Nonpublic reasons and the private lives of foundational beliefs

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1 Introduction

Public reason theory in the Rawlsian consensus tradition limits the justifications for policies on which citizens are permitted to draw in fora of political decision making to *public* reasons. Public reasons draw on those shared political values and principles which form part of a society's conception of political justice.[1] Nonpublic reasons, which are rooted in citizens' comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrines, rendering them inherently controversial, are considered unsuitable as justificatory bases for decisions on basic political matters.[2] According to the standard Rawlsian narrative, reasonable individuals will refrain from presenting their co-citizens with reasons that the latter do not share because respect for their status as free and equal, morally autonomous citizens requires that the reasons for coercion are equally acceptable to all citizens. And because reasonable citizens, by definition, also accept the consequences of the burdens of judgment, they know that they cannot expect others to endorse their nonpublic reasons. This narrative implies that not only is there no point in offering reasons we do not expect others to share, but that to do so knowingly and in full awareness of the burdens of judgment, is tantamount to expressing a lack of respect for their

[1] John Rawls. *Political Liberalism*. 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 217, 223-224.

[2] Ibid., pp. 224-225.

status as free and equal citizens. What is wrong with nonpublic reasons in that context is that individuals seem to not take seriously the moral autonomy of their interlocutors. From this vantage, introducing nonpublic reasons is seen as primarily a *moral* failing.

This is the notion I will challenge in this article. I will suggest that, in introducing nonpublic reasons, individuals can be fully, and sincerely committed to respecting others' equal moral autonomy. This is because we can interpret the presentation of nonpublic reasons as an appeal to the moral autonomy of others, instead of disregard for it. I will argue, that individuals' failing in introducing nonpublic reasons is better understood to be of a practical rather than of a moral nature: these individuals merely fail to comprehensively appreciate the situational constraints of the sphere of public reason which make it an inappropriate forum for engaging others with reasons that they do not share.

What is the upshot of this? At the most basic level, the argument I offer here sheds new light on why nonpublic reasons are unsuitable for the sphere of public reason. It provides us with a better understanding of the manner in which citizens fail in their duty of civility when they introduce nonpublic reasons. Beyond that, my analysis of the role of nonpublic reasons in public reason develops a nuanced conception of liberal respect – to which I will refer to as a *first-personal* conception – which emphasizes the significance of inter-personal attitudes, an understanding of individual moral autonomy as an active faculty, and attention to contextual factors. Ultimately, this conception can help us to think further about the circumstances conducive to shaping a productive public discourse within and beyond the sphere of public reason and the (discursive) virtues we should foster in a liberal society.

In section 2, I briefly discuss the discursive norms within public reason which emerge from the standard interpretation of liberal respect for individual moral autonomy, before proceeding to sketch an alternative, "first-personal" conception of liberal respect, which zooms in on individuals' genuine beliefs about their reasons in section 3. In section 4, I argue that although many citizens may genuinely be able to argue that their

nonpublic reasons are acceptable to others, the use of nonpublic reasons in the domain of public reason is ultimately limited by citizens' capacity to successfully substantiate that genuine claim within the specific practical constraints of that domain.

2 Public reason and liberal respect

Respect for individuals' moral autonomy is a fundamental tenet of liberal political theory. What liberalism recognizes as crucially valuable to an individual is her capacity as a subject to determine her actions according to her ends,[3] to be the genuine author of her actions. The public reason tradition pays heed to this commitment when it requires that coercion is only legitimate for reasons that are public in that they are acceptable (or non-rejectable) to each and every person: a person's actions must not be driven by reasons that elude her, however compelling they may appear to others.

The Rawlsian consensus conception of public reason[4] prohibits the use of nonpublic reasons as justifications for policy proposals on fundamental political issues in fora of public debate (the sphere governed by public reason).[5] Political power, for Rawls, is only legitimate if it is exercised on the basis of a set of principles and ideals which are acceptable to all (reasonable and rational) citizens.[6] For that reason, when they debate questions of fundamental political importance, citizens in liberal societies are subject to, what Rawls calls, the (moral) duty of civility: they must "be able to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate

[3] Jeremy Waldron. *Liberal rights: collected papers, 1981–1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 41.

[4] See also Jonathan Quong. *Liberalism without Perfection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 261-273) and Stephen Macedo. "Why Public Reason? Citizens' Reasons and the Constitution of the Public Sphere". Available at SSRN: `http://ssrn.com/abstract=1664085` (accessed July 2015). Aug. 2010.

[5] See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 217. What matters from the perspective of the consensus conception is that the justifications individuals invoke for a proposal are rooted in values and principles shared by all. This is in contrast to a convergence conception which requires each citizen to have a reason to support the proposal, but does not mandate that others share those reasons or their normative bases. See, *e.g.,* Gaus (*The Order of Public Reason: A Theory of Freedom and Morality in a Diverse and Bounded World*), Vallier (*Liberal politics and public faith: Beyond separation*), and Billingham ("Convergence Justifications Within Political Liberalism: A Defence").

