

CAN CIVIC FRIENDSHIP GROUND PUBLIC REASON?

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Public reason views hold that the exercise of political power must be acceptable to all reasonable citizens. A growing number of philosophers argue that this reasonable acceptability principle (RAP) can be justified by appealing to the value of civic friendship. They claim that a valuable form of political community can only be achieved among the citizens of pluralistic societies if they refrain from appealing to controversial ideals and values when justifying the exercise of political power to one another. This paper argues against such accounts. In order to justify RAP, one must explain and defend a conception of reasonableness. Civic friendship is unfit to perform this task, rendering it unable to ground public reason alone. Meanwhile, pluralist views that combine civic friendship with other considerations in order to specify RAP either fail or make civic friendship a spare wheel in the argument for public reason.

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Public reason views hold that the exercise of political power must be acceptable to all reasonable citizens. Call this requirement the reasonable acceptability principle (RAP). One of the most important questions we can ask about RAP is what justifies it: why should we think that the legitimacy of laws and policies depends on this kind of acceptability? Perhaps the most widely discussed answer to this question is that respect for persons requires that political power be acceptable to those over whom it is exercised (Larmore, 1990, 2015; Nussbaum 2011; Boettcher 2012; Wong 2020; van Wietmarschen 2021).¹ A rather different answer has become increasingly popular within the literature, however. This is the claim that compliance with RAP realizes relations of civic friendship between citizens. Proponents of what we will call the argument from civic friendship suggest that it is the value of this kind of political community that grounds public reason. The origins of this argument can be traced to brief comments by John Rawls, who held that compliance with his ideal of public reason specified ‘the nature of the political relation in a

¹ For critique, see Eberle (2002: ch. 4–5).

constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship' (Rawls 2005: 447).² But it has been articulated in detail by theorists such as Kyla Ebels-Duggan (2010), Andrew Lister (2013), R.J. Leland and Han van Wietmarschen (2017), and Leland (2019).³

This paper raises serious challenges to the argument from civic friendship to public reason. Though particular versions of the argument have been subjected to criticism already, our argument is both ambitious and general. It is ambitious in that it suggests that the value of civic friendship is unable to play one of the central roles that a justification for public reason must play. And it is general in that if our argument is sound, then it is not just that this or that particular version of the argument from civic friendship fails; it is rather that any argument from civic friendship to public reason faces major difficulties. Given the increasing prominence of arguments from civic friendship in the literature, we believe this is a significant conclusion. While our argument is grist for the mill of critics of public reason views, our primary aim is not to cast doubt upon those views themselves. If such views are to be vindicated, however, then we doubt that civic friendship is going to be what justifies them.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section I, we consider what a successful justification for public reason must achieve, and defend a framework to help us assess any grounding argument. Section II sketches the civic friendship arguments for public reason from Lister, Leland, and van Wietmarschen. Sections III and IV critique 'monist' civic friendship arguments, which appeal to this value as the sole grounding for public reason. We show that such arguments cannot justify public reason in light of the framework defended in Section I. Specifically, they cannot justify an account of the idealization involved in specifying the justificatory constituency of reasonable citizens, whose acceptance defines what count as 'public reasons' and thus determines when RAP is satisfied. There are many different conceptions of reasonableness that public reason views could appeal to, and civic friendship is incapable of choosing between them. A natural response to this is to adopt a pluralist view, according to which other considerations combine with civic friendship in order to specify and vindicate RAP. We consider several pluralist civic friendship arguments in Section V, and find each of them wanting. None can provide an adequate specification of RAP while maintaining a significant role for civic friendship. This points towards a negative answer to our titular question.

² Rawls did not, however, take civic friendship to be the grounding for public reason in the sense that we are discussing in this paper. See further footnote 7 below.

³ Some theorists have appealed to similar ideas without using civic friendship as the grounding for RAP, so do not fall within the ambit of our critique. See Neufeld (2019) and Kugelberg (2021).

I. GROUNDING PUBLIC REASON

What would a successful justification of RAP have to achieve? The obvious reply is that it must tell us why the exercise of political power must be acceptable to all reasonable citizens. But things are not so simple. Participants in this debate disagree both about who ‘reasonable citizens’ are and what it means for something to be ‘acceptable’ to them. To start with, reasonable citizens are an idealized constituency: No public reason theorist holds that the exercise of political power must be acceptable to all actual citizens. And there are a wide variety of ways in which reasonable citizens might be idealized, with public reason theorists—and their critics—disagreeing about the appropriate level and kind of idealization. Given this, any defence of RAP needs to defend a particular account of idealization. It needs to explain why the exercise of political power must be acceptable to *this* constituency of reasonable citizens, understood in this particular way. Further, it also needs to explain what makes the exercise of political power acceptable to this group.

This thought can also be expressed as follows. Public reason theorists hold that in order for RAP to be fulfilled, laws must be justified using public reasons, where these are defined as reasons that are (in some sense) acceptable to reasonable citizens. So, to know what reasons can permissibly justify laws, we need to know what reasons reasonable citizens accept. And to know that, we must know who the constituency of reasonable citizens are. What standards of reasoning do they comply with? What beliefs, values, or evaluative standards do they hold? Without this, the demand to justify laws using public reasons is empty or indeterminate. A specification of this constituency is thus required in order for us to know what RAP demands and what laws fulfil those demands. Any grounding for RAP must therefore explain why it is justification to *this particular* constituency, and thus justification using public reasons as defined in relation to that constituency, that matters with respect to the legitimacy of laws.

We can express these ideas more concretely by saying that a defender of RAP must provide answers to the following four questions:⁴

Idealization: How are the reasonable citizens to whom the view refers idealized? What conditions are used to specify their beliefs, desires, or commitments?

