

The Burden of Total Experience and Epistemic Abstinence

CPSA 2019, June 5

Abstract

In this present age of divisive politics and disagreement, questions over the role of truth in using our beliefs as a basis of our claims in public discourse is becoming ever more pertinent. This paper will reconstruct a Rawlsian argument to defend the claim that even when we have strong convictions that our beliefs are true, there can also be strong epistemic grounds that make the use of political power to enforce such beliefs unjustified in the context of reasonable disagreement. This paper will build upon the relevant epistemic literature, starting with Nagel's argument that claims made in the arena of public justification require a higher threshold than the beliefs we hold as true in our own private lives, and then the Raz/Barry response that driving this sort of a wedge in between truth and belief in the public realm leads to an incoherent epistemic position. This paper will defend a position of epistemic abstinence that avoids this critique, as it does not depend on separating one's beliefs from truth. Instead, it turns on a reconstruction and extension of Rawls' 'total experience' burden. The way we assess evidence and make moral judgements is affected by lived experiences over the course of our lives. As such, our interlocutors in the public sphere are not necessarily in a symmetrical epistemic relationship with us. A recognition of the incommunicability on particular matters of truth makes it coherent to abstain from imposing our beliefs on others, even when we are confident in their truth.

Two Conditions of Political Liberalism

Society is composed of citizens who disagree on a diverse array of conflicting and incompatible beliefs on religious, moral, and political matters. The overarching views that are informed by these religious, moral, and philosophical beliefs can be called comprehensive conceptions. Such comprehensive conceptions inform the way we carry out our lives and include ideas about what is to be valued in human life, claims about ontology, the positions of humans in relation to nature, ideals as to personal character and virtue, and so forth (Rawls, 1993: 175; Leland and van Wietmarschen, 2012: 725). Political liberalism takes such disagreements as a basic fact of society, yet contends that this need not preclude the possibility of creating a just and stable society. For political liberalism, such stability is not based on coming to any sort of resolutions on such disagreements, but is instead made possible by calling on citizens to refrain from invoking their comprehensive conceptions when in deliberation with other citizens about public matters, those matters that refer to constitutional essentials and matters of justice as applied to the basic structure of society (Rawls, 1993: 224). The idea here being that because there is deep disagreement on comprehensive conceptions, the only way for the resultant political institutions to be deemed acceptable by all, regardless of whatever particular comprehensive conception they hold, is for their basis and justification to be from public reasons. This is not because such comprehensive conceptions are irrelevant or unimportant, but because we recognize that they are *too important* and that they will never be able to be resolved politically (Rawls, 1985: 230). Now such a condition need not mean that one's political justification is *completely* disconnected from one's beliefs as one's comprehensive conception can indeed provide further backing for these public values, yet political liberalism argues that one *must* be able to explain their political views and opinions to others in terms that are not associated with their comprehensive conception and are instead based on the shared political values that exist in democratic society (Rawls, 1993: 243). If we did otherwise we could never expect others, with their differing beliefs and comprehensive conceptions, to see our argument as reasonable. Let's say I am a devout Catholic and

my belief heavily informs my political views. If I cannot appeal to any other basis for such views other than my religious belief, then my views could never be seen as acceptable for those who disagree with my comprehensive conception. Within political liberalism then, a necessary condition of a reasonable citizen is that one refrains from using one's comprehensive conception as a public justification to others. This we can call the *refraining condition of reasonableness*

Furthermore, a core part of political liberalism is that accepting the reasonableness of the diverse array of comprehensive conceptions, need not lead to any skepticism on the part of citizens about the truth of their own beliefs.¹ Political liberalism, for Rawls, "does not argue that we should be hesitant and uncertain, much less skeptical, about our own beliefs" (1993: 63; see also 1993: 59-60; 2001: 184). Returning to the case of being a Catholic, the claim here is that through recognizing that it would be unreasonable to use my belief as a justification to another citizen who is not a Catholic, this does not lead to any affiliated reduction in my confidence that Catholicism is true, in a capital T sense of true. We can call this the *retaining confidence condition*.

So, we have these two conditions of political liberalism. On the one hand, political liberalism asks citizens to acknowledge that it would be unreasonable to invoke one's own comprehensive conception as a justification and basis of one's views when considering matters of basic justice, due to the deep and pervasive disagreement that exists on these matters. While on the other hand, it asserts that such reasons for seeing that refraining as necessary, need not then also lead one to feel less confident about the truth of one's belief.

