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**THE RISE OF UNREASONABLNESS: BEYOND BINARIES FOR CONTAINMENT**

In this article, I explore the question of unreasonableness in accounts of political liberalism, in light of recent scholarly attention vis-à-vis particular phenomena of unreasonableness: unreasonable partisans, conspiratorial thinking, and persistent motivated reasoning in political information processing and belief, among other phenomena. The conception of reasonableness inspired by Rawls’ political liberalism attempts to isolate and categorize discrete modes of un/reasonableness in order to delimit the scope and strategies for containment: ethical versus epistemic; unreasonable persons versus beliefs; dispositional versus judgment reasonableness; political versus philosophical reasonableness, among other distinctions. I argue that these attempted typologies present an idealized conception of discrete modes of reasoning which belie contemporary understanding of how we think, form beliefs, and how we act on our beliefs.

Current attempts at formulating containment strategies for unreasonableness need to acknowledge that the sphere of public reason and justification, even in its ideal form, cannot be cordoned off from unreasonableness as a matter of a few select unreasonable persons, doctrines, beliefs, or on the basis of ethical versus epistemic unreasonableness. Justifications of coercion from public reason as the core of liberal legitimacy must reckon with the absence of an Archimedean point of reasonableness—in select (liberal, reasonable) persons, institutions, doctrines, or procedures. Reasonable institutions are not self-executing and un/reasonable beliefs are not simply held or not held. Instead, unreasonableness must be seen as imbricated in our institutions, culture, language, and in our inescapable methods of cognition. Reasonable and rationally justifiable democratic, egalitarian institutions or rights regimes, for example, are ideals that must be interpreted, enforced and realized by imperfect reasoners—from officials and in everyday relationships among citizens—to have empirical purchase. This uncontroversial claim, I argue, nonetheless tends to undermine the strict delineation of justificatory practice—i.e., who is entitled to it and under what grounds exclusion is justified. The very notion of justification—and determinations of exclusion—presupposes an Archimedean point of rationality that is impossible to maintain in the face of the pervasive interrelationship between reasonableness and unreasonableness, unreasonable and reasonable persons.

Moreover, understanding the role of emotive, social, contextual, subconscious, as well as preexisting institutional and interpersonal factors—and otherwise neglected or excluded features in accounts of public reason—demonstrates the unworkable of the paradigm represented by these ideal conceptions of reasonableness and containment. I turn to the insights from contemporary empirical studies that offer some guidance in non-utopian approaches to unreasonableness and unreasonable persons, as it best comports with our current understanding of reasoning and information processing. This turn to a more empirically-grounded understanding of unreasonableness shows a radical reform of *social* or ethical relationships and the foundations of our culture and institutions is required—and not just reforms within the cordoned off domain of public reason. A more empirically-grounded theory of public justification can shed light on the scope of prescriptions necessary for addressing the most visible and potentially detrimental manifestations of reasonableness— conspiratorial thinking, right-wing populism, susceptibility to misinformation and disinformation, distrust of science and expertise, and institutions central to liberal democracy, like the news media, higher education, and representative democracy generally.

In this article, I first define ‘reasonableness’ and ‘unreasonableness’ from Rawls, and the typologies of unreasonableness carved out by his interpreters. These forms of unreasonableness carry under their purview conspiratorial thinking, susceptibility to mis-and dis-information, and ethically objectionable viewpoints—which together oppose claims based on verifiable evidence versus biases, or unverifiable first-premises, and which honor fair terms of fair cooperation and equality. I argue these existing treatments of reasonableness and unreasonableness tend to elide the sources, pervasiveness, and tractability of unreasonableness. Such accounts view unreasonableness as restricted to select unreasonable individuals, who must either be excluded or silenced in the public sphere, or treated with respect qua individuals but not as rational interlocuters in the domain of public justification.

I next introduce contemporary empirical studies on the pervasiveness of motivated reasoning in information processing, and the persistent *sources* of unreasonableness. I argue that examination of ‘unreasonable’ beliefs and their sources ought to recognize the pervasiveness of forms of ‘unreasonable’ reasoning, as an inescapable component of how we think and the limitation of viewing certain individuals or claims *alone* as un/reasonable, worthy of inclusion or exclusion from the public sphere. But, on the other hand, I argue that the current method of justification itself must be re-configured if we are to take seriously empirical studies underwriting the complex nature of reasonableness and unreasonableness. As current empirical literature demonstrates, emotive factors and specific individual contexts can never be fully divorced from the thinking processes. The separation between reasonable and unreasonable—and its specific sources—appears predicated on an empirically questionable foundation. Finally, I argue for the need for radical social reforms to target the root causes of un-reasonableness and a recognition of its pervasive nature not just in contaminating rational or ethical discourse, but in everyday relationships and the structure of even otherwise legitimate liberal democratic institutions.

**Unreasonableness and Unreasonables in Rawls’ Political Liberalism**

Both empirical and normative scholarship today has been concerned with the appropriate scope and nature of state intervention or exclusion of unreasonableness in its many forms: should unreasonable citizens be stripped of citizenship rights, or excluded from the public sphere? Should they be excluded only when espousing ethically objectionable doctrines? Should unreasonable beliefs be penalized?

Reasonableness and reasonable persons, comprehensive doctrines, beliefs, disagreements, methods of public justification, and political conceptions of justice, etc. are central to Rawlsian political liberalism and liberalism more generally. Under Rawls’ *liberal principle of legitimacy* (1999, 137)—or the litmus test for justified exercises of coercive state power within a well-ordered liberal democracy—such exercises of power must comport with *the public political culture* of a liberal democracy and the core values presupposed within that culture. A *liberal political conception of justice* interprets the general features of a public political culture, specifically, the view of citizens as free and equal, and society as a fair cooperative system. This requires respect for individual rights and liberties, and sufficient institutional opportunities, health, and income, amongst other provisions, as the platform for the realization of such rights and liberties. This is the source of a politics that can be grounded in *reasonable judgments*—or reasonableness more generally.

