

Anti-Perfectionist Childrearing

Matthew Clayton

An important problem that every parent faces concerns how she should exercise her authority over her children. In this paper, I address one aspect of that problem: how we should judge whether a parent's conduct as a parent is more or less successful. Since I hold a reasonably controversial view about how we should understand the morally appropriate relationship between parent and child—which I call *parental anti-perfectionism*—I begin by setting out that view by contrasting it with some alternative—perfectionist—conceptions of the morality of parenting. The anti-perfectionist view is that parents act illegitimately if they enrol their child into religious practices that are controversial within society. Thereafter, I sketch some aspects of an answer to the central question of what successful anti-perfectionist parenting is, and I respond to three objections that might be raised against it, namely, that the view is too vague or too insipid, and that it permits parents to neglect the wellbeing of their child.

1. Parental Perfectionism

There are moral limits to the extent to which parents and others are morally permitted to promote a child's wellbeing. Some of those limits are generated by the claims of third parties. As in other domains of morality, it is generally impermissible to use other people in certain ways to advance one's child's wellbeing. For example, although my child's wellbeing might be improved if I kidnapped an effective mathematics tutor or cricket coach and forced her to perfect my child's arithmetic or spin bowling, I am not morally permitted to do so. A second limit relates to parents whose concern for their child leads them to perform acts that set back the interests of others as a side effect. Suppose that taking my child for a walk in the woods to enhance her understanding of the natural world would foreseeably release hundreds of wasps that would inflict harm on other people near the wood. If the harm done to others were disproportionate, I would not be permitted to improve my child's wellbeing in that way. The interests and claims of third parties, then, limit the extent to which parents are permitted to advance the wellbeing of their child.

· Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick.
Email: m.g.clayton@warwick.ac.uk.

Are there limits to the extent to which parents are permitted to promote their child's wellbeing that are grounded in the interests and claims of the child herself rather than the interests or claims of third parties? I shall call those who claim that there are no such limits *parental perfectionists*. Their view can be stated in more or less demanding ways. The most demanding parental perfectionist view asserts that, bracketing moral questions concerning third parties, parents are *morally required* to act in a way that *maximises* their child's wellbeing. The demanding perfectionist view is too demanding, however, because it requires parents to make huge sacrifices with respect to their own wellbeing if that would generate merely minor improvements in their child's wellbeing. On any plausible view of morality, parents have interests as adults that are separable from those of their child, and their reason to pursue these interests is not always defeated by their reason to promote their child's wellbeing.

A more plausible, less demanding, conception of parental perfectionism asserts that, bracketing their duties to third parties, parents are *morally permitted* to act in ways that maximise their child's wellbeing. Some might object that this view needs some revision, because parents are not morally permitted completely to sacrifice their interests as non-parents for the sake of their child. This objection seems to have some force. For example, some think that we have self-regarding duties. If I have a duty to live a dignified life, then it seems impermissible for me to accept an offer of employment in which I am dominated or abused in a way that is inconsistent with my dignity even for the sake of enhancing my child's wellbeing.¹

Accordingly, a plausible account of parental perfectionism will claim that, bracketing duties to third parties and provided they do not violate their self-regarding duties, parents are morally permitted to act in ways that maximise their child's wellbeing. However, this is an incomplete description, because perfectionists say that it is often the case that parents have a *duty* to promote their child's wellbeing. For that reason, they need to supply an account of when parents are morally required, and not merely permitted, to promote their child's wellbeing. Since I reject parental perfectionism, it is sufficient for my purposes to interpret perfectionism as a permissive view. However, those who embrace parental perfectionism need to offer a more complete account of the rights and duties of parents than has so far been provided.

Some embrace parental perfectionism because they assume that it permits parents to enrol their child into the practices and goals they (the

¹ For a discussion of dignity and self-respect that suggests this view, see Dworkin (2011, pp. 202-209).

parents) deem worthy of pursuit. That assumption is mistaken, because perfectionism is a *fact-* or *evidence-*relative, not a *belief-*relative, view. For example, if we suppose that a religious life is unworthy of pursuit, is it morally permissible for Christian parents to raise their child to be devout? If a Christian upbringing would diminish the child's wellbeing then the reason that motivates parental perfectionism—that, other things equal, parents ought to act to improve rather than diminish their child's wellbeing—suggests that it may well be morally impermissible to raise one's child in that way. Perfectionism is a set of claims about what we ought to do given the facts, or the evidence available to us. In the case above, it does not permit parents to raise their child as a Christian merely because they *believe* that a Christian life is good for her; to be permissible their belief must be correct or indicated by the available evidence.² Thus, parental perfectionism might condemn many practices that are commonly thought to be acceptable, such as parents pursuing their ethical goals with their child.³

It is not my aim to set out the most plausible version of parental perfectionism. If a version of parental perfectionism were adopted we would need to know more about wellbeing. In particular, we would need to understand wellbeing at different parts of the life cycle. As others have suggested, there might be certain goods that can be enjoyed only, or particularly, in childhood (Macleod 2010). On the other hand, childrearing involves imparting the beliefs and desires that will enhance the child's enjoyment of goods in her life as an adult. Furthermore, if there are different life-cycle-relative goods that cannot all be reconciled, then questions arise as to whether trade-offs can be made between them and, if so, which trade-offs should be made. These are questions that parental perfectionist must address. However, because I believe parental *anti*-perfectionism to be the right view, I shall not address those questions here.

