

Perfectionist Liberalisms and the Challenge of Pluralism

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Based on Steven Wall's work, I take perfectionism in political philosophy to include two components: the objective good and the non-neutral state. Some perfectionist theories aim to be liberal. But given the objective good component, perfectionism seems to be unable to accommodate the commitment to value pluralism found in liberalism. This is what I call the challenge of pluralism. The perfectionist reply is to claim that their objective good can also be plural and thus there is no conflict. My aim in this paper is to show that this reply does not work. I do this by looking at three different ways we could conceive of perfectionist theories as plural and show how each is unsatisfactory.

Keywords: perfectionism, value pluralism, Wall, liberalism

1. Introduction

From the liberal perspective, perfectionism in political philosophy faces what I will call the challenge of pluralism: namely that a perfectionist theory is incompatible with the value pluralism that is one of the main features of liberalism. There are liberal perfectionists who think they have found a solution to the challenge: make their perfectionism plural. It will be my aim in this paper to show that such an approach will not work to meet the challenge of pluralism. I will do this by examining three different types of pluralism that the perfectionist could subscribe to and show how each one of them is still incompatible with the value pluralism in liberalism.

The paper will proceed as follows: in section 2, I will look at perfectionism as it is found in political philosophy and pin down its two main components. In section 3, I will take a brief look at value pluralism as it appears in liberalism as one of its main features. In section 4, I will present

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the challenge of pluralism to those kinds of perfectionisms which aim to be both liberal and perfectionist at the same time and also look at one, probably most popular, solution provided by perfectionists to this challenge. In section 5, I will examine this solution and determine that it does not work, thus the challenge of pluralism stands for the liberal perfectionist and to meet it they would either have to give up their perfectionism or their liberalism. In the final section, I consider quickly two limitations of my argument.

2. Perfectionism in political philosophy

We can talk about perfectionism in ethics as a moral theory or as an account of well-being. We can also talk about perfectionism in politics, wherein perfectionist liberalisms are only one type (Wall 2009, note 3). I am interested in the latter: perfectionism in politics (and its relation to pluralism).

Having confined my interest to one type of perfectionism in politics but acknowledging that perfectionism can mean different things, the first step is to get a good sense of what it means for a theory in political philosophy to be perfectionist. Steven Wall (2012) has presented a general characterization of perfectionism in political theory: it means that one certain objective conception of the human good is put forth and then a set of political institutions is proposed based on that, so that politics would conform to this ideal and facilitate its realization.¹ From that description we can deduce that perfectionism in politics has two main features: the objective good component and the rejection of state neutrality component (Wall 2009, 101–102). The objective conception of the human good can take various forms. There are those which are presented in terms of well-being: what is important is that people's lives go well, judged according to the objective good posited by the theory; and those which are presented in terms of excellence or achievement: what is important is that people realize certain objective values or achieve a kind of excellence in themselves during their lives, their individual well-being is of only secondary importance (an individual may be required to forgo personal well-being for the sake of others or some impersonal value). Given that the latter is much broader, Wall (2009, 101; Wall 2012) thinks we should favor that view.

This, however, needs to be specified further: there are two versions of the

¹ I have chosen to present Steven Wall's conception of perfectionism as the basis of my discussion for three reasons: (1) he is the only author that I know of who has tried to present a comprehensive and a general conception of perfectionism as such, (2) after Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (1996), there were not many authors who stuck to their perfectionist guns, Wall was one, and he continues to argue for this approach to liberalism (see for example Wall 2014), and (3) he is the author of the relevant article in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Wall 2012).

excellence or achievement type perfectionisms. First, a version where the good could be related to an understanding of human nature. Wall (2012) cites Aristotle as a historic example and Thomas Hurka (1993) and Philippa Foot (2003) as contemporary examples of this kind of approach. The main task for these kinds of theories of perfectionisms is to present and defend a particular kind of conception of human nature, its components and the value it would imply. In the second version, what is important is the realization of some list of objective goods without any reference to human nature. Wall (2012) cites Derek Parfit (1986) and Richard Arneson (2000) as contemporary examples of this kind of approach. The main task of these other kinds of approaches is to compile a specific list, to defend the values in this list and explain why other values are not in it (Wall 2009, 102; Wall 2012). While this list need not be exhaustive, the theory should include some general criteria for determining which kind of values should have a place on that list and which should not, i.e., what makes something objectively valuable.

