

Research Statement – Julia Netter

I am a political philosopher interested in the ethics of public discourse. I have so far worked on political liberalism, a liberal theory which seeks to be compatible with citizens' different comprehensive moral doctrines, including religious ones. My DPhil research considered the limits of political liberalism when citizens face each other in deep moral disagreement. Going forward, I intend to explore how liberal societies can develop shared moral outlooks on fundamentally contested issues.

Moral pluralism is a fact of modern liberal societies. Rawlsian political liberalism draws on the idea of *public reason* to develop normative political principles for these diverse societies. In my dissertation, I showed that public reason cannot cope with common aspects of such pluralism: deep moral disagreement, and fundamentally unreasonable citizens who reject the moral equality of other persons. In the context of public reason, *reasonableness* is defined as a commitment to the freedom and moral equality of all people, as well as a degree of epistemic humility. This humility leads people to accept that others may not come to share the same moral beliefs and arrive at the same moral conclusions despite their good-faith efforts.

Public reason liberalism ensures respect for individuals' moral autonomy by requiring that coercive political decisions are justified to all, and that all share the reasons offered as justifications. However, political philosophers commonly interpret the commitment of public reason liberalism to universal justification as owing justifications only to those persons who are reasonable.

My work identifies a key tension triggered by that restriction, which renders the theory internally inconsistent. I argue that there is a conflict between the fundamental liberal commitment to the moral autonomy of all citizens and the theory's refusal to actually address justifications to all. I conclude that the least we owe to unreasonable people are justifications for their exclusion from further justification. Most importantly, I demonstrate that attempts to escape that conclusion by interpreting public reason liberalism as merely aimed at demonstrating the viability of liberal principles under ideal circumstances are ultimately unsuccessful.

I resolve this tension by developing two approaches to identifying relevant beliefs that can be attributed to unreasonable citizens in order to show that even they must recognise the core liberal standard of reasonableness as valid. I argue that fundamentally unreasonable citizens' attitudes and conduct towards the people they reject as moral equals reveal implicit acknowledgement of the latter's moral standing. Moreover, the character of individuals' foundational moral beliefs that are not shared by all citizens yields reasons against using these or derived beliefs as justifications for public policy. Both arguments rest on rationalist foundations: the requirement that individuals first rationally reflect on their conduct and the beliefs that are implicit in their actions, and then furthermore relate them to other beliefs they hold. I show that to rely on this kind of rational introspection and reflection is not only compatible with liberal respect for persons' moral autonomy, but even promotes it. Consequently, I show that public reason liberalism has a broader constituency than some political philosophers suggest: we need not artificially restrict the constituency of justification to a set of ideally reasonable citizens.

I am currently working on a series of four articles that further develop my dissertation work. A first article, "Political liberalism, deep moral disagreement, and higher-order commitments to cooperation", is currently under review. It counters a justification commonly invoked by political liberals to exclude private moral beliefs (i.e., beliefs not universally shared) from public reason: the assumption of a higher-order commitment to cooperation. In doing so, the article shows that political liberalism is less free-standing and more substantively tied to individuals' systems of private moral beliefs than typically acknowledged.

In a second paper, "What's wrong with nonpublic reasons? The private lives of foundational beliefs", I challenge another key assumption of political liberalism—namely that invoking private moral beliefs as justifications in public reason indicates an attitude of disrespect for others. Examining the foundational beliefs

underlying citizens' private moral conceptions, I argue that justificatory restraint is nevertheless warranted because the nature of these beliefs makes it impossible for citizens to render them accessible to others within public reason.

Two further papers are at earlier stages of development. One is based on chapter 2, where I argue that an influential interpretation of political liberalism by Quong relies on an idealized conception of the person that is illiberal and ignorant of the complexity of citizens' moral beliefs. The paper, "Tensions within the internal conception of political liberalism", makes the case that this conception is therefore untenable as an argument for excluding fundamentally unreasonable citizens from public reason. The other paper, "Justifying reasonableness to unreasonable citizens", draws on material from chapter 4 to develop a more compelling argument for their exclusion. Specifically, I show that fundamentally unreasonable citizens' conduct towards those who they refuse to recognize as moral equals implicitly acknowledges their interlocutors' moral equality.

Apart from finishing these papers based on my dissertation, my near-term research agenda concerns a challenge that comes into focus when we apply public reason in practice: disagreement among citizens on how to interpret key shared values. I plan to investigate how public reason can delineate reasonableness more concretely, and how we should treat disagreements about interpretations of shared values more broadly.

In my dissertation, I worked with a somewhat abstract definition of a fundamentally unreasonable person: denying the moral equality of others. This abstraction masks substantial potential for disagreement on interpretations. What some citizens interpret as an attack on their equal status in society, others regard as a much less fundamental disagreement unrelated to their interlocutors' moral equality. This lack of shared understanding has implications for applying public reason to challenges evident in real liberal societies. For example, should institutions—like the media or universities—avoid providing a platform to those whose reasonableness is in question? Should those who align themselves with the supposedly unreasonable face repercussions by association? As it stands, public reason lacks the devices to answer these questions.

Public reason draws on shared moral commitments and, importantly, shared interpretations of these commitments, but does not itself generate them. Instead, public reason theorists generally assume that such commitments develop outside of public reason as part of a "background culture" (Rawls), in which citizens exchange, deliberate, and develop shared understandings from their individual moral convictions. If shared understandings emerge from the background culture, we must explore what methods and devices citizens can (and should) use to develop them. In this vein, I have started work on a paper that explores how the background culture should adjudicate disputes that involve accusations of fundamentally unreasonable views. I intend to explore who might be arbiters of reasonableness—e.g., those who see their moral status under threat, or courts, or the media? I also plan to examine how those citizens who strive to respect all their co-citizens ought to engage with these ongoing disputes. I expect that this will require expanding on the abstract notion of unreasonableness widely used today.

In the long run, I intend to develop a research program that examines the ethics of public discourse more widely. This will also allow me to draw on my recent side-interest in the ethics of algorithms and artificial "intelligence" (AI). Given that algorithmic models, AI, and technology increasingly shape the flow of information in the public discourse, we as political philosophers must pay attention to the moral judgments they impose, and how these judgments are generated. How can we cope with imperfect AIs that may not promote goals that liberals envision for public discourse—such as open-mindedness, fairness, or overcoming biases—if all (including the engineers who design them) have an incomplete understanding of how the AIs come to their decisions?

I firmly believe that transforming citizens' moral convictions in the public discourse goes beyond the substance of the arguments related to a policy. In practice, cultural and social context, as well as technology matter too, and these matters should be in the purview of political philosophy.