

In Public Reason, Diversity Trumps Coherence*

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OUR aim in this article is to argue that the public reason project, as initiated by John Rawls and others 25 years ago, is evolving into two distinct projects, with one having clear advantages over the other.¹ The public reason literature is no longer an intramural debate between people with similar foundational commitments, but two new projects with fundamentally different goals and starting assumptions.²

These two projects derive from the resolution of a tension within Rawls's thought, specifically the conflict between what Rawls called *pro tanto justification* and *full justification*. Pro tanto justification concerns the justification of a political conception of justice that "takes into account only political values," such that the justification of a political conception is "complete" in that political values can be "suitably ordered, or balanced, so that those values alone give a reasonable answer by public reason to all or nearly all questions concerning constitutional essentials and basic justification."³ But its very name suggests the possibility that pro tanto justification might be *overridden* by citizens' comprehensive doctrines. Full justification follows, occurring when each citizen "accepts a political conception and fills out its justification by embedding it in some way into the citizen's comprehensive doctrine as either true or reasonable." That is, each citizen must figure out how to order or weigh political values against her nonpolitical values. A political conception itself "gives no guidance in such questions" because it does not address nonpolitical values.

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¹Which we shall sometimes call two "views," which we use synonymously with "projects."

²In this piece, we focus on the Rawlsian public reason project. There have been alternative public reason projects for just as long, if not longer; but the Rawlsian model receives more attention than most of them. For a discussion of competitor accounts of public reason 20 years ago, see D'Agostino 1996, pp. 38–55.

³Rawls 2005, p. 386. In this piece, political values include values like equality and liberty, embedded within a particular political conception of justice. Nonpolitical values are unique to particular comprehensive doctrines.

The tension in Rawls's thought is revealed when we ask whether it is possible for a citizen's comprehensive doctrine to override all liberal political conceptions of justice. In other words, what do we do when some putatively reasonable citizen claims that her nonpolitical values normally outweigh shared political values? For Rawls, the answer is unclear. Presumably, the reasonable citizen has determined that the political conceptions of justice are in some way inappropriate for governing her behavior and so cannot satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy.⁴ To impose a political conception on a reasonable person who rejects it, then, would be similar to imposing a conception of the good on her that she rejects. However, if that is the case, then it looks as though, at least in principle, a reasonable person could also reject a liberal conception of justice as regulative of her behavior. The problem then is that, as Jonathan Quong puts it, a reasonable person can hold justice *hostage* to her own political values.⁵ So we must worry about what to do when a reasonable person rejects liberal political conceptions.

The literature on public reason features two replies, and these two replies, we argue, lead to the formulation of two different public reason projects.⁶ The first reply, associated with Quong, is to deny that reasonable people can reject reasonable political conceptions of justice. According to Quong, a reasonable person *by definition* will accept any reasonable political conception of justice as regulative of her behavior. So, in response to the worry that people might hold justice hostage to their nonpolitical values, Quong argues that if we properly understand the purpose of political liberal theorizing, we will recognize that conflict is impossible. The second reply, associated with Gerald Gaus, is to allow reasonable people to reject all liberal political conceptions of justice, but to argue that, in practice, liberal institutions may yet be justified to a public deeply divided over justice and the good.

Both answers have costs. Quong's answer avoids the uncomfortable possibility that some reasonable people will reject reasonable conceptions of justice, but the "internal conception" that he defends may boil down to an argument by stipulation that forces Quong to label a broader swath of (otherwise reasonable) persons as unreasonable. This shrinks the scope of liberal justification. The Gaussian route pursues a substantive rather than a stipulative victory, but must overcome greater obstacles to vindicate liberal institutions. Recently, Lori Watson and Christie Hartley have largely followed Quong.⁷ We largely follow Gaus.⁸

⁴Ibid., pp. 386–7.

⁵Quong 2011, p. 162.

⁶We might see Rawls's work on public reason, along with that of George Klosko (2000), Charles Larmore (2008), and Paul Weithman (2011), as an ur-project from which the diversity and coherence projects derive.

⁷Watson and Hartley 2018.

⁸Muldoon 2016; Vallier 2014, 2019a. To some extent, these problems have been identified by public reason's critics, such as Enoch (2015), who argues that the public reason liberal's appeal to idealization must either fall victim to rejection by real persons (a cost for the diversity view) or lose justification to real persons (a cost for the coherence view). However, these critics do not distinguish between the two views as distinct projects.

We term these research projects the *coherence* view and the *diversity* view respectively. The coherence view sees the public reason project as attempting to show that the key concepts in political liberalism are a conceptually coherent unit; it offers a model of citizens whose conceptions of justice and conceptions of the good are in alignment, but does this by stipulating away a more realistically diverse population. The diversity view, in contrast, expressly argues that respecting real-world pluralism requires liberal institutions. The coherence view idealizes away from pluralism to focus on the relations between liberal ideas. The diversity view embraces that pluralism to show how pluralism and liberalism can mutually reinforce one another. Because these projects have identified different answers to the problem of public justification, they have likewise adopted incompatible aims and means for addressing those aims.

Our aim in this article is to argue in favor of the diversity view. Towards this end, we first argue that the public reason project has split into the coherence and diversity camps. And, if so, the debate between public reason liberals must adjust in some ways. Public reason liberals will need to focus more on within-project work and take more care in formulating desiderata that help adjudicate between the two views. Given the divergence of aims and means between the projects, these are now better understood as distinct projects with a common ancestor, rather than rival versions of the same project.

