

SYMPOSIUM  
POLITICAL LIBERALISM VS. LIBERAL PERFECTIONISM



AUTONOMY AND ANTI-PERFECTIONISM

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## Autonomy And Anti-Perfectionism

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Anti-perfectionism and autonomy are important ideas for much contemporary political theory. However many – including Jonathan Quong – claim that a commitment to autonomy is in tension with a commitment to anti-perfectionism. In his recent book *Autonomy and Liberalism*, however, Ben Colburn argues that these commitments are not only compatible but mutually supporting. His arguments rest on the distinction between first- and second-order values. Anti-perfectionism, he thinks, only requires a prohibition of the state’s promotion of the former, and autonomy is an instance of the latter. After discussing attempts by John Rudisill and Thomas Porter to undermine Colburn’s arguments, I offer my own critique of the distinction between first- and second-order values. Following that, I try to offer three alternative characterisations of the distinction, all of which attempt to redress the inadequacies of Colburn’s formulation, and argue that all of those fail. Finally, I try to diagnose this failure, and suggest that my arguments help to vindicate the idea – held by Quong and others – that there is a deep tension between the promotion of autonomy and anti-perfectionism.

Many liberals think that the state should not promote ways of life that are believed to be valuable. Such liberals endorse anti-perfectionism. Moreover, many liberals think that individual autonomy is valuable, and that it should be promoted by the state. A person is autonomous, very roughly, if they are the author of their own life.<sup>1</sup> These two commitments are often thought to

<sup>1</sup> See: B. Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 4-20; G. Dworkin, *The Theory and Practice of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 369-378 and S. Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127-144.

be in tension. Jonathan Quong suggests as much in *Liberalism Without Perfection*.<sup>2</sup> Liberal perfectionists, he says, endorse the following 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.<sup>3</sup>

The view that autonomy is valuable and should be promoted by the state, therefore, simply is a variety of liberal perfectionism, and therefore opposed to anti-perfectionism. Indeed, Quong suggests that such autonomy-minded liberalism is a paradigmatic instance of liberal perfectionism. ‘If there is a distinctively liberal conception of the good life’ which could be used to underscore a perfectionist political morality, he says, then ‘many philosophers believe that the ideal of personal autonomy must play that role.’<sup>4</sup>

This tension strikes many as obvious, perhaps even trivial. However, in *Autonomy and Liberalism*, Ben Colburn attempts to turn this supposed tension on its head. He argues that these commitments are not only compatible but mutually supporting. He defends the ‘equivalence thesis,’ which claims that ‘the state ought to promote autonomy if and only if anti-perfectionism is true.’<sup>5</sup> According to Colburn and contrary to Quong, liberals can and should be both autonomy-minded and anti-perfectionist. The appearance of a conflict between a commitment to autonomy and anti-perfectionism can be resolved, Colburn claims, by distinguishing between two types of values. Anti-perfectionism, he argues, should be understood as an opposition to the state promotion of only one of these types of values, and autonomy is an instance of the other type. If Colburn is correct, then this is an extremely exciting result for liberal theory. One of the main reasons why liberals resist anti-perfectionism – namely, because of a commitment to autonomy – *and* one of the main reasons why liberals resist autonomy – namely, because of a commitment to anti-perfectionism – can be countered. So, Colburn’s arguments may help to vindicate both anti-perfectionism and autonomy. Many liberals find both the value of autonomy and anti-perfectionism extremely intuitive. If Colburn is right, then liberals do not have to choose

<sup>2</sup> See J. Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45-72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> B. Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism*, 44.

between these commitments. Liberals can have their cake and eat it. This shows that Colburn's arguments are well worth considering.

Quong's arguments in *Liberalism Without Perfectionism* offer scant ammunition for ruling out the particular form of autonomy-minded anti-perfectionism which Colburn defends. However, I shall argue that Colburn's strategy ultimately fails to offer a way of occupying the logical space which Quong claims is untenable. Colburn's formulation of anti-perfectionism is unsatisfactory. Moreover, I argue that it is unlikely that another formulation can do the work that Colburn requires. Before offering these arguments I shall outline Colburn's position, and also examine some recent criticisms of it from Thomas Porter<sup>6</sup> and John Rudisill.<sup>7</sup>

## I

Colburn's strategy turns on distinguishing between two types of values. Anti-perfectionism, he claims, should be understood as an opposition to the promotion of the first type of values, and autonomy is an instance of the second. The distinction is between first- and second-order values.<sup>8</sup> Second-order values are a kind of content neutral value. A value is content neutral if, in order to specify which state of affairs satisfies the value, we need some further piece of information. For instance, the value claim 'it is good to satisfy one's desires' is a content-neutral because, in order to know whether some state of affairs actually satisfies a given person's desires, we need to know what their desires are.

