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Public Deliberation, Public Reason, and Concern for Truth

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Abstract: In "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," John Rawls implied that a well-ordered society would be a deliberative democracy and said that public reason is essential to it. After his turn to political liberalism, he was chary about claims of truth. In Section 1, I lay out essential features of Rawlsian deliberative democracy. In Section 2, I introduce some prominent commentary on Rawls's treatment of truth and public reasoning. On these readings—collectively "the non-permissive reading"—Rawls's treatment of truth has problematic implications for public reasoning and therefore for deliberative democracy. In Section 3, I survey those implications. In Section 4, I argue that the texts which are taken to support the non-permissive reading support a very different reading. In Section 5, I argue that Rawls does not endorse the theses imputed to him by the non-permissive reading and that his view does not have the implications surveyed in Section 3.

It is impossible to follow American political debate without being deeply worried by some participants' failure to value truth. One especially troubling form this failure takes is contempt, which a speaker shows when he proceeds as if truth doesn't matter because it is not important enough *to* matter. Such contempt is troubling enough on its own, but more so when it is shown to listeners, as when listeners' concern for truth and the speaker's contempt for it are mutual knowledge. In those cases, the speaker insults listeners and readers—often intentionally—by flouting and being known to flout a value they care deeply about.

There is also much of interest to be said about the objects that can be taken by indifference to, rather than contempt for, truth. Sometimes indifference takes as objects claims which purport to be true. Sometimes it extends to well-established methods for ascertaining truth—as when, in touting hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID, Fox News commentator Laura

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Ingraham dismissed the lack of supportive clinical trials by saying that scientists "want a double-blind controlled study on whether the sky is blue."[1] When influencers like Ingraham are contemptuous of or indifferent to truth and the methods for attaining it, the conditions for public deliberation are undermined. When they are undermined and a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic strikes, it is difficult to reach solutions that can secure reasoned consensus, regardless of how urgently they are needed.[2]

In "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," John Rawls implied that a well-ordered society would be a deliberative democracy and said that the idea of public reason is essential to such a democracy.[3] But after his turn to political liberalism, Rawls was chary about claims of truth. Some readers have taken him to mean that citizens engaged in public reasoning must proceed without using the concept of truth at all. They have pointed to untoward implications of this position and explored ways political liberalism might avoid them. Other, less forgiving readers have suggested that Rawls's position dovetails with the "rejection of truth" characteristic of public deliberation in some quarters, and have claimed that its "legacy" is precisely the polarization that characterizes American politics.[4] Still others have said that Rawls's position precludes appeal to the shared standards of evidence that public deliberation needed to address the COVID pandemic[5]—thus claiming, in effect, that it leaves deliberation vulnerable to those, like Ingraham, who ridicule those appeals.

In Section 1, I lay out some of the essential features of deliberative democracy as Rawls understands it. One of those features is public reasoning. In Section 2, I introduce some prominent commentary on Rawls's treatment of truth and public reasoning. I distinguish five theses which Rawls might be read as defending and say which ones his most prominent interpreters take him to defend. On their readings—collectively "the non-permissive reading"—Rawls's treatment of truth has a number of problematic implications for public reasoning and hence for deliberative democracy. In Section 3, I survey those implications. In Section 4, I argue that the texts which are taken to support the non-permissive reading support a quite different reading. In Section 5, I argue that Rawls does not endorse the theses imputed to him by the non-permissive reading and that his view does not have the implications

[1]Michael M. Grynbaum, "Fox News Stars Trumpeted a Malaria Drug, Until They Didn't," *New York Times*, April 22, 2020, updated October 2, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/business/media/virus-fox-news-hydroxychloroquine.html.

[2]Joss Hands, "Public Reason in the Time of Covid-19," *The Public* 29, no. 2 (2022): 115–29.

[3]John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 139.

[4]E.g., Michael Pakaluk, "Rawls and the Rejection of Truth," *Law and Liberty*, April 23, 2021, https://lawliberty.org/forum/rawls-and-the-rejection-of-truth/.

[5]E.g., Calvin H. Warner. "Public Reason in a Pandemic: John Rawls on Truth in the Age of COVID-19," *Philosophia* 50 (2020): 1503–13.

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surveyed in Section 3. I conclude that Rawls's view does not give comfort to the indifference to and contempt for truth that are all too common in contemporary politics.

1. Rawlsian Deliberative Democracy

There is some disagreement in the literature about the defining features of deliberative democracy. I follow Samuel Freeman in thinking that a Rawlsian deliberative democracy is one in which

- "political agents or their representatives aim to collectively deliberate and vote their sincere and informed judgments regarding measures conducive to the common good of citizens."[6]
- "citizens recognize a duty in their public political deliberations to cite public reasons—considerations that all reasonable citizens can accept in their capacity as democratic citizens—and to avoid public argument on the basis of reasons peculiar to their particular moral, religious, and philosophical views and incompatible with public reason."[7]
- "[p]olitical agents are seen and see one another as democratic citizens who are politically free and equal participants in civic life."[8]

To fill in details, let us start with the word "public" in the second feature. Rawls distinguishes what he calls "the public political forum" from "the background culture."[9] The public political forum consists of the discourse of judges, public officials, and candidates for office.[10] The background culture is the culture of civil society. It includes public media of all kinds; it also includes contributions to political philosophy like Rawls's own. Discussion and deliberation about politics takes place in both. But the second feature above refers to "public deliberations." What makes these deliberations public is that they are conducted in the public political forum. What makes them deliberations, rather than, say, declamations?

As Rawls understands it, public deliberation is discussion in the public forum that aims at reaching and justifying what I call "political outcomes": the election of a candidate, the passage of a law, or the adoption of a policy. I take the first feature of deliberative democracy to require that in such discussion, citizens or their representatives do not just state their preferences, but rather exchange reasons purporting to justify the political outcomes they favor. When they exchange such reasons with the intention of reaching and

[6]Samuel Freeman, "Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic Comment," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2000): 382.

[7]Freeman, "Deliberative Democracy," 382.

[8]Freeman, "Deliberative Democracy," 382.

[9]John Rawls, *Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 133.

[10]See Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 133–36, where Rawls also discusses the way the ideal applies to ordinary citizens.