Formulation: What conditions need to be satisfied for an exercise of political power to be acceptable to all reasonable citizens?

Rationale: Why should we endorse this version of RAP? Why does the legitimacy of laws and policies depend on what this constituency of reasonable citizens would or would not accept?

⁴ For a full discussion and defence of this framework, see Billingham & Taylor (2022).

Content: What, if anything, is acceptable to all reasonable citizens? What laws and policies does this view deem to be legitimate?

Not only must these four questions be given plausible answers, but also, importantly, those answers must stand in a particular relationship to one another. Central to our argument in this paper is the relationship between the rationale question and the idealization and formulation questions. A successful answer to the rationale question must explain and justify its proponents' answers to the idealization and formulation questions. This is because it must explain and justify the acceptance of RAP, and, more specifically, explain and justify a particular version of RAP, as specified by answers to the idealization and formulation questions. A public reason view tells us that the legitimacy of laws depends upon their being acceptable to an idealized constituency of reasonable citizens, and so its proponents need to provide a justification for this claim, which includes justifying its specification of that justificatory constituency and what acceptability to them involves. This is the role that a rationale, or grounding argument, must play. The framework thus provides us with a way to assess civic friendship arguments for public reason: by assessing whether they can explain and justify answers to both the idealization question and formulation question. For simplicity, in what follows we will focus primarily on the relationship between civic friendship and the idealization question. However, we believe that a related argument focusing on the formulation question could also be developed.

Before moving on, we will make four points of clarification about this framework. First, we do not hold that the answer to the rationale question must appeal to a single value or argument. A defence of public reason may of course be pluralist (rather than monist), appealing to multiple values that together justify the view. Thus, for example, civic friendship might show why political decisions must be justified using reasons acceptable to an idealized constituency, while another value (or other values) helps to specify the nature of that constituency. In other words, civic friendship *alone* need not provide the full justification for a theorist's answers to the idealization and formulation questions. It might instead play the more modest role of showing why we should adopt *some* version of RAP, or one from some range of specifications of RAP. We discuss both monist and pluralist views below.

Secondly, our framework is compatible with the idea that there are questions of ultimate, comprehensive, and/or metaphysical grounding that can be set aside by public reason views.⁵ There are some questions that those views may leave to citizens to answer for themselves. In Rawlsian language, RAP may be part of a political morality that reasonable citizens treat as a module that they

⁵ Proponents of public reason views often present their arguments as philosophically modest in this way. See, for example, Dreben (2002), Quong (2011: ch. 5 and 8), and van Wietmarschen (2021: 356–7).

can fit into their broader comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 2005: 12). But those defending RAP cannot avoid answering the question of why their version of RAP is the one that citizens should incorporate in this way. They therefore cannot leave to citizens themselves the task of explaining and justifying answers to the idealization and formulation questions. To not answer these questions would be to assert a controversial philosophical view without defence.

Thirdly, some might read our framework as surreptitiously committing us to a foundationalist theory of justification, according to which a principle like RAP must ultimately be justified by appealing to a set of basic beliefs or values; it cannot ultimately be justified by appealing to considerations of coherence. If our claim did have this implication, it would be vulnerable to the objection that it ruled out a number of possible routes to answering the rationale question by fiat. However, we do not take our framework to imply this foundationalist commitment. The range of possible answers to the rationale question is not constrained in this way, and so we explicitly leave open the possibility that an answer to it might appeal to considerations of coherence.

Fourth, the framework is not merely an esoteric demand that we are placing on participants in the public reason debate. Existing well-known defences of public reason are already structured such that they give an answer to the rationale question that aims to explain and justify their answers to the idealization question. Consider, as a first example, the respect rationale offered by Charles Larmore. On his view, reasonable citizens are those who are ‘thinking and conversing in good faith’ (Larmore 1990: 340), and so on his version of RAP laws must be justifiable to all who meet this condition in order to be legitimate. This answer to the idealization question is supported by his rationale, according to which equal respect for one another as beings with the capacity for reason requires us to settle our political disputes via rationale dialogue rather than force. To force others to comply with our preferred rules without offering them an appropriate justification would be to bypass rather than engage that capacity. Thus, all who are ‘applying, as best as [they] can, the general capacities of reason’ (Larmore 1990: 340) are owed a justification that they can accept. Though Larmore’s view is vulnerable to various objections,⁶ if his rationale is successful then it does support his account of the justificatory constituency.

As a second example, consider Gerald Gaus’s argument from the presuppositions of the reactive attitudes. Gaus (2011: ch. 4) argues that there is an ideal of interpersonal justification embedded in our social-moral emotions of resentment and indignation. According to that ideal, we do not resent rule violations by those who lack sufficient reason to accept and internalize the rule in question. Therefore, laws can only be permissibly imposed on those

⁶ Perhaps the most important is that his overly broad justificatory constituency makes the principle far too restrictive. He grapples with this problem in Larmore (1987: 67–8).

who have sufficient reason to accept them. Again, there is much that could be said about this view, but, if successful, it does support Gaus's account of the justificatory consistency, for Gaus (2011: ch. 5) models this constituency as a set of idealized agents deliberating on the basis of their sufficient reasons. The rationale, our commitment to the reactive attitudes, supports the modest level of idealization that Gaus employs.⁷ The fact that the civic friendship argument cannot answer the idealization question, as we argue in the rest of this paper, is therefore a flaw that it does not share with (at least some of) its competition. (Of course, there might well be other public reason theories that do face the same objection; we take no stance on that here.)

