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Defending Perfectionism: Some Comments on Quong's *Liberalism without Perfection*

Abstract *The article offers a defense of liberal perfectionism in the light of criticism of perfectionist politics stated in Jonathan Quong's book Liberalism without Perfection. It argues against Quong's claims that perfectionism is incompatible with demands of individual autonomy and non-paternalism as requirements of liberal commitment of treating all persons as free and equal.*

Keywords: *Quong, perfectionism, autonomy, paternalism, liberalism*

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Introduction

This paper offers a defense of perfectionist politics within a liberal framework in opposition to Jonathan Quong's main arguments presented in his book *Liberalism without Perfection*. Quong's argument is that perfectionism is not compatible with a core liberal presupposition of treating all persons as free and equal because it shows disregard for individual autonomy, entails paternalism and lacks true political legitimacy. In this paper I will address first two issues – autonomy and paternalism. My argument will be that perfectionist policies are not only compatible with demand for autonomy, but in the context of unequal material distribution present in liberal societies today, are also welcomed. Also, I will argue that policies promoting certain conceptions of good and ways of life at the expense of others do not necessarily have to be paternalistic, i.e. rest on an assumption that some citizens don't know what is in their own interest and, therefore, the state is justified in using coercion or manipulation to promote their welfare. I will not address the third issue of legitimacy for two reasons. First, the discussion between Quong and his critics on that issue has already been published in some detail (Chan 2012; Quong 2012b). Second, I believe that the claim of lack of legitimacy of liberal perfectionism in most part rests on accepting arguments about its paternalistic and disrespecting-autonomy character, arguments which I hope to put into question in what follows.

In short, Quong's book *Liberalism without Perfection* is an impressive work in a sense that it puts liberal perfectionism to tight scrutiny that

has often been lacking in contemporary liberal theory. Additionally, it convincingly points out some of the inconsistencies present in theories of most prominent advocates of perfectionism (most notably Joseph Raz). However, I will argue that it fails in its main mission of showing that liberalism and perfectionism can't go hand in hand. *Liberalism without Perfection* is persuasive when it comes to warning us about possible perfectionist *hubris* that can lead to illiberal policies, but it falls short in demonstrating that perfectionist state is inevitably violating basic liberal *ethos* by refusing to treat its citizens as free and equal persons.

Autonomy

The argument that attempts to justify perfectionist policies on the basis of autonomy is pretty straightforward. To lead an autonomous life, individuals need to have valuable options to choose from. If we agree that one of the roles state has to play is to provide its citizens with a framework for leading such a life, it makes sense to embrace perfectionism as a way of promoting and sustaining valuable options through political means¹. We can ask ourselves what would happen if the state remained neutral and refused to promote and subsidize these valuable options, letting individuals themselves pay for those options they find valuable. The answer is that many valuable options would either a) disappear or b) be accessible only to chosen (richest) few. As Joseph Chan points out, “the cost of” disallowing perfectionist state policies “is that people risk losing the opportunities to experience valuable goods and worthwhile ways of life” (Chan 2000: 34). Take one of Quong’s favorite examples: opera. If we remove the government subsidies out of the equation the only way the opera could survive would be for it to be commercially sustainable. To make it profitable either a lot of people have to be ready to pay for it (by buying tickets or donating money to opera-loving fund-raisers) or a smaller amount of people have to be willing to pay a lot of money for it. Both of these scenarios are problematic because nobody could convincingly argue that most profitable activities are also the most valuable and worth maintaining (think Hollywood blockbusters, Dan Brown’s novels or Lady Gaga) or that if you are unable to afford certain cultural activities such as opera it’s only fair that you are deprived of such experiences.

¹ Part of perfectionist agenda can also be *negative* by banning or discouraging certain activities (gambling, prostitution, drug use, smoking, high-cholesterol diet, etc.), but Quong’s argument mainly deals with *positive* perfectionism (promoting certain activities, practices and goods) rather than with *negative* perfectionism, so in my discussion I will also concentrate on *positive* perfectionism.

This is where perfectionism comes in by using state power to maintain those activities that are valuable but not profitable. If we agree that the essential element of autonomous life is having a range of valuable activities available to us and we are afraid that leaving the survival of these options to market logic would lead to many of them dying out or accessible only to the richest among us, then perfectionism seems like a reasonable way to go. “Anti-perfectionism in practice”, Joseph Raz argues, “would undermine the chances of survival of many cherished aspects of our culture” (Raz 1986: 162). On this account, perfectionism plays a *corrective* role of maintaining those valuable practices and goods that would probably not survive in the context of unequal material distribution and market logic of supply and demand.