Now, second-order values are content neutral in the following way. The state of affairs that satisfies a second-order value cannot be specified without a *de dicto* reference to a judgement of value. In order to know what state of affairs satisfies the value we must know some further judgement about what is or is not valuable. For instance, consider the claim 'what is

<sup>6</sup> T. Porter, "Colburn on Anti-Perfectionism and Autonomy," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (2011).

<sup>7</sup> J. Rudisill, "Avoiding the Whiff of Paradox in the Liberal Promotion of Autonomy," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 37 (2012), and J. Rudisill, "Some Further Concerns With Colburn's Autonomy-Minded Anti-Perfectionism," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 37 (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Colburn uses 'value' and 'value claim' fairly interchangeably. For simplicity, I shall assume that this slight looseness in terminology is harmless and follow his use of these terms.

valuable in life is to do what your parents value.<sup>9</sup> This is a second-order value claim because, to find out whether a particular person satisfies this value claim we must find out what their parents actually value. Importantly, the reference to a judgement of value is *de dicto* rather than *de re*. So, according to the claim that I just mentioned, it is valuable to do what your parents value *simply because your parents value it*. This differs from other value claims which contain references to value judgements but only as a way of picking something out, where that something is taken to be valuable. The reference in such cases is *de re*. For example, the claim ‘your parents know what is valuable; so to pursue a valuable life do what your parents think is valuable’ references a value judgement, but this reference could be replaced by simply specifying what way of life is valuable. This would not significantly alter the claim. The appeal to parental judgement is only meant to serve as a reliable guide to what is valuable. Second-order values contain a *de dicto* reference to a judgement of value. First-order values, by contrast, do not contain a *de dicto* reference to a judgement of value.

Another way in which Colburn describes the distinction is as follows. Sometimes there is a variable in the specification of a value claim. When this variable ranges over judgements of value, it is a second-order variable. Second-order values contain second-order variables. First-order values, by contrast, do not contain any second-order variable. They may contain variables that range over states of affairs, such as ‘it is valuable to do what you desire’. They may, that is, be content neutral. However, crucially they do not range over judgements of value.<sup>10</sup>

Anti-perfectionism, Colburn argues, should be understood as a prohibition on the state’s promotion of first-order values. Anti-perfectionism should be understood as *first-order* anti-perfectionism. This renders it compatible with autonomy, he claims, since the latter is a second-order value. Someone is autonomous, he argues, if she decides for herself what is valuable and lives her life in accordance with that decision.<sup>11</sup> Hence we cannot establish whether a person is autonomous, on Colburn’s definition, without knowing what they judge to be valuable. Colburn argues that – contrary to Quong – we can believe both that the state should promote autonomy and endorse anti-perfectionism.

<sup>9</sup> This example is taken from B. Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism*, 54.

<sup>10</sup> For greater elaboration on the distinction between first and second-order values, see *ibid.*, 50-57.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, 21-42.

However, why should we understand anti-perfectionism as *first-order* anti-perfectionism? Two reasons for thinking this can be extrapolated from Colburn's work. First, he says that opposing first-order values *is* what anti-perfectionist liberals tend to be concerned with, so his understanding is in line with the current literature. He claims that

most people who endorse anti-perfectionism have the state promotion of first-order values...as their target...For example, in *Political Liberalism* (p. 37) Rawls gives three examples of comprehensive doctrines which the state should not promote: orthodox medieval Catholicism, utilitarianism, and the 'liberalisms of Kant or Mill,' based on ideals of individuality or reason. That which Rawls identifies as impermissible in each case is a commitment to values which are first-order.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Colburn defends his first-order understanding of anti-perfectionism in part by arguing that a commitment to anti-perfectionism implies a commitment to autonomy. For anti-perfectionism to be defensible, therefore, it must be consistent with autonomy, which suggests that it should be understood as first-order anti-perfectionism.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to these two reasons Colburn offers a defensive manoeuvre against some counter-examples to the claim that anti-perfectionism should be understood as first-order. He concedes that anti-perfectionists and, indeed, autonomy-minded liberals will oppose some second-order as well as first-order values. The value claim, 'it is valuable to live the life of a slave except for one day a year when one should do as one deems valuable,' for instance, indicates an objectionable second-order value.<sup>14</sup> However, he claims that an autonomy-minded liberal can reject these values on a case-by-case basis. Being a slave for three-hundred-and-sixty-four days a year can be opposed as autonomy-undermining. So, the autonomy-minded anti-perfectionist will not claim that such values should be promoted. However, they will not oppose them on the grounds of a general commitment to (first-order) anti-perfectionism.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 57 and 140.

