

Colburn on anti-perfectionism and autonomy

In this article, I argue against the strategy recently proposed by Ben Colburn for reconciling two apparently conflicting theses, the 'Autonomy Claim' and 'Anti-Perfectionism'. The strategy turns on demonstrating that the conception of Anti-Perfectionism that captures the intuitions of most Anti-Perfectionists is not opposed to state promotion of what Colburn calls 'second-order values', and that autonomy is just such a value. I object that Anti-Perfectionism should be understood as opposed to *some* second-order values, and that autonomy is just such a value.

I. Colburn's argument

Colburn aims to provide support for a view which is committed to:

- (1) The Autonomy Claim: the state ought to promote autonomy
- (2) Anti-Perfectionism: the state ought not in its actions intentionally to promote any value or putative value¹

¹ Ben Colburn (2010), "Anti-Perfectionisms and Autonomy," *Analysis* 70, pp. 247-256. Note that Colburn's conception of anti-perfectionism is unusually strict. Most liberal anti-perfectionists have no objection to the state's promotion of 'political' values such as equality and fairness. However, their acceptance of the state's promotion of these values does not show that their anti-perfectionism is compatible with the Autonomy Claim, since autonomy as

Why, you might wonder, should we care about defending the conjunction of what appear to be contradictory claims? Colburn himself cares about doing so because the two claims are at the heart of the autonomy-minded liberalism that he endorses.² But others also have reason to want to defend both claims, according to Colburn, for it turns out that most of the reasons that liberals offer for Anti-Perfectionism imply the Autonomy Claim.³ So, most liberals turn out to be committed to their conjunction too.

Colburn's strategy for establishing the consistency of the two claims begins by distinguishing between first-order and second-order values, the specifications of which "differ in respect of the types of variables they can contain".⁴ The specification of a value contains a variable if it is ineliminably incomplete in the following way: it makes *de dicto* reference to the content of attitudes, beliefs, or desires, so that one cannot know whether a state of affairs realises the value without knowing the content of the attitudes, beliefs, or desires to which the specification refers. For example, the specification 'what is valuable is satisfaction of desire' includes the variable 'satisfaction of desire'. One cannot tell whether a state of affairs realises this value unless one knows the content of the relevant desires.

Variables can be first-order or second-order. Second-order variables are those variables which range over states of affairs that satisfy *other*

Colburn understands it is not normally understood to be a political value in the relevant sense. I say more about this below.

² See Colburn's defence of that view in Colburn (2010), *Autonomy and Liberalism* (London: Routledge).

³ See *Autonomy and Liberalism*, chapter 3.

⁴ Colburn, "Anti-Perfectionisms," p. 4.

specifications of values (e.g. 'what Philip Wakem thinks is valuable'). First-order variables are those variables which do not (e.g. 'what Philip Wakem wants'). The distinction between first-order and second-order values, then, is simply that second-order values contain second-order variables, whereas first-order values contain either no variables at all (in which case they are 'content-specific') or first-order variables only.

Now, autonomy, in the sense that Colburn favours, is to be understood as "consist[ing] in an agent deciding for herself what is a valuable life and living her life in accordance with that decision".⁵ This specification of the value of autonomy takes it to be a second-order value, since it includes a second-order variable. Anti-Perfectionism, meanwhile, is to be understood as *first-order* Anti-Perfectionism. It is opposed only to the promotion of *first-order* values. Since autonomy is to be understood as a second-order value, Colburn concludes, Anti-Perfectionism is consistent with the Autonomy Claim.

That's the argument. However, we can make a further distinction in types of value, and doing so makes room for an objection. The objection is that Anti-Perfectionism should be understood as opposed to first-order values *and* some second-order values, and that autonomy is one of the second-order values to which it should be understood as opposed.

II. Second-order values with first-order characteristics

The distinction in types of value that I have in mind is a distinction in second-order values. On Colburn's account, the presence of a second-order variable in

⁵ Ibid., p. 5

the specification of a value is sufficient for the specification to be a specification of a second-order value. But this sufficiency condition for second-order values does not rule out values whose specifications contain *both* second-order variables *and* first-order variables or other specifications of states of affairs as valuable.⁶ Can there be such values? Yes. Here are the specifications of two.

Tom: 'What is valuable is to follow your parents' values and satisfy your grand-parents' desires.'

Maggie: 'What is valuable is to follow your parents' values and enjoy a pleasurable brain-state.'

