

Review

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

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

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

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

This justification relies on Neufeld’s analytical work distinguishing three different senses in which a Rawlsian account of public

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44 reason represents an ideal of autonomy. First, it calls for ‘institutional
45 autonomy’ in that deciding constitutional essentials based on public
46 reason involves assigning to every person in society the right to vote,
47 run for office, and otherwise participate as equal contributors to pol-
48 itical decision-making. Second, it requires that at least the most im-
49 portant political decisions be made based on arguments that all
50 reasonable persons can accept, protecting their ‘justificatory auton-
51 omy’. Third, a society where citizens obey public reason also
52 secures their ‘shared autonomy’, because they all share and acknow-
53 ledge in each other a commitment to make decisions that can be rea-
54 sonably accepted by all (pp. 27–29). According to Neufeld, this third
55 generally overlooked element makes public reasoning into the reason-
56 ing of a collective agent in Michael Bratman’s sense of the term, cre-
57 ating a ‘civic people’ with shared intentions (pp. 51–56). In turn, this
58 strengthens the view that public reason is justified by its ability to
59 create a strong relationship of togetherness, or civic friendship,
60 despite comprehensive disagreement. For Neufeld, this relationship
61 is intrinsically important. Moreover, given that public reasoning ex-
62 presses respect for every person decision-makers justify themselves
63 to, the civic friendship it creates also has the instrumental value of
64 being conducive to self-respect (pp. 71–78).

65 Public reason has many critics. Therefore, part of justifying it is
66 pushing back against public reason’s foes. For instance, one of the
67 main purposes of Jonathan Quong’s highly influential *Liberalism*
68 *without Perfection* is to criticise liberal perfectionism, i.e., the idea
69 that liberal democratic institutions are justified not because they are
70 generally acceptable among reasonable persons but because they
71 enable individuals to pursue the good life (Quong, 2011).
72 Interestingly, Neufeld does not believe that public reason should
73 be defined in terms of neutrality and therefore pays little attention
74 to the long-standing debate with liberal perfectionists (pp. 5–6).
75 However, he builds on his civic people account of public reason to
76 add to the many objections that broadly Rawlsian public reason lib-
77 erals have levelled at another classical opponent of theirs, i.e., the
78 framework of ‘convergence’ public justification. This framework
79 posits that to be legitimate, political decisions should be widely ac-
80 ceptable in society. However, different individuals are allowed to
81 support a decision based on completely different idiosyncratic
82 reasons that each can derive from their religious or otherwise compre-
83 hensive doctrine (Gaus, 2011). In contrast, Rawlsian public reason
84 liberals call for reasons that build on shared ground among reasonable
85 persons. Among other things, Neufeld argues that convergence
86 public justification is an ideal for ‘subjects’ to political power, not

87 ‘co-sovereigns’. Indeed, given how demanding it is to check that
88 every political decision one contributes to can be justified based on
89 a convergence of all comprehensive doctrines in society, most citizens
90 will have to be relegated to a passive role in the democratic process
91 (pp. 68–71).

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

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

126 In the last few years, feminist approaches to public reason liberal-
127 ism have constituted one of its most important growth areas.
128 Exemplified among others by Lori Watson and Christie Hartley’s
129 *Equal Citizenship and Public Reason* and Gina Schouten’s *Liberalism*,

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130 *Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labour*, such approaches aim
131 to show (among other things) that working from within a public
132 reason framework leads to surprisingly gender-egalitarian normative
133 recommendations (Watson and Hartley, 2018; Schouten, 2019).
134 Chapters 4 and 5 of Neufeld's book discuss many characteristic
135 issues of this literature. For instance, he argues that some, but not
136 other, 'aspects' of the institution of the family are part of the basic
137 structure of institutions that are subject to justice and should there-
138 fore be shaped as required by public reason through coercive state
139 power (p. 105). This is a mid-way approach that is meant to enable
140 the liberal state to push for gender equality in the family while
141 leaving families enough freedom to pass (within certain limits)
142 their favoured comprehensive doctrines on to their children.
143 Relatedly, Neufeld investigates what sort of citizenship education
144 students should receive, arguing that it should limit itself to socialis-
145 ing younger generations into strictly political virtues like reasonable-
146 ness. In contrast, it should let individuals free, e.g., to take their
147 church's word for important matters about their personal conduct,
148 given that those matters fall in the comprehensive realm (pp. 128–36).

149 To conclude, *Public Reason and Political Autonomy* provides a
150 stimulating addition to the tradition of wide-ranging books about
151 public reason. However, there are some argumentative moves that I
152 do not find fully convincing. For instance, I am somewhat sceptical
153 of Neufeld's choice of giving pride of place to the question of the jus-
154 tification of public reason. In my view, there is room to argue that
155 public reason liberals simply should not worry about identifying
156 the single best justification for their framework. At the end of the
157 day, public reason liberalism is centred around bracketing all founda-
158 tional questions of value that reach any deeper than widely acceptable
159 reasonable political ideas. Moreover, I do not think that Neufeld's
160 civic people justification for public reason does much work in
161 linking together (and with the rest of the book) Chapters 3, 4 and
162 5's important discussions about ideal and non-ideal theory, the
163 family, and education. Indeed, it seems to me that such discussions
164 could stand independently of Neufeld's preferred approach to
165 justification.

166 I believe that Neufeld's book will be an interesting read for anyone
167 working on public reason. In the future, however, public reason lib-
168 erals might want to consider building their book projects around
169 slightly different centres of gravity. For instance, taking inspiration
170 from Neufeld's current research, political activism in non-ideal cir-
171 cumstances might well turn out to work better than the old
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173 problem of how to justify public reason to the unconvinced (Neufeld,
174 [forthcoming](#)).

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