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Liberal Perfectionism

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Alexandra Couto

Liberal Perfectionism

The Reasons that Goodness Gives

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For my Mother, whose infinite love, devotion, hard work and care have been a continuous source of awe and inspiration.

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0 Introduction

In liberal thought, ‘neutrality’ refers to the *political or philosophical restricted neutrality of the justification of the basic structure of the society with respect to different reasonable conceptions of the good*. It is often claimed that neutrality in this sense is central to liberalism – it is central, for example, to John Rawls’s Political Liberalism. A commonly held view, propounded most notably by Rawls,¹ assumes that, because neutrality is central to liberalism, the latter is incompatible with *any* form of perfectionism.² Perfectionism, to keep it simple for now, is the view that the state could be justified in invoking a conception of the good to justify its policies.

In previous writings, I argued that this widespread assumption is mistaken.³ I argued that the liberal state is not neutral and, moreover, that neutrality is not what liberal thinkers should really aim at. Of course, I am not alone in doing so: Joseph Raz,⁴ Thomas Hurka⁵ and Steven Wall⁶ have all defended a version of liberal perfectionism (and have thereby rejected neutrality). But what does it exactly mean to be a liberal perfectionist? Unlike illiberal perfectionists, liberal perfectionists do not recommend coercion as a legitimate form of intervention of the perfectionist state (they recommend rather the use of subsidies, tax exemptions or other non-coercive forms of encouragement such as educational schemes).⁷ Moreover, liberal perfectionists endorse *liberal* goods. In other words, liberal perfectionists differ from illiberal perfectionists both in the *non-coercive type of intervention* they envisage for the state and in the *goods* they protect and promote.⁸

By focusing on objections, too much of the recent literature on perfectionism has failed to capture the appeal of perfectionism. This is why, in this book, I

1 Rawls J., *Political Liberalism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, p. 194.

2 Dworkin R., *A Matter of Principle*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986.

3 Couto A., *Impartiality, Neutrality and Justice as Fairness*, Mphil thesis, Oxford University, Oxford, 2004.

4 Raz J., *The Morality of Freedom*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001.

5 Hurka T., *Perfectionism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.

6 Wall S., *Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

7 Chan J., ‘Legitimacy, Unanimity and Perfectionism’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 29, n. 1, 2000. Haksar V., *Equality, Liberty and Perfectionism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 161–192. Hurka T., *ibid.*, p. 147–160. Raz J., *ibid.*, p. 369–429. Wall S., *ibid.*, p. 125–233.

8 In this book, I make an argument in favour of liberal perfectionism, which in no way could be extended to support illiberal perfectionism.

want to develop a positive argument in support of the claim that there is a *prima facie* reason for the state to protect and promote certain objectively valuable goods (rejecting thereby the liberal commitment to neutrality). I discuss nevertheless some of the objections raised against perfectionism and show that these objections fail to reach their target once we distinguish among various forms of perfectionism. Theoretically, in ideal circumstances, liberal perfectionism remains undefeated. However, I concede that political perfectionism faces some serious problems when it is actually specified.⁹

0.1 The Rejection of Neutrality

Let me briefly summarise some of the arguments against the claim that the liberal state is neutral.¹⁰ I believe that, in political philosophy, validity-claims and moral values are unavoidable. And any commitment to the truth of some moral values will narrow down the range of comprehensive views that can be adopted.¹¹ Following Raz, I believe that epistemological abstinence is not a viable alternative for a political conception.¹² Although Raz does not really make this explicit, I suggest the following defence of this claim. To claim a foundational value as *really* true commits the claim-holder to a meta-ethical view about the status of moral values. Therefore, the claim-holder forfeits his philosophical neutrality and adopts a cognitivist meta-ethical view. In other words, epistemic abstinence is not a viable stand when one is doing political philosophy. This is true also in the case of Rawls; contrary to his official view, Rawls does make a range of validity claims: there are moral values implicitly present in the idea of public reason and implicit validity-claims present in the concept of ‘the reasonable’ in Rawls’s Justice-as-Fairness. Moreover, I have argued elsewhere that these moral values are necessary to motivate citizens to act in conformity with the principles of justice.¹³ To sum up, I believe that liberals, and Rawls in particular, should affirm the ethical values that ground liberal thought, even if

⁹ I discuss pragmatic objections arising from such specification of the perfectionist view in the conclusion.