2. Political Anti-Perfectionism

A different kind of perfectionism that has received considerable attention in normative theory is *political* perfectionism. The question here is not whether

² The distinction between the three different kinds of permissibility draws on Parfit (2011, pp. 150-151).

³ Brighouse and Swift (2009) set out a conception of familial relationship goods, which might be thought to rescue the compatibility of perfectionism and parents sharing their values with their child. However, it is not obvious that the value of parents and children having common goals is wholly independent of the intrinsic value of the goals that they pursue together.

parents are morally permitted or required to act in ways that maximise their child's wellbeing, but whether the *government* is morally permitted to interfere in society, by regulating the family or educational institutions, to promote the wellbeing of its citizens. Although political perfectionists accept that the government might have other reasons for action that sometimes compete with and, perhaps, override its reason to advance its citizens' wellbeing, they claim that there is no principled reason for it to disregard this consideration (Raz 1989, p. 1230). *Anti-perfectionists* reject this view. They claim that the government has principled reasons not to take a stand within certain debates, such as those about religion, and, accordingly, should not use its powers to maximise the wellbeing of its citizens. Consider the example of Christianity again. Suppose it were true, and the government knew, that living a Christian life is always worse for individuals than living some alternative life. In those circumstances, would it be morally permissible for the government to use its legal powers over educational institutions to promote suitable non-Christian lifestyles, if such promotion were shown to be successful in enhancing the wellbeing of its citizens? Anti-perfectionists claim that the government should refrain from promoting non-Christian lifestyles even if Christian belief and practice is worse for people and their wellbeing might be enhanced by the political promotion of non-Christian practices.

One prominent argument for anti-perfectionism proceeds from the ideal of *independence*, which asserts that each person should endorse the rules that govern how she lives her life. With respect to our personal goals, for example, independence requires that we decide for ourselves what ends we pursue during our lifetimes, rather than have our ends set by other people. Standardly, however, the fact that we live in political relationships poses a problem for independence, because we are born into a society with legal, social and political institutions that force us to do various things and exercise coercion over us. In short, we do not choose which political ends we serve. A central question of political philosophy, identified by Rousseau, is how to reconcile our independence with the fact that our relationship to the state is both non-voluntary and coercive. Rousseau's solution to this problem is that political authority and independence can be rendered compatible if legal and political institutions are regulated by principles that every citizen endorses. In that way, each can view herself as governed by ends she sets for herself (Rousseau ([1762] 1978, Book I, Ch. vi-viii).

Rousseau's solution is developed by Rawls who argues that we have duties of justice to arrange our social institutions so that they distribute social

goods and bads fairly. Legitimate political institutions, he argues, will protect a range of familiar civil and political freedoms—democratic rights, and the rights of free expression, association, and conscience—as well as distribute social and economic goods so that everyone has the opportunity to be healthy and the wherewithal to pursue her goals. Rawls notes that if such institutions are maintained then a diversity of convictions about what he calls ‘comprehensive’ ends will inevitably develop. Comprehensive ends include, for example, religious goals, occupational aims, and conceptions of the kinds of family and sexuality that are worthy of pursuit. Individuals who think about these issues under conditions of freedom are, he claims, bound to disagree over which comprehensive ends are worthy of adoption and pursuit. Given that we have a weighty reason to arrange political institutions in a way that is compatible with the maintenance of independence, it appears that those institutions should not be motivated by or directed to serve any particular comprehensive end. Because citizens disagree about religion, for example, if the government adopted and promoted a particular view of religion, then those citizens who reject that view would no longer be constrained by rules they endorse. The upshot of this argument is political anti-perfectionism. It is not the government’s role to promote the wellbeing of its citizens, because that would jeopardise the independence—Rawls calls it ‘political autonomy’—of many of its citizens (Rawls 2006).

3. The Case for Parental Anti-Perfectionism

What are the implications of political anti-perfectionism for what parents are permitted to do to or for their children? The most *popular view* articulated by those who subscribe to political anti-perfectionism is that, within certain constraints, it is legitimate for parents to raise their child according to a religious view even if that religious view is not widely shared within society. Provided that they educate her so that she has the wherewithal to live an independent life as an adult and they observe other constraints such as the duty not to inflict physical harm on her, parents may legitimately raise their child as they choose. Among the constraints placed on this permission are that parents must raise their child in a way that enables her to understand the various ends she might pursue and to deliberate rationally about which ends she ought to

embrace, and they must impart to her the mental and physical wherewithal to pursue those ends rationally.⁴

On this view parents are permitted to maximise their child's wellbeing subject to the constraints discussed above involving duties to third parties and to parents' own self-regarding duties. They are also permitted to act in ways that fail to maximise their child's wellbeing. According to the popular view, anti-perfectionist political morality refuses to engage with the question of which comprehensive ends are worthy of pursuit and, thus, it gives parents rights over their child that permit them to act in ways that make their child's life go worse than it might with an alternative upbringing.⁵

I reject the popular view of the implications of political anti-perfectionism for parental conduct.⁶ I claim that if anti-perfectionism applies to the relationship between state and citizen, then it should also govern the relationship between parent and child. Like citizens, children are also born into families that have significant effects on their life-chances and the values they adopt. Parents also force their children to do various things. If the ideal of independence requires us to arrange unchosen coercive political arrangements so that they can be affirmed by citizens whatever the particular comprehensive ends they endorse, then the activities of parents should be similarly constrained. For these reasons, parental anti-perfectionism appears to be a required extension of political anti-perfectionism.

