

Republicanism, Perfectionism, and Neutrality*

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THE debate between liberalism and republicanism has hitherto concentrated on the ideal of liberty or freedom: as is well known, liberals and republicans offer distinct views as to how we should understand freedom in the politically relevant sense, along with distinct views on what promoting freedom so understood might require. Another potential area of disagreement has received rather less attention, however. Whereas both historically and in recent years, liberal writers have been centrally concerned with exploring the appropriate degrees of state neutrality or impartiality towards diverse conceptions of the good, republican writers in contrast have had comparatively little to say about such issues.¹ On reflection this is surprising.

One of the distinguishing features of the classical republican tradition was its insistence on the value of a politically engaged and virtuous citizenry, which has led many to worry that republicanism must involve a perfectionist vision of the human good incompatible with modern conditions of reasonable pluralism. Contemporary civic republicans such as Philip Pettit (also referred to as “instrumental” or “neo-Roman” republicans) have argued this concern is unfounded: while it is true that robust political engagement and civic virtue are important, their importance is merely instrumental to maintaining well-ordered republican institutions. Thus properly understood, the republican tradition is “compatible with modern pluralistic forms of society.”² Given how important this instrumental turn was in reviving interest in the republican tradition, it is remarkable that it has gone more or less unexamined. Just as contemporary civic republican writers have mostly been content to point out that their doctrine need not be perfectionist, so too liberal authors have mostly been content to accept that move as sufficient to remove any objections on that score. “With classical republicanism so understood,” John Rawls observed, “political liberalism has no fundamental opposition.”³ Indeed, some have suggested that the only problem

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¹Maynor (2003) and Weithman (2004) are among the few who have addressed them in any detail.

²Pettit 1997, p. 8; cf. Sunstein 1988, p. 1541; Skinner 1991, pp. 204–5.

³Rawls 1993, p. 205.

with civic republicanism is that—pending a resolution of the aforementioned dispute about political freedom—it removes any “philosophically interesting disagreement between the two views.”⁴

But in fact many questions still remain. Is it true that republicanism need not be perfectionist? Even if the affirmative civic republican answer is correct, “need not” does not mean “must not.” One might thus wonder if perfectionist principles are nevertheless compatible with republicanism. To what extent, if at all, is republicanism committed to state neutrality or impartiality toward diverse conceptions of the good? In this paper we argue that republicans cannot endorse principles of either neutrality or impartiality. It follows, we claim, that at least some forms of perfectionism will be compatible with republican political doctrine. Does this constitute a fatal objection? Obviously, that depends. While some republicans may rest content with perfectionist bedfellows, committed anti-perfectionists (liberal or republican) will no doubt regard it is a serious problem. Either way, we aim at least to initiate further discussion by exploring the possible relationships between republicanism, perfectionism, and neutrality in greater detail and clarity than has been done previously.

In the first section of the paper, we propose working characterizations of perfectionism and republicanism, and discuss the various types of arguments one might level against the former. In the second and third sections we consider whether republicans can endorse liberal principles of neutrality or impartiality respectively, either of which would be sufficient to defeat perfectionism. We argue that republicans cannot endorse either principle: they can endorse a weaker toleration principle on the one hand, and they can aspire to provide an ecumenical justification for republicanism on the other, but neither is sufficient to resist perfectionism on general and principled grounds.

I. PERFECTIONISM AND REPUBLICANISM

Let us say that a public philosophy or political doctrine is a reasonably coherent set of normative principles for assessing public policies, institutions, constitutions, or laws as better or worse. Among these, presumably, would be principles of social justice, principles of political legitimacy, principles of economic welfare, and so forth. To be reasonably coherent, of course, a political doctrine must supply relative weights or ranks to these various principles, otherwise it would provide no guidance in cases where the principles conflict. Both the principles and their weighting must also be supported by some sort of justificatory apparatus purporting to show why *these* principles ordered in *this* way represent the best political doctrine on offer.

⁴Patten 1996, p. 27; cf. Dagger 1997.

