

# Reasonable Citizens and Epistemic Peers: A Skeptical Problem for Political Liberalism

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## I. INTRODUCTION

A central aim of liberal political theories is to reconcile the idea of a free political society with the presence of profound disagreement about morality, philosophy, and religion. A persistent concern about liberalism is that its account of such a society explicitly or implicitly rests on skeptical assumptions about moral, philosophical, and religious claims. This concern can take a variety of shapes: liberal arguments may be said to presuppose that such claims are false or unjustified, or that citizens should be hesitant, doubtful, or uncertain with regard to such claims.

Whether it is problematic for liberalism to rest on skeptical assumptions depends on what we take the liberal project of reconciliation to consist of. Some versions of liberalism merely aim to show that liberal political institutions can stably persist over time, even if conditions of freedom give rise to pluralism. Reliance on skeptical premises need not conflict with this aim. Other liberal views, however, aim to demonstrate not just the stability of liberal political institutions, but also that those political institutions are justifiable or acceptable to the members of the political society, despite the fact that those members endorse a variety of different and

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This article has been very long in the making, and over the years many more people than I could possibly remember have shared their questions, criticisms, and suggestions. I will only mention a few people without whom this article would have been very different, or might not have existed at all. The first of these is R. J. Leland, my longtime collaborator on questions of political liberalism. The others are the members of my dissertation committee: Michael Bratman, Joshua Cohen, and Krista Lawlor.

conflicting doctrines. This aim does conflict with reliance on skeptical claims: citizens cannot coherently endorse a religious view, say, and at the same time accept an argument for liberal political institutions premised on the claim that religious views are false or unjustified. This article is exclusively concerned with political liberalism, a version of liberalism which is committed to the second, more ambitious, reconciliatory project.<sup>1</sup> The central claim of political liberalism is that the basic principles and institutions of society should be justified in terms that all reasonable citizens can reasonably be expected to accept, and not in terms of citizens' reasonably disputed religious, moral, and philosophical convictions. So justified, liberal political institutions can be acceptable to all reasonable members of a political society despite conditions of pluralism.

As Rawls and others recognize, political liberalism's central commitments give rise to their own concerns about skepticism. Why would a citizen, convinced of the truth of a particular religious or moral doctrine, agree that political decisions should be made on the basis of mutually acceptable considerations, rather than on the basis of the full moral or religious truth? What, other than doubt or uncertainty, could motivate such an attitude? Concerns about skeptical assumptions underlying political liberalism can take different forms. As will become clear in this article, Rawls and other proponents of political liberalism successfully defend the view against a variety of skeptical objections. My main argument, however, will be that recent developments in

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<sup>1</sup>See Rawls (1993) and Larmore (1996) for the main original statements of political liberalism. The importance of reconciliation, as I understand it, is emphasized in Rawls (1993), pp. 4–11, 133–72; Larmore (1996), ch. 7; see also Quong (2010), ch. 5. Rawls (2001), pp. 3–4, uses the term “reconciliation” for the reasonable acceptance or affirmation of our social world.

the epistemology of disagreement produce a new skeptical challenge for political liberalism. In this form, the challenge is not adequately addressed by proponents of political liberalism.

The rest of this article has the following structure. In Section II, I will investigate the epistemic commitments of political liberalism's ideal of reasonable citizenship. I will argue that reasonable citizens believe that religious, moral, and philosophical issues are disputed among the most competent reasoners in their society. In Section III, I will argue in favor of a conciliatory view of peer disagreement, according to which peer disagreement undermines the justification of our beliefs. I will explain and motivate the main conclusions of Sections II and III in this article, but I have provided more detailed arguments for these views elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> My aim here is not to further defend these views, but to show how they force us to revisit political liberalism's skeptical problem. In Section IV, I will show that the epistemic commitments of reasonable citizenship in combination with the truth of a conciliatory view about peer disagreement entail what I call *Justificatory Incoherence*:

If you are a reasonable citizen who holds a set of religious, moral, or philosophical beliefs, then either your belief that these beliefs are subject to peer disagreement is unjustified, or your religious, moral, or philosophical beliefs are themselves unjustified.

The various elements of this claim will be explained in the article. In Section V, I argue that Justificatory Incoherence represents a skeptical problem for political liberalism. Political liberalism fails in its reconciliatory aims, because it fails to provide an argument for a liberal political order that citizens can coherently endorse together with their religious, moral, and philosophical commitments. In the final section, I will consider both existing treatments of

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<sup>2</sup>See Leland and van Wietmarschen (2012); van Wietmarschen (2013).

skeptical concerns about political liberalism, and possible responses to the argument provided in this article.

## II. POLITICAL LIBERALISM AND REASONABLE DISAGREEMENT

This section has two main aims. The first is to explain the role of reasonable citizenship in political liberalism, and the second is to argue that the ideal of reasonable citizenship should be understood to include a significant epistemic component. The starting point for this discussion is political liberalism's central idea of mutual justifiability. This idea can be expressed more precisely as a principle of reciprocity in justification:

Reciprocity Principle: political decisions must be justified only on the basis of considerations that all reasonable people can reasonably be expected to accept.<sup>3</sup>

This principle structures political justification by drawing a line between a set of considerations that can properly justify political decisions and a set of considerations that cannot. I will call the former public considerations and the latter nonpublic considerations. According to political liberalism, only considerations that all reasonable people can reasonably be expected to accept are public considerations. The relevant expectations are normative, not predictive: the question is not which considerations we can reasonably believe all reasonable citizens *do* accept, but which considerations we can reasonably think all reasonable citizens *should* accept.

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<sup>3</sup>As stated, the principle is arguably too strong and should be made subject to a proviso allowing citizens to appeal to nonpublic considerations as long as they supply public considerations in due course (Rawls 1997). Whether such a proviso applies will not affect my discussion, so I will leave this issue aside.

The content of the Reciprocity Principle depends on how we are to understand the idea of reasonableness. In this context, reasonableness does not refer to an intuitive conception of the reasonable person, but to a substantial ideal of citizenship. Reasonableness, as political liberalism conceives of it, has three main components. First, the reasonable citizen endorses the Reciprocity Principle itself. Secondly, the reasonable citizen believes that religious, moral, and philosophical convictions, including her own, are subject to reasonable disagreement such that she cannot reasonably expect all reasonable citizens to accept any particular religious, moral, or philosophical view. From now on, I will refer to citizens' religious, moral, and philosophical views as their sectarian views.<sup>4</sup> Third, the reasonable citizen endorses a set of basic political values—including liberal democratic values of freedom, equality, and fair social cooperation—and, consequently, she reasonably expects all reasonable citizens to accept these political values.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>I use the term “sectarian” simply as a label for a range of considerations all political liberals consider to be subject to reasonable disagreement and hence nonpublic. I prefer this label to Rawls’s “comprehensive doctrines,” which suggests that considerations need to be part of a general and systematic world view to count as nonpublic, and to “conceptions of the good,” which suggests that only ethical or evaluative claims count as nonpublic. A disadvantage of the term “sectarian” is that it may carry a disparaging connotation, which I do not intend here.