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justifying outcomes, they deliberate. According to the Rawlsian account of public reason, not all the considerations that could be brought forward in public deliberation have justificatory force. Only a subset does: that which the second feature refers to as "considerations that all reasonable citizens can accept in their capacity as democratic citizens." These are "public reasons."

Some considerations which do not have justificatory force may be brought forward in disregard of the fact that they do not. Others may be brought forward in good faith, by citizens who believe that they do justify. Even exchanges in the public forum which include reasons brought forward with such disregard might count as public deliberation, but let's restrict ourselves to the exchange of reasons that is and is mutually known to be in good faith: the exchange of reasons in which participants try in good faith to reach justified political outcomes. This deliberation satisfies an important part of the first feature of deliberative democracy: it is sincere. When I refer to public deliberation from now on, it is sincere public deliberation that I have in mind.

Sometimes the phrase "public reason" is used—as by Rawls, as we shall see—to refer, not just to a consideration with reason-giving force in public deliberation, as in deliberative democracy's second feature, but to an activity which includes the exchange of such considerations. On those occasions, it is used to mean "public reason*ing*." To what activity does the honorific "public reason," in this sense of "public reasoning," apply?

To see the possibilities, consider a chain or set of sincere exchanges which results in a political outcome, perhaps because it is adopted after all "vote their sincere and informed judgments"—informed, that is, by the preceding deliberation. Even public deliberations which include reasons that are not themselves public can result in justified political outcomes. Does the whole set of deliberations which results in the justified outcome count as public reasoning? Or does the honorific apply just to that—perhaps artificially abstracted—fragment of deliberations that consists only of the exchange of reasons that are public?[11]

Call the former "the wide view of public reasoning" and the latter "the narrow view." The difference between them matters because we want to know what is meant by saying that Rawlsian public reasoning does without the concept of truth. It also matters because, according to Rawlsian deliberative democracy, political outcomes should be based on sincere public deliberations. This raises the question of what the appropriate basis of a political outcome is. Is the whole set of exchanges, including non-public

[11]An interpretation of public reasoning according to which it takes place in the public forum may seem crimped, since public reason is to provide a "framework of thought" that citizens can employ anytime; see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 455. But at *Law of Peoples*, 135, Rawls insists that, when they employ that framework, they are "to think of themselves *as if* they were ideal legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact" (emphasis original). So even public reasoning which does not actually take place in the public forum is to be conducted as if it did. The interpretation in the text is therefore capacious enough.

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reasons, an appropriate basis? Or does the appropriate basis include only that part of public deliberation in which public reasons are exchanged? How the account of deliberative democracy is to be filled in depends upon how we answer these questions. I shall say something later about how I think it should be filled in, but first I will turn to the readings of Rawls I want to examine.

2. The Non-Permissive Reading

There are a number of passages in *Political Liberalism* in which Rawls abjures the concept of truth. Some commentators have taken these passages to have radical—and ultimately self-defeating—implications. Edmund Santurri cites a passage from *Political Liberalism* to claim that "political liberalism 'does without the concept of truth' *altogether.*"[12] Rawls does say that political liberalism does without the concept of truth, but as we shall see, speaking of what "political liberalism does" is ambiguous. Without disambiguation, it is not clear that Santurri's addition of the word "altogether" is warranted.

Other readers have drawn out implications of Rawls's remarks about truth for what we have seen is an important element of Rawlsian deliberative democracy and what is an important element of Rawls's political liberalism: public reasoning specifically. Thus Linda Zerilli takes Rawls's "method of avoidance" to apply to what she calls "public reason" and implies that for him, "claims to the truth of one's beliefs, values, or judgments have no place."[13] The interpretation of Rawls according to which public reason does without truth is elaborated and defended by David Estlund and Joshua Cohen. Estlund might initially seem to echo Santurri when he says Rawls's "stated view" is that "political liberalism need[s] to avoid truth claims."[14] In a later essay, Estlund reiterates his commitment to what I call "the non-permissive reading," remarking that "Rawls says that he hopes political liberalism can proceed without putting forward *anything* as true, preferring to rely on the property of reasonableness instead."[15] But in the same essay, he says "Rawls proposes that political liberalism should be understood as banning the concept of truth *from our proper justificatory practices.*"[16] On one

[12]Edmund N. Santurri, "Rawlsian Liberalism, Moral Truth and Augustinian Politics," *Journal of Peace and Justice Studies* 8, no. 2 (1997), 12 (emphasis added), citing Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 94.

[13]Linda M.G. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 144–45.

[14]David Estlund, "The Insularity of the Reasonable: Why Political Liberalism," *Ethics* 108 (1998): 260.

[15]David Estlund, "The Truth in Political Liberalism," in *Truth and Democracy*, ed. Andrew Norris and Jeremy Elkins (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 255 (emphasis added).

[16]Estlund, "Truth," 262 (emphasis added).

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natural interpretation of the phrase "justificatory practices," they are part of public reasoning somehow understood.

Cohen also endorses the non-permissive reading of what he calls "public reason," saying that Rawls suggests "we can have truth or public reason, but not both. He embraces the idea of public reason as common ground under conditions of doctrinal disagreement, and concludes that we should leave truth aside."[17] Cohen says that "Although I find the idea of public reason compelling, I disagree with Rawls's claim that the concept of truth *finds no place in it*."[18] He goes on to emphasize that:

> Rawls's point … is that the concept of truth is unavailable. Thus we cannot while operating within democracy's public reason, make claims about the nature of truth (and whether it has a nature), about its importance, or relationship to justification, objectivity, and reasonableness. Nor can we make assertions about the truth of any elements of our views, including our comprehensive doctrine, or our views about justice, *or our understanding of how the society works*.[19]

Because he thinks Rawls claims that "public reason lacks the concept" of truth,[20] Cohen dubs the view that his non-permissive reading attributes to Rawls Rawls's "No Concept view" of public reason.[21]

Santurri, Zerilli, Estlund, and Cohen cite a number of passages from *Political Liberalism* to support their readings. All but Zerilli cite Rawls's claim that "political liberalism, rather than referring to its political conception of justice as true, refers to it as reasonable instead."[22] All also cite the page where he says that "within itself the political conception does without the concept of truth."[23] And all cite Rawls's discussion of political constructivism, where he says that "political liberalism … need not go beyond its conception of a reasonable judgment and may leave the concept of a true moral judgment to comprehensive doctrines."[24] What licences the move from claims about what political liberalism does and does not do, to claims about the relationship between public reason and truth?