Following Wall (2009, 101; 2012), the pivotal point with regard to the objective good feature of perfectionism (whether it is human nature or list type) is that the things considered valuable by the theory *are valuable objectively and not subjectively*. The people who live in a perfectionist state have no say in deciding what is valuable for them or what is valuable at all.

But the objective good component is not sufficient to pick out perfectionist theories, so we also need the second component: the rejection of state neutrality. This could mean two things, first, that the perfectionist thinks that the state should be given the task of promoting the good provided by the objective good component (e.g., the state makes policies with the sole aim of increasing people's autonomy). Or second, using the objective good to justify state actions (e.g., the state makes all kinds of policies with all kinds of aims but justifies all of them in terms of autonomy). But it is difficult to imagine what the justification for the former would have to be in order to avoid making reference to the objective good itself. Presumably the motivation for promoting the good has to come from the fact that it is believed to be the objective good, and if so, such actions would be justified with reference to the objective good. In other words, all of the first type cases are subsumed under the second type cases. This suggests that when we ask "What is the state neutrality that the perfectionist rejects?" then it should be taken to be: not using objective conceptions of the good to justify state action. So in Wall's (2009, 103) characterization, perfectionist's rejection of state neutrality is all encompassing: the state need not be neutral in the aims nor the justification of their actions.

This kind of non-neutral state action can take many forms: mild forms of perfectionism include subsidizing certain activities by using funds which are

voluntarily collected; a stronger version of perfectionism taxes citizens and then redistributes those resources according to the conception of the human good by providing certain services and products; and an even stronger versions of perfectionism would not just provide additional valuable options, but would prohibit and ban unworthy pursuits. Yet the main point here is that unlike in anti-perfectionist states, which aim to remain neutral on the question of good, in the perfectionist state there is no principled reason why the state should not act upon a particular judgment about the good life which is thought to be the best regardless of whether that judgment is shared by the society.

According to Wall (2009, 104–105), with these two components—the objective good component and the rejection of state neutrality—in mind, we are able to pick out all and only the political theories which are historically thought of as perfectionist, and at the same time leave enough generality to our definition that there still can be a variety of theories.²

3. Value pluralism in liberalism

Value pluralism as it is found in liberalism consists of three parts. First, the claim that at least in some sense, values are plural, that a fairly wide array of things must be valuable and it is rational to value any of those things. This normative claim is often backed up by an empirical claim that when reasonable people, in good faith, think about what is valuable they come to vastly different conclusions. Second, which I will call the claim of unsolvability consists of three subparts: incompatibility, incommensurability, and incomparability of values. Meaning that not only are many things valuable but that one cannot value all of those things at once and there can be no cardinal or ordinal comparisons of those values (no strict hierarchy in relation to some universal measure or even way to say if one is better than the other). The upshot of this is that if some people value autonomy and others value community, then valuing one might mean that they cannot value other, but both must also think that they are not in a position to claim the other to be mistaken and that it cannot be said which of the two is more valuable. Given these three subparts value conflicts cannot be “solved.” This contrasts with value monism which claims that there is only one value, or that while there are multiple values, they are ordered into a strict hierarchy and thus

² Such description gives us positive perfectionism: there is a conception of the good and the state aims to promote it. However, it has been suggested that perfectionism should take a negative form, such “that laws and institutions should be designed so that they prevent (or at least do not promote) objectively bad human living” (von Platz 2012, 107). But because this negative conception of perfectionism view is still fairly new and unorthodox, I will not consider it further and will stick to the positive formulation of perfectionism.

any conflict can be “solved.”

