When Is Public Reason Possible?

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1 Introduction

According to Rawls's ideal of public reason, “citizens are to conduct their public political discussions of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice within the framework of what each sincerely regards as a reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others as free and equal also might reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse.”

‘Free’ and ‘equal’ are contested terms in ordinary political discourse. Their ambiguity is both cause and consequence of the fact that they are routinely invoked in defense of the most disparate political agendas. The same can arguably be said of many of Rawls’s examples of “political values,” such as ‘equality of opportunity,’ ‘the common good,’ and ‘economic efficiency,’ among others. To function as the currency of public reasoning, such terms require interpretation and disambiguation.

But disambiguating these values may also make it harder for them to meet the test of being generally acceptable among reasonable citizens. I may be able to accept your appeal to the common good, if ‘common good’ denotes nothing more than that in which each citizen has a shared interest, but may not be able to accept it if it is taken to refer, more specifically, to an alleged shared interest in living a virtuous life, for example.

There is a danger, then, that once the meanings of alleged political values have been made precise, it will no longer seem plausible to suppose that these political values are acceptable to all reasonable citizens. We might worry that all reasonable citizens can undersign political liberalism’s social contract only because they haven’t read the fine print.

This paper seeks to provide a rigorous foundation for this worry. It assumes, with Rawls, that citizens’ comprehensive doctrines can inform their thinking about matters of basic justice and, as a result, disagreements about questions of

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basic justice often reflect in part differences among reasonable citizens’ comprehensive doctrines. The argument then shows that if assumptions about political values are stated precisely enough that they have determinate implications for these questions, then these assumptions indirectly bear on the truth of some reasonable comprehensive doctrines. As such, they will prove unacceptable to some reasonable citizens. The fine print will include more sectarian clauses than political liberals are inclined to admit.

The paper’s argument also contributes to the literature on the “asymmetry objection” to political liberalism. According to this objection, political liberalism implausibly asserts the inevitability of reasonable disagreements about the good life, but denies the possibility of reasonable disagreements about justice. The argument of this paper provides a more rigorous basis for this objection by specifying the particular kind of reasonable disagreements about justice that fit uncomfortably with political liberalism and identifying its underlying commitments that make for the friction.

The argument presented here differs from other criticisms of public reason in two respects. First, many critics merely take issue with the normative force that is claimed for the ideal of public reason, while tacitly conceding the possibility of satisfying its constraints. I deny, however, that these constraints, as Rawls understands them, can be generally satisfied. Second, among those critics who have questioned the possibility of public reasoning, none identifies as clearly as is done here the general assumptions on which its possibility or impossibility depends. This paper isolates these assumptions. As a result, it sets the stage for a more fruitful and productive inquiry into the prospects for alternative accounts of public reason by identifying the possible ways forward for its defenders: the ideal of public reason, if it can be salvaged, must be reformulated so that one or more of these assumptions fails to hold.

I argue that Rawls cannot easily reject any of the assumptions on which this argument rests, but there may well be ways of developing a revised account of public reason, which departs from Rawls in one or more respects and can

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4For example, one finds in the literature various authors who register skepticism about the possibility of an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice—see section 2 for an explanation of the connection between public reason and political conceptions of justice—and appeal to the existence of certain kinds of disagreements among reasonable persons as the basis for this skepticism. See, for example, Jeremy Waldron, Law and Disagreement (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 161-163; Samuel Scheffler, “The Appeal of Political Liberalism,” Ethics 105 (1994): 4-22; and Leif Wenar, “Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique,” Ethics 106 (1995): 32-62. These arguments, however, do not articulate, as I do here, the other assumptions under which such disagreements can prove problematic for Rawls.
afford to reject one or more of these assumptions. The nature of the argument, however, suggests that such revisions will have to be more than merely cosmetic alterations.

The argument rests on three assumptions. The first assumption specifies a necessary condition for claims about political values to be “acceptable” to reasonable citizens. The second assumption clarifies the sense in which claims about political values must be capable of underwriting inferences to determinate conclusions about questions of basic justice. The third and final assumption articulates the kind of reasonable disagreements about justice that undermine the possibility of public reasoning, given the first two assumptions. After discussing these assumptions in section 2, section 3 lays out the argument that public reasoning is not possible when these assumptions hold. Section 4 anticipates and responds to several objections, and section 5 concludes.

2 The assumptions

2.1 The ideal of public reason

Rawls’s political liberalism is motivated by the “fact of reasonable pluralism,” the fact that “a plurality of conflicting reasonable comprehensive doctrines, religious, philosophical, and moral, is the normal result of [democracy’s] culture of free institutions.” An important requirement on principles of justice, which Rawls recognized already in *Theory of Justice*, is that a society regulated by those principles be stable, on account of its members coming to endorse the principles for good reasons. In *Theory of Justice*, Rawls appealed to Kantian theses about rational agency and autonomy as part of the explanation for why members of a well-ordered society regulated by justice as fairness would have reasons to accept its principles of justice. But reflection on the fact of reasonable pluralism led Rawls to revise his view of what reasons citizens will have in a democratic society for endorsing principles of justice. Given the fact of reasonable pluralism, there are bound to exist other reasonable comprehensive doctrines that reject these Kantian theses about autonomy, and for their adherents, these theses do not provide good reasons for accepting justice as fairness. “The problem of political liberalism is to work out a conception of political justice for a constitutional democratic regime that the plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines... might endorse.” Political liberalism aims “to uncover the conditions of the possibility of a reasonable public basis of justification on fundamental political questions,” and “it has to be impartial... between the points of view of reasonable comprehensive doctrines.” Only what Rawls calls a “political conception of justice,” the acceptance of which “does not presuppose

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7 Ibid., xxi.
accepting any particular comprehensive doctrine,” can meet this condition.

Such conceptions of justice provide the content of “public reason.” The ideal of public reason requires that citizens appeal to political conceptions of justice when defending their judgments on matters of constitutional essentials and basic justice in public, political discussions. The reason why only political conceptions of justice, and not comprehensive doctrines, can provide the basis of public justification, is because all reasonable citizens can reasonably accept these conceptions’ claims about how the political values bear on questions of justice. Appeals to comprehensive doctrines, by contrast, cannot be reasonably accepted by those who subscribe to conflicting doctrines. Public justification “proceeds from some consensus: from premises all parties in disagreement, assumed to be free and equal and fully capable of reason, may reasonably be expected to share.”