An obvious objection to the parallel case argument described above is that there is a morally relevant difference between the relationship between adult citizens and the state, on the one hand, and that between children and parents, on the other. Because adults reflectively endorse their religious convictions, making them worship or live under laws that promote religion

⁴ Many liberal educational theorists endorse what I call the popular view. Perhaps the most prominent statement of it is Feinberg (1992)

⁵ For the observation that this view permits parents to encourage their child to adopt goals that diminish her wellbeing, see Fowler (2010). Perhaps it is consistent with the popular view for the state to prohibit parents acting with an inappropriate *attitude* towards their child. For example, suppose I am a devout Christian but regard my child as not entitled to an upbringing that introduces her to Christianity, because children are morally inferior to adults and, therefore, their wellbeing matters less. In that case, the state might legitimately claim that I have the wrong attitude towards my children that is revealed by the fact that I refuse to offer my child the opportunity to pursue what I take to be the right way to live. That attitude might be wrongful and, perhaps, an appropriate basis for creating a criminal wrong, even if refusing my child an introduction to Christianity does, in fact, improve her life (because, suppose, Christian lifestyles diminish people's wellbeing). For discussion of the right to an attitude, as applied to human rights, see Dworkin (2011, pp. 335-339).

⁶ Here I summarize and clarify the argument of Clayton 2006, ch. 3.

involves requiring them to act *against their reasoned convictions*. By contrast, parents who make their child worship do not thereby require her to act in ways she reflectively rejects. The child, at least when a young child, does not possess appropriately formed beliefs and desires that constitute the basis for principled moral constraints on how parents may treat her. True, she is entitled to certain kinds of treatment that serve her various interests. However, unlike a mature citizen whose reasoned convictions operate as principled constraints on how the state can legitimately act, the child lacks the properties that make her convictions morally relevant in that way. The exercise of parental power, the argument goes, need not, therefore, be regulated by ideals and principles that are acceptable to the child. On this view, parents are off the hook with respect to the anti-perfectionist restraint that characterises political morality: perfectionist parents do not wrong their child in the way the state wrongs a citizen when it enrolls her into a particular comprehensive practice.

The response to this objection is that it is mistaken to claim that the child cannot reject her religious enrolment on the basis of morally relevant—reasoned—convictions. Granted, she cannot offer that kind of rejection as a young child. Nevertheless, she can object to her enrolment in the right way when she becomes an adult and evaluates her upbringing *ex post*. She is capable of giving or withholding *retrospective endorsement*.

When evaluating *ex ante* how they ought to raise their child—that is, before their child has developed the mental powers to give or withhold endorsement—parents must accept that if they enrolled their child into a religious practice their child might, and it is likely that the child will, retrospectively reject that enrolment. The explanation of this non-normative fact appeals to Rawls’s observation of the ‘burdens of judgement’: disagreement about comprehensive matters is an inevitable consequence of people forming beliefs and desires under free institutions (Rawls 2006, pp. 54-58); furthermore, if political morality demands an education that provides individuals with the capacity to decide for themselves which comprehensive ends are worthy of adoption and pursuit, then we can add that which of the diverse comprehensive ends any particular person will adopt is unpredictable.

Accordingly, the revised argument for parental anti-perfectionism is as follows. Because (i) retrospective rejection is morally troubling and they have weighty reasons to raise their child in a way that avoids it, and (ii) they know that their child might retrospectively reject her religious enrolment as a child, and (iii) there are adequate alternative ways of raising their child that do not

involve comprehensive enrolment, parents have a weighty *ex ante* reason not to enrol their child into a religious practice.

Several objections have been raised against parental anti-perfectionism. Some argue that I overstate the similarities between state-citizen and parent-child relationships, others that respect for independence is not incompatible with the comprehensive enrolment of children (Morgan 2009; Cameron 2012). I have responded to some of these objections elsewhere (Clayton 2009; 2012). In the remainder of this paper, I turn to certain concerns about anti-perfectionist childrearing that centre on considerations of the child's wellbeing. One worry about parental anti-perfectionism is that its implications for evaluating whether parents and other adults raise and educate children well or poorly are unclear. It is reasonable to expect parental anti-perfectionism to provide a positive account of how children should be raised given its claim that parents (and other adults) should not regard their role as encouraging the child to adopt comprehensive ends that will enhance her wellbeing. Secondly, it might be thought that the view allows for only an insipid upbringing, because it seems to rule out many different activities that make for a rich and stimulating upbringing and, thereby, fails to prepare the child for adulthood or simply makes her suffer a drab childhood.