Because each of these specifications includes a second-order variable ('follow your parents' values'), Tom's and Maggie's values are second-order values. But as well as that second-order variable, Tom's value includes a first-order variable ('satisfy your grand-parents' desires'), and Maggie's value includes a straightforward specification of states of affairs as valuable ('enjoy a pleasurable brain state'), in the manner of a content-specific value. So, each is a second-order value with what we can call 'first-order characteristics'. We can distinguish these from 'pure' second-order values, which do not have first-order characteristics.

⁶ Colburn effectively notes this possibility (ibid., pp. 6-7), but his discussion seems to assume that Anti-Perfectionists who appeal to it must do so to suggest that Anti-Perfectionism should be construed as opposed to *all* second-order value promotion. The objection I develop here doesn't construe it that way, and so avoids his arguments against doing so.

III. A strategy for establishing inconsistency

As we've seen, Colburn favours an interpretation of autonomy as a second-order value. Because it is a second-order value, the Autonomy Claim is consistent with what he calls 'first-order Anti-Perfectionism', which is the view that the state ought not in its action intentionally to promote any first-order value.

It's not sufficient to impugn this conclusion to point out that second-order values may have first-order characteristics. For one thing, having first-order characteristics is not the same as being a first-order value, and it is only the promotion of first-order values that is inconsistent with first-order Anti-Perfectionism. For another thing, autonomy might be a pure second-order value.

However, Anti-Perfectionism should not be interpreted as opposed only to the promotion of first-order values. As I'll argue in the following section, it should be interpreted as opposed to the promotion of values with first-order characteristics.⁷ Only such an understanding would capture the spirit of liberal anti-perfectionism, as Colburn is concerned to do.

⁷ As I noted above, proponents of one important liberal conception of anti-perfectionism make exceptions for certain values such as equality and fairness. One feature that distinguishes such values from those to which these anti-perfectionists are opposed is that the latter are values which specify what makes for a good life, whereas the former are not. The distinction is unrelated to the first-order/second-order distinction upon which Colburn's argument relies, and the fact that anti-perfectionists make the relevant exceptions does not expose them to the objection that they should therefore also make an exception for the value of autonomy, since autonomy (as Colburn conceives it)

Moreover, as I'll argue in section V below, specifications of the value of autonomy that Colburn has in mind suggest that it is a second-order value with first-order characteristics. So, there turns out to be a contradiction of the sort that Colburn is concerned to eliminate after all.

IV. Anti-Perfectionism

I'll develop and defend my interpretation of Anti-Perfectionism by addressing Colburn's arguments for interpreting Anti-Perfectionism as he recommends. Those arguments are as follows.

- (1) Philosophers who endorse Anti-Perfectionism "almost invariably have the state promotion of first-order values as their target".^s
- (2) Anti-perfectionism of any sort can only be plausibly motivated by a commitment to the Autonomy Claim—so, for consistency's sake, it had better be first-order anti-perfectionism.
- (3) There are lots of reasons, many of which are captured by a commitment to the Autonomy Claim, to condemn state pursuit of other second-order values. So, restricting one's anti-perfectionism to the first-order

is a value which specifies what makes for a good life. So, I'm not begging any questions when, in what follows, I disregard the exceptions, understanding 'value' for the purposes of the argument to refer to a value that specifies what makes for a good life.

^s Ibid., p. 6.

kind does not preclude condemnation of those second-order value-promoting policies which offend anti-perfectionists' intuitions.

The first of these arguments involves tendentious interpretations of those philosophers who endorse Anti-Perfectionism. What such philosophers almost invariably have as their target are certain policies pursued by the state as part of its promotion of value. The relevant policies involve the state's use of its coercive power to do things to people, or to make people do things, which conflict with what's recommended by the values that those people themselves affirm. This is what the philosophers object to. Such policies may aim at states of affairs specified as valuable not only by first-order values but also by second-order values with first-order characteristics. For instance, imagine a totalitarian state whose current premier thinks that bracing early-morning runs are an essential part of what is valuable in life. Such a state might adopt a policy of forcing individuals to take early-morning runs with smiles on their faces on the ground that 'what is valuable is joyfully to follow the values of the Great Leader'. Anti-Perfectionists will not moderate their hostility to this policy upon discovering that it is an instance of state promotion of a second-order value with first-order characteristics rather than an instance of state promotion of a first-order value.*

The first argument, then, favours at best an interpretation of Anti-Perfectionism that takes it to be opposed to the promotion of values with first-order characteristics (characteristics which first-order values are not alone in

