

Ivan Cerovac  
Faculty of Philosophy  
University of Rijeka

## An Overview of *Liberalism without Perfection*

**Summary** Quong's influential book probably represents the most sophisticated defence of Rawlsian political liberalism. This review focuses on its content and systematizes it by chapters, emphasizing its relevance both in the first part, where the author puts the liberal perfectionist position under critical scrutiny by advancing three major objections (regarding autonomy, paternalism and political legitimacy), and the second, where the author presents and defends a distinctive version of political liberalism that clearly differs from the one presented by Rawls in several important features. The review also summarizes Quong's innovative arguments regarding the nature of an overlapping consensus, the structure of political justification, the idea of public reason, and the status of unreasonable persons.

**Keywords:** Liberalism, Perfectionism, Public reason, Overlapping consensus, Quong, Rawls, Raz

5

Quong's *Liberalism without Perfection* (Quong, 2011) represents one of the most sophisticated defences of Rawlsian political liberalism, although the author's position clearly differs from the one presented by Rawls in several important features. The book itself has two main objectives; first, it builds a detailed critique of liberal perfectionism, and second, it presents a new conception of political liberalism (i.e. internal conception) and defends it from various objections.

This influential book begins with a description of the main differences between varieties of liberalism; he distinguishes perfectionist and anti-perfectionist form of liberalism, as well as its comprehensive and political form. However, Quong focuses the detailed discussion to two forms: comprehensive perfectionism (or liberal perfectionism), as presented by Raz and Wall, and political antiperfectionism (or political liberalism), presented by Rawls and Larmore. Quong's intention is first to set up a clear distinction between different forms of liberalism, and then to argue against liberal perfectionism and in favor of political liberalism.

In the following chapters Quong presents three well developed arguments against liberal perfectionism. His first objection targets famous argument from autonomy put forward by Joseph Raz, according to which the best way of justifying principles of liberal toleration is by

appealing to the value of leading an autonomous life. Raz's central claim is that liberal state can, as least sometimes, legitimately promote or discourage particular ways of life on grounds relating to their inherent or intrinsic value. Raz believes that this idea is compatible with the harm principle, since the liberal state can use means other than coercion (e.g. conferring honors, giving grants, taxing some activities or products) to protect autonomy and to promote valuable ways of life. Quong's first objection adopts Raz's idea that autonomous choice cannot be achieved unless persons are free from coercion and manipulation by others, but points out that, since all non-coercive policies used by a perfectionist liberal state are a form of a manipulation, liberal perfectionism is not consistent with the conception of autonomous choice Raz adopts, not with the perfectionist version of harm principle derived from it.

6 Second argument put forward by Quong points out that liberal perfectionism is paternalistic and therefore *pro tanto* objectionable. Though many perfectionists might endorse non-coercive methods to promote a certain way of life, Quong underlines that even non-coercive actions can be paternalistic when motivated by a negative judgment about the ability of others to lead their own lives. Paternalism is then rejected because it denies one's moral status of free and equal citizen, and since even a non-coercive perfectionism is a form of paternalism, it is rejected on the same grounds.

Quong's final argument builds on A. J. Simmons' distinction between the justification and legitimacy of a political institution. While justification appeals to institution's virtues and qualities, legitimation is achieved only by the consent of the governed. Liberal perfectionism claims that states that enable citizens to lead flourishing lives are justified, and since they are justified they are also (for the same reason) legitimate. It thus fails *Simmons' Challenge* since it is unable to construct an account of state's legitimacy without appealing to its justification. Unfortunately Quong does not discuss Estlund's influential idea of normative consent that can be used by liberal perfectionist to reconstruct the link between justification and legitimacy.

Having displayed three convincing arguments against liberal perfectionism, Quong focuses on what he sees as a far more plausible alternative, i.e. on political liberalism. This position is motivated by two notable ideas: first, a moral idea according to which states must, in order to rightfully exercise power over citizens, be able to justify it to the citizens, and

second, an assumption about the existence of pluralism. Quong points out that we should, based on their interpretation of the second idea, distinguish two different conceptions of political liberalism. External conception sees the fact of pluralism as a fact about the world to which liberalism must accommodate itself (p. 138). Basic liberal principles and institutions must thus be justified to actual citizens in existing liberal societies, despite their differences. External conception of political liberalism recognizes that we owe public justification only to reasonable citizens, but takes them in a real (non-idealized) form, drawing them from public political culture of existing liberal democracies. Quong admits that this is an important and praiseworthy goal, yet he doubts that it can be achieved. Furthermore, he displays two important arguments against this conception; it is political in the wrong way since it gives actual citizens, despite prejudices they might have and irrationalities they might display, a normative authority over what legitimacy requires. Second argument is based on an idea that liberal society needs the support of the majority of citizens in order to be stable over time. However, since it is not clear that the majority of people endorse liberal principles for the right reasons, Quong concludes that the external conception fails because it becomes dependant on too many empirical contingencies (p. 150).