And, finally, there is the fundamental objection that anti-perfectionism denies parents the moral resources to protect their child from falling into comprehensive activities that are harmful and from forming false beliefs that make her life go worse, either instrumentally or intrinsically. A prominent issue that might be thought to illustrate this powerful objection to parental anti-perfectionism is the teaching of biology. In some societies—the USA is a prominent example—the truth of evolution as an account of natural history is widely contested, and many embrace creationism or intelligent design as a superior explanation. Does it follow that parents and teachers who teach that intelligent design is demonstrably false violate the norm of anti-perfectionism? Should they instead teach natural history in a way that does not take a stand on the dispute between the evolutionary biologists and creationists? The objection I shall consider is claims that, because they must be committed to the view that parents and teachers ought not to take a stand on which version of natural history is correct, anti-perfectionists are wedded to educational norms that set back the interests of children.

To respond to these three worries about vagueness, insipidness and negligence, I shall first set out the principal elements of a positive account of upbringing that is compatible with parental anti-perfectionism and, thereafter,

try to show that such an upbringing is neither vague nor insipid. I shall finish with some remarks on whether the failure to promote the child's wellbeing is a decisive objection and the specific issue of whether parents can legitimately encourage their child to reason scientifically.

4. An Anti-Perfectionist Conception of the Currency of Parental Concern

Parental anti-perfectionism asserts that it is not a legitimate aim for those responsible for raising a child to enrol her into particular comprehensive practices. In what follows I shall discuss the example of religious enrolment, but it is worth noting that parental anti-perfectionism is not hostile to religious enrolment alone. It holds that resolute atheists who encourage their young child to reject theism and religion also act illegitimately; the prohibition on enrolment also applies to other comprehensive ideals, such as controversial conceptions of sexuality and occupational choice, and views about which personal goals are worthy of pursuit. Thus, although I illustrate the view I articulate by reference to religion, this should not be taken to imply that religious enrolment is uniquely problematic.

According to parental anti-perfectionism, religious parents are not permitted to enrol their child into particular religious practices. The term 'enrolment' is shorthand for a number of activities. It covers the following: baptising one's child thereby making her a member of a church and undertaking religious commitments on her behalf; encouraging her to pray and perform as other believers do; and encouraging her to believe and affirm particular religious views. These activities constitute enrolment when the aim of parents is to raise their child as a Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jew, and so on, by shaping her beliefs and desires such that the child is motivated to affirm the central doctrines of the religion and to participate in its practices. Moreover, as I argue elsewhere (Clayton 2006; 2012), enrolment is wrong even when parents also educate their child such that later in life she can autonomously decide to continue with or reject the religion into which she has been enrolled.⁷

⁷ One objection to my focus on enrolment is that it rests on the controversial view that the permissibility of acts is not independent of the aims that motivate the agent. For a critique of that view, see Scanlon (2008). I lack the space to deal with this objection here. However, I simply note that, like its political counterpart, anti-perfectionist parenting is primarily an account of the reasons that ought to motivate individuals. The precise relationship between parental motivation and the permissibility of their actions, I leave to discuss on another occasion.

The impermissibility of the religious enrolment of children implies that parental perfectionism is mistaken. Consequently, the morality of childrearing cannot simply be read as the answer to the strategic question ‘what kinds of upbringing would make children’s lives go well?’ If we have reason to respect individuals’ independence then, like states, parents should not understand their role as seeking the truth about wellbeing and encouraging their child to act in ways that enable her to maximise her wellbeing as a child or adult, or across her life.

If parental concern for their child should not be understood exclusively in terms of promoting her wellbeing, then how should it be understood? Plainly, parents can perform their role more or less successfully. Our question is: how should we understand the *currency* or *metric* by which we identify the successes or failures of parents if the child’s wellbeing is not the appropriate currency?

In what follows I attempt to offer a response to that question, albeit an incomplete one. I characterise an account of children’s *advantage*, which consists of those items that are the proper object of parental concern. An account of advantage is commonly used by liberal political philosophers who want to specify a conception of interpersonal comparison for the purpose of guiding social and political institutions in a way that avoids controversial judgements about wellbeing. Those philosophers identify a metric that gives appropriate guidance with respect to who to help and how to help those who are entitled to help. For example, a prominent account of advantage is Rawls’s account of *primary social goods*. In his conception, individuals are identified as more or less advantaged by reference to their enjoyment of certain basic liberties, the educational and employment opportunities available to them, their level of wealth and income, and whether they live in social conditions conducive to their self-respect. Those who favour parental anti-perfectionism must articulate a similar account of parental concern.

The currency of parental concern also provides an account of what parents may do to or for their child. That account is constrained by the considerations that favour parental anti-perfectionism. Parents are not permitted to enrol their child into particular comprehensive practices. Part of the task, then, is to figure out the implications of the prohibition on comprehensive enrolment and to identify what parents are permitted or required to do for their child.