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, 60-67 and B. Colburn, "Anti-Perfectionisms and Autonomy," *Analysis* 70 (2010), 254.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibid.*, 253-254.

## II

Thomas Porter and John Rudisill both argue, in different ways, that the distinction between first- and second-order values is problematic. Although I agree with their conclusion, I will explain why I do not think that they do enough to establish it. Considering both, however, serves to highlight some important weak points in Colburn's strategy.

Rudisill raises a number of objections to Colburn's arguments, most of which are adequately dealt with by Colburn.<sup>16</sup> However, there is one criticism worth discussing here. Colburn's distinction between first- and second-order values, Rudisill claims, is merely 'structural' and, as a result of this, it fails to do any interesting work for Colburn. 'The merely structural distinction,' he says,

carries with it none of the normativity that is required to explain why all the values that have the structural features that make them first-order are also values that we ought to be anti-perfectionist with respect to.<sup>17</sup>

Rudisill suggests that the first-/second-order distinction could instead be 'a useful tool for identifying (when in doubt) whether a value can or cannot permissibly be promoted by the state.'<sup>18</sup> However, as Rudisill points out, by Colburn's own admission the distinction does not map this. There are some second-order values that an autonomy-minded liberal should reject. Given this, Rudisill concludes that the distinction 'does no vital work for him [Colburn] and could be jettisoned with no cost.'<sup>19</sup>

Rudisill is correct that this distinction performs neither of the roles he suggests. However, in one sense at least, it does seem to do important work for Colburn. The point of the distinction, for Colburn, is to characterise the category of values opposed by liberal anti-perfectionism. First-order anti-perfectionism is supposed to be – at least broadly – in line with the contemporary anti-perfectionist literature. Most anti-perfectionists, Colburn thinks, have first-order values as their target. Given his clarification, Colburn

<sup>16</sup> See B. Colburn, "Autonomy-Minded Anti-Perfectionism: Novel, Intuitive and Sound," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 37 (2012).

<sup>17</sup> J. Rudisill, "Some Further Concerns with Colburn's Autonomy-Minded Anti-Perfectionism," 245.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

is able to argue that anti-perfectionism is consistent with a commitment to autonomy, contrary to both common suspicion and Quong. This paves the way for his defence of the equivalence thesis (that the state ought to promote autonomy if and only if anti-perfectionism is true). This seems to show that the distinction is important for Colburn. It gives him the resources to win over liberals to his favoured version of liberalism. However, Rudisill draws attention to an important point. Although Colburn's distinction is 'merely structural' it must generate a good characterisation of anti-perfectionism. If the characterisation is poor, then demonstrating its compatibility with autonomy, with a view to showing equivalence between them, is not a convincing defence of autonomy-minded liberalism. Defending a connection between autonomy and anti-perfectionism is pointless if anti-perfectionism is a thesis that nobody cares about and has no reason to care about. I argue below that Colburn does not offer a good characterisation of anti-perfectionism, not least because the distinction is merely structural.

Thomas Porter recognises that Colburn's characterisation of anti-perfectionism is central to the latter's defence of autonomy-minded liberalism. However, it is, Porter argues, an inadequate characterisation of anti-perfectionism. He distinguishes between two types of second-order values. Some second-order values have first-order characteristics, others do not. The value claim, 'What is valuable is to follow your parents' values and enjoy a pleasurable brain-state,' for instance, contains a second-order variable ('follow your parents' values') but also a first-order specification of what is valuable ('enjoy a pleasurable brain state'). He then claims that anti-perfectionism should be understood as an opposition to the promotion of first-order values *and* second-order values with first-order characteristics. Since Colburn's conception of autonomy is a second-order value with first-order characteristics, the tension between autonomy and anti-perfectionism remains. Quong's position has been vindicated.

Porter defends his position by responding to both of Colburn's reasons – sketched in §I – for understanding anti-perfectionism as first-order. Against Colburn's claim that anti-perfectionists have first-order values as their target, Porter argues that second-order values with first-order characteristics – such as 'what is valuable is joyfully to follow the values of the Great Leader' – are just as likely to be opposed by anti-perfectionists as first-order ones.<sup>20</sup> Colburn's second reason is that, since anti-perfectionists are committed to

<sup>20</sup> T. Porter, "Colburn on Anti-Perfectionism and Autonomy," 4.



autonomy, anti-perfectionism had better be first-order. In response, Porter argues that even if anti-perfectionists are committed to autonomy, this is not necessarily a reason to think that anti-perfectionism must be first-order. Rather, if we presuppose Porter's conception, it is a reason to reject anti-perfectionism, since it both presupposes and is in tension with a commitment to autonomy.<sup>21</sup>

Porter also considers Colburn's defensive manoeuvre, which suggests that some second-order values should be opposed on grounds other than a general commitment to anti-perfectionism. Porter agrees that this manoeuvre may satisfy our intuitions about what values should and should not be promoted. But, he claims, it fails to show that Colburn's understanding of anti-perfectionism is adequate, since it is plausible that the best explanation of these intuitions against second-order values is a general commitment to anti-perfectionism.<sup>22</sup> Anti-perfectionists are likely to think that their opposition to some second-order value *is* rooted in a general commitment to anti-perfectionism rather than, for instance, a commitment to autonomy.