<sup>5</sup>This description of political liberalism’s conception of reasonableness is not meant to provide a complete specification of which considerations political liberalism considers to be public and which nonpublic. It will not matter to my argument where exactly this line is drawn. What matters is that the set of nonpublic considerations includes the kind of convictions many citizens

Given a conception of reasonableness with these three components, reasonable citizens think that political decisions should be made on the basis of shared political values, and not on the basis of reasonably disputed considerations, including citizens' sectarian views. Liberal principles and institutions, if justified by public considerations, can now be justifiable to all reasonable citizens even if these principles and institutions fail to reflect, or are in tension with, their sectarian views. Consider, for example, decisions about the legal permissibility of abortion. Suppose that the public political considerations speak in favor of a permissive abortion regime.<sup>6</sup> Suppose, further, that some reasonable citizens believe that embryos are ensouled at conception and that the killing of ensouled life is morally wrong. I will call this set of beliefs "Ensoulement." Considerations like Ensoulement would, if brought to bear on political decision making, seem to speak in favor of a restrictive abortion regime. Political liberalism can explain how the decision to adopt a permissive abortion regime is justifiable to all reasonable citizens, including those who reasonably endorse Ensoulement, because all reasonable citizens agree that political decisions should be made exclusively on the basis of public considerations. Needless to say, both the Reciprocity Principle and its accompanying conception of reasonableness are controversial.

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in a liberal society take to be central to their conception of how to live their lives and of their place in the world. If political liberalism rests on skeptical claims about such views, then it rests on skeptical claims about a highly significant set of views.

<sup>6</sup>I believe that if political questions about abortion were decided on the basis of public considerations alone, a permissive abortion regime is the only sensible outcome. However, this conclusion is subject to debate. For discussion of this point, see Williams (2015) and Kramer (2017), ch. 3. Readers who disagree should feel free to substitute a different example.

My question is not, however, whether these core components of political liberalism's answer to pluralism can be defended, but whether political liberalism relies on skepticism about sectarian claims.

In general terms, it is now clear what political liberalism is committed to with regard to citizens' sectarian convictions: political liberalism holds that reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian views are reasonably disputed, such that they cannot reasonably expect all reasonable citizens to accept any particular sectarian doctrine. This, however, does not yet resolve our concerns about skepticism. The question is which epistemic commitments, if any, are involved in the view that one cannot reasonably expect all one's fellow reasonable citizens to accept one's sectarian convictions.

Proponents of political liberalism provide strongly divergent answers to this question. Rawls, for example, takes reasonableness to include a rather substantial epistemic commitment, in the form of the acceptance of the burdens of judgment. The burdens of judgment are a list of difficulties people face in reasoning about sectarian issues, including the complexity of the evidence bearing on those issues, the vagueness of the concepts involved, and the way our assessment of the evidence is shaped by our life experience.<sup>7</sup> On Rawls's view, reasonable citizens expect disagreement on sectarian matters because we are all subject to the burdens of judgment. Even if we think that our fellow reasonable citizens frequently are ignorant, thoughtless, or insincere, such failings are not the full explanation of sectarian disagreement. A number of authors have argued, however, that Rawls's appeal to the burdens of judgment is unnecessary, leading to an overly demanding conception of reasonable citizenship.<sup>8</sup> On their

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<sup>7</sup>Rawls 1993, pp. 56–7.

<sup>8</sup>See Wenar (1995); Kelly and McPherson (2001); see also Nussbaum (2011), pp. 20–1.

alternative views, reasonableness does not include any epistemic commitments. The acknowledgement of reasonable disagreement includes the belief that morally decent citizens, committed to fair social cooperation on free and equal terms, dispute one's sectarian views, but it does not include the belief that any of the disagreement is due to the difficulties involved in reasoning about sectarian issues.<sup>9</sup>

My answer to the question is in the spirit of Rawls's view, but it aims to provide a more precise and better supported account of the epistemic commitments involved in reasonable citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Central to my answer is the idea of competence with regard to a question. Suppose the question is whether the set of beliefs I have labeled "Ensoulement" is true. Competence with

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<sup>9</sup>The literature includes a number of other views about the epistemic commitments of reasonable citizenship. Nagel (1987), p. 229, argues that citizens should recognize that their sectarian views fail to meet a "higher standard of objectivity" needed to justify the exercise of political power on the basis of such views. Barry (1993), p. 169, defending a view similar to political liberalism, claims that citizens cannot justifiably hold their sectarian views with a degree of certainty that would warrant the imposition of those views on others. Forst (2013) provides an account of liberal toleration that is not a version of political liberalism, but that nonetheless has many comparable features. On his view, the epistemic component of citizens' grounds for accepting principles of toleration is their recognition of the "finitude of reason," which involves the belief that the faculty of reason cannot fully resolve ethical questions, including religious, moral, and philosophical questions.

<sup>10</sup>This view is developed and defended at much greater length in Leland and van Wietmarschen (2012).



regard to this question refers to those properties of a person's psychology that would make the person well positioned to judge whether Ensoulment is true. What these properties are depends on the question but, generally speaking, we can say that they include access to relevant information and the possession of relevant intellectual virtues.<sup>11</sup> I will assume that reasonable citizens, for each of their sectarian views, have at least a rough conception of what makes a person competent with regard to that issue. I will *not* assume that reasonable citizens agree about what makes a person competent with regard to various sectarian questions,<sup>12</sup> and I will also not assume that reasonable citizens have correct, or even plausible, conceptions of competence with regard to sectarian questions.

The notion of competence provides us with a systematic way to describe the epistemic commitment involved in reasonable citizenship. When a reasonable citizen has a set of sectarian views, she does not think that she can reasonably expect all her fellow reasonable citizens to

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<sup>11</sup>Access to relevant information could include information obtained through perceptual or other kinds of experience, or on testimony. This means that my very broad concept of competence is compatible with religious views according to which the justification of religious belief rests on a particular kind of mystical experience (see Alston (1991) for a canonical statement of such a view), or on testimonial evidence.