II. CIVIC FRIENDSHIP ARGUMENTS FOR PUBLIC REASON

For defenders of the civic friendship argument, what grounds RAP is the fact that it allows us to realize a valuable form of political community in spite of reasonable disagreement. Ideals of political community or civic friendship might strike us as valuable, but they may also appear to be unachievable in liberal democratic societies where citizens profoundly disagree on matters of religion, morality, the nature of the good life, and so on. But if, despite these profound disagreements, citizens can share certain values and reasons, and laws and policies are justified by appealing to those shared values and reasons, then a liberal democratic society may nonetheless be able to realize a valuable ideal of civic friendship (Ebels-Duggan 2010: 55–8). This would be the best available ideal of community, given reasonable disagreement.

Lister (2013: 107–8) makes this general thought more precise by appealing to an analogy with marriage. He argues that when making decisions in a marriage, it is appropriate to exclude from consideration any reasons that your partner rejects. If Alf and Betty disagree about whether social justice requires them to send their child to a state school rather than a private school, then those reasons of social justice should be set to one side, and they should make their decision based on the remaining reasons about which they agree. Here, according to Lister, the mutual commitment to act only on reasons that are shared among the marriage partners is constitutive of a valuable form of relationship. Importantly, this is not about the beneficial effects of avoiding

⁷ Why have we appealed to Gaus and Larmore as examples rather than to Rawls? Primarily, because the best way to understand Rawls's answer to the rationale question is disputed, even among his defenders. Any plausible interpretation must take seriously his claim that the view aims to answer the question of how a stable and just society of free and equal persons can persist over time, but the implication of these ideas has been interpreted in different ways. Compare, for example, the contrasting accounts in Quong (2011) and Weithman (2010). For an argument connecting a Rawlsian rationale to an account of idealization, see Taylor (2022).

conflict; it is about the character of the relationship itself being one that reflects a shared commitment to act in concert.

Public reason is an analogue of this for political society. There are, according to Lister, two principal reasons to think that setting aside reasons that are controversial among reasonable citizens would be constitutive of a valuable form of political community among the citizens of liberal democratic societies. First, common knowledge of the fact that political decisions are made in accordance with public reason is a public good. Everyone can recognize that others are committed to making decisions based on shareable grounds, such that ‘no one need think that public decisions aim at fundamentally alien purposes’ (Lister 2013: 110). Secondly, making decisions in this way allows liberal democratic citizens to meet the requisite conditions for group agency. Plausibly, this requires shared intentions and collective rationality, and that each citizen can reasonably see their society as acting (or at least attempting to act) for common goals. For Lister, what is significant about these conditions is that their satisfaction changes the character of a relationship. When it is common knowledge that members of a political society are committed to making their political decisions in accordance with public reason, the members of that society can be assured that their co-citizens would not bend those decisions towards their partisan interests even if the balance of power were to tilt in their favour. All can recognize a common desire that ‘laws and institutions should be ones that everyone can see as aiming at common goods’ (Lister 2013: 116).

Does this picture of political community require public reason specifically, however? One ground for doubt is that the shared commitments that are mandated by this ideal of community seem to be satisfiable without public reason.⁸ If liberal democratic citizens were committed to subjecting each other’s views to deliberative scrutiny, making laws using democratic procedures, and living together under the laws that these procedures produce, then they would share a conception of democratic citizenship that fell short of being a shared commitment to public reason. But these shared commitments to deliberative democratic procedures also allow citizens to meet group agency conditions, and may well also be adequate to ensure that public decisions are not fundamentally alienating.

Perhaps more can be said to tie civic friendship to public reason. Leland and van Wietmarschen (2017: 148–56) suggest that Lister’s account is primarily concerned with ‘joint rule’, which can be achieved both by a commitment to public reason and by the democratic proceduralist account sketched in the previous paragraph, and thus cannot uniquely justify the former. Friendship, however, requires something more (Leland & van Wietmarschen 2017: 157–64). Specifically, it requires an at least partially shared conception of the other’s

⁸ This critique of Lister is also made in Billingham (2016).

interests. To be a friend, you must avoid the twin perils of completely deferring to the other's conception of their own interests, on the one hand, and of always imposing your own conception, on the other. Though a friendship can tolerate some instances of deference and imposition, it cannot be generally characterized by either while remaining a genuine friendship. What civic friendship requires, in parallel, is that liberal democratic citizens avoid both deference and imposition in their political decision-making and deliberations with one another. This requires them to share a conception of each other's interests that goes beyond procedural commitments. When democratic decisions are made by appealing to controversial views about the good life that some citizens reject, they cannot be regarded as aiming to advance a shared conception of citizens' interests. Fortunately, for Leland and van Wietmarschen, in spite of their disagreements, reasonable citizens do share a conception of one another's interests. In their own words: 'all reasonable citizens endorse a set of basic liberal-democratic values, such as freedom, equality, the rule of law, and the idea of fair social cooperation, together with a set of uncontroversial political values such as security and efficiency' (Leland and van Wietmarschen 2017: 146). Decisions based on these values can be understood by all citizens as advancing a shared conception of their interests, and are thus non-deferential and non-imposing. The ideal of civic friendship therefore supports a thicker conception of democratic citizenship, where decisions are based on these shared values, over its thinner procedural rival.

Further building on these claims, in more recent work Leland (2019: 75–80) argues that a group stands in a relation of civic friendship when its members: (i) non-instrumentally value and participate in fair social cooperation for mutual benefit; (ii) act according to a shared sense of one another's interests; (iii) conceive of these interests as the interests of citizens, to be advanced by political means; and (iv) are disposed to find their own contribution to such benefits to be a source of satisfaction, to find others' contributions to be targets of appreciation, and to trust one another in political contexts. Public reason contributes to the realization of this ideal by directing citizens to make political decisions in accordance with a shared sense of each other's interests. By complying with RAP, citizens can promote the relationship specified by (i)–(iv) above.⁹

⁹ Leland's view is somewhat revisionary in that he holds that the requirement to reason publicly is (i) defeasible, such that it can sometimes be overridden by private reasons, and (ii) only kicks in when there is a sufficient degree of compliance with RAP and citizens are not subject to systematic and pervasive injustices. Despite these differences, the critique we present applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to Leland's view.