Public reason and justification rely, in turn, on certain criteria. Most generally, it must be *reasons*, not power or domination, which ground proposals and the ultimate use of state power. And such reasons must be *public*—reasons that can be embraced by all good faith reasoners. As Gerald Gaus has categorized this component of public reason, publicity can be interpreted either as Agreement is reached if we presuppose 1. A regulative ideal of all reasoners with complete and ideal information and reasoning; 2. All reasonable persons would accept the proposal in good faith and to the best of one’s abilities, without “gross cognitive defects”; 3. Reasonable *beliefs* not persons are accepted on the basis of the reasonable grounds that can be advanced in their defense. Such a belief, as Gaus writes, “is one that is sufficiently credible to justify acceptance, assuming that a belief that violates clear maxims of logic or is based on manifestly bad evidence cannot be sufficiently credible.” (Gaus 1997, 214-215) Here, sufficiently credible does not require the ideal regulative model’s turn to the best or ideal belief, policy or practice.

Moreover, public reason requires a criterion of reciprocity, which requires that debates on issues of constitutional or fundamental political issues be based on reasons that citizens and officials reasonably believe other citizens and officials can accept (1996, 50).[[1]](#footnote-1) This willingness is presupposed by the interpretation of liberal public political culture. That is, reasonable people share public reasons and justifications with each other, with reference to public values of a political conception of justice and public standards of deliberation. Others, like Gerald Postema (1995), have identified a principle of sincerity, which requires that deliberators present reasons that they sincerely endorse.

Reasonableness for Rawls appears to be rooted in a disposition or an ethical virtue possessed by citizens—not just public officials—who freely engage in this reciprocal reason-giving under fair terms of cooperation (Boettcher 2004). They demonstrate a kind of democratic capacity or ethos, or a willingness to engage in cooperative terms with others as free co-equals. Reasonable people will work with other citizens to find and abide by a fair baseline of acceptable rules to govern their interactions. As Rawls notes, the methods or *guidelines of inquiry* and the “principles of justice have essentially the same grounds. They are companion parts of one agreement” (224-226). Rawls outlines the guidelines of inquiry by specifying broadly an “appeal only to presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial […] The application of substantive principles be guided by judgment and inference, reasons and evidence that the persons they represent can reasonably be expected to endorse.” (ibid) A basic turn to common sense and judgment, inference, reasons, and evidence must be met by a principle of reciprocity.

Reasonableness and reasonable citizens make stability possible in the face of *inevitable* pluralism. This fact of inevitable pluralism is central to Rawlsian political liberalism. Rawls distinguishes three types of judgments: rational judgments that approximate means-end reasoning and our estimation of the “appropriate place in our way of life” that ends assume (56); the reasonable as it pertains to moral and practical use, and the assessment of conflicting claims (ours against another’s, claims “against one another, or on our common practices and institutions”; and thirdly, “theoretical uses of our reason” which are not moral and practical but have to do with “beliefs and schemes of thought” (56). Rawls recognizes that for all types of judgment, our differing “total experience, our whole course of life up to now” as well as “a modern society [and] its numerous offices and positions, its various divisions of labor, its many social groups and their ethnic variety” (57) will lead invariably to differing outcomes, beliefs, decisions, etc. Rawls turns again to reasonableness as entailing a recognition of *burdens of judgment*: reasonable people will accept that disagreement in a constitutional regime is inevitable—a burden of judgment—because there cannot be coercive enforcement of a single contestable doctrine, or insistence on basing politics on a universal ‘truth’ (35-36) which is itself a *prima facie* unreasonable demand. While we may be committed to our own claims and doctrines, we accept reasonable disagreement and we see those we disagree with as our free, equal, reasonable interlocutors. Those burdens of judgment can derive from conflicts in the weight given to empirical evidence, the indeterminacy of our political and moral concepts, and different values and normative considerations in making hard decisions.

Reasonable pluralism is a foundational assumption of living in any free society, against liberal perfectionist conceptions of unitary conceptions of good (Ancell 2019; Raz 1998). Pluralism— epistemic, ethical, political, theological, etc.— must be met with a univocal law that makes determinations built on disputed or disputable claims. Without resorting to assertions of truth by fiat, which are anathema to political liberalism (cf. Estlund 1998), Rawls offers an account of how a stable social order among reasonable citizens is possible—and again can satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy—even if those citizens’ specific ethical or other personally held claims are not endorsed by the law or exercises of legitimate state power. Stability may be achieved in the face of inevitable pluralism through an *overlapping consensus* in which reasonable citizens accept a set of laws and the central values of a political conception of justice. Their acceptance may be based on their own individual moral reasons, consonant with their own reasonable, if still incommensurable, comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 60). That is, they may arrive at a sense of *political* justice—find reasons and moral motivation qua reasonable citizens, not private individuals—through on different grounds than their reasonable interlocutors. But no individual comprehensive doctrine will be enforced by the state as reason for acceptance. Rawls also makes clear that public justification requires a *political* conception of reasonableness. This *political* reasonableness is divorced from comprehensive doctrines but a liberal political conception of justice.

*Demarcating the scope of “unreasonableness” in public reason*

Given the centrality of reasonableness in the architectonics of political liberalism, more recently, efforts have been made to clarify the conception of *unreasonableness*, so as to shed light on the appropriate scope of toleration, and public justification, towards unreasonableness by the state and as co-citizens. Rawls himself leaves “deliberately loose” (1996, 59) his account of what makes a comprehensive doctrine reasonable and other precise metrics of reasonableness. Rawls’ oft-cited statement, that unreasonableness “gives us the practical task of containing them—like war and disease—so that they do not overturn political justice” (64 fn19) has itself opened up debate amongst scholars as to the scope of Rawls’s toleration vis-à-vis reasonableness. Generally, Rawls categorizes the unreasonable citizen as one who rejects the principles of liberal public political culture. They may reject the premise of reasonable pluralism and the necessity of keeping comprehensive doctrines outside the realm of public justification, or seek to repress others’ views. His treatment of the sources of unreasonableness also includes in their purview what might arguably be categorized as epistemic sources of unreasonableness — including biases; unwillingness to update opinions or beliefs when evidence is presented; dogmatism; opinions held on the bases of self-interest or group membership; illogical or fallacious reasoning (Rawls, 1996, 55-58).