¹⁰ See Couto A., *Impartiality, Neutrality and Justice as Fairness*, Mphil thesis, Oxford University, Oxford, 2004.

¹¹ Raz J., *ibid.*

¹² Raz J., ‘Facing Diversity, the Case of Epistemic Abstinence’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 19, n. 1, 1990, p. 3–46.

¹³ Couto A., *Impartiality, Neutrality and Justice as Fairness*, Mphil thesis, Oxford University, Oxford, 2004.

these commit them to a partial conception of the good, as these ethical values are constitutive of liberalism.

0.2 Why the Rejection of Neutrality is not Enough

Even if it is granted by liberals that the liberal state is not fully neutral and that neutrality is only an ideal, the question that still needs to be asked is whether there is nevertheless significant *value* in state neutrality. If state neutrality is a valuable ideal, then recognition that the state falls short of that ideal does not imply that the state ought to move towards the endorsement of a particular conception of the good. Brian Barry has argued along similar lines in response to multiculturalism: even if total cultural neutrality is impossible, this does not mean that liberalism should abandon neutrality as an ideal.¹⁴ Barry argues that what critics like Charles Taylor demand from cultural neutrality is that it would remain compatible with all other beliefs. This, Barry claims, is too much to ask and thus cannot be a serious objection to cultural neutrality. As he argues:

It would seem that for liberalism – or any other doctrine for that matter – to be culturally neutral, there would have to be no existing (or possible?) world view with which it conflicts. Since this is manifestly absurd, the assertion that liberalism is not culturally neutral asserts something that could not conceivably be denied.¹⁵

On Barry's view, one cannot expect too much from neutrality. Even if liberalism fails to be unqualifiedly neutral, there might be value in approximating the ideal of neutrality. This is why, in order to argue for perfectionism, the claim that liberalism fails to be neutral isn't in itself enough to clear the ground. We need to argue that liberals would do better by rejecting neutrality and endorsing a form of liberal perfectionism.

Moreover, there is another reason why the rejection of neutrality is not enough to establish the validity of liberal perfectionism. It is not only perfectionists who oppose neutrality and recommend the promotion of a conception of the good: communitarians, multiculturalists and neoconservatives all share this view. Therefore, if we want to defend liberal perfectionism in particular, we need to show why liberal perfectionism has an appeal that these other competing views do not have.

¹⁴ Barry B., *Culture and Equality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2002.

¹⁵ Barry B., *Culture and Equality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 2002, p. 27.

These views differ from liberal perfectionism, in so far as they do not ground the conception of the good they wish to promote in claims about objective values. As, for example, Charles Taylor writes: ‘communitarianism suggests that the specific normative directives that flow from the good society model are historically and culturally contingent.’¹⁶ Multiculturalists share such a particularist viewpoint with communitarians, but differ from them in valuing the diversity of conceptions of the good as such.¹⁷ Thus both communitarianism and multiculturalism ground the particular conceptions of the good life they advocate in existing cultures or traditions.¹⁸ Perfectionists argue very differently: they would want to promote a specific conception of the good not because some individuals endorse it but because it is valuable in itself. But what about neo-conservatives? While neo-conservatives might be less prone to relativism, their substantive conception still differs greatly from liberal perfectionism.¹⁹ This said, one could conceive of views very similar to communitarianism and multiculturalism that would be compatible with liberal perfectionism, but these views do not correspond to actual communitarian and multiculturalist views.²⁰

16 Taylor C., ‘No community, no democracy’ in *The Communitarian Reader*, Etzioni A., Volmert A., Rothschild E., Rowman & Littlefield publishers, Inc., 2004, p. 3.

17 A brief look at the beginning of Amitai Etzioni’s book ‘The spirit of the community’ gives a good summary of communitarians’ main tenets. See Etzioni A., *The Spirit of the Community*, Fontana Press, New York, 1995, p. 1–2.

18 Moreover, communitarians also attach intrinsic value to the community itself and to the relationships between the members of the community. Avineri De-Shalit, in *Communitarianism and Individualism*, Avineri and de-Shalit (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 5–6.