7

Contrary to external conception that sees the fact of pluralism as something outside of political liberalism, internal conception understands pluralism as a consequence of liberalism itself. It is more modest since it does not aim to justify liberalism to non-liberals, but to construct a model of political justification for those who already endorse liberal values and commitments. Public justification is now owned to idealized (reasonable) citizens, making the internal conception safe from the empirical facts of our societies.

But why should we care about internal conception if it cannot solve numerous political problems that contemporary liberal societies face? Quong emphasizes that the goal of the internal conception is to show that political liberalism can create its own support under ideal conditions, and thus is not incoherent or unstable (p. 158). However, he also anticipates the next question; why do we need a coherent theory if it does not address the problems we currently face? Quong points out several points about the value of internal conception; it shows that political liberalism is not a practically impossible ideal, that we should strive to bring our own political behavior and institutions closer to ideal conditions, and finally, it allows a stronger account of legitimacy of our political principles.

Having adopted the internal conception of political liberalism, in the next few chapters Quong displays three important objections that have been pressed against political liberalism. His argumentative strategy is to show that these objections target only the external conception of political liberalism, remaining ineffective against his own position.

8

The first objection targets the traditional role of an overlapping consensus; it is seen as a final stage of a full or public justification of justice. This traditional conception holds that a justification is not complete until we show that the principles within political conception can be the subject of an overlapping consensus amongst all the reasonable comprehensive doctrines that might exist under liberal conditions (p. 162). However, critics warn us that such idea of overlapping consensus is either redundant to the justificatory process, playing no important role in the theory (since reasonable people will, by definition, endorse the political conception), or the demand for consensus might make political liberalism hostage to the claims of the unjust. Quong agrees that this objection represents an important critique of external conception of political liberalism, and claims that this traditional (external) role of an overlapping consensus should be modified. Instead of being a test that a political conception of justice must pass in order to be fully justified, the consensus should provide an initial common ground from which any attempt at public justification needs to proceed. Quong's alternative view places overlapping consensus in the beginning, not the end, of political justification (p. 163). Quong also modifies the subject of the public reason; it is no longer a conception of justice, but the fundamental idea of a society as a fair system of social cooperation amongst free and equal people. This modification is necessary since public reason requires citizens to have a fundamental stock of ideas they can draw on when they deliberate on the disagreements about justice. By modifying both the role and the subject of overlapping consensus Quong successfully dodges the first objection.

The second objection against political liberalism focuses on an asymmetry between disagreements over the good life, and disagreements over the principles of justice. Political liberalism distinguishes between reasonable disagreements (disagreements about good life) that back up the idea that claims about good life are illegitimate reasons for state action, and (unreasonable) disagreements over justice, that back up the idea that state can act on reasons of justice even when many people do not accept these reasons. However, the problem is that reasonable

people disagree on principles of justice just as they disagree on conceptions of good life. It seems that this asymmetric approach, though it plays so important role in liberal argumentation, does not seem defensible (p. 192). To answer this objection, Quong introduces two different types of reasonable disagreement: *foundational disagreements* are characterized by the fact that the participants do not share any premises which can serve as a mutually acceptable standard of justification, while *justificatory disagreements* occur when there are shared premises that can serve as a mutually acceptable standard of justification, but participants still disagree on certain substantive conclusions. Arguing from the perspective of internal conception of political liberalism, Quong concludes that disagreements about justice are, by definition, justificatory disagreements, while disagreements about good life represent foundational disagreements (p. 193). This distinction enables Quong to justify and keep the asymmetric approach.