What would qualify a political doctrine as perfectionist? Let us simply say that perfectionist political doctrines are ones that include perfectionist principles. Roughly speaking, the latter are principles taking something like the following form:

(P) Public policies, institutions, and so forth ought to be designed so as to deliberately encourage some objectively better conceptions of the good while discouraging other objectively worse conceptions.⁵

Observe here that perfectionist principles will characteristically have two main parts. First, they hold that certain conceptions of the good ought to be encouraged through favorable public treatment, while others ought to be discouraged through unfavorable public treatment. In addition, however, they maintain that such favorable or unfavorable treatment is justified with reference to the objective value of those conceptions for the persons who hold them, and not merely on some unrelated instrumental grounds. Thus to support Calvinism merely because it promotes economic prosperity, say, might not count as perfectionist, while doing so because it genuinely reflects the will of God obviously would.

Lots of people find perfectionism worrisome. Indeed, many liberals in particular regard one or another form of anti-perfectionism as central or even foundational to their political doctrines. Though arguments for anti-perfectionism vary along many dimensions, they can for our purposes be categorized as raising objections to either one of perfectionism's two main parts. On the one hand, advocates of state neutrality object to the favorable or unfavorable treatment perfectionism would afford to various conceptions of the good: these "liberal neutralists" believe that all worthwhile conceptions of the good should be afforded equal treatment.⁶ On the other hand, advocates of impartiality object to the grounds on which perfectionism justifies such favorable or unfavorable treatment: these "political liberals" believe that public policies, institutions, and so forth should be justified on grounds acceptable to all reasonable persons regardless of their conception of the good.⁷ Not all liberals advocate both neutrality and impartiality, of course, though many do. The main point is simply that ample resources for resisting perfectionism exist within standard liberal doctrine.

⁵Here we closely follow Patten 2012, p. 265; but see also Wall 1998, pp. 7–15. Note that to be non-trivial, a perfectionist principle should not merely discourage entirely *worthless* conceptions of the good: more on this detail subsequently.

⁶Prominent liberal neutralists include Dworkin 1985, Rawls 1993, and Patten 2012, among others.

⁷Some leading examples of political liberalism include Larmore 1990, Rawls 1993, and Barry 1995. Notice that we term "impartiality" here what sometimes goes by the expression "neutrality in justification." Unfortunately, arguments for and against neutrality of treatment on the one hand, and neutrality in justification on the other, have often been confounded.

Do republicans have similar resources for resisting perfectionism? As noted in the introduction, our interest here lies strictly with the sort of contemporary civic republicanism associated with the work of Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner, among others. For our purposes, let us say that civic republicanism is any public philosophy or political doctrine in which a principle promoting freedom from domination is given central place. Call this the “non-domination” principle:

(ND) Public policies, institutions, and so forth ought to be designed with the aim of reducing domination, so far as this is feasible.

Roughly speaking, we can here regard domination as being subject to arbitrary power: persons or groups experience domination to the extent that they are dependent on a social relationship in which some other person or group wields arbitrary power over them. Arbitrary power, in turn, might variously be defined as the unconstrained or uncontrolled ability to interfere with or frustrate the choices and actions of others. For the purposes of our discussion a precise definition is not necessary; however, domination in the relevant sense is paradigmatically experienced by slaves at the hands of their masters, wives at the hands of their husbands under traditional family law, unprotected workers at the hands of their employers in markets with structural unemployment, and citizen at the hands of tyrannical or despotic governments.⁸

Of course, different versions of civic republicanism will characterize the centrality of non-domination differently. On some accounts, its priority might be absolute—whether as a side-constraint or through a high position in the ranking (lexical or otherwise) of principles—admitting other principles only to the extent that they do not conflict with it. On other accounts, the non-domination principle might simply be one among many independent principles, though being more or less heavily weighted in cases of conflict.⁹ These differences will not be important for our discussion: the issues we consider will arise for any political doctrine in which promoting freedom from domination is given a central place. But to reiterate, we are here distinguishing civic republicanism proper from the sort of civic humanism (or “neo-Athenian republicanism”) associated with Hannah Arendt and others, in which the life of active political engagement and civic virtue is valued for its own sake as a form of human excellence.¹⁰ Such views are trivially perfectionist and unsuited for modern conditions. Far more interesting is the question of how far civic republicanism—which prioritizes freedom from domination and aspires to be a viable political doctrine for modern pluralistic societies—is compatible with various perfectionist principles.