[6] Ibid., p. 217.

and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason."[7]

Reasonable citizens, according to Rawls, will refrain from drawing on nonpublic reasons because they accept two core ideas: of society as a framework of mutual cooperation among free and equal citizens, and of the consequences of the burdens of judgment.[8] Those who recognize the consequences of the burdens of judgment, realize that, for a variety of reasons, individuals may not reach agreement on fundamentally contested moral questions even if they try in good faith to come to a shared understanding. Individuals who are aware of the consequences of the burdens of judgment, yet insist on using nonpublic reasons nevertheless, are thus prepared to resort to using unjustified political power.

According to this line of reasoning, individuals who insist on drawing on nonpublic reasons – on what they, but not others, believe to be true – fail to respect their co-citizens' equal standing as free, that is, morally autonomous persons who are equally entitled to shape the coercive power of the state according to what is acceptable to them. In other words, those who use nonpublic reasons fail to recognize that others, in virtue of their status as persons, must equally authorize the fundamental rules and coercive institutions of the state to which they are subject. Nonpublic reasons are considered to be insufficient to justify a policy – no matter their weight to those that hold them – because they fail to command the normative authority of others who would be affected by said policy.

Importantly, within public reason liberalism, citizens are expected to *recognize* that their nonpublic reasons are not equally acceptable to others. In that respect, public reason liberalism approaches the question of respect from an external, third-personal perspective: just because some reasons are empirically divisive, it follows that citizens who hold them must see them as divisive as well, or at least treat them as such in public reason. From that perspective, what is wrong with nonpublic reasons is this: proposing

[7] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 217.
[8] Ibid., pp. 61-62.

them is indicative of a moral failing. Willful ignorance of the fact that not all citizens consider those reasons to be acceptable is taken to imply a lack of respect for their moral autonomy. In what follows, I suggest that this one-dimensional understanding of respect is too simplistic in the context of a liberal theory.

3 A first-personal conception of liberal respect

Liberal respect in public reason as it is commonly interpreted requires that individuals must only be coerced for reasons acceptable to all members of the constituency of public justification. Nonpublic reasons do not seem to live up to that standard whenever they are approached from the perspective of an external observer. Such an observer relies on an *external* assessment of both the reasons acceptable to another person – which is likely based on her *articulation* of the reasons she considers herself to have – and the nonpublic reasons that are proposed to her by her interlocutor. From an external perspective, all judgment on what can or will be acceptable to a person is ultimately derived from whatever reasons she presents as currently acceptable to her. This means that any reason that others offer to her is likely to be dismissed as a nonpublic reason, unless there is some overlap between it and the reasons she *presents* as acceptable to her, insofar as they can be identified by an external observer. In other words, the question of justifiability is settled by a somewhat static comparison of individuals' outward expression of their reasons and beliefs. In the following, I will argue that this is not the only plausible interpretation of the ideal of liberal respect.

The notion of respect that I just described reflects, in particular, a mindfulness of the moral personalities of individuals and their choices *as they are.* The reasons that individuals *present* to others are recognized as the sole authoritative enabler of coercive power. Respect in this sense translates into trust that individuals themselves must *actually* be the ultimate judges of what they may and what they must not (be coerced to)

do. Hence, we should take a person's willingness to offer to others only reasons which match the reasons they present as acceptable to them as an important marker of respect for their actual exercise of their moral autonomy. This dimension of respect should not be discounted lightly. If we are committed to paying respect to individuals' expression of their moral autonomy, yet do not pay attention to whether we actually respond to and act upon their real choices, said commitment could be seen as failing to grasp the very essence of the idea of autonomy.

However, this conception of respect fails to account for the significance that is often intuitively attributed to a person's intentions and attitude towards others which accompany her actions when judging whether or not she has acted respectfully. In assessing whether a person's conduct towards another is respectful, we may often be inclined to credit her for her intentions, even if the intended action is ultimately unsuccessful. In this case, we may well consider it to be to her credit if she *sincerely aims* to do whatever respect requires under the circumstances in question. (In the context of public reason, it requires her to present reasons acceptable to her interlocutors.) For example, if a person acts in a way that is considered respectful in her own culture, but disrespectful in another, her intention to act respectfully is not voided by her failure to make her interlocutors feel respected within the latter cultural context. Exculpatory reasons help account for the mismatch between her intentions and the reactions her actions elicited. If someone is unaware of what respect requires in a particular context, her actions are no longer blamed on a lack of good intentions, but on a lack of knowledge. But even in the absence of such exculpatory reasons – "The manner in which she acted was just plain stupid!" – our reaction to someone whose intention it was to express respect is different from our reaction to someone who acted in the same way without regard – or blatant disregard – for the requirements of respect. A person's attitude is *a factor* in assessing the moral character of a person's actions.

To further substantiate that point, consider the opposite example of a person merely

feigning respect. Imagine a person who outwardly acts in line with what respect requires in a given situation, but does so not motivated by an intention to show respect, but by other reasons, such as a fear of repercussions or a desire merely to be seen to be showing respect. If we discovered this discrepancy between her attitude and her actions, we would struggle to continue to think of her actions as respectful, precisely because we would judge her attitude to be wanting. Attitude is a significant dimension of the expression of respect.