With this point established, we vindicate the diversity view by contrasting it with the coherence view. We will explore four charges against the coherence view: (1) that the diversity view outperforms the coherence view in terms of the four purposes of political philosophy identified by Rawls, most of which have to do with the ability of a political philosophy to solve various practical questions that arise in the course of social life. In this way, the coherence view is inadequately action-guiding with respect to important problems. We will also argue that (2) the coherence view seems dangerously circular, (3) is less able to resist the challenge posed by liberal perfectionism, and (4) that there is no central role for discovery in the view—that is, the view does not straightforwardly accommodate social learning, especially in the form of moral or political progress, as part of the internal dynamics of the view itself. We will then turn to address two objections to the diversity view: that it does not guarantee liberal outcomes and that it does not idealize enough to provide normatively significant reasons.

We defend our thesis as follows. We first describe the two public reason projects and how they can be understood as arising out of Rawlsian thought. We cover the coherence view in Section I and the diversity view in Section II. In Section III we explore some difficulties in adjudicating between the two views. In Section IV, we criticize the coherence view. And in Section V, we defend the diversity view against criticism.

I. THE COHERENCE VIEW

Quong is arguably the first author to fully articulate the elements of the coherence view.⁹ Quong develops what he calls an “internal conception” of political liberalism that he contrasts with the “external conception.” The division is about “what kind of question political liberalism is meant to answer, what social facts it should respond to, how the constituency of reasonable people should be defined, and what it means to justify something to reasonable people.”¹⁰ In particular, the distinction concerns how to understand the fact of reasonable pluralism. For the internal conception, reasonable pluralism is *not* a fact about the world “to which liberalism must accommodate itself if it is to be considered a sound position.”¹¹ Instead, the pluralism is “a consequence of liberalism itself” and a property of any society that is liberal and well-ordered.¹² This means that we understand public justification as “internal to liberal philosophy.” Moreover, the internal conception says that the subjects of justification are those who affirm liberal values and have given them deliberative priority over comprehensive considerations, and who are ideally rational and reasonable. Public justification obtains when political principles are endorsed by these idealized persons,¹³ such that public justification “*at no point* depends on the beliefs of real people.”¹⁴

A principal implication of the internal conception is that Rawls’s idea of an overlapping consensus has to be reinterpreted. Quong says that the overlapping consensus should be placed at the beginning of what is now called public justification (distinguished from Rawls’s technical use of “public justification”), rather than in the second step. The problem with Rawls’s ordering is that it allows reasonable citizens to reject political conceptions of justice based on their reasonable comprehensive doctrines.¹⁵ This creates a dilemma based on whether reasonable comprehensive doctrines can override all reasonable political conceptions. If they cannot override reasonable political conceptions, they are superfluous for public justification, but if they can override them, this “might make political liberalism hostage to the demands of the unjust.”¹⁶ Instead, reasonable people are those who “by definition” understand society as a system of mutual cooperation on equal terms, such that there is no “need to check and see if reasonable people will endorse [a] free standing conception of justice.”¹⁷ Anyone who rejects a free-standing conception of justice is unreasonable *by definition*.

⁹Although Quong cites Dreben (2003) as a precursor.

¹⁰Quong 2011, p. 137.

¹¹Ibid., p. 138.

¹²Ibid., p. 139.

¹³Ibid., p. 145.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 144, emphasis added.

¹⁵Rawls 2005, p. 392.

¹⁶Quong 2011, p. 162.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 166–7.

Quong is not the only coherence view practitioner. To illustrate, consider Lori Watson and Christie Hartley's book, *Equal Citizenship and Public Reason*, which agrees with Quong in arguing that political liberalism is centrally concerned with shared ideas of free and equal citizens and a society as a system of fair cooperation over time.¹⁸ The justificatory constituency is composed only of highly idealized reasonable persons. Reasonable persons not only share these ideas and associated liberal values, but give them near absolute priority over all other considerations; they are also committed to the use of shared or shareable reasons to decide political questions of great importance. Notice that, for Watson and Hartley, political liberalism entails a serious commitment to sex equality, because pluralism about whether the sexes are equal is not reasonable; if political liberalism cannot accommodate sex equality, therefore, it is not true.¹⁹ Reasonable pluralism arises only as a fact about an idealized society, "an ideal, liberal polity."²⁰

The demand for public justification does not fall out of a commitment to justifying coercion or authority to real persons, but rather is part of an ideal of citizenship in a constitutional democracy, which requires following a reciprocity requirement when citizens engage in public justification.²¹ A consequence of embracing a substantive notion of reciprocity is that only shared reasons are sufficient to justify laws and principles, yielding what Watson and Hartley call, following Rawls, an "exclusive" account of public reason.²² And the only challenges from individual liberty or integrity of citizens that matter morally are those that are "reasonable." So, the only way that someone's comprehensive commitments could influence what gets endorsed as publicly justifiable is if they are already reasonable under ideal conditions. Watson and Hartley expressly embrace the internal conception.²³

We dub the internal conception, and approaches similar to it, the *coherence* view. The term "coherence" denotes shared commitment to showing that the fundamental commitments of political liberalism, especially the ideas of society as a system of fair cooperation and persons as rational and reasonable equals, all fit together. The goal is to show that there is no essential tension between these ideas, and that is all. No engagement with the real world is necessary; it is perhaps even misleading, as it gives in to the temptations that yield the mistaken external conception. The result is a political theory that is *entirely insulated* from standard concerns of political philosophy—namely, the challenge of how we choose shared rules for ourselves in the face of deep disagreements. This approach

¹⁸Watson and Hartley 2018, pp. 18–21; also see Neufeld 2017; Neufeld and Watson 2018.