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Note that the ideal of public reason does not constrain all public, political discussions, but only those with questions of “constitutional essentials and basic justice” as their subject matter.

“Constitutional essentials concern questions about what political rights and liberties, say, may reasonably be included in a written constitution... 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 the constitution.” I shall refer to the set of questions to which the ideal of public reason applies as the domain of public reason.

The first and most basic assumption on which my argument in section rests is simply that the ideal of public reason requires that, when citizens engage in public, political discussion of questions of constitutional essentials and basic justice, they be able to justify their judgments by means of valid arguments, the assumptions of which are acceptable to all reasonable citizens. I explain below the sense in which these arguments must be valid.

I now lay out the three assumptions under which the ideal of public reason will be impossible to satisfy, starting with an assumption about what must be true if claims about political values are to be acceptable to all reasonable citizens.

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2.2 ‘Acceptable reasons’

Rawls nowhere states explicitly any definition of the sense in which reasonable citizens must be able to “accept” or “endorse” claims about political values and how they are to be ordered. One might think that such claims are acceptable to a person if she has a reason to accept them, and one might fill in this definition with an “external” theory of reasons according to which the content of a person’s comprehensive doctrine does not in any significant way constrain the reasons that she has.

That is clearly not the sense in which Rawls intends the term to be taken. Despite the lack of an explicit definition, Rawls makes it clear in many passages that a necessary condition for a claim to be acceptable to someone, in the sense relevant to public reason, is that it not conflict with her comprehensive doctrine. For example, he writes, “While autonomy as a moral value has had an important place in the history of democratic thought, it . . . cannot be part of a political conception of justice. Many citizens of faith reject moral autonomy as part of their way of life.” That many citizens of faith reject moral autonomy is the only explanation given for why the value cannot be part of a political conception of justice, and it is clear from the context that what explains why the value cannot be part of a political conception of justice is the fact that recognizing the moral value of autonomy conflicts with their faith. Elsewhere he writes, “One aim [of political liberalism] . . . is to specify the political domain and its conception of justice in such a way that its institutions can gain the support of an overlapping consensus. In this case, citizens themselves, . . . looking to their comprehensive doctrines, view the political conception as derived from, or congruent with, or at least not in conflict with, their other values.” When addressing questions of basic justice and constitutional essentials, we should, instead of “relying on any particular comprehensive view,” “try to work up, from the fundamental ideas implicit in the political culture, a public basis of justification”—i.e., a political conception of justice—“that all citizens as reasonable and rational can endorse from within their own comprehensive doctrines.” The point of the clause “from within their own comprehensive doctrines” is clearly to stress that the content of a citizen’s comprehensive doctrine constrains whether a citizen can endorse the “public basis of justification.” These and other passages suggest that a necessary condition for deeming a claim acceptable to someone is that it not conflict with the person’s comprehensive doctrine.

If a claim implies that a comprehensive doctrine is false, then it clearly conflicts with the doctrine and cannot be deemed acceptable to its adherents.

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14My interpretation on this point differs from that offered in James Bohman and Henry Richardson, “Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and ‘Reasons that All Can Accept’,” The Journal of Political Philosophy 17 (2009): 253-274. See the discussion in section 4 for my explanation for why their interpretation is incorrect.


16Rawls, Political Liberalism, 10, 11.

17Rawls, Justice as Fairness, 29, emphasis added.
In this case, if someone holding the doctrine were to accept it, she would have to abandon her comprehensive doctrine, on pain of logical inconsistency. But we should acknowledge a second way in which a claim can severely conflict with a doctrine. An example: “Either utilitarianism is false or the earth is flat” is a claim that severely conflicts, albeit indirectly, with utilitarianism, even though it does not directly contradict it. It conflicts because it implies that, either the basic tenets of the doctrine are false or some proposition (“the earth is flat”), which proponents of utilitarianism (along with the rest of us) have very good reason to believe to be false, is true. Claims that conflict in either of these ways with a comprehensive doctrine seem like paradigmatic cases of claims that should be deemed unacceptable to its adherents.

Some utilitarians can accept these claims, in the sense that it is not impossible for some utilitarians to have logically inconsistent beliefs or to ignore, for example, their reasons for believing that the earth is not flat. But the relevant sense in which they cannot accept these claims is normative: were a utilitarian to accept such claims and continue to affirm the truth of utilitarianism, she would violate some norm enjoining logical consistency among her beliefs and responsiveness to the reasons she has to hold certain beliefs (such as reasons for believing that the earth is not flat). For lack of a better term, I shall refer to such norms as norms of rationality and say that someone who violates them is irrational. I assume, then, that a claim is unacceptable to someone if she cannot accept it and at the same time hold onto core tenets of her comprehensive doctrine, on pain of being “irrational” in this sense, and acceptable otherwise. Both “Utilitarianism is false” and “Utilitarianism is false or the earth is flat” will thus count as unacceptable to any utilitarian for whom it would be irrational to believe that the earth is flat.

To remain faithful to Rawls’s own writings, it may be necessary to add further necessary conditions for a reason to be acceptable. But since my argument purports to show that with respect to some questions in the domain of public reason, there are no generally acceptable reasons to which citizens can appeal in answering those questions, placing further necessary conditions on a reason being acceptable could only exacerbate the problem. For the sake of weakening the assumptions on which my argument rests, I therefore use the definition given above. In section 4 I consider an alternative understanding of ‘acceptability.’

2.3 Valid reasoning

So far we have explained the meaning of one condition that a successful public justification must fulfill—it must rest on premises acceptable to all reasonable persons—but that condition is clearly not sufficient. The reasons provided for a political judgment must not only be generally acceptable, but must also support the judgment in the right way. Rawls is “concerned with reason, not simply with discourse,” and “all ways of reasoning…must acknowledge certain common elements: the concept of judgment, principles of inference, and rules of
Public reason still requires some notion of a “valid” argument. “Public justification is not simply valid reasoning”—though it is also that—but arguments 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.\(^3\)

What constitutes a “valid” argument, or “correct” reasoning from premises to conclusions, according to the theory of public reason? The operative notion of validity and correct reasoning need not be equivalent to deductive validity and deductive reasoning. Perhaps, like the conceptions of justice that provide the content of public reasoning, the concept of validity needs to be “political.” These issues can be set aside for the purposes of my argument, which requires only that there is some such concept of validity and that it has the following property: if a list of assumptions are the assumptions of a valid argument for a given conclusion, then it would be irrational to affirm these assumptions and not accept the conclusion, in the same sense of ‘irrational’ invoked in the definition of ‘acceptability’ above. I shall refer to this assumption as the assumption that valid arguments have force. Since it will be convenient to have a verb to denote the relationship between the assumptions and conclusion of a valid argument, I shall say that assumptions imply a conclusion if they are part of a valid argument for the conclusion.