Within liberalism, this attitudinal dimension of respect is particularly important. Liberal values are crucially concerned with the attitude that citizens are supposed to adopt towards each other. They are supposed to regard each other as free and equal persons – as equal sources of valid claims. It is not surprising that there are sometimes discrepancies between individuals' actions and their fellow citizens' expectations as to what actions befit that attitude. But people who intend to relate to each other as free and equal citizens can debate and learn from each other what respect requires in terms of actions. That is what public reason is about. From a liberal perspective, the successful expression of respect cannot be more important than the attitude which renders such acts of respect morally significant in the first place. There can be no liberal respect among citizens who do not see and intend to treat each other as moral equals.

Nevertheless, there is also good reason not to focus on professed intentions alone and disregard entirely the way in which a person's professedly respectful actions are perceived. Such disregard would ultimately provide cover for individuals who cast a blind eye to easily identifiable reasons, either out of insincerity or negligence. Negligence is disrespectful – assuming appropriate standards for the effort to obtain information about others' actual reasons – because it expresses a disposition to shirk reasonable amounts of effort, giving us reason to doubt the sincerity of individuals' pursuit to identify acceptable reasons. Insincerity in their professed intentions to present reasons acceptable to others is clearly disrespectful because it is incompatible with a proper

attitude of concern for the moral autonomy of others. For a conception of respect that puts weight on its attitudinal dimension, it is insufficient for individuals to merely pay lip service to a commitment to others' moral autonomy: it must be backed by a sincere concern for offering to others reasons that are acceptable to them, and by the willingness to expend a reasonable amount of effort on identifying them.

It seems to follow that, under circumstances where information on citizens' beliefs and reasons with respect to a particular matter is readily available, those looking to justify a policy on the subject cannot respectfully disregard that information. Not only can there be no doubt that their justificatory efforts will be successful when they use reasons they *know* to be acceptable to their interlocutors. Failure to do so, it seems, can only spring from negligence or insincerity. After all, one would not forgo ensured justificatory success and the successful expression of respect that goes with it, unless one either neglected to consider what respect required, or intended to disregard it. While we can dismiss those who merely feign respect as clearly beyond the scope of reasonableness since, by definition, they lack the required attitude, those who do not draw on reasons known to be acceptable to others may simply fail to be sincere enough in their commitment.

Still, it would be too rash to subsume all appeals to reasons a person does not currently accept as an indication of a lack of a sufficient concern for others as morally autonomous, free and equal persons, and thus as a deficient attitude of respect. I will go on to paint a more complex picture of the relation of reasons and respect. At this point, it is worth considering what the information we have about others' beliefs and reasons actually reveals to us. It reveals the reasons they *currently* consider themselves to be able to accept. However, given the fact that human rationality is bounded, the reasons we currently accept are never reflective of our full system of reasons and beliefs. We are not fully transparent to ourselves. Hence, our current reasons can only ever paint a partial picture of our set of reasons and beliefs. In other words, what we

deem to be acceptable to us right now may tell us only little about reasons that could be acceptable to us as well, given the entirety of beliefs we hold. Relatedly, what we deem acceptable now also tells us little about the strength of said beliefs, the exact nature and structure of their foundations, as well as their respective strength.

Hence, the set of reasons and beliefs that a person currently accepts does not necessarily provide much information – and certainly no determinate information – about the way in which her position with regard to a particular subject *might* be transformed. Yet, such transformation is a common occurrence. When we deliberate on complex normative matters, we are prepared to – and frequently do – change our minds after re-examining the reasons we already have and considering potential reasons we have come across. In fact, this process is precisely what we would expect the responsible use of our moral autonomy to amount to, as I will explain in the following.

Respect for autonomy requires that we recognize individuals as the ultimate judges of any potentially coercive measure. But to take this recognition to mean that we cannot expect individuals to reflect on their judgments would be to discount the normative dimension of moral autonomy. To be autonomous does not merely protect individuals' prerogative to cast the ultimate judgment on what is acceptable to them, but also to examine which judgment is *right* for them to cast. This is not to say that respect for these judgments should depend on their quality in that latter respect, but merely that the normative dimension of moral autonomy discourages resistance to reflection. Careful consideration of normative positions and the reasons that support them is what is required if an individual is serious in her endeavor to decide what is right for her to do, what reasons for action she should accept, and what reasons she is right to reject.