⁸This arbitrary power conception of domination is discussed in further detail by Pettit 1997, ch. 2, and 2012, ch. 1; and Lovett 2010, chs. 2–4.

⁹As an example of the former view, see Pettit 1997, p. 81; of the latter, Lovett 2010, pp. 187–8.

¹⁰This distinction is noted by Rawls 1993, pp. 205–6, and is further emphasized in Pettit 1997, pp. 7–8, and Lovett 2010, pp. 215–6.

Now of course republicans may have a wide range of reasons for resisting certain specific forms of perfectionism. For those who find perfectionism especially worrisome, however, the best anti-perfectionist arguments would be both *general* and also *principled*. To illustrate, republicans would obviously have to reject a perfectionist principle that endorsed some conception of the good at odds with the very aim of minimizing domination: conceptions that supported the oppression of racial minorities, or conceptions that valorized passive suffering in the face of domination might be examples. Arguments of this sort, however, are grounded in the particular substantive content of the perfectionist principle in question, and do not apply to perfectionist principles in general. Certainly there exist many conceptions of the good whose public encouragement or discouragement would not interfere with the project of reducing domination, and indeed others whose public encouragement or discouragement might contribute to that project.

Likewise, republicans might reasonably reject a perfectionist principle that could not be implemented successfully given inherent limitations in what we can achieve through the instrument of public policy or institutional design. Some argue that public efforts to promote the good of personal autonomy, for instance, will necessarily be self-defeating, which if true would argue against any perfectionist principle proposing that we attempt to do so. This sort of argument, however, is merely pragmatic, and not derived in any principled manner from specifically republican commitments. Presumably there exist any number of perfectionist principles that could be implemented with at least some degree of success, otherwise anti-perfectionists would have nothing to fear.

Significantly, the neutrality and impartiality arguments commonly employed by liberal anti-perfectionists are both general and principled in the desired sense: they apply to all or nearly all perfectionist principles, and they reject such principles on principled and not merely pragmatic grounds. In the following sections, accordingly, we consider what sorts of general and principled arguments for resisting perfectionism republicans might construct parallel to: first, the liberal argument for state neutrality, and second, the liberal argument for impartial justification.

II. CAN REPUBLICANS ENDORSE NEUTRALITY?

Many liberals, though of course not all, advocate some variety of state neutrality. Here we should clarify that neutrality in the relevant sense refers to neutrality in the *treatment* of differing conceptions of the good, and not neutrality in the actual *effects* of whatever policies, institutions, and so forth we ultimately adopt. Thus according to Rawls, the neutral state “is not to do anything intended to favor any particular comprehensive view”; or as Patten says, the state violates neutrality “when its policies are more accommodating, or less accommodating,

of some conceptions of the good than they are of others.”¹¹ Neutrality in actual effect, whether a desirable aspiration or not, is widely regarded as chimerical. All public policies and institutions will influence—often in unintended and indirect ways—the relative ease with which citizens can pursue different conceptions of the good, and it is simply not possible to anticipate and neutralize all of these possible effects. Properly understood, therefore, the principle of neutrality might be expressed as follows:

(N) Public policies, institutions, and so forth ought to be equally accommodating of all worthwhile conceptions of the good.

Here the modifier “worthwhile” is intended merely to indicate that on any plausible account, the domain of neutrality need not extend to every possible conception of the good without exception: some conceptions may have no possible benefit for those who hold them, for instance, and others may militate against whatever prior values underlie our commitment to neutrality in the first place.¹² We leave such issues aside, however, as having no bearing on our present concerns.