Let's understand political liberalism as an approach to certain fundamental questions in political philosophy the practitioners of which—call them "political liberals"—assume what Rawls calls "the fact of reasonable pluralism."[25] Because political liberals assume reasonable pluralism, they attempt to answer

[17]Joshua Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2009): 23.
[18]Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," 5 (emphasis added).
[19]Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," 9–10 (emphasis added).
[20]Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," 20.
[21]Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," 6.
[22]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xx.
[23]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 94.
[24]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 116.
[25]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xvii.

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those fundamental questions without addressing the moral and metaphysical questions on which many political philosophies have been premised, such as questions about the nature and ends of persons. Instead, political liberals start from ideas found in the public political culture of democratic societies. The results are political conceptions of justice.

Rawls's political conception includes distributive principles and a principle of legitimacy. It also includes guidelines of public reasons which say what considerations have justificatory force in favor of political outcomes. The guidelines spell out the duty of civility and elucidate the second feature of deliberative democracy by saying what kinds of considerations citizens must appeal to in their attempts to justify political outcomes. They also say what considerations citizens should not appeal to, since appealing to them—or appealing to them without offering other, public, reasons besides—would run afoul of the third feature of deliberative democracy, which implies citizens' duty to address one another as free equals.

The values and principles furnished by a political conception of justice therefore provide what Rawls calls "a guiding framework for deliberation,"[26] by which I take him to mean a guiding framework for public deliberation. In saying that political liberalism does without the concept of truth, and makes do with reasonability instead, Rawls might be making one or more of several claims about the exclusion of truth from the reasoning or public deliberation which takes place using that framework. Among the things he might mean are:

(1) Public deliberation need not include truth-claims for its political outcomes to be justified.

Another possibility is:

(2) Truth-claims are never public reasons.

Since public reasons are claims with reason-giving force in public deliberation, (2) implies that truth-claims never have such force even if the propositional content of which truth is predicated is in fact true.

(1) and (2) concern public reasons understood as considerations which count in public deliberation. But in saying that political liberalism does without the concept of truth, Rawls might be staking a claim about public reason*ing*. Because, as we saw in the previous section, "public reasoning" can mean one of a couple of things, there are a couple of claims about public reasoning Rawls might be making. One takes public reasoning narrowly and says:

(3) Truth-claims have no place in public reasoning, understood as that part of public deliberation that includes only reasons which are public.

Another takes public reasoning widely and says:

(4) Truth-claims are never public reasons. Even though they are not, they could still enter into public reasoning but those who enter them thereby violate the duty of civility.

[26]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 368.

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But in saying that political liberalism does without concept of truth, Rawls might not be referring to such reasons at all. He might instead be referring to the defense he—writing as a political liberal—provides for justice as fairness and its "guiding framework." That defense is offered in the background culture rather than in the public forum. It is founded on basic intuitive ideas of the person and society, and draws out their implications. And so, in saying that political liberalism does without the concept of truth, Rawls might mean

(5) The presentation of political liberalism should defend the basic ideas on which it is based, and the principles drawn out on their bases, as reasonable, while not addressing the question of their truth.

How are these five claims related? (1) clearly does not imply (2). For truth-claims could be public, contrary to (2), but unnecessary for the justification of political outcomes, as (1) says, because for any justified outcome, there is always a set of public reasons sufficient to justify it which does not include truth-claims. But if there are some political outcomes that are justified, and justification is always by sufficient public reasons, then (2) does imply (1). Moreover, (2) clearly implies (3). (3) does not, however, imply (2) since one could consistently hold that truth-claims have no place in public reasoning narrowly construed, while holding that there is some other explanation for their having no place in it than that they are not public reasons.

Because (1) does not have any of the allegedly problematic implications for Rawls that I discuss in the next section, I ignore it in what follows. What is most important for my purposes is that (5) is consistent with, but logically independent of, (2), (3), and (4). To state a possibility I elaborate later, Rawls could—without inconsistency—propose as reasonable a guideline of public reasoning according to which some truth-claims count as public reasons, while remaining silent about the truth of that guideline.

We have seen that Estlund reads Rawls as "banning truth from our proper justificatory practices."[27] Whether he takes Rawls to endorse (2) depends upon what he means by "proper justificatory practices." I have said that public deliberation is the exchange of putatively justificatory reasons for political outcomes. When citizens engage in public reasoning so understood, they exchange reasons they take to contribute to the justification of the outcomes they favor. If Estlund took public deliberation to be a justificatory practice because citizens engaged in it try to justify the outcomes they favor, then he would read Rawls as taking the wide view of public reason and banning truth from it, perhaps on pain of violating the duty of civility. In that case, he would read Rawls as endorsing (4). But I do not believe that is what Estlund has in mind. I believe he takes "proper justificatory practice" to refer to the practices of providing considerations that really do justify a political outcome. Taken this way, proper justificatory practice includes the practice of a court's or a legislature's displaying reasons that really do justify the outcomes it has reached, and

[27]Estlund, "Truth," 262.

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of citizens adducing reasons that really do have justificatory force. This is the set of practices from which Estlund thinks Rawls bans truth. He takes Rawls to ban it because he reads Rawls as endorsing (2).

By contrast, I believe Cohen takes Rawls to endorse (3). It is possible to hold that truth-claims have no place in public reasoning because truth-claims are never public reasons, and so to endorse (3) because one endorses (2). But (3) does not entail (2), and so Cohen is not committed to thinking that Rawls endorses (2) just because he thinks Rawls endorses (3). There is a passage, to which I shall return, in which Cohen discusses someone who believes that human beings have a right to religious liberty on the basis of natural law. That person "is simply not permitted to say everything he or she believes about that proposition—in particular, not to say that it is true and a consequence of more fundamental truths."[28] If "not permitted" means "not morally permitted," and if the duty of civility is the source of the moral prohibition, then Cohen would read Rawls as endorsing (4). But I take Cohen to mean that the prohibition is conceptual rather than moral: he takes Rawls to mean that the conceptual resources of public reason do not permit the person "to say everything he or she believes." And so the quoted remark is consistent with my claim that Cohen takes Rawls to endorse (3) rather than (4).