(Nothing of consequence depends on the use of the term ‘irrational’ here. The only important point is that both the definition of ‘acceptability’ and of ‘validity’ make reference to the same norm governing the acceptance and rejection of claims. Whether we call it a norm of rationality or something else is immaterial.)

Deductively valid arguments also have force in this sense: in the case of a deductively valid argument, one cannot accept the assumptions and reject the conclusion, on pain of irrationality. I assume that deductively valid arguments fulfill whatever other conditions are laid down for arguments that are valid for the purposes of public reasoning, but my argument does not presuppose that only deductively valid arguments can count as valid in this special sense. If, given some list of assumptions, it is extremely probable that human activity contributes to global warming, then, from the standpoint of the theory of public reason, we may wish to regard these assumptions as part of a valid argument for the conclusion that human activity contributes to global warming. Since in this example it would be irrational to accept these assumptions and deny that human activity contributes to global warming, this example is consistent with my assumption that valid arguments have force.

If we deny that an argument has force in this sense, the argument’s assumptions can be reasons for someone to accept its conclusion only in a weak sense.

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\(^3\)Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 220. This important feature of the theory of public reason has recently led Joshua Cohen to argue that political liberalism cannot dispense entirely with the concept of truth, since notions of inference and judgment are hard to make sense of without at least a minimal concept of truth. Joshua Cohen, “Truth in Public Reason,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 37 (2009): 2-42.


To be sure, much ordinary reasoning consists of providing reasons for our judgments, the acceptance of which does not necessarily compel someone to share our judgments. We often provide reasons which can be outweighed or defeated by other considerations. But we would not ordinarily describe the assertions of conclusions on the basis of such reasons as valid or correct reasoning, and there is no reason to assume that this is what Rawls envisions when he writes of reasoning “correctly” from premises to conclusions. That some policy would lead to greater economic growth might be a *prima facie* reason for implementing the policy, but it would be a *non sequitur* to conclude, simply on the basis of the assumption that the policy would contribute to economic growth, that the policy should be implemented. The presentation of such reasons is better interpreted as an intermediary step towards the goal of constructing genuinely valid arguments, the assumptions of which cannot be accepted while rejecting their conclusions.

Note that this requirement can be viewed as a response to the worry voiced in the introduction. As they are used in ordinary political discourse, the meanings of ‘free and equal’ and other terms designating political values (‘common good,’ ‘efficiency,’ etc.) are too ambiguous and contested to be the basis for determinate conclusions about justice. By requiring that public reasoning involve *valid* arguments, we effectively require that these terms be defined and interpreted more carefully—so that their acceptance compels acceptance of certain political judgments—if they are to figure in the assumptions of these arguments. Otherwise these arguments will not have force, in the sense defined above.

### 2.4 The fact of reasonable pluralism and the domain of public reason

A familiar objection to political liberalism, which helps to motivate the next and final assumption of my argument, alleges that it asserts, implausibly, that in modern democratic societies there is bound to be a fact of reasonable pluralism of moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines, but that there can be no reasonable disagreement over questions of justice. In political liberalism, what seems to explain the inadmissibility of appeals to moral and religious doctrines is the mere fact that there is reasonable disagreement over these doctrines, so reasonable disagreement over principles of justice would also suffice, one would think, to make appeals to principles of justice inadmissible. Since political liberalism thinks such appeals are admissible, it must deny that there is any reasonable disagreement over questions of justice, or so the thought goes.

As both critics and defenders of public reason have pointed out, this asym-

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21 It is also one way to capture the “determinacy” of public reason as described in Micah Schwartzman, “The Completeness of Public Reason,” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 3 (2004): 191-220, according to which public reason is ‘determinate’ if it provides a sufficient reason for deciding between any two political outcomes.

22 Caney, “Liberal Legitimacy, Reasonable Disagreement and Justice”; Chan, “Legitimacy, Unanimity, and Perfectionism”; Sandel, “Review of Political Liberalism.” For a recent reply to the asymmetry objection, see Quong, “Disagreement, asymmetry, and liberal legitimacy.”
metry seems implausible. How are we to understand the sources of reasonable disagreement in such a way that there is bound to be reasonable disagreement over moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines, but no reasonable disagreement over, say, the question of whether the distribution of wealth must satisfy the difference principle or some other principle of distributive justice? Certainly Rawls’s own description of the sources of reasonable disagreement—what he calls the “burdens of judgment”—does not seem to support this asymmetry.

While some of Rawls’s remarks in his early writings on political liberalism invite this objection, he explicitly repudiates the interpretation on which it rests in his later writings, as commentators have noted. In “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” Rawls acknowledges that there is more than one reasonable political conception of justice and on the question of abortion rights, for example, he claims that the disagreement over the question is the “normal case: unanimity of views is not to be expected. Reasonable political conceptions of justice do not always lead to the same conclusion.” Political liberalism “does not hold that the ideal of public reason should always lead to a general agreement of views, nor is it a fault that it does not.”

Presumably, reasonable citizens come to affirm different political conceptions of justice in part because their divergent comprehensive doctrines inform their reflections on justice. In line with this assumption, Rawls writes,

Political liberalism, then, does not try to fix public reason once and for all in the form of one favored political conception of justice. That would not be a sensible approach. For instance, political liberalism also admits Habermas’s discourse conception of legitimacy, . . . as well as Catholic views of the common good and solidarity when they are expressed in terms of political values.

Here Rawls is giving examples of political conceptions of justice and not comprehensive doctrines, but it is clear from the choice of examples that he thinks different comprehensive doctrines—for example, one comprising Habermas’s theory of communicative action and another consisting of some form of Roman Catholicism—will favor different political conceptions of justice. That Rawls thinks that different reasonable comprehensive doctrines will lead citizens to different reasonable political conceptions of justice is also suggested by his

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24For example, in describing the conditions for a well-ordered society, Rawls writes in *Political Liberalism*, “These conditions do not impose the unrealistic—indeed, the utopian—requirement that all citizens affirm the same comprehensive doctrine, but only, as in political liberalism, the same public conception of justice,” (*Political Liberalism*, 39, emphasis added). But see, for example, pp. 240, 241, for text that suggests that Rawls already in *Political Liberalism* acknowledged the possibility of reasonable disagreements about the questions of basic justice to which public reason applies.
27Ibid., 605, 606, my emphasis.
28Ibid., 607.
29Ibid., 582.
discussion of the “wide view of public political culture,” where he acknowledges that “the roots of democratic citizens’ allegiance to their political conceptions [of justice] lie in their respective comprehensive doctrines.”

