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The shallow ecology of public reason liberalism

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I shall contend that Rawlsian public reason liberalism (PRL) is in tension with non-anthropocentric environmentalism. I will argue that many reasonable citizens reject non-anthropocentric values, and PRL cannot allow them to be used as the justification for ecological policies. I will analyse attempts to argue that PRL can incorporate non-anthropocentric ideas. I shall consider the view, deployed by theorists such as Derek Bell and Mark A. Michael, that PRL can make a distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials, and therefore ecocentric values can be employed when only non-essentials are at stake. I will also consider Simon Hailwood's argument that PRL can incorporate concern for nature based on its 'otherness'. I shall conclude that both positions fail to rebut the claim that PRL excludes non-anthropocentric viewpoints. I will consider the question of whether PRL's exclusion of non-anthropocentric ethics is a problem, and I shall show that appealing to purely anthropocentric arguments leads to a variety of unpalatable conclusions. I will suggest that comprehensive liberalism can include non-anthropocentric concerns, and hence is superior from an environmental perspective.

KEYWORDS Public reason; liberalism; anthropocentrism; non-anthropocentrism; environmental ethics

Introduction

This paper will analyse current liberal approaches to environmental ethics, focusing mostly on the later Rawlsian conceptions of state neutrality and public reason. I will argue that Rawlsian notions of neutrality and public reason can provide us with only anthropocentric or 'shallow' environmentalism, and this ultimately culminates with a variety of conclusions that many will find unpalatable. I will conclude that more 'comprehensive' forms of liberalism can incorporate both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric concerns, and therefore can do better on an ecological level.

I shall first outline what I mean by 'public reason liberalism' (PRL), 'anthropocentrism', and 'non-anthropocentrism'. I will explain why I think that public reason liberalism cannot accommodate non-anthropocentric ecological viewpoints. I will then critique some of the theorists who argue that it is

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possible to reconcile public reason liberalism and non-anthropocentric environmentalism, such as Derek Bell, Mark A. Michael, and Simon Hailwood. Bell and Michael both argue that we can make a distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials, and that environmental policies – which fall within the realm of constitutional non-essentials – can legitimately be justified with non-public reasons. I will argue that we cannot draw the necessary distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials, at least not where ambitious environmental policies are concerned. Moreover, it is doubtful that a good philosophical basis can be found for saying that public reasons are required only when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are concerned, if we accept the framework of PRL. I shall also consider Simon Hailwood's argument that reasonable citizenship within public reason liberalism involves respecting the 'otherness of nature'. I will argue that Hailwood's 'otherness view' is actually a controversial philosophical position disguised as a purely political principle, and therefore lies outside the realm of public reason. I will conclude that public reason liberalism can only accommodate anthropocentric environmentalism, and I shall then outline why I think that a purely anthropocentric outlook might be ethically unsatisfactory.

Why is it so important to address the issues of public reason liberalism and non-anthropocentric environmentalism? For one thing, Rawlsian public reason liberalism is tremendously popular in contemporary political theory; in fact, it is likely that the majority of political philosophers believe in Rawlsian public reason liberalism, or something close to it. Moreover, climate change and ecological issues unquestionably constitute some of our most pressing and important concerns. If there is deep tension between PRL and environmentalism, that is a significant concern for political theorists. Another important consideration is that all forms of liberalism have, in recent years, been subjected to quite uncompromising criticisms from non-liberal environmental theorists and 'environmental authoritarians' (for discussions, see Faber et al., 2021, p. 2; Brennan & Lo, 2022, §2). It is important to explore these issues in greater detail, carefully showing the specific ways in which there may – or may not – be tensions between environmental ethics and liberalism. The hope is that this paper can make a contribution by showing that environmentalist critics of liberalism are indeed correct to argue that public reason liberalism cannot accommodate non-anthropocentric ethics, and that this matters – but that this criticism is not applicable to all forms of liberal theory.

The anthropocentrism of public reason liberalism

First, what is 'Rawlsian public reason liberalism'? That is a difficult question to answer succinctly, not least because there are so many varieties of public reason liberalism. At its simplest, PRL is a form of liberalism that is 'political'

and not 'metaphysical' in nature (Rawls, 1991, 1996). It is a theory about the kinds of reasons we should offer one another when justifying the liberal state and its core policies. According to PRL, for the liberal state to be legitimate, we must be able to justify its existence, and at least its *core* policies, to all 'reasonable' citizens. These reasonable people espouse a wide range of 'reasonable comprehensive doctrines', which give different and incompatible views on religion, metaphysics, epistemology, personal ethics, and so on (Rawls, 1996, Lecture 2). Rawlsian PRL thus differs from *comprehensive liberalism* because the latter is premised on a comprehensive philosophical doctrine, and it usually includes no requirement for citizens to refrain from appealing to their controversial world-views. For public reason liberals, in order to show respect for reasonable pluralism – and in order for the liberal state to have legitimacy – it is necessary for liberalism not to become a comprehensive philosophical doctrine in its own right, but instead a kind of 'module' that slots within all these viewpoints. For PRL, the justification for the liberal state must be accessible to all these different comprehensive doctrines, and so perfectionist reasons and other controversial philosophical doctrines must not be used to ground the liberal state or justify coercive state action. Justifications should instead be made using *public reason*, that is, principles and values that all reasonable persons will accept, and which can be harmonized with very different philosophical frameworks (see Rawls, 1996; cf., pp.157–158; Quong, 2018).

This is probably best shown through examples. The core liberal principle of the 'presumption of innocence', for instance, is a publicly accessible principle that different reasonable citizens can all accept. A reasonable Muslim may accept this principle for various reasons, but ultimately because it is mandated by Quranic law; a liberal Jewish citizen may find the foundational justification for it in the Talmudical law; and a secular Kantian may see it as deriving from Kant's view that we should always treat others as ends, and never as a mere means to an end (for a general discussion, see Graham, 2007, p. 135). So, this liberal principle passes the test set by public reason. And something similar can be said about other key liberal principles, such as religious toleration, equality before the law, and so on. This is a rather broad overview of PRL, and there are many disagreements amongst its various proponents: Rawls, Larmore, Nussbaum, Quong, and so on.