III. WHY CIVIC FRIENDSHIP ALONE CANNOT BE THE ANSWER TO THE RATIONALE QUESTION

In this section, we show that civic friendship alone cannot ground public reason because it cannot provide an answer to the rationale question that both explains and justifies an answer to the idealization question. Monist civic friendship accounts therefore cannot succeed. Showing this is an essential part of our argument even against pluralist accounts that combine civic friendship with other considerations to answer these questions. As we argue in Section V, the reason that monist accounts fail also provides reason to doubt that civic friendship can play a significant role within a pluralist account.

Before we begin, however, two preliminary points about the argument from civic friendship. First, we will not question whether the value of civic friendship is sufficiently weighty to justify public reason. Though questions may certainly be raised on this score, we will presume that if public reason is indeed necessary to achieve relations of civic friendship, then this suffices to justify RAP. Secondly, we also grant for the sake of argument that considerations of civic friendship rule out the democratic proceduralist account. This is to concede that civic friendship does, as its proponents claim, require deliberation and political decision-making to appeal to a substantive conception of citizens' shared interests, and thus to shared values or reasons.¹⁰

To begin to see the problem with the argument from civic friendship, consider the following. Proponents of the account typically argue that citizens' shared conception of their interests is constituted by liberal democratic values: a commitment to freedom, equality, and fair social cooperation.¹¹ But an alternative picture of citizens' shared interests could be thicker than this, including a shared conception of the good life. On what basis can we choose between these two pictures? Assuming that we prefer the former, on what basis can we do so?¹²

The argument from civic friendship has a deceptively simple answer to this question: political community based on a shared conception of the good life is off the table due to liberal democratic citizens' reasonable disagreements about the good. Though this answer is *prima facie* plausible, the argument of Section I reveals it to be inappropriate. An answer to the rationale question must explain and justify its proponent's answer to the idealization question. It must explain and justify a view about who reasonable citizens are and why acceptability to them is required. The argument from civic friendship therefore cannot appeal, at this point, to the notion of reasonable disagreement as a

¹⁰ While we concede this for the sake of argument, at least one of us doubts it (see Billingham unpublished ms.).

¹¹ See the quote above (p. 8) from Leland & van Wietmarschen (2017: 146).

¹² Some theorists might be content with the idea that reasonable citizens share some views about the good. But the core problem we will articulate remains, as we explain below.

reason to reject conceptions of citizenship that include a more extensive set of shared commitments as the basis for political community: the scope, nature, and normative significance of *reasonable* disagreement are precisely what are in dispute.

Defenders of public reason might appear to have a straightforward solution to this problem. The scope of reasonable disagreement, they might suggest, is readily explained by Rawls's notion of 'the burdens of judgment'. In his account of why the citizens of a well-ordered liberal society would not agree on a single comprehensive doctrine, Rawls appealed to the idea that human judgement is inevitably burdened in various ways. For example, we reason with conflicting and complex evidence, our concepts are often vague or indeterminate, and our judgements are influenced to some extent (though we cannot be sure how much) by our total life experience.¹³ It might be thought that this idea can be used to explain why political community based on a shared conception of the good life is an unachievable ideal and, thus, to deliver an account of the contours of reasonable disagreement.

The problem with this suggestion is that the burdens of judgement offer a fully general explanation of why agreement may not be achieved in a particular domain. What they do not tell us is whether and when we might expect reasonable citizens to *agree* rather than disagree. An account of the scope of reasonable disagreement requires an account of what reasonable citizens can be expected to share. But the burdens of judgement explanation of disagreement is equally compatible with a range of different views about what citizens must share in order to be reasonable. It is an explanation that could be wielded by those with various views about the shared commitments of reasonable citizens: from those who hold that these are exhausted by a very minimal conception of basic rights to those who believe that reasonable citizens agree on certain claims about the good, as well as the more traditional Rawlsian view focused on shared liberal democratic ideals. Therefore, though the burdens of judgement have an important role to play in explaining why we should not expect widespread agreement about all issues in a liberal society, they are not capable of delivering an account of the contours of reasonable disagreement, as this response suggests.

How, then, can we choose between different accounts of the shared interests of reasonable citizens? Crucially, civic friendship itself is unable to do this. What civic friendship requires is that deliberation and political decision-making should appeal to a shared conception of citizens' interests. The ideal of civic friendship does not itself tell us what these interests are. Thus, it does not tell us how the constituency of reasonable citizens ought to be idealized. To put this another way, any group acting on a shared conception of each other's interests enjoys civic friendship. The civic friendship argument can tell us what the

¹³ For the full list, see Rawls (2005: 54–8).

relationship of civic friendship consists in, but it cannot tell us with whom we should aim to have this relationship.