Some reasonable comprehensive doctrine bears on questions of constitutional essentials and basic justice only in conjunction with additional auxiliary assumptions. Utilitarianism, for example, does not by itself have any implications for, say, whether justice requires an equal distribution of wealth. It implies an answer to this question only when it is conjoined with auxiliary assumptions concerning the effects of different distributions of wealth on total utility.

Disagreements about justice can sometimes be traced to disagreements about such auxiliary assumptions, as opposed to conflicts between different reasonable comprehensive doctrines. But at least some reasonable disagreements are surely traceable to differences between comprehensive doctrines. The passages just quoted suggest that this is Rawls’s own view. As my fourth and final assumption about Rawls’s theory of public reason I therefore assume that with respect to at least some questions of constitutional essentials or basic justice, reasonable comprehensive doctrines, relative to the same auxiliary assumptions, imply conflicting judgments on these questions. Moreover, it will surely sometimes be the case that the parties to such disagreements also have very good reasons to affirm these auxiliary assumptions, relative to which their comprehensive doctrines imply conflicting judgments, such that it would be irrational for them not to accept these auxiliary assumptions. Call this assumption the assumption of reasonable disagreements over justice.

For example, if one comprehensive doctrine implies that wealth should always be distributed equally, and another claims that it should be distributed so as to maximize aggregate utility, then, given the auxiliary assumption that the equal distribution does not maximize aggregate utility, they each imply, relative to this auxiliary assumption, conflicting judgments on the question. Provided that adherents of the utilitarian doctrine have very good reason to believe the auxiliary assumption that the equal distribution does not maximize aggregate utility, this example would instantiate the assumption of reasonable disagreements about justice.

Note that, in assuming that citizens’ reasonable comprehensive doctrines can imply conflicting judgments on a question within the domain of public reason, I am not assuming that the citizens holding these doctrines take their judgments on the question to be justified, politically, by their comprehensive doctrines. According to the interpretation on offer, a reasonable Roman Catholicism might, alone or in conjunction with other auxiliary assumptions, imply that justice is incompatible with abortion rights. But this judgment is not justified, and does not serve to legitimate exercises of political power, unless it can be defended by

\[30\] Ibid., 592.

\[31\] By ‘auxiliary assumptions,’ I mean any other assumptions except those that by themselves imply the conclusion in question. So, while utilitarianism plus the assumption that abortion is unjust imply that abortion is unjust, ‘auxiliary assumptions’ should not be taken to refer to such an assumption, which trivially implies the desired result in conjunction with utilitarianism.
appeal to generally acceptable reasons. The Roman Catholic, if he is reasonable in Rawls's sense, will recognize this constraint on public justification, and he can recognize it even if his comprehensive doctrine implies a judgment on the justice of abortion rights. I return to this point in section 1.

3 The argument

In addition to the general statement of the ideal of public reason given in 2.1, I have defended three assumptions about Rawls's theory of public reason: an assumption about the meaning of ‘acceptability,’ an assumption about the meaning of ‘valid arguments,’ and an assumption about the kind of reasonable disagreements that can arise over questions of justice.

Assumption 1. The ideal of public reason requires that in public, political discussions of questions of constitutional essentials and basic justice, citizens justify their judgments on these questions by providing arguments for them that are valid and whose assumptions are acceptable to all reasonable citizens.

Assumption 2. A claim is unacceptable to a person if she cannot, on pain of irrationality, accept it and hold onto core components of her comprehensive doctrine, and it is acceptable otherwise. 32

Assumption 3. Valid arguments have force, meaning that $p$ implies $q$ only if it is irrational to accept $p$ and reject $q$.

Assumption 4. There is at least one question in the domain of public reason such that there are at least two reasonable comprehensive doctrines that, given some auxiliary assumption $A$ that their adherents have good reason to accept, imply conflicting judgments on the question.

Section 2 sought to show that rejection of any one of these assumptions would entail a significant departure from Rawls’s thinking about public reason. As it turns out, the ideal of public reason, when these assumptions apply, is incoherent, in the sense that the stipulation that it can be satisfied in all the cases to which it applies leads to a contradiction. Rawls’s account of public reason must go.

The first part of the argument consists in showing that the following two claims are consequences of assumptions 2 and 3.

Claim 1 (Closure property). For any given citizen, the set of claims acceptable to this citizen is closed under implication, meaning that if $p$ is acceptable to her and $p$ implies $q$, then $q$ is acceptable to her.

32Recall from section that I assume that the absence of a conflict between a claim and a comprehensive doctrine suffices to make it acceptable to the doctrine’s adherents (as opposed to assuming merely that it is a necessary condition) only for the sake of weakening my argument’s assumptions. Imposing further necessary conditions on a claim being acceptable could only make it harder to find generally acceptable reasons.
To see why claim 3 follows from assumptions 2 and 3, suppose that \( p \) implies \( q \) and \( q \) is unacceptable to me. By assumption 3, if I accept \( p \), I have to accept \( q \), on pain of irrationality. But that means, given the supposition that \( q \) was unacceptable to me and assumption 2 that if I accept \( p \), then, on pain of irrationality, I have to reject core components of my comprehensive doctrine. But that is just what it means to say that \( p \) is unacceptable to me. Hence, when \( p \) implies \( q \), if \( q \) is unacceptable to me then \( p \) is unacceptable to me. Thus, by the contrapositive, if \( p \) is acceptable, then so too is \( q \), when \( p \) implies \( q \). That is what claim 3 asserts.

**Claim 2.** If the conjunction of \( p \) and \( A \) implies \( q \), then \( \neg q \) is unacceptable to anyone who has good reason to believe \( A \) (such that it would be irrational not to believe \( A \)) and affirms \( p \) as a core component of a comprehensive doctrine.