Hence, approaching others with the expectation that they might accept a reason presented to them only after reflection is compatible with respect for their moral autonomy. In other words, there is nothing disrespectful in acting on the assumption that a person's current set of reasons and beliefs *could* be transformed by the very confronta-

tion with the nonpublic reasons that their interlocutor believes to be applicable to them. Addressing others with reasons that they do not currently accept, but which might induce a change of mind, should not be deemed disrespectful of their moral autonomy just because it looks past their current allegiances. As an appeal to the very trait that enables them to *change* their position on the matter at hand, we can also take it to reflect an emphatic embrace of their moral autonomy, rather than a dismissive attitude towards it. In summary, to present others with reasons in the hope of transforming the reasons they currently accept does not necessarily undercut the sincerity of an individual's commitment to only coerce others based on reasons that are acceptable to them. While such behaviour may also mask negligence or insincerity, it does not *necessarily* reflect either of these.

4 What kind of reasons?

In the previous section, I argued that a conception of liberal respect for moral autonomy which takes seriously the first-personal perspective and attitude of the individual proposing nonpublic reasons, must not dismiss these reasons merely for their lack of ties to any reasons and beliefs that their addressees currently accept. An attitude of liberal respect is compatible with the proposal of reasons which are claimed to be acceptable to others merely on the basis of a person's *internal* assessment.

At first, this conclusion might give us pause: are we wrong in brandishing those who propose nonpublic reasons as unreasonable? How much weight should we give to their internal perspective on the reasons they propose in public reason – according to which these reasons are acceptable to others – compared to the external perception – according to which they are not? Fortunately, there is no need to tackle this question head on. My main reason for embarking on an analysis of individuals' internal perspective on nonpublic reasons was to identify reasons they have to refrain from proposing these

nonpublic reasons in the process of public reason. Taking seriously that perspective, I argued, would provide us with a robust justification for their exclusion from the constituency of justification. As will become apparent in the further course of this article, the basic assumption integral to the internal perspective which has so far held up – namely, that nonpublic reasons can be assumed to be acceptable to those who currently do not accept them – ultimately proves to be untenable. Consequently, the apparent conflict between the internal and external view collapses. There is, after all, a conflict between an attitude of respect and the proposal of nonpublic reasons, and it is one that individuals can grasp entirely from within their internal perspective on their reasons. This perspective thus provides them with reasons for justificatory restraint and, in turn, furnishes political liberalism with justifications for excluding them from the constituency of justification should they fail to exercise that restraint. But in order to arrive at that conclusion, we must first dig further into individuals' internal, first-personal perspective on their nonpublic reasons. Specifically, we must ask what precisely gives them reason to believe that the latter are acceptable to others.

4.1 Truth and acceptability

A person's individual internal experience of the nonpublic reasons she is prepared to propose may differ significantly from the way in which they are perceived from an external perspective. What appears to her to be acceptable to others may actually seem quite alien to them. But that is not decisive from the perspective we have so far adopted in this article. Namely, a perspective which is concerned with the question of whether an individual can *sincerely claim to believe* that the reasons she proposes are acceptable to others. All that is required for her to be able to make such a claim, is that she sincerely believes that she has valid *second-order reasons* to believe that her nonpublic reasons are acceptable to others. Some such valid reasons may draw on information that a person has about her interlocutor's overall set of reasons and beliefs. To be able

draw a consistent and coherent argument in favor of a currently nonpublic reason from higher-level or even foundational beliefs contained in said former set of reasons and beliefs certainly constitutes a good reason to believe that it may be acceptable to the owner of that set.

Yet, from an internal perspective, a valid reason to believe that a given reason may be acceptable to others does not necessarily require any such connection to a person's current beliefs. Another valid reason to believe that others may come to share a particular reason is a sincere belief that it is *true,* and therefore *universally* acceptable. This requires further explanation. I do not mean to claim that truth actually enables acceptability. All I mean to say is that the insight one believes to have gained into the world *as it is* must also be *believed* to be acceptable to others insofar as they also ultimately strive for truth with respect to their beliefs. For others to be able to recognize said truth, a person may also believe it to be necessary for them to accept a potentially quite expansive network of other beliefs. They may have to buy into a new view of the world so to speak. But the potentially high cost that may be associated with enabling others to recognize the truth – and hence acceptability – of a given belief does not need to affect a person's perception of its universal acceptability. From a person's *internal* perspective, being convinced of the truth of a particular belief may still constitute a good reason for her to believe that it is, in principle, acceptable to others. In fact, many of the most controversial beliefs that people have are backed by a sincere belief in their truth: this includes religious beliefs and non-relativist moral beliefs that contain a truth-claim.[9] According to the preceding argument, such beliefs may be perceived, by those convinced of their truth, to be acceptable to all.

This warrants a more detailed explanation. Consider the following example of *cars:*

[9] As an aside, this is precisely how Rawls characterizes the beliefs which individuals may be tempted to introduce as nonpublic reasons: "those who insist, when fundamental political questions are at stake, on what they take as true but others do not, seem to others simply to insist on their own beliefs when they have the political power to do so. Of course, those who do insist on their beliefs also insist that their beliefs alone are true: they impose their beliefs because, they say, *their beliefs are true and not because they are their beliefs.*" (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 61, my emphasis).