Given the space restrictions of the paper, I cannot make a comprehensive case for value pluralism in liberalism, but I can offer some reasons to think it is an integral part of liberalism.

This might initially seem to put me in a very difficult situation—for it seems that it requires answering an extremely demanding question “What is liberalism?” As Judith Shklar (1989, 21) has put it: “overuse and overextension have rendered [liberalism] so amorphous that it can now serve as an all-purpose word, whether of abuse or praise.” If one were to try to pin down exactly what liberalism is, or at least what its core components are, then that seems to be a difficult, if not impossible, task. It is made even more difficult by the great diversity within liberalism. As Thomas Nagel (2002, 62) has put it: “[i]t is a significant fact about our age that most political argument in the Western world now goes on between different branches of [the liberal] tradition.” So even if one were to distill out the main features of liberalism, it is very likely that not everybody who thinks of themselves as liberal would subscribe to all of them.

However, the outlook is not all that dire, since for my purposes I do not need all of the features or components of liberalism. I just need to show that commitment to value pluralism is one of them. Whatever other ideas a liberal affirms, if they accept value pluralism, then the challenge of pluralism arises for the perfectionist.

My first attempt to show that value pluralism is a part of liberalism starts with the liberal accepting that persons are free and equal. Once we accept that we must end up with value pluralism since any other solution would be to deny others’ status as free and equal: we either deny them their freedom to choose their own values or we deny them their equality and assert our superiority over them when it comes to choosing one’s values. It may be objected that such an argument might only give us subjectivism and not value pluralism as I have defined it here. My first reply is that in some sense it does not matter since the challenge of pluralism could also be offered from the perspective of subjectivism. My second reply is to look at the liberal tradition directly and see if we can find explicit support for value pluralism.

Raymond Geuss (2001) has presented one such examination of the liberal tradition and he found that one of the four main elements of liberalism is a commitment to a principle of toleration in the sense of a lack of oppression of dissenters. When elaborating on the idea of toleration, Geuss (2001, 73–74) says that it started out as a strictly negative policy concerning religion: there should be no persecution for religious reasons and people ought to be religiously tolerant. But this idea developed so that by the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century toleration had extended to spheres

other than just religion (Geuss 2001, 80). In essence we get the idea of plural values as I described it earlier as well as the unsolvability claim (we have to tolerate since we cannot “solve the conflict” between different sides).

But crucially there is also a second main element in liberalism according to Geuss which is relevant for the current discussion: individualism and autonomy in the sense of individuals being the final objects of value and they being able to decide the things they consider valuable. Geuss (2001, 98) elaborates that the liberal conception of individualism means, first, that individuals are the bearers of political relevance and, second, that *individuals are the only and final judges of value*. The latter implies that when it comes to the good of each individual then they should be the arbiter on what counts as good for them. So we also get the source of value pluralism: the individuals which I take to be the third part of value pluralism.

When we look at another comprehensive study of the core elements of liberalism, this time from Michael Freedman (1998), then similar elements emerge. Even though Freedman (1998, 259–260) uses a different label, neutrality, the idea is the same: there are many things that are valuable and the individuals should be left to decide what those are. In his own words, one of the implications of the idea of neutrality in liberalism is that “all individual preferences must be considered equally valuable from a public, if not private, viewpoint—valuable not only in their entitlement to express themselves but to draw equal support for their realization from the public domain” (Freedman 1998, 260).

We can find similar sentiments being expressed also by many contemporary authors:

Liberal societies are crucially characterized by pluralism or disagreement regarding what makes a life good, or valuable, or worthwhile. Disagreement about the nature of human flourishing is a deep and permanent feature of free societies. (Quong 2011, 2)

By “diversity” I mean, straightforwardly, legitimate differences among individuals and groups over such matters as the nature of the good life, the sources of moral authority, reason versus faith, and the like [...] Properly understood, liberalism is about the protection of legitimate diversity. (Galston 2002, 21, 23)

At the same time there is a wealth of authors who should unequivocally be labeled as liberals who at the same time subscribe to the idea of value pluralism:

We acknowledge, first of all, the permanent fact of pluralism: reasonable people disagree not only about preferences and interests, but widely and deeply about moral, philosophical, religious, and other views. (Macedo 1990, 47)

We need most of all to make use of one of the cardinal lessons of modernity, which is that the ultimate ends of life are bound to be an object of reasonable disagreement. (Larmore 2008, 3)

[T]he diversity of reasonable comprehensive religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines found in modern democratic societies is not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy. (Rawls 1996, 36)

In these quotes we have all of the same elements present: that there are plural values, that this pluralism is not susceptible to a solution and that (reasonable) people are at the root of this. Hopefully this is sufficient to demonstrate that whatever else we think to be part of liberal principles, then at least value pluralism is one of them.³

4. The challenge of pluralism and the liberal perfectionist reply

If we take the liberal position and thus accept that values are plural and unsolvable and that individuals are the final judges of value, then that seems to conflict with the perfectionist position of there being an objective conception of the human good in which individual persons have no say in. The conflict between these two positions is what I will call the challenge of pluralism. Now, this particular challenge should not be confused with another similar problem. A conflict also arises in terms of the second feature of perfectionism if one thinks that liberalism has also another foundational part: the requirement of justification for coercion. It would be difficult for the non-neutral state to meet the requirement of justification if we at the same time subscribe to value pluralism, because due to value pluralism we cannot expect people to endorse the objective good used by the state and thus we cannot expect them to accept the justification for coercion the state presents them. But to reiterate the challenge of pluralism as I understand it here: according to value pluralism, as it is found in liberalism, individuals are the final judges of value, but the objective nature of the conception of the good in perfectionism rules out any subjective nature of value.

It is important to note here that this challenge does not affect every perfectionist in the same way. For many perfectionists this challenge does not carry much weight since they have no reason to accept the underlying premise of values being plural. But for those perfectionists who also want to be liberal this is a real worry. This is because some form of value pluralism or at least an acknowledgment of reasonable disagreement about values has been and still is a foundational part of liberalism.

³ It should be pointed out here that while John Gray (2000) is usually taken to be a critic of modern liberalism, he also subscribes to the idea of value pluralism and proposes a political arrangement actually not much different from the liberalism he criticizes.

So it seems that the liberal perfectionist either has to give up their perfectionism or liberalism or come up with some sort of explanation of why they can still accommodate the demands of perfectionism within liberalism or vice versa. Of course, this is not some new and original problem for perfectionists, and there is a fairly standard reply from the perfectionists to this challenge: they claim that the challenge is misconceived since the objective conception of the good used in perfectionism could be plural. The general characterization of perfectionism leaves it open whether one or more (incompatible) kind of lives are valuable or whether the realization of one or more (incompatible) values contribute to the objectively good life (Raz 1988, 161; Wall 2009, 102; Wall 2012). Thus, according to the reply, all we have is only an apparent challenge, since there is nothing in perfectionism as such that necessarily conflicts with value pluralism, even though particular perfectionist theories might face this challenge. In short, the liberal perfectionist can claim that the objective good component in their theory is plural and thus compatible with liberalism.

It will be my argument in the rest of this article that this response does not work and the idea of a plural perfectionism is unable to meet the challenge, at least in any sense that the people who present this challenge would be willing to accept.

5. Three types of pluralism

In order to see if the perfectionist reply to the challenge of pluralism works we have to know what the perfectionist can mean when they claim that the objective conception of the good could be plural. In this section, I will present three possible interpretations of pluralism—of practice, values and conceptions—and argue that none of them would do the job that the perfectionist needs them to do to successfully answer the challenge. Each of those pluralisms concerns a different area of application: in the first there is a plurality of different practices or forms of life that are considered to be valuable by the perfectionist theory; in the second there is a plurality of values that are considered important by the perfectionist theory; and in the third there is a plurality of conceptions that are considered valuable by the perfectionist theory. To clarify the relation between the three types of pluralism: I take conceptions of the good to be sets of values organized in pretty much the same way Rawls (1996, 13) thought comprehensive doctrines are organized (although each set could only have just one member). Within each conception one can find one or more values that belong to that conception. When a person tries to live their life according to any of those values or realize them in some way they are in the area of practice.