Assume that \( p \& A \) implies \( q \). (Think of \( A \) as an auxiliary assumption.) Then someone who accepts \( p \& A \) cannot, on pain of irrationality, accept \( \neg q \), by assumption 3. Hence, someone who has good reason to believe \( A \), such that it would be irrational not to believe \( A \), cannot, on pain of irrationality, accept \( p \) and \( \neg q \). By assumption 2, it follows that \( \neg q \) is unacceptable to this person, if the person’s comprehensive doctrine includes \( p \) as a core component. This establishes claim 3.

I now argue that there are questions within the domain of public reason—questions to which the ideal of public reason applies—with respect to which the ideal of public reason cannot be satisfied. This conclusion follows almost immediately from assumption 4 and the two preceding claims. I present the argument twice, first in the context of a concrete question of basic justice, which plausibly instantiates assumption 4, and then in general, abstract form.

Suppose the political question at hand is whether justice requires that economic inequalities satisfy Rawls’s difference principle, or whether justice requires that they satisfy a prioritarian principle. The question concerns a matter of basic justice and thus falls within the domain of public reason. Prioritarian principles assign priority to the interests of the less well-off, but, unlike the difference principle, they do not assign an absolute priority. Unlike the difference principle, prioritarian principles permit benefiting the better off even at some cost to the less well-off, but the priority assigned to the less well-off means that for such a tradeoff to be justified, these benefits must become increasingly larger, as the less well-off become increasingly badly-off.

Let \( p \) denote the proposition that justice requires that the distribution of wealth maximize aggregate utility.

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33 Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason” in *Political Liberalism*, 229, fn. 10. Rawls says that “political discussions of the reasons for and against...the difference principle, though they are not constitutional essentials, fall under questions of basic justice and so are to be decided by the political values of public reason.”

34 An example of a prioritarian principle would be one that required maximizing \( \log w_1 + \ldots + \log w_n \), where \( w_i \) is person \( i \)’s share of wealth (or whatever is being regulated by the prioritarian principle).
and let $q$ denote the proposition that justice requires that the distribution of wealth satisfies a prioritarian principle.

I assume that $p$ is the core component of some reasonable version of utilitarianism, and, further, that $p$, conjoined with some auxiliary assumption $A$ that the utilitarian has good reason to believe, implies $q$. For example, the conjunction of $p$ and the right auxiliary assumption about the decreasing marginal utility of wealth would logically entail $q$.

I assume that there can be reasonable disagreements about whether $q$ is true, so that one might, on the basis of some reasonable comprehensive doctrine, judge $q$ to be false. For example, Rawls, as a proponent of justice as fairness, judges $q$ to be false, since he believes that justice requires that economic inequalities be arranged so as to satisfy the difference principle and not a prioritarian principle.

Since the conjunction of $A$ and $p$ imply $q$ and the utilitarian has good reason to believe $A$, not-$q$ is unacceptable to the utilitarian, by claim 3.

Now suppose there is some list of assumptions, $a_1, \ldots, a_n$, such that their conjunction is acceptable to all reasonable citizens and implies not-$q$ (such as any generally acceptable reasons for the difference principle). By claim 3, it follows that not-$q$ is acceptable to all reasonable persons, but this contradicts what we just claimed, namely that not-$q$ is unacceptable to the utilitarian. That is, a contradiction follows from the assumption that there is a valid argument, the assumptions of which are acceptable to all reasonable citizens, for the judgment that justice requires that economic inequalities satisfy the difference principle.

The difficulties stem from the conjunction of assumptions 1-4 and not from any special feature of utilitarianism or this particular question about the difference principle. The following general, abstract statement of the argument should make this point clear.

Suppose that the question of whether some proposition $q$ is true—e.g., the question of whether justice requires that economic inequalities satisfy the difference principle—is a question within the domain of public reason and one that instantiates assumption 4: there are at least two reasonable comprehensive doctrines such that, relative to some auxiliary assumption $A$ that adherents of these doctrines have very good reason to believe, they imply conflicting judgments over whether $q$ is true. Suppose that there is a list of premises $a_1, \ldots, a_n$, acceptable to all reasonable citizens, such that $a_1 \& \ldots \& a_n$ implies not-$q$. Then

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Note that the prioritarian principles that compete with the difference principle apply to the distribution of income and wealth and not utility, so there need not be a conflict between the objective of distributing wealth and income according to a prioritarian principle and the objective of distributing wealth and income so as to maximize the sum of utilities, and the two objectives coincide given the right assumption about individuals’ utility functions. For example, if we assumed that the utility function for wealth of each citizen $i$ is given by $u_i(w_i) = \log w_i$, where $w_i$ is $i$’s wealth level, then maximizing the sum of utilities requires maximizing $\log w_1 + \cdots + \log w_n$, as required by a corresponding prioritarian principle of distributive justice (see previous footnote).

Note that we could construct a symmetrical argument showing that there are no generally acceptable premises supporting the judgment that justice requires that inequalities satisfy a prioritarian principle.
not-\(q\) is acceptable to all reasonable persons, by claim 3. Since the question of whether \(q\) is true instantiates assumption 4, there is some reasonable doctrine, such that a summary statement of its core components together with \(A\), implies \(q\). By claim 3 not-\(q\) is unacceptable to someone who holds this doctrine and hence not acceptable to all reasonable persons. Thus, a contradiction follows from the supposition that there are generally acceptable reasons for the judgment that not-\(q\). A symmetrical argument establishes that there can be no generally acceptable reasons for the judgment that \(q\). Hence, the requirement imposed by the ideal of public reason—when citizens discuss their judgments on this question within the public, political forum, they must justify their judgments with valid arguments, the assumptions of which are acceptable to all reasonable citizens—cannot be satisfied.

To sum up: when citizens’ opposing views on questions of basic justice are reasonable responses to the demands of their comprehensive doctrines, any answers to these questions indirectly conflict with someone’s reasonable comprehensive doctrine. But if the conclusion of a valid argument conflicts with a reasonable comprehensive doctrine, then so too do its assumptions, and the ideal of public reason excludes assumptions conflicting with others’ reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Thus, when it comes to questions within the domain of public reason over which this kind of reasonable disagreement obtains, it is impossible to answer these questions consistent with the ideal of public reason.

In the next section, I consider a few objections that might occur to some readers and that can be reformulated as objections to one or more of my assumptions.

4 Replies to objections

4.1 Objections to assumption 1

One might play down the significance of the argument by claiming that I have only shown that public reasoning is sometimes not possible. Assumption 4 merely states that there is some question in the domain of public reason on which there is the problematic kind of reasonable disagreement. Perhaps this result is not troubling if public reasoning is possible on most other questions within the domain of public reason.