It is also necessary to distinguish between different kinds of environmentalist thought. The contention in this paper is that Rawlsian PRL is in tension with non-anthropocentric environmentalism, although it is not necessarily in tension with anthropocentric (or 'shallower') forms of ecology. It is important to give a sense of what these terms mean, because they are ambiguous. Anthropocentric environmentalism is the more straightforward of the two: this form of environmentalism recognizes that humanity is dependent on the rest of nature, and in order to ensure

a reasonably safe and promising future for humans, we need to put into place some policies of environmental protection. Those who espouse anthropocentric ecology might think that our current system needs tweaking; conversely, they might believe that we need to radically change our society in order to avoid serious ecological degradation. Being an anthropocentric or 'shallow' environmentalist does not mean that one is a supporter of the status quo, or is opposed to radical change. However, anthropocentric environmentalism does entail there is no *intrinsic value* in the non-human natural world, or at least that any intrinsic value the natural world might have is almost always outweighed by human considerations. For the anthropocentric environmentalist, then, forests might be considered important because they are 'the lungs of the Earth', and humans cannot survive without them. They also contain important resources that can be used to make food, medicine, and luxuries that will improve the lives of human beings. They may also have aesthetic value for humans. However, for anthropocentric environmentalists, forests do not have intrinsic value: their worth derives from their usefulness to human beings, and if they ceased to be necessary or desirable for human survival, or aesthetically pleasing to humans, they would lack value.

On the other hand, there are non-anthropocentric environmentalists, who might also be termed 'ecocentric' or 'biocentric' environmentalists. I shall use these terms interchangeably in this article, although distinctions have sometimes been made in the literature (see, e.g. Attfield, 2018). Non-anthropocentric environmentalists believe that the non-human natural world has intrinsic value, and thus harming the natural world constitutes an ethical wrong even if this causes no harm to human beings. Of course, even those who believe in ecocentric ethics do not believe that it is *always* wrong to harm the natural world; it could be that doing so is necessary to fulfil another moral obligation. However, those with non-anthropocentric sympathies do believe that the non-human natural world has intrinsic value, and therefore it ought to be given due moral consideration, even when its protection has little bearing on human well-being (although other concerns might ultimately outweigh this in some cases). For a non-anthropocentric environmentalist, then, forests are worthy of moral consideration not only because they are necessary for human survival and are aesthetically pleasing to people, but also because they are important in their own right. This could be couched in the language of 'rights': one might argue that forests should not be cut down because they have a 'right' to live and flourish. It would also be possible to use the language of virtue ethics when arguing for non-anthropocentric ethics – for example, one could argue that the most fulfilling and flourishing life involves treating the non-human natural world with respect, even when human well-being is not at stake. Non-anthropocentric environmentalism, like anthropocentrism, is not tied to the belief in any

particular moral theory – although it might exclude certain theories such as utilitarianism, which sees moral consideration in terms of the ability to experience pain and pleasure.

Of course, this is a rather broad overview of anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics, and I have presented the two positions in terms that make them appear mutually exclusive. However, there are some ethical ideas which fall between the two, for instance the belief in animal rights or animal liberation (see Regan, 2004). Non-human animals are a part of non-human nature, and so the belief that they have rights is a form of non-anthropocentrism. Nonetheless, the moral status of non-human animals usually derives, on this view, from the strong similarity that many animals share with human beings (in terms of their sentience, thoughts, kinship, fears, hopes, and so on). Animal liberation therefore constitutes a rather narrow extension of human-centred ethical thinking, and for the purposes of this article, I am going to use the terms ‘non-anthropocentrism’, ‘ecocentrism’, and ‘biocentrism’ to refer to the view that at least some aspects of the non-sentient, ‘inanimate’ natural world have intrinsic value, rather than merely instrumental value – although many ecocentric theorists will, of course, also believe in animal liberation.

Why would we be inclined to believe that there might be a conflict between non-anthropocentric environmentalism and Rawlsian PRL? To answer this, we need to look again at PRL’s basic assumptions and principles. According to Rawlsian PRL, the liberal state and its laws and policies should be justifiable to all ‘reasonable’ citizens. It is a ‘module’ that slots into a wide variety of reasonable comprehensive doctrines. We should aim for neutrality, and eschew appeals to specific controversial philosophical doctrines. Who qualifies as a ‘reasonable citizen’, and what counts as a ‘reasonable doctrine’? Opinions on this differ within Rawlsian circles to some extent, but there is a general attempt to make sure that the definition is broad enough to include those who are sympathetic to liberal democracy, and who wish to live in a society that constitutes a fair system of social co-operation for our mutual benefit. Because PRL aims to justify the liberal state and its key policies to a wide range of reasonable persons – who hold a large number of views on a wide range of metaphysical, religious, and moral issues – the definition needs to be wide enough to include these people, while excluding those who are not interested in creating a fair system of social co-operation based on mutual tolerance. What we might call ‘minimalist’ definitions of reasonableness are provided by theorists such as Martha Nussbaum and Jonathan Quong. According to Nussbaum, ‘... [A] reasonable citizen is one who respects other citizens as equals. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine is one endorsed by such a reasonable citizen ... including a serious commitment to the value of equal respect for persons as a political value’ (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 33). Who are ‘unreasonable’ people, and what is considered an

'unreasonable doctrine', then? According to Jonathan Quong, an unreasonable citizen '...rejects at least one, but usually several of the following: (1) that political society should be a fair system of social cooperation for mutual benefit, (2) that citizens are free and equal, and (3) the fact of reasonable pluralism' (Quong, 2004, p. 315).