1. I have the perception of a red car.

2. I trust that my relevant perceptive faculties (my eyesight) are truth-sensitive.

3. I have – to the best of my capacities – assured myself that my faculties operate without distortion.

4. Therefore, my perception of the red car warrants my belief that it is true that the car is red.

5. I believe that others also aim to believe what is true.

6. I trust that others' relevant faculties are also truth-sensitive.

7. Therefore, others' faculties – if operating without distortion – should generate the same belief as mine.

8. I have reason to believe that the belief that the car is red is acceptable to others if I believe that it is true.

Step 2 and the inference from step 6 to 7 are the crucial elements in this line of argument. I will discuss them in turn.

Step 2 assumes that I may trust that my perceptive faculties generate true conclusions. This assumption invites a skeptical challenge. May I trust my faculties if I have no means to ensure that they do not deceive me and actually accurately generate the kind of insight I believe them to generate? To comprehensively address the skeptical challenge is beyond the scope of this article. However, I do not believe it is necessary to assuage the skeptic. The skeptic might challenge my trust that my respective faculties generate true beliefs about the real world because they are my only source of such insight, and hence cannot be tested against any information obtained independently of them. But this is not to say that my trust may not be epistemically warranted. To assume that only external validation of my perceptive faculties' capacity to yield true

beliefs may vindicate such trust would be to apply an inappropriate standard of epistemic warrant, which is profoundly at odds with the way in which we relate to world. We cannot escape the reality that, in our day-to-day conduct, we do trust these faculties and consider them to be indicative of what is indeed true. The belief that our perceptive faculties are truth-sensitive – though fallible – is normative for us. To seek further justification for the validity of our normative beliefs may simply not be feasible, as Alan Millar argues:

> The key question to consider is what aiming to have only true beliefs requires of us. Certainly it requires us to take such steps as are feasible to ensure that we believe only what is true. But what steps are feasible? Any steps we take proceed from a starting point which we have not chosen and could not reject wholesale even if we tried. The starting-point is our perspective on the world, which comprises the concepts we have acquired and the propositions which are normative for us [...] Having this perspective commits us to managing our beliefs and evaluating beliefs generally in certain ways. Indeed, if we manage and evaluate beliefs competently it would seem that we do as much as could feasibly be done to serve the aim of believing only what is true. [...] Doing what is feasible to serve the aim of believing only what is true does not preclude forming beliefs on grounds of a sort which do not reliably yield true beliefs.[10]

To seek further justification for our belief that our faculties are truth-sensitive is not a feasible step because said belief qualifies as precisely the kind of starting point which, according to Millar, we "could not reject wholesale even if we tried." It is implicit in most, if not all of our conduct, that we do not choose to subject it to epistemological scrutiny. In a similar vein, Crispin Wright argues that our day-to-day functioning sets limits to what is feasible in ensuring that we believe only what is true. Awareness of

[10] Alan Millar. *Reasons and Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 213.

these limits entitles us to trust that our faculties are indeed truth-sensitive.

> [A person] is so entitled because the need to take decisions will, time and again, trump whatever may be the limited possibilities – especially in the light of skeptical argument – for gathering positive evidence that the general presuppositions hold good in the particular context, and because – as a rational agent – her decisions have to be informed by *reasoned* beliefs about what is for the best. Since such beliefs will be possible for her only in a context in which she has trust in what she knows to be necessary conditions for their being soundly arrived at are met, only a thinker who has such trust can be a rational agent.[11]

In other words, as an agent, I must not seek further evidence for the truth-sensitivity of my faculties, since to do so would undermine my capacity to arrive at reasoned decisions. An approach like this, which draws on our conception of ourselves as functioning agents, is congruent with the liberal perspective and therefore highly attractive.

I now turn to a discussion of steps 6 and 7, explaining why my assumption that others' perceptive faculties – if operating without distortion – are also truth-sensitive requires me to infer that they will generate the same conclusions as mine. I cannot reject this conclusion, because if I believed that my faculties were truth-sensitive while also believing that they might not generate the same conclusions as others' faculties of the same kind – absent any distortions – I would need to entertain serious doubts as to whether or not we share the same reality. Talking about truth – about what is the case – is only intelligible if we assume that what is real for me is also real for others. The relativism implicit in doubting that we share the same reality is fundamentally at odds with the project of public reason. Not only could we no longer talk about truth, but the whole endeavor of seeking political principles to govern interaction among individuals would be futile. This is because it is premised on the idea that we can come to

[11] Crispin Wright and Martin Davies. "On Epistemic Entitlement". In: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 78 (2004), p. 198.

recognize some principles as mutually acceptable – a convergence which is not purely incidental but principled: it arises from a shared appreciation of what morality demands under certain circumstances and why. Within public reason (and liberal political theory more generally) disagreements are not explained in terms of moral relativism, but in terms of distortions and the general boundedness of human reason. Moral relativism is incompatible with the project and those committed to such relativism cannot be genuine members of the constituency of public justification, since they are incapable of committing fully to the idea that public reason discovers and expresses what *are* the appropriate principles governing our political interaction. Hence, as a member of the relevant constituency, I cannot reject the belief that, if operating undistortedly, distinct truth-sensitive faculties will generate the same conclusions. Hence, if I believe others' faculties to be truth-sensitive, I have reason to believe that what I believe to be true is also acceptable to others.

