist religions, or certain nonreligious (secular) doctrines, such as those of autocracy and dictatorship, of which our century offers hideous examples. How far unreasonable doctrines may be active and are to be tolerated in a constitutional democratic regime does not present a new and different question, despite the fact that in this account of public reason we have focused on the idea of the reasonable and the role of reasonable citizens. There is not one account of toleration for reasonable doctrines and another for unreasonable ones. Both cases are settled by the appropriate political principles of justice and the conduct those principles permit. Unreasonable doctrines are a threat to democratic institutions, since it is impossible for them to abide by a constitutional regime except as a modus vivendi. Their existence sets a limit to the aim of fully realizing a reasonable democratic society with its ideal of public reason and the idea of legitimate law. This fact is not a defect or failure of the idea of public reason, but rather it indicates that there are limits to what public reason can accomplish. It does not diminish the great value and importance of attempting to realize that ideal to the fullest extent possible.

3. I end by pointing out the fundamental difference between A Theory of Justice and Political Liberalism. The first explicitly attempts to develop from the idea of the social contract, represented by Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, a theory of justice that is no longer open to objections often thought fatal to it, and that proves superior to the long dominant tradition of utilitarianism. A Theory of Justice hopes to present the structural features of such a theory so as to make it the best approximation to our considered judgments of justice and hence to give the most appropriate moral basis for a democratic society. Furthermore, justice as fairness is presented there as a comprehensive liberal doctrine (although the term “comprehensive doctrine” is not used in the book) in which all the members of its well ordered society affirm that same doctrine. This kind of well ordered society contradicts the fact of reasonable pluralism and hence Political Liberalism regards that society as impossible.

Thus, Political Liberalism considers a different question, namely: How is it possible for those affirming a comprehensive doctrine, religious or nonreligious, and in particular doctrines based on religious authority, such as the Church or the Bible, also to hold a reasonable political conception of justice that supports a constitutional democratic society? The political conceptions are seen as both liberal and self-standing and not as comprehensive, whereas the religious doctrines may be comprehensive but not liberal. The two books are asymmetrical, though both have an idea of public reason. In the first, public
reason is given by a comprehensive liberal doctrine, while in the second, public reason is a way of reasoning about political values shared by free and equal citizens that does not trespass on citizens’ comprehensive doctrines so long as those doctrines are consistent with a democratic polity. Thus, the well ordered constitutional democratic society of Political Liberalism is one in which the dominant and controlling citizens affirm and act from irreconcilable yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines. These doctrines in turn support reasonable political conceptions—although not necessarily the most reasonable—which specify the basic rights, liberties, and opportunities of citizens in society’s basic structure.

[1] See John Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture VI, § 8.5 (Columbia paperback ed 1996). References to Political Liberalism are given by lecture and section; page numbers are also provided unless the reference refers to an entire lecture, section, or subsection. Note that the 1996 paperback edition of Political Liberalism contains a new second introduction which, among other things, tries to make clearer certain aspects of political liberalism. Section 5 of this introduction, id at 1-lvii, discusses the idea of public reason and sketches several changes I now make in affirming this idea. These are all followed and elaborated in what is presented here and are important to a complete understanding of the argument. Note also that the pagination of the paperback edition is the same as the original.

[2] I shall use the term ‘doctrine’ for comprehensive views of all kinds and the term conception for a political conception and its component parts, such as the conception of the person as citizen. The term idea is used as a general term and may refer to either as the context determines.

[3] Of course, every society also contains numerous unreasonable doctrines. Yet in this essay I am concerned with an ideal normative conception of democratic government, that is, with the conduct of its reasonable citizens and the principles they follow, assuming them to be dominant and controlling. How far unreasonable doctrines are active and tolerated is to be determined by the principles of justice and the kinds of actions they permit. See § 7.2.


[7] These questions are described in Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture VI, § 5 at 22730 (cited in note 1). Constitutional essentials concern questions about what political rights and liberties, say, may reasonably be included in a written constitution, when assuming the constitution may be interpreted by a supreme court, or some similar body. Matters of basic justice relate to the basic structure of society and so would concern questions of basic economic and social justice and other things not covered by a constitution.

[8] There is no settled meaning of this term. The one I use is not I think peculiar.