The notion of unreasonableness has been discussed along at least three demarcating lines: unreasonable ethical versus epistemic beliefs; unreasonable political versus philosophical beliefs; and unreasonable people versus unreasonable beliefs or comprehensive doctrines. The distinction between ethical versus epistemic are epistemically-oriented conceptions of reason and unreasonableness tracks loosely with Rawls’ distinction between rational and reasonable—where the former speaks to means-end reasoning, while the latter appears more broadly as a disposition attuned to “a fair system of social cooperation” and a sense of justice. For epistemically-oriented conceptions, the demarcating line for those who can be excluded from the domain of public reason and political justification relies on adherence to norms of information acquisition and method—to update viewpoints as new information is acquired and processed. Rawls appears to include an epistemic conception of reasonableness (even beyond its application to rationality versus reasonableness), which has been most notably championed by Charles Larmore (1994, 1999, 2015).

Perhaps the most influential conception of ‘ethical’ unreasonableness comes from Martha Nussbaum, who argues in brief that it is “not coherence or intelligibility, which may unduly exclude some comprehensive doctrines.” The ethically reasonable citizen “respects other citizens as equals. A reasonable comprehensive doctrine is one endorsed by such a reasonable citizen, that is, including a serious commitment to the value of equal respect for persons as a political value” (Nussbaum, 2011, 33). Jonathan Quong’s definition of unreasonableness tracks generally with a view championed by Nussbaum in favor of an ethical conception of reasonableness in describing reasonable persons and comprehensive doctrines (Quong, 2004, 319-320). Quong defines an unreasonable person as one who “rejects at least one, but usually several of the following: (1) that political society should be a fair system of social cooperation for mutual benefits, (2) that citizens are free and equal and (3) the fact of reasonable pluralism” (ibid, 315). The incompatibility of political liberalism and unreasonableness, according to Quong, rests in the fact that the former is “a theory about the freedom and equality of citizens”—a premise “unreasonable people by definition reject” such that “their (unreasonable views are simply of no normative interest in the process of political justification.” (ibid, 315)

Within a given polity, epistemically unreasonable beliefs and comprehensive doctrines are widespread. The oft-cited example in the literature, of astrology, points to an epistemically unreasonable belief system that may be genuinely endorsed by some individuals and even serve as guide to their actions. In categorizing conspiracy theories and the corresponding appropriate response is to acknowledge, Cibik and Hardos argue with Nussbaum, that “epistemically problematic” and “far-fetched theories are omnipresent at all levels of contemporary society” (2020, 7). As they note, “irrationality, epistemic blindness, immunity to evidence and large-scale support for clearly far-fetched views are simply features of our society… a ‘fact of irrationality’, which needs to be taken into consideration by political philosophers. For the issue at hand, the ‘fact of irrationality’ means that we cannot use epistemic criteria to single out bad conspiracy theories and fight against them.” Though such beliefs are readily undermined by a turn to empirical evidence and scientific method and expertise, there is equally no reason to exclude such persons from the domain of public reason for earnestly adhering to such beliefs. However, if an individual espouses and acts on the belief that others are not equals, or adhere to doctrines that espouse or advance such beliefs, there is reason to exclude such individuals from public justification, and perhaps more, in terms of punishment, revocation of citizenship rights, or punishment from the state.

Another type of categorization hinges less on the unreasonable nature of the belief or doctrine that is espoused and acted upon, than the person themselves.[[2]](#footnote-2) One formulation of this distinction separates dispositional unreasonableness versus judgment unreasonableness. *Dispositional* unreasonableness characterizes *persons* who ‘do not have a sense of justice or other moral dispositions’, have ‘no respect for others’’, and are ‘hardly fit for social life’ (Freeman 2004, 2049 in Ancell, 2019, 416). On the other hand, judgment unreasonableness hinges on unreasonable beliefs, which are developed as a byproduct of flawed reasoning and “sources of unreason” like bias, self-interest, and dogmatism. Ancell explains that reasonable people can display judgment unreasonableness, and links this idea to Raz’ and Gaus’ claims that reasonable people can hold unreasonable beliefs. (Raz 1998; Gaus 1999 in Ancell, 2019). As he writes, “one can have the basic moral commitments and motivations of a reasonable person—respect for others, a concern for justice, and so on—but nonetheless hold unreasonable beliefs about moral and political issues because one’s reasoning is distorted by the sources of unreason.” With this distinction in mind, others have identified types of unreasonable persons specifically. One such categorization from Badano and Nuti distinguishes ‘self-aware’ and ‘unaware’ unreasonableness. The former may “self-confessedly believe that the liberal order should be overthrown,” whereas the latter category, and what they believe to be the majority of Right-Wing populist supporters do not see their views as a threat to liberal democracy or the values of freedom and equality (2018, 151). The demarcation among problematic types of unreasonableness rests on the level of conscious self-awareness attained by the unreasonable person in question.

*Dealing with Unreasonableness*

Scholars have grappled also with how to deal with unreasonableness and which category of unreasonableness properly grounds the suspension of citizenship rights and/or access to or membership in the domain of public justification– from a refined *modus vivendi* including non-reasonable persons and beliefs; narrow versus broad toleration towards unreasonable persons; non-state interventions which may itself violate principles of political pluralism; or Rawls’ belief in the possibility of eventual assimilation into reasonableness and a public political culture through exposure to liberal political institutions.

