Reason and Democracy: Are the Cognitive and Moral Demands of Public Reason Excessive?

Catherine Audard

Is a political consensus possible based on reason alone, without the intervention of force or persuasion? John Rawls' answer in Political Liberalism *is that of epistemic abstinence. By renouncing the intervention of the True, while accepting only the Reasonable, by mobilising public reasons and not personal or collective beliefs, it would be possible to regulate political conflicts and stabilise democratic institutions without the intervention of force. But this solution, with its distinction between the "public" and "non-public" spheres, has been widely criticised, and, somewhat like the "constitutional patriotism" advocated by Habermas, it seems too weak a basis for protecting the democratic consensus against its enemies. Above all, it requires excessive cognitive and moral competences. After analysing the conditions of possibility of epistemic abstinence, I respond to three sets of objections and conclude that, as much as cognitive and moral competences, public justification needs a truly democratic and pluralistic public space. The effectiveness of "public reason" is a social and political problem, not simply a cognitive or a moral one.*

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How can people who are separated by religion, ethnicity, social class, culture, standards of living and education live together, while declaring the people sovereign? How can their conflicts be arbitrated and their consent to the law secured while respecting this sovereignty? In *What is Enlightenment?* (1784), Kant reminds us that, "To test whether any particular measure can be agreed upon as a law for a people, we need only ask whether a people could well impose such a law upon itself"[1]. The challenge of contemporary democra-

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