

SYMPOSIUM  
POLITICAL LIBERALISM VS. LIBERAL PERFECTIONISM



SECTARIANISM WITHOUT PERFECTION?  
QUONG'S POLITICAL LIBERALISM

GERALD GAUS

# Sectarianism Without Perfection? Quong’s Political Liberalism

Gerald Gaus

## I

Jonathan Quong is, in my view, the leading Rawlsian political philosopher of his generation. His *Liberalism Without Perfection*<sup>1</sup> is an original and important restatement of a Rawlsian-inspired political philosophy. Quong does not merely restate and defend Rawls; his work is an original contribution, developing a distinctive version of the public reason project. Too often those struck by the power of Rawls’s work have bowed before it — but looking at the ground is never a good vantage point for seeing further. Quong builds on, and in so doing extends, Rawls’s public reason project. As a fellow participant in this project, I am delighted by the enthusiastic reception accorded to *Liberalism Without Perfection*.

Yet Quong and I disagree as to the way forward. As is often the case with disagreements between those working in the same paradigm, these can be sharp. After all, so much more is at stake than in disputes with external critics, whose approach is based on fundamental mistakes. We disagree on the most fruitful way to proceed on what we agree is the most fruitful project.

## II

With that prolegomenon, let me press one, rather complex, query. In his précis, Quong asks:

<sup>1</sup> Oxford University Press, 2011. hereafter referred to as “LWP.”

Should liberal rights and institutions depend on engaging in ... controversial debates about the nature of the good life? Is liberalism, in this sense, just another sectarian doctrine, one that competes alongside others to use the power of the state to promote its particular views about value and human flourishing? (p. 2)

I totally agree that the answers to both of these questions should be a resounding “No!” Rejecting sectarianism is, I believe, fundamental to public reason liberalism. Note, though, that Quong characterizes “sectarianism” in a rather narrow way — a view that seeks to employ state power to advance notions of *value and flourishing*. Although that is the form of sectarianism represented by so-called “perfectionism,” there are surely others, such as those based on a moral philosophy, which may not be about value or flourishing but, say, about the correct moral code. A more general characterization of an illiberal sectarian doctrine seems to be something like:

$\beta$  is an illiberal sectarian doctrine in population  $P$  if (1)  $\beta$  is held only by  $S$ , a proper subset of  $P$ , (2), the members of  $S$  justify moral and political regulations  $R$  for the entire  $P$  population (3) by appeal to  $\beta$  and (4) only  $\beta$  could justify  $R$ .

This is only an approximate characterization, but I believe it captures the crux of illiberal sectarianism. There is nothing illiberal about being a sect; so long as  $S$  only applies  $R$  to  $S$  itself, it is merely a group of like-minded people (say a Church) regulating its common life by common beliefs. What is objectionable in the eyes of the public reason liberal, I would have thought, is when  $S$  extends  $R$  to all of  $P$ .

We can employ Quong’s distinction between foundational and justificatory disputes to make the point clearer (LWP: 214ff). “By definition” (LWP: 193) disputes within  $S$  about the contours of  $R$  (what the precise regulations should be) are “justificatory”: all members of  $S$  accept that  $\beta$  is the grounds of  $R$ , though of course they may still disagree on whether  $\beta$  leads to this or that specification of  $R$ . We can think of  $R$  as a family of regulations that sensible and competent members of  $S$  think are sound implications of  $\beta$ . So if  $S$  is, say, the Catholic Church (or Razian Perfectionists), their internal disputes about proper social regulation will be justificatory. However, disputes between the members of  $S$  and the rest of the population will be what Quong calls “foundational”: “Disagreements of this type are characterized by the fact that the participants do not share any premises which can serve as a mutually acceptable standard of justification” (LWP: 193). Illiberal sectarianism is so objectionable because, though there is foundational disagreement concerning  $\beta$  within  $P$ ,  $S$  nevertheless claims

that  $R$  regulates all of  $P$ , and is willing to enforce  $R$  on all of  $P$ . Those members of  $P$  who are not members of the sect  $S$  cannot accept  $R$  as justified. Regulation  $R$  is not part of a basic framework of political life those outside the sect can endorse.