5. The Implications of the Ideal of Independence

Our questions are: (1) what are parents permitted or required to do for their child if they are not permitted to enrol her into a religion? And (2) on what bases are we to evaluate the success or failure of different kinds of parenting if wellbeing is not the appropriate metric? In response, I suggest that the foundational ideal of *independence for everyone* that motivates anti-perfectionism offers a significant, if not complete, basis for answering these questions. Here, I summarise two different ways in which independence might be elaborated as a conception of children's advantage, that develop Rawls's account of our basic interests as 'free and equal' persons.

(a) *'The Capacity for a Conception of the Good'*

In the first place, as I understand it independence requires adults to set their own goals in life rather than have them set by others. If they are to set their own goals individuals must have what Rawls calls 'a capacity for a conception of the good': the capacity to deliberate rationally about the various goals, projects and relationships that are available to them and the intellectual and physical wherewithal to pursue the ends that they come to endorse.

It is clear that we can use the capacity for a conception of the good as the foundation for judging whether parents and teachers are effective in raising a child. Plainly, for the purposes of developing a public guide to evaluate individuals in these roles we would need to disaggregate several different features of the capacity. For example, the capacity for rational thought needs further elucidation. Is the child rational only if her thought conforms to the requirements of expected utility theory, or are the requirements of rationality for the purposes of conferring independence less demanding? Second, the intellectual and physical capacities that constitute the capacity for a conception of the good might be characterised in more detail. Is it better from the point of view of independence if the child has an advanced understanding of mathematics or literature, for example, or better to the extent that she is physically stronger or faster?

I cannot give complete answers to these questions. However, it should be noted that the rational, intellectual and physical powers required for ethical independence are satiable. Independence requires that individuals have enough of these powers: just because Bertrand is a better philosopher, logician, linguist and mathematician than Barry does not mean that his life is more independent, because Barry might possess sufficient rationality and intellectual and physical

capacity to satisfy the conditions for independence. The capacity for a conception of the good demands a certain threshold of capability with respect to rationality: individuals should understand that their goals are nested in structures in which certain goals serve others, and they should have the ability to avoid adopting mutually inconsistent goals and to choose effective means of realising their fundamental goals. The rationality required for this capacity need not, then, be the kind of rationality that is demanded by certain variants of decision theory in which individuals maximise their expected preference-satisfaction. The rationality required for independence is less demanding and consistent with individuals adopting different attitudes towards preference-satisfaction. They may be satisficers rather than maximisers, or be averse to certain kinds of risk, or regard their practical reasons as given by their duties to others regardless of their preferences, without jeopardising their independence. What matters is that their goals are chosen in a way that faithfully reflects their own ambitions.

Below the threshold, we might say that individuals might deliberate and act more or less rationally and, accordingly, be closer or further away from independence. One example of this concerns the development of children. In our infancy, when we lack well-developed deliberative and rational powers, independence is absent and others must control our lives and conduct so that we acquire these capacities. As we develop deliberative and rational powers, that control lessens until the point at which we have sufficient powers to develop and pursue our own goals according to the standards of independence (Locke [1690] 1988, II. 55). In addition, we might evaluate different kinds of parenting and education to assess whether they are well designed to assist the development of these powers such that individuals acquire them in a timely fashion: parenting arrangements that fail to facilitate their acquisition or that take longer to do so might be subject to criticism or reform (Hannan 2011).

Independence, I have argued, requires possession of the capacity for a conception of the good. But some have suggested that the capacity is itself a conception of the good and, therefore, if it is illegitimate to enrol children into religious conceptions then surely it is also illegitimate to shape the child's life so that she is able and willing rationally to choose and pursue the particular goals that strike her as worthwhile. The objection is that anti-perfectionist childrearing cannot without contradiction advocate the development of the child's capacity for a conception of the good.

This objection can be rebutted by observing that it overlooks the fact that anti-perfectionism operates with a distinction within ethics. It asserts that there

is a set of ethical ideals—in this account, comprehensive ideals—with respect to which adults should take no stand in their capacity as carers or educators of children. But that does not mean that this set of ethical ideals includes *every* ideal. It is coherent to hold that there is an ideal—independence in this conception—that should guide the choices of parents and, at the same time, hold that parents should not be guided by other ethical ideals, such as those involving religious claims. Indeed, the argument above is that the ideal of independence, which demands that the individual sets her own ends, explains and justifies the distinction that is drawn within ethics. Independence is possible only if we are able rationally to adopt and pursue our own goals. That explains the importance of the development and exercise of the capacity for a conception of the good. An upbringing that goes further and enrolls the child into a particular conception of the good is not inconsistent with her acquisition of that capacity, but it is ruled out by a further requirement of independence: that others do not force her to serve ends she later reflectively rejects.⁸

(b) A Sense of Justice and Morality

The second important educational implication of independence for everyone is the good of the development of a sense of justice and morality. The reason is straightforward: if everyone is to lead an independent life then each of us must constrain our behaviour towards others such that we do not jeopardise their independence. My independence is lost if others manipulate or coerce me to pursue ends they set for me; and it is lost if I lack the opportunity to pursue my own ends due to the intentional or unintentional conduct of others: if they steal the property I was counting on to lead my life, for example, or pass laws that criminalise the pursuit of my religious convictions.