19 Others have pointed to two crucial differences between liberal perfectionists and neoconservatives. Where neo-conservatives insist on the value of self-reliance, liberal perfectionists tend to focus on the importance of the role played by social and economic opportunities. Another key difference is that while neoconservatives are keen to make judgmental assessments of the value of people’s lives, liberal perfectionists are not committed to such judgments. See Dzur A. W., ‘Liberal Perfectionism and Democratic Participation’, *Polity*, 30, 1998, p. 667–690, p. 673. I will criticize the claim that liberal perfectionists are committed to an ethical evaluation of *individuals* in chapter 3, section 4.

20 For that to be the case, they would need to be fundamentally objectivist. The particular instantiations of the goods they protect and promote might remain culturally specific, but the general goods themselves would need to be objectively valuable. One would then understand the substantive goods or practices defended by multiculturalists and communitarians as specific tokens of the more general and abstract goods endorsed by liberal perfectionists. If that is the view endorsed, this would of course transform the foundations of existing communitarian and multiculturalist views but it might not change them much at a substantive level (except in so far as there would be an added constraint on the kind of practices that could be protected and promoted by the state; they would need to be *genuine* instantiations of objective goods). Note that if a practice belongs to a culture but fails to be an instantiation of an objective good,

0.3 Basic Features and Definitions of Perfectionism

Steven Wall has claimed that political perfectionism can be described as the combination of four claims:

- 1) Some ideals of human flourishing are sound and can be known to be sound
- 2) The state is presumptively justified in favouring these ideals
- 3) A sound account of political morality will be informed by sound ideals of human flourishing
- 4) There is no general moral principle that forbids the state from favouring sound ideals of human flourishing, as well as enforcing conceptions of political morality informed by them, when these ideals are controversial and subject to reasonable disagreement.²¹

I take *some* version of all these claims to be necessary features of liberal perfectionism. The first claim is equivalent to the view that there are some intrinsically and objectively valuable goods and that these goods can be known to us. The first two chapters try to make a case for the first claim. The second claim holds that there is a strong justification for the state protecting and promoting these goods. In other words, the second claim supports what I below call *Prima Facie Perfectionism*. The fourth and fifth chapters of this book will be providing arguments for *Prima Facie Perfectionism*. The third claim makes the assumption that goods defined in the ethical realm have a positive role to play in our political decisions. This claim is crucial to the move from *Ethical Perfectionism* (an *ethical* view) to *Political Perfectionism* (a *political* view). In chapter 5, I argue that objectively and intrinsically valuable goods already inform our political concept of rights. Although the fourth claim assumes that the ideals of human flourishing are subject to reasonable disagreement, I endorse a version of this fourth claim, which does not take the contentious character of these goods to be necessary for perfectionism.²² The version of the fourth claim that I favour states that ‘there is no general moral principle that forbids the state from favouring sound ideals of human flourishing, as well as enforcing conceptions of political

then its belonging to a culture would not be enough to protect and promote it. In this way, liberal perfectionism can be more reformative than multicultural and communitarian views: it can recommend a criticism of traditions as it does not justify itself by merely invoking historical contingencies or traditions). But we can set aside this possible view here.

²¹ Wall S., *ibid.*, p. 8.

²² Many of the items on the list I suggest in chapter 2 are widely accepted and are not more contentious than the normative values that liberals themselves rely on.

morality informed by them'. This reformed version amounts to what I call the 'modest definition' of perfectionism:

The Modest Definition: The state is *permitted*²³ to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value.²⁴

should be distinguished from

The Bold Definition: The state *ought* to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value.

Bold Perfectionism implies Modest Perfectionism, but in order to argue for bold Political Perfectionism, it might be easier to start to argue in favour of Modest Perfectionism. However, if we wanted to make a case for Bold Political Perfectionism, we would need to satisfy many other conditions. First, we would need to claim that the liberal state ought *not* to be neutral. In chapter 5, I argue that it would be *inconsistent* for the liberal state to uphold state neutrality. Second, we would need to reject one by one theoretical and practical objections to Political Perfectionism. In chapters 1 to 3 of this book, I suggest many qualifications that would restrict and weaken the objections that could be raised against Political Perfectionism. In the conclusion, I briefly address some of the objections that I do not have the space to fully discuss. However, this book does not address exhaustively the objections that have been made to Political Perfectionism.

