

In Defence of Comprehensive Liberalism

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Published in *Philosophy and Public Issues* 2 (2012): 17-19.

In *Liberalism without Perfection* Jonathan Quong defends a form of political liberalism; that is, a political philosophy that answers ‘no’ to both the following questions:

1. Must liberal political philosophy be based in some particular ideal of what constitutes a valuable or worthwhile human life, or other metaphysical beliefs?
2. Is it permissible for a liberal state to promote or discourage some activities, ideals, or ways of life on grounds relating to their inherent or intrinsic value, or on the basis of other metaphysical claims? (p. 15)¹

In these remarks, I respond to Quong’s arguments against those of his rivals who answer ‘Yes’ to his first question by dint of their comprehensive commitment to an ideal of individual autonomy. One of these, which Quong calls ‘comprehensive antiperfectionism’, answers ‘Yes’ to Question 1 and ‘No’ to Question 2.² The other, which answers ‘Yes’ to both, he calls (comprehensive) ‘liberal perfectionism’.³ Quong poses these positions a dilemma: they cannot consistently be both comprehensive (by retaining their commitment to autonomy) and liberal (by ruling out the sort of coercive interference in people’s choices which is beyond the liberal pale). In what follows, I argue on the contrary that a comprehensive commitment to autonomy actually demands a general injunction against such coercive interference, because responsibility is an important component of the autonomous life, and coercion always undermines responsibility. So, Quong’s dilemma is unsuccessful.

1. The Antiperfectionist’s Dilemma

Quong argues that comprehensive antiperfectionism is inconsistent, because its comprehensive foundations inevitably lead to perfectionist politics.⁴ He suggests that the following argument represents the core motivation behind the position:

1. It is wrong to coerce someone for his own good.
2. The reason it is wrong has to do with *autonomy*, the importance of being the author of your own decisions and your own life.
3. People disagree about perfectionist judgements and conceptions of the good life generally.

¹ All in-text references are to J. Quong *Liberalism Without Perfection* (New York: OUP, 2011). Other political liberals include Charles Larmore (e.g. *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987) and ‘Political Liberalism’, *Political Theory* 18 (1990): 339-360) and John Rawls (e.g. *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993)).

² Quong ascribes versions of this position to Ronald Dworkin, J.S. Mill, and Will Kymlicka. See R. Dworkin *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially chapter 6; J.S. Mill *On Liberty* in S. Collini ed. *On Liberty and other writings* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989); and W. Kymlicka *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989).

³ E.g. J. Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), S. Wall *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), and T. Hurka *Perfectionism* (Oxford: OUP, 1990).

⁴ It is worth noting that Quong’s positive case for political liberalism doesn’t depend on this argument against comprehensive antiperfectionism, just his attempt to close off theoretical territory available his rivals (p.22).

Therefore,

4. The liberal state, being a coercive institution, should thus not act for perfectionist reasons because formulating its policies because this would infringe some people's autonomy.

Quong directs four arguments against this position (pp. 23-26). First, no motivation is offered for thinking that autonomy is so important that it must always trump other considerations. Second, even if we grant that it *is* that important, what we're granting is a view of the good life that is 'just as controversial' as its rivals; so, Quong says, acting on reasons to do with autonomy will be 'no less perfectionist' than the sort of policies which the defender of comprehensive antiperfectionism seeks to rule out. In light of this, Quong considers that the defender of comprehensive antiperfectionism might concede, and say that she is in fact arguing for antiperfectionism about everything *except* autonomy, thus modifying the conclusion of the above argument to read:

- 4*. The liberal state, being a coercive state, should thus not act for perfectionist reasons, except considerations to do with the value of autonomy, when formulating its policies.

Quong's third line of attack is to argue that this position is now on the same footing as 'any version of perfectionism', since *any* perfectionist will think that the state ought to act on some, but not all, putative perfectionist values (hence, trivially, be an antiperfectionist about the rest).