The same structure of argument may also be applied to moral beliefs. Consider *animals:*

1. My moral judgment leads me to conclude that animals should be granted the same moral status as humans.

2. I trust that my relevant faculties (my moral sense and moral reasoning) to be truth-sensitive.

3. I have – to the best of my capacities – assured myself that my faculties operate without distortion: I have reflected on whether my conclusion has been influenced by factors which I do not judge to be morally relevant and, if appropriate, whether my reasoning contains any (logical) errors.

4. Therefore, my moral deliberation warrants my belief that (it is true that) animals should be granted the same moral status as humans.

5. I believe that others also aim to believe what is true.

6. I trust that others' relevant faculties are also truth-sensitive.

7. Therefore, others' faculties – if operating without distortion – should generate the same belief as mine.

8. I have reason to believe that the belief that animals should be granted the same equal moral status as humans is acceptable to others, because I believe that it is true.

While this line of argument may appear persuasive with regard to beliefs about the material world like in *Car*, it may seem to lose some of its appeal when applied to normative beliefs as in *Animals*. This is because we are generally inclined to trust that we share the same material reality. Intuitively, we seem to be more reluctant to accept relativism about the material world than we are in relation to normative judgments. However, none of this matters for the present argument. As I argued above, we can easily ward off doubts about the existence of a shared, objective moral reality, not by means of any substantive philosophical argument, but with reference to our shared commitment to such a reality as expressed by our commitment to the project of political liberalism and public reason. Therefore, the structure of the argument supporting my inference from my belief in the truth of a particular belief to its acceptability to others may be transferred to moral beliefs. Hence, whenever I engage in normative discourse that I believe to be meaningful and to which I believe others to be committed in the same way, my belief in the truth of a normative proposition warrants a belief that said proposition should, in principle, be acceptable to others, assuming that they also aim to believe what is true.

4.2 Acceptability and transformative potential

This conclusion brings us to the core of the story. According to the manner in which I have depicted the first-personal conception of liberal respect so far, it tolerates the

inclusion of a wide range of nonpublic beliefs, including highly controversial moral and religious convictions. The fact that individuals present their interlocutors with reasons that may be entirely alien or even contradictory to anything they currently believe is compatible with a sincere *attitude* of respect towards others' moral autonomy. In other words, what is wrong with nonpublic reasons is *not* that their proposal in the context of public reason betrays a person's lack of a commitment – or insincerity thereof – to coerce others only for reasons that are acceptable to them.

So what *is* wrong with nonpublic reasons? I have so far argued that an individual's perception of the reasons she believes to be acceptable to others should matter. But their perception of their own beliefs is not *all* that citizens should care about if they care about respect for others' moral autonomy. Respect for others' moral autonomy requires that the latter cannot be expected to simply take their interlocutors' judgment of acceptability at face value. They must be allowed and *enabled* to arrive at that judgment themselves. This echoes my argument in the previous section that counting on the mere transformative potential of some reasons is not only compatible with liberal respect, but is, moreover, also reflective of the following crucial dimension of individuals' moral autonomy: their capacity to *change* their minds upon evaluating relevant reasons available to them. Therefore, a person's perception of the path towards the transformation of her interlocutor's set of reasons and beliefs is also relevant to the question of liberal respect.[12]

In that context, the epistemic conditions mediating said transformation matter: a person who proposes reasons that she believes to be acceptable to others must distinguish between her perception of said reasons themselves and her perception of the conditions that affect her capacity to induce that perception in others.

More specifically, she must acknowledge the distinction between:

(1) the abstract belief that some reasons *are* universally acceptable, because they are

[12]This concern is more pressing with regard to reasons which are deemed acceptable not because of their roots in others' current set of reasons and beliefs, but because of a more abstract belief in their universality.

true,

(2) the belief that others *can come to recognize* them as acceptable in general, and

(3) the belief that they can do so under certain conditions.

It is possible to conceive of reasons which fall under *(1)* but not under *(2):* reasons that are sincerely believed to be true and hence believed to *be* universally acceptable, yet unrecognizable as such by others. Implicit in the concept of an externally unrecognizable universal truth is the assertion of privileged access, which disqualifies them as reasons whose proposal is respectful of others' moral autonomy. Their acceptability cannot be ascertained by means of assessing their substantive content. If others did accept such reasons after being presented with them, they would not – and could not – do so because they actually judged them to be valid, but only because they would have deferred to the epistemic authority of the proponent. But for the proponent of reasons to rely on their authority, rather than on a belief that the reasons in question would withstand a person's substantive evaluative judgment, is fundamentally incompatible with a commitment to their fellow citizens' moral autonomy. It counts on the latter's willingness to be directed by others, rather than exercising their capacity for self-directed judgment. This is not to say that a person cannot *decide* to defer to someone else's epistemic authority. She may have good reasons to do so (*e.g.,* trusting others' expertise on a particular subject matter), but the judgment that these second-order reasons are good, again, implies that they have been, or can be judged on their substantive merit (*e.g.,* with reference to evidence that such trust has proved to be warranted in the past). If the proponent of an externally inaccessible universal truth were to propose such second-order reasons to substantiate her unique competence in accessing said truth, others would be enabled to exercise their moral autonomy. But that is precisely what the proposal of externally inaccessible truths alone fails to do, for it relies solely on external authority for its transformation of others' reasons and beliefs.