One advantage of distinguishing (2), (3), (4), and (5) is that the distinctions make it possible to pry apart versions of the non-permissive reading—those according to which Rawls endorses (2) or (3)—which may initially have seemed quite similar.[29] They also make it possible to distinguish my reading from others. For on my reading, many of the passages in *Political Liberalism* and elsewhere that are taken to support the imputation of (2) or (3) to Rawls in fact support the imputation of (5). Because (5) is compatible with the denials of (2), (3), and (4), this leaves open the possibility that Rawlsian public reasoning can allow for at least some truth-claims.

3. Untoward Implications

If some version of the non-permissive reading of Rawlsian public reason is right, then Rawls's view has implications that seem problematic, some of which have been surveyed by Cohen and Estlund.

No True Guidelines

Rawls says that "each of us must have, and be ready to explain, a criterion of what principles and guidelines we think other citizens (who are also free and equal) may reasonably be expected to endorse along with us."[30] Each of us

[28]Cohen, "Truth and Political Liberalism," 19.

[29]Cohen distinguishes his reading of Rawls from Estlund's at "Truth and Political Liberalism," 19–20, but on different grounds than I do.

[30]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 226.

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must have and be ready to explain guidelines which say what reasons we take to be public. Rawls does not say that each of us must be ready to explain those guidelines in the public forum. But the possibility that guidelines could be entered into public deliberation raises the question of what role, if any, they can play in justifying a political outcome. (2), which says that truth-claims are never public reasons, implies that truth-claims about those guidelines cannot play any justificatory role at all.

I have said that Estlund thinks Rawls endorses (2). According to Rawls's guidelines, the reasons that are admissible in justification are reasons that are acceptable to reasonable citizens. But, Estlund observes, there are many possible guidelines, each of which identifies a constituency to whom reasons must be acceptable to be admissible, and each of which is acceptable to the constituency it identifies. So each is, by its own lights, admissible in public justification. How, Estlund asks, can political liberals claim that the admissibility criterion which refers to reasonable persons is itself admissible and the criterion which refers to Branch Davidians is not? Estlund thinks that if political liberals are to claim that their guidelines are uniquely admissible, they have to claim that they are true.[31] So if Rawls endorses (2), and if defending Rawlsian public reasons as uniquely admissible is something that must be done in public reasoning, then Rawls cannot consistently defend his guidelines in the only way Estlund claims they can be defended—namely, as true.

No Soundness

Public reasoning involves inferential reasoning and the defense of claims reached by such reasoning. Inferences which are valid and sound are generally thought of as truth-preserving. The natural way to defend the conclusion of an inference is to say that its truth is guaranteed by its logical relationship to premises which are true. But if Rawls endorses (2), then that defense does not contribute to the justification of the political outcome the inference is said to justify. And if he endorses (3), as I have said Cohen takes him to, then such a defense cannot be part of public reasoning. I call these implications of (2) and (3) *No Soundness.* But *No Soundness* seems implausible.

No Truth-Claims Backing the Overlap

The Rawls of *Political Liberalism* thinks stability for the right reasons is brought about, in part, by an overlapping consensus. Such a consensus obtains when reasonable comprehensive doctrines endorse the conception or conceptions of justice that well-order society, each for its own reasons. Some citizens, following doctrines that take part in the consensus, may think that claims of justice implied by the political conception or conceptions are

[31]Estlund, "Insularity," 254.

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true. They may, for example, be natural law or natural rights theorists who think it is true that citizens are entitled to equal and extensive basic liberties because they are made in God's image or endowed with those rights by their creator. But if Rawls endorses (3) then, should they assert the truth of citizens' rights claims or what they take to be the philosophical bases of those claims in public deliberation, they thereby cease to engage in public reasoning.[32] If Rawls endorses (4), then they violate the duty of civility. I call the implication of (3) *No Truth-Claims Backing the Overlap*. Cohen, who I have said takes Rawls to endorse (3), is troubled by *No Truth-Claims*.[33]

The Irrelevant Truth of Science

Other untoward implication of the non-permissive reading can be grouped under what we might call *The Irrelevant Truth of Science.* If Rawls endorses (2) then he must think that a change in the tax code—say, an increase in the capital gains tax—cannot be justified by the claim that it is true that the tax would decrease inequality or that under the current tax regime, the top 1% have captured an increasing share of national income and wealth. And he must think restrictions on freedom of assembly to prevent the spread of disease cannot be justified by truth-claims about the findings of epidemiology. Estlund, who thinks Rawls endorses (2), seems to read Rawls as committed to these implications.[34]

If Rawls endorses (3), as Cohen thinks he does, then he must think that citizens in the public forum who—to use Cohen's phrase—"make assertions of truth about … [their] understanding of how society works"[35] are not engaging in public reasoning. And so they would not be engaging in public reasoning when they assert the truth of the claim that affirmative action would increase opportunities for minority students by increasing minority enrollment at elite universities. And because the truth-claim is not an assertion in public reasoning, the claim that it is true that affirmative action would increase opportunities cannot contribute to the justification of affirmative action.

I am troubled by *Irrelevant Truth* because I find it implausible that citizens who assert the truth of scientific claims in the public forum thereby cease to engage in public reasoning. Someone might try to draw the sting from this objection by saying that scientific claims can be entered into public reasoning, even if assertions of their truth cannot, and that they can be entered because

[32]As Zerilli puts it, Rawls would have participants in public debate "bracket claims to the moral truth of human equality." *Theory of Judgment*, 157.

[33]Cohen, "Truth and Political Liberalism," 18.

[34]In "Insularity," Estlund raises the possibility that Rawls means only to deny that truth-claims about moral doctrines can justify, but "suspect[s] this would be too permissive to fit with the larger view," 256, n. 11.

[35]Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," 9–10.

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all reasonable views accept them as reasonable. But I also find it implausible that what allows scientific claims to play a part in the justification of political outcomes is their reasonability. I agree that these findings are reasonable, in some sense of that term. Indeed, I think it is unreasonable to reject them, again in some sense of the term. But these senses of "reasonable" and "unreasonable" are not the senses Rawls attaches to those terms.