One could argue that if it is the variety of options that autonomous life requires then any and every practice is worth saving. To use another Quong’s example (this one borrowed from Hurka): why chose to subsidize opera and not mudwrestling? This complaint only makes sense if we presuppose a certain skepticism or subjectivism about making value judgments when comparing different activities. Who is to say that opera is more valuable than mudwrestling? Maybe pushpin is as good as poetry. If it’s the variety we need to live autonomously then the best option would be to have opera, poetry, mudwrestling and pushpin. However, if we can’t maintain all of these activities, which of them should survive – considering they are all mere preferences that have equal weight – should be decided by how many individuals are ready to pursue (and pay for) a specific activity. This line argument is not available to Quong because he rejects such skepticism or subjectivism.

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Some philosophers claim that we can never hold views about human flourishing with any degree of certainty or confidence either because such matters are too difficult, or more radically, because there are no right or wrong answers about human flourishing, only preferences. These objections are sometimes pressed against perfectionism in order to defend political liberalism, but these arguments are deeply flawed (Quong 2011: 33).

As rational and reasonable persons we are able to make valid judgments on which options are valuable and which are less valuable or have no value at all². On this point Quong goes along with Raz and acknowledg-

2 Quong is right in pointing out that endorsing skepticism and subjectivism would put the whole liberal project of public justification into question.

es that it is not the variety of options, but a variety of valuable options that matters.

Quong relies on a different strategy to show us what is wrong with invoking autonomy in the defense of perfectionism. His main target is Joseph Raz and his understanding of autonomy. I want to avoid getting entangled in scholastic-type argument here (interpreting Quong's interpretation of Raz), so I'll just assume that what Quong has to say about Raz is correct. I do, however, want to argue that even if Quong's criticism of Raz is convincing, perfectionism doesn't stand or fall depending on validity of Raz's position. One doesn't need to embrace Raz's understanding of autonomy to show that perfectionism as a set of corrective policies makes sense if we want to ensure that citizens have valuable options constitutive of autonomous life available to them³.

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The core of Quong's argument is that autonomy requires that we are neither coerced nor manipulated in choosing between different options. Limiting his discussion on the issue of state subsidies, he argues that, by offering financial incentives, the state is manipulating its citizens in choosing some options over others. Quong does acknowledge that "mere offers... need not be manipulative" (Quong 2011: 63), but state subsidies are not mere offers because what the government is actually doing is taxing its citizens to pay for the activities – such as opera – that citizens are not willing to pay for themselves. These kinds of policies are government's attempt to "subject the will of citizens to its own perfectionist judgment" (Quong 2011: 66) and are, therefore, manipulative and incompatible with the requirements of autonomy.

This, I want to argue, is a wrong way to look at what is happening when state offers subsidies for activities such as opera. Quong's view is that "the aim of such subsidies is to make the subsidizes activity cheaper and thus more attractive to citizens – presumably to get people to engage in the activity when they would not be willing to do so at its market cost" (Quong 2011: 61-62) and that "state intentionally acts to alter the price of tickets with the aim of changing people's options" (Quong 2011: 63). This is a very narrow view of the role of subsidies as one of the instruments of perfectionist government. The goal of such subsidies is not to manipulate people into engaging with the activities they would

3 Quong admits that different understanding of autonomy than one endorsed by Raz would be immune to the his criticism (Quong 2011: 60) and offers himself such an alternative notion of autonomy (Quong 2011: 58)

otherwise not want to engage, but to maintain and keep open for everyone valuable activities that are not profitable (or profitable at the price that would exclude the majority of citizens from accessing them). Take the example of opera again. First, it is highly unlikely that anyone who dislikes opera or has not interest in it whatsoever would go to opera just because the tickets are now made affordable by government subsidies (I have failed numerous times in convincing my friends who think jazz is just a noise to join me in going to jazz concerts even when I offered to buy them tickets or the concert was free). Second, if the government's main goal was to get people to go to opera the best policy would be to buy the tickets and give them out to citizens, not to make the tickets cheaper. Also, perfectionist policies are not limited only to subsidies that make paying for certain activities cheaper, but also grants which are first and foremost directed to maintaining these activities and not making them more finically attractive to potential audience (think of grants to music schools where opera singers and musicians are trained or grants to opera houses where performances are held).