It should be obvious that the principle of neutrality is more than sufficient to reject all forms of perfectionism from the back end, so to speak.¹³ This is because, however plausible our grounds for endorsing some particular form of perfectionism might be, by definition it will issue in the mandate that some conception of the good or other be afforded special favorable or unfavorable treatment. But treating some conceptions of the good more or less favorably than others is precisely what the principle of neutrality rules out. (As we shall see later, neutrality is not *necessary* to reject perfectionism, since one might also block the latter from the front end by objecting to its mode of justification.) In short, neutrality and perfectionism are inconsistent principles: holding one rules out holding the other.

The principle of neutrality thus provides liberals a general and principled instrument for resisting perfectionism. We shall next show that republicans have no similar instrument ready at hand. Our argument will proceed as follows:

- (1) The neutrality principle N is sufficient to reject perfectionism, insofar as all forms of perfectionism entail affording some conceptions of the good favorable or unfavorable treatment.
- (2) Republicans cannot endorse N.
- (3) Republicans do endorse a weaker principle, the principle of toleration T.

¹¹Rawls 1993, p. 196, and Patten 2012, p. 257, respectively.

¹²Thus John Locke excludes atheists and Catholics on the grounds that their promises to adhere to the social contract cannot be reliable; contemporary liberal neutralists commonly exclude fascists and others who are hostile to the value of equal respect. See Patten 2012, p. 253.

¹³It is *more* than sufficient insofar as neutrality rules out other things as well. Policies or institutions might give favorable or unfavorable treatment to a conception of the good without aiming to encourage or discourage it, for instance. See Patten 2012, pp. 250–1.

- (4) T is not sufficient to reject all forms of perfectionism.
- (5) No other widely accepted republican principle is sufficient to reject all forms of perfectionism because of their practical entailments.
- (6) Therefore, republicans cannot point to the practical entailments of perfectionism in order to disavow the possibility that republican political doctrine might legitimize a society characterized by perfectionism.

Step one has already been discussed. Before considering the extent to which republicans could endorse a principle of neutrality (step two), let us explain the difference between neutrality and toleration.

While the precise boundary between toleration and neutrality is no doubt difficult to specify with analytic precision, the intuitive contrast should be clear enough. Consider the state of religious freedom in England, for example.¹⁴ Most people regard the United Kingdom as a reasonably tolerant society with respect to religion, no doubt on the grounds that no special legal or economic disabilities are imposed on the holders of any particular faith, no one is denied the right to vote or hold public office on account of their faith, no important educational or occupational opportunities are barred to the members of certain faiths, and so on. (In the not-so-distant past, of course, none of this was true in England, nor indeed anywhere else.) Generalizing from this example, we might characterize a principle of toleration as follows:

(T) Public policies, institutions, and so forth should impose no special disadvantages on any worthwhile conception of the good.

Notice, however, that the United Kingdom does not meet the standard of neutrality in respect to religion since it has an established church: public policies, institutions, and so forth afford members of the Church of England at least some favorable treatment not afforded to the holders of other faiths. The principle of neutrality is thus stronger and more demanding than the principle of toleration.

There are many good reasons, both principled and pragmatic, for endorsing toleration. Indeed, no contemporary public philosophy or political doctrine should be considered plausible that does not include some sort of toleration principle. One principled republican argument for toleration starts with the observation that when public disabilities are imposed on a conception of the good, persons holding that conception often come to be regarded as socially anathema. Persons regarded as socially anathema are especially vulnerable to private or economic domination: they will be easier to exploit, for example, because others will be less inclined to hear their complaints. Holding the disfavored conception of the good will thus constitute a sort of “badge of vulnerability,” as Pettit puts it.¹⁵ The republican non-domination principle,

¹⁴Here we adapt an example used in Patten 2012, pp. 255–6.