<sup>12</sup>For example, the utilitarian may believe that competence in judging whether first and second trimester abortions are morally permissible requires understanding the principle of utility and knowing whether the embryo or fetus is capable of suffering in the first two trimesters, whereas the Catholic may believe that competence on this question requires a proper understanding of the nature of the human soul.

accept these views. We can now ask, for each of her sectarian views, above which level of competence she believes people will converge on the same conclusion. The higher the level of competence at which a citizen believes sectarian disagreement runs out, the more difficult to answer she judges the sectarian question to be. This allows us to distinguish three views about the epistemic commitments of reasonable citizenship. The first view says that citizens can reasonably believe that anyone who reaches a very basic level of competence would agree about sectarian matters. On this view, reasonableness includes few or no epistemic commitments. The second view is that reasonable citizens must believe that sectarian issues are disputed at high or very high levels of competence, but they can nonetheless reasonably believe that there is an intellectual elite of the most competent, who all converge on the same sectarian views. The third view is that reasonable citizens must believe that sectarian views are disputed at all levels of competence. On this view, it is unreasonable to believe that some people are at such an elevated level of competence that no one at that level disagrees with them about their sectarian convictions.

So understood, I argue for the third view: reasonable citizens believe that disagreement about sectarian matters persists at all levels of competence.<sup>13</sup> By all levels of competence, I mean

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<sup>13</sup>Enoch (2017) objects that this conception of reasonableness demands too much of citizens by way of philosophical reflection and sophistication, as most citizens will not have beliefs or even entertain thoughts about the various levels of competence at which disagreement about their sectarian views persists. My view takes citizens to have their own conceptions of competence, however, that do not have to involve any great level of sophistication. A reasonable citizen may simply believe that “learned people” are most competent to judge questions like Ensoulment. In

all levels of competence the citizen believes to be present among the members of her political society, including herself, now and in the foreseeable future. The reason for this limitation is that political justification takes place among the members of a political society: the reasonable citizen is not committed to the view that even the gods or the angels disagree about sectarian issues.<sup>14</sup> Why should political liberalism endorse this strong epistemic commitment as part of its conception of reasonableness? I have defended this claim elsewhere, so I will limit myself here to a brief statement of one of the main arguments.<sup>15</sup> Recall that the Reciprocity Principle asks citizens to refrain from appeal to their sectarian views in their political deliberation and decision making. This is a demanding form of political restraint, which needs a convincing rationale. Of course, all political liberals agree about the general shape of this rationale: citizens refrain from appeal to their sectarian views because they acknowledge that they cannot reasonably expect all

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that case, my view requires this citizen to believe that even learned people disagree about Ensoulment, which does not seem to be an overly intellectualized requirement.

<sup>14</sup>One may wonder whether a reasonable citizen could acknowledge disagreement at her own level of competence, but take herself to have testimonial evidence in support of her sectarian commitments provided by those, such as God, elevated above this level. It is important to keep in mind here that if someone attaches weight to testimonial evidence of this kind, the availability of such evidence must be reflected in her idea of competence with regard to her sectarian views. On my view, a reasonable citizen who takes herself to have such testimonial evidence would nonetheless believe that disagreement about her sectarian views occurs among those who have access to this evidence. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this question.

<sup>15</sup>See Leland and van Wietmarschen (2012), esp. sect. III.

their fellow reasonable citizens to agree with their sectarian views. Whether this provides an adequate rationale for political restraint, however, depends on the epistemic commitments of reasonableness.

Consider, first, views according to which citizens can reasonably believe that anyone who reaches a very low level of competence would come to accept the same sectarian views. From the perspective of such citizens, disagreement about sectarian issues is explained by very basic failures of competence to judge those issues or, to put it crudely, by plain ignorance and stupidity. A reasonable citizen may, for example, believe that anyone with modest reasoning abilities and access to basic information would come to the conclusion that Ensoulment is true. Political liberalism is nonetheless committed to the view that reasonable citizens cannot reasonably expect their fellow citizens to accept their sectarian views, including Ensoulment. This means that reasonable citizens would have to set their normative expectations at a very low level: I cannot expect my fellow citizens to accept Ensoulment, even if I reasonably think that everyone with a basic level of competence can see that Ensoulment is true, because I cannot normatively expect my fellow citizens to reach this basic level of competence. In other words, in the context of political decision making, reasonable citizens cannot normatively expect their fellow reasonable citizens to be more than plain ignorant or stupid. It is difficult to see how, on this interpretation of reasonableness, the Reciprocity Principle is a plausible demand of political morality. Political liberalism's demand for public justification, and the exclusion of sectarian views, would amount to a concession to the sheer incompetence of citizens.

On the view I defend, reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian views are disputed at all levels of competence. This means that, no matter how high reasonable citizens set their normative expectations about what their fellow reasonable citizens can accept, they will not

expect them to agree with their sectarian views. On this picture, the political restraint demanded by the Reciprocity Principle does not reflect a concession to the incompetence of our fellow citizens, but an acknowledgement of the inevitability of sectarian disagreement even among the best informed and most capable reasoners among us. It is important to emphasize that my view does *not* hold that only the most competent citizens are reasonable. On all views under discussion, the highly competent and the less competent alike can be reasonable citizens. The question is not how competent one must be in order to count as reasonable; the question is at which level of competence reasonable citizens believe sectarian disagreement ends, and which level of competence reasonable citizens normatively expect of their fellow citizens when determining what they can expect them to accept.<sup>16</sup>

How does this view provide a rationale for the political restraint demanded by the Reciprocity Principle? Imagine a citizen who endorses Ensoulment, but believes that Ensoulment is disputed even at the highest levels of competence. This means that no matter how high she sets her normative expectations, she will not expect all of her fellow reasonable citizens to agree that Ensoulment is true. If she would nonetheless appeal to Ensoulment in her political deliberation, she would show a willingness to exercise political power over her fellow citizens on the basis of her beliefs, even though she recognizes that equally competent judges reject those beliefs. She

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<sup>16</sup>Again, the relevant normative expectations are concerned with what one's fellow reasonable citizens should accept, not with what one predicts they will in fact accept. This means that on my interpretation, a citizen's normative expectations involve an idealization of her fellow reasonable citizens towards a particular level of competence. I will continue to refer to these expectations as "normative expectations."

may, for example, be willing to support a restrictive abortion regime on the basis of Ensoulment, even though she cannot consistently hold that those who deny Ensoulment do so because they lack the requisite information or intellectual abilities to properly judge whether Ensoulment is true. Such willingness would be straightforwardly at odds with the political ideal underlying the Reciprocity Principle: the ideal of citizens being able to justify their political decisions to one another, as free and equal citizens.