Quong, for example, argues that an individual may hold ethically unreasonable beliefs, and this alone cannot be grounds for denying citizenship rights, but the state can intervene in any attempt to exercise such rights to advance or share his ethically unreasonable beliefs. As he writes, “these (ethically) unreasonable citizens, while not losing the rights and benefits of full citizenship, cannot exercise these rights in pursuit of unreasonable objectives…if a doctrine is found (ethically) unreasonable and if the reasons to suppress it are ‘especially compelling’ (333), the state can act against it and the individuals concerned have no grounds for complaint. Quong proposes the limitation of rights of ethically unreasonable citizens in processes of political justification—while allowing them to retain their citizenship rights. In terms of containment, Quong argues that the state can have a legitimate interest to limit the proliferation of nonpublic beliefs which are antithetical to liberal democratic values, even if individuals may be entitled to hold such beliefs—as in the hypothetical case of restricting private religious education inculcating anti-egalitarian viewpoints. An attempt to use rights as absolute trumps misunderstands the understanding the limited domain of rights, within the purview of political justice, and their incompatibility with claims antithetical to the status of persons as free and equal (Quong, 2004, 330-335).

The solution offered by Cibik and Hardos in dealing with conspiracy theorists in particular, is to distinguish between ethical and epistemically problematic conspiracy theories—insofar as the former alone appears to pose threats to liberal democracy, and “the support and trust of its citizenry” and a belief among citizens in the value of liberal democracy institutions. (2018, 9) The Archimedean point is not necessarily those helming such institutions, as exposing wrongdoing and abuses of power may justifiably erode trust in them. They propose targeting ethically-unreasonable conspiracy theories in the same way that liberal democracies have targeted other ethically unreasonable beliefs, like Holocaust denial.

Pace the exclusion of irrational persons in the realm of political justification, a broad toleration has been championed by Quong and Kelly & McPherson. The latter narrow down the exclusion of unreasonable beliefs to a “narrow political standpoint” versus “broader philosophical criteria” (2001, 39). Kelly and McPherson claim that “[i]t is mistaken to assume that overall evaluations of whether a person is reasonable or unreasonable are necessary for judgments of political reasonableness.”[[3]](#footnote-3) “Philosophical reasonableness” requires looking at “what counts as adequate critical reflection,” which is relevant for adjudicating among philosophical claims. Such philosophically reasonable views are a byproduct of reasonable pluralism or disagreement and trigger the burdens of judgment. Kelly and McPherson argue that justice does not require looking to philosophical reasonableness. Instead, what is required is a minimal requirement of *political* reasonableness, which looks like the ethical standard of reasonableness proposed by Rawls, Nussbaum, and others, namely that recognition of equality, terms of social cooperation, and to keep sectarian beliefs out of public political discussion. This requires that all citizens—ie, holders of both politically reasonable and unreasonable philosophical beliefs—share access to institutions. As proposals or limitations, they note that “Restricting toleration, however, will sometimes be required when persons would make demands on public resources in order to promote unreasonable doctrines” (ibid, 45). In other words, the two-tiered system of toleration vis-à-vis philosophically unreasonable persons extends toleration and public justification to these philosophically unreasonable persons, but limits toleration when it comes to their demands for public resources.

**Beyond Binaries of Unreasonableness**

When we consider Rawls on his sources of our unreasonableness, we must recognize that our interpretation of facts and beliefs cannot be segregated from factors like fears, desires, strategic considerations, existing moral frameworks, or self-interest (see, e.g., Peterson 2016), which are in turn, imbricated in systems, groups, and identities. What we know, what we think about and how we interpret events, is shaped by the contexts and social networks we find ourselves in (e.g., Smith et al 2020; Behler, Suh, Brashears & Shi 2018; Rawlings & Childress 2021). Such factors need to be considered in understanding the potential *sources* of our unreasonable moral motivation and potentially unreasonable public and private justifications. We are not fully rational entities, nor can we fully isolate one reasonable versus unreasonable source—ethical versus epistemological—of moral motivation to commit to liberal principles of justice and fair terms of cooperation in the domain of public reason. As such, various attempts at using binaries for delineating reasonable from unreasonable seem to offer a fleeting and radically unstable basis for containment, which at best offers a temporary modus vivendi amongst unreasonable viewpoints and persons and public reason.

*Epistemic v. Ethical Unreasonableness*

Though I agree with Cibik and Hardos —as well as Nussbaum and Quong— in the recognition of the pervasiveness of epistemic irrationality, I disagree to the extent that their accounts rely on a neat delineation between epistemic and ethical thinking. As I argue below, complicating such binaries ought to complicate prescriptions for containment on their bases. If a person holds what are deemed to be ethically reasonable viewpoints, while still adhering to epistemically unreasonable viewpoints, this seems to suggest that the demarcating line in poor methods of reasoning can remain steady, even if there is a pervasive unwillingness to look at evidence, or to adhere to beliefs dogmatically without critical thought, to prefer empirically dubious conclusions over scientifically-grounded explanations, among other pitfalls of rational thinking as Rawls himself identified. However, developing, articulating and acting on ethical versus epistemic claims does not rely on a distinctive *method* of cognition or reasoning (Baytelman & Iordanou 2020; Kuhn, Cheney & Weinstock 2000). The diversity, depth, and complexity of social and ethical claims are directly linked to epistemic capacity. But more globally, the adherence to substantively acceptable ethical positions—even if demarcated according to ethically acceptable substance—may be arrived at through unstable or even suspect methods of reasoning.

This should give us pause. Though suspect methods of reasoning in themselves do not necessitate ex ante exclusion, containment, or punishment from the state or the realm of public justification, the distinction itself requires more justification as line of demarcation for subsequent responses. For example, it may be difficult to distinguish ethically versus epistemically unreasonable beliefs that refuse fair terms of cooperation and the status of others as free and equal versus claims of adherents of the “Stop the Steal!” movement, who believe themselves to be adhering to the fair terms of cooperation, which they believe were violated by their opponents through unfair electoral manipulation. They may feel, on the basis of a perceived “ethical” reasonableness, that they are therefore entitled to attempt to rectify this violation of fairness by engaging in civil disobedience, even if their conclusions are based on “epistemic” unreasonableness and appear “ethically” unreasonable. Such actions may be rightly seen as a one of the most serious threats to liberal democracy, and public reason and justification, and adherents may well need to be denied full certain citizenship rights on the basis of their actions and beliefs. But this seems tenuously a question of ethical unreasonableness versus epistemic unreasonableness. This may be a case of ‘self-aware’ and ‘unaware’ unreasonableness per Badano and Nuti, but this distinction itself is ultimately, as I will argue, untenable insofar as biases and unreasonableness can be largely and subtly unconscious, automatic–and any ethical and political prescriptions based on such a distinction themselves seem questionable.