The ideal of independence generates the need for a set of moral and legal arrangements that are familiar within liberal democratic societies. These arrangements are stably realizable only if individuals operate with appropriate convictions about what is owed to each other—a sense of justice that regulates how we choose our important legal, political and socioeconomic institutions, and a sense of morality that shapes how we interact with others where the law is silent.

⁸ I am conscious that the position I expound here differs in many important respects from the way in which Rawls deploys the capacity for a conception of the good. For an examination of those differences and an argument for departing from Rawls, see Clayton (2006, pp. 24-27).

Although the preconditions and requirements of independence have implications for the kind of justice and morality we ought to adopt it does not fully determine their content. For instance, independence restricts the extent to which we are morally permitted to act in ways that make another's pursuit of her goals more costly or difficult. However, it does not tell us whether we owe others *equal* or *sufficient* opportunity to pursue their goals or, if we adopt an egalitarian interpretation, how to judge whether equality obtains.

Interesting questions are raised by the fact that independence is compatible with different conceptions of distributive justice. Is it a violation of independence if parents and teachers aim to impart particular moral and political convictions to the children they raise? If it is a violation are we morally forbidden from imparting such convictions? Is it morally impermissible to raise one's child to be an egalitarian, supposing equality to be more plausible as a moral and political ideal compared to sufficientarian views, say?

Several different responses might be offered to these questions. The response I favour is that our reason to respect individuals' independence is conditional: setting one's own ends, and endorsement of the ideals that motivate the legal rules that constrain one, are normatively important provided one honours one's duties to others, at least reasonably well. On this conditional view we have no reason to refrain from imposing liberal democratic principles on fascists; similarly we have no reason not to shove Arthur into a pond to save a drowning child at small cost to Arthur—assume that shoving Arthur is the only way of saving the child's life—just in virtue of the fact that Arthur does not believe he has a moral duty to save the child. In these cases, we should say that our reason to respect an individual's independence is cancelled because she proposes to commit a serious injustice. Our claim to be governed by institutions that we endorse is conditional upon our views conforming to certain standards of morality. These claims can be extended to address questions of upbringing: parenting is less successful to the extent that it fails sufficiently to develop the child's understanding and motivation to comply with the demands of morality. The child herself has certain duties to others and successful parenting involves taking steps to ensure that she recognises and fulfils those duties. The independence case for anti-perfectionism, then, does not rule out enrolling children into justice-promoting practices or the cultivation of various moral dispositions.

There are further issues of detail to be resolved in this account. For example, a sense of justice might be given a more or less determinate specification. Consider Rawls's distinction between the properties of a

reasonable conception and the details of a particular reasonable conception, such as his own conception of *justice as fairness*. In his view, reasonable conceptions of justice are constituted by their endorsement of basic liberal rights and their priority, and of the provision of the material wherewithal for citizens to make use of their freedoms; and he sets out some quite demanding institutional proposals that follow from these requirements, including basic health care for all and society underwriting employment for everyone (Rawls 2006, lvii-lx). However, although reasonableness with respect to political morality seems to rule out many views that are widely held in contemporary society—such as libertarian views, for example—it does not choose between, say, Justice as Fairness and Dworkin’s resourcist account of justice. Our sense of justice might be legitimate—it might be permissible to act on it in public life—even if it is not entirely right. If we apply that observation to parenting, we might say that parents are morally required to cultivate a sense of reasonableness in their child, but they should not try to perfect their child’s sense of justice.

6. Too Vague?

I hope I have outlined enough of its positive conception of upbringing to rebut the charge that anti-perfectionist childrearing is too vague to operate as an ideal of parental morality. The charge is founded on the worry that the impermissibility of religious enrolment is a wholly negative injunction telling parents what they may not do, and it offers little guidance on the question of what they ought to do for their child. Setting out the positive requirements of anti-perfectionism—the cultivation of a sense of justice and providing the wherewithal for the child reflectively to decide religious matters for herself—dispels that worry.

A more interesting elaboration of the vagueness worry is that anti-perfectionism is primarily a view about which kinds of reason can legitimately guide parental conduct. While I have argued that it is incompatible with religious enrolment, that is because enrolment is an activity in which parents aim to align their child with a particular faith. But if that is so, the worry is that legitimate aims can be expressed in action in several ways and anti-perfectionism cannot choose between those different ways of raising or educating children. For example, one set of parents, cognisant of their duty to avoid religious enrolment, might send their child to a secular school; another set might give their child an education in a religious school in the belief that

such an education compensates for her exposure to the commodifying norms that saturate the background culture of society. Despite the profound differences in the way they raise their children, neither set of parents, it seems, violates the constraint against religious enrolment.

Observations such as these, however, raise open questions that call for further investigation, rather than confirm the worry that anti-perfectionist childrearing is hopelessly vague. I do not know whether parents who choose to send their child to a religious school on the grounds that it gives them a different perspective to the dominant culture do the right thing for their child. True, such parents need not count as enrolling their child into a particular viewpoint; their aim might simply be to expose their child to a wide range of comprehensive viewpoints from which to make an informed choice. But there are other requirements of the liberal anti-perfectionist view on the basis of which we might evaluate the success of their decisions, such is whether the education they choose serves the child in acquiring a sense of justice and the wherewithal to decide for herself which comprehensive ends to pursue. Whether or not their parenting is fully adequate according to those requirements is a separate question. Of course, in the final analysis there may remain many different ways of satisfying the anti-perfectionist liberal conception of upbringing. To the extent that that is the case, the conception is permissive rather than vague.