[9] Here we face the question of where to draw the line between candidates and those who manage their campaigns and other politically engaged citizens generally. We settle this matter by making candidates and those who run their campaigns responsible for what is said and done on the candidates’ behalf.

Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture I, § 2.3 at 14 (cited in note 1).

The background culture includes, then, the culture of churches and associations of all kinds, and institutions of learning at all levels, especially universities and professional schools, scientific and other societies. In addition, the nonpublic political culture mediates between the public political culture and the background culture. This comprises media—properly so named—of all kinds: newspapers, reviews and magazines, TV and radio, and much else. Compare these divisions with Habermas's account of the public sphere. See Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture IX, § 1.3 at 382 n 13 (cited in note 1).

See Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture VI, § 3 at 220-22.

See David Hollenbach, S.J., Civil Society: Beyond the Public-Private Dichotomy, 5 The Responsive Community 15 (Winter 1994/95).


See also § 4.2.

Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture I, § 2.1 at 12 (cited in note 1). For concerns about exiting only by death, see id, lecture IV, § 1.2 at 136 n 4.

The idea of reciprocity has an important place in Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement chs 1-2 and passim (Belknap 1996). However, the meaning and setting of our views are not the same. Public reason in political liberalism is purely political, although political values are intrinsically moral, whereas Gutmann and Thompson's account is more general and seems to work from a comprehensive doctrine.

Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture I, § 4 at 22-28 (cited in note 1).

Here I follow the definition in Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture I, § 1.2 at 6, lecture IV, § 5.3 at 156-57 (cited in note 1).

Some may think the fact of reasonable pluralism means the only forms of fair adjudication between comprehensive doctrines must be only procedural and not substantive. This view is forcefully argued by Stuart Hampshire in Innocence and Experience (Harvard 1989). In the text above, however, I assume the several forms of liberalism are each substantive conceptions. For a thorough treatment of these issues, see the discussion in Joshua Cohen, Pluralism and Proceduralism, 69 Chi Kent L Rev 589 (1994).

I do think that justice as fairness has a certain special place in the family of political conceptions, as I suggest in Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture IV, § 7.4 (cited in note 1). But this opinion of mine is not basic to the ideas of political liberalism and public reason.


Deriving from Aristotle and St. Thomas, the idea of the common good is essential to much of Catholic moral and political thought. See, for example, John Finnis, Natural Law and Natural Rights 153-56, 160 (Clarendon 1980); Jacques Maritain, Man and the State 108-14 (Chicago 1951). Finnis is especially clear, while Aquinas is occasionally ambiguous.

Thus, Jeremy Waldron's criticism of political liberalism as not allowing new and changing conceptions

See note 2 for my definition of doctrine.

See § 4.

Here see Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture IX, § 1.1 at 374-75 (cited in note 1).


See the discussion by Michael Perry of John Finnis’s argument, which denies that such relations are compatible with human good. Religion in Politics: Constitutional and Moral Perspectives ch 3 at 85-86 (Oxford 1997).

An example of how a religion may do this is the following. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, in his book Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law 52-57 (Syracuse 1990), introduces the idea of reconsidering the traditional interpretation of Shari’a, which for Muslims is divine law. For his interpretation to be accepted by Muslims, it must be presented as the correct and superior interpretation of Shari’a. The basic idea of An-Na’im’s interpretation, following the late Sudanese author Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, is that the traditional understanding of Shari’a has been based on the teachings of the later Medina period of Muhammad, whereas the teachings of the earlier Mecca period of Muhammad are the eternal and fundamental message of Islam. An-Na’im claims that the superior Mecca teachings and principles were rejected in favor of the more realistic and practical (in a seventh-century historical context) Medina teachings because society was not yet ready for their implementation. Now that historical conditions have changed, An-Na’im believes that Muslims should follow the earlier Mecca period in interpreting Shari’a. So interpreted, he says that Shari’a supports constitutional democracy. Id at 69-100.

In particular, the earlier Mecca interpretation of Shari’a supports equality of men and women, and complete freedom of choice in matters of faith and religion, both of which are in accordance with the constitutional principle of equality before the law. An-Na’im writes:

The Qur’an does not mention constitutionalism, but human rational thinking and experience have shown that constitutionalism is necessary for realizing the just and good society prescribed by the Qur’an.

