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Autonomy-minded Anti-perfectionism: Novel, Intuitive, and Sound

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Abstract

John Patrick Rudisill purports to identify various problems with my argument that the state promotion of autonomy is consistent with anti-perfectionism, viz. that it falsely pretends to be novel, is unacceptably counterintuitive because too restrictive and too permissive, and that it deploys self-defeating formal apparatus. I argue, in reply, that my argument is more novel than Rudisill gives me credit for; that properly understood my anti-perfectionism implies neither the implausible restrictions nor the unpalatable permissions that Rudisill claims; and that my formal apparatus is innocent of the flaws imputed to it.

I. INTRODUCTION

John Patrick Rudisill's thought-provoking article develops various interesting lines of response to some recent work in which I have explored the relationship between autonomy and anti-perfectionism.¹ The gist of my position is that, when properly understood, the state promotion of autonomy (conceived of as a full-blooded value) and anti-perfectionism (that is, the view that the state should not seek to promote values) are not only compatible, but mutually supportive; thus, the initial whiff of paradox surrounding an autonomy-minded anti-perfectionistic liberalism can be dispelled. Rudisill presses three criticisms of my position. The first is that it falsely pretends to be novel, whereas in fact it bears significant similarities to arguments in the work of John Stuart Mill and John Rawls. The second is that the anti-perfectionism I defend is counterintuitive because it is, in different respects, both too restrictive and too permissive. The third is that my attempt to reconcile political and comprehensive liberalisms (that is, liberalisms characterised respectively by anti-perfectionism and autonomy-promotion) is vitiated by flaws in the formal apparatus deployed in my argument. In what follows I set out my response to these three arguments. Put briefly, my answers are as follows: that my argument is more novel than Rudisill gives me credit for; that properly understood my anti-perfectionism implies neither the implausible restrictions nor the unpalatable permissions that Rudisill claims; and that my quasi-formal apparatus is innocent of the flaws imputed to it.

¹ The arguments concerned appear in both Colburn 2010a and Colburn 2010b. Since I think the latter version is marginally more satisfactory I shall, where choice is possible, refer to that in what follows.

II. REPLIES

A. Is it novel?

My strategy for demonstrating the consistency of anti-perfectionism with the state promotion of autonomy is as follows: I distinguish different types of value; I note that the anti-perfectionist must specify the type (or types) of value about which she is an anti-perfectionist; and I show that with respect to the best such precisification anti-perfectionism and the state promotion of autonomy are consistent, because autonomy is not a value of the forbidden type (Colburn 2010b).

Rudisill's first worry about novelty is based on the observation that this approach – which he calls the “value-distinguishing strategy” – is hardly novel. In particular, Rudisill argues that the strategy in *Autonomy and Liberalism* differs little from the work of two distinguished precursors: John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*, as interpreted by Charles Larmore (1987, 1990); and John Rawls, in *Political Liberalism*, both of whom in his view combine a commitment to restricted anti-perfectionistic neutrality with the state promotion of some value or good.

In reply: the distinctiveness of my argument is not in its overall structure, but rather in the details; in particular, in the fact that the requisite work is done by the distinction between what I call first- and second-order values (Colburn 2010b: 248-251). First-order values are those whose specifications refer directly to particular states of affairs, either *de re* or *de dicto* (e.g. ‘It is good to climb Mount Everest’, ‘Watching a play by Shakespeare is valuable’, ‘Pleasure makes life go well’). Second-order values are those whose specifications refer *de dicto* to other specifications of value (e.g. ‘The good life is one in which you fulfil your parents’ ambitions for you’). Autonomy, on my view, is a second-order value: it consists in deciding for oneself what is valuable and living one’s life in accordance with that decision. So, it is consistent with anti-perfectionism about first-order values, which – or so I argued – is the best way of precisifying the ambiguous anti-perfectionism we find in the literature (Colburn 2010b: 253-255). The distinction between first- and second-order values is a structural one: different values (or, to be more precise, different value-claims) have different structures, depending on how their specifications pick out the states of affairs in which they are instantiated. This is an intrinsic distinction. By contrast, the distinctions drawn by Rawls and by Mill (at least on Rudisill’s reading) are extrinsic. Mill’s distinction between what Rudisill calls “lower-level” neutrality and “higher-level” individuality (1989: 56-93 *passim*), and Rawls’s distinction between the comprehensive and the political (e.g. 1993: xviii-xxi), are both distinctions between values on the basis of where and for what purposes those values may be invoked.