I don't propose to address these parts of Quong's argument here. For one thing, I think I have said things elsewhere which allow the comprehensive antiperfectionist to address them.⁵ For another, Quong's fourth argument seems to me the most powerful and interesting. It runs as follows: even if he concedes the pre-eminence of an uncontroversial value of autonomy, that doesn't preclude the liberal state also pursuing other perfectionist values, so long as it does so in a way that doesn't damage autonomy. Quong says that this leaves the comprehensive antiperfectionist unable consistently to oppose non-coercive perfectionist policies like subsidy, advertising and other incentives; and although he concedes that quite how much perfectionism must be permitted depends on the conception of autonomy at issue, he thinks it impossible to rule out all such action (p. 25). Hence, he concludes, '[o]nce liberalism is tied to some specific views about the good life, the liberal state will unavoidably be acting for perfectionist reasons'. Effectively, this poses the following dilemma:

- **The Antiperfectionist's Dilemma:** The comprehensive antiperfectionist liberal cannot sustain her comprehensive commitment to autonomy without violating her commitment to antiperfectionism.

In Section 3, I show how the comprehensive antiperfectionist can respond to this dilemma by adopting a particular conception of autonomy. Before I do so, however, I turn to Quong's argument against comprehensive perfectionism.

⁵ See my 'Forbidden Ways of Life', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2008): 618-629; 'Autonomy and Anti-Perfectionisms' *Analysis* 70 (2010): 247-256 (hereafter 2010a); and *Autonomy and Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2010): chapters 2 and 3, (hereafter 2010b). The gist of my arguments is that we should think autonomy pre-eminently valuable – at least in political contexts – because any argument to the contrary presupposes as much, in light of which autonomy's being a controversial value doesn't matter much; and that being a perfectionist about autonomy and an antiperfectionist about everything else is as close as one can get to wholesale antiperfectionism, in light of the fact that a commitment to promoting autonomy is the only credible motivation for any consistent and coherent version of antiperfectionism on the market.

2. The Perfectionist's Dilemma

Joseph Raz, in his book *The Morality of Freedom*, gives the most significant elucidation and defence of comprehensive perfectionist liberalism. Raz's position combines comprehensive foundations – a particular view of human flourishing with autonomy at its heart – with what Quong calls the Liberal Perfectionist Thesis:

It is at least sometimes legitimate for a liberal state to promote or discourage particular activities, ideals, or ways of life on grounds relating to their inherent or intrinsic value, or on the basis of other metaphysical claims (p. 46).

Raz allows such action because he believes that autonomy (which he understands as an ideal of 'self-authorship') is good for individuals, but good only when exercised in pursuit of genuinely valuable ends.⁶ One might think, in light of this, that Raz's state should coerce people into pursuing only such ends, and disbar them from pursuing worthless or bad ends. In fact, Raz thinks not, because he thinks that concern for autonomy implies a version of John Stuart Mill's Harm Principle, that coercion can be used only to prevent people harming others (p. 51). This forbids the state to use coercion to make people pursue only valuable options, but doesn't rule out using other non-coercive means like those mentioned in the Liberal Perfectionist Thesis.

Raz's endorsement of his Harm Principle is very important for his view his claim to be defending a form of *liberal* perfectionism depends on his combining that perfectionism with a general injunction against coercive interference. Quong argues that this combination is untenable.

On Quong's reconstruction, Raz's argument runs as follows:

- (Normative premise) We should not reduce people's ability to autonomously choose the good in order to prevent them from choosing badly.
- (Factual premise) There is no practical way for the state to use coercion to prevent people's pursuit of repugnant options without this coercion also preventing people's autonomous pursuit of the good (p. 54).⁷

Therefore:

- Raz's Harm Principle: [It] is wrong to coerce people in order to prevent them from pursuing bad options, but ... it is not wrong to use coercion to force people to fulfil the moral duty they have to help provide others with good options (p. 53).