My paper considers whether these two conditions are at odds with one another, and whether political liberalism asks citizens to uphold an incoherent epistemic position. In particular, I focus on whether in acknowledging that there is deep disagreement between individuals who hold differing comprehensive conceptions, one is necessarily led to reduce their level of confidence in their belief. In other words, does political liberalism suffer from a skeptical problem? A number of philosophers have recently argued that when the refraining condition is based on epistemic reasons, then skepticism about one's own views is either a possible or probable outcome (Leland and van Wietmarschen, 2012; van Wietmarschen 2018; Peter, 2013). It is important to note here that such a skeptical problem, is understood as applying to individuals and groups within political liberalism, not for political liberalism itself per se. The political institutions make no comments on matters of truth (Rawls, 1993: 94; Rawls, 1985: 230-231), and the argument that follows is based on the coherence of the demands political liberalism places on citizens and groups themselves.²

Respect and Epistemic Bases for the Refraining Condition

Now, one obvious response to such concerns would be to drop the epistemic basis of the refraining condition entirely and instead appeal to other reasons, such as respect. One example of this approach is by Erin Kelly and Lionel McPherson (2001), who differentiate philosophical and political reasonableness, and argue that so long as a citizen accords with certain basis liberal-democratic principles (grant others the status of free and equal persons, propose and abide by terms of social cooperation believed as fair and mutually acceptable) then from a political perspective they are reasonable and political arrangements must be justifiable to them. Epistemic questions regarding comprehensive conceptions simply have no bearing, as "justice may well require us to acknowledge the claims of persons who hold views that have little or no rational support or seem plainly irrational" (Kelly and McPherson, 2001: 39; see also Wenar, 1995; Nussbaum, 2011). According to this view, it is the ethical respect for the views of others and the importance of comprehensive conceptions in the lives of individuals that justifies the refraining condition of reasonableness. While such a view is necessary, it appears to be insufficient without an epistemic basis being included in the refraining condition.

Part of the appeal of only using respect as the basis of the refraining condition is that it attempts to appreciate the core place that comprehensive conceptions have in the lives of society's citizens. However, the flip side to the fact that comprehensive conceptions are so important to individuals' lives, is that we are going to need strong reasons to justify why reasonableness should entail us to refrain from calling upon our comprehensive conceptions as public justifications. If part of the reason comprehensive conceptions are important to citizens is because each person believes their own to be true, then any basis of the refraining condition that is silent on epistemology is more likely to be violated. A commitment to tolerance of the not unreasonable views of others, simply out of the respect we have towards them that they are their views, might be just as a controversial position as particular comprehensive conceptions, and many individuals and groups may simply reject it (Buchanan, 2004: 127; Leland and van Wietmarschen, 2012: 735-738)

Kelly and McPherson (2001: 39-40) give the example of a Klansman whose argument for the protection of the promulgation of his view is based on the value of autonomy as a (politically) reasonable view. But is such a view likely to be sustained if the sort of world that a racist Klansman desires is achieved? If his group finds itself with political power, is it likely that the same individual will argue for the protection of minority values due to the value of autonomy? After all, the Klansman is of the belief that his view is the right one, it is, for him, simply true that the white race is superior. When considering fundamental political matters, those who act unreasonably by imposing their beliefs on others often do so because they insist that their beliefs alone are true (Rawls, 1993: 61; Rawls, 1985: 230). Due to the fundamental role that comprehensive conceptions play in peoples' lives, and the fact that such beliefs are often based on perceived truth, the respect view is then unsatisfactory as it relies on citizens simply bracketing ideas of the truth of their beliefs entirely from their justification of the refraining condition, and this seems to underplay the importance of such beliefs in people's lives. It seems that an epistemic basis to the refraining condition of reasonableness is needed to ensure political liberalism can remain stable. As such, we will need to find an epistemic account that provides a rationale for the refraining condition, without reducing each person's confidence that their own comprehensive conception is the right one.

A concern might arise here that relying on an epistemic basis for the refraining condition will lead to an overly restrictive account of reasonable comprehensive conceptions. But the epistemic criteria need not be overly strong, and I do not mean here that comprehensive conceptions must pass some high epistemic threshold, such as being verified by empirical evidence and the like. The epistemic basis is that they are informed and inculcated by our total experience, and as such the range of comprehensive conceptions will be broad.

Now, initially such an approach might seem implausible, and using an epistemic basis to ground the refraining condition might be seen as simply a half-way house on the road to skepticism. If there are good epistemic reasons to not impose my belief onto you, then maybe there are good epistemic reasons for me to question the confidence in my belief (Barry, 1995: 177-188). Similarly, if a particular belief is epistemically justified for myself then one must suppose it would also be a justified for others (Raz, 1990). Such a criticism certainly would apply if we were understanding public justification as requiring a *higher* epistemic standard than the one we impose on our own beliefs in the private sphere (this is the view of Nagel, 1987), such that the refraining condition asks us to have two differing doxastic attitudes towards our belief. My argument is that we do not refrain from imposing our views on others because we think there is some higher epistemic standard in the public realm, we refrain because despite maintaining our steadfast conviction that our beliefs are true we are aware that the nature of the evidence we have for such beliefs (our total experience) is often incommunicable to others with differing life experiences. The content of the belief might be communicable, but the full extent of the reasons we have it are not.

The Total Experience Burden

This position comes from a reconstruction of Rawls' burdens of judgement. For Rawls, it is through recognizing the burdens of judgement that citizens recognize that a particular set of their views cannot form a reasonable basis to their arguments and justifications in the public sphere, as they would be imposing their beliefs on others unfairly. Rawls' burdens of judgement are the following:

- a) Empirical and scientific evidence is conflicting and complex
- b) Disagreement over the weight we give considerations and values
- c) Concepts are indeterminate and inherently vague
- d) The way we assess evidence and weigh values is shaped by our total experience
- e) Normative considerations pulling in different directions
- f) Limited social space for the realization of values (Rawls, 1993: 56-57).

