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Liberalism without Perfection

Jonathan Quong

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A growing number of political philosophers favour a view called liberal perfectionism. According to this view, liberal political morality is characterized by a commitment to helping individuals lead autonomous lives and making other valuable choices. This book rejects this widely held view and offers an alternative account of liberal political morality. It argues that the liberal state should not be engaged in determining what constitutes a valuable or worthwhile life nor try to make sure that individuals live up to this ideal. Instead, it should remain neutral on the issue of the good life, and restrict itself to establishing the fair terms within which individuals can pursue their own beliefs about what gives value to their lives. The book thus defends a position known as political liberalism. The first part of the book subjects the liberal perfectionist position to critical scrutiny, advancing three major objections which raise serious doubts about the liberal perfectionist position with regard to autonomy, paternalism, and political legitimacy. The second part of the book presents and defends a distinctive version of political liberalism. In particular, it clarifies and develops political liberalism's central thesis: that political principles, in order to be legitimate, must be publicly justifiable to reasonable people. Drawing on the work of John Rawls, the author offers his own interpretation of this idea, and rebuts some of the main objections that have been pressed against it. In doing so, he provides novel arguments regarding the nature of an overlapping consensus, the structure of political justification, the idea of public reason, and the status of unreasonable persons.

Conclusion

Jonathan Quong

in *Liberalism without Perfection*

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The Conclusion briefly returns to the main questions posed at the outset of the book, and offers two broad considerations in favour of a liberalism that is political and neither perfectionist nor comprehensive.

Liberal Foundations

Matthew Clayton

in *Justice and Legitimacy in Upbringing*

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This chapter sets out the liberal ideals of justice and legitimacy that form the basis of the conception of upbringing defended in later chapters. It begins with a summary of Rawls's conception of political morality, then discusses the different dimensions of liberal autonomy and summarizes Rawls's case for anti-perfectionist justice. Section 3 considers certain objections to Rawls's political liberalism and against Rawls, asserting the view that autonomy should be treated as valuable in non-political lives. Section 4 sets out a conception of advantage with which to judge the demands of justice, drawing on Rawls's account of the interests of citizens and Dworkin's hypothetical insurance scheme. Finally, the questions addressed in later chapters are clarified by reference to recent discussions of the site of political morality offered by G.A. Cohen and Andrew Williams.

From Bondage to Freedom

Michael Lebuffe

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This book defends a comprehensive interpretation of Spinoza's enlightened vision of human excellence, including his theories of good

and evil, virtue, perfection, and freedom. Spinoza holds that what is fundamental to human morality is the fact that we find things to be good or evil, not what we take those designations to mean. When we come to understand the conditions under which we act—that is, when we come to understand the sorts of beings that we are and the ways in which we interact with things in the world—then we can recast traditional moral notions in ways that help us to attain more of what we find to be valuable. For Spinoza, we find value in greater activity. Two hazards impede the search for value. First, we need to know and acquire the means to be good. In this respect, Spinoza's theory is a great deal like Hobbes's: we strive to be active, and in order to do so we need food, security, health, and other necessary components of a decent life. There is another hazard, however, that is more subtle. On Spinoza's theory of the passions, we can misjudge our own natures and fail to understand the sorts of beings that we really are. So we can misjudge what is good and might even seek ends that are evil. Spinoza's account of human nature is thus much deeper and darker than Hobbes's: we are not well known to ourselves, and the self-knowledge that is the foundation of virtue and freedom is elusive and fragile.

Fair Governance

Francis H. Buckley

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This book examines justifications for interfering with personal preferences. The paternalist would second-guess a person's choices with the goal of making him better off; the perfectionist would do so to enforce morals by eliminating immoral choices. The two categories overlap to a large extent, but remain different. The paternalist is not a perfectionist when he would impugn morally neutral choices which would nevertheless leave a person worse off. This book calls this “soft paternalism” and contrasts this to a “hard paternalism” that overlaps with perfectionism and enforces a moral vision. Whether soft or hard, paternalism would embrace state interference based on judgment errors, weakness of the will, information costs and endogenous preferences. In general this book keeps a sceptical view that such arguments make a strong case for state intervention with people's choices. There are different ways of influencing choices, and liberal perfectionists would use moderate means (carrots more than sticks) to do so. Rules that nudge people towards particular choices are less troubling when they permit people to opt out, but such rules might still be illiberal if they direct people to choices that they would never want to make if they