This allows coercion to ensure that individuals have an adequate range of options, because such a range is needed for autonomy, and (says Raz) failing to secure the necessary preconditions for autonomy constitutes harm; but it forbids coercion of an individual just for perfectionist reasons applying to her. The label 'coercive perfectionism' usually applies only to the latter type of case, where coercion is applied solely for the sake of the individual herself, and not for any third party reasons. All coercive perfectionism is ruled out by Raz's harm principle.

⁶ Raz 1986 p. 378 et seq.

⁷ This is in fact a concatenation of several smaller steps. For the details, see Quong 2011 p. 53 and Raz 1986 p. 418-19.

Quong's objection is that the second (factual) premise is empirically contingent 'on the wrong sort of factual considerations' (p. 54-5). For that reason, he thinks that Raz's argument ultimately fails, because (contrary to its stated ambitions) his harm principle applies only in those cases where the factual conditions hold, rather than generally. Quong argues that this is a much smaller set of cases than Raz thinks: sufficiently well-focussed coercion could impede our choice of bad options without having any effect on our ability to choose good ones, and Raz's harm principle would not rule out coercion in such cases.

One might seek to defend Raz by arguing that there's something autonomy-impeding about coercion *per se*: even if only bad options are precluded, coercion changes the character of our pursuit of good options in a way which undermines our autonomy anyway. Quong considers several possible defences of this sort, each identifying some autonomy-impeding feature of perfectionist coercion: that it 'expresses a relation of domination', constitutes disrespect, 'shows a lack of trust in some people's status as rational agents' or makes one's will 'subject to the will of someone else', and concludes that no such manoeuvre will work (pp. 57-60). Either they don't actually rule out coercive perfectionism (for example, if we're confident that the option being ruled out is a bad one, there's no reason to think that coercive prevention shows disrespect); or it will do so only at the cost of ruling out the non-coercive encouragement of valuable goals which is also integral to Raz's position (pp. 57-9, 60-67, 70-1).

The question is important for Raz. For reasons noted above, his claim to be defending a liberal theory depends on combining his comprehensive perfectionism with a robust injunction against coercive interference. Moreover, Quong thinks that that this argument generalizes to all liberal comprehensive perfectionists, because there is no conception of autonomy that can do all the work that they require (pp. 71-72). Autonomy might be construed in a way that can deliver a principled injunction against perfectionist coercion (for example by taking it to be precluded by relations of domination); but so construed, it will likely rule out the apparently more innocuous practices ('subsidies, incentives, and other means of manipulating citizens into making good choices') which characterize liberal *perfectionism*. Or, autonomy might be construed in a way which is consistent with such manipulation; but on such an understanding it will be unable to sustain a general rule against coercion, thereby bringing into question whether this perfectionism can be recognizably *liberal*. That is, the comprehensive perfectionist faces her own dilemma:

- **The Perfectionist's Dilemma:** No comprehensive position can consistently be both liberal (by ruling out coercive perfectionism) and perfectionist (by permitting non-coercive manipulation).

3. Autonomy and Responsibility

Quong's two arguments don't prove that no stable and attractive comprehensive liberalism is possible, as he himself acknowledges (p. 72 n. 72). Taken together, however, they do indicate just how narrow is the theoretical space left for such a position. The Antiperfectionist's Dilemma poses us a choice between preserving our antiperfectionism at the cost of dropping the comprehensive commitment to autonomy, or retaining the latter at the cost of permitting at least some non-coercive perfectionism; the Perfectionist's Dilemma then shows that one cannot consistently permit non-coercive perfectionism without also, at least in principle, permitting coercive perfectionism. So, putting the dilemmas together, Quong poses comprehensive liberals the following problem:

- **The Master Dilemma:** No theory can consistently be both comprehensive (by retaining its commitment to autonomy) and liberal (by ruling out coercive perfectionism).