As I said, I believe Quong is entirely right that perfectionism is a sectarian doctrine in this sense. But now the worry: isn't also Quong's "modest" version of political liberalism? Quong makes much of the fact that he does not offer an "external" justification of liberalism, which seeks to show "non-liberals" that liberalism is justified (LWP: 5). The modesty of Quong's political liberalism is that it seeks to show that "citizens *already committed* to certain basic liberal norms" can justify certain further principles to each other (LWP: 5, emphasis in original).

As Quong stresses, "by definition" disputes about justice in this group are justificatory (LWP: 193), for *by definition* they share a common set of premises from which justification proceeds. But unless the liberal sect is coextensive with  $P$ , it looks like we have another sectarian doctrine. The liberal sect ( $S_{\text{LIB}}$ ) employs Quong's method to justify to themselves a favored  $R$ , which they then insist should regulate all of  $P$ . Between  $S_{\text{LIB}}$  and the rest of  $P$  the disagreement over Rawlsian principles appears to be what Quong calls "foundational," for those in  $P$  outside of  $S_{\text{LIB}}$  do not share the basic liberal norms that serve as premises for  $R$  (but see below, §IV). It looks like Quong's political liberalism is not an opponent of sectarianism, but of perfectionist sectarianism, willing to replace it with a Rawlsian sectarianism. Isn't the Church of Perfection simply replaced with that of High Rawlsianism?

### III

We might anticipate the following, correct, reply: in one sense *any* set of moral or political principles will be sectarian in relation to *some* part of the population. For example, we have strong reason to think that psychopaths cannot grasp basic aspects of our moral practice, so it cannot really be justified to them for they do not grasp what "it" is all about. The live worry about sectarianism looms when those who wish to live with others on terms that all can see as normative, who understand the basic give-and-take, and impartiality, of moral life, are subjected to regulations and demands that, searching their understanding of the normative realm, they simply cannot

endorse. So we must ask: is  $S_{LIB}$  almost all the population, excluding only the most extreme sorts of evaluative perspectives (say, fanatics who have no interest in mutually acceptable terms for our common life), or do a lot of good-willed moral agents fall into the “not- $S_{LIB}$ ” part of the population?

Now at some junctures Quong’s version of political liberalism seems ecumenical. He tells us that “by ‘basic liberal norms’ I mean fairly abstract values such as the idea of persons as free and equal, or a general commitment to fairness in the distribution of goods and advantages amongst citizens” (LWP: 5). Stated thus it would appear that everyone who is committed to the moral life is part of the liberal sect. However, I do not think that the rest of the analysis bears this out. In the end, I believe that the liberal sect excludes a great many good-willed and sensible people. Quong’s liberal sect, I fear, is just another illiberal sect.

The key to seeing why this is so goes to the heart of his main revision of the Rawlsian theory: the place of overlapping consensus. On Rawls’s view there are three stages of justification.<sup>2</sup>

1. *Pro tanto justification*. The famous argument from the original position is, as Rawls sees it, a “free-standing” justification that turns only on certain political values and conceptions. Rawls calls this a “*pro tanto*” or as “far as it goes” justification, since it is only based on a subset of our overall evaluative considerations.

2. *Full justification* is the core of “overlapping consensus.” Here each person reflects on her overall evaluative considerations to decide whether she can endorse the *pro tanto* argument. Rawls explicitly allows that, since justification depends on one’s entire set of relevant considerations, the *pro tanto* argument can be overridden “once all values are tallied up.”<sup>3</sup> An overlapping consensus obtains when individuals find that the *pro tanto* argument is supported, or at least does not conflict with, their overall evaluative standards.

3. *Public Justification* obtains when all “reasonable members” of the society have achieved a full justification of the principles, and this is generally

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, paperback edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 374-434, at 385ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 386.

known, and shapes their relations. This is, says Rawls, a basic idea of political liberalism.<sup>4</sup>