An Islamic justification and support for constitutionalism is important and relevant for Muslims. Non-Muslims may have their own secular or other justifications. As long as all are agreed on the principle and specific rules of constitutionalism, including complete equality and non-discrimination on grounds of gender or religion, each may have his or her own reasons for coming to that agreement.

Id at 100. (This is a perfect example of overlapping consensus.) I thank Akeel Bilgrami for informing me of An-Na’im’s work. I also owe thanks to Roy Mottahedeh for valuable discussion.

See § 4.3.

Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture I, § 2.3 at 13-14 (cited in note 1) (contrasting public political culture with background culture).

I am indebted here to valuable discussion with Dennis Thompson.

Greenawalt discusses Franklin Gamwell and Michael Perry, who do evidently impose such constraints
on how religion is to be presented. See Greenawalt, Private Consciences and Public Reasons at 85-95 (cited in note 35).

[37] I take the term from Philip Quinn. The idea appears in Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture VI, § 7.1-2 at 240-41 (cited in note 1).

[38] I use the term “grounding reasons” since many who might appeal to these reasons view them as the proper grounds, or the true basis—religious, philosophical, or moral—of the ideals and principles of public reasons and political conceptions of justice.

[39] Some have quite naturally read the footnote in Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture VI, § 7.2 at 243-44 (cited in note 1), as an argument for the right to abortion in the first trimester. I do not intend it to be one. (It does express my opinion, but my opinion is not an argument.) . . .

Rawls, Political Liberalism, lecture VI, § 7.1 at 240-41 (cited in note 1).


As far as I can see, this view is similar to Father John Courtney Murray’s position about the stand the Church should take in regard to contraception in We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition 157-58 (Sheed and Ward 1960). See also Mario Cuomo’s lecture on abortion in his Notre Dame Lecture of 1984, in More Than Words: The Speeches of Mario Cuomo 32-51 (St Martin’s 1993). I am indebted to Leslie Griffin and Paul Weithman for discussion and clarification about points involved in this and the preceding footnote and for acquainting me with Father Murray’s view.

[41] These two powers, the capacity for a conception of justice and the capacity for a conception of the good, are discussed in Rawls, Political Liberalism (cited in note 1). See especially id, lecture I, § 3.2 at 19, lecture II, § 7.1 at 81, lecture III, § 3.3 at 103-04, lecture III, § 4.1 at 108.

[42] Id, lecture VI, § 4 at 223-27.

Sometimes the term “normalize” is used in this connection. For example, persons have certain fundamental interests of a religious or philosophical kind; or else certain basic needs of a natural kind. Again, they may have a certain typical pattern of self-realization. A Thomist will say that we always desire above all else, even if unknown to ourselves, the Visio Dei; a Platonist will say we strive for a vision of the good; a Marxist will say we aim for self-realization as species-beings.

The idea of such a consensus is discussed at various places in Rawls, Political Liberalism (cited in note 1). See especially id, lecture IV, and consult the index.


[44] See § 3.2. It is sometimes asked why political liberalism puts such a high value on political values, as if one could only do that by assessing those values in comparison with transcendent values. But this comparison political liberalism does not make, nor does it need to make, as is observed in the text.


[46] Perhaps some think that a political conception is not a matter of (moral) right and wrong. If so, that is a mistake and is simply false. Political conceptions of justice are themselves intrinsically moral ideas, as I have stressed from the outset. As such they are a kind of normative value. On the other hand, some may think that the relevant political conceptions are determined by how a people actually establish...
their existing institutions—the political given, as it were, by politics. Viewed in this light, the prevalence of slavery in 1858 implies that Lincoln’s criticisms of it were moral, a matter of right and wrong, and certainly not a matter of politics. To say that the political is determined by a people's politics may be a possible use of the term political. But then it ceases to be a normative idea and it is no longer part of public reason. We must hold fast to the idea of the political as a fundamental category and covering political conceptions of justice as intrinsic moral values.

[51] See § 3.2.

[52] Id at xviii.

[53] Id, lecture II, § 1.1 at 49-50.

[54] Id, lecture II, §§ 2-3.4 at 54-62.

[55] Id, lecture IV, § 1.2-3 at 135-37.

[56] Id, lecture IX, § 2.1 at 393.

[57] See note 3.