So, the distinction I use is novel. The preceding thoughts show also why the argument I use is likewise novel. It would be circular, in an argument which seeks (amongst other things) to establish which values we may invoke in politics, to rely on a distinction which presupposes a claim about which values we may invoke in politics. So, either my argument is circular, or Rawls and Mill’s arguments are circular, or my argument is novel. Rudisill doesn’t claim to show the first, and the second doesn’t seem fair to me – both Rawls and Mill offer independent reasons for which values we may

invoke in politics, and hence for drawing the distinctions that they do – in which case the third must be true.

Rudisill offers a more pointed argument against my claim to offer a third way between political and comprehensive liberalism. He argues that the status of my second-order value of autonomy is unclear, as is revealed when we consider Rawls's distinction between political autonomy and moral autonomy (1993: xliv-xlv). Political autonomy is “the legal independence and assured integrity of citizens and their sharing with other citizens equally with others in the exercise of moral power”, and moral autonomy is an ideal that “characterises a certain way of life and reflection, critically examining our deepest ends and ideals, as in Mill’s ideal of individuality”. Political liberals eschew the promotion of autonomy only in the latter sense, because it is, in Rudisill’s words, “a matter of deep and divisive controversy amongst reasonable citizens”, hence not something the liberal state may legitimately promote; but they endorse the promotion of autonomy in the former sense. Rudisill poses me a dilemma. On the one hand, if my conception of autonomy is a conception of moral autonomy, then I bear a burden of proof to show why “the account of legitimacy as necessitating acceptability” is wrong, and hence that we can legitimately rely on a controversial conception of autonomy despite its not being accepted by all. On the other hand, if mine is a conception of political autonomy, then I “appease political liberals by becoming one of them”.

I agree that it would be fatal to my claims of distinctiveness for me to grasp the second horn of Rudisill’s dilemma. Rawls’s specification of political autonomy, though it might appear otherwise on first sight, cannot be charitably interpreted as a load-bearing part of his view, or indeed as an individual ideal at all, because it is just a roundabout what of describing the social arrangements for which *Political Liberalism* is supposed to be an argument. So, my conception of autonomy is not “political autonomy” in Rawls’s sense. Rudisill thinks that some of my arguments commit me to that view, for example my suggestion that many people’s apparent rejection of autonomy depends on conflating it with something else, or my demonstration that a commitment to promoting autonomy neither privileges shallow individualism nor requires that we make people value autonomy themselves. However, these arguments are not intended to show that autonomy on my conception is an entirely uncontroversial value, but just to show that some (not all) opposition to my view will be based on a misapprehension. Elsewhere, I make clear that – as Rudisill himself notes – there are in fact many people who either don’t value autonomy on my conception, or who actively disvalue it (Colburn 2010a: pp. 39-42, 78-80; and Colburn 2008).

So, I grasp the first horn of Rudisill’s dilemma, and acknowledge that mine is a conception of “moral autonomy” in Rawls’s terms, albeit not the first-order lionization of occurrent critical reflection that Rawls himself picked out.² Doing this, says Rudisill, means that I must provide an argument against the political liberal constraint of legitimacy, which is that the presence of reasonable disagreement to the state promotion of a value makes it illegitimate. However, I only argue that this constraint itself presupposes a commitment to promoting autonomy in my sense (Colburn 2010a: pp. 60-

² As Rudisill notes, I distinguish my conception of autonomy from this putative first-order value, suggesting that the word ‘autarchy’ would be a better label for it. See Colburn 2010a: pp. 53-54.

66). Rudisill contends that either this means that my conception of autonomy “is not of the sort that ever worried political liberals in the first instance” (in which case I grasp the second horn of the dilemma after all, at the cost of my position collapsing into political liberalism), or I am shirking the duty to explain why it is OK to promote a more substantive value of autonomy even against reasonable opposition.