Now, there are two ways to read Colburn's arguments. First, he could be understood as attempting to describe, as accurately as possible, the notion of anti-perfectionism found in the current literature. Second, he could be understood as offering a charitable reconstruction of the notion of anti-perfectionism, found in the current literature. Colburn can be read either way. At times he leans towards the first, at other times the second. However, by far the most charitable way to interpret Colburn is along the lines of the second. This interpretation is entirely compatible with Colburn's aims. The equivalence thesis is not undermined if it is understood as suggesting that a commitment to anti-perfectionism – understood in as plausible a way as interpretation of the current literature permits – leads to a commitment to autonomy. Anti-perfectionists should still endorse autonomy (as well as the best interpretation of anti-perfectionism), and those committed to autonomy should still endorse anti-perfectionism.

Moreover, on this understanding it seems possible to respond, on Colburn's behalf, to Porter's arguments. In support of Colburn's first reason, we may agree that some values that are opposed by *actual* anti-perfectionists will not be covered by Colburn's characterisation of anti-

<sup>21</sup> See *ibid.*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

perfectionism. If Colburn was only concerned to give a descriptively adequate account, then this would be problematic. But on the second interpretation it need not be. If Colburn is offering a charitable reconstruction of anti-perfectionism, it may well turn out that that characterisation does not exactly match up with some actual instances of anti-perfectionism in the literature. Moreover, we can also reinforce Colburn's defensive manoeuvre. Some actual anti-perfectionists may indeed be motivated to oppose some second-order values by a general commitment to (their understanding of) anti-perfectionism, rather than autonomy. But so what? If we are concerned with the most plausible interpretation of anti-perfectionism, and Colburn's arguments are correct, then all this shows is they are motivated by a poor understanding of anti-perfectionism. Colburn's arguments turn on a better one, and it is that conception which is of concern.

In response to Colburn's second reason, Porter supposes that the question of whether anti-perfectionism is best motivated by a commitment to autonomy is separate from the issue of how anti-perfectionism should be characterised. Colburn may be right that anti-perfectionists should endorse autonomy, Porter claims, but this could simply lead us to reject anti-perfectionism as inconsistent rather than claim that it is best understood as first-order. The commitments of anti-perfectionists, therefore, do not cast light on how anti-perfectionism is best characterised. However, on the reading of Colburn that I have suggested, these are not entirely separate issues. Since Colburn is offering a charitable reconstruction of the notion of anti-perfectionism, one of the criteria for characterising anti-perfectionism is, 'which characterisation makes the endorsement of anti-perfectionism most plausible?' We should endorse Colburn's characterisation of anti-perfectionism in part because this will avoid a *reductio* of anti-perfectionism. In the context of Colburn's project, the reason we should understand anti-perfectionism as he does, rather than as Porter does, is because the former is more charitable.

Now, if it turns out that anti-perfectionists are frequently concerned with second-order values, or that they do not care much about first-order ones, then this would be a big problem for Colburn's characterisation. On my reading, he is offering a charitable reconstruction of the literature, so his conception must be rooted in the literature. If it is not, then that is a

problem for his strategy.<sup>23</sup> This might be correct, but Porter does not offer the textual evidence that would make this charge stick.<sup>24</sup> What this discussion highlights, however, is that Colburn is best understood as trying to offer a charitable reconstruction of the literature on anti-perfectionism, rather than one that is faithful to it in every detail.

### III

Despite the shortcomings discussed above, Porter and Rudisill are right to identify the first-/second-order distinction, and the related characterisation of anti-perfectionism, as a weak point in Colburn's arguments. The problem with Colburn's position which I will focus on stems from the fact, highlighted by Rudisill, that the distinction is based upon a structural feature of values – the presence or absence of a second-order variable – which does not give us a substantial difference in the *content* of values which can and cannot be opposed. Because of this, I will argue, first-order anti-perfectionism is not, in fact, much of a threat to perfectionists. Perfectionist values can be re-construed, without any significant change of content, to contain second-order variables. Since first-order anti-perfectionism does not, in fact, cause much problem for perfectionists, first-order anti-perfectionism is an uninteresting thesis for anti-perfectionist liberal theory. Because of this, I take it that first-order anti-perfectionism is not what liberals who endorse anti-perfectionism have in mind. Moreover, since it is a version of anti-perfectionism which lacks any bite, it is not the characterisation that liberals *should* have in mind. Unlike Porter, I am not suggesting that there may be some outlying values, opposed by anti-perfectionists, which is not covered by first-order anti-perfectionism. Rather, my point is that first-order anti-perfectionism is a complete straw man, and so no anti-perfectionist should accept – or, indeed, be charitably interpreted as accepting – first-order anti-perfectionism as a characterisation of their position. This cannot, therefore, form the basis for a defence of Colburn's autonomy-minded liberalism.