I do not argue for Bold Political Perfectionism, because I believe that there are many legitimate circumstances in which the state ought *not* to be perfectionist. Instead, I will argue that one needs to combine the modest perfectionist claim with what I call Prima Facie Perfectionism in order to defend Full Political Perfectionism, which I will call Political Perfectionism tout court. First, let us look at the definition of prima facie perfectionism:

²³ I use 'permitted' in the Modest Definition in the weak sense of claiming that there is no *general principle* against it, not in the strong sense of *allowed in all specific cases*. The Modest Definition rejects the neutrality thesis, but does not suggest that perfectionism is *always* permitted.

²⁴ I take Raz' definition to amount to be a modest definition of Political Perfectionism: '[perfectionism] is the view that whether or not a particular moral objective should be pursued by legal means is a question to be judged on the merit of each case, or class of cases, and not by a general exclusionary rule...' Raz J., 'Facing up', p. 1231.

Prima Facie Political Perfectionism: There is at least some reason for the state to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value (OR the state has some justification to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value).

In order to defend Prima Facie Political Perfectionism, there is no need to address every objection to perfectionism. Note also that this definition does not assume that the state is permitted to act in order to protect and promote goods. In other words, there might be some reason for the state to do x but there might be a general objection against the state doing x. Recall the different claims made by Wall mentioned above. The state might be presumptively justified in furthering some ideals of human flourishing but that does not imply that there is no general moral reason *against* it doing so. Finally, let us now look at my definition of Political Perfectionism *tout court*:

Political Perfectionism: the state is *permitted to* and *justified in* protecting and promoting intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value.

This definition stipulates that, in order to be a perfectionist, you must claim both that there is no general principle against perfectionism and some reason in favour of it. This does not entail that, if you are a perfectionist, you believe that the state ought to act in a perfectionist way in every circumstance.

0.4 Re-conceptualisation of the Differences between Neutralist and Perfectionist Liberals

Many objections to liberal perfectionism take the state to be the wrong kind of actor to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods. But from a perfectionist perspective, the question of the legitimacy of state intervention to protect and promote the goods is to be understood in the context of what would occur without such a state intervention. In this context, it is important to point out that arbitrary forces affect the opportunities individuals have to engage with the goods, even in the absence of state interference.

The difference between neutralist liberals and liberal perfectionists could thus be re-conceptualised in the following way: the neutralist liberal denies that the government can legitimately intervene in structuring the choices of individuals, while the liberal perfectionist rejects the legitimacy of individual

choices being constrained ‘by external forces like existing social and economic institutions, or internal forces like learning disabilities or poor impulse control.’²⁵ In other words, common liberal worries about political perfectionism seem to depend on a distinction between the influence of the state and other non-state actors on the opportunities individuals face. After all the market and civil society actors have a huge impact on society and play a dramatic role in shaping opportunity.²⁶ It is odd to be so adamant about the state stepping in to promote some conception of the good, when market mechanisms and the civil society as a whole are left free to influence (and even determine) the conceptions of the good that are prevalent in a society and thereby citizens’ choices to engage with certain goods or fail to do so.²⁷ If the market is allowed to have such an impact, why are liberal neutralists exclusively concerned about state interference, and not about market and civil society interference? As Joseph Chan asked:

...as we allow individuals and social, cultural and religious associations to further their conceptions of the good and influence citizens’ thinking and lives, why should we not allow states to do the same?²⁸

Why then do not neutralist liberals have a problem with the market and civil society actors interfering with the structure of opportunities available for individuals? This, I believe, can be traced to two reasons. On one hand, the neutralist might claim that there is a big distinction between violating someone’s freedom through *coercion* and changing the incentive structures. But the liberal political perfectionism I recommend is not coercive and there is thus no difference between non-state actors, the market and the state in the *kind* of intervention that is involved: both merely change the *incentive structure* available for individuals by intervening at the level of the price structure of different options.²⁹

On the other hand, the neutralist might have issue with the *intentionality* of the state intervention. But, if that were the case, the neutralist would have issue not only with perfectionist interventions instigated by the state, but also with

²⁵ Druz A.W., *ibid.*, p. 678.

²⁶ Some have argued that a good social practice should be able to survive without legal institutions. Waldron J., ‘Autonomy and Perfectionism in Raz’s Morality of Freedom’, *Southern California Law Reviews*, 1988, p. 1138.

²⁷ Kymlicka has introduced the distinction between state and social perfectionism. Kymlicka W., ‘Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality’, *Ethics*, 99, 1989.

²⁸ Chan J., *ibid.*

²⁹ Chan J., *ibid.*, p. 14–15.

those instigated by civil society actors, which are also intentional. However, this would justify neutralists allowing for the market to shape opportunities, but restricting interventions by the state or civil society actors.