In reply: the argument that Rudisill picks out, that the legitimacy constraint presupposes a commitment to promoting autonomy, is in fact exactly the argument against the unrestricted legitimacy constraint that he claimed was missing. My point is that political liberals are unwittingly guilty of inconsistency, because their theory of legitimacy simultaneously precludes any reliance on controversial values, *and also* itself relies upon my controversial value of autonomy (in the sense that it is ungrounded unless by a tacit commitment to the promotion of that value). So, the legitimacy constraint should be rejected on the basis of inconsistency. If the argument referred to is satisfactory, then I can happily grasp the first horn of Rudisill’s dilemma, and the threatened collapse into political liberalism is averted. Indeed, my argument is that any threatened collapse will be in the other direction (Colburn 2010a: pp. 67-68). My view is that, in light of the inconsistency described above, the political liberal should abandon the discredited legitimacy constraint and instead wholeheartedly embrace a commitment to autonomy, which will in any case – by dint of its implying first-order anti-perfectionism, and also ruling out the promotion of most other second-order values – end up having most of the same practical consequences anyway.³

B. Is it too restrictive, or too permissive?

Rudisill worries that the first-order anti-perfectionism I espouse rules out some things that ought to be permitted. In particular, he is concerned that it implies that the autonomy-minded state may not promote the things Rawls called “primary goods”, on the basis that these things (rights and liberties, freedom of movement, free choice of occupation, powers and prerogatives of office, income, wealth, and self-respect) are first-order values on my definition (Rawls 1993: p. 181). This, Rudisill thinks, is implausible.

My reply to this is twofold. In respect of some policies, my response is one that Rudisill briefly essays on my behalf: my view does not in fact have the implication judged implausible, because anti-perfectionism does not in fact rule out the state promoting Rawls’s primary goods. In respect of others, my response is to agree that my view has the stated implications, and to argue that those are less counterintuitive than Rudisill believes.

It isn’t sufficient for state action to be ruled impermissible by anti-perfectionism that it would, as a matter of fact, cause some putative value rather than another to be instantiated. (If it were, it would show that no state action – or indeed inaction – is ever

³ Of course, we may still feel uncomfortable about promoting autonomy despite some people’s sincere and reasonable opposition. I have argued elsewhere that such discomfort can’t be a reason to reject my position, because if it is well-grounded, it is itself based on a tacit commitment to thinking that it’s important for people to decide for themselves what is valuable, which is to say a tacit commitment to promoting autonomy. That is, the reason to be uncomfortable is at the same time a reason to endorse the political system about which we are uncomfortable. See Colburn 2010a: 41-2, and Colburn 2008: 627-9.

permissible at all, because any successful action will produce one state of affairs rather than another, and any state of affairs thus not instantiated might in principle be the object of some first-order value claim.) Anti-perfectionism is instead, strictly speaking, a constraint on the reasons on which states may act: a proposed state action or policy is impermissible if it is justified only by appeal to a purported first-order value. This does, of course, rule out a great many policies and actions, namely those that can *only* be justified by such appeals. But there are others which, though they might in principle be justified in a manner inconsistent with anti-perfectionism, can *also* be justified neutrally, or by direct appeal to autonomy. This, I think, is what is to be said about Rawls's primary goods. I suppose it is possible that someone might propose that we promote freedom of movement or wealth on the basis that those things are intrinsically valuable, though I must confess that I find the thought bizarre. Nevertheless, policies promoting and protecting access to primary goods can also be justified by appeal to autonomy: the primary goods that Rawls mentions seem to be necessary for people to be able to decide for themselves what is valuable, and to live their lives in accordance with those decisions, almost irrespective of what those decisions actually are. That is enough for such policies to avoid conflict with first-order anti-perfectionism.

Rudisill, when he considers whether I might reply to him in this vein, judges the response unsatisfactory, mostly because he thinks that this purely instrumental construal of the primary goods isn't what Rawls intended. In support, he cites a passage in which Rawls denied that the liberal state may not use any conceptions of the good whatsoever: instead, said Rawls, we may use such conceptions of the good so long as they can be accepted by all reasonable people (1993: pp. 173-174). This shows that there are some conceptions of the good which are acceptably political in spite of containing claims about what is intrinsically valuable. It does not, however, show that Rawls thought that we should secure access to the primary goods on the basis that they are intrinsically valuable, just that showing that a policy *did* depend on treating them as such wouldn't by itself be enough to make them non-political on Rawls's view. That isn't enough to support Rudisill's interpretation.