<sup>23</sup> Colburn could develop an alternative conception of anti-perfectionism which is not rooted in the literature, give us good non-question-begging reasons to endorse it, and then show that it is equivalent to a commitment to autonomy. However, this is a completely different approach to that of *Autonomy and Liberalism*.

<sup>24</sup> See T. Porter, "Colburn on Anti-Perfectionism and Autonomy," 4-5.

The fact that the first-/second-order distinction turns on a structural feature of values causes problems for Colburn since it is relatively easy to re-construe any given first-order value to make it a second-order value without any significant change in the content of the value. What the value claim is actually about and the substantial political implications of that value claim will remain basically unchanged by the insertion of a fairly trivial second-order variable into a first-order value claim. For instance, the first-order value claim ‘people should learn to play Bach’s cello suites flawlessly’<sup>25</sup> can be re-construed, without any significant change in content, to the second-order value claim ‘people should learn to play Bach’s cello suites flawlessly, starting with the one they value the most.’ Similarly, the first-order value claim, ‘drinking coffee is valuable,’ can be re-constructed as the second-order judgement ‘drinking coffee – in a cup or a mug depending on which you value most – is valuable.’ Further, any perfectionist state policies designed to promote the first-order version of either value (for instance, for the Bach example, free cello lessons or propaganda campaigns to promote the greatness of Bach’s Suites) would surely be basically the same as state policies designed to promote the second-order counterpart.

It seems that any first-order perfectionism can be re-construed, with only the slightest change of content, to make a second-order perfectionism, since the first-/second-order distinction itself does not turn on any distinction in the content of values or value claims. Consequently, claiming that states should not promote first-order values, while leaving open the possibility that they may promote second-order ones, is an almost completely hollow thesis; any given first-order value is a marginal adjustment away from a second-order value.

It might be argued that the *possibility* of re-construing a first- into a second-order value is not sufficient to undermine the importance of first-order anti-perfectionism; what is important is that perfectionisms as they are actually presented *are* first-order, not that they *could be* second-order. As a quick response, it should be emphasised that whether anti-perfectionism is an interesting notion depends, at least in part, upon its capacity to oppose perfectionisms. If the categorisation of objectionable perfectionist values leaves open such an easy counter-move for the perfectionist, then first-order anti-perfectionism clearly does not cause problems for the perfectionist (at best it causes a minor inconvenience). Even if Colburn’s anti-perfectionism can refute actual perfectionisms, this is only a temporary victory.

<sup>25</sup> This example is taken from B. Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism*, 51.

As a longer response, it is possible to go beyond the idea I have been pushing so far and claim that many actual perfectionisms which appear first-order may be implicitly second-order to begin with. Statements of perfectionisms may exclude explicit references to second-order variables. However this need not imply that they are absent. They may go unstated merely because they are not particularly important. Further laborious cashing out of every requirement of a given perfectionist theory may uncover unimportant, but nonetheless present, second-order variables. My suspicion that it will come from the basic point that second-order variables are cheap; at some point any given perfectionism will stop dictating the details of how a particular value is to be realised and will, at that point, leave some detail to individual taste. To use Rawls's example quoted in §I, even the values that underlie medieval Catholic orthodoxy may contain second-order variables that go unmentioned in official dogma, simply because they are hardly worth stating. Devotional prayer may be demanded, but whether prayer is offered to an icon or using a rosary is presumably left to the tastes of the worshipper. Failure to explicitly state a lurking second-order variable is not, I presume, grounds for discounting it as a second-order perfectionism.<sup>26</sup> So, many perfectionisms seem to be second-order to begin with. It seems, therefore, that anti-perfectionism should not be understood as first-order anti-perfectionism.