As I said earlier, the question of what counts as 'reasonable' is contested, although the definitions given here are good starting points that will allow us to discuss the key issue of whether PRL allows non-anthropocentric environmental policies. However, I shall discuss the definitional issue to some extent, because it is quite common for Rawlsian philosophers to add various clauses to the notion of 'reasonableness', and to narrow the scope of what counts as 'reasonable'. This is true in the realm of environmental issues as well, and some theorists, such as Simon Hailwood, have proposed altering or narrowing the scope of 'reasonableness' in order to make liberalism 'greener'. I will discuss Hailwood's theory later, but for now – if we bear in mind the definitions of 'reasonableness' given by Nussbaum and Quong – the apparent tension between PRL and non-anthropocentric environmentalism can be stated simply: ecocentrism appears to be an archetypal example of a controversial doctrine that many reasonable people will reject. And it is very difficult to see how this could be changed in existing liberal societies: for one thing, it is still deeply ingrained in our history and culture (at least in the Western world) that nature is intrinsically worthless, and any value it may have derives from its usefulness to human beings. Liberalism in particular has traditionally been associated with the position that nature has no intrinsic moral worth, and this is a view commonly attributed to many towering philosophical figures of modernity, among them Locke, Hobbes, and Kant (see Hobbes, 1651/1985; Kant, 1785/1993; Locke, 1689/1993/1993). Now, it is certainly possible to be a liberal (in the broad sense, at least) who believes in some ecocentric ideals – there is nothing contradictory here – but the fact remains that suggesting the natural world has intrinsic value will generate controversy among reasonable persons.

When we deliberate about which laws the liberal state should put into force, Rawlsian public reason liberals believe that we have a moral duty of civility to appeal only to publicly accessible principles and reasons. To be sure, we may offer principles and reasons for action that are *grounded* in our own comprehensive doctrine – e.g. a reasonable Muslim may believe that freedom of religion is ultimately grounded in Quranic law – but the reasons and principles themselves (in this case religious freedom) must be accessible from the standpoint of all reasonable doctrines. And it seems as though ecocentric ideals cannot possibly qualify, since they are not accessible to all reasonable doctrines. A modern Kantian or Lockean may well be thoroughly *liberal* and *reasonable* (on the definitions given by Quong and Nussbaum), but they may believe that the possession of *reason* is a prerequisite for moral

status. Since no part of the non-human natural world possesses reason – at least not in the way that Lockean and Kantian define the term ‘reason’ – only human beings can have moral worth. Therefore, to justify coercive state action on the basis of ecocentric ideals is to neglect one’s duty of civility – the requirement to use *public reason* – when deliberating about how to use the coercive powers of the liberal state. Hence the tension between non-anthropocentric forms of environmentalism and Rawlsian PRL.

Attempts to reconcile public reason liberalism and non-anthropocentrism: Bell and Michael

A number of Rawlsian theorists, such as Derek Bell and Mark A. Michael, have attempted to circumvent this problem. Their approach is based on one of Rawls’ proposed limitations regarding the duty to use only public reasons when justifying the liberal state and its policies. Rawls argues that appealing to strictly public reasons is only necessary when considering ‘constitutional essentials’ and ‘matters of basic justice’ (Michael, 2000, p. 50; Rawls, 1996, p. 214). So, when trying to establish the liberal state’s general legitimacy, we must use public reason. When we discuss (e.g.) questions about imposing the death penalty for murder or whether to ban hate speech, we must use publicly accessible reasons – these are constitutional essentials, as they relate to the basic rights and liberties of citizens. It would also be necessary to use public reason when discussing issues such as distributive justice and welfare, as these are ‘matters of basic justice’. However, it would, to give a classic example, be acceptable to argue for establishing state-funded art galleries on non-public grounds. It would be permissible to use (say) perfectionist arguments for this purpose, since this is not a matter relating to constitutional essentials or questions of basic justice. According to Bell and Michael, at least some ecocentric environmental policies will thus be permissible within Rawlsian PRL. Rawls himself explicitly argues that the protection of the natural world is not a constitutional essential, and hence is not subject to the strict requirements of public reason (Rawls, 1997, p. 94). As Bell says, ‘... Rawls’s account allows appeal to biocentric, ecocentric and aesthetic arguments where constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice are not at issue. ... Rawls’s view is that on many issues that come before a legislature, it is right for citizens and legislators to appeal to their comprehensive doctrines in the democratic process’ (Bell, 2002, p. 707; see also Michael, 2000, p. 54).

To assess the tenability of this response, we need to know more about whether Rawls’ distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials stands up to close analysis. To ask the most basic question, why would Rawls believe that there is this fundamental difference between constitutional essentials and non-essentials? In some sense, it does seem intuitive to draw such a distinction, since liberals obviously place special emphasis on

basic freedoms, equality before the law, and other fundamental constitutional matters. However, it is more difficult to state exactly *why* public reason should be required only in cases where essentials are concerned, and it is equally challenging to clearly draw a distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials. Rawls offers no well-developed and lucid position on this matter, and some prominent proponents of PRL – among them Charles Larmore – have argued that the scope of public reason covers all cases in which there is a proposal to use coercive power (Larmore, 1999). Moreover, some Rawlsian theorists, such as Jonathan Quong, have taken a stronger position and argued that all state policies – whether coercive or not – should be justified using public reason (Quong, 2014, pp. 272–3). I will first provide a critique of the view that there can be a clear distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials, at least as this relates to the issue of environmental protection. I will then cast doubt upon the idea that there is a good basis for claiming that public reasons are only required when essentials, rather than non-essentials, are concerned.

As Kent Greenawalt has argued, Rawls' distinction between constitutional essentials, matters of basic justice, and non-essentials is not as clear-cut as it first appears. Greenawalt uses the examples of abortion and fetal research (Greenawalt, 1994, pp. 686–687). However, as I will outline below, it is equally possible to use other examples, including those relating to the environment (which I think actually work very well for this discussion). Greenawalt argues that any issue would appear to have an impact, if only indirect, on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. As he puts it, 'It would be odd to say that you can use religious (and other comprehensive) perspectives to argue about constitutional essentials when the essentials are not directly involved (the fetal research issue) but you may not use such perspectives when the essentials are directly at stake (the permissibility of abortion issue)...' (Greenawalt, 1994, p.687.)

I will add that it seems not only odd, but arbitrary, at least in many cases: if you are a public reason liberal advocating a particular kind of state coercion, and such coercion has an impact on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, why should it be considered permissible to appeal to your own comprehensive doctrine? This undermines one of the imperatives to use public reason in the first place: the desire to 'extend toleration to philosophy itself'. According to this principle, we must not subject reasonable citizens to coercion on the basis of values and principles which are completely alien to them, at least where constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are concerned (Rawls, 1991, p. 145). As Martha Nussbaum puts it, 'When the institutions that pervasively govern your life are built on a view that in all conscience you cannot endorse, that means that you are, in effect, in a position of second-class citizenship. Even if you are tolerated...government will state, every day, that a different view, incompatible with yours, is the

correct view, and that yours is wrong' (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 35). If we advocate or enact coercive policies on the basis of ideas that most reasonable citizens cannot endorse – even if these policies only relate *indirectly* to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice – the government will have to tell reasonable people, every day, that their view is wrong and a different, incompatible view is correct.