The most plausible alternative to the view I defend is an intermediate view: reasonableness requires citizens to believe that sectarian issues are disputed at high or very high levels of competence, but reasonable citizens can nonetheless believe that there is an intellectual elite of the most competent citizens who all agree on the same sectarian views.<sup>17</sup> A reasonable citizen may believe that Ensoulment is true, disputed by highly competent people, but agreed upon by all the members of an even more competent elite. On this view, in order for the Reciprocity Principle to exclude sectarian views, reasonable citizens would have to be required to temper their expectations. Our citizen, when determining whether she can appeal to Ensoulment in her political deliberation, cannot reasonably set her normative expectations at the highest level of competence.

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<sup>17</sup>Quong seems to suggest a view of this kind. Quong accepts Rawls's view that reasonable people acknowledge the burdens of judgment, but he also writes that "many reasonable people (again, both secular and religious) believe that the truth about religion and human flourishing is rationally accessible to anyone who takes the trouble to carefully think things through"; Quong 2017, p. 270.

The first problem for this view is that it needs to explain why reasonable citizens would have to temper their expectations in this way. The most promising candidate explanation seems to be a notion of respect.<sup>18</sup> We might claim that if our citizen appeals to Ensoulment in her political decision making, this is disrespectful to reasonable citizens who disagree with Ensoulment and lack the competence to see that Ensoulment is true. In other words, we might claim that respect for our fellow citizens requires that we refrain from appeal to considerations that are inaccessible to them. The problem is that it is not generally disrespectful to make political decisions on the basis of considerations that are not accessible or understandable to all citizens. Many important political decisions about, say, the economic organization of society, the structuring of educational institutions, or the response to environmental risks, are justified by appeal to claims that many citizens are not in a position to understand, and that can be disputed by informed and capable reasoners even if there is consensus at the expert level. Perhaps it would be better if all citizens did understand such issues, but this does not amount to a disrespectful treatment of citizens, nor to a failure of public justification.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>See Larmore (1999) and Nussbaum (2011) for accounts of the justification of political liberalism based on considerations of respect. The relationship between respect for persons and accessibility constraints on political reasons has been discussed in greater detail by, among others, Eberle (2002) and Vallier (2016).

<sup>19</sup>One may object that this argument ignores an important asymmetry between scientific and sectarian disagreement. Even when scientific findings are beyond the understanding of many citizens, one might claim that those citizens can still be expected to recognize scientific expertise. We can make political decisions based on complex scientific findings, not because all

We can put the same point in the opposite direction: if reasonableness requires citizens to lower their expectations to high but not *too* high levels of competence, then the Reciprocity Principle would exclude complicated scientific findings from political justification whenever such findings are disputed by highly competent people, even if there is expert-level agreement about these findings. This would be a troubling result, especially with an eye towards questions about, for example, economic policy or climate change. On the view I defend, this problem does not arise because reasonable citizens are allowed to set their normative expectations at the highest levels of competence.<sup>20</sup>

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reasonable citizens can be expected to accept those findings, but because all reasonable citizens can be expected to agree about who the relevant experts are. In the case of sectarian views, on the other hand, citizens reasonably disagree not only about sectarian matters themselves, but also about who would count as a relevant expert. This objection points to some complications concerning testimonial evidence. Suppose a political society makes a decision based on scientific finding  $p$  because the relevant experts claim that  $p$  is true. If all reasonable citizens can be expected to agree who the relevant experts are, then it seems to me that they can also be expected to accept  $p$  based on the testimony of those experts. If, instead, a political society decides to delegate authority to a group of experts to make decisions within a certain domain based on their specific expertise, without having to publicly justify those decisions, then the relevant political decision is this delegation of authority. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this concern.

<sup>20</sup>Gaus's account of public reason provides a different justification for limiting the extent to which we idealize the relevant justificatory constituency; Gaus 2011, esp. sect. 13. The account



A final problem for the intermediate view is that, whatever rationale it provides for the requirement to temper our expectations, this rationale is put under pressure when the political stakes are high. After all, it would seem that the greater the consequences of the political decisions we make, the more we are entitled to normatively expect of our fellow citizens. For example, when the continued existence of humanity hangs in the balance when it comes to certain decisions about climate change, it seems *especially* difficult to explain why citizens cannot normatively expect the highest levels of competence of their fellow citizens. Our reasonable citizen, however, may believe that many lives are at stake in political decisions for which Ensoulment would be a relevant consideration. From her viewpoint, which the intermediate view considers to be reasonable, it would be similarly difficult to explain why she cannot normatively expect the level of competence of her fellow citizens that would allow them to appreciate the truth of Ensoulment. On the view I defend, again, this problem does not arise: even if high-stakes political situations lead citizens to set their normative expectations at the

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is very complex, but the basic idea is that political rules, as well as social and moral rules are tied to practices of holding one another accountable for complying with those rules. Practices of accountability, including reactive attitudes of blame and guilt, in turn presuppose that we engage in moderate rather than full idealization. Gaus's account rests on a number of claims—about the relationship between political rules and accountability, and about the relationship between accountability and having a reason—which are not part of political liberalism as I understand that view in this article. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

highest levels of competence, they would still find that their sectarian views are subject to disagreement.<sup>21</sup>

### III. A CONCILIATORY VIEW ABOUT PEER DISAGREEMENT

In the previous section, I argued that political liberalism's ideal of reasonable citizenship includes a significant epistemic commitment: reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian views are disputed at all levels of competence. This, however, does not resolve my original question of whether political liberalism faces a skeptical objection. The reason is that it is not obvious what the epistemic significance is of the belief that one's sectarian views are disputed at all levels of competence. In this section, I turn to the epistemology of disagreement to better understand the epistemic implications of political liberalism's conception of reasonableness. My main aim is to argue for a conciliatory view about peer disagreement. According to this view, when you have good reason to believe that your belief that *p* is disputed by an epistemic peer, then you are not justified in believing that *p*. It is important to note at the outset that I do *not* argue that reasonable citizens are committed to this conciliatory view, nor do I argue that political liberalism is committed to this view. For all I say in this article, reasonable citizens and

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<sup>21</sup>This is not to deny that reasonable citizens may feel torn between the requirements of political morality and the requirements of their sectarian convictions. On my view of reasonableness, just as on any other view, the requirement to set aside one's sectarian convictions for the purpose of political decision making is a significant sacrifice. My view differs from the intermediate view in providing a rationale for this sacrifice which doesn't dissolve when the political stakes are high.

political liberals alike can consistently reject the conciliatory view defended here. Of course, insofar as the argument offered in this section is sound, they would be mistaken in doing so.