#### IV

Colburn does not deliver on his promise. Liberals should not understand anti-perfectionism as he does. He fails to show that it is possible to occupy the logical space that Quong claims is untenable; he does not establish that liberals can be autonomy-minded and anti-perfectionist. However, perhaps it is possible to succeed where Colburn has failed. In this section I shall develop three alternative ways to characterise the distinction between first- and second-order values. Each attempts to redress the problems of Colburn's original proposal and thereby vindicate his claim that the state promotion of autonomy is not in tension with, and may even be equivalent

<sup>26</sup> If it is grounds for discounting it, then this seems to introduce tacitly an evaluative dimension to the discussion of second-order variables. We would presumably think that variables which go unmentioned are not important enough to be categorised alongside values such as autonomy. I will discuss this suggestion shortly.

to, a commitment to anti-perfectionism. These alternatives are the best I can think of, but each is ultimately unsuccessful. In the next section, I will suggest that these failures allow us to draw some conclusions about the tension between autonomy and anti-perfectionism.

The root cause of the problem outlined in §III is that the first-/second-order distinction is merely structural and unconcerned with the substantial content of values. This diagnosis may point towards a way out for Colburn. He could characterise his anti-perfectionism as a prohibition on the promotion of values that do not have a *significant* second-order variable. Given that the second-order variable seems to play a significant role in the value of autonomy, Colburn would have the distinction he needs to affirm both autonomy and anti-perfectionism.

There are three immediate concerns with this approach. Firstly, to be plausible it requires some characterisation of the *significance* of a second-order variable, and it seems hard to say what this really amounts to. Does it mean that the variable has a significant practical upshot in realising the value? Or that the range of options given by the variable is greater than for other values? Or that the variable is the aspect of the value that is most controversial or salient? Or perhaps a combination of the above? One of these suggestions may work, but there is no obvious answer.

Secondly, even if we can articulate a dimension (or set of dimensions) along which some second-order variables are more significant than others, in many cases we still have to draw some sort of line in the sand to say which variables are and which are not significant. We must establish how significant a variable has to be to be significant *enough*. It is difficult to see, however, how this can be done without being somewhat arbitrary. Given that Colburn's aim is to establish the consistency (and, ultimately, the equivalence) of a commitment to autonomy and anti-perfectionism, such arbitrariness is worrying.

Thirdly – and perhaps most importantly – such a move begins to look extremely ad hoc. It seems to amount to little more than characterising anti-perfectionism so as to render autonomy consistent with, rather than in order to align it to, the tradition of anti-perfectionism in liberal theory. Colburn may be right to suppose that a charitable reconstruction of anti-perfectionism should take into account the fact that it is motivated by autonomy. But such an obvious act of ad hoc gerrymandering makes Colburn's position appear extremely suspect.

The best way to respond to the first and second problems that I can think of turns on a slightly more detailed characterisation of the precise role of a second-order variable in a value. A particular second-order value varies along two dimensions: one that specifies the *source* of the second-order variable (for instance: what *I* value; what *my parents* value and so on), the other specifies the *breadth of options* that the second-order variable covers (for instance: what *sort of life* I lead; which *Bach cello suite* to play first; whether I drink from a *mug or cup*, and so on). We might think that the significance of a second-order variable should be characterised, at least in part, through the latter axis. So, a second-order variable is more significant if the nested judgement of value covers a broad variety of options. I shall grant the adequacy of this characterisation for the sake of argument. Unlike many values, this line of thought goes, autonomy allots a particularly large breadth for the second-order variable. A person can decide for themselves what kind of *life* is valuable, rather than merely what kind of drinking vessel or which Bach cello suite is valuable. Autonomy is distinctive, therefore, because it occupies an extreme position on the breadth axis. Hence, in response to the second problem raised above, *wherever* we draw the line in the sand, autonomy can be distinguished from other values in virtue of the breadth of the second-order variable.

This response is mistaken. There is plenty of space for values that allow more breadth for the second-order variable than autonomy (understood, following Colburn, as deciding for oneself what life is valuable and living one's life in accordance with that decision). I will draw out one reason why this is the case. If I am to be autonomous, then I must choose to value a life that I *can* live in accordance with. My choice, in other words, is constrained by the lives that it is possible for me to lead. The alternative value claim 'decide for yourself what sort of life is valuable and then live your life in whatever way you see fit' does not have this constraint. As a result, it leaves a much broader variety of options for the second-order variable than Colburn's characterisation of autonomy. An example may help to clarify this point. According to Colburn's characterisation, I cannot lead a fully autonomous life if I decide that living a valuable life consists in being the author of *Autonomy and Liberalism* (because I am not and cannot be the author of *Autonomy and Liberalism*). However, this is a choice that I can make whilst satisfying the alternative value claim that I sketched above. I could decide that being the author of *Autonomy and Liberalism* is valuable, but given that I cannot be the author go on to lead my life as I see fit.