This response amounts to an objection to assumption 1. Assumption 1 says that the ideal of public reason requires citizens, when engaging in public, political discussion of questions of constitutional essentials and basic justice, to justify their judgments by appealing to generally acceptable reasons. But it is absurd to insist that one is required to appeal to generally acceptable reasons when addressing some question of constitutional essentials and basic justice, if there are no such reasons. That absurdity seems to me a decisive embarrassment for the theory of public reason, even if it appears in the case of just a single question in the domain of public reason.

We might modify assumption 1 by relaxing the ideal of public reason. We
might reformulate it as something less than a requirement, or the requirement might merely be that citizens appeal to generally acceptable reasons if such reasons exist. Under this revised understanding of public reason, the existence of a single case in which no generally acceptable reasons can be found might not be troubling.

The argument still shows, however, that there can exist generally acceptable reasons only on questions of constitutional essentials and basic justice that do not instantiate assumption 4, i.e., only on questions about which there is no reasonable disagreement, in the relevant sense. But what reason is there for thinking that most questions within the domain of public reason will not instantiate assumption 4? Such an expectation, I submit, could only be warranted if we assumed an implausible amount of homogeneity among reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

A second objection to assumption 1 points out that Rawls’s descriptions of the ideal of public reason sometimes differ from assumption 1. For example, in a passage quoted earlier, Rawls writes, “Public justification is not simply valid reasoning, but arguments addressed to others: it proceeds correctly from premises we accept and think others could reasonably accept…” I have assumed that public reason requires one to give others reasons that are actually acceptable to them. Of course, Rawls expresses the idea of public reason in this way, too. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that the statements in the first category, and not the second, correctly express the requirement of public reason: citizens must merely give others reasons that they think are acceptable to them. This requirement could be fulfilled even if there are no generally acceptable reasons.

A cost of this alternative account is that the only citizens who can satisfy the ideal of public reason in all those cases where the ideal applies are citizens who are sometimes ignorant of what reasons are actually acceptable to others. Any citizen who, with respect to each question in the domain of public reason, had correct beliefs about what reasons were and were not generally acceptable, would know in some cases—those cases instantiating assumption 4—that there are no generally acceptable reasons. For that is what the argument in section 2 demonstrates. On this alternative account of public reasoning, a certain form of ignorance is needed in order to comply with public reason.

4.2 Objections to assumption 2

A first objection to assumption 2 might claim that, contrary to what I have supposed, the ideal of public reason is formulated relative to an “external” standard of reasons, according to which the set of claims that can be deemed acceptable

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38 As, for example, when he writes that “[c]itizens must be able, then, to present to one another publicly acceptable reasons for their political views in cases raising fundamental political questions” (Justice as Fairness, 91). I interpret the other kind of remark—“reasons that citizens think are acceptable to others”—as simply Rawls’s description of sincere—but not necessarily successful—attempts to satisfy the requirement of public reason.
to a reasonable citizen is not constrained by the content of her reasonable comprehensive doctrine. James Bohman and Henry Richardson defend a version of this interpretation.

On Rawls’s characterization, the hope for such a freestanding justification of justice as fairness does not depend on our trying to fit this liberal view to the various comprehensive doctrines that happen to exist, nor even on our knowing what these doctrines are. Instead, whether or not we can say that a reason is acceptable to reasonable citizens depends simply on whether the “given reason coheres well with the constitutive commitments of reasonableness, and by nothing else.”

Suppose that a citizen proposes to settle the fair terms of social cooperation by appeal to a conception of justice built around, say, the moral value of autonomy, as understood by Mill, and we ask whether this proposal can meet the “criterion of reciprocity,” i.e., the requirement that the citizen offering these terms of social cooperation “must reasonably think that those citizens to whom such terms are offered might also reasonably accept them.” (“Criterion of reciprocity” is just another name for the principal constraint imposed by the ideal of public reason.) If Bohman and Richardson are right, Rawls’s explanation for why this conception of justice fails to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity should make no reference to actually existing comprehensive doctrines. Instead, it should refer us to the “constitutive commitments of reasonableness.” But here is what Rawls says:

While autonomy as a moral value has had an important place in the history of democratic thought, it fails to satisfy the criterion of reciprocity required of reasonable political principles and cannot be part of a political conception of justice. Many citizens of faith reject moral autonomy as part of their way of life.

Contrary to what we should expect on Bohman and Richardson’s interpretation, Rawls points to the fact of a conflict between existing (reasonable) comprehensive doctrines and moral autonomy, and not to any “constitutive commitments of reasonableness,” to explain why moral autonomy cannot be part of a political conception of justice. This passage and others like those cited in section will prove hard to reconcile with any interpretation according to which the standard for reasonable acceptability makes no reference to the content of reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

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39 Bohman and Richardson, “Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and ‘Reasons that All Can Accept’,” 259, 260, emphasis added.
40 Ibid., 260, emphasis added.
41 Rawls, Political Liberalism, xlv.
42 Rawls, Political Liberalism, xlv.
43 It is worth pointing out that there is no conflict between this passage and the following passage from Political Liberalism, which might be wrongly thought to lend support to Bohman and Richardson’s interpretation: “To find this political conception we do not look at known
Here is another objection to assumption 2. Some readers might think that the argument rests on the unnecessary and implausible assumption that all reasonable comprehensive doctrines are perfectly consistent and do not have any internal tensions or contradictions. Of course, no such assumption is introduced at any point explicitly in my argument, but there is a way of reformulating this objection as an objection to assumption 2.

**Objection:** “It is not necessary that a political conception of justice be consistent with every core component of all reasonable comprehensive doctrines, provided that each reasonable comprehensive doctrine contains elements that support it. Some reasonable comprehensive doctrines will contain elements in tension with each other, so that a doctrine may support the political conception of justice even though this conception of justice supports judgments contradicting other elements of the doctrine. Thus, the fact that a set of premises implying a judgment on some question of basic justice conflict with a core component of a reasonable comprehensive doctrine does not mean that they are unacceptable to adherents of that doctrine.”

As I interpret Rawls, a claim is acceptable to someone only if the claim does not conflict with a core component of her comprehensive doctrine. Given this assumption, the argument in section 3 goes through, whether or not comprehensive doctrines are consistent or inconsistent. But this objection suggests an alternative account of acceptability, motivated by the fact of reasonable but inconsistent comprehensive doctrines. We might say that a claim is acceptable to a person if and only if the person’s doctrine includes components that (alone or in conjunction with auxiliary assumptions) imply it—even if the doctrine also includes components that conflict with it.