¹⁹Watson and Hartley 2018, p. 4.

²⁰Ibid., p. 6.

²¹While public reason views are often concerned with justifying coercion, Gaus (2011, pp. 6–36) is primarily concerned with the public justification of moral authority. Once a standard for justifying moral authority is set, we can show that there is a right against legal coercion that explains why political coercion must be publicly justified. For discussion of this point, see Gaus 2011; Van Schoelandt 2015.

²²Watson and Hartley 2018, p. 62.

²³Ibid., p. 33.

“resolves” the concern by eliminating potential sources of disagreement, rather than engaging with them. The project is not primarily to grapple with real-world diversity, but rather to see if a social ideal can be theoretically constructed that renders all the normative commitments common to political liberals consistent with one another. A project like this has interesting theoretical implications about how particular normative ideals relate to each other. But because it is useful in this way, it will be less useful if it is meant to relate back to a real-world target.

To further clarify why the coherence view is distinctive, we want to show that it has (1) particular foundational normative commitments (a normative ontology understood as a system of basic normative principles), (2) a common object of inquiry, and (3) unique sets of questions that don’t quite make sense in other public reason views.

The coherence view has two fundamental ideas: the idea of persons as free and equal, rational, and reasonable, and the idea of society as a system of free and fair cooperation over time. These are normative ideas about how to understand what an ideal agent is and an account of how such agents should regard and interact with each other. The common object of inquiry is the structure of a highly idealized, well-ordered society, one that is governed by a reasonable liberal political conception of justice.

The coherence view does aim to answer a number of important questions. How should social practices and institutions of a well-ordered society be structured? What sort of conception of justice should govern a well-ordered society? How could such a society be stable for the right reasons over time? How should citizens, legislators, and other political officials conduct their public discourse? Which values are properly considered political values? Do those include perfectionist values? Feminist values? How should religious citizens behave in such an order? When can they appeal to religious reasons or request religious exemptions?

These questions don’t make as much sense or even much sense at all within the diversity view. The diversity view has a related ideal of society, but, as we shall see, the constituency of this ideal society is composed of idealized versions of real individuals, so its subject matter is not ideal persons, but real persons and accounts of their reasons. All of the questions central to the coherence view are geared towards demonstrating consistency among a robust set of fundamental normative principles to answer questions about how an idealized social order can and should function. The diversity view asks *similar* questions, but not the same, for it is concerned with moderately idealized real-world people—that is, people with a wide variety of beliefs and interests, reflecting on those beliefs and interests calmly and rationally.²⁴ It is also not focused on a highly idealized well-ordered

²⁴Strictly speaking, the diversity view itself can be neutral on the question of whether we are idealizing actual persons or modeling their concerns with potential, but similar persons. But diversity theorists usually focus on idealizing real persons.

society. All of the above questions within the coherence view are addressed to a different group of agents, reasonable agents in a well-ordered society.

There are challenges that the diversity view must face that don't arise for the coherence view. For instance, on the coherence view, there cannot be a conflict between the reasonable political conceptions and reasonable persons. Such a conflict is impossible *in principle*. Thus, the question of what to do in a conflict makes no sense on the coherence view. Similarly, one might think that political liberalism has to settle the question of how citizens should handle extensive reasonable disagreement about justice. But the coherence view stipulates that reasonable people agree about the main features of conceptions of justice.²⁵ While this leaves some room for some disagreements, the allowable scope is rather limited. In this way, the problem of what we might call *justice pluralism* is not a major problem for the coherence project, as it is for the diversity project. There's also no real concern about political liberalism overly burdening religious citizens. On the diversity view, there might be someone with religious values who sincerely believes that their religious values ought to override their political values. But on the coherence view, no such agents figure into the system. Agents who make this complaint are unreasonable, such that the diverse reasons they offer do not figure into public justifications.²⁶

II. THE DIVERSITY VIEW

From a Rawlsian perspective, the diversity view is distinguished by its acknowledgment that reasonable comprehensive doctrines, or the justificatory reasons of persons more broadly, can lead to the justified rejection of political conceptions of justice. On the diversity view, the *entire point* of public justification is to show that this possibility of rejection can be overcome by the mechanisms that generate public justification. The public reason project is understood as a non-stipulative attempt to vindicate liberal institutions, by showing how they have the resources to respond to the challenges brought on by diversity and disagreement.

Another important feature of the diversity view is that justificatory reasons—the reasons that figure into public justification—are the reasons of *actual persons*. The diversity view gives a characterization of the reasons of persons based on an idealization, but the idealization tells us the reasons real persons have. Gaus and Vallier, for instance, both advance moderate models of idealization on the grounds that those models are good heuristics for determining what reasons actual persons have.²⁷ And these reasons have the power to override or defeat moral and legal restraints on personal behavior, such that it can be permissible to reject them. So public justification proceeds in terms of the reasons real persons have.

²⁵Watson and Hartley 2018, p. 27.

²⁶It is true, however, that some religious citizens, such as religious perfectionists, will dislike both the coherence and diversity projects. But our sense is that the diversity project nonetheless places fewer restraints on religious belief and practice, and that counts in its favor.

²⁷Gaus 2011, pp. 232–59; Vallier 2014, pp. 145–80.