Now, I am not claiming that this alternative value claim is either more or less plausible than autonomy. My point is merely that the alternative offers a considerably broader variety of options for the second-order variable than autonomy. The attempt to forge a distinction between autonomy-promoting and therefore defensible perfectionism on the one hand, and objectionable perfectionisms on the other by understanding the significance of a second-order variable in terms of the breadth of options on offer fails. There is also nothing special about the breadth of options allotted by autonomy to the second-order variable. It is merely at one point, somewhere between extremes, on a spectrum.

I will now move on to a second way of recasting the first-/second-order distinction to salvage Colburn's strategy. His characterisation of second-order values – as essentially a type of content-neutral value that has a nested judgement of value – is perhaps not what we might expect 'second-order value' to refer to. The well known idea of a second-order desire, for instance, refers to a desire to (or not to) desire something else. We might reasonably expect a second-order value, therefore, to be a value which is in some sense contained within or concerning another value. For example, the claim 'we should value artworks that express a morally valuable message' might be understood as a second-order value in this sense. By contrast, Colburn's characterisation requires that a *judgement of value*, rather than a *value*, is nested within a second-order value.

Now, the fact that Colburn does not use the term 'second-order value' as we might expect is not a criticism. He is entitled to define terms as he wishes. However, the more natural reading of 'second-order value' is important because it may offer a solution to the problem raised in §III. If in recasting a first- into a second-order value we need to insert a further value rather than merely a further unspecified judgement about what is valuable, then the move from a first- to second-order value is not a trivial move. For example, the second-order value judgement 'it is valuable to drink coffee, in a mug or a cup depending on which you like best' must, on the current interpretation of second-order values, claim *both* that it is valuable to drink coffee *and* that choosing a drinking vessel, a mug or a cup, *is itself* a valuable thing to do. Now, the first-order counterpart, which claims that drinking coffee is valuable, is only committed to the former. Accepting the second-order counterpart is, therefore, to accept a distinct (and disputable) value claim, namely that choosing either to drink coffee out of a mug or a cup is valuable. Such a move is not, therefore, a trivial re-casting. So, on this



alternative understanding of second-order values the problem of §III does not arise.

Now, for this approach to be successful a lot of work needs to be done to clarify what exactly it means for one value to be ‘contained within’ another. However, even without such clarification, this alternative understanding of first-order anti-perfectionism still does not seem to make it a thesis worth caring about. Any perfectionism that sought to promote two or more values could avoid such anti-perfectionism, simply by re-construing the value claims. For instance, suppose a perfectionist thought that pleasure and engaging with art were independently valuable. As it stands, these two value claims are first-order. However, the value claim: ‘one should live a life of pleasure that involves engagement with art’ is, on the current characterisation, second-order since one value claim (that one should engage with art) is specified in the context of another (that one should lead a life of pleasure).<sup>27</sup> Of course, first-order anti-perfectionism may still oppose perfectionisms that only endorse one value. However, only opposing such perfectionisms is along way from how anti-perfectionism is usually understood in the literature. More importantly, it has limited bite in criticising many paradigmatically perfectionist doctrines, and so does not seem to be a very plausible variety of anti-perfectionism. Why, we might ask, should we oppose the state’s promoting one value but not two?

A third possible response develops the strategy of the previous suggestion – namely, that the move from first- to second-order values is not trivial because what must be added to make a value or value claim second-order must, itself, be valuable – by combining it with the idea in Colburn’s original characterisation that second-order values contain a *de dicto* judgement of value. According to the characterisation that I shall now consider, a judgement is second-order if it contains a *de dicto* judgement of value, and if that *de dicto* judgement is itself *valuable*. This gets around the problem of §III in the same way as the second strategy that I have considered. (That is, the move from a first-order value to a second-order counterpart is not trivial, since the move adds something that is purportedly

<sup>27</sup> Granted, this second-order value can be broken down into components (i.e. pleasure and art) that a perfectionist will find valuable in themselves, whereas this does not appear to be the case with autonomy. Deciding for oneself what is valuable may not be a valuable thing to do if one cannot live one’s life in accordance with that decision. However, this difference merely turns on the way in which I described the motivation in the case offered and the motivation that advocates of autonomy tend to have. It is difficult to see, therefore, why this is an important difference between two kinds of values.

valuable.) However this strategy does not suffer from the same difficulty as the previous one. On the current suggestion, we cannot merely conjoin any two first-order value claims to get a second-order one. A second-order value must contain a *de dicto* judgement about what is valuable and that judgement must be valuable.

This approach distinguishes first- and second-order values through the presence or absence of a substantial feature. Essentially, a value on this account is second-order if importance is attributed to value judgements that people make. Once we rule out a few values that are entirely uninteresting for contemporary liberal political philosophy – such as ‘do whatever your parents think is valuable’ – this amounts to the claim that a value is second-order if it is somewhat like autonomy. Put another way, I emphasised that the problem of §III arose because the first-/second-order distinction turned on a structural feature of values rather than the content of those values. This alternative way of understanding the first-/second-order distinction, by contrast, does seem to turn on the *content* of values. More specifically, it turns on the idea that some values attribute importance to the value judgments that people make, while others do not.