My argument is that the initial appeal of the skeptical charge against political liberalism is based upon an ambiguity that occurs when we treat the burdens of judgement as a unified whole where the takeaway is simply that others reasonably disagree with me. But we need to look at *why* others disagree, what exactly is it that makes the disagreement reasonable? My claim is that from an epistemological point of view there are two main burdens of judgement, and that disagreements as a result of each of these two different kinds of burdens might lead to different conclusions regarding whether such disagreement should reduce our confidence in the truth of our belief.

The first burden corresponds to burdens (a) in Rawls, which is when empirical and scientific evidence bearing on a case is complex and conflicting. We can call this the *burden of conflicting external evidence*. An example of this kind of disagreement would be two meteorologists disagreeing on the weekend forecast. The weather data is complex and messy, and thus each individual has to make a number of guesses to come up with a forecast, which leads one to forecast rain on Sunday morning while the other forecasts clear skies. Such disagreement does not depend to any meaningful extent on any differing life experiences between the meteorologists, but instead is a result of there being a lack of scientific consensus on the case.

The second burden corresponds to burden (d) in Rawls. It has been noted that this burden, which refers to the way our total experiences impact the way we understand and assess evidence, is conceptually different from the other burdens in that it is agent-relative (Larmore, 1996: 170; Horton, 2010: 65). Building upon this, I argue that not only is (d) agent-relative, but that the burdens of judgement (b), (c), and (e) are all subsumed within it. In as much as our total experience impacts the way we assess and understand evidence, it must also therefore impact the weight we give considerations, our judgement and interpretations of concepts, as well as the way we assess differing normative considerations.³ In this way, burden (d) appears to be somewhat of a master burden, as the fact of differing life experiences is what explains the weightings and judgements of normative values that we have to make. We can call this the *burden of total experience*. An example of this second kind of disagreement might be two individuals who disagree on whether priority should be given to alleviating poverty, or environmental protection. This disagreement is not a result of there being any confusion or conflict between the two in terms of the empirical evidence of the case, they agree on all the relevant poverty statistics and the likelihood of climate change, they even agree on what it is about poverty and climate change that make each respectively troubling. Instead, the disagreement is a result of the different rankings of normative values as a result of their total life experience up to this point. The advocate of poverty alleviation might have

spent their childhood in federal housing and has experienced firsthand what it is like to be in poverty, while the environmentalist possibly grew up spending weekends camping and hiking and has built up a deep and steadfast appreciation of non-human animals and nature. Such disagreement then is unlike the meteorologist case because it is not simply a result of the external world being a complex and confusing place, but because each person's total experience has led them to give value and priority to different normative values, and such disagreement continues even when there is agreement on the facts of the matter. We need to differentiate then, between disagreements that are based on the burden of conflicting external evidence and based on the burden of total experience, as the attractiveness of the skeptical charge might differ between the two cases.

The comprehensive conceptions that individuals have are, to not an insignificant degree, heavily influenced and inculcated by the total experiences of their lives. This total experience can be seen not only as a summation of individual once-off experiences, but also as a result of the entirety of the social environment that we find ourselves in. The form beliefs and knowledge take, is largely a collective enterprise (Buchanan, 2004: 98), and while we might be sure that our beliefs are determined in a powerful sense by the particular context in which we were brought up, the *exact* experiences or factors that led to it might be difficult to pin down. Another way of putting the point is that the comprehensive conceptions we have are near the center of our Quinean 'web of belief' and as such, they are not necessarily tied to particular experiences. While imagining recalcitrant experiences can alter views that are on the periphery of our web of belief, beliefs that are near the center are instead tied to one's experience as a whole (Quine, 1951: 40-41). Nothing here I think is especially contentious or surprising, and this seems like a basic sociological and psychological fact.

However, one might raise the example of individuals 'escaping' from the social inculcation of particular beliefs as evidence that one's comprehensive conception is not so dependent on total experience as I am making it out to be. Many individuals do indeed 'escape' from the norms or beliefs of the social environment in which they find themselves, some individuals are able to get out of racist cultures with no corresponding views on white supremacy, others are able to reject the beliefs of religious cults despite being raised there. I do not mean to make a reductive argument that dismisses the role of agency, and the idea is not so much that one's social environment precisely determines the comprehensive conception we hold, but that one's total experience both sets constraints to the options available to us and makes certain choices more appealing. I think it would be near impossible to reject the claim that one's comprehensive conception is dependent in this way on our total experience. The example of an individual 'escaping' from the religious cult were they were born is an interesting example, because despite no longer believing in the cult's comprehensive conception the resultant belief will likely still be heavily informed from one's original total experience. The traumatic experience might lead one to a steadfast form of atheism, for example. The early abolitionism of Benjamin Lay is sometimes given as an example of this sort of ability to transcend one's social environment. He after all, was a steadfast opponent of a practice that for the most part was commonly accepted. But Lay's opposition to slavery was heavily informed by the atrocities he saw against slaves in Barbados while working as a sailor (see Rediker, 2017: 32-35). His moral belief that slavery was wrong, was in part informed by the differing total experience that he had. Of course I am not saying here that the disagreement between Lay and defenders of slavery was a case of reasonable disagreement, but merely making the point that one's comprehensive conception is heavily dependent on one's total experience.

