Science, State Neutrality, and the Neutrality of Philosophy: A Reply to Bellolio

Gabriele Badano, Department of Politics, University of York, gabriele.badano@york.ac.uk

─────────────────

In 'The Quinean Assumption: The Case for Science as Public Reason', Cristóbal Bellolio takes a close look at John Rawls's hugely influential theory of public reason–in essence, a theory of how debates leading to legally binding political decisions should be carried out, prescribing that the supporters of any decision should be able to offer at least one argument for it that is *neutral* between the competing religious beliefs, conceptions of excellence in life and philosophical positions that divide the citizens of liberal democracies. Specifically, Bellolio focuses on those critiques of Rawls claiming that public reason excludes scientific arguments from political debates, impoverishing them and showing that, after all, Rawls's theory is not such a good guide for how to conduct political discussions.

Is not the reasoning of, say, evolutionary biologists, cosmologists and climate scientists the reasoning of associations, if not sects, as opposed to the truly general reasoning of the public advocated by Rawls? Are not scientific arguments typically so complex and rooted in technical knowledge as to be hopelessly beyond the reach of the general public? According to Bellolio, they are not, because of the 'Quinean assumption', i.e., the claim, advanced by W.V.O. Quine, that scientific reasoning is continuous with the universally shared faculty of common sense. If they were given enough time and applied themselves systematically, the members of the general public would come to master scientific arguments, and *this is specifically because scientific reasoning is nothing but a refined extension of common-sense reasoning.*

The task that Bellolio sets for himself is interesting, adding to a quickly developing field of philosophical research into whether, and how, science can be made compatible with Rawls's and other neutralist accounts of political deliberation (Badano and Bonotti forthcoming; Fowler 2019; Jønch-Clausen and Kappel 2016; Leland and van Wietmarschen 2012). His positive argument is appealing, and I agree with large parts of it, especially where it makes the point that scientific reasoning is not *in principle* beyond the reach of the general public. Still, the way one goes about making that sort of point can make the whole difference, especially within Rawlsian public reason (also called 'political') liberalism. And Bellolio's heavy reliance on naturalized epistemology, a specific school of thought in the field, throws into relief a problem everyone interested in science and public reason should get a tighter grasp of–a problem concerning the very use of controversial epistemological and philosophy of science theories within political philosophy.

Rawlsian Political Liberalism and the Role of Philosophers

Rawlsian political liberalism, which includes Rawls's theory of public reason, constitutes a very distinctive position, if for no other reason than the constraints it imposes on how we are supposed to do philosophy. To make matters confusing, it is commonly said that Rawls's work on public reason comes after the 'political turn' in his political philosophy. What this means is that political philosophy is not meant to come up with the single most theoretically watertight definition of political justice anymore; focusing its attention on the ineliminable disagreements characterising any minimally free society, political philosophy is now supposed to investigate whether there can be any common ground that, accessible to persons holding the most diverse beliefs about philosophical controversies, religion and the

good life, citizens can build political arguments on and that can therefore provide unity by constraining political disagreements. Theories of public reason are theories of what that common ground amounts to.

Rawls underlines that one implication of the political turn is that 'political liberalism applies toleration to philosophy itself' (Rawls 1993, p. 10; see also p. 154). In characteristically Rawlsian fashion, this is a somewhat circumvoluted way of saying that political philosophy should steer clear of controversies in philosophy, building arguments that are independent of them. Why? Political philosophy's main task is to explain how citizens who are deeply divided about philosophical and other 'comprehensive' issues can still share basic political commitments like the freedom and equality of all citizens, somewhat more concrete political commitments like freedom of speech, and, crucially for the sake of my comment, principles for applying those commitments to concrete problems of policy or otherwise drawing inferences. Literally, this task is only coherent if political philosophers refrain from taking any stance about any philosophical controversy while making the case that all citizens, *whatever their controversial philosophical stances*, could in principle appeal, say, to the idea of free and equal citizens or to scientific opinions when building political arguments. This is an idea that in other places Rawls expresses by saying that political philosophy must not be 'sectarian' any more (e.g. at p. 180).