A third critical feature of the diversity view is that reasonable, or evaluative, pluralism is extended beyond dissensus about the good to dissensus about justice and other topics, like social ontology. In recent work, Gaus follows Muldoon in arguing that social coordination can proceed even given disagreement about the nature of the social world that persons occupy.²⁸ Muldoon's project establishes perhaps the outer bound of this approach, given that his model tries to vindicate social rules in the face of radical pluralism about social worlds.²⁹

We can see, then, that the diversity view adopts a kind of overlapping consensus justification as the ultimate normative entity in the approach; the diversity project insists primarily on an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice, or institutions, or laws, or some other object of justification.³⁰ Crucially, this overlapping consensus allows for far more kinds of reasons, rather than imposing strict constraints from the beginning. The only role for a previous stage of consensus on common norms, rights, laws, and so on, is to locate points of convergence among members of the public. The solutions sought by the diversity view—its exemplar solutions—are of a different kind than those sought by coherence view. We can come to agree on rules even if we disagree about their basis.

Fourth, the fact that justification is owed to real persons who exhibit enormous evaluative pluralism means that non-liberal persons' justificatory reasons can figure into public justification.³¹ Liberal institutions must be vindicated to non-liberals if liberal institutions are to be non-authoritarian, respectful, non-sectarian, and so on.

Finally, the diversity view has a different notion of the purpose and structure of the social order within which agents are situated. The idea of society well ordered by a single conception of justice is not the focus of this project. In fact, Gaus has recently argued that the target society is an *open society*, one characterized by enormous evaluative pluralism about the good, justice, social worlds, and so on.³² An open society is also one that is subject to significant change within a common framework of social rules that do not specify common ends at which social institutions must aim. Moreover, the diversity view assumes that there are facts about justice that members of the public must discover, so the project assumes ignorance about justice. Muldoon agrees with Gaus on this,³³ and, in fact, partly inspired the Gaussian model.³⁴

²⁸Gaus 2016, pp. 165–72; Muldoon 2016.

²⁹Muldoon 2016, 2017, 2018; Muldoon et al. 2014a.

³⁰Practitioners of both projects think the thing to be justified can vary. Some theorists in the coherence project think public justification applies to only constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, like Watson and Hartley (2018), whereas Quong (2011) applies public justification to laws as well. Gaus (2011), Vallier (2014), and Muldoon (2016) apply the diversity project to constitutional essentials and laws, though they also apply it to various kinds of social and moral rules.

³¹Gaus 2012.

³²Gaus 2016, p. 147.

³³Muldoon 2015, 2016.

³⁴There is some relationship here between the Gaussian model and Jeremy Waldron's (1999) familiar argument that law is best understood as a way we respond to disagreements about what is best. Gaus stresses similarities and differences in Gaus 2011, pp. 456–60.

The diversity approach has quite different foundational normative commitments from the coherence view. The diversity view appeals to a notion of public justification that involves moderate idealization, diverse justificatory reasons, and a need to demonstrate that liberal institutions can be justified to diverse real-world persons who, in principle, might have good reason to reject liberal institutions. It also makes unique assumptions about the structure of the object of inquiry. The diversity project appeals to justification to real-world persons in a society characterized by deep diversity and disagreement, and, more recently, by acknowledging that society must grapple with considerable ignorance about what justice requires.

The diversity view also generates a unique set of questions. First, it asks questions that are superficially similar to the coherence project, but that are in reality quite different. It asks which rules of justice, rights, constitutional and legal rules should govern society, but not a well-ordered society. It asks whether a society's institutions and norms can be stable for moral reasons over time; but its notions of stability³⁵ are importantly distinct from Rawlsian ideals and, again, govern a different set of agents. Of course, diversity view practitioners are interested in the norms of proper conduct of legislators and citizens, but this work is focused on real legislators and citizens, and has a different approach to generating their duties. Further, the goal in answering these questions is not, in the first instance, a matter of showing that a set of normative commitments are internally consistent. The goal is rather to show that liberal institutions ought to govern real-world people.

The diversity view also poses questions that follow from accepting full justification rather than just *pro tanto* justification as the standard of public justification. Again, the diversity project allows for the possibility of non-liberal rejection of liberal institutions, and so entertains the possibility that the case for liberal institutions could be defeated by real-world diversity. The diversity view also asks how to grapple with reasonable disagreement not only about which *known* conception of justice to institutionalize, but how to organize institutions so that we can *discover* conceptions of justice, and their conditions of application. Furthermore, on the diversity view, there is a real concern about norms that stifle diversity, such as norms that require religious citizens to limit the kinds of reasons they express in their public discourse, making it difficult for them to honestly explain their reasons for their favored political positions.

An important feature of the diversity view, though not strictly incompatible with the coherence view,³⁶ is that diversity theorists do not limit themselves to the tools of philosophical reasoning. Instead, the diversity view deliberately adopts tools from the social sciences. Gaus, Muldoon, and Vallier all appeal to social choice theory and game theory in determining whether liberal institutions can be

³⁵Muldoon 2016; Vallier 2017b.

³⁶Hadfield and Macedo 2012.

justified to a diverse public. Vallier develops a computational model of stability based on Muldoon et al.'s work on social norms.³⁷ Gaus uses evolutionary theory to help explain how a diverse society can converge on liberal institutions when people's own normative reasoning yields indeterminate moral conclusions, drawing on Brian Skyrms's work on the evolution of the social contract.³⁸ Philosophers working in the diversity project, then, rely on formal models. Since thinking through the dynamics of a diverse population can be more demanding than what can be done through a thought experiment, agent-based computational models are fairly pointless on the coherence project, as we do not need to worry about the potential consequences of disagreement among ideal agents. So, in general, the set of tools appealed to by the diversity project is rather extensive. In this way, the diversity view lies squarely within the research program of philosophy, politics, and economics. The diversity project is greatly aided by a multidisciplinary approach to normative political philosophy.