Returning to my earlier threefold distinction regarding the way a person may perceive

the reasons she deems to be universally acceptable, the same conclusion does not seem to be warranted with respect to beliefs of the second kind: beliefs that are claimed to be universally acceptable and recognizable as such by each and every individual *in general* do acknowledge the need for a *substantive* transformation of the beliefs of others to take place, in order to satisfy liberal respect for moral autonomy. However, a person's general belief in the ultimate possibility of such a transformation alone does not account for her capacity to *induce* such transformation in others. This is important because, without an argumentative path towards the belief she wants and believes others to be able to accept, the sincere claim that such transformation is possible would, again, demand acceptance on the basis of the proponent's epistemic authority alone, rather than enabling and relying on the addressees' substantive judgment. Hence, to satisfy the first-personal conception of liberal respect, a belief in the universal acceptability of a given reason must not discount the process of reasoning that is thought to lead towards the acceptance of the proposed reasons. To care about this process requires us to ask what it takes for individuals to follow the proposed path. Returning to the previous distinction I made between different ways in which a person may interpret her conviction of the universal acceptability of some reasons, we must conclude that we have reason to take seriously the *conditions* under which others can come to accept the proposed reasons. Importantly, we must ask whether these conditions can be satisfied in the context in which the proposal of reasons is taking place, which, in our case, is the process of public reason.

We may distinguish between internal and external forms of such conditions: as far as *internal conditions* are concerned, we must ask what about a person's internal epistemic constitution has to change in order for her to accept the currently nonpublic belief that is presented to her. For example, does she have to accept one particular (relatively isolated) belief, or does her whole set of interrelated reasons and beliefs have to undergo major transformations? In terms of *external conditions,* we must ask what constraints affect our ability to persuade her of the validity of our claim that the nonpublic belief in

question is really acceptable to her. For example, we may genuinely believe that others can come to accept a particular set of beliefs, but that they will only be persuaded of their validity after they have been exposed to a particular set of experiences (*e.g.,* experiences while living, for a while, according to a particular set of rules or principles, or having experienced the loss of people close to them).

The more comprehensive the required change in a person's epistemic constitution (internal conditions), the less likely it is for said change to occur by comparatively non-invasive means (external conditions), such as deliberation and debate in the sphere of public reason. But as long as it is genuinely thought to be possible to transform others' set of beliefs, attempts to transform others' epistemic constitution by means of proposing nonpublic reasons to them is not disrespectful. They are merely less likely to be successful under some circumstances. However, if we do indeed have reason to believe that the epistemic constitution required for a person to accept a particular belief could not *possibly* be induced by another person given the external constraints, we would fail to live up to our commitment to respect others' moral autonomy if we insisted that our nonpublic belief could constitute justifiable grounds for coercion to her.

Colin Bird offers an argument to the effect that we must not hope to bring about the internal conditions, *i.e.* transformation of others' epistemic constitution, required for them to accept the reasons we propose. In his view, we have reason to believe that it is impossible in principle to convince others to adopt the required epistemic state, *precisely because* we are unable to convince them in actual debates on controversial issues. Therefore, he believes this approach to be inappropriate. According to Bird, "individuals ought to acknowledge and respect each other's authority to interpret their opaque experiences."[13] Experiences or beliefs are referred to as opaque if they are based "upon the interpretation of experiences which are not available for public political scrutiny", while those which are "based on the interpretation of experiences available to every-

[13] Colin Bird. "Mutual Respect and Neutral Justification". In: *Ethics* 107.1 (1996), p. 76.

one for critical scrutiny" are referred to as transparent.[14] He argues that "we can know whether the grounds of dispute are transparent or opaque in a given instance. This is itself a question about which the grounds of dispute are normally transparent."[15] In other words, Bird claims that whether one of our beliefs is opaque or transparent is itself a question which may be discussed on the basis of shared experiences. According to Bird, in the case of deciding whether or not the grounds of a given dispute are opaque, the relevant shared experience is that of failures to reach agreements on the matter at hand. From that perspective, what does count is our sincere conviction that others would come to share our view if they had only gone through similar experiences and if, as a consequence, their set of reasons and beliefs resembled our own.