The epistemology of disagreement is concerned with whether disagreements of certain kinds undermine the justification of our beliefs. The discussion has largely been focused on disagreements between epistemic peers. Two people are epistemic peers with regard to the question of whether  $p$  just when they have the same evidence about  $p$  and they are equally good at evaluating that evidence.<sup>22</sup> The question is: if you believe that  $p$  and you know that some person  $S$ —who you have good reason to believe is your epistemic peer with regard to  $p$ —believes  $\sim p$ , are you justified in believing that  $p$ ? Generally, conciliatory views hold that when confronted with peer disagreement about one of our beliefs, we should significantly revise our disputed belief in the direction of the belief held by our peer. The particular conciliatory view I defend holds that when a person believes  $p$ , and has good reason to believe that an epistemic peer believes  $\sim p$ , then she is not justified in believing that  $p$ .

The argument for this view rests on two key ideas. The first is that a person's justification for the belief that  $p$ , given disagreement about  $p$ , is related to the person's justification for various explanations of the disagreement. This idea is captured by the following principle:

Integration: a person is not justified in believing that  $p$  if: (a) she believes  $p$  and she is justified in believing that some other person,  $S$ , believes  $\sim p$ ; (b) she is justified in

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<sup>22</sup>Gary Gutting (1982), p. 83, introduced this conception of epistemic peerage and several authors follow him; Kelly 2005; Christensen 2007; van Wietmarschen 2013. Other authors think of peerage in terms of equal reliability; Elga 2007; Enoch 2010.

believing that either her own or S's mistake explains the disagreement; and (c) she is not justified in believing that S's mistake, rather than her own, explains the disagreement.

This principle has considerable intuitive appeal: if you justifiably believe that either you made a mistake in believing that  $p$ , or S made a mistake in believing that  $\sim p$ , you can't justifiably continue to believe that  $p$  unless you have reason to believe that it is S who made the mistake.

The second key idea is that in evaluating a person's justification for beliefs about the explanation of disagreements, we should set aside or disregard that person's reasoning about the disputed issue. This idea can be stated as follows:

Independence: when we determine what a person is justified in believing about the explanation of her disagreement with S about  $p$ , we should bracket the person's original reasoning about  $p$ .

This principle is disputed in the peer-disagreement literature, but it too is intuitively appealing: it would seem to beg the question to dismiss S's disagreement as a reason to doubt one's belief that  $p$ , on the basis of the very reasoning that S's disagreement calls into question.

With these two principles in place, the argument for conciliationism proceeds as follows. The overall question is whether you are justified in believing that  $p$ , if you have good reason to believe that S disagrees with you about  $p$  and that S is your epistemic peer with regard to  $p$ . We assume that you are justified in believing that either your own or S's mistake explains the disagreement.<sup>23</sup> Integration now says that you are justified in believing  $p$  only if you are justified in believing that S's mistake, rather than your own, explains the disagreement. The Independence

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<sup>23</sup>This assumption is controversial generally, and especially in the context of sectarian disagreement. I will return to this issue in Section VI.

principle places a restriction on our evaluation of what you are justified in believing with regard to the explanation of your disagreement with S. When we determine whether you are justified in believing that S's mistake explains the disagreement, we cannot appeal to your reasoning about  $p$ —the very reasoning that S's disagreement calls into question. Setting aside your reasoning about  $p$ , what you have left is good reason to believe that S is your epistemic peer with regard to  $p$ : S has the same evidence about  $p$  and is equally good at evaluating this evidence. Having good reason to believe S to be your epistemic equal in this sense does not justify you in believing that S must have made the mistake: you have no more reason to believe that S is mistaken than that you are. From Integration, it now follows that you are not justified in believing that  $p$ . This establishes the conciliatory view: when you have good reason to believe that your belief that  $p$  is disputed by an epistemic peer, you are not justified in believing that  $p$ .

The Independence and Integration principles, as well as the resulting conciliatory argument, are subject to considerable debate in the peer-disagreement literature. I have defended this view in much greater detail elsewhere, and a variety of other authors have defended similar views.<sup>24</sup> My aim here is not to further develop the argument for conciliationism, but to use this view to better understand political liberalism's epistemic commitments.

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<sup>24</sup>My reconstruction of conciliatory arguments in this section relies on Christensen (2007) and van Wietmarschen (2012). For other defenses of conciliationism, see Feldman (2007a, 2007b) and Kornblith (2010). Some of the main arguments against conciliationism can be found in Kelly (2005) and Enoch (2010).

#### IV. JUSTIFICATORY INCOHERENCE

In Section II, I argued that political liberalism's conception of reasonableness requires citizens to believe that their sectarian views are disputed among the most competent reasoners. In Section III, I argued for a conciliatory view about peer disagreement, which holds that when you believe that  $p$  and you are justified in believing that your epistemic peer disagrees with you about  $p$ , you are not justified in believing that  $p$ . The main aim of this article is to show that these two claims produce a skeptical problem for political liberalism. We have to take a few steps, however, to bring these two claims into contact with one another.

First, the epistemology of disagreement is exclusively concerned with the justification of beliefs. People's sectarian views, however, may at least in part be constituted by attitudes other than belief. A person's Catholic world view, broadly construed, may include emotions, desires, habits, intentions, and feelings. Conciliatory views about disagreement do not apply to such non-doxastic attitudes. My arguments will not assume that religious, moral, and philosophical views are *purely* a matter of belief. Nonetheless, distinctive world views (the major world religions, say) typically have an important belief component, and many or most people seem to hold at least some sectarian beliefs. Moreover, in many cases, other aspects of the sectarian doctrine, such as various rituals or practices, would lose their significance were a central set of beliefs to be given up. My arguments will be concerned with this doxastic component of people's sectarian views, and from now on I will simply focus on citizens' sectarian beliefs rather than their wider sectarian views.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Perhaps some people do, or at least could, have a set of sectarian views without any doxastic component, in which case the skeptical problem I will describe would not apply to their views.

Secondly, I have argued that reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian views are disputed at all levels of competence, and this is not quite the same as believing that their sectarian views are disputed by epistemic peers. However, any citizen will take herself to occupy some position in the distribution of competence with regard to any of her sectarian views. Whatever this position is, the reasonable citizen will conclude that each of her sectarian views is disputed by others who are at least equally competent with regard to the issue. Consequently, the reasonable citizen will believe that each of her sectarian views is disputed among her epistemic equals in terms of access to relevant information and possession of relevant intellectual virtues. Although there is still *some* room for disagreement on this point, I will assume that reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian views are disputed by at least some epistemic peers.

With this in place, we are led to two claims. First, given the observations in this section, I take the argument of Section II to show that political liberalism is committed to:

- (1) Reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement.

In other words, it is a requirement of reasonable citizenship to believe that one's sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement. Secondly, in Section III, I have argued for the truth of:

- (2) When you believe  $p$ , and you are justified in believing that  $S$  is your epistemic peer and disagrees with you, then you are not justified in believing  $p$ .