We can apply Greenawalt's arguments to specific issues in environmental ethics. As we saw earlier, Rawls does explicitly say that protecting the natural world falls outside the realm of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice (Rawls, 1997, p. 94). What does he have in mind here? He is thinking of issues such as the preservation of national parks and the control of urban pollution. It might reasonably be thought that these policies will not have a significant effect on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. There are, to be sure, some forms of individual freedom which may have to be limited for the purposes of even modest environmental protection. For example, hunting and fishing may have to be banned in some places, access to certain areas may have to be restricted, and rules regarding personal property (such as where houses can be built) will have to be tightened. However, Rawlsians could plausibly argue that, although these might be significant constraints on individual freedom, they do not fall within the scope of constitutional essentials and basic justice because they do not concern 'basic freedoms' (see Wenar, 2021, §3.4).

However, this will not be enough to rescue PRL here. Whilst it is plausible to suggest that relatively *unambitious* environmental policies will not have a significant impact on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, these policies are insufficient for confronting the major environmental problems that the world faces. Environmentalists are calling for far more to be done, and I will contend that more *ambitious* ecological policies will be much more difficult to justify on non-anthropocentric grounds within the framework of PRL. This is because such policies will almost always have a large effect on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. For example, the preservation (on ecocentric grounds) of the Amazon rainforest and other carbon sinks may involve raising taxes, banning many kinds of agriculture, and placing restrictions on free movement. Can we really argue that these things are not strongly related to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice? It seems unlikely, especially considering that the resources spent on preserving the Amazon would have to be considerable, and this would have a substantial impact on issues such as distributive justice and personal freedom.

In this section, I am following Greenawalt in disputing the distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials. We can understand this issue better if we make a distinction between policies that have a 'strong' indirect impact on constitutional essentials, and those which only

have a 'weak' or negligible indirect impact. A policy that has a 'strong' indirect effect on constitutional essentials would usually be one that has inevitable (or almost inevitable) side-effects which lead to basic liberties or other constitutional matters being called into question. For instance, here are some current proposals for avoiding potentially disastrous climate change: banning internal flights where trains are available; introducing legislation to reduce meat consumption; carbon taxes; reducing overconsumption by the wealthy; and policies designed to stabilize and gradually reduce the population (Ripple et al., 2017, p. 3). Each of these policies has either a direct or strong indirect effect on constitutional essentials. Policies designed to reduce meat consumption will have an impact on what people can choose to eat, and are therefore related to constitutional essentials (individual freedom and choice). Laws designed to reduce overconsumption by the wealthy may limit how people can choose to buy and sell goods and services. Put simply, enacting such policies would entail restricting basic liberties. These policies could therefore be said to have (at least) a 'strong' indirect impact on constitutional essentials. Although the policies themselves might not mention constitutional essentials explicitly, their side effects mean that constitutional essentials would almost certainly be impacted. I think that, in these cases, it does seem strange and somewhat arbitrary to say that the duty to use public reason does not apply.

Nonetheless, it is clear that some proposals would not have a *significant* effect on constitutional essentials – the impact might be subtle or even non-existent. We can say that such proposals have only a 'weak' indirect impact on constitutional essentials. An example might be a policy that does not have widespread or fundamental societal implications, such as a law which bans hosepipe use during times of drought. It might seem less intuitive to think that policies of *this* sort have enough of an impact on constitutional essentials to require justification using public reason. They might be said to only have a marginal or 'weak' indirect impact on constitutional essentials (if they have any effect at all). However, I would argue that most environmental policies – at least *ambitious* environmental policies – will have a strong rather than a weak impact on constitutional essentials. Within PRL, it is therefore wrong to say that there is no requirement to use public reason when arguing for ambitious environmental policies, and probably even some more modest environmental policies. Consequently, PRL still seems to rule out appeals to non-anthropocentric policies most of the time.

So far in this section, I have called into question the idea that we can make a practical distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials, at least in many cases. However, there is another assumption that can be called into question, namely whether proponents of PRL have a good philosophical basis for claiming that public reasons are only required when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are concerned. We can begin by asking

why Rawlsian liberals think that we should adopt public reason in the first place. One very common and intuitively appealing approach is Charles Larmore's suggestion that public reason embodies 'respect for persons'. Larmore explains why he thinks that this concept should be central to PRL: 'Respect for persons lies at the heart of political liberalism not because looking for common ground we find it there but because it is what impels us to look for common ground at all' (Larmore, 1999, p. 608). If we make the laws and principles governing society justifiable to all reasonable persons, we show respect for persons as ends in themselves. On the other hand, '...if we try to bring about conformity to a rule of conduct solely by the threat of force, we shall be treating persons merely as means, as objects of coercion, and not also as ends, engaging with their distinctive capacity as persons' (Larmore, 1999, p. 607). For Larmore, the requirements of public reason extend not only to constitutional essentials, but to all coercive legislation (see Larmore, 1996). Larmore believes that this follows from the notion of *respect for persons*. This grounds public reason because we should never coerce reasonable people on bases that they cannot accept, and he thinks that it is inconsistent to make an exception for 'ordinary' legislation – which is still coercive, and has a large impact on citizens' lives. Clearly, ecological legislation is no exception to this, even if it is relatively unambitious. It will still involve coercing reasonable people and, by the standards of PRL, it should be justified by public reason in order to show respect for persons.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to analyse all the potential arguments for and against the possibility of finding a principled basis for saying that public reasons are only required when constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are concerned. However, the considerations raised here do indicate that many prominent supporters of PRL do not believe that there are good reasons for thinking that there is such a basis. As the passages above outline, if we use the idea of 'respect for persons' to support PRL, it will potentially be very difficult to find this basis. It is true that respect for persons is not the only concept that could be used to justify PRL. Others have been put forward, amongst them concerns about justice and toleration (Rawls, 1991). Obviously, I cannot possibly analyse all these positions in this article. However, it is worth noting that some more recent public reason liberals have raised doubts about whether any justification for PRL will allow us to argue that public reasons are required only when essentials are concerned. Jonathan Quong, for instance, analyses several arguments for thinking this, but he finds all of them inadequate. He therefore favours, like Larmore, a broader view of the scope of public reason, and he thinks all state policies should be publicly justified (Quong, 2011, pp. 274–288). For the most part, Bell and Michael have both assumed that public reasons are only required when dealing with constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, even though there are significant doubts about this amongst some of

