In Defense of Idealization in Public Reason

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Abstract

Contemporary public reason liberalism holds that coercion must be publicly justi-fied to an *idealized* constituency. Coercion must be justified to all *qualified* points of view, not the points of view held by actual persons. Critics, in particular Nicholas Wolterstorff and David Enoch, have complained that idealization, by idealizing away what actual people accept, risks authoritarianism and disrespect by forcing people to comply with laws they in fact reject. I argue that idealization can withstand this criticism if it satisfies two conditions. First, the standards of idealization, such as the norms of rationality and information, must be grounded in the present commitments of the large majority of members of the public. Second, the standards of idealization must be moderate; that is, they cannot be used to attribute reasons to citizens that stray too far from their actual commitments.

Contemporary public reason liberalism holds that coercion or moral authority must be publicly justified to an *idealized* constituency (Quong 2011, 4). These forms of interference and directives must be justified to all *qualified* points of view, not the points of view held by actual persons (Estlund 2008, 45). Normal persons are too irrational and vicious for us to allow their actual acceptances to determine what is justified. Consequently, public reason liberals clean up citizens' "epistemic pock-marks" in order to generate a philosophically attractive account of justifying moral and political authority over other citizens (Eberle 2002, 200). Idealizing away from what actual people would accept has led many to criticize idealization, however. Following Christopher Eberle's lead, David Enoch and Nicholas Wolterstorff have complained that idealization risks authoritarianism and paternalism by forcing peo-ple to comply with laws that they *would* accept if properly idealized despite the fact that they *in fact* reject (Wolterstorff 2012, 31–35; Enoch 2013).

I argue that idealization can withstand these criticisms if it meets two condi-tions. First, the standards of idealization, such as principles of rational inference and available information, should be grounded in the present commitments of the

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