The question is: does it follow from political liberalism's commitment to (1) and the truth of (2) that political liberalism suffers from a skeptical problem?

Note that, taken together, these claims do *not* entail that reasonable citizens' sectarian beliefs are unjustified. Conciliationism says that your sectarian beliefs are unjustified when you are *justified in believing* that they are disputed by epistemic peers. Reasonableness merely requires that you *believe* that your sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement; it does not,

and could not, require you to *justifiably* believe so. The requirements of reasonableness do not undermine the justification of citizens' sectarian beliefs. Further, (1) and (2) do not entail that reasonable citizens are hesitant, doubtful, or uncertain about their sectarian beliefs. There is nothing in (1) and (2) to indicate that one couldn't be fully convinced of the truth of one's sectarian beliefs, while at the same time believe that epistemic peers think otherwise. One reason for this is, as I wrote above, (2) does *not* say that reasonable citizens believe in the truth of a conciliatory view about peer disagreement. Reasonable citizens can deny (2) and remain confident in their sectarian beliefs even if they also believe that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement. Finally, the requirements of reasonableness are not inconsistent with the truth of sectarian beliefs. It can be true that, say, God exists and also be true that the belief that God exists is subject to peer disagreement. This is important, because it means that political liberalism successfully avoids several skeptical objections that have been made against it: political liberalism's conception of reasonableness does *not* undermine the justification of sectarian belief; it does *not* entail that citizens are uncertain in their sectarian belief; and it does *not* entail that sectarian beliefs are false.

Instead, from political liberalism's commitment to (1) and the truth of (2), it follows that political liberalism is subject to a skeptical problem I will call *Justificatory Incoherence*:

If you are a reasonable citizen who holds a set of sectarian beliefs, then either your belief that your sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement is unjustified, or your sectarian beliefs are unjustified.

Take, for instance, a reasonable citizen who is convinced of Ensoulment. As a reasonable citizen, she believes that Ensoulment is subject to peer disagreement. If that belief is epistemically justified, then her belief in Ensoulment is not. If her belief in Ensoulment is epistemically



justified, then she cannot be justified in believing that Ensoulment is subject to peer disagreement. In other words, it is not possible to be a fully reasonable citizen in accordance with political liberalism's conception of reasonableness and to hold a set of sectarian beliefs without suffering from a failure of epistemic justification. Such a person could have an entirely consistent set of beliefs, so her beliefs could all be true, but they cannot all be epistemically justified. Note that Justificatory Incoherence follows from the demands of reasonable citizenship in combination with the *truth* of the conciliatory view defended in Section III. The argument of this article does not at any point rely on either political liberals or reasonable citizens believing, or being committed to believe, that this conciliatory view is true.

#### V. JUSTIFICATORY INCOHERENCE AND RECONCILIATION

The remaining question for this article is whether Justificatory Incoherence represents a problem for political liberalism. In this section, I will argue that it does. The general shape of this argument is that political liberalism's reliance on a conception of reasonableness which includes a significant epistemic commitment is in conflict with political liberalism's reconciliatory aims. In schematic form, the argument proceeds as follows:

- (1) Political liberalism aims to show that citizens can reconcile their acceptance of political liberalism's justification of liberal political institutions with their endorsement of a set of sectarian views.
- (2) Political liberalism only realizes this aim if citizens can coherently accept political liberalism's justification of liberal political institutions together with a set of reasonable sectarian views.

- (3) Political liberalism seeks to secure its reconciliatory aim by providing a justification for liberal political institutions in purely political terms, leaving aside nonpublic considerations.
- (4) Political institutions which can be justified on the basis of public political considerations are justifiable to all reasonable citizens, even if those justifications ignore or are in tension with their sectarian views, because reasonable citizens are committed to the Reciprocity Principle.
- (5) The Reciprocity Principle is a plausible principle of political morality in light of reasonable citizens' belief that their sectarian convictions are subject to peer disagreement.
- (6) Justificatory Incoherence tells us that citizens cannot coherently hold a set of sectarian beliefs and, at the same time, believe that those sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement.
- (7) Conclusion: political liberalism fails in its reconciliatory aim.

I will explain and motivate each of the steps in this argument.

The first claim requires us to take a closer look at political liberalism's reconciliatory aims. As I said in the introduction, political liberalism does not *just* aim to provide an account of why liberal political institutions are, in fact, justified. Instead, it aims to show that liberal political institutions are justifiable to the members of the political society, despite their endorsement of a wide range of religious, moral, and philosophical views. Drawing on political liberalism's central concepts, as introduced in Section II, we can formulate this aim more precisely as follows: political liberalism aims to show that liberal political institutions are justifiable to all reasonable citizens, despite their endorsement of a variety of sectarian, but

reasonable, doctrines. In other words, political liberalism seeks to provide a justification for liberal political institutions which reasonable citizens can reconcile with their endorsement of a reasonable sectarian doctrine.

Claim (2) is meant as an uncontroversial statement of a necessary condition for the realization of political liberalism's reconciliatory aim. If citizens can only accept political liberalism's justification for liberal political institutions, together with their sectarian convictions, on pain of incoherence, then political liberalism has not shown how citizens can reconcile their political and their sectarian commitments. It is important to note that (2) does *not* require that this justification can be coherently endorsed together with each and every sectarian view citizens could reasonably hold. More minimally, (2) requires that the endorsement of a set of sectarian views is not, as such, incoherent with the endorsement of political liberalism's justification for liberal political institutions.

Claims (3) and (4) state basic features of political liberalism, as outlined in Section II. Political liberalism's strategy for providing a justification for liberal political institutions that citizens can reconcile with their endorsement of a set of sectarian views is to provide a justification for such institutions drawing exclusively on public political considerations. As outlined in Section II, the set of public considerations includes basic liberal democratic values—such as the political values of freedom, equality, and fair social cooperation—but excludes sectarian views. Political institutions that can be justified in exclusively public terms count as *justifiable to all reasonable citizens*, because reasonable citizens accept the Reciprocity Principle. This means that reasonable citizens think that political decisions must be justified only on the basis of public political considerations, and not on the basis of reasonably disputed sectarian

views. Consequently, reasonable citizens can accept publically justified political decisions, even if those decisions are in tension with their sectarian views.

Claims (5) and (6) have both been defended in the earlier sections of this article. In Section II, I argued that it is part of political liberalism's conception of reasonableness that reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian convictions are disputed at all levels of competence they believe present in their political society. Based on some further considerations offered in Section IV, it follows that reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement. Claim (6) is supported by the argument for a conciliatory view about peer disagreement in Section III. This argument shows that when a reasonable citizen holds a set of sectarian beliefs, then their belief set is subject to a particular kind of incoherence: either their sectarian beliefs are unjustified or their belief that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement is unjustified.