* I say a bit more about this in note 12 below.

having),¹⁰ not an interpretation that takes it to be opposed only to first-order values. It does not give us a reason to think that philosophers who endorse Anti-Perfectionism must endorse only first-order Anti-Perfectionism.¹¹

As for the second argument: perhaps it's true that Anti-Perfectionism can be plausibly motivated only by a commitment to the Autonomy Claim. For my part, I think that it could also be plausibly motivated by a non-consequentialist analogue of the Autonomy Claim which construed individuals' autonomy as a ground for side-constraints on state action, for example. But if it *is* true that Anti-Perfectionism can be plausibly motivated only by a commitment to the Autonomy Claim, then if autonomy turns out to be a second-order value with

¹⁰ I say that it favours *at best* such an interpretation because in fact the promotion of many *pure* second-order values will be objectionable from the Anti-Perfectionist point of view. Making someone follow the Pope's values despite her own rejection of those values, for example, could be construed as an instance of the promotion of a pure second-order value, yet it would violate Anti-Perfectionism as Anti-Perfectionists typically conceive it. Colburn's third argument, to which I respond below, is aimed at this sort of objection.

¹¹ Colburn claims that when the later Rawls lists some examples of comprehensive doctrines that the state ought not to promote, what he "identifies as impermissible in each case is commitment to values which are first-order" (ibid.). But since all first-order values have first-order characteristics, it can't be inferred from a list of first-order values that what unites them in an Anti-Perfectionist's eyes is that they're all first-order values and not that they all have first-order characteristics. What Rawls explicitly identifies as impermissible is the "oppressive use of state power" (Rawls [1993], *Political Liberalism* [New York: Columbia University Press], p. 37) to maintain shared acceptance of these doctrines. The state's promotion of *any* value with first-order characteristics—not only of first-order values—could be oppressive. Moreover, Kantian liberalism, one of the listed examples, might reasonably be supposed to include second-order values with first-order characteristics.

first-order characteristics, that may simply be a reason to reject Anti-Perfectionism in the form that liberals typically accept it. The prima facie contradiction between the two views may, in that case, signal a real contradiction between them.

What about the third argument? It's true that restricting one's Anti-Perfectionism to first-order values doesn't preclude case-by-case condemnation of second-order value-based policies that offend one's intuitions. But the availability of case-by-case condemnation doesn't show that an Anti-Perfectionism that opposed the promotion of values with first-order characteristics just for that reason would be misplaced. It might be that a commitment to Anti-Perfectionism understood in the way that I'm recommending offers the best explanation of those intuitions.

If this is right, then Colburn's arguments aren't sufficient to rule out the following possibility: Anti-Perfectionism, under the interpretation that best accords with liberal intuitions, isn't compatible with the Autonomy Claim, because the interpretation of Anti-Perfectionism that best accords with liberal intuitions takes it to be opposed to second-order values with first-order characteristics, and autonomy is a second-order value with first-order characteristics. In order for that possibility to represent a problem for Colburn's argument, I must make a case for supposing that autonomy, in his view, is indeed such a value.¹²

¹² Isn't the resistance to second-order values with first-order characteristics that I'm attributing to Anti-Perfectionists an *ad hoc* modification to Anti-Perfectionism that one would make only in order to justify some independently given hostility to the Autonomy Claim? Surely such values are neither important nor common enough to feature in Anti-Perfectionist thinking. In reply to this concern, I'll make three points. First, even if it had

V. Autonomy

Colburn's favoured conception of autonomy "consists in an agent deciding for herself what is a valuable life and living her life in accordance with that decision".¹³ Since in this specification of the value of autonomy "there is an

never occurred until now to Anti-Perfectionists to highlight their resistance to second-order values with first-order characteristics, it's plausible to suppose, for the reasons that I gave above in response to Colburn's first argument, that such resistance was implicit in their Anti-Perfectionist commitments anyway. Second, there may indeed be few genuine second-order values with first-order characteristics. This wouldn't be surprising, since the specifications of second-order values (and, therefore, of second-order values with first-order characteristics) typically tell us that what is valuable is what some specified agent thinks or says is valuable. More often than not we'll think that what is valuable is valuable whether or not anyone thinks or says that it's valuable, and so we'll expect our specifications of value to reflect that. But the obvious exceptions concern cases in which the specified agent is the person the value of whose life it is that we're interested in and cases in which the specified agent is God, and these—at least one of which has first-order characteristics, as I argue below—are surely important enough to feature in Anti-Perfectionists' thinking. Third, there are cases in which state policies appear to be motivated by acceptance of *non-genuine* second-order values with first-order characteristics, such as the non-genuine value of joyfully following the values of the Great Leader, and it seems to me that Anti-Perfectionists do and should reject such policies for the same reasons that they reject policies motivated by acceptance of even *genuine* first-order values. The fact that the non-genuine values in question are non-genuine is a *further* reason for Anti-Perfectionists' rejection of policies based on them. I am grateful to a referee for the *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* for pressing me on these issues.