The Incommunicability of Total Experience

There is the further fact that our total experience which grounds and determines our comprehensive conceptions is often *incommunicable* to other citizens in society. It is this fact that grounds the epistemic

basic of the refraining condition of political liberalism. As such, the disagreements that we find ourselves in with our interlocutors in the public sphere are not able to be resolved simply by reasoning at a higher level of rationality, or by exposing oneself to more empirical and scientific evidence on the matter. The beliefs persons have (and the political views that are a result of those beliefs) are heavily dependent on the sorts of experiences we have been exposed to and the social context in which such beliefs were developed, and a full disclosure of that experience and the way it informs one's views is not always possible (Peter, 2013: 608). A Christian's experience of religious revelation, or their spiritual experiences at church on Sundays, and the way this connects and informs their particular comprehensive conception is not something that can be communicated to others without something getting lost (or left behind) in translation. A Jewish person's aversion to any form of government authority that hints at paternalism, which is informed by her family's history and persecution during the Second World War, is not the sort of thing that one can easily communicate to others. Furthermore, not only is the way particular experiences affect and inform our beliefs incommunicable, but the very first-order evidence that informs and determines our comprehensive conceptions can at times be too complex or subtle to be fully detailed to another person and the full array of factors that influence our beliefs gradually over time results that we can never be certain of *all* the particular factors that influenced our belief (Sosa, 2010: 290). This dual incommunicability can be shown with an example. The poverty advocate might struggle to translate the sum of their total experience over a prolonged period into a communicable piece of evidence to others, there might not be a nice and neat train of experiences that one can point to as definitively determining their comprehensive conception. For sure, one can be confident in saying that the experience of growing up in poverty *as a whole* is what led to their comprehensive conception, but the fine-grained examples might be difficult to articulate. In addition, the way in which one's total experience has informed one's moral outlook and normative perspective, at a deep and profound level through affective and emotive responses, can never be fully communicated (Horton, 2010: 67). The idea of the sort of incommunicability at work here is expressed well by van Inwagen, in relation to his belief in certain philosophical theses he claims to have "an insight that is incommunicable – at least *I* don't know how to communicate it – for I have done all I can to communicate it to Lewis [the person who disagrees], and he has understood perfectly everything I have said, and he has not come to share my conclusions" (1996: 30). Van Inwagen contends that to a significant extent, philosophical, political, and religious views are grounded in certain insights and states of mind that simply are incommunicable to those who disagree with us (1996: 42).

Now, the fact that at times we cannot place a *particular* experience to our comprehensive conception, does not mean in scenarios where we can, the experience will necessarily be communicable to others. While such one-off experiences being what informs one's comprehensive conception is likely a rarer occurrence than the total experience one has more generally, such cases certainly do exist and the fact of incommunicability appears to remain. The prototypical case here would be a private religious revelation. It was on the road to Damascus that Saul became Paul after experiencing a divine revelation. Now, the claim that the experience of a religious revelation and its effect on one's comprehensive conception is incommunicable in any meaningful way has been contested. For Barry, "[i]f I report [a private religious revelation's] content faithfully to you, then you have what I have in the relevant sense," (1995: 180) just like a doctor has an idea of the pain of their patient, despite not themselves experiencing any pain.

Barry's claim then is that personal experiences can be conveyed into information whose importance and significance we can then come to an opinion on. The problem with this however, is that, in relation to experiences that inform our comprehensive conceptions, each person *does not have what the other has*, one has an account of religious revelation, while one has an actual lived experience of it. Alston outlines that there is a meaningful distinction between sensory and non-sensory experiences when it comes to having justified beliefs. Seeing one's house, argues Alston, is different from thinking about, reasoning about it, remembering it, and so forth (1991: 14-15). Many accounts of religious revelation outline such

sensory experiences, where god or the divine was presented to one's consciousness (Alston, 1991: 12-14). Such one-off experiences are not unique to religious views either, one can imagine an individual turning to veganism after witnessing the practices of an abattoir, or pacifism after experiencing the horrors of war. Such experiences and the way they affect and influence the normative judgements that we have and lead to certain comprehensive conceptions, are similarly incommunicable. If a doctor had never experienced pain, then I don't think they would be able to appreciate the patient's situation. In a sense, the pain would be incommunicable. This, is more accurate to the situation of differing total experiences that inform our comprehensive conceptions.

Epistemic Peers

The best place to turn for the argument that it is this fact of the incommunicability of our total experiences that provides the epistemic basis of the refraining condition, is to the idea of epistemic peers in the epistemology of disagreement literature. The basic underlying question for the epistemic peer literature is that if you have a particular belief p and you know that there is somebody, who you have good reason to believe is your epistemic peer, who disagrees with you and believes not- p , are you justified in maintaining confidence in your belief p ?

