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The Mutability of Public Reason

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Abstract

Rawls's "public reason" has not been without its critics. One criticism is that public reason is "conservative." Public reason must rely on those beliefs that are "widely shared" among citizens. But if public reason relies on widely shared beliefs, how can it change without departing from those beliefs, thus violating public reason? In part one of my essay, I introduce the conservatism objection and describe two unsatisfactory responses to it. Part two argues that there are aspects of public reason which diminish the force of the conservatism objection: first, that public reason is historical, and second, that it is mutable.

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