¹⁵Pettit 1997, p. 145.

however, requires that we aim to reduce domination so far as we can. Since, presumably, there would be fewer opportunities for subjecting others to domination if no citizens were regarded as socially anathema, and since imposing special disabilities on certain conceptions of the good encourages and supports the latter, it follows that we should impose no such disabilities. Adopting the non-domination principle, therefore, plausibly commits us to the toleration principle as well.¹⁶

Can republicans go further? Probably not. As noted in the introduction, among the defining features of the republican tradition is its advocacy of measures designed to promote political engagement and civic virtue. Some examples of the sorts of measures republicans might support include mandatory voting laws; subsidies for political activities such as running for office, attending public meetings, or political organizing; and education or other policies designed to inculcate a patriotic love of republican institutions.¹⁷ None of these measures need violate the toleration principle, or at any rate at least not if properly designed. (Mandatory ballots must include an “abstain” option, for instance; educators must stress that a true love of republican institutions includes the desire to improve them through critical examination; and so on.) Such measures do, however, violate the neutrality principle. Consistent with a commitment to state neutrality, liberals could support measures that remove barriers to voting and other sorts of political activity; and they can support educational policies designed to provide students an understanding of the political system, how it works, and how to become involved if they so choose. But a firm commitment to neutrality must rule out any measures that would afford favorable treatment to those conceptions of the good in which active political engagement and civic virtue are valorized relative to those conceptions of the good in which they are regarded with indifference or even abhorrence. Since that is precisely what republicans want to do, it necessarily follows that they cannot endorse neutrality.

Of course, as we have seen, most contemporary civic republicans take great pains to stress that, even if they cannot endorse a neutrality principle, their *reasons* for advocating such measures are purely instrumental, and thus need not constitute a form of perfectionism.¹⁸ This is quite correct, and it was on this basis that Rawls said there is “no fundamental opposition” between civic republicanism and political liberalism with its commitment to impartial justification (more on this below).

¹⁶The derivation of basic liberties proposed in Pettit (2012), pp. 92–104 might provide republicans an alternative path to the toleration principle. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for noting this point.

¹⁷For discussions of such measures (unfortunately not very specific), see Skinner 1991, pp. 198–201; Pettit 1997, pp. 190–1, 257–60; Pettit 2000, pp. 133–7; and Viroli 1999, ch. 6.

¹⁸Sunstein 1988, pp. 1550–1; Skinner 1991, p. 202; Pettit 1997, p. 8; Dagger 1997, pp. 194–8; Viroli 1999, pp. 64–6.

Our point, however, is that *if* one is concerned to resist perfectionism on general and principled grounds, then republicans cannot avail themselves of one very powerful instrument for doing so—namely, the principle of neutrality. Importantly, whatever its other merits (and they are many), the principle of toleration does not suffice to rule out all forms of favorable treatment. This being the case, the path remains open to a perfectionist republican political doctrine. And indeed, at least a few authors have proposed just such a move. Paul Weithman, for instance, has argued that republican measures designed to encourage political participation and civic virtue will ultimately not succeed *unless* they are supported by a perfectionist argument to the effect that such civic-minded dispositions constitute intrinsic goods for the individuals who hold them.¹⁹ It is perhaps an open empirical question whether this claim is correct, but if so (he argues), republicans *should* be perfectionists.

Now republicans might produce some other argument for rejecting the practical entailments of perfectionism—that is, an argument not grounded in some version of the neutrality principle. Since it would be difficult to prove that no such argument could ever succeed, we instead limit ourselves to a brief consideration of what is perhaps the most promising possibility: namely, an argument that the non-domination principle generates a procedural side-constraint strong enough to rule out perfectionism.²⁰ As we have seen, however plausible our grounds for endorsing some particular perfectionist principle might be, by definition it will issue in the mandate that some conception of the good or other be afforded special favorable or unfavorable public treatment. But will not granting favorable or unfavorable public treatment to certain conceptions of the good itself constitute a form of domination, insofar as it would necessarily entail interfering in people's lives in ways they might not endorse? On the republican view, however, only arbitrary or uncontrolled interference counts as domination. Republicans differ on how precisely to characterize this claim, but to use Pettit's most recent formulation, the state's power to interfere with its citizens will not be dominating provided it is subject to a suitable degree of popular control.²¹ While perfectionist policies or institutions imposed in the absence of fair democratic debate would certainly fail this test, there is nothing in the nature of perfectionism as such to prevent its being adopted democratically. It follows that the implementation of perfectionism does not inherently involve domination, and cannot be excluded by republicans on such grounds.