More generally, the era of extreme polarization suggests that motivated reasoning, especially when colored by partisan attachments and pre-existing group identity markers, can color the perception of opponents, as far from co-equal citizens or proposals even in the perception that ‘fairness’ and other core ethical values has been achieved (Umphress et al 2003; Roberson 2006). Partisanship can also color epistemic reasonableness. In the context of sharing fake news researchers have found that partisan polarization and identification serves as the chief psychological motivator (Osmundsen et al 2021). In other words, the type of reasoning associated with Rawlsian rationality can be deployed in shaping ‘ethical’ biases, *and* *vice versa* (Bisgaard 2019; Wojcieszak 2011). Liberal democratic institutions can still be maintained, as well as the basic bounds of public reason, even when citizens continue to allow to percolate an overwhelming sense that their partisan opponents pose an existential threat to the republic, that they are not fit or equipped to be co-equal citizens, that they violate their commitment to fair terms of cooperation, that they do not merit equal respect and dignity, that what they believe and the actions they are taken threaten core liberal democratic values and rights. Though such citizens may hold in an abstract level a belief in the free and equal status of their co-citizens, their application of this ideal may result in the total perversion of these ideals, especially as a matter of motivated reasoning and in-group bias (Lord et al, 1979, Taber and Lodge, 2006). Despite the presupposition of an idealized entity that reasons behind the veil in the constructivist accounts of public justification, the totality of such partisan ‘mega-identities’ today throws into doubt whether *any* entity can engage in such idealized universalizable reasoning to achieve consensus or convergence via public reason and be sufficiently sealed off from these social and ethical factors to engage which most profoundly shape the views and discursive practices of everyday citizens (Mason, 2018).

*Philosophical versus political unreasonableness*

I follow Quong in rejecting the distinction between philosophical and political reasonableness in broad terms. Quong objects to the distinction offered that allows public justification be extended to *philosophically* unreasonable persons. The subject matter of public justification is *only* the basic structure of society and comprehensive doctrines need only be “*compatible* with the ideal of public reason”(320)—not epistemologically reasonable. Quong emphasizes the implausible nature of the story offered by Kelly and McPherson on the question of moral motivation: why would someone who rejects the burdens of judgment, i.e., who is philosophically unreasonable, have any reason to accept the ideals of public reason? What may result is, as Quong rightly notes, a *modus vivendi* type of toleration, though my argument differs from his on the troubling implications of Kelly and McPherson’s account.

In understanding the realm of public reason, it is difficult to defend, even within the bounds of ideal theory, the distinction between public reasons and debates on issues pertaining to the basic structure of society and private conversations. Our ability to participate in public reason, and to talk about issues of public importance is deeply conditioned by engagement and discussions with others privately and on issues outside of the pre-demarcated sphere of the public (e.g., Small 2017, 2019; Bayer, Lewis & Stahl 2020). In other words, the experiential component of ‘ethical life’ which Habermas (1996) pointedly rejects in his conception of deliberative democracy can never be fully eliminated in a sphere of ideal rational discourse.

Especially given the fluid nature of public discussion in domains of political relevance, how can such discourse be cabined off or its reasonableness properly adjudicated? When privately held beliefs—shared in a private men’s-only club, as in Kelly and McPherson’s example, or in the locker room, board room, or social media platform—are shared in private, it nonetheless will color the reception (and the implications) of their publicly announced beliefs. While the undermining of the norm of sincerity may be one offense in this type of bifurcation, more globally the bounds of public justification and private philosophical beliefs—and the very notion of a hermitically sealed domain of public political justification and public reason—is no longer tenable in the social media era, if it ever was. We needn’t move too far into the imaginary of liberal democracies being threatened by philosophically unreasonable persons to understand that even within the domain of ideal theory, the blurring lines of private/public reason require different categories and different prescriptive measures.

The distinction of toleration offered by Kelly and MacPherson stretches plausibility and undermines the method of bifurcating and categorizing unreasonableness, amongst peoples and categories of beliefs. Kelly and McPherson’s examples are intended to challenge this type of claim and to show how a philosophically unreasonable person may participate in public justification. But as their examples show, such persons are able to do so only insofar as their beliefs ultimately comport with what is ex ante considered politically reasonable. As they write, “pacifists need not disguise the religious content of their conscientious objection as they appeal to this shared public principle.” But this objection seems less convincing if the example used were not one of “speculative religious conviction” but refusing wars against perceived Aryan nations or ethically (philosophically) unreasonable claims or comprehensive doctrines. There is no reason to take seriously these arguments as speaking to the same public political principles, even if they constitute a discernibly reasonable, or superficially overlapping end-position.

The justification for separating philosophical from political reasonableness from Kelly and McPherson hinges in part on the possibility, cited from Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that it is “not in fact uncommon for people to ‘cabin off’ dubious philosophical views.” As they argue, “Many people, for example, affirm among themselves the superiority of their own religious or ethnic group, yet might not do this in the public realm or otherwise in their political behavior.” But there is reason to question this claim—as a function of basic cognition and whether private behavior and philosophically unreasonable beliefs like misogyny and racism can be cabined off from one’s beliefs concerning the basic structure of society. As Quong notes, there is reason to question the possibility of a moral motive amongst individuals who reject the fair terms of cooperation of fellow citizens as free and equal. More generally, the brain does not isolate *methods* of reasoning and beliefs in neatly demarcating boundaries, in the ways in which Kelly and McPherson suggest. Motivated cognition is only one type of non-ideal reasoning that undermines the possibility of a firmly held demarcation in cognition among reasons we turn to in advancing our claims.