9

The third and final objection focuses on the fact that political liberalism does not refer to the concept of truth, but limits itself to presenting political principles as reasonable. Many philosophers find this move disturbing, and Quong summarizes their concerns in three separate objections. *The priority question* raises a serious doubt when political liberalism asks us to refrain from referring to the (whole) truth; why should one, when basic matters are at stake, appeal only to public conception of justice, and refrain from appealing to the whole truth? Two more objections rise from the first one; in order to answer the priority question political liberalism must admit either that there are some metaphysical truths that support public justification (*the truth objection*), or adopt certain skepticism about people's capacity to know the truth about the good life (*the skeptical objection*). However, political liberalism cannot embrace either of these answers since both rely on controversial epistemology that political liberalism is trying to avoid. These three objections together form a strong argument against political liberalism; it seems that this position lacks the persuasive power to convince other people, who do not accept basic liberal values and commitments, to embrace them. It is clear that this objection targets the external conception of political liberalism. Quong can thus conclude that this objection misses his internal conception, since its ambition was never to justify liberalism to non-liberals, but instead to answer a question that is internal to liberal theory: what should be the structure and content of political justification amongst people who already

embrace certain liberal values (p. 254). Following his argumentative strategy based on the distinction between external and internal conception of political liberalism, Quong has successfully defended his version of political liberalism.

In the final two chapters Quong clarifies his position in detail, giving additional attention to the scope and structure of public reason, as well as to the rights of unreasonable citizens. This clarification can be extremely useful since Quong in a clear way simply places his position in relation to ideas and theories of other influential public reason philosophers: John Rawls and Gerald Gaus.

10

Having explained the idea of public reason and presented several ways how this idea can be defended, Quong focuses on the scope of public reason, i.e. to the set of political issues to which the idea is meant to apply. Unlike Rawls, who claims that the idea of public reason should be applied only to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, and not (or at least not necessary) to other democratic decisions, Quong argues that the idea should have a much broader scope – it should regulate all the political decisions in a liberal democratic society (p. 258). He is aware that it will not always be possible to produce a public justification of every political decision, but in principle believes that all instances where citizens exercise political power over one another should be subject to the idea of public reason (p. 274). Quong also considers the structure of public reason, i.e. the way in which we can justify a political decision. Arguing against Gaus, who claims that public justification can be accomplished by convergence on a political decision for different non-public reasons, Quong argues that the structure of public reason requires shared or public reasons. He develops an argument against the convergence view which relies on the importance of sincerity in public reasoning. Quong argues that, according to the convergence view, citizens might use arguments they themselves do not find convincing in order to persuade other citizens to adopt their conclusion. Such citizens would not act sincerely (in fact, they would intentionally manipulate other citizens), and Quong worries that such behavior cannot represent an acceptable form of public reasoning amongst free and equal persons.

In the finishing chapter Quong discusses the position of unreasonable citizens. He argues that unreasonable citizens should not be excluded from the benefits of citizenship, though they are rightfully excluded from the constituency of public justification. Finally, he argues that the

state can sometimes be justified in limiting or even denying the rights of unreasonable citizens. Quong adopts the argument put forward by Rawls (unreasonable citizens threaten the stability of liberal democracies), but also argues that the right claims of unreasonable citizens cease to be valid when they are used to pursue unreasonable objectives (p. 291). He concludes with an idea that the state can legitimately exercise political power over unreasonable citizens, even when such citizens are not given arguments for the exercise of state power that they can find acceptable.

Quong's argumentation is rich and insightful; he thoroughly clarifies his assumptions, presents in detail both his position and the arguments put forward by critics, as well as of the authors that he criticizes, and resourcefully anticipates many of the objections to his position. It would be worthwhile to engage future debates in the attempt to clarify the exact contribution the internal conception of political liberalism can have on contemporary liberal democracies, as well as to specify the implications of Quong's position, from those regarding global and distributive justice to those regarding actual policy-making in liberal democratic states.

11

Primljeno: 2. oktobar 2013.

Prihvaćeno: 15. februar 2014.

#### Literatura

Quong, J. (2011) *Liberalism Without Perfection*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Ivan Cerovac

Osvrt na knjigu *Liberalizam bez savršenstva*

#### Apstrakt

Uticajna knjiga Džonatana Kvonga verovatno predstavlja najsofisticiraniju odbranu Rolsovog političkog liberalizma. Ovaj pregled se usmerava na njen sadržaj, koga sistematizuje po poglavljima, naglašavajući istovremeno važnost prvog dela, u kojem autor kritički sagledava poziciju liberalnog perfekcionizma i protiv nje izlaže tri uticajna prigovora (vezano uz autonomiju, paternalizam i političku legitimnost), kao i drugog, gde autor izlaže i brani posebnu verziju političkog liberalizma koja se jasno razlikuje od Rolsove u nekoliko važnih karakteristika. Pregled takođe sažima Kvongove inovativne argumente vezane uz prirodu preklapajućeg konsenzusa, strukturu političkog opravdanja, ideju javnog uma i status nerazložnih osoba.

**Gljučne reči:** Liberalizam, perfekcionizam, javni um, preklapajući konsenzus, Quong, Rawls, Raz.