7. Too Insipid?

Two versions of what I shall call the insipidness worry about anti-perfectionist childrearing might be distinguished. The first worry is that, because parents are not permitted to enrol their child into a particular religion, the child will not develop the right kind of understanding of the rich meaning of religious commitment that can be gained only from being immersed within a set of religious practices. Children will be left directionless, the argument goes, and not develop a sense of commitment to a project, which is a necessary feature of leading an independent life. In short, then, the objection is that enrolment is necessary preparation for an independent adulthood.⁹

The second version of the concern is not that anti-perfectionist childrearing serves our interests as adults less well than a regime that permits religious enrolment; rather, it fails to serve us as children. Childhood should

⁹ See, for example, McLaughlin (1984); worries of this kind are also expressed by Callan (2002).

not be theorised simply as preparation for adulthood; the child's enjoyment of certain goods makes her life go well *as a child* irrespective of whether those goods also prepare her well for life as a free and equal adult. However, because these goods—what Macleod (2010) calls the 'intrinsic goods of childhood'—are not universally valued and, indeed, might be rejected by one's child when she reaches adulthood, it appears impermissible to enable one's child to enjoy them.¹⁰ If that is the case, then parental anti-perfectionism condemns too much, because it does not permit parents to offer their child a childhood in which she can experience and partake in the activities that are particularly valuable for children.

In response to the first worry, it is worth noting that although anti-perfectionist childrearing finds comprehensive enrolment and immersion problematic, it allows and, indeed, requires *political* enrolment and immersion. If Rawls's account of moral development is right, the acquisition of a sense of justice seems to require an upbringing in an intimate family and relevant associations that enable the child to cultivate an appropriate understanding of morality and justice, and to acquire the motivation to comply their demands. That can be viewed as developing a sense of commitment to particular moral ideals, a sense of permissible and impermissible conduct, and fitting attitudes towards moral success or failure. To the extent that the objection is premised on the claim that parental anti-perfectionism leaves individuals incapable of understanding fully what it means seriously and responsibly to pursue goals, the moral and political demands of liberal citizenship give assurance that this kind of orientation to life will not be lost. Religious enrolment is, therefore, unnecessary to give individuals an understanding of what it means to adopt, reflect on, plan and execute a life plan, because that understanding is provided via the development of a sense of justice.

The second worry—the loss of childhood goods—appears more threatening. It is not merely that theorising children's advantage in terms of the development of a sense of justice and the wherewithal to lead an autonomous life is, as Macleod argues, incomplete in virtue of not offering a conception of what is good for children as children. The possibility of retrospective rejection seems to make it impermissible to encourage one's child to engage in imaginative, adventurous and carefree play or to provide opportunities for valuable aesthetic experience, athletic success, fun and amusement. If so, then

¹⁰ Consider, for example, 1 *Corinthians* 13: 11, 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, and reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways'.

the charge is that an anti-perfectionist upbringing is incapable of delivering the intrinsic goods of childhood: it restricts parents to providing a dreary or insipid upbringing on pain of retrospective rejection.

Because I lack the space fully to consider this objection, I shall simply offer some suggestions about how an anti-perfectionist might respond to it. In doing so, I shall assume that there are certain types of activity that are appealing to us as children but which we might find disagreeable as adults. Even so, it does not follow that parents must prevent their child from engaging in those activities. In virtue of its focus on the reasons that motivate parents, the non-enrolment requirement treats the intention/foresight distinction as morally relevant. Parents who allow their young child to engage in uninhibited dance knowing that she might later develop puritanical convictions that condemn dance as ungodly, do not thereby wrong their child. Even if her later rejection of the activities she pursues in childhood were foreseeable, that would not be sufficient to render her parents' conduct illegitimate. Anti-perfectionist childrearing objects to parenting that tries to shape the child's life in accordance with a particular religious doctrine, not indiscriminately to any upbringing that happens to involve the child engaging in activities that she may retrospectively reject.

Suppose, then, that the child is introduced to a range of different activities, including different kinds of sport, music, art, and literature. Part of the justification of that exposure appeals to the child's interest in developing the two moral powers reviewed above—a sense of justice and the wherewithal to lead an independent life. However, it is also the case that living within the particular background culture of a free society makes it inevitable that the child will experience a variety of those activities. Suppose, in addition, that her parents notice that their child is attracted to a certain activity and face the decision of whether to facilitate or encourage her pursuit of it. Of course, they will take various considerations into account, such as the nature and strength of the child's preferences, whether her pursuit of that particular activity needs to be balanced against other developmental considerations, risks to her psychological wellbeing (if the activity in question has a significant competitive element, for example), and so on. But in this story, there need be no violation of the non-enrolment constraint, because it is the child's preferences and her developmental needs that determine the shape of her childhood.