Let us first start with practice pluralism. This would be the kind of per-

fectionism which claims that there is a plurality of different, incompatible but equally valuable forms of life or practices that people can enact. An example of this type of pluralist perfectionism would be Raz's (1988, 161), who thinks that "perfectionism is, however, compatible with moral pluralism, which allows that there are many morally valuable forms of life, which are incompatible with each other." He distinguishes between weak and strong moral pluralism, and even though he thinks that there are reasons to adopt the strong view, he still only defends the move from autonomy to weak pluralism (Raz 1988, 398). This weak moral pluralism consists in two claims: (1) that there are different but incompatible forms of lives and (2) that they each display distinct virtues, thus there are "several maximal forms of life" (Raz 1988, 396). Most importantly though, the weak pluralism does not exclude that these different forms of life derive from a common source. So this approach, in general and Raz's particular version of it, would not be very helpful in solving the challenge. In Raz's case the various forms of life would not be considered worthy in their own right, but only in their relation to autonomy. If we grant that people can live different and equally valuable yet incompatible lives if their lives exemplify autonomy or if they have autonomously chosen to live those lives, then that does not give us the kind of pluralism we are interested in, since at the top (or bottom depending on how you conceptualize this) of this pluralism is still only one value: autonomy. As we saw earlier, value pluralism, as found in liberalism, would allow one to reject autonomy as a value or at least recognize other values alongside it, but here the only plurality people get to decide is how to exercise the one true value. So what we have here is still monism, or at least monism where it matters for the people who bring up the challenge of pluralism. This reply would generalize over all perfectionist theories which are plural in the sense of practice: having multiple forms of life does not address the concern the challenge raises, if those forms of life are grounded by one single value. If, however, the grounding for the forms of life would also be plural then there might be a chance to meet the challenge. So I will now consider those options.

If we go into the area of different conceptions of the good, perfectionist could claim that there is a plurality of different conceptions of the good which are all objectively valid (and which could then serve as the basis for a whole range of different forms of lives). And that within this plurality we would find the tools to meet the challenge without giving up the perfectionism (i.e., the objective good component). While this might be the case, this does not help the perfectionist, for two reasons. First, the perfectionist by definition can only endorse one of these conceptions (see section 2). Thus this plurality does nothing for the perfectionist in this matter, since al-

though there is a plurality of different conceptions the perfectionist can pick only one of them. Meaning that one of the key components of value pluralism is lacking: individuals cannot be the judges of value. But secondly, to claim that there are multiple objective conceptions but only endorsing one of them seems to create more problems than it solved for the perfectionist. On the one hand, why prefer this particular one over others? If they all truly are similarly objective then we either need to stipulate yet another level from which to choose from or choose by some arbitrary method, neither of which seems very appealing. Because stipulating another level would not help to solve the issue but merely push it back, since one could then raise the challenge in terms of that new level of choice. The lack of appeal of going for an arbitrary method should be obvious: deciding these kinds of questions based on chance or whim would make doing philosophy rather pointless. On the other hand, if the particular conception endorsed by the perfectionist is somehow better, then it is questionable whether the initial description of plurality of objective conceptions was adequate. Therefore, it would not make sense for the perfectionist to construe pluralism in this sense regardless of whether they are trying to meet the challenge of pluralism or not.