As it happens, I think there is good textual reason to think that Rawls did think that the relevant value of the primary goods is non-intrinsic. For one thing, he explicitly said so: "primary goods are clearly not anyone's idea of the basic values of human life and must not be so understood" (1993: p. 188). For another, he took it as definitive of the primary goods that anyone rational will want them, on the basis that they are useful no matter what one's conception of the good (1971: pp. 61-62; 1993: pp. 180-181). Nothing much hinges on the exegetical point, however. Irrespective of Rawls's attitude, my view doesn't imply that we may not promote access to primary goods.⁴

My view may nevertheless have implications which Rudisill is minded to find counterintuitively restrictive. He worries, for example, that I fail to recognise "the intrinsic worth of national security": recognising that intrinsic value, he suggests, requires that we go beyond what can be derived just from a concern for the autonomy of individual citizens. At this point, I must just bite the bullet. If the reader believes that

⁴ I might add that, even if it did, I would argue that this just goes to show that Rawls's position is inconsistent, rather than that mine is unacceptably stringent. One man's *modus ponens* is another man's *modus tollens*.

there is intrinsic worth to national security, and that state action must be motivated by that worth, then he or she will be unavoidably out of sympathy with my view. As it happens, I would be surprised if such readers are numerous, especially in light of the fact that a concern for individual autonomy – and the derivative concern for peace and stability that it demands – will imply quite robust rights of national security for autonomy-minded liberal states. But it would be foolish for me to claim that my conclusions will be pleasing to everyone; of course people with perfectionistic commitments (whether nationalistic, religious, aesthetic or something else) will find so thoroughly anti-perfectionistic a theory counterintuitive.

Rudisill also thinks that there are respects in which my view may be too permissive. In *Autonomy and Liberalism* I reflect on the relationship between an agent's history and her autonomy, and claim that autonomy is not necessarily precluded by a thoroughly anti-autonomy upbringing; even if an agent has had a repressive and restrictive upbringing designed to inculcate a particular set of values and commitments, she might in later life transform her relationship to those values in such a way as to make their pursuit supportive of her autonomy (Colburn 2010a: p. 37). Does this mean, then, that terribly repressive upbringings are unproblematic vis-à-vis autonomy?

I say no: the bare consistency of such upbringings with an autonomous life isn't enough to vindicate them. For one thing, the sort of upbringing that an autonomy-minded liberal will favour is one that is not merely consistent with, but actively supportive of an autonomous life; hence, a repressive upbringing's being consistent with autonomy is not sufficient to show that the autonomy-minded liberal ought not to frown on it.

Rudisill worries that my view is nevertheless too permissive, for this reason. My argument here is, after all, conditional on the empirical facts turning out the way I predict. If, instead, such upbringings are in fact just as likely to lead to people living autonomous lives, then the current line of argument would imply that such upbringings are acceptable.

In reply: showing that my view may be more permissive than it appears to be doesn't show that it is "too permissive". In light of the importance for parents' autonomy of their bringing up children as their convictions dictate, we might very well think that – if that sort of upbringing didn't conflict with the autonomy-based interests of their children – we would have a strong reason not to prevent them doing so. Why would we, if that didn't damage the autonomy of the children? Insofar as this is counterintuitive, it is likely not because there's anything wrong with the implications of my view under those hypothesised conditions, but rather because we are convinced that those conditions don't obtain. So, once again, I'm not convinced that the implications that Rudisill correctly ascribes to my position are as counterintuitive as he claims.