¹³ Colburn, "Anti-Perfectionisms," p. 5.

ineliminable variable which stands for an individual living the sort of life that he deems valuable”, and since that variable “refers to other judgments of what is valuable”,¹⁴ autonomy so conceived is a second-order value. However, as Colburn notes, “some conditions upon autonomy are given” as well.¹⁵

We can turn to one of the philosophers whom he cites as a proponent of the second-order conception of autonomy for examples of the sorts of conditions he has in mind. Joseph Raz argues that “[t]he ideal of autonomy is that of the autonomous life”, and that for a person to live the autonomous life, “he must have the mental abilities to form intentions of a sufficiently complex kind, and plan their execution”.¹⁶ This, of course, is not part of the *specification* of an autonomous life: it’s merely an aspect of something (what Raz calls ‘the capacity for autonomy’) that’s instrumentally necessary for it.¹⁷ However, it *is* part of the specification of an autonomous life that a person “must use these faculties to choose what life to have” and that “[t]here must...be adequate options available for him to choose from”.¹⁸ A full specification of the Razian conception of the value of autonomy, then, will include not only the second-order variable that Colburn highlights but also straightforward specifications

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Joseph Raz (1986), *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 372.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, if the promotion of a value instrumentally requires the state’s use of its coercive power to do things to people, or to make people do things, which conflict with what those people’s own values recommend, then even if the specification of the value itself doesn’t include specification of those things as valuable, adopting the promotion of that value as one’s aim will offend against Anti-Perfectionist intuitions.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

of states of affairs that are valuable, in the manner of a first-order value.¹⁹ So, this conception of autonomy takes it to be a second-order value with first-order characteristics.

It's reasonable to suppose, moreover, that any plausible specification of autonomy as a value to be promoted will give it first-order characteristics in this way. For autonomy to be worth promoting, it must surely involve more than merely living in accordance with one's judgments of value. One's judgments must be untainted by manipulation, extreme irrationality, and forced choices, for example. The full specification of the value of autonomy, then, will include specification of states of affairs in which people have not been manipulated, are to some minimum degree rational, and face choices that are not forced. These content-specific elements in the specification of the value of autonomy suffice to show that it has first-order characteristics.

VI. Conclusion

If Colburn is right to hold that the only plausible motivation for Anti-Perfectionism is a commitment to the Autonomy Claim, then, on pain of inconsistency, Anti-Perfectionists ought not to oppose the promotion of at least one second-order value with first-order characteristics, namely the value of

¹⁹ This isn't all that Raz includes in his specification of the value of autonomy, but it's enough to illustrate my point. I eschew appeal to Raz's well-known view that autonomy has value only insofar as it is autonomy in the pursuit of valuable options, since Colburn argues that this "belongs more properly to Raz's views on well-being, which ought to be distinguished from his theory of autonomy" (Colburn, "Anti-Perfectionisms", p. 5).

autonomy. But that may be to secure consistency at the expense of fidelity to an intuition that liberal Anti-Perfectionists typically endorse, according to which the state's coercive power should not be used to do things to people, or to make people do things, which conflict with what is recommended by the values that those people themselves affirm. Perhaps that intuition should be revised or discarded.²⁰ But at least when it is in this form, its conflict with the Autonomy Claim is not illusory.²¹

²⁰ One strategy for autonomy-minded liberals who wish to hold on to the intuition would be to revise the Autonomy Claim so that it no longer requires *promotion* of autonomy rather than (say) *respect* for it. (Thus motivated, Anti-Perfectionism could be seen as an expression of a commitment to the priority of the right over the good.) It might be consistent with such respect to enact policies that are ordinarily associated with the promotion of various values, to the extent that doing so did not involve doing things to people, or making them do things, which conflict with what's recommended by the values that those people themselves affirm.

²¹ I thank Jonathan Quong and an anonymous referee for the *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* for helpful comments.