How do all of these claims, taken together, show that political liberalism fails in its reconciliatory aim? Claims (2)–(6) serve to establish a connection between Justificatory Incoherence and political liberalism's reconciliatory aims. In brief, political liberalism must show that citizens can coherently endorse political liberalism's justification of liberal political institutions together with a set of sectarian views (2); to show this, political liberalism offers a justification in terms of public considerations (3); publicly justified political institutions are justifiable to all reasonable citizens, because they accept the Reciprocity Principle (4); the Reciprocity Principle provides citizens with a plausible rationale for political restraint, because reasonable citizens believe that their sectarian views are subject to peer disagreement (5); but—and here is the problem—citizens cannot, without incoherence, hold a set of sectarian beliefs and, at the same time, believe that those sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement (6).

The central argument of this article shows that political liberalism's attempt to reconcile citizens' political and sectarian commitments ultimately presupposes that citizens are committed to an incoherent set of beliefs.

To further explain the force of this argument, I will consider one objection to it. Insofar as citizens face a skeptical challenge to their sectarian commitments, one might think this challenge arises from the truth of a conciliatory view about peer disagreement, together with citizens being justified in believing that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement. As I indicated above, however, political liberalism is not committed to a conciliatory view about peer disagreement and, more obviously, political liberalism does not *make* such a view true. Further, political liberalism does not, and could not, provide citizens with epistemic justification for the belief that their sectarian views are subject to peer disagreement.<sup>26</sup> Whatever skeptical challenges citizens face, it seems that they face them independently of political liberalism and its demands of reasonable citizenship. How, then, can the argument of this article lay these skeptical challenges at the doorstep of political liberalism?

In answer to this question, consider, first, the prospects of political liberalism insofar as citizens are *not* epistemically justified in believing that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement. In this case, political liberalism clearly faces a problem. After all, epistemic justification is the central normative standard that applies to beliefs: epistemically unjustified

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<sup>26</sup>Of course, my arguments in Section II indicate that it is politically advantageous in certain ways if citizens do have this belief: it plays a key role in explaining why the Reciprocity Principle imposes a plausible form of political restraint. Such considerations, however, do not provide epistemic justification for the belief.

beliefs are simply unjustified, they are beliefs we should reject. As claims (3)–(5) show, political liberalism’s justification of liberal political institutions to all reasonable citizens ultimately turns on those citizens’ belief that their sectarian views are subject to peer disagreement. If this belief is epistemically unjustified, then citizens should reject it. Consequently, political liberalism would have failed to provide a justification of liberal political institutions which is acceptable to citizens with a wide range of different sectarian views, for the simple reason that it has failed to provide an acceptable justification for liberal political institutions.

I turn, then, to the prospects of political liberalism insofar as citizens *are* epistemically justified in believing that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the

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<sup>27</sup>Are we in fact epistemically justified in believing that our sectarian views are subject to peer disagreement? We need not expect the answer to be the same for everyone, nor for each of our sectarian views. However, Elga (2007), pp. 492–4, argues that we generally do not have good reason to believe that those who disagree with us in “messy real world” cases of disagreement are our epistemic peers; see also Christensen (2011), pp. 15–16. Disagreements about our sectarian views would—unlike simplified cases of disagreement about horse races and restaurant bills discussed in this literature—fall into this category. The reason he gives is that in messy real-world cases, the issue under dispute is so deeply entangled with many of our other views that no disagreement-independent basis remains from which we can judge the other person to be an epistemic peer. Consequently, Elga argues, in such cases we do not have good reason to believe those who disagree with us to be our epistemic peers. I agree with Kornblith (2010), pp. 47–51, that this argument exaggerates how little common ground there normally is between people, even

conciliatory view defended in Section III would entail that citizens' sectarian beliefs are not epistemically justified. This may be a skeptical problem for citizens, but how is it a skeptical problem for political liberalism? The answer is that even though political liberalism does not make it the case that citizens are epistemically justified in believing that their sectarian beliefs are subject to peer disagreement, political liberalism does *rely* on this being the case. As claims (3)–(5) show, the acceptability of the political justification that political liberalism addresses to reasonable citizens ultimately depends on reasonable citizens' belief that their sectarian views are subject to peer disagreement. Insofar as this belief is epistemically unjustified, citizens should reject it. This means that political liberalism relies on the truth of a claim which, given the truth of the conciliatory view defended in this article, entails that citizens' sectarian beliefs are unjustified. Such reliance is incompatible with political liberalism's reconciliatory aims.

## VI. RESPONSES

Whether political liberalism faces skeptical problems has been the subject of some debate. Rawls's discussion of skeptical concerns largely focuses on the compatibility of the burdens of judgment with the truth of sectarian doctrines and with sectarian belief:

Political liberalism does not question that many political and moral judgments are correct and it views many of them as reasonable. Nor does it question the possible truth

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in cases of sectarian disagreement, so I don't think Elga shows that we generally have no good reason to believe that our views are disputed by our epistemic peers.

of affirmations of faith. Above all, it does not argue that we should be hesitant and uncertain, much less skeptical, about our own beliefs.<sup>28</sup>

And further:

Imagine rationalist believers who contend that these beliefs [concerning salvation] are open to and can be fully established by reason (uncommon though this view may be). In this case, the believers simply deny what we have called “the fact of reasonable pluralism.” So we say of the rationalist believers that they are mistaken in denying that fact; but we need not say that their religious beliefs are not true.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, Quong argues that the burdens of judgment are compatible with the truth of sectarian doctrines, and that the acceptance of the burdens of judgment is compatible with sectarian belief. Moreover, Quong argues that acceptance of the burdens of judgment is consistent with denying the *possibility* that one’s sectarian views are false.<sup>30</sup>

I agree with Rawls’s and Quong’s claims: my discussion does *not* show that reasonableness is incompatible either with the truth of sectarian doctrines or with sectarian

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<sup>28</sup> Rawls 1993, p. 63. Rawls continues: “Rather, we are to recognize the practical impossibility of reaching reasonable and workable political agreement in judgment on the truth of comprehensive doctrines, especially an agreement that might serve the political purpose, say, of achieving peace and concord in a society characterized by religious and political differences”; *ibid.* This sentence may suggest that the Reciprocity Principle is motivated by a practical concern for social stability, rather than by any kind of intellectual modesty. Despite this suggestion, it is clear that the burdens of judgment play a crucial role in Rawls’s account of reasonableness.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152–3.