Considerations are reasonable in Rawls's sense because of their acceptability to reasonable persons, understood as those who want to cooperate on fair terms and who recognize the burdens of judgment.[36] Mathematical truths and well-confirmed scientific findings may be accepted by persons who are reasonable in this sense, but they may also be accepted by persons who are not. Moreover, what makes it reasonable to accept them—in the sense of "reasonable" in which it is—is that they are the results of the most reliable methods we have of ascertaining truth in their domains. It is reasonable to accept them, and unreasonable to reject them, because of the confidence we should have in their truth. That we should have confidence in asserting their truth is, it seems to me, what ultimately gives them their justificatory force, contrary to (2).

Finally, if the imputation of (2), (3), or (4) to Rawls is right—and if (2), (3), and (4) have these implications—then it is hard to see how Rawls could consistently favor deliberative democracy, understood as having the defining features laid out in Section 1.

As we have seen, the first feature is that "political agents or their representatives aim to collectively deliberate and vote their sincere and informed judgments regarding measures conducive to the common good of citizens." As Cohen says, "[t]ruth is so closely connected with intuitive notions of thinking, asserting, believing, judging, and reasoning that it is difficult to understand what leaving it behind amounts to."[37] Indeed, we might think, what participants in deliberation try to do is convince their interlocutors of the truth of their political views. So the first feature of deliberative democracy seems to require that truth not be left behind.

The second feature says that deliberation requires the exchange of public reasons. If, as (3) implies, public reason does "leav[e truth] behind," then the first and second features of deliberative democracy cannot both be satisfied. The second feature also seems likely to conflict with *No True Guidelines*, since citizens who recognize a duty to deliberate using public reasons seem likely to assert—and to assert the truth of—that duty in their deliberations. The third feature seems inconsistent with *No Truth-Claims Backing the Overlap*, since "seeing one another as democratic citizens" seems equivalent to "affirming that others are" such citizens, and to affirm something is to judge it true. Citizens who recognize others as equals may well be moved to say why. But according to (4), they would violate the duty of civility by doing so.

[36]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 50–59.
[37]Cohen, "Truth and Public Reason," 15.

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Because Estlund thinks Rawls is committed to (2) and Cohen thinks he is committed to (3), both think that Rawls needs to revise his view so as to avoid its untoward implications. Estlund contends that Rawls was wrong to hold (2) and that he must allow truth "in our justificatory practices" after all. Cohen develops a political conception of truth which he thinks serves the purposes of public reason while avoiding the implications he finds problematic, thus contending—in effect—that Rawls was wrong to hold (3). Cohen, at least, identifies himself as a deliberative democrat.[38] Perhaps it is the conflicts and inconsistencies between what they take to be the implications of Rawls's view and the demands of deliberative democracy that move both Cohen and Estlund to look for ways Rawlsian public reason could be revised so as to accommodate some claims to truth.

There is another way to avoid the conclusion that Rawlsian public reason has the untoward implications that motivate these revisions. The untoward implications discussed above are said to follow from Rawlsian political liberalism because Rawls is said to be committed to (2), (3), or (4). The implications could be avoided by successfully contesting that interpretive claim. In Section 5, I cast doubt on the claim that Rawls endorses (2), (3), and (4). But first, I want to consider:

(5) The presentation of political liberalism should defend the basic ideas on which it is based, and the principles drawn out on their bases, as reasonable, while not addressing the question of their truth.

4. What do the Texts Support?

It seems unquestionable that Rawls endorses (5) since it seems unquestionable that it describes the way Rawls himself presents political liberalism. That it does makes (5) importantly different from (2)–(4) because they concern reasons or reasoning in the public forum while (5) does not. In this section, I question the textual support for imputing (2)–(4) by arguing that passages which are often taken to support their imputation to Rawls in fact support the imputation of (5).

We saw that Zerilli takes Rawls's "method of avoidance" to apply to citizens' public reasoning and to imply that, for him, "claims to the truth of one's beliefs, values, or judgments have no place."[39] If this were what the method of avoidance implied, then Rawls would be committed to (3). But what Rawls says about the method of avoidance supports a claim that is critical to my reading, the claim that many of the passages in which Rawls

[38]Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in *Philosophy, Politics, Democracy*, ed. Cohen. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[39]Zerilli, *Theory of Judgment*, 144–45.

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forswears appeal to truth refer to his own exposition of justice as fairness. He says that the method applies "to the presentation of justice as fairness and … how it is set up."[40] He never says that it applies to citizens' public reasoning.

In a passage which is taken to support the imputation of (2) or (3), Rawls does say that "within itself the political conception does without the concept of truth."[41] But the phrase "within itself" and the context are crucial. The passage is part of an extended contrast between rational intuitionism and constructivism. The rational intuitionist, Rawls says, claims that moral principles are arrived at by accessing a prior and independent moral order. When Rawls says that "within itself the political conception does without the concept of truth" in this context, I take him to mean that the political constructivist can show how to arrive at political principles without claiming to access such an order, by constructing them on the basis of conceptions of the person and society. And so, in laying out the political conception, he need not appeal to the concept of truth or make claims about being true to such an order.

In a passage in "Political Not Metaphysical" that might be taken to support the imputation of (2) or (3), Rawls says

> The aim of justice as fairness as a political conception is practical, and not metaphysical or epistemological. That is, it presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve as a basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal persons.[42]

The impersonality of Rawls's language is confusing, since justice as fairness does not present itself. Rawls presents it. I take him to be referring here to *how* he presents it. He presents or proposes it as a possible basis for consensus, rather than as a conception that is true. But this is compatible with people who accept his proposal reasoning with it as if it is true. It is therefore compatible with the denial of (2) and (3), and so does not lend them support.

In "Reply to Habermas", Rawls does say:

> Political liberalism does not use the concept of truth applied to its own political (moral) judgments. Here it says that political judgments are reasonable or unreasonable; and it lays out political ideals, principles and standards as criteria of the reasonable. … For the political purpose of discussing questions of constitutional essentials and basic justice political liberalism views this idea of the reasonable as sufficient. The use of the concept of truth is not rejected or questioned, but left to comprehensive doctrines to use or deny, or use some other idea instead.[43]

The remark about the sufficiency of the "idea of the reasonable" might be thought to tell in favor of (2) or (3), but I do not believe that it does.