C. Is it based on a formal error?

Above, I characterised my distinction between second-order and first-order values as follows: second-order values are all and only those values whose specifications refer *de dicto* to other specifications of value. Another way of making this distinction clear was to introduce the notion of a variable in the specification of a value, which is to say an

ineliminable incompleteness which, in different contexts, will be filled in by different things (Colburn 2010b: 248-250). There are different types of variable, distinguished by their ranges. Second-order values are distinctive by dint of containing variables which range over other specifications of values. This represents the distinctive way that such values have specifications which refer *de dicto* to other specifications of value. As I argued, this distinguishes them from first-order values, whose specifications either refer *de re* to states of affairs (hence contain no variables) or refer *de dicto* to states of affairs (hence contain variables capable of ranging over states of affairs). It also makes clear how my distinction is related to the more familiar content-neutral/content-specific distinction. Content-specific values contain no variables because they refer *de re* to particular states of affairs, and are hence all first-order; content-neutral values involve *de dicto* reference, and are thus either first- or second-order depending on what type of variable (hence what type of *de dicto* reference) they involve.

Rudisill claims that deploying this formal apparatus commits me to self-defeat. His argument is as follows. First, because “the canonical statement of any content-neutral value is *semantically incomplete*” (his emphasis), it cannot have a truth-value. Second, it makes no sense to speak of things without truth-values being consistent, or inconsistent, or bearing relations of mutual entailment. Hence, it makes no sense to talk as I do of autonomy, a content-neutral second-order value, being consistent, and mutually entailing, with anti-perfectionism.

Rudisill’s argument is valid but unsound: both premisses of this argument are false. Let us start with the first, namely that “semantic incompleteness” of the sort we find in content-neutral values precludes their having truth-values. The presence or absence of a variable represents only the difference between *de re* reference, which we find in content-specific value-specifications; and *de dicto* reference, which we find in content-neutral value-specifications. And the different *types* of variable, distinguished in virtue of their permissible ranges, indicates different ways in which a specification might pick out states of affairs *de dicto*: either directly; or indirectly via a reference to other specifications of value, which will themselves pick out states of affairs in one of the three specified manners.

Crucially, the only substantial difference here is between different modes of reference. The only incompleteness arising in the specification of a content-neutral value is that which comes from its referring *de dicto* rather than *de re*. But it would be eccentric to claim that the presence of *de dicto* reference is enough to make a sentence lack a truth-value. It would mean, amongst other things, that ‘The occupant of the White House is President’ isn’t true, and that ‘The Queen of the United Kingdom can be a Roman Catholic’ isn’t false. Hence, either content-neutral values aren’t “semantically incomplete” in the sense Rudisill has in mind (since their merely involving *de dicto* reference can’t make them so), or “semantically incomplete” sentences can have truth-values after all.

Suppose that Rudisill can reply here, and claim that although containing *de dicto* referring expressions doesn’t *ipso facto* make sentences non-truth-apt, there’s something specific about the incompleteness in content-neutral values which does. There may anyway be reasons to think that the specifications of values aren’t truth apt. We may, for example, be non-cognitivists about morality, hence believe that a commitment to autonomy is not best construed as a declarative sentence capable of truth or falsity. Even

granting such concessions, Rudisill's argument would be unsound, because his second premiss is false. There are many contexts where it makes perfect sense to speak of consistency or inconsistency between items of language that lack truth-values. Imperatives have no truth value; that doesn't make it impossible to speak of orders being consistent or inconsistent with each other, or with true declarative sentences. So, even if – either for Rudisill's reasons, or because of our general metaethical framework – we think that it is neither true nor false that 'it is valuable to decide for oneself what is valuable and to live one's life in accordance with that decision', that sentence is nevertheless capable of being both consistent with and equivalent to the thesis of anti-perfectionism as I have argued.

III. CONCLUSION

Rudisill's criticisms of my position are thought-provoking, and in many cases they indicate a need for clarification or elaboration of the argument as originally stated; I am grateful for the opportunity to provide such clarification. I think, though, for the reasons stated, that I need make no further concession. There are indeed interesting parallels between my strategy and those deployed by Mill and Rawls, but mine is nevertheless distinct and (I would say) superior to theirs; even if we're inclined to regard counterintuitive consequences as damning for a theory, my theory doesn't have most of the counterintuitive consequences that Rudisill has claimed; and my formal apparatus is not guilty of the flaws that he purports to identify. So, I think his arguments pose me no further peril.⁵

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