the most prominent supporters of PRL. Michael does provide a brief analysis of this issue, although he says little that is designed to convince an opponent of his view (Michael, 2000, pp. 51–52). This is not necessarily to say that no such justification could ever be given, but, as I argued above, I do not think that a clear distinction between constitutional essentials and non-essentials can be made, at least where ambitious environmental policies are concerned. Therefore, while I have outlined some of the doubts about whether there is a good basis for saying that public reason is only necessary when basic justice and constitutional essentials are concerned, the strength of my overall argument does not primarily rest on this.

Attempts to reconcile public reason liberalism and non-anthropocentrism: Hailwood

Simon Hailwood puts forward a somewhat different attempt to reconcile public reason liberalism with environmentalism (including non-anthropocentric environmentalism) in his book *How To Be a Green Liberal: Nature, Value and Liberal Philosophy* (Hailwood, 2004). He argues for a particular view of nature called the ‘otherness’ view, in which non-human nature is seen as something that has its own aims and purposes, separate from those of humans (Hailwood, 2004, ch.2). Nature is not to be seen as a ‘blueprint’ for human ethics or society. To this end, Hailwood argues against different views of the natural world, such as those offered by Robert Goodin and Arne Naess (Ibid., pp.36–40). Nature’s ‘otherness’ implies, for Hailwood, not that the natural world is a resource to be used and exploited, but rather that it has an independent existence that should be respected, just as Rawlsian theory emphasizes the ‘separateness of persons’. The state and liberal society should respect the otherness of nature and remain ‘neutral’ towards it, in much the same way that the liberal state should remain ‘neutral’ toward different (reasonable) conceptions of the good (Ibid., 98–102). Respect for the otherness of nature is thus similar to respecting otherness amongst persons. According to Hailwood, then, Rawlsian PRL might accommodate concern for the intrinsic value of nature by appealing to nature’s otherness. The otherness view can, according to Hailwood, enter the realm of public reason and allow us to circumvent the supposed tension between PRL and environmentalism.

One possible objection to Hailwood’s view is that he has assumed the framework of liberalism and has tried to show how it can be ‘greened’. He provides few arguments that will appear persuasive to people who do not already accept liberalism (see Meyer, 2005, pp. 119–120). Let us set this aside, however, and engage with Hailwood’s book on its own terms. The most straightforward objection to his ‘otherness view’ is that it is simply another controversial metaphysical or philosophical viewpoint which many

reasonable citizens will reject. Therefore, Hailwood's otherness view of nature *cannot* enter the sphere of public reason, and Rawlsian liberals have made no progress on this issue. Ultimately, I think that this objection does hold, but Hailwood anticipates it, and we need to see whether his reply stands up to scrutiny. Hailwood, following Rawls, makes a distinction between ideas about 'justice' and 'the right' on the one hand, and ideas about 'the good' on the other. Hailwood agrees with Rawls that any particular (thick) conception of the good is almost always going to be controversial amongst reasonable citizens, and therefore such ideas cannot enter the realm of public reason. However, Hailwood denies that his 'otherness' view of nature *is* a thick conception of the good or a 'controversial metaphysical' position (Hailwood, 2004, p. 107). It is not entirely clear why Hailwood believes that his otherness view is not 'metaphysical' in nature. However, here is my interpretation: for Hailwood, people cannot be reasonable citizens unless they accept the otherness of nature, and the otherness view constitutes a political principle that enshrines ethical concern for other beings. If someone believes that the non-human natural world does *not* have its own (non-human) aims and purposes – i.e. if they repudiate the otherness view – then they are not showing sufficient respect for the separateness of different persons, sentient beings, or life forms. The otherness view is therefore not 'metaphysical', or an idea about the good, but instead an extension of public reason to the non-human natural world.

This response pushes the problem back one step. Although it may not be a conception of the good or a 'metaphysical' ideal, we might wonder why we should treat the otherness view any differently, given that it will appear to generate controversy amongst reasonable citizens (as defined by theorists like Rawls, Nussbaum, and Quong). In other words, you might be someone who believes that society should be a fair system of social co-operation, and that citizens are free and equal, but you may still be suspicious of the otherness view. I think that Hailwood is assuming that there is an important parallel between respecting the independence of other persons, and respecting the independence of nature (by adopting the otherness view), when in fact this parallel is not particularly striking. The point of 'respect for persons' is that you respect rational beings as independent and as having different interests and goals from you. However, 'respect for persons' and the separateness of persons essentially involves the thought that the 'other' in question is nonetheless importantly the same. Therefore, there would be nothing contradictory about respecting the separateness of persons, and reasonable pluralism amongst *humans*, but arguing that the natural world is merely a resource to be used for human purposes. It is easy to imagine a Christian, Muslim, or secular Kantian who is generally sympathetic to the aims of PRL taking this stance. Perhaps their positions will ultimately not hold up to scrutiny, but the important point is that there will unquestionably be debate

and disagreement about the otherness view amongst reasonable citizens; some reasonable citizens will repudiate it entirely. Therefore, the otherness view is outside the scope of public reason, and to justify coercive environmental policies with this argument is impermissible according to PRL.