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Certainly, a perfectionist would hope that more people than not will decide to engage in valuable activities such as opera once they had a chance to experience it (and if enough people decide to do that then opera would become profitable, and therefore would not need to be subsidized anymore), but that is not perfectionism's main goal. It is not going to the opera that makes our lives more autonomous, but having an option of going to the opera. One can live an autonomous life without ever going to opera, but living in a society where only available activities are those that are profitable and many among those available only to the richest among us would result in the loss of autonomy for many.

Paternalism

The second line of Quong's attack is based on the argument that perfectionism "treats citizens as if they lack the ability to make effective choices about their own lives" and, therefore, denies them the moral status of free and equal persons. Treating people as if they are unable to rationally pursue their own good is clearly paternalistic and if Quong's claim that "paternalism is... (almost) unavoidable part of perfectionism" (Quong 2011: 106) is right, then perfectionism is incompatible with liberal *ethos*. The challenge he puts before us is the following: can perfectionism avoid paternalism?

There are some clear cases where perfectionist non-coercive policies are not paternalistic. Wall's example of nonhumanistic version of perfectionism is one such case.

Not every kind of noncoercive state perfectionism is paternalistic, however. Recall nonhumanistic versions of perfectionism. Those who accept these views might favor state support for excellence in science and art not because doing so will enable citizens to lead better lives, but because the state ought to promote excellence. This defense of noncoercive state paternalism does not presume that some citizens are not good at making independent moral decisions about how to lead their lives (Wall, internet).

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Second example would be *corrective* perfectionism that I discussed in the previous section. If perfectionist government is in the business of providing valuable range of options for its citizens, rather than trying to coerce or manipulate them in taking these options, then the government is not behaving paternalistically. State subsidies and grants serve as a message that, as a political community, these are the practices and goods we find valuable and, therefore, we want them to be available to all citizens. It is up to each individual citizen to decide which of these practices and goods are an important part of his own conception of good life.

Quong's criticism of perfectionism goes deeper than this. In the *Précis* to the discussion on his book published in *Philosophy and Public Issues* journal, he summarizes his argument in the following way:

Liberal perfectionists must explain why the state needs to enact perfectionist policies. Why not simply give each citizen their fair share of resources and let them make their own decisions? The perfectionist answer must be, I suggest, that people will not make the right decisions if left to their own devices. But this means that perfectionist policies are justified by reference to paternalistic reasoning. The perfectionist believes the state must act because she makes a negative judgement about citizens' capacities to make effective decisions about their own lives. This negative judgement, I claim, makes perfectionist policies presumptively wrongful, since it fails to treat people in accordance with their moral status as free and equal (Quong 2012a: 2).

The question "why not simply give each citizen their fair share of resources and let them make their own decisions?" is crucial here, because it allows Quong to argue that even if *corrective* perfectionism makes sense when we are faced with dramatically unequal distribution of resources, in the context where citizens have enough resources to pay for those practices and goods they find important, perfectionist policies

become unavoidably paternalistic. In *Liberalism without Perfection* this argument is stated even more clearly when Quong talks about non-justice-based perfectionism:

What this form of perfection must claim, in order to practically distinguish itself from theories such as Rawls', is that even if everyone has been given their fair share of rights, liberties, opportunities, income, and wealth, further perfectionist policies will be necessary (Quong 2011: 85).

By imagining a certain liberal egalitarian utopia in which no one lacks resources to pursue his or hers idea of good life, Quong makes the appeal of *corrective* perfectionism redundant. Corrective perfectionism's role is to correct the injustices that would arise from the fact that many people can't afford valuable goods and practices and to ensure the survival of those goods and practices that are unprofitable. In the world where everyone has enough income and wealth, there is no non-paternalistic way to defended perfectionist policies⁴.

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This argument is problematic in two ways. First, there is a bit of sleight of hand going on: it is not very hard to argue that a certain theoretical position – in this case perfectionism – is unconvincing if we can just imagine political and social context in which the problem that this theoretical position is trying to resolve doesn't even exist.

