

Lecture Notes 3 : Liberal Perfectionism

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Two questions:

- (1) Can a liberal use comprehensive materials to construct the most fundamental tenets of his theory?
- (2) Can a liberal appeal to comprehensive materials to construct constitutional essentials, to settle issues of basic justice, and to direct general state policy?

Political liberals: 'no' to both questions.

Comprehensive *antiperfectionist* liberals: 'yes' to (1), 'no' to (2).

Comprehensive *perfectionist* liberals: 'yes' to both questions.

Raz on Perfectionism

A preliminary argument:

- (3) Respect for citizens requires that the state promote the autonomous pursuit of individual well-being, and
- (4) Well-being is about inherently valuable projects.
- ∴ (5) The state should be in the business of promoting 'valid' conceptions of the good, and not valueless, or 'invalid' ones. Moreover,
- (6) Personal autonomy presupposes value pluralism.
- ∴ (7) Respect for citizens requires that the state promote autonomy by providing citizens with a sufficient number of valuable options and therefore by safeguarding value pluralism.

Respect for citizens

Raz on personal autonomy:

Autonomous life is valuable only if it is spent in the pursuit of acceptable and valuable projects and relationships. (*The Morality of Freedom*, p. 312)

And since the state is charged with promoting the value of autonomy, it is charged with promoting such relationships and projects.

A Millian objection

The harm principle (HP): 'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant...' (J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, p. 14)

Raz's response: 'harm' has to be reinterpreted to include failures to promote autonomy.

Well-being

For Raz moral and ethical claims are objective. Hence:

(8) A necessary condition for a life being good is that it realize some objective value(s).

NB: This is not to say that realizing objective value *makes* a life good.

Objection 1: Content-scepticism

No objective fact of the matter as to whether the life of the gambler (considered as a unified whole) is worse than the life of the farmer.

What justifies the asymmetry in belief vis-à-vis the *right*?

Objection 2: Coercion

Any attempt to coerce people into leading a good life will be *self-defeating*.

Raz's response: perfectionism need be neither coercive, nor manipulative.

Should the liberal state support art?

Modes of justification:

(i) 'Subsidy is for art, for culture... It's for what people don't want but ought to have.' (Sir Humphrey Appleby)

(ii) People actually like art, but don't contribute because of irrationality or errors in judgement.

(iii) Lack of art implies injustice to art lovers and/or to future generations who are denied access to cultural artifacts.

(iv) Art (not unlike health, education, etc.) involves positive externalities.

If (ii)-(iii) do not apply, is (iv) anti-perfectionist? How far can it take us?

Study questions

Does the harm principle make any room for perfectionism?

What distinguishes comprehensive perfectionist liberalism from its non-perfectionist cousin?

Further Reading

Dworkin, R. (1985), *A Matter of Principle*, Harvard, ch. 11.

Raz, J. (1986), *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford, ch. 5, 14.