What makes someone our epistemic peer? One view is that an epistemic peer is someone who is equally familiar with the same body of evidence, as well as being equal with respect to certain 'epistemic virtues' such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias (Kelly, 2005: 175). If epistemic peers were individuals who had the *same* body of evidence, then there would not seem to be much applicability in epistemic peer literature to the question of disagreement between citizens with incompatible comprehensive conceptions and beliefs. Each person's total experience is different to others, and as such, each person has different bodies of evidence which bear on the question. However this conception of epistemic peers has come under question as being too restrictive, such that the range of cases of disagreement between epistemic peers would be close to zero. As a result, the idea of familiarity with the same body of evidence is often replaced with the idea that epistemic peers are those who have distinct but *equally good* bodies of evidence, in the sense that an epistemic peer is someone who can be reasonably regarded as *antecedently* being just as likely to be right on the issue on which there is now disagreement. (Matheson, 2014; Wedgwood, 2010: 226-227; Elga, 2007). In a similar vein, Conee argues that epistemic peers should be understood as those who have a "shared basis" for reasonable attitude formation. Such a shared basis is not however based on having the same evidence, but that the differences in bases of attitudes are mutually known (2010: 70).

It is this broader notion of an epistemic peer that allows literature on the epistemology of peer disagreement to be applied to the disagreements that are important to political liberalism. That is, disagreements over comprehensive conceptions, or political goals or priorities that are a result from those conceptions. The notion of two persons disagreeing as a result of the incommunicability of their total experience is, I argue, a reasonable example of a peer disagreement where individuals have equally good bodies of evidence (despite it being different evidence), and where the differences in bases of attitudes are mutually known. For each person, it is their total experience that is informing their particular belief about the truth of a comprehensive conception, in a way that makes it reasonable for each person to believe what they believe. In the case of a religious revelation, one individual has the perceptual experience of perceiving god in their consciousness, while the other person has the experience of no such thing ever occurring to them, all they have is the testimony of somebody else, which does not carry the same weight as their own lived experience (which has been full of secular experiences). The basis of attitude formation is shared, in the sense that each person is aware of what the differences are in the bases of the other person's attitude formation. The atheist is aware that the Christian's belief in the truth

of their comprehensive conception is in part formed by their total experience, and this is enough to classify their disagreement as between two epistemic peers.

This fact of the differing total experiences being ‘equally good’ in leading to differing beliefs and comprehensive conceptions, the fact that others are seen as our epistemic peers, is what grounds the refraining condition of reasonableness. Being steadfast in the confidence in the truth of one’s beliefs is one thing, but the recognition that the other person has perfectly good reasons to believe what they believe (and to be confident in its truth), is what stops individuals imposing their beliefs on others. This provides a more stable basis of the refraining condition of reasonableness than the basis from respect. Without taking the epistemic consequences of differing life experiences into consideration, it is easier to be dismissive of the beliefs and views of others. It is compatible with such a view that one’s attitudes towards others is that they are simply stupid for their beliefs. One could have the following attitude: “sure, it is the belief of this particular individual or group, but I don’t really see how anyone could believe such drivel.” The refraining condition of reasonableness is more likely to be broken in these sorts of scenarios, especially when the stakes are high. But such an outcome is less likely with the epistemic basis of the refraining condition, as one refrains because one can imagine someone with sound epistemic virtues having the belief.

We still see those who disagree with us as wrong, but it is important here to view ‘wrong’ in a particular way. It is not that we view their disagreement as unreasonable, but rather we recognize that their particular beliefs and experiences are such that the communicability of truth is highly questioned. Therefore the disagreement is not being reduced to a tautology. We do not view them as wrong because we are right, but by recognizing them as our epistemic peer we are still able to recognize how their life experiences can lead them to a differing conclusion than us, and that is *why* they are wrong. The reason that we see such imposition of our views as unreasonable, is due to the fact that the epistemic conditions make us unable to fully communicate the reasons for which we have our belief. This epistemic fact, is what leads us to respecting the views of others and to not use our own comprehensive conception as a basis of public justification.⁴

Total Experience and the Steadfast View

To consider however whether acknowledging the total experience burden necessarily leads one to a reduction in the confidence of the truth of their belief, we need to return to the basic underlying question in the epistemology of disagreement: if you have a particular belief p and you know that there is somebody, who you have good reason to believe is your epistemic peer, who disagrees with you and believes not- p , are you justified in maintaining confidence in your belief p ? Where here, for our purposes, p is a moral, religious, or philosophical belief that underpins a particular comprehensive conception. Generally, the answer as to what response is appropriate in light of disagreement over a question between two epistemic peers falls somewhere on a spectrum where at one end we have the conciliationist approach (we should lose confidence in our original belief) and the steadfast approach (we should remain confident about our belief). We need to show then, that in the case of disagreements over comprehensive conceptions, the incommunicability of one’s total experience is a valid basis for holding the steadfast view.

The prototypical case in the epistemic peer literature is the case of two friends who go out to dinner, and when it comes time to pay the bill each person sees the final figure clearly and agrees to give a twenty percent tip. I do the math and am confident that we each owe \$43 while my friend also does the math in her head and is confident that the amount owed is \$45. Supposing that each person has a track record of being equally successful of calculating tips in the past, what is the appropriate response to learning about the disagreement (This example comes from Christenson, 2007: 193)? My argument here is not to prove that a steadfast response is *always* the correct response to peer disagreement. As I said earlier, it is

important to separate the two different burdens of judgement. In some cases, where the external and empirical evidence is conflicting, the steadfast response to disagreement might not be appropriate. My argument does not depend on the view that in the restaurant case, I should retain confidence that the amount owed is \$43. Indeed, doing otherwise might be thought of displaying a form of epistemic egoism.