Corrective perfectionism makes sense because there is unequal distribution of income and wealth in liberal democracies. Removing the fact of unequal distribution pulls the rug under the justification of perfectionist policies. It's like a critic of egalitarian liberalism arguing that if we all lived in societies where there is perfectly just distribution of resources we would have no need for egalitarianism and this, by itself, is a proof enough that egalitarianism is a failed model. Actually, by resorting to "egalitarian utopia" though experiment Quong implicitly admits that in current, not ideally egalitarian context of liberal societies, *corrective* perfectionism is a valid theoretical position. Second, for Quong's argument to work we would have to assume that every rational and reasonable person in our society would have to embrace Rawlsian model of distribution as the only just model, otherwise this egalitarian utopia would become more oppressive, paternalistic and disrespectful of citizens' autonomy than any liberal perfectionist state could ever be. Most

⁴ Quong talks about five arguments used to defend non-justice based perfectionism and shows that they all reveal "liberal perfectionism's true paternalistic colours" (Quong 2011: 86).

liberals would have a hard time accepting that the price worth paying for non-perfectionist state is to dismiss all those who do not accept some kind of Rawlsian scheme from the process of public deliberation.

42 Nevertheless, it's worth addressing the question that Quong possess through his thought experiment: is there a way to defend perfectionist policies in a perfect egalitarian society without resorting to paternalist argument? My answer is yes. Even if we lived in a society where all citizens have enough resources to pursue those activities, practices and goods that give meaning to their lives, there is still a danger we might lose some of these activities, practices and goods if citizens are paying for them directly and not through taxes. If everyone is paying only for those activities and goods they are participating in or using, that would not ensure the survival of many valuable activities and goods. Let me give an example. Let's assume that Amy is big fan of Bruce Springsteen's music and she is ready to pay for tickets for his concerts and for his CDs. She doesn't like to listen to opera, so she never goes to opera concerts or buys opera music CDs. However, Amy understands that this is her personal preference and that opera is equally important to many people, as Springsteen's music is to her. Both Springsteen and opera are valuable, but she is ready to pay only to listen to Springsteen. Even if she didn't mind going to the opera sometimes, she doesn't have time to go because time is a limited resource and there is only limited amount of valuable activities and goods that we can invest ourselves in⁵. To record or enjoy first-rate opera in concerts is more or equally expensive as for Springsteen to record or perform, so more or equal amount of resources are necessary to sustain opera as it is to sustain Springsteen's music. Unfortunately, there are much less fans of opera than there are of Springsteen, so unless we presuppose a society where material resources are not only equally distributed, but also unlimited, it is fair to assume that if not enough people are willing to pay for opera concert tickets or CDs, opera will die out. Even in egalitarian utopia, valuable practices, activities and goods would disappear. Possible counter-argument, suggested by Quong himself⁶, is that opera fans could appeal to Springsteen fans like Amy who are not willing to listen to opera, but accept it as a valuable practice, to donate money so that opera could survive. This would put

5 Unless we take Quong's thought experiment one step further and assume that in our egalitarian utopia time is an unlimited resource, but then we are not doing political theory anymore, but writing science fiction.

6 This counter-argument was proposed by Quong during our discussion at the symposium dedicated to his book held at the University of Rijeka on 23rd of June, 2012.

the survival of non-profitable practices not only at the mercy of possible donors, but also entrepreneurial skills of fans of these non-profitable activities. If opera fans in one generation are not very skilled at collecting money from non-opera fans, future generations of possible opera-lovers will never have chance to experience opera performed live.

There is, however, a deeper issue at stake. When discussing the free-rider problem in relation to public goods Quong points out that perfectionists have a valid claim in arguing that although we all have interest in enjoying public goods, it is also in our selfish interest to benefit from these goods without paying for them. If everyone reasons this way, nobody will want to pay for public goods, so this is where the state should step in. The problem is, Quong argues, that “subsidies usually called for by perfectionist almost never involve genuine public goods” (Quong 2011: 89). Valuable goods that perfectionist most often want to subsidize – goods like “performance art, art galleries, public parks, works of literature, sights of cultural significance, educational programs for adults, and athletic events” – are not genuine public goods because “they lack the essential feature of non-excludability” (Quong 2011: 89). Let us take the example of public funding of parks. Parks do not qualify as strictly public good: they are neither non-excludable (one can put a fence around the park and charge the admission at the gate), nor non-rival (use of park reduces its use for others)⁷. From Quong’s perspective, this means that perfectionist argument about need for public funding of parks is misguided. There is no justifiable perfectionist reason why parks should be funded from taxes because those who find parks as important goods can pay for them at the entrance⁸. In economic terms, Quong’s argument makes sense: let those who want to enjoy certain goods (in this case, walks in the park) pay for them without taking money away from those who do not want to enjoy these goods or are indifferent to them.