Quong’s fundamental revision is to move the idea of overlapping consensus — which for Rawls comes *after* the argument from the original position and is the basis of full justification — to *before* the argument from the original position (LWP: 180-87). Overlapping consensus is among  $S_{\text{LIB}}$  on the shared premises for the justification of the principles of justice in the original position; drawing on their overall evaluative perspectives, a portion of the population discovers that they have the shared premises to engage in the justification of liberal principles. After uncovering the requisite shared premises *overlapping consensus plays no further role*, and so, as far as I can see, the stage of full justification is divorced from overlapping consensus and the former is dropped. Now on this view, before we can commence with political justification in the form of the original position, we must first identify a liberal sect: those individuals who are to be included in the overlapping consensus on the shared liberal premises. That is, the *very first move in political justification* is to divide the population into liberals, who participate in the foundational overlapping consensus, and the non-liberals who are excluded. Because overlapping consensus occurs at the initial stage of justification there is no way to distinguish these two groups except by first identifying the initial liberal sect for whom disputes will, by definition, be justificatory. The theory commences with a sectarian classification.

A fundamental implication of dropping the stage of full justification is that the initial liberal sect is not simply identified as a sub-group that endorses shared premises (the “basic liberal norms”) but by a further condition: *this group must also hold that these basic liberal norms, along with the idea of shared public reason, are sufficient for justification*. Once  $S_{\text{LIB}}$  has decided on the abstract principles that follow from their shared liberal convictions, all further justification must be conducted in terms of Rawlsian public reason. As Quong sees it, to allow full justification as a check on the argument from the original position renders the original position’s results hostage to “illiberal” values and unjust views (LWP: 167, 169). And so a person is illiberal, and so excluded from  $S_{\text{LIB}}$ , if, even though she accepts the basic values of free and fair cooperation, on her view these values (along with public reason) are not sufficient for her to reach judgments about basic principles of justice. Anyone who believes that her own conclusions about morality, ethics, or the will of God are *relevant* to checking whether the

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 387.

liberal “freestanding” argument is truly justificatory is expelled from  $S_{\text{LIB}}$ . Surely we have now excluded large swaths of the population on the grounds that they are “unreasonable” and hold “unjust” views. And this, even if they are good willed, wish to live with others on mutually acceptable terms, and concur that the argument from the original position gives us *pro tanto* reasons! Can Quong plausibly criticize perfectionists for being sectarian while deeming unreasonable and unjust anyone who thinks that her views on moral philosophy or religion are relevant to whether the conclusions of the rather austere freestanding Rawlsian argument are acceptable?

#### IV

Again, we might anticipate a reply. The perfectionist’s sect advances a dogma: human flourishing ( $\beta_{\text{PER}}$ ) is a — on some views *the* — ground of political justification, whether or not a person can endorse this. The perfectionist sect,  $S_{\text{PER}}$ , and the rest of population  $P$ , have what Quong calls a foundational disagreement about  $\beta_{\text{PER}}$ . In contrast, Quong’s version of political liberalism is exclusionary, not dogmatic. I think he might say that on his view, just about everyone accepts the basic liberal values ( $\beta_{\text{LIB}}$ ), and so just about everyone has a justificatory dispute about them. However, the liberal sect  $S_{\text{LIB}}$ , we have seen, does not merely claim that  $\beta_{\text{LIB}}$  and its associated norms of shared public reasoning are relevant to justification, but that they are (essentially) *all that counts* in justification; those in  $P$  outside of  $S_{\text{LIB}}$  might well disagree, and hold that other considerations are also be relevant (they may insist on relevancy of the stage of full justification). Thus we might contrast dogmatic sectarianism with exclusionary sectarianism. The former says that you must accept some premise, the latter that you cannot use some premises in your reasoning. Is this a fundamental difference?<sup>5</sup>

It is not at all clear to me that exclusionary sectarianism is less worrying than dogmatic sectarianism. Jonathan Haidt’s recent research into the moral attitudes of left-leaning liberals and conservatives, I believe, indicates that Quong’s liberal exclusionary view systematically favors the moral attitudes of those on the left while discriminating against those on the right. Thus  $S_{\text{LIB}}$ ,

<sup>5</sup> Formally, the exclusionary version conforms to the schema in section II; the variable  $\beta$  is a meta-belief about what is relevant to justifying  $R$ .