The appeal of the conciliatory position is based on two principles, that of *independence* and that of *uniqueness*. The independence criterion is that when we determine what one can justifiably refer to in explaining one's disagreement with an epistemic peer, the person's original reasoning toward the proposition should be bracketed. Doing otherwise would appear to simply be begging the question (Christenson, 2007: 198; van Wietmarschen, 2018: 496). If I realized that my friend came to a different calculation of the restaurant bill, I cannot use the fact that I myself came to \$43 as some sort of basis to justify retaining confidence. Instead, I need to have some independent basis separate from my reasoning, such as the fact that my friend had three glasses of wine over dinner, or that I knew that my friend had a headache that evening. The uniqueness criterion is that a single body of evidence justifies at most a single attitude toward any particular proposition (Feldman, 2007: 205). In the case of the restaurant bill, there is only one particular total amount owed that is justified from the bill that the friends receive. There are indeed intuitions that suggest a rejection of the uniqueness thesis would be problematic. For instance, Roger White gives the example that if I was called up to a jury, and was given a magic pill to determine if I will find the defendant innocent or guilty, I should not maintain much confidence in my conviction after taking the pill. The point here being that if we think that the evidence of a trial permits the conclusion of *either* guilty or innocent, then we are functionally doing the same thing as taking the pill (White, 2005: 450).

However, while both *independence* and *uniqueness* might seem like reasonable conditions determining one's response to disagreement in the idealized case of restaurant bills, this does not mean that the conditions are reasonable to impose in other types of disagreement between epistemic peers. As such the mere fact of conciliationism being appropriate in examples like the restaurant case, where there is strict evidential equality, need not result in a required reduction in confidence in disagreements over comprehensive conceptions (van Wietmarschen, 2018 seems to make this claim).

The appeal of the conciliatory response to peer disagreement begins to wane when considering disagreements over comprehensive conceptions that are based on the incommunicability of total experience. First of all, the fact of incommunicability means that epistemic peers are no longer in a perfectly symmetrical relationship to the evidence. As such, the rationale for the independence criterion no longer applies (Kelly, 2005: 179-181, Foley, 2001: 79), as the different ways our total experiences influence our comprehensive conceptions is now a relevant difference between us. One example of asymmetry would be the fact that propositions based on introspection seem to be more justified than propositions based on testimony from others. Such asymmetrical relations to the evidence means that each person can be justified in favouring their own reasons for their belief. (Matheson, 2014) The same logic applies to one's total experience, as one's lived experiences and the way they have informed one's comprehensive conception is a more justified reason for believing the truth of one's own belief, than believing the truth of another's comprehensive conception when one has only heard their testimony, or is aware of their situation and experience, which is itself incomplete and not a full reflection of all the relevant ways such experience is determining one's comprehensive conception. As Wedgwood (2010: 242) outlines, two parties can hold their incompatible beliefs, not because of irrational reasoning, but because "[i]t is rational for my background beliefs, experiences, memories and intuitions to guide me directly in a way in which it is simply not possible for your beliefs, experiences, or intuitions to guide me directly." Our beliefs are in part guided by our current beliefs, our experiences, and memories in such a way that it is reasonable for me to have what Wedgwood calls a "fundamental trust" in my own

experiences and beliefs in a way that cannot be expected for me to have in the same experiences of others (2010: 242-243).

It is important to note here that the total experience burden is not asking citizens to accept the claim that all truth is relative. This would be asking citizens too much, as it would be asking them to accept a particular ontological claim that might go against their particular comprehensive conception. The incommunicability as a result of total experience is compatible with there being some 'objective truth,' such that any proposition (or comprehensive conception) p is either going to be true or it is not. But this does not mean that it is not rational for a particular person to believe in p at a particular point in time but then believe not- p at another point in time, or that it is irrational for other persons to believe p while you believe not- p . Such rationality of differing beliefs need not be because there are 'different' truths, but simply be because of the incommunicability of conveying to one another the way one's total experience has informed one's comprehensive conception and made one confident that their beliefs are in fact true.

The point here is not that there is an asymmetry in terms of access to evidence in general between those who disagree, such that the two persons are no longer appropriately seen as epistemic peers. It is the asymmetrical position that develops as a result of it being the way our total experience informs and determines our beliefs and how this particular process is unable to be communicated to the other. Who, in turn, is unable to communicate fully the way their total experience informs their own comprehensive conception. It is as if the full extent of our two experiences are hidden from each other. While I can see that you have particular experiences that are informing your comprehensive conception, I do not have access to the full pull of that evidence. The asymmetry is that the disagreement is a result of those who disagree having different total experiences that bear on the question at issue, with each of these giving each person their own justified reason for maintaining confidence in their belief.