Even if one were able to advance positions using disingenuous arguments, or hiding gross ethical biases, again the question is whether this perverts the very purpose of public justification in the first place. In other words, there needs to be greater justification for discarding the sincerity requirement of public justification in advancing a claim for broad toleration. There would be good reason to see such cabining off as blatant hypocrisy, self-serving, and in itself perverting the fair terms of cooperation even beyond an absence of moral motivation—of concealing the ethically unreasonable bases of one’s viewpoint which may be at best substantively incoherent and illogical, or at worst, defying and covertly undermining the terms of ethical reasonableness and ideals of public reason itself. In other words, *justification* requires just that—justification of something other than a viewpoint that is ex ante already deemed reasonable and justifiable by other “right reasons”, especially given the tenuous interpretation of “free and equal citizens” in a polarized landscape. The method of policing such a hierarchy, amongst those who can participate actively in public justification, or those who can simply assent to a position for whatever (unreasonable) reason seems to negate the need to justify. This is again a thin modus vivendi that may ultimately encourage a type of disingenuous method of public justification that undermines core tenets of public reason.

Even if working within the bounds of an ideal theory, the claim that inclusion in public political discussion will be sufficient to appease philosophically unreasonable persons seems to presuppose a preternaturally passive constituency of philosophically unreasonable people and a hierarchy which will place philosophically reasonable persons at the helm of the appropriate bounds of toleration. Otherwise put, why would unreasonable people—ethically, epistemically, dispositionally, or otherwise—be content to cabin off their unreasonable views for a pre-circumscribed domain of public reason and shared public principles?

*Reasonable beliefs versus reasonable persons*

Moreover, and more troublingly for the possibility of containment, reasoning is not a phenomenon isolated to discrete individuals, nor are beliefs binary in terms of being held/not held. Take racism as a key and most glaring example. Racism itself is not simply a core set of beliefs held by individuals who are either racist or not racist, or holders of ethically versus epistemically unreasonable beliefs. Even those who do not vocally espouse racist ideologies or conspiracies like contemporary replacement theory during a Congressional hearing, or a citizen speaking in support of a candidate, can demonstrate automatic cognitive racially-motivated biases and be readily primed to do so—and in ways that may threaten our liberal democratic commitments. For example, a longstanding literature on ‘racial priming’ shows subtle and implicit racial messaging can stoke racial resentment in opinion formation (e.g., Mendelberg, 2001, 2007; Huber and Lapinski 2006; White 2007). As one well-known study documented, a predominantly “liberal” white community came to adopt exclusionary attitudes towards Spanish-speaking individuals through only a few days of intergroup contact (Enos, 2014). Such studies suggest that the stability of liberal political conception of justice—even if outwardly espoused—are extraordinarily unstable, and individuals can be primed instantaneously or in a manner of days, to espouse exclusionary and racist beliefs and opinions.

This fact must be taken together with the understanding that racism is not simply a belief system but instead a *structural* phenomenon, imbricated at all levels of culture and institutions, including liberal democratic institutions, which in turn affects social cognition and cognitive biases (Salter et al 2018). Liberal egalitarian institutions in turn are ostensibly not *defined* by racist or other anti-egalitarian or illiberal values, but they are certainly colored by them in a society in which unreasonableness and racism is not fully eradicated, except as an ideal presupposition, which defies the reality of existing liberal democracies today.

**Containing Unreasonableness**

Given the centrality of reason and reasonableness to the ideal framework of political liberalism, it may not be surprising to note that unreasonableness often takes on the guise of a pathogen or disease. Rawls describes the unreasonable as disease to be eradicated, while scholars like Quong detail a method of containment for unreasonable beliefs and persons qua citizens, albeit unreasonable ones. But this metaphor tellingly mistakes unreasonableness as a disease, when it might be better described as a permanent epigenic marker, or at minimum, defined by a permanently symbiotic relationship with reasonableness itself.

Directed state action, whether censorship, criminal punishments, or limiting access to public resources may be necessary to curtail pernicious doctrines and beliefs and conspiracy theories from circulating and gaining traction, as argued by these scholars. My point of objection is not in denying the need of such responses, or an objection to the attempt to pinpoint with greater precision, the target of such prescriptive measures. But I argue that the underlying method of bifurcating beliefs and persons, and the presuppositions of public justification and deliberations, are empirically suspect, especially as primary prescriptive measures.

Of course, Rawls’ was an ideal theory and could arguably survive these critiques. I follow Ansell (2019) in finding as the threshold of viability for any prescriptive measure, a baseline in empirical plausibility, even if understood as an ideal theory. The presuppositions of ideal theory posit, of course, an Archimedean point from which such biases can be held in abeyance, while principles of justice are formulated. But the baseline of ideal theory and idealized reasonable citizens defies the situated nature of reasoning, which never takes place in an isolated, ideal vacuum. In other words, it idealizes a facet of reasoning from a neutral, universal standpoint, which requires the suspension of cognitive heuristics and motivated reasoning, which simply cannot be eradicated, even if the stated moral motivation for proposing or assenting to a reason is colored by a belief in our interlocuters as free and equal. The prescriptions for containment then seem to be colored by the same idealized conditions, despite the reality of pervasive unreasonable conditions that it underscores.

Rawls himself acknowledged the persistence of unreasonableness in society, but did not think it would impugn his ideal theory, and that the baseline of his theory was pervasive *reasonable* disagreement. Rawls’ own insistence on the fact of pluralism derives, as noted above, from the recognition that individuals each arrive at their situated positions in “total experience, our whole course of life up to now” and “numerous offices and positions, its various divisions of labor, its many social groups and their ethnic variety” (1996, 57). These same sources of *reasonable* pluralism, invariably lead also to various forms of *unreasonableness*.

To understand this phenomenon then, we must see also that even close to ideal legitimate liberal democratic institutions, which may in their ideal form be acceptable to reasonable persons on the basis of the ‘right reasons’, are nonetheless realized in fundamentally—not just tangentially—unreasonable ways. On the most abstract level, just as a concept of law is itself oftentimes colored by the biases of those who posit it as a neutral, analytical concept (Chun 2021), even an ideal theoretical conception of liberal institutions is colored by the specifics of those who set out to justify its universality and reasonableness.