It would be nevertheless hard to justify why the neutralist is only concerned with intentional interventions. One could plausibly argue that intentional interventions are superior to non-intentional ones; the outcome of intentional interventions would be much less random. Moreover, intentional interventions could be geared towards good outcomes instead of letting random factors affect the outcome in a possibly negative way.

However, the neutralist could make a case by claiming that it isn't the intentionality as such that is problematic but what comes with it. For instance, only intentional decisions can be *paternalist*, in the unusual judgmental sense defined by Jonathan Quong in his new book, *Liberalism Without Perfection*. According to him, the 'presumptive wrongness of paternalism is not to be found in terms of some harm or damage to the paternalizee's interests or autonomy, but instead is to be found in a particular conception of moral status.'³⁰ His judgmental definition of paternalism claims that the paternalist is motivated by a negative judgment about the paternalizee's abilities and he claims further that perfectionism is necessarily paternalist in this sense. I will deny in this book that perfectionism is paternalist in this sense.

Finally, the distinction could be conceived as pertaining to the willingness of the liberal state to intervene only in certain delimited spheres and its reluctance to do so in others. According to the negative responsibility argument proposed by Nagel, one can justify the liberal state reluctance to intervene when it pertains to conceptions of the good because the state is not responsible for the disappearance of a conception of the good if it does not intervene to support it.³¹ In contrast, the state is responsible if it does not intervene in matters of social justice, because its own institutions are *already* involved in a certain distributive outcome. Joseph Chan has convincingly argued against the negative responsibility argument.³² He has claimed that assuming that the state cannot be negatively responsible for the disappearance of a conception of the good amounts to assuming the neutrality of the liberal state instead of arguing for it.

³⁰ Quong J., *Liberalism without Perfection*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, p. 99.

³¹ Nagel T., *Equality and Partiality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991, chap. 14.

³² Chan J., 'Legitimacy, Unanimity and Perfectionism', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 29, n. 1, 2000.

0.5 Summary of the Argument of the Book

This book investigates what a plausible liberal perfectionism would be like. Two different ways of understanding what I call Ethical Perfectionism will be considered. On the one hand, some authors take perfectionism to refer only to the so-called ‘objective list’ conception of *well-being*.³³ On the other hand, many contemporary perfectionist authors understand perfectionism to be an *ethical theory*, which is distinctive in so far as it gives a fundamental role to the objective goods in defining the right. I will argue that Ethical Perfectionism is best understood as a distinctive ethical theory that is based on an Objective List conception of well-being. An Objective List conception of well-being claims that an individual’s well-being is constituted by an engagement with intrinsically and objectively valuable goods. An example of such a list of objective goods would be: knowledge, understanding, aesthetic appreciation, deep personal relationships, autonomy, pleasure, etc. I will critically discuss such lists of objective goods in chapter 2.

Common intuitions about value support an Objective List view of well-being. But once we adopt an Objective List view of well-being, it is hard to deny that individual well-being matters ethically and that we therefore have ethical reasons to promote engagement with these objective goods. This takes us to Ethical Perfectionism. From Ethical Perfectionism, it is a relatively short step to an argument in favour of the *political* promotion of engagement with objective goods: the demands of practical reason commit us to the promotion of the things we take to be valuable.³⁴

I said earlier that we needed more than a negative argument that complete neutrality is philosophically impossible. We needed to provide a positive argument claiming that the state has at least a *prima facie* reason to protect and promote certain objectively valuable goods. A primary aim of this book is thus to clarify and defend the existence of such reason. The argument will start with the claim that we have firm intuitions about value. If there are strong intuitions

³³ Objective list theories of well-being, with hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories, are currently the three dominant conceptions of well-being. Hedonism defines an agent’s good as enjoying certain psychological states. Desire satisfaction theories claim that an individual’s well-being consists in the satisfaction of his preferences. Objective list theories hold that an agent’s well-being is constituted by the engagement of the agent with some intrinsically and objectively valuable goods.