It is important to note here that a steadfast response to the sorts of disagreements that are important to political liberalism need not reject the uniqueness thesis, understood as the claim that the *same* body of evidence can only lead to a single justified belief. As we have seen, those who disagree on comprehensive conceptions do not have the *same* evidence, but *equally good* evidence, and the appeal of uniqueness is not as strong in this case. We can use a simple example to demonstrate this. Imagine two spectators who are watching a football match from opposite ends of a large stadium, such that when the ball is at one end of the stadium one of the spectators has a better view, while when the ball is at the other end, the other spectator has the better view. The two spectators are likely to come to different conclusion as to who was the best player in the game, as one spectator will be able to use the brilliant move of a particular player when the ball was up at their end of the stadium, while the other spectator will call back to a different move that occurred when the ball was at their end. In such a case, it seems reasonable that each spectator will come to a different belief as to who the best player was, as each of their own perspectives (which are equally good) lead to different answers.

It is an unnecessary assumption that any genuine 'cognitive contact' with reality must necessarily yield agreement, even when different persons each achieve veridical contact as different persons might be accessing different aspects of the 'truth' (Alston, 1991: 267). While such agreement might occur more regularly with respect to the physical and social environment (yet there remains here still substantial disagreement of course), this need not occur to all sorts of beliefs. The insights that are gained from the differing total experience for the poverty advocate and the environmentalist, are both perfectly good reasons for each of them to conclude that their particular belief is true.

Begging the Question?

But this seems to only be in the case of the first-person perspective, and we need to defend why remaining in the first-person perspective is appropriate in the case of one's total experience. Are we not, the skeptic might ask us, simply unjustifiably privileging our own reasons for our belief, in the same way that we thought it was unreasonable to privilege our own mathematical process of calculating the restaurant bill? What the conciliationist argues is that we must find reasons independent of the disagreement itself in order to satisfy a steadfast view. As Christenson argues, "trapped though I am in my own epistemic perspective, I am perfectly capable of taking an impartial attitude toward some of my own beliefs and using the varied opinions of others as resources for my own epistemic improvement" (2007: 204). But does this apply to our comprehensive conceptions? Or is there something special about the way one's total experience informs our beliefs that justifies remaining in the first-person perspective? I believe we can get to the answer here if we turn to *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, where G. A. Cohen asks a similar question to the one considered in the paper, when he probes the idea that there is some level of irrationality of maintaining a nurtured belief in p , when we could just as easily have had a different nurtured experience that would have led us to believe q . Cohen asks the question of whether we can rationally maintain confidence in believing things that we acknowledge are to some extent informed by somewhat arbitrary past decisions and circumstance. Taking a personal example, he outlines that the fact he believes in the analytic/synthetic division is because he went to Oxford, and that if he went to Harvard then he would most likely reject it (2000: 18). For Cohen, "this is disturbing. For the fact that I studied at Oxford is not reason for thinking that the [analytic/synthetic] distinction is sound" (2000: 18), as it is reasonable to think that the intellectual environments of Oxford and Harvard are equally good.

But Cohen's example of school choice is not reflective of the sort of total experiences that matter for the comprehensive conceptions that are objects of disagreement in society. Cohen's belief in the distinction is not informed by his experience in the same way as one's total experiences inform one's comprehensive conceptions through emotive and affective ways and therefore, the same asymmetry does not develop between having the total experience for oneself and having such experience simply be conveyed to you. In a way Cohen's example here is really just like the restaurant bill example, but as if the abacus had not been invented yet. The belief depends on an impersonal use of reasoning that makes it possible to abstract away from and take an impartial standpoint, in a manner that is not possible for the beliefs and experiences that inform our comprehensive conceptions. As such, any appeal of skepticism towards belief about the merits of the analytic/synthetic distinction need not lead to an affiliated skepticism towards one's belief in the truth of their comprehensive conception.

But here we might think that this is simply because Cohen did not go far enough in questioning his nurtured beliefs. What we need to do is not to only imagine going to different schools, but to imagine counterfactual total experiences as a whole, in order to truly test the reasonability of our particular belief. The problem with this however, is that in imagining a counterfactual total experience, we are, in a sense, imagining a scenario where we are no longer ourselves. Recall the fact that our comprehensive conceptions are embedded deep into our web of belief and as such, we are not able to simply imagine counterfactuals that lead to differing beliefs without replacing the whole web. By imagining a counterfactual total experience (that is, imagining living a different life) that would lead to a different embedded belief, this would then likely lead to a snowball effect toward all of our other collateral beliefs and commitments that are connected to the embedded belief at the center of the web. By shifting our experiences in this manner, we might find ourselves with nothing left to stand on (Pettit, 2006). One is not able to abstract out and look down at one's total experience impartially, without losing the identity of who one is entirely. I argue that it is this fact that makes remaining in the first-person perspective in cases of disagreement based on differing total experiences reasonable. It is different from abstracting

from once-off experiences, such as your decision to go to a particular university, or your calculation that the restaurant bill is \$43. In these cases, we are able to take an impartial standpoint without losing the perspective that they are still *our* beliefs. Of course, all this is not to say that we *cannot* abstract from our total experiences, we can. The point is that when we do, we are no longer considering the beliefs as beliefs that we, with our own particular experience, hold and therefore, it does not lead to any reduction in our confidence towards our beliefs, because we are not imagining them as *our* beliefs anymore.