To defend comprehensive liberalism we must find a conception of autonomy which responds to this dilemma. In what follows I argue that Raz’s conception of autonomy – or one extremely like it – has the resources to do that, when we realise the central role that responsibility plays in the autonomous life.

The conception of autonomy Quong has in mind is the ideal sketched by Raz, who conceives of autonomy as an ideal of self-authorship or ‘self-creation’:

The ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives.⁸

What makes a view like Raz’s unusual is its emphasis on success. It is necessary, but not sufficient, that someone has appropriate mental abilities and options, and identifies with her goals and projects.⁹ In addition, one must successfully pursue those goals: ‘the autonomous person is the one who makes his own life’.¹⁰ To think otherwise, says Raz, would be to mischaracterize what really matters: one values the capacities involved in autonomy only because they can be successfully exercised.¹¹

How do we analyse what is meant by saying that the autonomous person *makes* her life go in accordance with what she decides is valuable? It can’t simply be that her life happens to follow the pattern she values, because that could happen purely by chance, or because of benevolent external management. To capture the additional requirement that *she* makes her life, I propose that we incorporate a responsibility condition. Assuming that she endorses her values in the right way, someone’s life is autonomous to the extent that her life goes in accordance with those decisions, and she is responsible for the fact.

There are two different ways in which someone might be responsible for how her life goes.¹² One – which we might call *explanatory responsibility* – picks out her having a certain causal role in bringing about a state of affairs. For example, this article’s existence is causally attributable to me (in part) because of my sitting down and writing it: I am in this descriptive sense responsible for it. For present purposes, I assume that one is explanatorily responsible for all and only the things that counterfactually depend on one’s free intentional actions: that is, which happened because of one’s intentional actions, and which (all else equal) wouldn’t have happened if one had acted otherwise. So, with regard to autonomy, someone’s life is not autonomous unless it goes in

⁸ Raz 1986 pp. 369-70; and see Quong 2011 pp. 16, 23, 45, and 47-50.

⁹ Contrast, for example, Gerald Dworkin, on whose view autonomy consists just in one’s desires being structured in a certain way, regardless of whether they are satisfied. See *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988): esp. Chapters 1 & 2.

¹⁰ Raz 1986 p. 375.

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 372.

¹² Other philosophers have also distinguished between two conceptions of responsibility. Most importantly, Thomas Scanlon distinguishes between ‘attributive’ and ‘substantive’ responsibility, and Ronald Dworkin distinguishes between ‘causal’ and ‘consequential’ responsibility. To some extent, my theory is an attempt to improve on those important but somewhat ill-drawn distinctions. See T. Scanlon *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) chapter 65, and R. Dworkin *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2000) pp. 278-8.

accordance with her decisions about value as a result of her freely and intentionally making it so: a life must be attributable to an individual for it to be autonomous.

The second sense of responsibility is *evaluative responsibility*. This is a normative concept, picking out a relation between an individual and a state of affairs which grounds some normative upshot: some normative claims about what the individual must, may, or may not do or demand are true *because* the relation obtains, and *ceteris paribus* wouldn't be true if the relation didn't obtain. So, for example, I am evaluatively responsible for this article's existence in at least two ways: my having agreed to write it has placed an obligation on me to make it exist, such that the editors of this journal would have a legitimate complaint against me if that state of affairs hadn't obtained; and my having successfully written it means that I am properly held to account for its content, being praised, blamed, or sued for libel, depending on how things go.