III. FRUITFUL ENGAGEMENT

The coherence and diversity approaches are quite distinct, but they can productively engage one another. Their respective practitioners need not talk past one another.

One way to engage one another is to focus on common subject matter in both theories and argue that one view makes better sense of it than the other. For instance, both public reason projects are opposed to liberal perfectionism, since both views adopt a public justification restraint that prohibits much, if not all, perfectionist legislation. So, one way for the two views to engage one another is to ask which view provides the better defense against perfectionist coercion, wherein the apparatus of the state is used to promote a particular conception of the good, and suppress others. It is no coincidence that both Gaus and Quong have written against liberal perfectionism at some length.³⁹ And both views often appear to share at least some foundational moral commitments, given that both sides sometimes appeal to respect for persons as the basis for public justification.⁴⁰ In this way, the views might be able to address one another by appealing to plausible formulations and implications of their putatively shared normative foundations.

Practitioners of the two views can also fruitfully engage one another by posing *internal* problems for the other view. Vallier has argued that even on Quong's internal conception of political liberalism, there is still good reason to adopt a modified "convergence" conception of justificatory reasons.⁴¹ Quong has argued against Gaus's account of public reason on the grounds that it cannot vindicate

³⁷Vallier 2017b; Muldoon et al. 2014b.

³⁸Gaus 2011, pp. 409–23; Skyrms 1996.

³⁹Gaus 2010; Quong 2011.

⁴⁰Vallier 2014, p. 31; Watson and Hartley 2018.

⁴¹Vallier 2017b.

human rights.⁴² Paul Billingham provides internal criticisms of both Vallier's and Quong's versions of public reason.⁴³

More generally, the two views can engage one another by insisting on a solution to the puzzle that led to the divergence of the two views in the first place. Advocates of both views can argue about the relative theoretical virtues, for instance, of allowing a reasonable comprehensive doctrine to override a reasonable political conception of justice. Quong worries that allowing an override condition will hold justice hostage to the illiberal, whereas Gaus worries that not allowing an override generates an excessively sectarian version of political liberalism. Quong denies that sectarianism is a problem.⁴⁴ But practitioners in either project might think these worries are misplaced.

IV. IN FAVOR OF THE DIVERSITY VIEW

The coherence and diversity views both originate in Rawls's thought. We find it illuminating to appeal to Rawls's account of the four purposes of political philosophy; each purpose provides reason to prefer the diversity view over the coherence view.

For Rawls, the first role of political philosophy is practical, which is to "focus on deeply disputed questions and to see whether, despite appearances, some underlying basis of philosophical and moral agreement can be uncovered."⁴⁵ Here, for Rawls, political philosophy is concerned with real-world problems, and with wanting to uncover the basis for agreement among disputants. It is clear that the coherence view can play this role, as we see, say, in Watson and Hartley's application of the coherence view to sex work and marriage;⁴⁶ but the diversity view is better suited to it, because it takes on a wider range of real-world diversity, and so can resolve a wider range of disputes between people with diverse views, especially as it has a broader range of dispute-resolution tools to draw from. Diversity views can allow for shared outcomes without shared reasons for those outcomes, as well as novel options generated from the learning process brought on by the dispute itself. By discounting many political disagreements upfront, the coherence framework can't offer practical advice on how to resolve those disagreements. The coherence model presupposes that one side of those disagreements is illegitimate. This upfront rejection of one side of a dispute will not help uncover shared moral agreement.

The second role of political philosophy is that "members of any civilized society need a conception that enables them to understand themselves as members having a certain political status—in a democracy, that of equal citizenship—and

⁴²Quong 2014.

⁴³Billingham 2017, 2018.

⁴⁴Quong 2012, p. 53.

⁴⁵Rawls 2001, p. 2.

⁴⁶Watson and Hartley 2018, pp. 163–88, 212–47.

how this status affects their relation to their social world.”⁴⁷ Here again the coherence view can help, since it has an account of equal citizenship and it has a model of a well-ordered society. But, once again, the diversity view is stronger, because it has a more realistic and diversity-respecting model of our social world. It does not abstract away from important differences between real people to the degree that the coherence view does. We can help more people, with more diverse perspectives, see themselves as bearing stable, moral, and political relationships to one another. By explicitly representing diversity in the framework, it allows theorists to more readily connect the model to the real world. The high degree of abstraction employed by the coherence view has costs.

The third role is one of reconciliation. Political philosophy “may try to calm our frustration and rage against our society and its history by showing us the way in which its institutions ... are rational, and developed over time as they did to attain their present, rational form”.⁴⁸ The coherence view can help with reconciliation, especially since Rawls says that the ideas of a fair system of cooperation over time and of persons as free and equal citizens can help to convince citizens that they are indeed free and equal if the basic structure of society embodies those ideals. But what if reconciliation in our society is far off, due to frustration and rage among persons with highly diverse perspectives, including perspectives about justice? How can the coherence view play a reconciling role? It rules out many views as unreasonable, and so cannot propose reconciliation between those views and other members of society.