So it seems that the perfectionist needs the third perspective: one in which there is a plurality of values. This would mean that within their objective conception there is a plurality of different values which are equally valid compared to each other. As an example, we could think of a list of fundamental values, as suggested by the work of Jonathan Haidt (2012, 153–154) or some other set of values, for example, autonomy, equality, and community. Such pluralism, if sufficiently plural, would seem to provide the perfectionist with the tools needed to meet the challenge. As we saw in section 2, this type of pluralism would have to take one of two forms: either it will present us with a list of specific values which are included and all other values are excluded (making it closed) or it will present us with a general description or criteria which then determine what values will be included and which ones excluded (making it open-ended). Any other approach would not yield a coherent or a workable conception, e.g., the perfectionist could not say “my objective conception of the good is plural and its contents will include all the values that are out there” since then it would stop being an objective conception of the good and become a mere dictionary of values.

So let us examine each option in more detail. Would the closed plural values perfectionism be able to meet the challenge? I think there are three reasons for thinking that it cannot. First, as soon as we are presented with some specific list with some values excluded from the plurality endorsed by the conception, there is again the possibility for the challenge to be raised, since there can be people who affirm those values which were left off the list.

The value pluralist perfectionist (and perhaps also the conception pluralist perfectionist) could reply to this worry of inclusion that their particular version of pluralism does not need to include those values since it only includes the values that are actually valuable. Values (or whole conceptions) not endorsed by the perfectionist are not a problem because they should not be endorsed by anybody even outside a perfectionist approach. But this reply seems to beg the question against the liberal position, in effect, this assumes that the value pluralism which the liberal is committed to does not exist. But if our starting point is liberal then we would not be entitled to that assumption.

The second problem concerns progress. If we are presented with a specific closed list of values then could the conception still be open to new values. Considering, for example, the drag (or other cross-dressing) life as an example of a valuable life that is a relatively new addition to value space of the modern democratic society. Of course not all additions to our space of values are always good, but we cannot know beforehand if this or that idea is worthwhile pursuing and we cannot know before we consider them. But to be able to consider them as valid options the current value system has to allow for the possibility of those new values being added to our value space. But if the particular objective conception of the good is defined in terms of that particular list of values then adding new values could only come about by essentially adopting a new conception. Such a move would imply that the original list was not valid but what reason do we have to think that the new list is valid? This seems to call into question the whole approach of determining a specific list of values.

The third problem concerns the third element of value pluralism. Even if we were to overcome the two previous problems then whatever list we end up with claims to be an objective list, thus it denies that individuals can be judges of value. It can, as we saw with the pluralism of practice, allow people to judge between the values offered by the list, but it leaves no room for people to judge the overall validity of the list.

So how well would the open-ended plural values perfectionism fare in this regard? It seems that it might be able to overcome to some of these problems. With regard to the third and partly to the first two, the perfectionist could define the general description of values that are included in the following way: all and only those values that are affirmed in the society. The list is not (nor does it aim to be) exhaustive so it serves as a useful list, it is able to address everybody in the society, it is open to revision and the source of revision is the judgments of the people. The problem with this of course is that this would no longer be an objective conception, thus the perfectionist could not adopt it. A further issue with this route could be that once we

have expanded the pluralism to cover all the current values then are we still dealing with a single coherent conception? That is, could all the values that are held by people right now be brought together into one single conception of the good? This does not seem likely: a conception of the good would not make sense if it were nationalist and cosmopolitan at the same time, for example.

If the open-ended list would be defined in some other way, that is, without any reference to people and their choices, then first and third problems would still apply. Any criteria that is not based on the judgments of individuals is open to leading to a mismatch between the list and the judgments of the individuals. At the same time any such criteria would not be sensitive to the source of value pluralism in liberalism, that is, the judgments of individuals.

So it seems that there is no interpretation of pluralism that the perfectionist could adopt, while still remaining a perfectionist (in the sense of the objective good component), to meet the challenge of pluralism presented by the liberal.