Now, it might be objected that almost *everything*, including the basic tenets of liberalism itself, are going to be philosophically 'controversial', and PRL cannot possibly be neutral on *all* 'controversial' topics. It might be argued that PRL is only supposed to be neutral between different *conceptions of the good* among *reasonable* persons, and hence there is no requirement to be neutral about the otherness principle (see Hailwood, 2004, p. 95). While it obviously would be impossible for PRL to be 'neutral' about all philosophical issues, this consideration does not rescue Hailwood's otherness principle. While public reason liberalism does not demand state neutrality about all philosophical topics, the otherness view will generate fundamental controversy among reasonable citizens, even if we use a relatively narrow definition of 'reasonable' (e.g. even if 'reasonableness' excludes all non-liberals, and even if it excludes all non-Rawlsians). Public reason liberalism surely is supposed to be neutral in these situations, and thus if the state enacts coercive policies on the basis of the otherness view, it is acting non-neutrally by the standards of PRL. Consequently, I cannot see how Hailwood's otherness view will allow public reason liberalism to be reconciled with non-anthropocentric environmentalism.

In essence, Hailwood is having to narrow the definition of 'reasonableness' so that it contains the very specific requirement that reasonable people accept the otherness view. You could be someone who accepts liberal democracy, and you could even accept everything that Rawls says in his later works, without endorsing the otherness view (it is probable that Rawls did not endorse it, and it is unlikely that he even considered this issue at all). There is nothing unusual about proponents of PRL making changes to the definition of 'reasonableness' by adding various clauses to the minimalist understanding of reasonableness. However, any attempt to do this has to remain in line with the main goals of PRL, and has to be such that it does not serve to trivialize the theory. To put it slightly differently, theorists cannot be permitted to alter the definition of reasonableness simply to defuse a potential objection or to define their way out of a problem. While it would certainly be uncharitable to think that this is all Hailwood is doing in his book, his argument nonetheless suffers from this problem. If it is permissible for Hailwood to argue that accepting the otherness view is a prerequisite for reasonableness, this might undermine the very point of PRL. For instance, one objection to the idea that perfectionism fits within PRL is that many reasonable citizens will reject any view of the good life that might underpin this perfectionism. However, could a perfectionist not simply reply that all reasonable citizens must (by definition) accept the perfectionist's favoured

view of the good life? If we were to permit Hailwood's arguments, it would be difficult to see what would be wrong with considering Joseph Raz to be part of the PRL tradition when he states that '... our duty to act only on political principles to which the reasonable consent is simply the duty to act on well-founded, valid principles. For that is what the reasonable consent to' (Raz, 1990, p. 46).¹

To give a different example, imagine that a proponent of PRL holds a controversial view about a contentious ethical issue such as abortion or euthanasia. Should this theorist be permitted to change the definition of 'reasonableness' so that all 'reasonable' citizens are brought closer to their preferred view? This would clearly be a case of someone manipulating a definition in order to shoehorn their preferred ethical position into a political theory (or at least to make the theory more amenable to their ethical view).² Once again, it is not easy to see the difference between this and Hailwood's argument. This article is clearly not the place to engage in a full-scale discussion of exactly when it should be permissible for proponents of PRL to alter the definition of reasonableness. However, I think that the concerns I have raised here should lead us to reject Hailwood's argument – at least to the degree that it is considered to be an argument that works within the tradition of PRL.

In this light of this, I do not believe that defenders of public reason liberalism have been successful in their attempts to accommodate non-anthropocentric ideals. However, I do not wish to suggest that Rawlsian PRL cannot support at least some environmental concerns that are human-centred. PRL does provide room for anthropocentric arguments for environmental preservation. Certainly, concerns about intergenerational justice can be invoked to justify liberal environmental policies to all reasonable citizens (see Bell, 2002; McKinnon, 2011). The same can be said about arguments for curtailing climate change to avoid negative effects on global justice, inequality, and so on (see Caney, 2010; Coglianese, 1998; Kenehan, 2007; Shue, 1993). However, this is very different from saying that biocentric positions can be used to justify ecological policies.

The significance of public reason liberalism's anthropocentrism

I will now turn to an analysis of why this conclusion is important. Why should proponents of PRL care that their political theory is unable to incorporate non-anthropocentric ethics, when there might be excellent human-centred arguments for enacting quite wide-ranging ecological policies? After all, if we really are in the midst of a *climate emergency*, as many scientists and some governments are claiming, there are going to be persuasive anthropocentric arguments for (dramatically) improving humanity's treatment of the environment. This is reflected by the fact

that, in the ‘Scientists’ Warning to Humanity’ series of articles (e.g. Ripple et al., 2017; Rivers et al., 2022), the arguments for extensive change are largely anthropocentric. Thus, even leading climate scientists – probably the group of scholars most worried by climate change and ecological breakdown – usually find no need to couch their recommendations in the language of non-anthropocentric ethics. Why, then, should we be so concerned with the conclusion that PRL cannot accommodate biocentric ideas? The reason is that the failure to build such concerns into one’s ethical theory leads to a number of disturbing conclusions; this is best shown through examples.

Take the case of the Anthropocene extinction (also referred to as the sixth mass extinction or the Holocene extinction). Currently, humanity’s destruction of other species is so extensive that it threatens the survival (or at least well-being) of humanity itself – the scientific research is fairly clear about this (see Bradshaw et al., 2021). However, it is not too implausible to imagine that humans might get away with exterminating a very large number of species, particularly if technological advances allow us to artificially sustain ourselves. Many proposals concerning how to do this have been put forward, although as of today none of them – with the possible exception of carbon capture and storage, which could help us to deal with global heating caused by CO₂ emissions – is widely accepted by the scientific community as feasible and reliable. Currently, there is no generally accepted method by which the negative effects of the Anthropocene extinction could be mitigated with a technofix. Should that be enough to reassure us? Such a proposal makes us hostages to fortune in the sense that it will depend on what sort of technology is developed in the future. In other words, it is difficult, on this view, to find a principled basis for taking action against the Anthropocene extinction. Hailwood recognizes this problem, and this is one of his motivations for attempting to create a ‘truly green’ brand of liberalism. As he writes, ‘We might say that, unless buttressed with non-instrumentalist considerations, a purely instrumental approach can manage only (something like) a *modus vivendi* with nature, the rationality of which is contingent on the circumstances, particularly a relatively low level of technological capability to control what are now natural processes, or produce artificial or virtual analogues of particularly enjoyable parts of nature. We *need* to respect independent nature at the moment. But in the future?’ (Hailwood, 2004, p. 5, italics original.) If, in the near future, technology allows us to survive with far less biodiversity, rainforests might lose their status as the essential ‘lungs of the Earth’; insects will no longer warrant protection on the grounds that ‘... insect declines can negatively affect the maintenance of food supply and put at risk human well-being’ (Cardoso et al., 2020, p. 7); trees and forests will not require conservation because of the ‘... full range of benefits that are provided by forests to human society ...’ (Rivers et al., 2022, p.7.)