To illustrate, consider the difficulties posed by falling trust and rising political polarization in the USA.⁴⁹ While many parties to this dispute are unreasonable by the lights of both coherence and diversity theorists, the diversity view can better characterize and uncover legitimate opportunities for cooperation and peace-making in the present and highly heterogeneous American population. The diversity view, for instance, does not restrict the justificatory constituency to shared reasons, allowing people to appeal to diverse considerations much more often, and so counting a wider range of people as reasonable. It adopts less idealization, which will allow a wider range of views to figure in the social contract. The diversity view also acknowledges that there’s a great deal of potential for cooperation that is presently unknown. In this way, the diversity view becomes a kind of search algorithm for public policies and regulations that will advance the goals of progressive and conservative Americans simultaneously, and make that mutual satisfaction public, creating a basis for social trust. In short, both sides can see the other side as reasonable and prepared to compromise, and so see them as trustworthy.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Rawls 2001, pp. 2–3.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 3.

⁴⁹Vallier 2020.

⁵⁰Vallier 2019a.

Examples of such policies could include the Earned Income Tax Credit, certain elements of the Affordable Care Act, a cap-and-trade carbon emissions market, and residential zoning reform to reduce the price of building new houses in economically developed areas of the country. Yes, many disagree with these policies, but often based on quite bad information and simple bad will towards others; but even moderately idealized persons on both sides of the aisle can at least see some of the virtues in these policies. In this way, the diversity view provides the resources for real reconciliation in the challenging space of everyday American politics.

The coherence view, by contrast, may struggle to provide similar solutions. First, coherence theorists embrace more idealization and stronger restrictions on diverse reasoning than diversity theorists, both factors that will lead them to overlook the capacity for legitimate, even inspiring cooperation between real political groups they may simply dismiss as unreasonable. Second, by focusing on justifying a theory of justice, rather than a justifying a patchwork of local agreements on policies, we will need some kind of complex metric for measuring whether local changes bring us closer to or further away from what justice requires,⁵¹ and there are great epistemic hurdles to doing so.

The fourth role is that of political philosophy as

realistically utopian: that is, as probing the limits of practical political possibility. Our hope for the future of our society rests on the belief that the social world allows at least a decent political order, so that a reasonably just, though not perfect, democratic regime is possible.

Rawls adds, though, that realistic utopianism is bound by “conditions allowed by the laws and tendencies of the social world ...”⁵² Here there’s a way in which the coherence view outperforms the diversity view, since it involves more idealization, and is in that sense more utopian. But the diversity view provides the better account of how to reach certain realistic conditions, since it takes on more of society’s actual challenges in forming a contractarian model of society. The coherence theorist can idealize away all of the less-than-ideally motivated individuals, and remove big sources of basic political disagreements. But doing so does not illuminate how to get from here to there. The diversity theorist is forced to contend with those disagreements, and examine ways of overcoming them, via bargaining, or exemptions, or polycentric arrangements. It helps us to determine the transitional path from our society to a realistic utopia, since it grapples with more real-world conditions. Returning to the case above, the diversity view can help Americans figure out how to transition out of conditions of mistrust and damaging polarization; the coherence view, again, struggles here.

⁵¹Gaus 2016.

⁵²Rawls 2001, p. 4.

We can summarize our concerns without the Rawlsian framing. First, we are convinced that normative political philosophy should help us understand and shape real institutions in real societies. The diversity project takes seriously the tremendous amount of real-world diversity among citizens of liberal societies, like some of that found in the USA, and attempts to find ways to take advantage of the opportunities that this diversity creates. As Muldoon discusses at length, when we make diversity about more than labels or particular positions in a debate, and instead focus on how different preferences come along with different knowledge and different conceptual schemes, we gain epistemic resources to find new alternatives.⁵³ Disagreement can spawn innovation and progress, and not merely conflict. We fear that the coherence project has retreated from this objective, focusing instead on increasing the level of idealization found in Rawls, so as to focus on the relations between ideals. This modeling decision makes it harder to use the coherence project to formulate a regulative ideal for a society and marks a retreat from a core project of political philosophy—offering guidance for resolving real political disputes.

Another reason we favor the diversity project is that it takes on what we might term the hard problem of politics: how do we find ways of productively living together when we all want rather different things? The diversity project starts from the assumption that we have much wider scope of normative pluralism than the coherence view permits, and its challenge is vindicating sets of liberal institutions despite this significant normative divide. We worry that the coherence project assumes this problem away by narrowing the scope of the liberal project to merely internal justification. Especially given the challenges to liberal order that have arisen in our politics of late, we believe it is essential that the project of public reason engages with everyone. That is why we worry that the coherence view is inadequately action-guiding with respect to important problems, at least in comparison with the diversity view.

Now we can turn to the further concern that the coherence view seems circular. The basic worry about circularity in the coherence view is based on its appeal to a robust conception of the reasonable. If we ask, for instance, why reasonable people cannot reject a reasonable political conception of justice, we are told simply that it would be unreasonable to do so. Minimal explanation is given as to why reasonable people will reject conceptions of justice. Watson and Hartley say little on the subject, and Quong does not explain why, for instance, we should think that reasonable disagreements about justice are always “justificatory” or not concerned with “foundational” matters.⁵⁴ In short, the coherence view explains what reasonable people will endorse by appeal to reasonable political conceptions of justice and reasonable comprehensive doctrines, but it is not

⁵³Muldoon 2016, 2017, 2018.

⁵⁴Quong 2011; see Vallier 2019b for an exploration of this point.

obvious which notion of the reasonable is more explanatorily fundamental and why.