thought about it. The perfectionist is not a paternalist when he enforces a moral code without seeking to make a person better off, but instead to protect people influenced by his bad behavior. The book calls this “social perfectionism” as contrasted with the “private perfectionism” that is concerned with the morals of the person making the choice. Rules that promote nationalism are a prominent example of social perfectionism.

Virtue, Vice, and Value

Thomas Hurka

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DOI: 10.1093/0195137167.001.0001

What are virtue and vice, and how do they relate to other moral properties such as goodness and rightness? This book defends a perfectionist account of virtue and vice that gives distinctive answers to these questions. The account treats the virtues as higher-level intrinsic goods, ones that involve morally appropriate attitudes to other, independent goods and evils. Virtue by itself makes a person's life better, but in a way that depends on the goodness of other things. This account was accepted by many early twentieth-century consequentialists, including Franz Brentano, G. E. Moore, Hastings Rashdall, and W. D. Ross. The book elaborates it further than has been done before, describing its mathematical structure, connecting it to individual virtues and vices, and applying it to specific issues such as the morality of fantasy and the proper roles of private charity and the welfare state. While doing so, it argues for the account's superiority over rival views of virtue, including those defended under the heading of “virtue ethics.”

The Demands of Liberal Education

Meira Levinson

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Develops a liberal political theory of children's education provision. It argues that all children have a right to an autonomy-promoting education, and that this right is best satisfied through a state-regulated ‘detached school’ that aims to help children develop their capacities for autonomy. Parents have the privilege to direct their children's upbringing in substantial and pervasive ways, but they do not have the right to prevent their children from developing the capacity for autonomy. There are nonetheless ways to encourage parental involvement and permit

school choice. Although political liberals suggest that autonomy is too divisive of an aim, and that liberal schools should simply promote civic virtue, political liberalism and political liberal education are shown to be both theoretically and empirically inferior to weakly perfectionist liberalism and liberal education. Correctly conceived, autonomy-promoting education contributes to the development of civic virtue, nurtures children's capacities for cultural coherence as well as for choice, and promotes equality.

The Morality of Freedom

Joseph Raz

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This book explores, within a liberal framework, the nature, significance, and justification of political freedom or liberty. Against recent liberal positions, it is argued that political morality is neither rights-based, nor equality-based. What underlies rights, and the value of freedom, is a concern with autonomy. Autonomy requires, among other things, that individuals have an array of valuable options to choose from. The realm of values is marked by pluralism, incommensurability, and a dependence on social forms. Individualism is rejected and the importance of collective goods is given due emphasis. Though it is often assumed that liberal states must be committed to neutrality about valuable options, it is contended here that a concern with autonomy is perfectly consistent with perfectionism. The book also contains an extensive discussion of the connection between freedom and political authority.

Perfectionist Arguments for Liberalism

Margaret Moore

in Foundations of Liberalism

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This chapter examines Will Kymlicka's argument in *Liberalism, Community and Culture* and Joseph Raz's argument in *The Morality of Freedom*, both of which justify liberal political principles in terms of a (thin) conception of the good life as embodying autonomy.

Autonomy and the Foundations of Contemporary Liberalism

Meira Levinson

in *The Demands of Liberal Education*

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Discusses contemporary liberalism's meaning, character, and justification. Section 1.1 argues that three constitutive commitments define contemporary liberalism and distinguish it from other theories. Section 1.2 demonstrates that, contrary to political liberalism's claims, these three commitments are best linked by the value of autonomy. Hence, contemporary liberalism is best understood as displaying weak perfectionism. Section 1.3 analyses autonomy more carefully, developing it as a substantive notion of higher-order preference formation within a context of cultural coherence, plural constitutive personal values and beliefs, openness to other's evaluations of oneself, and a sufficiently developed moral, spiritual or aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional personality.