To illustrate this challenge more concretely, consider the following version of RAP, which we can call the partial good principle (PGP). According to this principle, though reasonable citizens have disagreements about the good, there are various claims about what makes a life go well that they all accept. All of these citizens accept an objective list account of what makes a life go well: They all hold that certain things contribute to a person's well-being irrespective of whether that person desires or prefers them. Further, their views about which goods belong on the objective list at least partially overlap. PGP could be formulated in different ways, but all of its formulations would involve some restriction on making political decisions based on claims about the good life that were not shared by all of the citizens it holds to be reasonable. Political decision-making based on the set of claims about the goods on which those citizens agreed would, by contrast, be unrestricted.¹⁴

PGP is a version of RAP with a higher degree of idealization than is usually endorsed by public reason theorists. It still holds that the exercise of political power must be justified to all reasonable citizens, but it idealizes these citizens such that they have a larger set of shared commitments than is typical. Of course, many actual citizens would reject both an objective list account of the good and the more specific claims about the objective components of the good life that PGP says that all reasonable citizens accept. However, this alone is no objection to PGP. Whatever degree of idealization a public reason view appeals to, there will be actual citizens who reject some or all of the commitments that reasonable citizens are said to share. Following the framework laid out above, public reason theorists who wish to reject PGP should hold that the problem is not that it idealizes reasonable citizens in a way that actual citizens would reject, but that there is no good rationale for idealizing citizens in this way. Put another way, public reason theorists must appeal to their answer to the rationale question to explain why this higher level of idealization is inappropriate. But civic friendship cannot do this, precisely because it does not tell us what the shared interests of reasonable citizens must consist in. Citizens cooperating on the basis of PGP enjoy civic friendship just as much as those cooperating solely on the basis of liberal democratic values.

As we noted above, a proponent of the argument from civic friendship may want to appeal to reasonable disagreement itself at this point. They may want to say that the shared conception of the good in PGP is ruled out because reasonable citizens' disagreements about the good life run deeper than this. But this response would be question-begging; PGP proposes an account of what disagreements are reasonable for the purposes of formulating RAP. An

¹⁴ For an exploration of a view along these lines, see Tahzib (2019). Tahzib is building on the claims of earlier 'moderate perfectionists' such as Caney (1998) and Chan (2000).

adequate response to it must therefore offer a reason to reject this account. There may be many good reasons to reject PGP's account of reasonable disagreement, but none of these reasons stem from the ideal of civic friendship. Therefore, civic friendship alone cannot ground public reason.

Some public reason theorists might respond to this by saying that they are happy with their view being compatible with PGP.¹⁵ But this is not an adequate response to the problem. The heart of the problem is *not* that civic friendship cannot rule out PGP but that it cannot *choose between* competing accounts of idealization. It is equally compatible with PGP as with thinner (and indeed thicker) accounts. A public reason view must specify the nature of its justificatory constituency, and civic friendship cannot do this. The problem is one of indeterminacy rather than it turning on one's attitude to PGP in particular.

Bearing this in mind, is there anything more that a proponent of the civic friendship argument who favours a lower level of idealization could say in order to rule out PGP? As we have seen, such theorists hold that public reason is required to avoid the problem of *imposition*. By appealing to values that are shared among reasonable citizens we can, they suggest, avoid simply imposing our values on those who reject them. An interpersonal relationship that was generally characterized by one party imposing their values on the other would not be a genuine friendship; likewise, genuine civic friendship requires citizens to refrain from simply imposing their values on one another in the political domain. PGP might seem to permit a great deal of imposition since it is based on a set of claims about the good life that many citizens will reject. Can proponents of the civic friendship view therefore argue that PGP (and other more heavily idealized versions of RAP) should be rejected for this reason?

To see the problem with this line of response, consider two ways in which it could be interpreted. On the first interpretation, the kind of imposition that should be avoided is what we can call *actual imposition*: actual citizens imposing their values onto other actual citizens who reject those values. We impose on each other in this way whenever we make political decisions by appealing to reasons or values that some of our co-citizens actually reject. If this is the kind of imposition that proponents of the argument from civic friendship want to avoid, it will be true that PGP involves lots of troubling imposition. But this kind of imposition will *also* be permitted on all public reason views, including those endorsed by proponents of the argument from civic friendship. When political decisions are made in accordance with public reason, they will still be based on reasons or values that many actual citizens reject. Public reason

¹⁵ Some public reason theorists are committed to anti-perfectionism; see Quong (2011). Others believe that some perfectionist policies might be compatible with public reason; see Lister (2014) and Neufeld (2022: 6). However, even the latter would likely balk at PGP's assertion that all reasonable citizens accept an objective list theory of well-being.

views, after all, only prevent decisions from being made on the basis of reasons or values that reasonable citizens reject. Many actual citizens reject the reasons or values that are imputed to idealized reasonable citizens, and on this view, those citizens would be the victims of a troubling kind of imposition.

This points towards a second way of interpreting imposition, which we can call *hypothetical imposition*. Here, what ought to be avoided is imposing onto citizens any values that reasonable citizens would reject. This view avoids the problem of actual imposition, but it does so only at the cost of not condemning PGP. If the kind of imposition that is inimical to civic friendship is the imposition of values that reasonable citizens reject, then PGP will not involve any pernicious imposition, as it holds that all reasonable citizens accept the partial account of the good on which it is based. We need some independent reason to reject this conception of reasonableness, which the avoidance of imposition cannot provide.

PGP does not, therefore, involve an objectionable kind of imposition, but might it instead involve an objectionable kind of *deference*? Here we can run the same argumentative move again, distinguishing actual deference from hypothetical deference. As with imposition, PGP may involve actual deference since some citizens will be deferring to their co-citizens' judgements about the good that they reject. But all public reason views will involve this kind of deference, since not all actual citizens will share the values that they impute to their idealized constituency of reasonable citizens. Moving to hypothetical deference, once again, PGP will not involve this kind of deference since it holds that all reasonable citizens accept the partial view of the good on which it is based. Since political decisions will be made by appealing to this shared conception of the good, there is no reason to think that their relationship will generally be characterized by hypothetical deference.¹⁶

In sum, the problem is that although the argument from civic friendship points towards the need for citizens to have a shared conception of each other's interests, it does not tell us what these shared interests look like. It is the inability of the monist civic friendship account to tell us about the content of these shared interests that renders it unable to ground public reason. As we put it above, any group acting on a shared conception of each other's interests enjoys civic friendship; the civic friendship argument cannot tell us with whom we should aim to have this relationship.