Indeed, it seems imperative that we can in fact do this sort of abstracting, as this is what allows us to see other individuals with their differing experiences as our epistemic peers, where we see each person's total experience as being equally good evidence for their own comprehensive conception. While I might not be able to imagine *myself* growing up going for nature hikes every weekend, I can acknowledge that *someone who did* have such a total experience might have a different comprehensive conception than I do, and this might be a reasonable and justified belief as a result of their differing experience. The reason that such a basis to the refraining condition does not lead to any necessary reduction in the confidence that one has in their beliefs, is due to the incommunicable nature of such experience and the way it informs one's beliefs. Through recognizing the burden of total experience, we are not asked to have two separate doxastic attitudes towards our belief in the public and private spheres. It is not as if we do not believe that one's total experience is not 'good enough' for others in the public sphere, it is the fact that we are unable to communicate why that is, which is what makes us refrain from using it as a public justification. The issues of incommunicability do not exist for myself, I have particular insights as to the way my experience has inculcated my belief and as such there is no basis of lowering my confidence in the truth of my belief. With such an epistemic basis to the refraining condition of reasonableness, political liberalism does not seem to suffer from a skeptical problem, or to ask citizens to maintain an incoherent epistemic position.

Endnotes

1. Although some disagree on this point, for example: Barry, 1995.
2. It should also be noted that by skepticism, I simply mean a reduction in the confidence of the truth of one's belief. I do not consider the more fundamental position of 'philosophical skepticism.' This paper makes certain foundationalist assumptions about experience that are unlikely to persuade this sort of skeptic.
3. Burden *f* is not in itself based on epistemology, but instead is a more practical point that institutions will always be limited in the values they can take in. As such, I will not consider it in this paper.
4. Of course, this inclusion of epistemic reasons for the refraining condition implies that special attention must be paid to ensure that individuals and groups are not victims of epistemic injustice (see, for instance: Fricker, 2007; Anderson, 2012). While I do not consider such concerns here, I believe my position in this paper is compatible with these insights.

References

- Alston, William P. 1991. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2012. "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions." *Social Epistemology* 26(2): 163-173.
- Barry, Brian. 1995. *Justice as Impartiality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Buchanan, Allen. 2004. "Political Liberalism and Social Epistemology." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 32(2): 95-130.
- Christenson, David. 2007. "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News." *Philosophical Review* 116(2): 187-217.
- Cohen, G. A. 2000. *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Conee, Earl. 2010. "Rational Disagreement Defended." In *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Elga, Adam. 2007. "Reflection and Disagreement." *Noûs* 41(3): 478-502.
- Fabienne, Peter. 2013. "Epistemic Foundations of Political Liberalism." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10: 598-620.
- Feldman, Richard. 2007. "Reasonable Religious Disagreement." In *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise M. Antony. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Foley, Richard. 2001. *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fuerstein, Michael. 2013. "Epistemic Trust and Liberal Justification." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 21(2): 179-199.
- Gutting, Gary, 1982. *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Horton, John. 2010. "Reasonable Disagreement." In *Multiculturalism and Moral Conflict*, ed. Maria Dimova-Cookson and P. M. R. Stirk. London: Routledge.
- Kelly, Erin and Lionel McPherson. 2001. "On Tolerating the Unreasonable." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 9(1): 38-55.
- Kelly, Thomas. 2005. "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement." In *Oxford Studies in Epistemology: Volume 1*, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Larmore, Charles E. 1996. *The Morals of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leland, R. J. and Han van Wietmarschen. 2012. "Reasonableness, Intellectual Modesty, and Reciprocity in Political Justification." *Ethics* 122(4): 721-747.
- Matheson, Jonathan. 2014. "Disagreement: Idealized and Everyday." In *The Ethics of Belief: Individual and Social*, ed. Jonathan Matheson and Rico Vitz. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Nagel, Thomas. 1987. "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16(3): 215-240.
- Nussbaum, Martha. 2011. "Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39(1): 3-45.
- Peter, Fabienne. 2013. "Epistemic Foundations of Political Liberalism." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10(5): 598-620.
- Quine, W. V. 1951. "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." *The Philosophical Review* 60(1): 20-43.
- Rawls, John. 1985. "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14(3): 223-251.
- Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawls, John. 2001. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Raz, Joseph. 1990. "Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19(1): 3-46.
- Rediker, Marcus. 2017. *The Fearless Benjamin Lay: The Quaker Dwarf Who became the First Revolutionary Abolitionist*. Boston: Beacon Press.

- Rosen, Gideon. 2001. "Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism." *Philosophical Perspectives* 15: 69-91.
- Sosa, Ernest. 2010. "The Epistemology of Disagreement." In *Social Epistemology*, ed. Adrian Haddock et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. 1996. "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence." In *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions*, ed. Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray. New York: Blackwell.
- Van Wietmarschen, Han. 2018. "Reasonable Citizens and Epistemic Peers: A Skeptical Problem for Political Liberalism." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26(4): 486-507.
- Wedgwood, Ralph. 2010. "The Moral Evil Demons." In *Disagreement*, ed. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wenar, Leif. 1995. "Political Liberalism: An Internal Critique." *Ethics* 106(1): 32-62.
- White, Roger. 2005. "Epistemic Permissiveness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 19: 445-459.