I want to argue that there is more to goods such as parks than just their economic value. When the government uses taxes to pay for upkeep of parks it is doing so in the name of its citizens. Public funding is a way of saying that citizens as equal members of political community are ready to support certain goods – performance art, art galleries, public parks, works of literature, sights of cultural significance, educational

⁷ Fresh air produced by the trees from the park is non-excludable and non-rival, but we can leave that aside for now.

⁸ Of course, fencing off parks and guarding them from non-paying trespassers would make visits to the parks much more expensive for individual visitors than if everyone paid taxes and they were left open to everyone.

programs for adults, and athletic events – that are not public goods in strict economic terms, but are common goods that should be available to everyone and immune to market logic of profit. In Quong’s egalitarian utopia where everyone has enough resources to pay for whatever they deem important for living a good life, why do we need a state to tell us what to pay for? The answer is that public funding also plays a symbolic role by removing certain goods from the market and transforming them into common goods. Even if everyone could afford these goods, the fact that we pay for them as citizens through taxes and not as individual consumers has an important political significance. By making people pay individually at the entrance to the park we are turning citizens into consumers and common goods into market goods⁹. This leads to impoverished view of politics that eliminates the ideal of true citizen – *citoyen* – participating in a common political project with his fellow citizens and leaves us only with bearers of individual rights as consumers – *bourgeois* – satisfying their personal preferences. It also leads to impoverished view of the state where its role is nothing more than to provide fair and equal playing field for each consumer to satisfy his or her needs. State is no longer seen as a guardian of common goods, but a company that charges us for the services it provides. If the state is driven solely by market logic there is no reason why it should sustain the provision of those services that not enough people are ready to pay for or why it shouldn’t privatize all these services.

Quong’s egalitarian state is more sophisticated than that because the government would also have a role of making sure that through fair distribution everyone is able to pay for activities and good they find valuable. Still, this doesn’t change the fact that in non-perfectionist state citizens are mere consumers voicing their individual preferences through their (now more or less equal) purchasing power. The appeal of perfectionist state is that it invites its citizens to publicly debate which good should be labeled as common goods and to offer public justification why they should not be privately funded, but supported through taxes. This ideal is a far cry from coercing or manipulating citizens into paying taxes for something – predetermined common goods designated as such by political and cultural elites – they would otherwise never spend money on.

⁹ For criticism of substituting social goods for market goods from the economic perspective, see: Ariely 2008, Ch. 4. For more comprehensive criticism of allowing market mechanisms to be the sole determining factor of maintaining practices, activities and goods, see: Sandel 2012.

Conclusion

Jonathan Quong in his book *Liberalism without Perfection* offers a well-argued criticism of liberal perfectionist project. Where it succeeds is in showing us that there always looming danger that perfectionist state might violate the liberal *ethos* by disregarding individual autonomy and turning paternalistic. It fails, however, in its main argument that liberal perfectionism is a contradiction in terms. One can consistently, I've tried to argue, be both liberal and perfectionist. In the context of existing liberal societies with their growing social inequalities, it would be self-defeating for liberals to abandon perfectionist policies. That would only results in many valuable practices, activities and goods dying out or surviving at the cost of being available only to the richest few. But even in the context of egalitarian utopia where everyone is given their fair share of rights, liberties, opportunities, income, and wealth we would still have need for perfectionist intervention into the market. First, such interventions would ensure the survival of many valuable, but less popular goods for both this and for future generations. Second, perfectionist state allows us to be more than just consumers, it ensures the framework within which we act as true citizens involved in the common project of determining what practices, activities and goods are valuable enough to threat them as common goods that are worth sustaining. There is a neat trick that political theorists can apply to any theoretical model they are advocating: following John Stuart Mill we can ask ourselves what would happen if all the elements of our theoretical model came to life. In this particular case, the question is how many liberals would support Quong's anti-perfectionist model coming to life? My hunch is that the answer would be: not many.

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U odbranu perfekcionizma: kritika Kvongovog *Liberalizma bez savršenstva*

Apstrakt

Članak nudi odbranu liberalnog perfekcionizma u svetlu kritike perfekcionistačkih politika koju je izneo Džonatan Kvong u svojoj knjizi *Liberalism without Perfection*. Članak kritički pristupa Kvongovim tvrdnjama da je perfekcionizam nekompatibilan sa zahtevima za poštovanje autonomije pojedinca i za nepaternalizam kao uslovima liberalnog stremljenja da se sve osobe tretiraju kao slobodne i jednake.

Ključne reči: Quong, perfekcionizam, autonomija, paternalizam, liberalizam.