If a technofix could be found, humans could still live comfortably and happily in a just society even while much life on Earth goes extinct due to anthropogenic environmental destruction. In other words, if we developed a technofix which lessened some of the impacts of biodiversity decline, we still might be able to get away with extensive ecological destruction. As I said above, humans do not currently have the ability to do this, but some geoengineering proposals are taken seriously in the scientific community (see, e.g. Zhang et al., 2015; for an overview of solar geoengineering, see Reynolds, 2019). Is there any reason to believe that we will not, in the coming decades or centuries, develop technologies that could allow modern societies to survive with only (e.g.) 20% of current wildlife remaining? There is little that can be said to conclusively rule this out, and those who believe in purely anthropocentric environmentalism cannot easily argue that such a situation would be ethically unacceptable. Because of this, I think that PRL's inability to incorporate non-anthropocentric considerations means that it is inadequate regarding the issue of biodiversity decline.

If we look instead at the specific issue of climate change, something similar becomes evident. In the current era, one of the reasons why virtually all climate scientists and some policymakers are so concerned with climate change is that it threatens human well-being and the future of human society.³ A 2005 article by Erik Stokstad, for instance, describes itself as summarizing and promoting 'A massive effort to document the state of ecosystems – and their ability to provide food, comfort, and other services ...' The author later makes claims such as the following: 'Drylands are some of the most delicate ecosystems in the world and face increasing demands, which could threaten efforts to fight poverty' (Stokstad, 2005, p. 41). More recently, the tone of many scientific articles has certainly become more urgent, but the emphasis is still generally – although not exclusively – on human well-being. For instance, in the 'World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency 2022', the authors write that 'We are now at "code red" on planet Earth. Humanity is unequivocally facing a climate emergency. The scale of untold human suffering, already immense, is rapidly growing' (Ripple et al., 2022, p. 1149). They also end this Special Report with a conclusion that is anthropocentric in nature: 'The very future of humanity depends on the creativity, moral fiber, and perseverance of the 8 billion of us on the planet now ... Rather than lose hope, we must equitably reduce ecological overshoot and immediately pursue massive-scale climate change mitigation and adaptation. This is the only way we can limit the near-term damage, preserve nature, avoid untold human suffering, and give future generations the opportunities they deserve' (Ibid., p.1152). Even more pressing calls for action are to be found in some other scientific articles: 'Could anthropogenic climate change result in worldwide societal collapse or even eventual human extinction? At

present, this is a dangerously underexplored topic. Yet there are ample reasons to suspect that climate change could result in a global catastrophe' (Kemp et al., 2022, p. 1). As we can see, there are many anthropocentric reasons why we should reduce fossil fuel emissions and seriously curtail other activities contributing to climate change.

However, as in the case of the Anthropocene extinction, we should not find ourselves satisfied with purely anthropocentric environmental ethics. The issues described above are serious indeed, but there is still a sense that, under anthropocentric ethics, treating the non-human world with respect will be worryingly contingent upon current circumstances. Again, we might consider scenarios involving geoengineering; some such proposals have been seriously discussed by climate scientists, policymakers, and the media as a means to mitigate anthropogenic climate change (see Reynolds, 2019; Vaughan & Lenton, 2011). The general consensus appears to be that most of these proposals are currently impracticable, but not excessively far-fetched. In some cases, the risks of geoengineering proposals (rather than their lack of feasibility) keep scientists and governments from currently embracing them (Reynolds, 2019, p. 1). If we were prepared to take the risks associated with geoengineering, however, it might allow us to continue to live as we currently do without removing the underlying causes of climate change. For instance, we could pursue a massive programme of stratospheric aerosol injection and carbon capture, and in theory this might allow us to survive even if the 'climate tipping points' of Amazon rainforest dieback and boreal forest dieback were reached. This raises troubling questions about what would happen if we developed more advanced geoengineering technologies. As in the case of the Anthropocene extinction, PRL struggles to find a principled ethical basis for combatting ecological destruction.

In response to this, perhaps proponents of PRL would reply that I am simply assuming that these 'disturbing' conclusions present a serious problem for PRL's 'shallow ecology', whereas in fact I am appealing to intuitions that are not widely held. In other words, most people might not find these conclusions particularly worrying, given that many do not hold ecocentric viewpoints (at least not in much of the world). However, I would contend that there is little to suggest that people are generally satisfied with a purely anthropocentric outlook. Indeed, there might be considerable evidence to the contrary. Most people would probably feel uneasy at the thought of clearing rainforests to extract natural resources, or the elimination of entire species for human enrichment – even assuming that these species are non-sentient. In fact, many would probably be a little uncomfortable with the thought of destroying mountains, or wiping out entire moorlands or wetlands for human amusement or material gain. Indeed, it is presumably the suspicion that many people have some non-anthropocentric intuitions – even if they are quite inchoate or

inconsistent – that motivates Rawlsians such as Bell and Hailwood to attempt a reconciliation between PRL and non-anthropocentric ethics. If I am correct that these attempts are not successful, it does pose a problem for PRL, since the evidence about people's general opinions and intuitions on these topics is at best mixed.

This is not to say that everyone would agree that destroying mountains and forests for human gain is wrong, or that all of us have some non-anthropocentric intuitions. Some proponents of PRL would respond, at this point, that they can bite the bullet when facing this kind of criticism. They might argue that, while the concerns raised in this article have some impact on how we should evaluate PRL, the points in favour of PRL outweigh these considerations. They might add that PRL is bound to leave some people uncomfortable because it is impermissible to argue for their deeply held comprehensive ideals. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that PRL rules out some non-anthropocentric policies – this is exactly the sort of conclusion that you would expect.