Whether or not someone is evaluatively responsible is, as will be clear, not a unitary matter: there are many co-existent conceptions of evaluative responsibility, because there are many different normative upshots that we can be concerned with: praise, blame, reward, punishment, compensation, liability, and so on. Each of these might be grounded in a different relation between an individual and a state of affairs. With respect to some normative upshots, being explanatorily responsible might be sufficient. Maybe freely choosing to perform an action is enough to render one liable for praise or blame, for example. With respect to others, we might need something more. For instance, following G.A. Cohen we might think that my freely choosing (without overt coercion) to enter hazardous employment is insufficient to render me wholly liable for any injuries or illness that come about, but that I must in addition be fully informed and not motivated by the prospect of serious economic hardship if I don't take up the job. With respect to praise or blame, free choice (hence explanatory responsibility) is sufficient for evaluative responsibility; with respect to bearing the burdens of asbestosis, it isn't.¹³

Evaluative responsibility is also an important part of autonomy, because Raz's appeal to the value of 'self-authorship' requires more than just explanatory responsibility. The word 'author' indicates not only the 'cause' of a thing authored, but also the person who has authority and stands in a certain normative relation to the thing authored. The self-authored life is one where the individual makes it go a certain way, and also bears the consequences. The concept of evaluative responsibility captures this further element. What matters is not just that someone causes her life to be a certain way, but that she does so in a way makes it appropriate to give her praise, blame, punishment, liability, reward and so on.

To summarise: one of the distinctive things about a conception of autonomy like Raz's is its inclusion of a success criterion, and that criterion is best construed as indicating that explanatory and evaluative responsibility are necessary for a fully autonomous life, and that diminutions of responsibility in either sense diminish one's autonomy.

This lets us reply to Quong's Master Dilemma, which stated that no theory can consistently be both comprehensive (by retaining its commitment to autonomy) and liberal (by ruling out coercive perfectionism). This is incorrect: we can be comprehensively committed to autonomy while still endorsing the general injunction against coercive perfectionism that Quong requires, because coercion always damages autonomy. The argument runs as follows:

1. Successful coercion always diminishes an individual's responsibility for how her life goes;

¹³ G. A. Cohen 'Are Disadvantaged Workers who take Hazardous Jobs Forced to take Hazardous Jobs?' in his *History, Labour and Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988): pp. 239-254.

2. Actions that diminish an individual's responsibility for how her life goes undermine her autonomy;
3. Coercive perfectionism constitutes successfully coercing an individual for no third-party reasons;
4. A comprehensive commitment to autonomy precludes actions that undermine an individual's autonomy for no third-party reasons;
5. (from 1 & 2) Successful coercion always undermines an individual's autonomy;
6. (from 3 & 5) Coercive perfectionism always undermines an individual's autonomy for no third party reasons;

Hence

7. (from 4 & 6) A comprehensive commitment to autonomy precludes coercive perfectionism.

So, Quong's dilemma fails. The comprehensive commitment to autonomy doesn't force one into (illiberally) permitting coercive perfectionism; in fact, the opposite is true.

I have already justified Premise 2. Premise 3 is just the definition of coercive perfectionism I gave above. Premise 4 should be uncontroversial: a comprehensive commitment to autonomy probably involves more than just avoiding actions that undermine autonomy for no third-person purpose, but it must involve *at least* that. This bare minimum commitment is all that I need for present purposes.

So, it remains to explain Premise 1, which states that successful coercion always undermines responsibility: to the extent that her being coerced features in an individual's performing a given action, her responsibility for that action is diminished.¹⁴ Different theories of coercion will say different things about what sorts of responsibility are damaged, and how. Perhaps the effect of coercion is to curtail or eliminate free choice;¹⁵ in that case, coercion diminishes both explanatory and evaluative responsibility, because it reduces the relevance of our individual agency to both the explanation and the normative consequences of her actions. Or, one might think that coercion (unlike strict physical compulsion) operates not by constraining the range of one's options, but by changing their nature to make all but one unacceptable to the chooser.¹⁶ On that theory, the coerced individual is still explanatorily responsible for her action, but lacks evaluative responsibility.

¹⁴ I talk of 'successful' coercion to sidestep the question whether coercion is successful by definition. There exist those who argue that coercion doesn't always undermine responsibility, but they do so on the basis that coercion can be unsuccessful, or that an act which would be a piece of successful coercion applied to one victim fails to be so (but perhaps invisibly) when applied to another; hence, they offer no reasons to reject Premise 1, which stipulates that the coercion has been successful. See e.g. C. Carr 'Coercion and Freedom', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25 (1988): 59-67.