[40]Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 403–04, n. 22.
[41]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 94.
[42]Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 394.
[43]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 394–95.

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For one thing, the sufficiency of the concept of reasonability would not imply that truth-claims are not good reasons or have no place in public reasoning; it would only imply their superfluity. For another, here as in the passage from "Political Not Metaphysical," the impersonality of the phrases "political liberalism says" and "political liberalism views" make the whole passage difficult to interpret. On my reading of this passage as of the earlier one, Rawls is not talking about public reasoning. Rather, when he uses these impersonal phrases, what he really means is what *he* says and views. When he puts forward political liberalism, he does not put it forward as true, nor does he say that truth is necessary for "discussing questions of constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice." But as I argue in the next section, if some citizens believe that asserting the tenets of political liberalism are true is necessary, Rawls leaves it open to them to do so, provided that their interventions are also received as reasonable.

My claim that the texts support (5) rather than (2), (3), and (4) might seem to depend on a distinction I drew between the former claim and the latter three: that (5) refers to reasoning in the background while (2), (3), and (4) refer to reasons or reasoning in the public forum. But, it may be objected, that distinction is untenable once what Rawls calls "the full publicity condition" is taken into account. For when that condition is satisfied, "everything that we would say—you and I—when we set up justice as fairness and reflect why we proceed in one way rather than another" is "publicly available" and "present in the public culture."[44] If what is present in the public culture can be introduced into public reasoning, then my distinction between (5) on the one hand, and (2), (3), and (4) on the other, is effaced.

But this objection can be lodged by those who would impute (2), (3), or (4) to Rawls only if they are willing to saddle him with inconsistency. Those who would impute (2) or (4) to him would have to read him as thinking both that what is present in the public culture can be entered into public reasoning and that truth-claims are never good public reasons. But since the public culture includes truth-claims,[45] Rawls could not consistently hold both. Those who impute (3) would have to read him as holding both that what he says when he sets up justice as fairness can enter into public reasoning and that public reasoning lacks the concept of truth. But since among the claims Rawls makes when he sets up justice as fairness is that "political liberalism does not use the concept of truth," he cannot consistently hold both of those theses either.

Why does Rawls present political liberalism without putting it forward as true? The phrase "some other idea instead" in the passage just above

[44]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 67.

[45]According to Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 14, the public culture includes "historic texts and documents that are common knowledge." In the US, these presumably include the American Declaration of Independence, which refers to self-evident truths.

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provides a clue. Political conceptions are put forward in the hope that they will be the objects of an overlapping consensus. Among the comprehensive doctrines whose consent is hoped for, there will be some—like the natural law view to which Cohen refers—according to which principles that bear on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice can have truth-values. These comprehensive doctrines will apply the concept of truth to practical principles. But there may be other doctrines according to which those principles are not the sorts of things that can be true or false. According to these doctrines, Rawls's principles are, in one respect at least, like the rules of a game: they are not truth-apt because there is nothing they are or can be true of. And so rather than using the concept of truth, these doctrines predicate "some other idea" of the principles and rules they favor, such as reasonability. Proposing a conception of justice without claiming truth for it leaves open the possibility that such views can be among those that overlap on the conception.[46] I suspect that the Kantian constructivism Rawls endorsed in the Dewey lectures is one such view.[47] If so, then he was intimately familiar with the kind of comprehensive view that required him to refrain from presenting justice as fairness as true once he turned to political liberalism.

5. What of (1)–(4)?

(5) is logically independent of (2), (3), and (4) so, even if the passages which are usually taken to support the attribution of (2), (3), or (4) to Rawls are better read as supporting the attribution of (5), that does not show that Rawls does not endorse one of (2)–(4). Of these possibilities, (4) is the one whose imputation to Rawls can most obviously be dispensed with. It says:

(4) Truth-claims are never public reasons. Even though they are not, they could still enter into public reasoning but those who enter them thereby violate the duty of civility.

To see how the imputation of (4) can be dispensed with, consider how we might be led to the reading that imputes it.

[46]I believe this to be the best explanation of a passage from *Political Liberalism*, 94, that Cohen and Estlund take to support their readings: "constructivism does not use or deny the concept of truth; nor does it question the concept, nor could it say that the concept of truth and its idea of the reasonable are the same. Rather *within itself* the political conception does without the concept of truth … One thought is that the idea of the reasonable makes an overlapping consensus of reasonable doctrines possible in ways the concept of truth may not." (emphasis added). Shortly afterwards, Rawls writes "Political constructivism doesn't use this idea of truth," adding that "to assert or to deny a doctrine of this kind goes beyond the bounds of the political conception of justice framed so far as possible to be acceptable to all reasonable comprehensive doctrines." (114).

[47]Rawls, *Collected Papers*, 303–58.

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Paradigm cases of reasons which are not public are reasons drawn from moral and religious doctrines. These are not reasons that can be recognized as such by citizens just as free equals because their recognition as reasons depends upon the acceptance of the doctrines from which they are drawn. But though moral and religious claims are paradigms of non-public reasons, claims which depend upon contested philosophical theses—such as contested theses in the philosophy of mind—are non-public as well. The nature of truth is also philosophically contested and so, it might be thought, Rawls would recognize that assertions of truth are no less problematic than assertions of claims about the nature of persons and minds. Thus truth-claims are relevantly similar to other reasons which are not public, and that is why they are not public either, just as (4) says. If Rawls also believes that the introduction of non-public reasons into public deliberation violates the duty of civility, then he holds that the introduction of truth-claims violates that duty, as (4) also says.

But the last step in this argument is contrary to Rawls's proviso. According to the proviso:

> reasonable [comprehensive] doctrines may be introduced in public reason at any time, provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support.[48]

I take "public reason" here to mean "public reasoning." And I take the first phrase of the proviso—that "reasonable [comprehensive] doctrines may be introduced into public reason[ing] at any time"—to show that Rawls takes a wide view of public reasoning, according to which the phrase "public reasoning" denotes the whole set of deliberations that leads to a justified political outcome.