¹⁶ This discussion highlights an important disanalogy between civic friendship and ordinary interpersonal friendship. Our concern for interpersonal friendship is a concern to avoid *actual* deference and imposition. We cannot claim to be realizing the ideal of friendship with someone when the interests that we share with them are not ones they in fact endorse but are instead a product of idealizing conditions (other than minimal procedural conditions, perhaps). This observation threatens to sever the link between Leland and van Wietmarschen's intuitively appealing account of friendship and the ideal of political community that public reason realizes. We will not pursue this thought further here, however, since it would take us too far away from our central concern in this paper.

IV. SHOULD WE JUST BE CIVIC FRIENDS WITH EVERYONE?

We have claimed that civic friendship cannot ground public reason because it cannot tell us with whom it is desirable to have this relationship. There might seem to be an obvious reply to this, however, which is that it is desirable to be civic friends with as many of our co-citizens as possible.¹⁷ The choice in politics is to be either civic friends, civic enemies, or strangers, so it is clearly preferable to be friends. This is a sense in which civic friendship is different from personal friendship. There generally are not normative reasons to be friends with as many people as possible, or with any particular people. But given the nature and circumstances of politics, there are normative reasons to be civic friends with as many of our co-citizens as possible. We all have to live together under common, coercively enforced, rules, and want to do so in a way that enables us to realize civic friendship with one another, rather than being civic enemies.

This reply has some initial plausibility, but quickly runs into serious difficulties. Whether or not we have a reason to be civic friends with someone depends on what civic friendship requires. If it simply involves maintaining cordial relations, respecting basic rights, and complying with democratic decisions, then it is plausible that we should be civic friends with everyone. But according to the view under discussion, civic friendship involves giving others vetoes over the reasons that can be used to justify laws. It is not at all obvious that we have reason to give as many citizens as possible such veto rights. Indeed, part of the point of accounts of public reason is to answer the question of who, if anyone, should have such a veto. Such an account cannot simply presuppose an answer to this question.

Further, incorporating the idea that we should aim to be civic friends with as many people as possible creates new problems. It means that the justificatory constituency should include anyone with whom we can be civic friends, which means anyone who is willing to reciprocate our desire only to act according to a shared conception of interests. Beyond this requirement to endorse the idea of civic friendship itself, idealization would be as minimal as possible, in order to extend the bounds of civic friendship as far as possible. This means that no further assumptions can be made about reasonable citizens' beliefs and values. Civic friendship theorists typically assume that all reasonable citizens accept a set of liberal democratic values, such that those values provide the shared conception of interests on which the exercise of political power can be

¹⁷ At one point, Leland (2019: 85) notes that 'political liberals are liable to favor more inclusive strategies over less inclusive ones' in defining reasonable citizens' shared commitments. This is consonant with the claim, sometimes made by defenders of public reason views, that there is a general reason for such views to prefer more inclusive over less inclusive justificatory constituencies. For example, see Vallier (2017). For discussion, see Tahzib (2021).

based.¹⁸ But we cannot make this assumption if the justificatory constituency includes anyone who endorses the idea of civic friendship (and with whom we can thus be civic friends by only enacting laws justified by the values, or conception of our interests, that we share). Such a constituency could include individuals who accept only a minimal state, or even reject the state entirely, for example. Such individuals could be willing to reciprocate a desire to act only according to a shared conception of citizens' interests, but would have a different idea of what citizens' interests are. Many liberal democratic values would thus be excluded from the shared conception of citizens' interests, or set of shared values, on which laws can be based. Indeed, the shared conception of interests might well be very thin, such that few (if any) laws would satisfy RAP. Few laws would be justifiable by values accepted by all members of this justificatory constituency, given that the only idealization involved in defining that constituency is acceptance of the idea of civic friendship.

This is a result that advocates of the civic friendship argument would likely balk at. In the language of the framework set out above, it is an unattractive answer to the content question. One response would be to hold that if this is the upshot of seeking to enjoy civic friendship with as many people as possible, then doing so comes at too high a moral cost. It would mean that too few of our own values or conceptions of our interests could be realized within law. More shared ground than this is required to make the achievement of civic friendship within a group sufficiently attractive to justify its costs.

The implication of this (plausible) response is that further idealization is required. The justificatory constituency needs to be defined as accepting a more extensive set of values and ideals. But, as we have already seen, civic friendship itself cannot tell us what form this idealization should take. Any suitably motivated group can enjoy civic friendship, so a wide range of possible idealizations is available, and civic friendship cannot choose between them.

V. THE PLURALIST VIEW

Our argument thus far has taken civic friendship alone to be the rationale for public reason. But as we noted above, theorists might instead seek to answer the rationale question by combining an appeal to the value of civic friendship with an appeal to other considerations. In this section, we will consider various versions of such a pluralist view. In light of our critique of the monist view, we argue that each of these faces serious challenges.

At the end of the previous section, we touched upon the potential moral costs of maintaining civic friendship with those with whom we disagree. Lister draws

¹⁸ Leland (2019: 81) lists some of these. See also the quote above (p. 8) from Leland & van Wietmarschen (2017: 146).

upon this idea in his version of the civic friendship argument. On his view, public reason involves moral compromise: it requires us to make a sacrifice from the point of view of what we take to be the whole moral truth in order to preserve a valuable relationship with our co-citizens (Lister 2013: 116–20). This sacrifice involves bracketing the reasons that we and our co-citizens disagree about and making our collective decisions on the basis of shared reasons. But for which of our co-citizens should we make this sacrifice? Since some of our co-citizens may be nihilists, or hold repugnant views of morality, we should not make this sacrifice for all of them: doing so would generate too many substantive costs to be worthwhile. The value of achieving civic friendship must thus be balanced against the costs it imposes from the point of view of our other substantive moral commitments.