³⁴ Thomson J.J., *Goodness and Advice*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2001, p. 76. Sher develops an account of autonomy in terms of responsiveness to reasons. Sher G., *Beyond Neutrality, Perfectionism and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

in favor of the intrinsic value of some general goods and if these goods are constitutive of individual well-being, we need very little to move to the claim that the liberal state has a reason to protect and promote these goods.³⁵ In order to move from a discourse about what we as individuals have reasons to do to a discourse about what the state has reasons to do, I will invoke a specific conception of legitimacy, the Service conception of legitimacy, which takes a state to be legitimate if and only if its directives generally stem from reasons that already apply to individuals.

The first three chapters distinguish between Prudential, Ethical and Political Perfectionism, and clarify these views and their possible relations. Although a considerable amount of space in these chapters is devoted to questions of value theory, this is always with an eye to the grounding of a political conception. Much discussion of Political Perfectionism is deficient because it ignores these foundational ethical questions which can make an important difference to the plausibility of the political conceptions based upon them. Chapters 4 and 5 next consider a range of arguments in favour of Political Perfectionism. Chapter 6 examines what view of social justice would be most compatible with political perfectionism.

In the *first chapter*, I distinguish between Prudential, Ethical and Political Perfectionism. I define Prudential Perfectionism as endorsing both the claims that there is a list of objective goods that are constitutive of well-being *and* that we should strive for them for our own good. I take Ethical Perfectionism to make the *further* claim that we have moral reasons to generally promote these goods. I discuss Ethical Perfectionism first, because I take Ethical Perfectionism to be more fundamental than Political Perfectionism. Political Perfectionism would have little plausibility if Ethical Perfectionism is not correct.

After drawing some basic conceptual distinctions, I will argue that what is distinctive about Prudential Perfectionism is that its conception of the good life is based on identifying a variety of goods that are intrinsically and objectively valuable while being constitutive of well-being. I will present some negative arguments against hedonist and desire-based conceptions of well-being and point to some intuitions in favour of an Objective List conception of well-being. Once Prudential Perfectionism has been defended in this way, I argue that the step from Prudential Perfectionism to Ethical Perfectionism is fairly simple, and so is the step from Ethical Perfectionism to Political Perfectionism. I identify two main ways in which Political Perfectionism has been defined. On the modest

³⁵ Raz J., 'Facing Up: A Reply', *Southern California Law Review*, 62, 1989, 1230–1232. See also Chan J., *ibid.*, p. 5–6.

definition, a political perfectionist merely argues that the state is *permitted* to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value. On the bold definition, a political perfectionist goes further and claims that the state ought to protect and promote intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value. I offer an alternative definition of Political Perfectionism which holds a middle ground between these two definitions by defining Political Perfectionism as the state being permitted to and justified in protecting and promoting intrinsically valuable goods on the basis of their intrinsic value.

In the *second chapter*, I consider the crucial question of what should count as intrinsically and objectively valuable goods. I critically examine several lists of such goods offered by various authors, and defend my own list, which includes both actions and states of affairs. I will argue that when we move from Ethical Perfectionism to Political Perfectionism, we should shift our focus from direct promotion of goods to promotion of *opportunities to engage* with these goods, so as to safeguard the autonomy of individuals. The most important part of this chapter is a critical examination of George Sher's attempt to provide a *unifying account* of the goods on the objective list. I argue that attempts to provide a unifying account of these goods are unsuccessful. But I also argue that this is no tragedy for Political Perfectionism because such an account is not really needed. I then turn to consider Martha Nussbaum's attempt to ground political perfectionism in an overlapping consensus. I will suggest that, although it would be beneficial for Political Perfectionism to be based on a list of goods that *command* such an overlapping consensus, the relevant list of goods cannot be appropriately *justified* by such an overlapping consensus. Perfectionist goods are objectively valuable goods and their standing as goods cannot thus be grounded in the actual endorsement of individuals.

In the *third chapter*, I show that we can resist some of the objections that have been levelled against Political Perfectionism by identifying a form of Ethical Perfectionism that is both independently compelling, and ground a more plausible and attractive Political Perfectionism. Many objections to Political Perfectionism arise only because implausible forms of Political Perfectionism are considered.

I therefore spend some time considering a range of key distinctions that both clarify the possible forms Ethical Perfectionism can take, and are helpful in countering objections to Political Perfectionism. I examine several distinctions that have been made in the perfectionist literature, and discuss their relevance and application. These distinctions are important because too often the literature discusses perfectionism without differentiating between very different views, ignoring possible attractive variants of perfectionism. In particular, I argue that the most plausible form of EP is non-exclusive, pluralist, broad, rela-