This part of the proviso indicates that public reasoning so understood can include reasons which are not public, such as contested claims in morals, religion, or metaphysics. If truth-claims are relevantly similar to those claims, then this part of the proviso also allows for their introduction into public reasoning, as the second sentence of (4) says. But if truth-claims are relevantly similar to other contested claims, then the proviso also seems to imply—contrary to (4)—that their introduction into public reasoning does not violate the duty of civility, since the introduction of those claims does not violate it. So if truth-claims are relevantly similar to other contested claims, Rawls's proviso implies that he does not endorse (4). And if they are not relevantly similar, then it is not clear what ground would be for imputing (4) to him, since the reasoning I sketched above supporting its imputation depends upon relevant similarity.

Recall that (3) says:

[48]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xlix–l.

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(3) Truth-claims have no place in public reasoning, understood as that part of public deliberation that includes only reasons which are public.

Perhaps Rawls would endorse (3). But if he consistently holds the wide view of public reasoning that is at work in his proviso, then he does not actually endorse it. The argument that he would needs to be qualified to make clear that (3) uses "public reasoning" more narrowly than Rawls himself does.

In "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," Rawls states the proviso differently, saying that it "allows us to introduce *into political discussion* at any time our comprehensive doctrine."[49] Rawls does not explain a shift of language that seems puzzling once the wide and narrow views of public reasoning are distinguished. One possible explanation is that he takes "public political discussion" and "public reasoning" to be co-referential, as the wide view holds, so that the conclusion in the text is correct. Another is that he came to think the two are distinct and that the narrow view of public reasoning is correct. In that case, (3) could be imputed to him in unqualified form. But what seemed problematic about the imputation of (3)—or part of what seemed problematic about its imputation—is that it implies *No Truth-Claims Backing the Overlap.* But since the proviso would allow the introduction of comprehensive doctrine into public political discussion, it is hard to see what is problematic about that implication or why Rawls's acceptance of (3) would motivate revision of his view.

I suggested earlier that the difference between the two ways of understanding public reasoning is significant for our understanding of deliberative democracy. Before I elaborate this, let us turn to the claim that Rawls endorses:

(2) Truth-claims are never public reasons.

(2) is the first sentence of (4). When I asked whether Rawls endorses (4), I laid out reasons he might have for accepting it. I said that truth-claims are not public because truth is a philosophically contested concept, as are the concepts employed in paradigm cases of non-public reasons. But it seems to me that whether truth-claims are contested depends upon the contestability of the propositional content to which the truth-predicate is attached. Truth-claims about morals and religion, even if admissible into public reasoning understood widely, seem controversial in a way that truth-claims about empirical matters are not. If that is right then, despite what I said above for the sake of argument, truth-claims about empirical matters can be public reasons and (2) cannot be attributed to Rawls without qualification.

There is also some textual basis for thinking it cannot be. In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls says:

[49]Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 144 (emphasis added).

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> the most appropriate design of a constitution is not a question to be settled by considerations of political philosophy alone, but depends on understanding the scope and limits of political and social institutions and how they can be made to work effectively. These things depend on history and how institutions are arranged. Of course, here the concept of truth applies.[50]

Reasoning about constitutional design is conducted in the public forum since it is conducted at stage 2 of Rawls's Four-Stage sequence.[51] That reasoning depends upon "the scope and limits of political and social institutions and how they can be made to work effectively," and ultimately upon a society's history. The justification of a choice of constitution depends upon empirical claims. It seems incontestable that, as Rawls observes, "here the concept of truth applies." If the empirical claims can help to justify a "design of the constitution" as "most appropriate," then why not the assertions that those empirical claims are true? These assertions may not be necessary to justify the design of a constitution; perhaps the empirical claims suffice. That would lend some support to the imputation of (1). But if the truth-claims can play any role at all, then they are public reasons, contrary to (2).

Earlier in *Political Liberalism*, Rawls also seems to allow appeal to truth in the justification of legislation that bears on fundamental questions. He says:

> As far as possible, the knowledge and ways of reasoning that ground our affirming the principles of justice and their application to constitutional essentials and basic justice are to rest on the plain truths now widely accepted, or available, to citizens generally.[52]

If Rawls thinks the application of principles of justice to a matter of basic justice like income distribution can be justified by claims which are widely accepted as true, it is hard to see why he would think the claim that they are true could not do the same justificatory work. If he thinks they could, then he does not endorse (2) in unqualified form.

In Section 3, I surveyed implications of the non-permissive reading of Rawls that motivated suggestions for revising Rawlsian public reason. The claim that Rawlsian public reason has those implications depended upon the imputation of (2), (3), and (4) to him. I have argued that many of the passages that were taken to support the imputations are best read as supporting the imputation of (5). I have also argued that Rawls does not endorse (4), that (3) can be attributed to him only if "public reasoning" in it is taken in a narrower sense than the sense Rawls attaches to that phrase, and that (2) can be attributed to him only if qualified so as to allow that truth-claims about empirical matters can be public reasons. These arguments undercut the

[50]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 408–9.
[51]Rawls, A *Theory of Justice*, 171ff.
[52]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 225.

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support for *No Truth-Claims Backing the Overlap, The Irrelevant Truth of Science,* and *No Soundness.* Qualifying (2) in the way that I have suggested does not undercut the argument for *No True Guidelines.* But that implication depends upon the supposition that a defense of admissible reasons is itself a necessary part of public reasoning. It is not clear that it is. Proposed revisions of and additions to Rawls's account of public reason may be useful, but not because that account has the problematic implications that are alleged.

6. Deliberative Democracy Revisited

By undercutting support for at least some of the untoward implications, the arguments offered here do much to block the further implications that the non-permissive reading was said to have for Rawlsian deliberative democracy. They also open the possibility that Rawlsian public reasoning is more congenial to truth-claims than the non-permissive reading allows. This possibility, in turn, affects how we fill out the ideal of deliberative democracy.

As we have seen, the proviso says that "reasonable [comprehensive] doctrines may be introduced in public reason at any time, provided that in due course public reasons, given by a reasonable political conception, are presented sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are introduced to support."[53] As I read this, natural law adherents may defend claims about religious liberty, for instance, on grounds drawn from their comprehensive doctrine, provided that in due course they defend those claims on the basis of political values as well.