As for the reasonableness of *specific* liberal democratic institutions—like a system of representative government with robust protection of individual liberal rights—we see the same difficulties emerge in understanding the idealized component of their articulation and realization, especially as a metric for determining reasonable adherents versus unreasonable rejectors. The framework of ideal theory, of course, presupposes that the basic structure of society and principles of political justice derived from the original position will be advanced by reasonable representatives under a veil of ignorance. But there is reason to question whether it is ever possible for reasoning to be divorced from a situated position, even if conscious efforts are made to hold one’s identity and self-interest in abeyance. In the seemingly simplistic American example, the biases of Founders or the best approximation of idealized reasonable representatives in a non-idealized framework, we see the idealized presupposition itself runs into trouble on two interrelated grounds: 1. Subconscious illiberalism and unreasonableness 2. The idealization of reasonable representatives. Even as a best approximation available as a thought experiment into the core of legitimacy and a regulative ideal for basic institutions, we are still faced with questions of the extent to which their biases and the institutions that are formulated tend to represent their interest. We can question whether in the context of American liberal democratic Constitution, the economic interests or slaveholding interest of the Constitution colored these otherwise legitimate liberal democratic institutions (Beard 1913) and the extent to which a *prima facie* reasonable, liberal democratic framework is nonetheless permeated throughout with ethically unreasonable claims, belief systems, interests, etc. If adherence to such institutions and the political conceptions of justice from which they ostensibly derive is the cornerstone of reasonableness, we should question whether containment is the appropriate response to questioning their legitimacy.

The issues with a non-ideal formulation of liberal democratic institutions and conceptions of political justice are most clearly implicated when we acknowledge how unreasonableness is embedded throughout in its *realization*. Ideal institutions of liberal democratic government—like a set of liberal rights—are not sui generis. It is an uncontroversial position to view the interpretation of the constitution as subject to unreasonable or irrational positions or commitments that may be shot through with ethically unreasonable biases. Rawls’ political liberalism doesn’t deny this fact. But this seems to sit in tension with Rawls’ aim for containment through exposure to liberal democratic institution, which would have a salutary effect on unreasonable persons. This view holds some promise if we suppose, like Rawls, that such institutions are generally just. But it is the components of unreasonableness embedded within liberal democratic institutions which makes simplistic accounts of salutary influence and subsequent containment untenable. Liberal institutions are, of course, realized in the mundane everyday sense of the term by actual people, who are, inescapably imperfect reasoners. Basic institutions themselves cannot sit outside of this potentially vicious circle of unreasonableness. In other words, justification is necessary in the means by which the basic structure is realized, and this requires persistent appeals to flawed reasoning within societies that fundamentally and routinely distort the basic values of political justice and commitments to free, equal citizens.

The reality appears to be the inverse, or a vicious—or potentially virtuous—circle: that unreasonable citizens will shape liberal institutions in unreasonable ways, whether they interpret rights in illiberal ways, bias the implementation of the rule of law, or interpret the demands of free, equal citizenship in ways skewed by in-group bias and perception. Such liberal institutions can continue to be imbricated at all levels by biases, racism, and unreasonableness. There may be no perfect entry point in for containment; that is, just liberal democratic institutions may not be the ideal salve for influencing unreasonable persons, non-idealized reasoners may not be able to formulate and realize institutions in reasonable ways.

Of course, this does not mean that no liberal democracies are generally legitimate, or that we lack a normative vocabulary for justification of basic liberal tenets. Instead, the metric of legitimacy from *idealized* reason and justification may present a simplistic basis for exclusion and containment. If adherence to ideal conceptions of political justice and ethical reasonableness provide the benchmark for inclusion versus containment, either everyone should be contained as unreasonable and worthy of exclusion, or everyone is posited as generally reasonable, despite their inescapable susceptibility (and likely persistent succumbing) to unreasonableness. The baseline for inclusion into the constituency of public reason must recognize that all actual, non-idealized reasoners—presumably those with whom we are concerned today in containing—cannot be nearly segregated from those who profess liberal democratic values, namely acceptance of the burdens of judgment and belief in others as free and equal. Biases can be unconsciously triggered within any member of a society with structural biases and egalitarian practices. Even containment on the basis of those who seek out public resources on the basis of unreasonable ideas may prove less cleanly determined in practice. Those who seek out resources for their segregated neighborhood may not be vocally clamoring for racist housing practices, but may seek out benefits or exclusions that are motivated by or contribute to racialized realities. The ideal metric then becomes a less than perfect tool for the practical demarcation of containment.

**Remedies versus containment of unreasonableness**

In general, the pervasiveness of structural unreasonableness does not in turn require the rejection of principles of legitimacy, or of political justice. But it throws into question the framework for containment, and the viability of certain assumptions of ideal theory, especially the viability of an overlapping consensus from reasonable comprehensive doctrines—or the stability of political liberalism. The basic, normative implication of the nature of unreasonableness is the need to turn to the *situations* we inhabit—not *only* as individual (motivated, moral) reasoners who must engage in corrective strategies. The baseline of any deliberative process of public reason—that can be empirically grounded and understood—rooted in fair terms of cooperation and equal respect, cannot be posited as a precondition or mandated by the state or as a matter of toleration or the bounds of containment and inclusion in the constituency of public justification. What this appears to require is much more comprehensive than the isolation of individuals or beliefs as articulated in the public domain, or amongst those that make a demand on public resources.

Extent calls for state-sanctioned interventions may address the most egregious cases of violation of others’ rights. For example, hate crimes can be prosecuted outside the bounds of reasonableness and public justification of constitutional essentials, as a matter of harm. Though Quong rejects this formulation, the restriction of parents’ right to educate their children in anti-egalitarian viewpoints, may be justified on grounds outside of reasonableness, but in the right to education, to equal opportunity, to capabilities, to tools necessary for contributing to a liberal democratic society. To place it on the restriction of parental rights in raising their children as they see fit, we would have greater difficulty in seeing the state justified in removing children from households of neo-Nazi sympathizers, or those who espouse racially-inflected NIMBY beliefs, or broad swaths of population who hold racist, anti-immigrant, anti-transgender, agist, misogynist views, or can be readily primed to act on them.