<sup>30</sup> Quong 2010, pp. 247–50.



belief. Political liberalism successfully avoids *those* skeptical concerns. The problem, however, is that political liberalism requires citizens to have a certain view about the causes of sectarian disagreement, and if this view is epistemically justified, then citizens' sectarian beliefs are epistemically unjustified. Rawls does not address this problem, but Quong discusses the related question of whether the acknowledgement of reasonable sectarian disagreement makes it irrational to retain a high degree of confidence in one's sectarian beliefs. His answer is a qualified one:

The answer, it seems clear to me, is no, though I concede there does not appear to be any obvious way of showing this to be correct. Still, the burden of proof must lie with the proponents of the skeptical objection since it is they who claim that the burdens of judgments and the ensuing reasonable disagreement should *always* cause people to doubt or be uncertain about their own beliefs.<sup>31</sup>

Once again, I agree: it is not obvious that the acknowledgment of reasonable disagreement, even if understood to include the belief that one's sectarian beliefs are disputed by epistemic peers, undermines the rationality of those sectarian beliefs. I also agree that the burden is on those who claim that reasonable disagreement undermines epistemic rationality. However, this burden is being shouldered by the arguments for conciliationism about peer disagreement. I conclude that existing discussions of skeptical concerns about political liberalism do not provide an answer to Justificatory Incoherence.

There are a number of other ways a proponent of political liberalism could respond to Justificatory Incoherence. I will discuss the responses that seem most promising. First, the conciliatory argument described in Section III concerns disagreements between exactly two

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<sup>31</sup>Quong 2010, p. 254.

epistemic peers. Reasonable citizens find themselves in disagreement about sectarian issues with large numbers of other people, holding a wide range of different views, having different kinds of evidence for those views, and being at different levels of competence when it comes to thinking about sectarian issues. Even if, as I claimed in Sections II and IV, reasonable citizens believe their sectarian beliefs to be disputed by *some* epistemic peers, they could, in keeping with the demands of reasonableness, believe that the majority of well-informed and thoughtful reasoners share their beliefs. In this case, it is not clear that conciliationism puts pressure on the rationality of their sectarian beliefs.<sup>32</sup>

This does not provide a convincing answer to Justificatory Incoherence. The independence principle tells us that when we assess the epistemic significance of someone's disagreement, we should not take into consideration our own reasoning about the issue under dispute. This also applies to the epistemic significance of someone's agreement: insofar as my reason for believing that you are a competent thinker is that you believe *p*, my belief that *p* receives no support from your agreement. So, to avoid Justificatory Incoherence, a reasonable citizen needs independent reasons to think that a majority of the most competent people agree with her views. At best, this strategy secures the rationality of the sectarian views of those citizens who happen to have good reason to believe that the social epistemological facts are on

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<sup>32</sup>Whether it does would seem to depend on whether the members of the well-informed and thoughtful majority hold their views independently from one another. If they all hold their beliefs purely on the authority of a single influential sectarian leader, their beliefs should not put the same weight in the scale as they would if they were held on the basis of independent reflection.

their side. In a society characterized by widespread reasonable sectarian disagreement, this strategy seems unlikely to be successful.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, a key assumption of the conciliatory argument is that you have good reason to believe that either your own or S's mistake explains the disagreement. The relevant notion of "mistake" in this context refers to a failure of epistemic justification, not simply to the idea that either your own or S's belief is *false*.<sup>34</sup> That is, conciliationism assumes that you have good reason to believe that either your belief that  $p$  or S's belief that  $\sim p$  is unjustified. We could try to avoid the problem posed by Justificatory Incoherence by claiming that this assumption is, perhaps especially in cases of sectarian disagreement, unwarranted. Of course, we can easily imagine scenarios in which one person justifiably believes  $p$  and another justifiably believes  $\sim p$ . The assumption is plausible only because we are assuming that you and S are epistemic peers, which implies that you and S have the same evidence with regard to  $p$ . This means that if we answer Justificatory Incoherence by insisting on the possibility of mistake-free disagreement, we come close to committing ourselves to a very strong variant of permissivism about epistemic justification: one person can justifiably believe  $p$  and another can justifiably believe  $\sim p$ , even if

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<sup>33</sup>As Kelly (2005) argues, consideration of disagreements between more than two persons does indicate that we ultimately need a theory about the epistemology of disagreement stated in terms of degrees of credence, rather than flat-out attitudes of belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment.

<sup>34</sup>The latter would be a trivial assumption that would undermine the strategy of determining whether you are justified in believing that  $p$ , despite S's disagreement, by determining whether you are justified in believing that S's mistake, rather than your own, explains the disagreement.

they have the same body of evidence with regard to  $p$ .<sup>35</sup> I cannot here settle the considerable debate about permissivism, so I will simply note that the proposed response to Justificatory Incoherence comes at the cost of making political liberalism dependent on a highly controversial epistemological doctrine.<sup>36</sup>

Third, and finally, I have assumed that people's sectarian views are at least in part constituted by attitudes of belief. One could try to avoid the problem of Justificatory Incoherence by arguing that, although many or most sectarian views are in part constituted by cognitive attitudes, these attitudes need not be beliefs. The cognitive elements of people's sectarian views might more properly be understood as attitudes of acceptance, trust, or faith. Christians may be said to have faith that Christ is our savior, accept or trust that he is, but not believe that he is. If we can then show that the requirements of rationality or justification for these non-belief cognitive attitudes are different from those that apply to beliefs, we might be able to deny that conciliationism applies to these attitudes. As a result, citizens could rationally accept, trust, or have faith that certain sectarian views are correct, despite acknowledging that these views are disputed amongst their epistemic peers. Though I believe this to be one of the most promising

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<sup>35</sup>We are not quite committing ourselves to this view because, to avoid the skeptical problem of Justificatory Incoherence, we only need people to *have good reason to believe* they are in a mistake-free disagreement; we don't have to claim that they can actually be in such a disagreement. For a useful discussion of these issues, see Ballantyne and Coffman (2011).

<sup>36</sup> For arguments against permissivism, see White (2005); Christensen (2007); Feldman (2007b); Sosa 2010. See Rosen (2001) and especially Schoenfeld (2012) for a defense of permissivism.

avenues for responding to Justificatory Incoherence, it would carry a commitment to a rather controversial picture of the nature of our sectarian convictions.

My main aim in this article has been to show that political liberalism suffers from a skeptical problem. Even though political liberalism successfully avoids a number of skeptical concerns, the recent debate about peer disagreement helps us see that political liberalism leaves reasonable citizens in the awkward predicament I call Justificatory Incoherence. The discussion in this last section is not meant to show that this problem cannot be resolved and that political liberalism must be rejected. Instead, my discussion suggests that there is no straightforward and costless solution to the problem, and that, consequently, the epistemic commitments of political liberalism warrant further investigation.

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