The diversity view, in contrast, appeals to minimal notions of reasonableness,⁵⁵ and only holds that moral agents in a social system need to be prepared to abide by reciprocal proposed norms. Further, the notion of the reasonable is clearly limited to reasonable *persons*, and does not apply fundamentally to conceptions of justice or the good. Gaus and Vallier focus on justifying rules to persons based on the reasons they affirm,⁵⁶ so the diversity view does not seek to justify an entire conception of justice, just particular rules, and does not appeal to reasonable comprehensive doctrines, just adequately moral reasons. This feature removes one potential source of circularity, since reasonable persons and reasonable doctrines/conceptions could be defined in terms of the other, as they sometimes appear in *Political Liberalism*.

Another difficulty with relying so heavily on the idea of the reasonable is that it raises questions about whether competing conceptions of reasonableness can ground other kinds of liberalism. Billingham argues that liberal perfectionists can formulate a similar “internal conception” for their own approach, holding that all reasonable citizens by definition embrace certain claims about the good life, and that respect for autonomy is part of respect for the reasonableness of others.⁵⁷ And indeed, Quong admits he has “no very well-developed objection” to this possibility.⁵⁸ Liberal perfectionism can be grounded not merely in sectarian considerations, but in some conception of reasonableness that competes with the internal conception. In fact, Collis Tahzib has recently made precisely this point, arguing that perfectionism can be grounded in conceptions of the good that are within the domain of the political, in that they can be justified in a free-standing way.⁵⁹ One needn’t adopt a comprehensive doctrine to be a perfectionist. Quong formulates various arguments against comprehensive perfectionism, but he lacks arguments against political perfectionism. The diversity view, in contrast, has more resources to resist perfectionism, because it allows diverse perspectives to generate diverse objections to perfectionist arrangements. While it is true that some conceptions of the good *might* survive the test of diverse public justification, it is unlikely in a diverse society, and so perfectionism is not as much of a threat to the diversity view.

Finally, we are drawn to the diversity project because we believe that there are important justificatory consequences to the fact that political philosophers haven’t worked everything out yet. The diversity project, at a fairly deep level, is about *discovery*. We believe that political philosophers can best make progress by making use of the tools and lessons of social science. The diversity project thus

⁵⁵Vallier 2014, pp. 146–8; Muldoon 2016, pp. 82–3.

⁵⁶Gaus 2011; Vallier 2019.

⁵⁷Billingham 2017, p. 99.

⁵⁸Quong 2011, p. 218.

⁵⁹Tahzib 2019.

pursues discovery in two ways: (1) it formulates models of social cooperation where discovering new ways of living together is central to social life, and (2) it appeals to a number of theoretical tools to uncover new ways of formulating and defending a social contract in a diverse world.⁶⁰

Consider three examples of both. Muldoon argues that a diverse society is better suited to learn more about what justice consists of, and how it relates to particular social and material conditions, by an iterated process of bargaining, experimentation, and evaluations of consensus.⁶¹ Gaus argues that public reason helps to maintain a practice of accountability by identifying which social and legal norms can be jointly adopted and used to hold one another accountable.⁶² In doing so, public reason can help diverse societies stably and respectfully hold others to shared rules that facilitate certain goods. Examples include helping people engage in experiments that reveal new ways of reaching different ideals of justice, as well as uncovering how our ideals can be institutionalized. Formal work on exploring rugged landscapes undergirds Gaus's approach. Vallier argues that a publicly justified polity is more effective in sustaining social trust between persons with diverse ends, which enables these societies to innovate more effectively in matters of economic production.⁶³ He appeals to the extensive literature on social and political trust in economics and political science to make his case.

V. CRITICISMS OF THE DIVERSITY VIEW

We now turn to address two arguments that the coherence view is superior to the diversity view. The first objection to the diversity view is that, unlike the coherence view, it does not guarantee liberal outcomes. The worry is that by introducing so much diversity, and so many *non-liberals* into liberalism's justificatory constituency, central liberal commitments will be, or at least could be, rejected. There are three forms of this objection. One concern is that *nothing* will be justified, since diverse perspectives will generate defeater reasons that ensure there is no contractarian bargaining or agreement point. A second concern is that *some* institutions will be agreed to, but they won't be liberal. And a third concern is that even if liberal institutions are justified, a public reason view must *ensure* that they are. The diversity view leaves the justification of liberal institutions to chance, in contrast with the coherence view. A concrete version of the objection is Watson and Hartley's claim that if political liberalism cannot accommodate sex equality, then so much the worse for political liberalism.⁶⁴

We freely concede that the diversity view cannot guarantee liberal outcomes as the coherence view can. But we do not think that's a significant problem,

⁶⁰Muldoon 2016.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Gaus 2016.

⁶³Vallier 2019a.

⁶⁴Watson and Hartley 2018, p. 1.

since the coherence view pursues the guarantee through arguments we consider circular and stipulative. Any *interesting* contractarian vindication of some of our moral and political commitments will at least be open to the possibility that an agreement cannot be reached. The power in contractarian reasoning is to vindicate our commitments *despite* this possibility. But that said, there are ways to answer the three grades of objection. On the first point, we stress the disastrous consequences of failing to come to an arrangement, so much so that this “anarchy objection” can be answered on the grounds that the contractors themselves will concede ground to other contractors simply in order to find a coordination point. If anarchy is sufficiently bad, then the eligible agreement points for the contractors will reflect that fact, which will make more agreement points eligible.