This revised account of acceptability escapes the critique presented in section 3 but at a severe cost. Say that a doctrine is inconsistent if it affirms some claim \( p \) and also comprises components implying not-\( p \). We shall still have to concede that sets of acceptable claims are closed under implication, provided

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comprehensive doctrines with the aim of striking a balance or average between them, nor do we attempt to strike a compromise with a sufficient number of those doctrines actually existing in society by tailoring the political conception to fit them” (ibid., xlvii). The claim that we do not “find” a political conception of justice by “tailoring” it to fit reasonable comprehensive doctrines might at first glance seem equivalent to the claim that a political conception of justice can contradict (i.e., not ‘fit’) reasonable comprehensive doctrines. But the two claims are not equivalent. The first claim is a claim about the process of formulating a conception of justice. Since there are other necessary conditions that an adequate conception of justice must satisfy besides compatibility with reasonable comprehensive doctrines—it should, for one thing, have its own internal logic and coherence—it would not be wise to formulate a conception of justice simply with the goal of general acceptance in mind. But that admonishment is entirely consistent with Rawls’s view that a defining feature of a political conception of justice is that it does not imply the acceptance or rejection of any particular reasonable comprehensive doctrine (*Justice as Fairness*, 26) and that it is to serve as a “public basis of justification that all citizens as reasonable and rational can endorse from within their own comprehensive doctrines” (ibid., 29).
that the implication relation is transitive. The revised definition of ‘acceptability’ escapes this paper’s critique only by supposing that every reasonable doctrine that implies a judgment on questions instantiating assumption 4 is inconsistent. To see why, suppose the question of whether \( q \) is true instantiates assumption 4 and there exists some consistent reasonable doctrine that affirms \( p \) and that \( p \) implies \( q \). Since this doctrine is consistent, it does not, alone or in conjunction with any other auxiliary assumptions, imply not-\( q \), and so not-\( q \) is not acceptable to this doctrine. But that means that there can be no list of assumptions belonging to a valid argument for the conclusion that \( q \) is false such that these assumptions are acceptable to everyone. For if there were, the closure assumption would imply that not-\( q \) is acceptable to everyone. Hence, this revised account of ‘acceptability’ preserves the possibility of public reasoning only by supposing that every reasonable doctrine that implies a judgment on questions instantiating assumption 4 is inconsistent, but that is absurd.

Note, finally, that if this revised definition is modified by supposing that a claim is acceptable to someone if it receives some “support” from their comprehensive doctrine—where “supporting” is something weaker than implying—then the point still holds if we grant that sets of acceptable claims are closed under the “support” relation.

4.3 Objections to assumption 4

I turn now to objections to assumption 4: there is at least one question within the domain of public reason such that at least two reasonable comprehensive doctrines, in conjunction with some auxiliary assumption \( A \) that their adherents have good reason to believe, imply conflicting judgments on this question.

Some may think that this assumption clashes with Rawls’s characterization of what it means to be reasonable. Rawls writes that “reasonable persons see that the burdens of judgment set limits on what can be reasonably justified to others” and would acknowledge that no person has “the right to use the state’s police power to decide constitutional essentials or basic questions of justice

44 The implication relation is transitive if it is true that if \( p \) implies \( q \) and \( q \) implies \( r \), then \( p \) implies \( r \). By the new definition of ‘acceptability,’ if \( p \) is acceptable to someone, then her comprehensive doctrine implies \( p \). Thus, if \( p \) implies \( q \) and \( p \) is acceptable to someone, then her doctrine implies \( q \), by transitivity. In this case, \( q \) is acceptable to her, by the new definition. This proves the closure assumption.

45 What is worse, one can show that any claim is acceptable to someone holding an inconsistent doctrine, under this revised definition of ‘acceptability.’ For an inconsistent doctrine implies a contradiction, from which any proposition can be derived. From the contradiction, \( p \) and not-\( p \), \( p \) follows, from which the disjunction, \( p \) or \( s \), follows. Together with not-\( p \), this disjunction entails \( s \). Since, we assume, logically valid arguments are valid arguments, it follows that for any proposition \( s \), an inconsistent doctrine implies \( s \), hence \( s \) is acceptable to someone holding this doctrine, using the revised definition of ‘acceptability.’ The requirement that premises in political justification be acceptable to reasonable doctrines is therefore trivially satisfied when those doctrines are inconsistent. So much, then, for this revised definition of ‘acceptability.’

46 Again, this closure property could be derived from an assumption that the support relation is transitive. See footnote 36.
as that person’s... comprehensive doctrine directs." In the example used in section one might think that the problem arises because the utilitarian takes her opposition to the difference principle to be justified on the basis of a sectarian tenet of her own comprehensive doctrine. Here is one way the objection might be put:

**Objection:** “Let us concede that a utilitarian may not be able to accept, consistent with her comprehensive doctrine, the judgment that justice requires that inequalities satisfy the difference principle. That is only a problem for public reason if this utilitarian doctrine is reasonable. But someone who thinks that sectarian components of her comprehensive doctrine imply conclusions about justice is unreasonable. It is unreasonable to think that one can justify a judgment about matters of basic justice merely by appeal to some such sectarian tenet. The doctrines of reasonable persons would not imply any such judgments but would instead recognize that one can justifiably make such judgments only upon seeing what assumptions other reasonable persons can accept.”

The objection wrongly conflates judgments being **implied** by sectarian tenets of comprehensive doctrines with judgments being **justified** by sectarian tenets of comprehensive doctrines. As explained earlier, these terms have specialized meanings in the theory of public reason and cannot be interchanged. In assuming the existence of a reasonable utilitarianism that (together with a reasonable auxiliary assumption) **implies** that justice requires income and wealth to be distributed according to a prioritarian principle (and not the difference principle), we are **not** assuming that any tenet of the doctrine **publicly justifies** this view, nor are we assuming that a utilitarian holding the doctrine takes any of its tenets to provide a public justification of the view. Someone is not unreasonable simply in virtue of holding a comprehensive doctrine that implies conclusions about justice, provided that she does not treat these conclusions as publicly justified in virtue of being implied by her doctrine. Once we recognize this point, the objection loses its apparent force.