> But although I am convinced that anyone who went through a similar experience would be compelled (as I was) to reject abstract dogmas about the sanctity of life, I am unable to convince others that this is the right place to start when reflecting on the morality of abortion. [...] The fact that I am unable to make any headway in such arguments, despite my continuing conviction, ought to convince me and observers that the grounds of dispute in this case are opaque. Failure to reach agreement on issues of this sort is surely an interpersonal demonstration of the fact that in such instances the grounds of dispute are opaque. This conclusion is not simply a matter of personal conviction: it is a conclusion based on a demonstration whose force can be equally appreciated by frustrated disputants and nonparticipating observers.[16]

However, I believe that Bird's inference from actual disagreement to opaqueness is flawed. The fact that we recognize that we are unable to convince others to expose themselves to the very experiences that we claim would make them appreciate the va-

[14] Bird, "Mutual Respect and Neutral Justification", p. 71.
[15] Ibid., p. 76.
[16] Ibid., p. 77.

lidity of our proposal does not commit us to accepting that our proposal rests on beliefs which Bird classifies as opaque: namely, beliefs which are based on the interpretation of experiences that are not available for public political scrutiny. We may still sincerely believe that *if* they were to expose themselves to the relevant experiences, they would come to share our conclusions. The fact that they are unlikely to undergo such exposure does not need to affect our sincere convictions about what *would* happen if they did. Hence, we may not have to accept that our experiences of persistent disagreement when debating with others are in fact transparent grounds for deciding whether or not the grounds which we introduce into the debate are opaque. We may well be in a position to consider the experience of *actual* disagreement to be irrelevant to the question at hand. Consequently, since we do not have a reason to believe the grounds underlying our and others' positions to be opaque, it would be unfair to accuse us of disrespecting others' "authority to interpret their opaque experiences",[17] merely for holding on to *our* sincere belief that our proposal can be acceptable to them. In doing so, we do not dispute their authority to interpret their experiences, but merely *suggest* an interpretation which we sincerely believe everyone can come to share. To return to my original point: even in the face of actual disagreement, we may hold on to sincere convictions that the reasons we propose, including their structure of supporting reasons and beliefs, may be acceptable to others. Actual disagreement does not commit us to believing that the internal conditions for others to share our reasons cannot be brought about.

As I discussed above, our capacity to bring about these internal conditions is bounded by external conditions, that is, by the means for confronting and addressing others that are available to us in the sphere in which our debate takes place. In the sphere of public reason, the external conditions are fixed: reasons must be communicable by means of *rational* argument. Public reason does not allow for reasons to be backed by invasive means of persuasion that require more of the addressees of reasons than to allow themselves to be confronted with and to consider verbal arguments that others offer. It does

[17] Bird, "Mutual Respect and Neutral Justification", p. 76.

not envisage the addressees to modify their *behaviour* in order to access, and eventually come to share, the insights underlying the reasons that others claim to be acceptable to them. This is not surprising: after all, liberalism is concerned with protecting individuals' moral autonomy – *i.e.,* their capacity to act on their reasoned judgment on what is the right thing to do. It cannot ask them to *act* in order to recognize what is right according to another person. At the point of being asked to do so, they would still be required to act without a reason that they can currently accept, and hence to relax their claim to all normative authority over themselves. Consequently, the sphere of public reason proper must remain the domain of verbal, rational argument alone.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I argued that is worthwhile to expand our understanding of liberal respect and to consider individuals' first-personal perspective on their nonpublic beliefs. In doing so, we do justice to the fact that the result of our external assessment of which beliefs can or cannot be considered acceptable to others may differ significantly from a person's considered and sincere judgment on the same matter. This perspective renders public reason liberalism more attuned to the diversity and complexity of individuals' sets of reasons and beliefs. It also puts trust in individual moral autonomy front and center and highlights that there is value in appealing to individuals' capacity to autonomously transform their convictions. Liberal respect thus understood leaves ample room for individuals to present each other with nonpublic reasons in the wider public discourse.

Nonpublic reasons remain inadmissible in public reason in most circumstances. Unless individuals believe that the nonpublic reasons which they sincerely believe to be acceptable to others in general are acceptable to them *under the relevant conditions, i.e.,* those of the sphere of public reason, respect for their interlocutors' moral auton-

omy requires them to refrain from introducing them into public reason. In other words, individuals engaged in public reason are subject to the duty of civility – to reason on the basis of shared, public reasons. But that duty applies not because it would be disrespectful to others to confront them with reasons that are not (currently) acceptable to them. It applies because in the sphere of public reason, individuals cannot avail themselves of all the means required to transform their interlocutors' beliefs.

We certainly cannot compel others to seek out the conditions that might change their minds in the wider world of public discourse either. But neither do we have to come to a conclusive agreement when we debate political matters in situations where we do not wield direct political power. In these situations, it suffices that we can encourage each other to immerse ourselves in each other's respective worldviews, going beyond verbal arguments, trying to grapple with reasons and beliefs we currently do not endorse. There is no guarantee that we will succeed at transforming each other's convictions. But that is not the point. Of course we care about others adopting our point of view, but the reason why we engage with them in these kinds of arguments is that we trust that, under favorable conditions, their autonomous judgment can lead them to what we believe to be the right conclusion. The interpretation of liberal respect which I presented in this article does not only give us license, it gives reason to confront each other with nonpublic reasons.