However, I think the arguments in this article can withstand this sort of criticism. Usually, when weighing up the plausibility of a political or ethical theory, we do take into consideration the possible outcomes of that theory in this way. A political theory like PRL relies significantly on intuitions, and it is important to compare the strength of these intuitions with the strength of our intuitions about the consequences that the theory may lead to.⁴ Such arguments are also very common when directed against other political theories. We can imagine Marxists facing the objection that their theory will (or might) lead to negative consequences – for instance that Marxism will likely lead to similar hierarchies to the ones found in capitalist societies. Should this be considered a decisive criticism of Marxism? Probably not, but it is surely relevant to its plausibility. I cannot see why the assessment of the tenability of public reason liberalism should be judged any differently in this respect – the potential to lead to negative consequences and policies is a reason to have a greater level of suspicion towards a theory (cf. Billingham & Taylor, 2022, pp. 676–677).

Proponents of PRL might also take a slightly different line. They could contend that, while the 'disturbing' conclusions I outline above have *some* effect on the viability of PRL, they involve scenarios that are quite far-fetched, and we can thus be dubious about the intuitions that they elicit. I acknowledge that this criticism has force against some thought experiments, namely ones which involve very far-fetched scenarios that are, in a sense, deliberately designed to produce the 'correct' response. However, I would argue that this is not true of the examples that I have chosen. It is true that we are not currently able to use climate engineering to save us from global heating and mass extinction, so the arguments remain somewhat theoretical. However, it is worth bearing in mind that humanity has already

embarked on a journey of destroying much of the natural world while still managing to survive – and even in some ways flourish.

Humans have, in fact, already succeeded in surpassing the expectations of some scientists in the ability to sustain ourselves in the face of extensive environmental degradation and the destruction of other species (e.g. Ehrlich, 1971). Robin Attfield has noted that around one million species may have been lost already (Attfield, 2018, p. 72), while the WWF's latest reports indicate that humans have exterminated around 60% of animal species since 1970 (Carrington, 2018). Moreover, extreme weather events exacerbated by global warming have become more frequent and severe. Despite this, however, humans have continued to survive (and in some respects thrive) since 1970, and this is in part because we have been able to artificially sustain ourselves in the face of a deteriorating natural environment. For instance, advances in technology have allowed us to more efficiently rescue victims of natural disasters, while improvements in medicine have the potential to counterbalance or outweigh the fact that global warming and declining biodiversity will lead to an increasing risk of disease. Of course, the fact that we have so far staved off the worst effects for human beings does not mean that we will keep being able to do so; it is probable, in fact, that environmental destruction will have a far greater impact on humanity in the future. However, the idea that we might, because of technological advances, get away with greatly reducing biodiversity or allowing destructive climate change is not simply science fiction. It already has a basis in reality, and it only requires a moderate use of our imagination to think that technology could be developed that will allow us to sustain ourselves in the face of further mass extinction and climate change.

Conclusion

I have argued that Rawlsian public reason liberalism is in tension with non-anthropocentric environmentalism. While PRL does allow anthropocentric arguments for environmental protection, ecocentric values are controversial philosophical ideals about which reasonable persons disagree, and they are hence outside the scope of public reason. I have sceptically analysed some attempts to defuse this criticism, namely the defences offered by Derek Bell, Mark A. Michael, and Simon Hailwood, and I have concluded that none of these is convincing. I have argued that a purely anthropocentric ethical outlook leads to some potentially disquieting conclusions, which should at least make us more suspicious of public reason liberalism.

However, some points of clarification need to be made here. First, while I have outlined some 'disturbing' conclusions of accepting a purely anthropocentric view, these considerations are not decisive, and as I said above, PRL can still accommodate anthropocentric arguments for greater environmental

protection. The considerations that I have sketched here should be seen as reasons for believing that PRL will probably remain inadequate even if it can accommodate anthropocentric environmentalism. However, it would be uncharitable to think that PRL cannot make room for better environmental policies, or even fairly radical environmental action. The arguments presented in this article should therefore be seen as relevant considerations when thinking about the viability of PRL, but not as decisive criticisms.

Finally, because comprehensive liberalism does not include the need to use only public reasons when justifying environmental policies, we can conclude that it is not affected by the problems outlined in this article. However, it is important to clarify that this does not necessarily mean that comprehensive liberalism will be environmentally sound, because there might be *other* reasons why comprehensive liberalism will fail on this score. As noted at the beginning of this article, liberalism has met quite uncompromising criticisms from environmentalists, some of whom allege that no form of liberalism can ever be environmentally sustainable. Of course, the arguments in this paper do not constitute a defence of comprehensive liberalism against this charge. The most that can be said is that comprehensive liberalism, because it does not demand that state policies are justified using public reason, can accommodate non-anthropocentric environmentalism. Therefore, the specific charge that all forms of liberalism are bound to treat the natural world as simply a resource to be used is misguided.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that some philosophers have attempted a reconciliation between public reason and perfectionism, and have argued that some perfectionist ideals should be accepted by all reasonable citizens (see, e.g. Tahzib, 2022, ch.7). There is clearly insufficient space here to consider all these possibilities, but I would argue that any such attempt will need to set very stringent limits to which perfectionist ideals can be considered to fall within this category (or else the arguments made above will have more force). Proponents of this position also need to make it clear precisely *why* these perfectionist ideals are such that all reasonable citizens should accept them.
2. Paul Billingham and Anthony Taylor make some similar points in their discussion of the 'idealization question' and the 'rational question' within public reason liberalism (Billingham & Taylor, 2022, pp. 674–675).
3. As Arne Naess points out, however, some environmental scientists privately do have ecocentric reasons for their views, but they sometimes practise self-censorship. '... their [scientists'] publications ... are limited to narrowly professional and specialized concerns ... If professional ecologists persist in voicing their value priorities, their jobs are often in danger, or they tend to lose influence and status among those who are in charge of overall policies' (Naess, 2005, p. 263).
4. Jeremy Williams argues along similar lines when he defends his objection to PRL in the article 'Public Reason and Prenatal Moral Status'. As he writes, ' ...

what ultimately matters, in assessing the Rawlsian model of public reason, is whether its pronouncements are sufficiently in line – in *reflective equilibrium*—with our considered moral judgements (as evaluators of political liberalism). If not, there is no higher court of appeal, as it were, at which public reason might be acquitted’ (Williams, 2015, p. 49, italics original).

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