I take Rawls's proviso to suggest that what he wants to rule out is citizens moving *from* their belief that a proposition is true on the basis of their comprehensive doctrine *to* the thought that its truth is sufficient to give that proposition reason-giving force in public deliberation. If a proposition drawn from comprehensive doctrine is to have reason-giving force, it must be reasonable and supportable as such on the basis of political values. Citizens are permitted to introduce claims from their comprehensive doctrines that they believe to be true, provided they also believe those claims to be reasonable and are prepared to show that they are. And so the problem against which Rawls warns is not that of citizens' introducing what they explicitly describe as truth-claims into public deliberation. The problem is that of citizens' taking their truth to be sufficient for introducing them as good reasons. Thus, speaking of political conceptions rather than their constituent propositions, Rawls says that "holding a political conception as true, *and for that reason alone* the one suitable basis of public reason" is a mistake.[54]

In societies as we know them, ordinary citizens rarely engage in public deliberation because they rarely enter the public political forum. But "[a]t the

[53]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, xlix–l.
[54]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 129 (emphasis added).

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heart of the institutionalization of the deliberative procedure," Cohen writes, "is the existence of arenas in which citizens can propose issues for the political agenda and participate in debate about those issues."[55] And so if contemporary democracies were deliberative democracies, perhaps ordinary citizens would participate in public deliberation to a much greater extent than they currently do. On my picture of how they would deliberate, those who think their comprehensive doctrines have implications for public policy would draw out those implications in deliberation, and may well articulate the metaphysical backing of their views. In doing so, they must satisfy Rawls's proviso, and so justify their policy conclusions by appeal to public reasons "in due course." The question is what "in due course" requires of them.

We have seen that citizens must believe the positions they advocate are reasonable and must be ready to show that they are. But accounts of public reason are regrettably short on the study of conversational pragmatics. My picture of public deliberation depends upon a fact that is not sufficiently taken into account in the public reason literature: that citizens engaged in it operate with knowledge of background and context. Rawls gives some indication of this, saying that

> [w]hat public reason asks is that citizens be able to explain their vote to one another in terms of a reasonable balance of political values, *it being understood by everyone* that of course the plurality of reasonable comprehensive doctrines held by citizens is thought by them to provide further and often transcendent backing for those values.[56]

Rawls also says that, in the public justification of a conception of justice, citizens do not look into the content of one another's comprehensive doctrines but "take into account and give some weight to only the fact—the existence—of the reasonable overlapping consensus itself."[57] But he does not ask how citizens come to know that others' comprehensive doctrines overlap on the political conception. Their coming to know this surely involves their gaining some acquaintance with the comprehensive doctrines that are widely adhered to in their society. That acquaintance is part of the background knowledge citizens bring to public deliberation. Having this background knowledge, they may recognize the goodwill of someone who argues for racial equality or religious liberty on the basis of her comprehensive doctrine, and see that she is defending a position that is reasonable and supportable by political values. In that case, they may never press her to provide a defense based on those values. "In due course" never comes.[58]

It may be thought that, when there is an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice, it is mutual knowledge among citizens that

[55]Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," 35.
[56]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 243 (emphasis added).
[57]Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 387.
[58]I therefore believe Rawls greatly overstates when he says that "citizens in a pluralist liberal democratic society realize that they cannot … *even approach mutual*

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all are collectively committed to reasoning within that conception just as the philosopher proposed it, and so to eschewing the concept of truth. It may be thought that, when there is an overlapping consensus, there is overlap on (2), (3), or (4). But nothing in the idea of an overlapping consensus compels this reading. My view is that, when there is an overlapping consensus, part of the object of the consensus is that public deliberation be conducted as the proviso permits, and the proviso permits appeal to a wide range of claims, including appeals to truth.

Conclusion

I have argued that Rawlsian political liberalism allows for appeals to truth in public deliberation. It can therefore avoid what looked like worrisome conflicts with, and inconsistencies with, the commitments of deliberative democracy laid out in Section 1. Deliberative democracies rest on the democratization of persons—on the leveling of hierarchies and on the recognition that every person is equally worthy of concern and respect. Social media in extant democracies seem to me to have led to what we might call "the democratization of opinion," to the view that everyone's opinion is equally worthy of attention and deserving of equal weight. If every opinion is deserving of equal weight, regardless of differences in accuracy, then truth has ceased to matter.[59]

Some of the charges I mentioned at the outset—that political liberalism is responsible for this state of affairs, and that polarization is its legacy—go wrong in a number of ways. Not the least of these is exaggerating the impact that Rawls's thought has had on workaday politics and political debate, where its impact seems regrettably small. The charge that political liberalism's treatment of truth would leave deliberation hamstrung in the face of

understanding, on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines." *Law of Peoples*, 125 (emphasis added). He acknowledged this overstatement in conversation.

[59]Perhaps it will be alleged that Rawls's view encourages the democratization of reasonable opinion: if all reasonable opinions are worthy of respect, then the question of whether any one of them is true has ceased to matter. But that this is not Rawls's view is clear from an important passage which Eva Odzuck has called to my attention where it is clear that differences in truth-value can be significant, and that there is more than one point of view from which significance is to be assessed. In *Political Liberalism* he writes: "Thus, the truth of any one doctrine in the consensus guarantees that all the reasonable doctrines yield the right conception of political justice, even though they do not do so for the right reasons as specified by the one true doctrine. When citizens differ, not all can be fully correct, for some are correct for the wrong reasons; yet if one of their doctrines should be true, all citizens are correct, politically speaking: that is, they all appeal to a sound political conception of justice." (128).

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crises like the COVID pandemic, alleged by some of the critics I surveyed at the outset, is also mistaken. For that charge depends upon misinterpreting what political liberals can and cannot say about truth—and in particular, about the truth of empirical claims. That is among the misinterpretations I have tried to correct.

The democratization of opinion is one side of a coin whose obverse is the kind of disdain for expertise that was evident in the US during the pandemic, a disdain distilled by Laura Ingraham's dismissal of scientific methods of ascertaining truth. All societies depend upon expertise in their quotidian operations and in times of crisis. Disdain for it in times of crisis can hamstring democratic deliberation. Deliberative democracies should hold those who claim expertise to demanding norms of transparency and accountability, but they cannot dispense with them. Rawls is badly misunderstood if his remarks about truth are taken to suggest some disagreement with this view. He is similarly misunderstood if those remarks are thought to give aid and comfort to the indifference toward, and contempt for, truth that are sadly characteristic of much political discourse in the contemporary US.

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