Rawls acknowledged that reasonable comprehensive doctrines can have implications for questions of basic justice and constitutional essentials.

> [F]or those who hold well-articulated, highly systematic, comprehensive doctrines, it is from within such a doctrine (that is, starting from its basic assumptions) that these citizens affirm the political conception of justice. The fundamental concepts, principles, and virtues of the political conception are theorems, as it were, of their comprehensive views.

i.e., their comprehensive doctrines imply (via the implication of political conceptions of justice) judgments on questions of constitutional essentials and basic

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justice. In a similar vein, Rawls supposes, in the course of considering a hypothetical overlapping consensus (involving a Kantian liberal and a reasonable utilitarian), that a political conception of justice can be “derived” from “Kant’s moral philosophy with its ideal of autonomy” and “someone who affirms Kant’s doctrine, or one similar to it, regards that view [Kant’s doctrine] as the deductive basis of the political conception.” In other words, elements of Kant’s moral philosophy (perhaps in conjunction with auxiliary assumptions) implies the judgments making up the political conception of justice. See also the passages cited in section 2.4.

Indeed, it is precisely because reasonable comprehensive doctrines do have implications for questions of justice that the ideal of public reason imposes a nontrivial and non-redundant requirement on justification. It would be pointless and redundant, for example, to require that in justifying political judgments, citizens not appeal to controversial claims about which NBA basketball teams are best. These claims simply have no implications for political judgments anyways. In order to dismiss appeals to them, we need not bother with a special theory of political justification like public reason. We can simply invoke ordinary standards of valid reasoning. The problem that prompts the theory of public reason is the fact that appeals to reasonable comprehensive doctrines cannot be dismissed simply on the basis of these ordinary constraints on reasoning. That is, such doctrines do have implications for questions of justice.

Another possible objection to assumption 4 is suggested by Jonathan Quong’s distinction between two kinds of disagreements about justice: “foundational” disagreements and “justificatory” disagreements. “Foundational disagreements” are characterized by the fact that the participants do not share any premises that can serve as a mutually acceptable standard of justification. The second type of disagreement, “justificatory disagreement,” occurs when participants do share premises that serve as a mutually acceptable standard of justification, but they nevertheless disagree about certain substantive conclusions. Quong introduces this distinction so that political liberals may defend a more nuanced and plausible asymmetry between disagreements about the good life and disagreements about justice. Political liberals can acknowledge the possibility of reasonable disagreements about justice, so long as these disagreements are justificatory, and not foundational, and they can argue that disagreements about the good life tend to be foundational.

According to Quong, political liberalism assumes that reasonable foundational disagreements about justice are impossible by definition. For it follows from the definition of ‘reasonable citizen’ that reasonable citizens recognize as reasonable and can accept certain political values and orderings of these values, which provide a shared framework for addressing questions of justice and rule out the possibility of foundational disagreements. A natural question is whether this account of what it means to be reasonable is consistent with assumption 4. Does assumption 4 simply beg the question against this view and assume that

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50 Quong, “Disagreement, asymmetry, and liberal legitimacy.”
reasonable citizens have foundational disagreements?

It does not. The disagreements described by assumption 4 could obtain among reasonable citizens who share common political values (i.e., assumption 4 does not assert the existence of foundational disagreements). What the argument shows, however, is that if assumption 4 is true, then either these political values are acceptable despite the fact that they contradict reasonable citizens’ comprehensive doctrines (i.e., assumption 2 is false) or they are so abstract or their orderings so indeterminate that one can accept them without being rationally compelled to accept any determinate judgments on questions within the domain of public reason (i.e., assumption 3 is false).

I conclude by taking up one final possible concern with assumption 4. When Rawls sought to answer the question of why we might have reason to think that an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice is possible, he appealed to sociological hypotheses about how the distribution of comprehensive doctrines might change over time. So perhaps we should concede the truth of assumption 4, but add the qualification that comprehensive doctrines can undergo revisions in the light of public deliberation, as a result of which assumption 4 might at some point cease to describe the set of reasonable comprehensive doctrines.

How plausible is it that assumption 4 will ever cease to be true? Take, for example, the question of whether economic inequalities must satisfy the difference principle or, on the contrary, a prioritarian principle. How plausible is it that the set of extant reasonable comprehensive doctrines will ever be such that they all imply the same judgments on this question? Such a prognosis seems unrealistic. Moreover, even if the prognosis were accepted, my argument would still show that in the interim, it is impossible to reason publicly about the questions within the domain of public reason, such as this one, on which reasonable comprehensive doctrines imply conflicting judgments.

5 Conclusion

The idea of public reason requires that in public, political discussions of constitutional essentials and basic justice, citizens justify their political judgments on these matters by appealing to reasons that all reasonable citizens can accept. I have argued that if one grants defensible assumptions concerning the meaning of ‘acceptable reasons,’ the notion of a ‘valid’ argument, and the nature of reasonable disagreements about the questions in the domain of public reason, then the constraints of public reason will be impossible to satisfy. In the face of reasonable disagreement about a question of basic justice, the conclusions of valid arguments addressing the question will conflict with some reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Given the assumptions about ‘validity’ and ‘acceptability,’ their assumptions will consequently fail to be acceptable to all reasonable citizens.

51 See, for example, Rawls, Justice as Fairness, 192-198.
If, as I have argued, these assumptions fairly characterize Rawls’s theory of public reason, then the argument can be taken as a refutation of the theory. But the argument should prove illuminating even to readers who deny that its assumptions fairly characterize Rawls’s theory or the strongest possible version of the theory. First and foremost, such readers should now be convinced, if they were not previously, of the need to clarify the meanings of key elements of the theory, such as the idea of generally acceptable reasons and valid arguments in public reasoning. This paper has sought to show how one way of doing so leads to an incoherent theory, but there may be other viable possibilities.

It seems likely, however, that if there are revisions to Rawls’s theory to which this paper’s critique does not apply, they will involve more than merely superficial alterations. If we try to understand an ‘acceptable reason’ in a way that does not link it to the absence of conflicts with comprehensive doctrines, then the fact of reasonable pluralism may not constrain political justification. If we deny that valid arguments with force are the currency of public reasoning, then it is less clear that the ideal of public reason regulates, reasoning, as opposed to plain discourse. If we reject the assumption that there can be reasonable disagreements about questions of justice, we may be committed to positing an implausible level of homogeneity among reasonable comprehensive doctrines. These are the tradeoffs that any revised account of public reason must negotiate.