The problem with this approach is that if first-order values are understood as little more than ‘values other than autonomy (and autonomy-like values),’ then first-order anti-perfectionism implies little more than an opposition to values other than autonomy (and autonomy-like values). In this case, Colburn’s promise to show, first, that autonomy is consistent with anti-perfectionism and, second, that a commitment to one is equivalent to a commitment to the other, becomes a cheap trick. Of course the two commitments are consistent: promoting autonomy is obviously consistent with an opposition to the promotion of values (other than autonomy and autonomy-like values). Moreover, given the obvious fact that promoting autonomy tends to conflict with promoting many other values, of course a commitment to autonomy will invite anti-perfectionism (and vice versa). However, like all cheap tricks, it does not show anything important. To point out the obvious, we could make the promotion of *any* value consistent with anti-perfectionism if we characterised the latter in such a way that it exempts our favoured value.

In response to this, Colburn might say that all he is doing is offering a charitable reconstruction of the notion of ‘anti-perfectionism’, which suggests that an exemption should be made for autonomy and autonomy-like values. True, this charitable reconstruction may come as a great surprise

to many actual anti-perfectionists. But, we might think, this is no different to the case discussed earlier when Porter argued that many actual anti-perfectionists would say that their opposition to second-order values is rooted in their anti-perfectionism rather than a commitment to autonomy. In both cases, a charitable reconstruction may differ slightly from the concerns of actual anti-perfectionists. The problem with this response, however, is that the ‘reconstruction’ here is colossal. If the most charitable ‘reconstruction’ ends up making this ad hoc move to give autonomy an exemption, then it seems to deviate too far from the literature to really constitute a charitable reconstruction of it. Two points draw this out. First, as I mentioned at the outset, anti-perfectionism is standardly thought to be in tension with a commitment to autonomy. Colburn himself acknowledges this. He suggests that autonomy-minded anti-perfectionism is ‘little discussed’ in the literature because it is considered to have a ‘whiff of contradiction’.<sup>28</sup> The ‘opposition-to-values-except-autonomy’ characterisation of anti-perfectionism, therefore, seems a long way from the current literature. Second, I also mentioned that Quong claims that autonomy-based liberalism is a paradigm instance of liberal perfectionism. He rightly says that many liberals concur on this point. If Colburn wants to endorse this conception of anti-perfectionism, therefore, he is no longer employing a conception that is a recognisable reconstruction of that found in the current literature. Claiming that autonomy is consistent with anti-perfectionism – on the understanding that I am currently considering – does not engage with the thought from Quong and others that the two are incompatible.

## V

My attempts to find an alternative characterisation of the first-/second-order distinction, which can do the work that Colburn requires, have been unsuccessful. Porter and Rudisill were certainly right to be suspicious of the distinction. This vindicates the suspicion, of Quong and others, that there is a deep tension between the claim that the state should promote autonomy and that the state should not promote any value. It is worth trying to offer a diagnosis of these failed attempts to pursue Colburn’s strategy of distinguishing between two types of values in order to make anti-

<sup>28</sup> B. Colburn, “Anti-Perfectionisms and Autonomy,” 248.

perfectionism consistent with autonomy. It seems that the attempts were caught between two pitfalls. On the one hand, we might try to distinguish between different types of values by appealing to a structural feature of those values. Colburn's original characterisation did just this. However, this approach faces a pitfall. It is difficult to see why there is anything about the *structure* of the value of autonomy that could not be trivially incorporated into other values. Any characterisation of anti-perfectionism which turns on a structural feature, therefore, is not likely to have much bite against anti-perfectionists. They can merely re-cast their values to incorporate the required structural feature. On the other hand, a distinction between the types of values could turn on the content of those values. For instance, we might assert that autonomy, unlike other values, attributes significance to people's judgements about what is valuable. However, this approach faces another pitfall. The characterisation of anti-perfectionism that we end up with begins to look like an ad hoc move merely designed to give an exemption to autonomy, which takes it too far from the understanding of anti-perfectionism in the current literature. This dual diagnosis should make us pessimistic about the possibility that this strategy could render autonomy consistent with anti-perfectionism. Since the content and structure of values are the two obvious ways of forging a distinction between different values, and both are liable to pitfalls, it seems that the tension between autonomy and anti-perfectionism is unlikely to be overcome by this strategy. The tension runs deep in contemporary liberal theory.<sup>29</sup>

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