¹⁵ E.g. J.R. Lucas *The Principles of Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966): p. 57; H. Frankfurt 'Coercion and Moral Responsibility' in T. Honderich ed. *Essays on Freedom of Action* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul, 1973): pp. 63-86, at 75; and G. Yaffe 'Indoctrination, Coercion, and Freedom of Will', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 (2003): 335-356.

¹⁶ e.g. R. Nozick 'Coercion' in P. Lazlett & W. Runciman eds. *Philosophy, Politics, and Society, 4th series* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), pp. 101-135; J. Feinberg *Harm to Self* (New York: OUP, 1986): pp. 192-4; Carr 1988; and S. Olsaretti *Liberty, Desert and the Market* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), pp. 141-148.

These disagreements don't matter for present purposes. On any plausible theory, if someone acts as they do because of coercion, their responsibility for that action is impaired in at least one of the two senses distinguished above. So, responsibility for how one's life goes is diminished to the extent that it is composed of coerced actions, and Premise 1 is true: these judgements come in degrees, but responsibility is necessarily diminished, though not always precluded entirely, by successful coercion.

So, there is a way out of Quong's Master Dilemma. Quong's first If one accepts a conception of autonomy like the one entertained here, one can (indeed must) be both comprehensively committed to autonomy and also have a firm general injunction against coercive perfectionism, because the latter necessarily undermines autonomy.

4. Conclusion

Quong is right that many comprehensive liberals will be unable to respond to his dilemmas. The argument given above depends upon accepting a conception of autonomy that incorporates a responsibility condition. While such a conception seems to me attractive both as an elucidation of Raz and on its own terms, I haven't argued for it here.¹⁷ So, my conclusion is conditional: my argument rescues the comprehensive liberal only if she thinks of autonomy like this.

In addition, there are further theoretical costs to be borne by both the antiperfectionist and the perfectionist liberal, if they are to be able to use my argument. To conclude, I set those costs out.

First, the antiperfectionist must complete the task I set aside earlier, of refuting the first parts of Quong's argument against comprehensive antiperfectionism. Only if we can satisfactorily give reasons to think autonomy pre-eminently important, and can defend the element of perfectionism inevitably implied by autonomy itself, does the truth of that position hang on Quong's dilemma.

Second, the fate of the perfectionist's view now clearly depends on our substantive theories of responsibility, and what they say about the non-coercive perfectionist techniques – manipulation, persuasion, encouragement, subsidy, and so on – which the perfectionist liberal like Raz wants to permit.¹⁸ If the liberal perfectionist can argue that only coercion systematically diminishes responsibility, then her position looks tenable. But if at least some such techniques do systematically diminish responsibility, because they erode the extent to which actions are attributable to individuals, or make it less appropriate to hold individuals accountable for those actions' consequences, then my argument will be little succour. In the end, she must probably concede to Quong (though for different reasons) that her 'account of personal autonomy cannot simultaneously ground the harm principle while also permitting many of the policies that liberal perfectionists favour.'¹⁹

¹⁷ More argument is provided in Colburn 2010b.

¹⁸ We might, of course, think there are further problems for those techniques, because they undermine autonomy by diminishing the extent to which an individual decides for herself what is valuable. These considerations seem to be sufficient to condemn perfectionism and vindicate comprehensive antiperfectionism, but I leave the point aside here. For further discussion see R. Crisp 'Persuasive Advertising, Autonomy, and the Creation of Desire', *Journal of Business Ethics* 6 (1987): 413-18, Colburn 2010b: pp. 26-31, and Colburn 'Autonomy and Adaptive Preferences', *Utilitas* 23 (2011): 52-71.

¹⁹ Quong in this volume, 2.