Anti-perfectionist childrearing is compatible with parenting that delivers the goods that some take to be distinctively good for children: a childhood involving adventure, play, and creativity. True, it does not justify such

parenting on the grounds that it enhances the wellbeing of children. It is not obvious, however, how many of the intrinsic goods of childhood are lost in virtue of the impermissibility of enrolment. It appears that many of these goods—carefree, imaginative, and uninhibited play, for example—are goods that young children choose to pursue without any parental guidance. To the extent that that is the case, parents need only facilitate their pursuit and, perhaps, share their child’s enthusiasms. The imposition of ends is not required. More needs to be said to flesh out the anti-perfectionist view of the child’s advantage as a child, but I hope its central features are reasonably clear.

8. Too Negligent?

The final set of criticisms I shall consider develop those discussed above into a direct challenge to anti-perfectionist childrearing. The central objection is that it makes parental negligence a moral requirement. The proper role of parents is to act in ways that promote rather than neglect their children’s long term flourishing. Because it sets out a principled objection to that conception of parenting, anti-perfectionist childrearing is mistaken.

For an illustration of the concern, consider the dispute about the teaching of Darwinian evolution as science. The public debate about that issue is whether the science curriculum in schools ought to give students the opportunity to learn about creationist or intelligent design theories as alternatives to Darwinian natural history. It appears to some that anti-perfectionist liberals who neither affirm nor deny the truth of particular religious conceptions of the world or universe must be committed to the view that public money should not be used to promote a sectarian irreligious conception of natural history. Critics insist that this case vividly reveals the counter-intuitive implications of this kind of liberal political morality. Not only are creationism and intelligent design demonstrably false, they claim, a schooling that presents them as a genuine alternatives to Darwinian accounts makes a mockery of science education and allows impressionable children to form the belief that scientific understanding can be gained from reading The Bible. Permitting those outcomes is, they insist, detrimental to individuals to the extent that holding veridical beliefs makes their lives go better, and worse for society in virtue of setting back the project of scientific progress, which enhances our collective ability to deal with many pressing problems.

Similar, perhaps stronger, objections of this kind might be raised against parental anti-perfectionism. The critic claims that parents have a weighty

reason to attend to their child's interest in leading a flourishing life. Compliance with that reason supports imparting to their child an understanding of the methods and current state of scientific knowledge. Such an understanding is instrumentally beneficial for the child, for it enables her to form her beliefs and desires on the basis of reliable non-normative facts, and it is, for some, a constituent of living well. Since parents have a special and, arguably, very weighty reason to attend to their child's interests, it is surely a dereliction of their duty if they fail to take a stand on important issues such as the dispute between Darwinian and creationist conceptions of biological change. Parental anti-perfectionism does not merely permit parents to offer their child a non-scientific education, it requires parents not to take a stand on the debate between ID and Darwinian evolution as accounts of natural history. In other words, it requires parents not to promote their child's interests, or so the critic argues.

Parental anti-perfectionists might offer two responses to the charge that their view requires parents to neglect their child's interests. First, they might soften the objection by pointing out that while parents may not adopt and promote a controversial comprehensive doctrine, such as a particular religious or irreligious doctrine, they are permitted, perhaps morally required, to educate their child according to the requirements of public reason. In the context of the debate about natural history, for example, parents might have weighty reasons stemming from their duty to promote their child's sense of justice to provide an education in science that conforms to well-established standards of inquiry and knowledge. In that way, it might be that parents have reasons other than the promotion of her wellbeing to encourage their child to adopt certain true or justified beliefs.¹¹ To the extent that that is the case, the differences between anti-perfectionist and perfectionist accounts of childrearing are smaller than they might at first appear and the charge of negligence loses some of its force.

The softening response depends on the soundness of the claim that public reason requires an education that imparts an adequate understanding of biology and natural history, or at least one that denies the assertions of those who advance creationist or ID accounts. That response depends, in turn, on showing that one's responsibilities as a citizen are better fulfilled if one possesses a more accurate understanding of science. I lack the space to offer a complete justification of that claim. The *prima facie* case for it is that citizens are duty bound to attend to the interests of their fellow citizens with respect to

¹¹ This is a familiar strategy within liberal thought. For an analogous argument for prohibiting trade on Sundays, see Mill ([1859] 2008, Ch. IV, par. 20).

health or energy, for example, and those interests are likely more effectively to be served through public institutions that are responsive to reliable science, just as individuals' interests in securing socioeconomic goods are better served if citizens' deliberative and electoral activity rests on good reasoning and evidence about society or the economy. Anti-perfectionists may take a stand on the soundness of claims that are relevant to our status or conduct as free and equal citizens.

The second response to the negligence claim is to bite some bullets. The softening response goes only so far, and it must be accepted that in some cases anti-perfectionist childrearing does indeed require parents to refrain from promoting their child's long term flourishing as much as they might. In that respect, parental anti-perfectionism is on a par with its political counterpart, which claims that it is impermissible for citizens to use the legal powers of the state to advance the wellbeing of other citizens. Parents may hope that their child's life goes well, but respect for her independence limits the extent to which they can legitimately make that happen.¹²

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