Lister seems to defend what we will call a ‘subjective’ pluralist view, which leaves the question of what balance to strike up to the judgement of each individual citizen. It is thus up to each individual citizen to judge when the costs of maintaining civic friendship are worthwhile. But this is not satisfactory. Citizens will clearly disagree about when maintaining civic friendship is too high of a moral cost. If some of Alf’s co-citizens think that the only kind of freedom worth having is a kind that rules out egalitarian redistribution, will Alf judge that jettisoning his redistributive commitments is a price worth paying to enjoy civic friendship with them? Or will he decide that this cost is too high and thus be willing to impose his views upon them? And if Betty is a vegan who wishes to prohibit the consumption of all animal products, will she believe that it is worth sacrificing this commitment for civic friendship with her carnivorous co-citizens?

The subjective pluralist view leaves it up to individual citizens to answer these kinds of questions. In effect, this means that each citizen defines her own justificatory constituency. But this means that different citizens may have different views of what count as public reasons. Each can believe that they are offering public reasons for laws, while each appealing to a different standard, and thus to reasons that others do not consider to be public at all. Each will be able to claim that their preferred view satisfies the demands of public reason, provided we weigh the value of political community correctly. Public reason will thus be unable to perform its role of offering a public standard via which to evaluate our laws and policies.¹⁹ The upshot for Lister is that for his argument to be satisfactory, it needs to tell us how to weigh the value of civic friendship against competing considerations, and thus with whom we should maintain this relationship. In other words, it must specify the justificatory constituency. The more general upshot is, once again, that public reason theories must themselves answer the idealization question.

¹⁹ On this role, see Rawls (2005: 66–71).

Of course, we have already argued that civic friendship itself cannot answer this question. So an ‘objective’ pluralist view requires other resources in order to do so. Such a view would appeal to other values or ideals to explain when maintaining the relationship of civic friendship is worthwhile. This is equivalent to holding that civic friendship does the work of explaining why laws must be justified *an* idealized constituency—thus justifying RAP—while other considerations specify this idealization (and more generally specify RAP). Civic friendship explains why laws must be justified by appealing to a shared conception of citizens’ interests, while other considerations define that conception.

How could an objective pluralist view be developed? We will consider two options. First, combining civic friendship with appeal to other familiar rationales for public reason. Secondly, combining civic friendship with a set of substantive liberal values.

First, then, one might draw upon other rationales. For example, the pluralist might seek to combine the appeal to civic friendship with an appeal to Larmorean respect for persons. They would then be able to give an answer to the rationale question that explained and justified their answer to the idealization question. But this would be an answer within which the value of civic friendship was a spare wheel, since, as we noted above, if the argument from Larmorean respect were to succeed, it would already explain why laws must be justified to an idealized constituency in general, even without any appeal to civic friendship.²⁰ There is no neatly carved-off question of ‘why RAP?’ left on the table for civic friendship to answer; respect already answers that general question as well as specifying the principle. Similar comments would apply to views that combine civic friendship with an appeal to Rawlsian stability or the presuppositions of the reactive attitudes.

This is not surprising. Other rationales are typically seen as competitors to civic friendship, because they are seeking to do the same work of justifying public reason. If they succeed, then there is no remaining question for civic friendship to answer. If they fail, then the attempt to combine them with civic friendship is fruitless.

Secondly, one might appeal directly to familiar liberal values in order to specify the shared commitments of the justificatory constituency. On this view, all reasonable citizens endorse values such as freedom, equality, and fairness, but there is nothing beyond this that they are required to share.²¹ The work

²⁰ For discussion of a pluralist view that combines civic friendship with respect, see Wong (2020: 249–51). But this pluralist view is one in which civic friendship is clearly a spare wheel. If, as Wong argues, we need public reason to avoid disrespectful structural coercion, then we can argue for RAP on the basis of this account of respect alone.

²¹ Rawls (2005: 48–58) holds that all reasonable citizens accept the ideal of society as a fair system or social cooperation between free and equal citizens, along with a recognition of the burdens of judgment. See also Quong (2011: 37–9).

of civic friendship is then to explain why this constituency should only enact laws that can be justified by appeal to their shared values.

In order to fully develop this kind of view, one must explain what the limits are to plausible (or reasonable) interpretations of these values. This is vital because it appears *prima facie* that quite radically different doctrines could be pitched as interpretations of these values. Anarchists, minimal state libertarians, and distributive egalitarians are all interpreting freedom and equality. As is Betty, our earlier vegan.

One option here is to say that any interpretation of the shared values is acceptable, and thus counts as a public reason. However, such an underspecified conception of reasonable citizens' shared interests is unacceptable from the point of view of the civic friendship argument. The appeal to a shared conception of citizens' interests was meant to help us avoid the problems of imposition and deference, by ensuring that all citizens could recognize laws as promoting their shared interests. However, this is no longer a plausible claim. Laws might well be based on interpretations of apparently shared values that are so distant from my own that I can no longer see those laws as promoting shared interests. Suppose some interpret the value of freedom as forbidding redistribution, while others interpret it as requiring redistribution. Can advocates of the latter interpretation recognize laws based on the former interpretation as promoting their interest in freedom? It is not at all clear that they can. By analogy, individuals who share an abstract commitment to 'promoting the human good' but interpret this in radically divergent ways do not enjoy friendship, in Leland and van Wietmarschen's sense, if they follow one such interpretation, because they do not avoid problematic relations of imposition and deference.