The objection then, however, is that many arrangements are better than anarchy, in which case contractors could agree, say, to a Hobbesian sovereign, since a Hobbesian sovereign would be better than at least some types of anarchy. We think that the best reply here is to focus on how to formulate the eligible set of proposals, especially with respect to how contractarian agreements are individuated. For instance, if the contractarian agreement is on the *entire political system*, then, indeed, many awful political systems are superior to anarchy, and so become an agreement point in principle, a worrying implication.

A virtue of the diversity view is that many more alternatives are available for consideration, so we are not left with all-or-nothing justifications. For instance, if we individuate more finely, then we are comparing a social system with, say, a particular law, to one without it. In that case, we might end up unable to justify particular laws, since they are not better than having no law, but that’s not the sort of debilitating problem we face if an entire political system cannot be justified, and so the worry about having no law shouldn’t make awful arrangements eligible. Gaus and Vallier both offer arguments for more fine-grained individuation to avoid this problem, which allows for many more agreement points.⁶⁵ Likewise, a diversity view could consider a polycentric response to some laws or social rules, and rely on discovery to help determine whether the rule even makes sense as something that ought to be universally binding, or merely something that may serve to support some conceptions of the good but inhibits others.

We will bite the bullet raised by the third form of the objection. Yes, indeed, we cannot guarantee that the contract will always yield a liberal outcome.⁶⁶ That is, we grant, a cost of our view. But we do not think that diversity theorists need

⁶⁵Gaus 2011, pp. 490–7; Vallier 2019, pp. 81–3. We grant that it may still be the case that each and every particular rule is defeated, that is, ineligible for public justification, but answering that objection is beyond our scope here.

⁶⁶We might arrive at an illiberal outcome if a population is composed almost exclusively of non-liberals, who jointly prefer non-liberal arrangements to liberal ones, such as a population composed entirely of conservative Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who jointly support anti-blasphemy laws. But we think the difficulty envisioning a non-liberal arrangement being justified helps make the diversity view attractive.

to be especially worried, because liberal arrangements have special properties that will support them over other political systems. As Muldoon and Vallier argue, liberal societies can contain a lot of diversity through robust freedom of association and the freedom to engage in experiments in living.⁶⁷ Non-liberal regimes tend to prioritize one particular view or doctrine over others, and so reduce the system's capacity to include everyone and give them all effective freedoms to live their own lives in their own way. Thus, diverse contractors will tend to prefer liberal regimes over regimes that privilege perspectives incompatible with their own. This means that liberal laws and policies will be eligible for public justification. While they may not be the optimal choice for any given person, their general accommodation of a variety of plans of life is such that people, including non-liberals, can see liberal arrangements as potential agreement points. That's the sort of argument that we think is compelling, since it allows for the vindication of non-liberal arrangements in principle, but justifies liberal institutions all the same.

A second objection to the diversity view is that it tends to eschew considerable idealization, which we can understand as determining which arrangements are justified by appeal to what agents with upgraded information and reasoning capacity would agree to. Idealizations can be moored to real persons or unmoored, as they are in the coherence view, but diversity theorists tend to avoid radical idealization in either sense. They instead tend to embrace moderate idealization of real persons, say in only idealizing real people to be boundedly rational.⁶⁸ The worry with moderate idealization is that we hold political institutions' justification hostage to what real persons want, which might be worrisome even if people tend to be of good will, since they will certainly be blind to certain important moral and empirical facts. Thus, moderate idealization might tether liberal institutions to manifest flaws, biases, and confusions.

We think these problems are the price of developing a contractarian theory of social institutions that can solve real practical problems and guide action. There is simply no good way to avoid a contractarian agreement being beholden to false or problematic views. If we are trying to determine how diverse people can live together, we have to have some account of how they can reason from their own flawed views to a mutual agreement on the terms of social life. And that means not idealizing them so much that much of what makes them distinctive is ignored. The coherence theorists will argue that we can formulate the agreement point through radical idealization, and that the overlapping consensus can then involve checking whether each person and doctrine can adopt the agreement point. But we think that this checking process will have to appeal to moderate idealization in order to ensure that the agreement is not held hostage to either present acceptances or idealizations that sap persons of their diverse commitments. Moderate idealization may stick us with accommodating some

⁶⁷Muldoon 2016; Vallier 2019.

⁶⁸Gaus 2011, pp. 232–58; Muldoon 2016; Vallier 2019, pp. 100–3.

weird and problematic views, but we should still have an agreement point that people can recognize, on reflection, as making sense for them.

VI. PUBLIC REASON PROJECTS

Our first aim in this article was to argue that the public reason literature has fractured into two broad projects—the coherence view and the diversity view. The coherence view focuses on rendering certain of our central political ideas consistent with one another, whereas the diversity view uses the idea of public justification to better accommodate real-world diversity. The views are now sufficiently distinct that mutual engagement is more difficult than if we were working within one public reason project, but we hope to have demonstrated how mutual engagement can fruitfully unfold.

Our second aim here was to argue for the superiority of the diversity view over the coherence view on a number of grounds: that the coherence view does not serve Rawls's four purposes of political philosophy, that it has a circular feel, sits too close to liberal perfectionism, and has no central role for discovery. We also answered some criticisms of the diversity view. We think the diversity view does not need to guarantee liberal outcomes, and can nonetheless provide an attractive case for liberal institutions. It is appropriate to appeal to the more modest forms of idealization found in the work of diversity theorists. We hope, then, to have helped orient the public reason literature so that it can continue to make progress.

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