

What are the varieties of liberalism? Don't forget backdoor liberal perfectionism

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Abstract. Jonathan Quong classifies varieties of liberalism based on two yes-or-no questions. I show that there is a kind of perfectionist liberalism that cannot be located on his map. I call it backdoor liberal perfectionism.

Draft version: Version 1 (June 20th 2022).

Jonathan Quong has introduced a neat scheme for classifying kinds of liberalism, based on the answers that each kind gives to two questions (2011: 15). One of these questions is “Must liberal political philosophy be based on some particular ideal of what constitutes a worthwhile human life, or other metaphysical beliefs?” If a kind of liberalism entails a yes answer to this question, Quong describes it as a comprehensive kind of liberalism. If a kind of liberalism entails a no answer, Quong describes it as a political kind. (Regarding this latter piece of terminology, it is natural to complain that all varieties of liberalism are political. Quong would say that the terms “comprehensive” and “political” are being used in specialist senses in this context, which do not necessarily fit well with ordinary usage.)

The second question which is involved in Quong's classificatory scheme is the following: “Is it permissible for a liberal state to promote or discourage some activities, ideals, or ways of life on grounds relating to their intrinsic value, or on the basis of other metaphysical claims?” If a kind of liberalism entails a yes answer to this question, then Quong describes it as a perfectionist kind of liberalism. If it entails a no, then Quong describes it as an anti-perfectionist kind.

Owing to these two questions, Quong ends up with the following table of four possibilities (2011: 21):

	Comprehensive	Political
Perfectionism	Comprehensive perfectionist liberalism	Political perfectionist liberalism
Anti-Perfectionism	Comprehensive anti-perfectionist liberalism	Political anti-perfectionist liberalism

But Quong’s classificatory scheme overlooks at least one kind of liberal perfectionism. I have not seen it formulated in the literature before, so assuming it is absent, this is an understandable oversight. Nevertheless, Quong’s scheme aims to classify all possible liberal philosophies, so it is necessary to attend to it. I call the overlooked kind “backdoor liberal perfectionism.”

To grasp it, let us focus on Quong’s second question. It begins with the words “Is it permissible”. By “permissible” what Quong means is morally permissible, or morally acceptable – I shall use these terms interchangeably. There are kinds of liberalism which entail – or just assert – that it is morally acceptable to promote or discourage some activities, ideals, or ways of life on grounds relating to their intrinsic value. These are perfectionist varieties of liberalism, according to Quong. However, could there not be an unusual kind of perfectionist liberalism which says, “This is morally unacceptable, but a liberal government sometimes has good reason to do this anyway”? This is backdoor liberal perfectionism.

A philosophical defence of this kind of liberalism seems to require rejecting the following principle: if action A is morally permissible and B is morally wrong,

then we ought to prefer A over B. The backdoor liberal perfectionist must assert that there is at least one exception to this principle (see also Kalderon 2005: 27-28; Edward 2020).¹

For example, let us imagine that members of the government of a certain country have read the arguments of liberal anti-perfectionists, according to which it is morally wrong for the state to promote some activities based on their intrinsic value. The state should impose a minimal set of rules which allow citizens to freely make decisions based on their individual perceptions of value, and not try to involve themselves in these decisions. The government is convinced by the arguments and hence answers, “No,” to Quong’s second question. But, horror of horrors, it encourages reading poetry, because it judges this activity to have intrinsic value. How can it encourage this given the anti-perfectionist arguments it accepts? The government must say that, although from a moral point of view there should be no official encouragement of reading poetry, or at least no official encouragement on the basis of this judgment, there is some non-moral reason which outweighs the moral reason not to do this.

Presumably many people will say that this is an insensible combination. They will prefer to respond to this kind of case in a different way: by saying that sometimes it is morally acceptable for the state to fund projects in science, the arts and sport, and not only on the strict condition that such projects contribute to maintaining a fair set of rules for free and equal individuals. (I am not entirely comfortable with the use of

¹ Someone might say, “Of course, because we sometimes think it is a good idea to break with some of the moral rules we are taught as children, such as do not lie – it is a good idea to lie if one can save a life by doing so.” However, in this case, it is natural to respond that those simple moral rules do not accurately capture what morality requires. The backdoor liberal perfectionist believes in an exception when faced with an accurate account of moral requirements, or one he believes to be accurate.

“perfectionist” for such a widespread and ordinary position, because it suggests a fanatical pursuit of perfection.) The preference gives rise to the question of whether backdoor liberal perfectionism is indefensible. But whether or not one can defend the philosophy, it seems to me that it needs to be on the map. Defensibility is not a suitable criterion for being on the map, because the mapmaker does not want to commit themselves to the position that all the varieties of liberalism on the map can be defended, or even that any can. The map is for liberals and opponents of liberalism alike.

I believe that backdoor liberal perfectionism is a defensible position, though perhaps one of last resort. But if it can be defended, the immoral acts it allows for are generally acts which are immoral by the standards of anti-perfectionist liberalism but which various others, people who do not seem especially evil, attribute positive value to, such as teaching poetry. Probably under this system, there will be jokes about what evil people “we” are, teaching poetry and the like.² Backdoor liberal perfectionism is probably for very nice people really.

References

Edward, T.R. 2020. Farewell to arms? The all-or-nothing problem again. Available at:

<https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWHTA>

Kalderon, M. 2005. *Moral Fictionalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Quong, J. 2011. *Liberalism without Perfection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

² An anti-perfectionist might say, “We are not against teaching poetry, so long as the reason is not the intrinsic value of reading poetry, rather that it contributes to liberal ends,” but I (foolishly?) suppose for anyone who really likes poetry and decides to teach it, there is some value in reading poetry which cannot be captured in purely instrumental terms and they are motivated to teach partly because of this value.