Recall that avoiding deference and imposition by ensuring that laws promote a shared conception of citizens interests was what was meant to make public reason superior to democratic proceduralism. The version of the view under discussion loses this advantage; the problems of deference and imposition arise just as acutely on this view as they do on the democratic proceduralist view.²² As a result, the civic friendship argument can no longer show why we should adopt a public reason view over the democratic proceduralist alternative.²³

In order to avoid this outcome, one might instead hold that public reasons are present only at the overlap of each citizens' interpretation of the liberal democratic values. This would still leave the boundaries of plausible interpretations unspecified, but would restrict the set of public reasons to interpretative claims that all can endorse. This view also faces a serious difficulty, however. It would make the content of public reason extremely minimal—arguably empty. Citizens' interpretations of values such as equality might diverge so drastically

²² For a discussion of this problem in relation to Lister's view, see Billingham (2016: 31–4).

²³ This therefore returns us to the critique of Lister's argument discussed in Section II.

that there is little or no overlap between them. With little or no content to public reason, very few, if any, laws could be justified by such reasons and thus satisfy RAP. The threat of anarchism thus looms large.

In light of these problems with leaving the interpretation of liberal values open, the theorist might seek to specify the bounds of reasonable interpretations more tightly. For example, Rawls (2005: 450) holds that all reasonable political conceptions of justice must specify a set of basic rights, liberties, and opportunities; assign these special priority; and guarantee to all citizens adequate all-purpose means for making use of their freedoms. A pluralist civic friendship theorist might seek to adopt this view, or some other specification of the values that all reasonable citizens share. But they then face the question of what justifies this move. What argument shows that these are the limits on reasonable interpretations of liberal values?²⁴ It is unclear what resources the pluralist civic friendship account has for answering this question. Civic friendship itself cannot do so, in light of our argument against the monist account. The question we are seeking to answer here is what views reasonable citizens endorse—i.e., the idealization question—and we have argued at length that civic friendship cannot provide an answer to this. An obvious alternative place to look would be at other rationales for public reason, but this takes us back to the problem of civic friendship becoming a spare wheel. A final possibility would be to turn to substantive arguments for why certain conceptions of freedom or equality are better than others. But such arguments have been made for a wide range of conceptions. It is not obvious why particular arguments would (or would not) be built into an answer to the idealization question. Indeed, part of the point of public reason views is that they are one step removed from such debates, specifying a second-order principle of legitimacy rather than settling first-order debates about justice. Any decisions about what views of justice to include or exclude should be driven by the rationale for RAP rather than simply the first-order merits of different accounts.

The core problem with views that attempt to use civic friendship to defend RAP, abstractly defined, while appealing to other values to specify the principle is that those other values are not self-interpreting. A public reason theory needs to go further than simply vaguely gesturing towards familiar liberal values in order to answer the idealization question. But any further specification must be defended with arguments. And those are precisely the kinds of arguments that answers to the rationale question need to provide. Civic friendship cannot do this alone, and if it tries to do it alongside other rationales, then it ceases to be needed at all. An argument that successfully tied political legitimacy to what

²⁴ Rawls also needs to answer this question, of course, and his answer is not particularly clear. But one suggestion is that he would appeal to the idea that this is the conclusion that the idea of stability for the right reasons (Rawls's rationale, at least on one prominent reading) gets us (see Taylor unpublished ms.).

a particular constituency of idealized citizens would accept would already tie legitimacy to reasonable acceptability, and so justify RAP.

Perhaps other kinds of pluralist views that we have not considered are available. However, defenders of the civic friendship view have not set out in any systematic way what such a pluralist story would look like. Leland (2019: 82), for example, simply states that there might be a variety of ways of answering the idealization question that could be combined with an appeal to civic friendship, without providing any indication of how this could work.²⁵ In light of our arguments in this section, we think there are strong reasons to be sceptical that a pluralist civic friendship account can successfully be made out. At the very least, the burden of proof here is firmly on the side of advocates of such a view.

VI. CONCLUSION

We have challenged the idea that civic friendship can ground public reason, either alone or in combination with other considerations. It is unable to answer one of the essential questions that any rationale for RAP must answer, namely the idealization question. Views that appeal to other considerations to fill this gap run into various difficulties. The ‘subjective’ pluralist view fails to provide a public standard, while ‘objective’ views either do not provide a plausible account of the boundaries of public reason or provide such an account in a way that renders civic friendship a spare wheel.

In order to respond to the challenge presented in this paper, advocates of the civic friendship argument must explain how they propose to answer the idealization question within a theory that gives a grounding role to the value of civic friendship. We can foresee two strategies here. First, one might thicken the account of civic friendship. The problems for the view emerge from the claim that civic friendship requires acting on a shared conception of interests while leaving the content of that conception unspecified. One way to develop the view might be to spell out in greater detail what content that conception must have in order for a valuable relationship of civic friendship to be realised. We are unsure what resources civic friendship theorists could draw upon in order to make this move, however. Secondly, one might seek to develop a more sophisticated version of the objective pluralist story that can evade the problems that we have highlighted. This route strikes us as more promising, but we are still doubtful that it would vindicate the civic friendship argument. Nonetheless, we are certainly open to considering proposals. In distinguishing the different possible versions of the pluralist story as we do above, we have already gone beyond what civic friendship theorists say about the role that this

²⁵ Leland & van Wietmarschen (2017: 146–7) also set this question to one side.

value plays in their case for RAP. If we have failed to consider the strongest version of that story, then we encourage those theorists to set it out.

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