Controversial Foundations

This fact about the constraints political philosophers must abide by in putting together theories of public reason should give a little pause to every scholar interested in making science and public reason compatible, because the obvious temptation is to draw heavily on philosophy of science theories in the process. Zooming back in on Bellolio's article, this fact is in tension with the foundations of his argument, which rests on Quine's naturalized epistemology and in particular the idea that '[s]cience is not a substitute for common sense, but an extension of it' (Quine 1957, p. 2). This idea is clearly controversial; if it was not, Quine would not have bothered arguing for it, stressing how he could see no break between common-sense thinking and scientific reasoning, and his argument would not have been picked up many times in later years. For example, a powerful rendering of a different view from Quine's had been famously provided by the physicist and philosopher of science Arthur Eddington with his two tables argument. For him, common-sense reasoning and scientific investigations work on such different levels that their application creates two distinct versions of every object–for example, two versions of the table Eddington used to work on–that appear impossible to reconcile (Eddington 1928).

If anything, the passing of time since the publication of Quine's work should have made the assumption that common sense and scientific reasoning form a continuum more controversial as a philosophical position. Think of the body of work produced by psychologist Daniel Kahneman who, after working with Amos Tversky and others, has popularised the clash between commonly-used 'System 1' fast and automatic thinking and much more infrequent 'System 2' slow and calculating reasoning (Kahneman 2011). Rich with preconceptions and short cuts that, for Kahneman, make it comparatively

unsatisfactory, System 1 thinking as he analyses it has sparked interest among political philosophers, who use it to probe the role that many assign to intuitions in philosophical arguments (Voorhoeve 2009, pp. 67-84), potentially adding to traditional critiques of intuitive judgements (e.g. Singer 2005); analogously, it could be used to probe the role Rawls and others assign to common sense. The evaluative judgement passed on the preconceptions and short cuts that commonly drive our thinking is, at any rate, not central here. Even if one sided with Gerd Gigerenzer and others in noting that System 1 heuristics often guarantee better results (Gigerenzer 2008), such heuristics would still by definition sidestep the principles of logic, probability theory and other scientific disciplines, arguably pointing to a discontinuity between common sense and science, against the use that Bellolio makes of Quine.

Conclusion

Political philosophers putting together a broadly Rawlsian conception of public reason are handed a unique brief–to stay away from the philosophical controversies we, as philosophers, are otherwise trained to dive into. For this reason, the continuity between common-sense thinking and scientific reasoning, borrowed from Quine's naturalized epistemology, does not seem like a fitting basis for an argument suggesting that science is part of public reason. The question, for Bellolio as well as the rest of us who are interested in producing that argument, seems to be, can the truly general nature of science and its accessibility, at least in principle, for the public at large be vindicated without building one's case on any controversial Quinean assumption?

References

Badano, Gabriele, and Matteo Bonotti. Forthcoming. 'Rescuing Public Reason Liberalism's Accessibility Requirement.' *Law and Philosophy*.

Bellolio, Cristóbal. 2019. 'The Quinean Assumption: The Case for Science as Public Reason.' *Social Epistemology* 33 (3): 205-217.

Eddington, Arthur. 1928. *The Nature of the Physical World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fowler, Tim. 2019. 'Public Reason, Science and Faith: The Case of Intelligent Design.' *Law and Philosophy* 38 (1): 29–52.

Gigerenzer, Gerd. 2008. *Gut Feelings: Short Cuts to Better Decision Making*. New York: Penguin.

Jønch-Clausen, Karin, and Klemens Kappel. 2016. 'Scientific Facts and Methods in Public Reason.' *Res Publica* 22 (2): 117-133.

Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Penguin.

Leland, R.J., and Han van Wietmarschen. 2012. 'Reasonableness, Intellectual Modesty, and Reciprocity in Political Justification.' *Ethics* 122 (4): 721-747.

Quine, Willard Van Orman. 1957. 'The Scope and Language of Science.' *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 8 (29):1-17.

Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Singer, Peter. 2005. 'Ethics and Intuitions.' *Journal of Ethics* 9 (3-4): 331-352.

Voorhoeve, Alex. 2009. *Conversations on Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.