But even if we were to solve the issues faced by the perfectionist in terms of their objective good component then when we turn to the other component of perfectionism, the non-neutrality of the state, we will see new issues arising for the perfectionist. Recall that the other feature of perfectionism was that the state justifies its action in terms of the objective conception of the good and that they also try to promote it. If that conception is monist then that seems like a very straightforward task: there is either the one value to promote or use as justification or there is a strict hierarchy between multiple values which gives both the aims and justification of state's actions a clear structure. But because value pluralism implies incompatibility of values then it will be difficult if not impossible for the state to promote those since the promotion of one comes at the cost of another (both in terms of actual resources dedicated to the cause and substantial content of the cause), but because the values are also incommensurable and incomparable the state has no non-arbitrary way of choosing between them. One could try to come up with counterexamples to this description, for example it seems possible for the state to support both religious and atheist groups at the same time (by providing tax breaks for them) without undermining each other. So it seems that the problem of promoting conflicting values does not arise in the case of all values and all actions (and one could question if two different values are even being promoted in the tax breaks case), this is because value pluralism does not require that all values be incompatible with each other. But we know that some values will be incompatible with others thus a state which aims to promote those values will at one point face this problem.

The incompatibility also makes providing justification very difficult, if not impossible, since if one value will speak for a policy while another speaks against it, but since both are part of the “official doctrine” then the state will be faced with a choice between inconsistency in their justifications for their actions and inaction due to lack of proper justification. Neither of which seems like a pleasant outcome. Incommensurability and incomparability further complicate the issue since those features will prevent solving the conflict between incompatible values in any non-arbitrary way. Similar points could also be raised against the conception pluralism: the state cannot, in pragmatic terms, try to exercise different conceptions (given that each would contain a different set of values or values ordered differently).

If the value pluralism would not be in a closed list form but rather open-ended so that it could include and exclude values based on some characteristic to make sure that internal consistency is preserved then the perfectionist state still would not be able to escape pragmatic problems. Given the complexity and size of modern states it takes time to implement policies and to actually get any benefits from it, but if the values the state wants to promote are changing then that would make the state’s ability to plan and execute their perfectionist policies much more difficult. And once again the same point applies to the conception pluralist perfectionist.⁴

So it seems to me that while the perfectionist could easily hold a plural conception of the good (in the sense of there being a plurality of equally valid values within the conception), then there cannot be a version of the kind of plural conception which would help the perfectionist meet the challenge. It will either be too exclusive to meet the challenge in every instance, it will end up containing too many different values to form a single coherent conception, or it will be so inclusive that it will fail to be useful or a meaningful conception of the good in the first place. And even if they could somehow respond to those worries then the practical problems of actually implementing that plurality would still prove difficult. Which leads me to conclude that the perfectionist reply—that perfectionism could be plural—cannot provide an answer to the challenge of pluralism from the liberals.

6. Final remarks

Perfectionism requires an objective conception of the good and a non-neutral state to exercise it, liberalism requires commitment to value pluralism in the sense of there being multiple things valuable because people get to decide what is valuable. There is a tension between the two, one could try to resolve it by making the objective conception plural also. This solution, however,

⁴ I would like to thank Indrek Lõbus for bringing these ideas to my attention.

does not work since the plurality would be in the wrong area or could not include all it would need to address the challenge. And even if it could, then the non-neutrality of the state would create pragmatic problems when exercising that plural objective conception of the good.

There are two limitations that I must admit to in this final section. First, while I do believe that I have demonstrated that commitment to value pluralism is one of the main features of liberalism, there is a bigger issue that I have just assumed to be true: namely that we even have any reason to be liberals. If there are no compelling reasons to be liberals, then the challenge of pluralism loses much of its force, since the perfectionist reply would be to just dismiss the need for value pluralism. With that said, the challenge would still stand for those perfectionists who actively seek to be both perfectionist and liberal. The second limitation is that one could take the position that this argument is merely about labels. Thus if the perfectionist who also wants to be liberal sees that they cannot meet the challenge of pluralism then they could claim to be perfectionist and pliberals, i.e., liberals without the commitment to pluralism. It is a separate issue of whether the liberal doctrine works without the commitment to value pluralism. But assuming it does, then dropping the label 'liberal' for the label 'pliberals' would be a valid option to meet the challenge of pluralism.

Despite these two points, I think that I have still made a case for rejecting the perfectionist reply for the challenge of pluralism.

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