*because of its requirement that all justification must take place in terms of the shared basic liberal values and associated public reason, does not simply exclude the marginal: it is essentially a sect of the left.*

Haidt’s “moral foundations theory,” based on his extensive survey of ordinary moral reasoners, hypothesizes six different foundations of people’s moral responses to various vignettes with which they were confronted, such as the following:

Julie and Mark, who are sister and brother, are travelling together in France. They are both on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie is taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy it, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret between them, which makes them feel even closer to each other. So what do you think about this? Was it wrong for them to have sex?<sup>6</sup>

Haidt finds that subjects make very quick and firm moral judgments (80% say that it was wrong for the siblings to have sex). However, many subjects, especially left-leaning-liberals, founder in attempting to give a justification for their view in cases like this. As one subject finally concludes in response to the attempt by the interviewer to solicit the rationale for his firm judgment that “it’s totally wrong [for Julie and Mark] to have sex”: “Um . . .well . . . oh, gosh. This is hard. I really — um, I mean, there’s just no way I could change my mind but I just don’t know how to — how to show what I’m feeling, what I feel about. It’s crazy!”<sup>7</sup>

Haidt’s hypothesis is that moral responses have six dimensions, given in Display 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012), 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.



<b>Name</b>	<b>Features</b>
<i>Liberty/ oppression</i>	anti-bullying; anti-constraining others; anti-tyrant; related to egalitarianism
<i>Fairness/ Anti-cheating</i>	emphasis on playing by the rules, and doing one's part in cooperative schemes; rewards according to desert
<i>Care/Harm</i>	emphasis on not harming others; disapproval of cruelty; sympathetic concern with the needs of others
<i>Loyalty/Betrayal</i>	loyalty to groups in which we participate; sensitivity to those who betray our group
<i>Authority/ Subversion</i>	respect for rank and status relations; sensitivity to inappropriate behavior given status
<i>Sanctity/ Degradation</i>	attribution of intrinsic value and sacredness to objects and symbols; disapproval of that which disrespects these values; disgust

DISPLAY 1 SOURCE: HAIDT, *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND*, PP. 153-54, 181-85

Haidt found that left-leaning-liberal subjects display responses and justifications that very strongly focus on the Liberty/Oppression and Care/Harm dimensions. Haidt calls this the Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic morality (or WEIRD morality); a morality that is most familiar in universities. We must be careful; this is not to say that left-leaning liberals are entirely without intuitions based on the other foundations, but that their intuitions are strongly inclined to those two foundations (or dimensions) as are, especially, their justifications. On their view morality is essentially about freedom, equality and preventing harm. Morality is really *only* about treating all as free and equal, avoiding harm and ensuring that needs are met.<sup>8</sup> All other foundations are irrelevant. Consequently, left-leaning-liberals are apt to be more confused when endeavoring to provide justifications for their moral reactions in cases such as incest; they are disgusted (which relates to impurity and sacredness), but cannot parse this into their essentially anti-oppression, anti-harm morality. In contrast, Haidt shows, those associated with conservative political views (a *lot* of people!) tend to rely on *all* the foundations, both in their reactions and justifications. Whereas “liberal” subjects put great stress on only two

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, chap. 5.

foundations, “conservative” respondents rely almost equally on all.<sup>9</sup> They do not reject the “basic liberal norms,” but they draw on others as well.

We immediately see how Quong’s exclusion of all considerations not shared in the freestanding argument from the original position mandates WEIRD political justification. But WEIRD morality is simply a subset of a much wider set of moral attitudes, a set on which conservatives draw far more extensively. Quong’s initial sect, from which justification proceeds, is the group of WEIRD reasoners. To say that *only* the foundations they identify count is simply to proclaim at the outset that the left-leaning liberal moral attitudes are correct, and the rest of the population are unreasonable and unjust. Isn’t *that* sectarian?

## V

In the end I only have one big question, which breaks up into many little ones. Isn’t Quong’s original and insightful book a critique of one form of sectarianism so as to make way for another? As far as I can see, it is a philosophical justification for one highly controversial view of what is morally relevant being imposed on all of us in the name of non-sectarianism.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 161. “Very conservative” respondents rely more on authority and loyalty. In the figure referred to here Haidt was relying on an earlier version of this theory, which only specified five foundations; some of the foundations are differently characterized in this earlier version.

<sup>10</sup> My thanks to Kevin Vallier and Chad Van Schoelandt for their very helpful comments.