Instead, my suggestions tread firstly on the rejection of existent binaries in understanding reasonableness and an emphasis on addressing root causes of unreasonableness in both the private and public spheres. Though I agree that containment of individuals for epistemically unsound beliefs like adherence to astrology is unnecessary, my argument instead suggests that a solution for unreasonableness generally requires looking at root causes, which touch upon ‘epistemic’ *methods of reasoning* no less than ethical reasoning or ethically unsound beliefs tout court. While we may continue to improve in our methods of reasoning—namely from the adherence of the scientific method of investigation into recognizing what is unreasonable—the stability of such ideals is ever tenuous, given the limitations of our reasoning within ethically unreasonable societies. We need to investigate and ‘contain’ unreasonableness as it creeps into and settles into the interpretation of our liberal democratic institutions, our basic structure, and the ideals on which we base the legitimacy of our political conceptions of justice. This requires a much more sweeping, ethical ideal of reasonableness: the ideal of a virtuous cycle of contestation and containment, in the private and public domain, in institutions, ideals, conceptions, and their realization.

Of course, this still presupposes an ideal of liberal, democratic values of free, equal reasonableness that is at the root of public justification. But the salutary effect of public justification may not be in asserting a reasonable set of values through which others may converge or arrive at consensus, despite their private, reasonable comprehensive doctrines (Fishkin et al 2000, 2011). The effect may be closer to the effects of public and *private* *deliberation* which create citizen competence and recognition of the limitations of their reasons—to make public and to interrogate and potentially modify beliefs—not simply parrot beliefs for non-reasonable reasons, or to arrive even at a stable overlapping consensus.[[4]](#footnote-4) This requires also moving beyond a delineation between philosophical and political (un)reasonableness, and the recognition of the role of private relationships and interactions in shaping beliefs and even methods of reasoning.

The goal seems to require not simply stability of beliefs but justification and potential modification of comprehensive doctrines, public reasons, which may be imperfect, or colored with unconscious or subconscious biases. But as a prima facie matter, as Rawls acknowledged, the cabining of philosophical beliefs, or non-reasonable beliefs, and the mere convergence of beliefs towards an ideal, can only erode the very ideal itself in its realization. Methods of containment and remedies among private citizens have been tested experimentally and over time—from holding in-person non-judgmental conversations with out-group members (Kalla and Broockman 2020), explicit resetting of stereotypes (Wittenbrink et al 2001), among other techniques. It may require re-setting the *culture* underwriting institutions, labor unions, private businesses, among others, as in persistent calls among critics of police departments as a necessary reform against racist practices—not solely in identifying individual racist actors (see e.g., Richardson 2014-2015, Radebe 2020).

Such methods at remedying unreasonableness seems to require firstly the acknowledgement that no one is immune from unreasonableness, ethical or epistemic. As empirical evidence increasingly shows, what may work best in offsetting biases in everyday interactions is actual interpersonal, diverse (non-hypothetical) interactions. The purpose instead is one of the ways in which deliberation requires coming into actual contact with conflicting viewpoints and being confronted with outside views, in private locker rooms and board rooms and living rooms, no less than in the public square. Though this may lead to entrenchment of one’s views, or a doubling-down, there are practices of citizenship that might become more meaningful in tandem with bottom-up and top-down attempts to create salutary conditions for overcoming biases and modes of unreasonable thinking—especially as they are imbricated in such institutions and practices. It may be through the practice of reason-giving, in which individuals are actually primed in the exercise of justification, not just as an ideal justificatory practice, but in making interpersonal contact, in which reasonableness and containment may occur.

But perhaps most importantly, we need to recognize the scope of the problem cannot be isolated to individuals or beliefs. Again, the issue of racism ought to have taught us the persistence of unreasonableness in every facet of society, and not simply as a belief system that can be contained with the articulation of hate speech or crimes or targeting hate groups. Instead, it is embedded in our liberal democratic institutions, practices, relationships, subconscious beliefs, culture, language, and longstanding history of racism. To suggest containment can be mitigated like disease or pathogen gives a radically perverted sense of the depth of the problem of unreasonableness as it permeates all aspects of our radically non-ideal society today.

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1. Amongst accounts of public justification, a well-known distinction distinguishes between “convergence” and “consensus” models (D’Agostino, 1996). The former find that idealized citizens should accept reasonable laws, but actual citizens can accept them for whatever nonpublic reasons (see, e.g., Gaus and Vallier 2009). The latter model, in which Rawls’ account is grouped, requires more than a perceived modus vivendi, and requires citizens to deliberate in public using public reasons. I am concerned primarily with the consensus account of Rawls, though the same critique I offer here applies to convergence models. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quong (315, fn 3) makes explicit in a footnote that he isn’t concerned with unreasonable persons per se but unreasonable views or claims, and in so doing, rejects this clean distinction. As he writes, “it is clearly possible for citizens who are generally reasonable to make unreasonable demands, and vice versa. Strictly speaking, therefore, it is not the unreasonable citizen who is ignored by public reason, but rather unreasonable views or claims.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quong challenges this distinction between philosophical and political unreasonableness, as misunderstanding the nature of moral motivation (320). It is the requirement of accepting the burdens of judgment, as he notes, that can create more than a mere modus vivendi, which itself *motivates* the acceptance of public reason and public justification. It is also this rejection of the premises of public justification, which can justify the exclusion of individuals from the constituency of justification, as their rejection of its premises means they will never accept the reasons advanced. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. On the distinction—or lack thereof—between public justification and public deliberation, see Kevin Vallier, “public justification versus public deliberation: the case for diverse” Canadian Journal of Philosophy Vol. 45 (2) (2015), p 139-158 and Henrik Kugelberg, ‘Public justification versus public deliberation: the case for reconciliation” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 2021 51:6 468-473. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)