Thus we conclude that republicans have no ready instrument parallel to the liberal neutrality principle for resisting the practical entailments of perfectionism on general and principled grounds.

¹⁹Weithman 2004.

²⁰We are grateful to Richard Dagger for suggesting this line of argument.

²¹Pettit 2012, pp. 146–79.

III. CAN REPUBLICANS ENDORSE IMPARTIALITY?

Republicans, as we have seen, cannot avail themselves of the neutrality principle in resisting perfectionism. But neutrality is only one of the instruments liberal anti-perfectionists have at their disposal: many liberals, though of course not all, also advocate some variety of impartiality. Roughly speaking, a principle of impartiality might be expressed as follows:

- (I) Public policies, institutions, and so forth ought to be justifiable to all persons holding a reasonable conception of the good.

In applying this principle, of course, it is important not to fall into the trap of identifying someone as “unreasonable” just in case their conceptions of the good prevent them from accepting whatever we happen to regard as a sound justification. So defined, impartiality would be trivially easy to achieve. Rather, we must have some independent criterion of reasonableness in the relevant sense. Following Rawls, let us say that people are reasonable so long as “they are ready to propose principles and standards as fair terms of cooperation and to abide by them willingly, given the assurance that others will likewise do so.”²² The principle of impartiality, we might then say, requires that public policies, institutions, and so forth be justifiable to all persons, regardless of their conception of the good, provided they are ready and willing to engage in social cooperation with others on fair terms.

Liberals might advocate impartiality for a variety of different reasons. Generally, however, impartiality is seen as flowing from a commitment to epistemic abstinence regarding ultimate questions about the good for human beings. Epistemic abstinence is not skepticism: we can agree, in principle, that some conceptions of the good may indeed be objectively better or worse than others. But given what Rawls calls “the burdens of judgment”—facts about morality, human reason, and the world in which we find ourselves that leave us doubting the superior soundness of our own judgments over those of others—reasonable people should nevertheless acknowledge that fundamental disagreements over the ultimate nature of the good are here to stay.²³ Appreciating the burdens of judgment, political liberals argue, entails that we not impose public policies or institutions on people who cannot accept the justifications we offer. The political liberal’s strategy for proceeding in the face of this constraint involves finding what Rawls calls a “freestanding” political doctrine that does not depend for its acceptance on the veracity of any particular conception or conceptions of the good.²⁴ If successful, a freestanding political doctrine would satisfy the principle of impartiality.

²²Rawls 1993, p. 49.

²³Ibid., pp. 54–8.

²⁴Ibid., p. 10.

For present purposes, we need not assess the extent to which the political liberals' project, so described, succeeds. (Communitarians, among others, argue it does not.) What is relevant here is that a commitment to impartiality, much like a commitment to neutrality, is clearly sufficient to rule out all forms of perfectionism at the front end, so to speak. This is because, however attractive the public policies, institutions, and so forth some variety of perfectionism practically entails, by definition a perfectionist principle will justify these with reference to the objective value or disvalue of particular conceptions of the good for the persons who hold them. While it may be true that the conceptions of good favored by a given perfectionist principle are indeed objectively superior to other disfavored conceptions, the burdens of judgment suggest that we lack epistemic grounds for establishing this fact with sufficient certainty: reasonable persons not holding the favored conceptions of the good will not see the force of our justifications, and would thus be forced to comply on grounds they do not accept. In short, impartiality and perfectionism are just as incompatible as neutrality and perfectionism.

The principle of impartiality provides liberal anti-perfectionists a second general and principled instrument for resisting perfectionism. We shall next show that republicans can employ this instrument no more than they can the principle of neutrality. Our argument proceeds as follows:

- (7) The impartiality principle I is sufficient to reject perfectionism, insofar as all forms of perfectionism rely on justifications that reference the objective merits or demerits of particular conceptions of the good.
- (8) Republicans cannot endorse I.
- (9) At best, republicans can aspire to justify their political doctrine on ecumenical grounds.
- (10) Requiring that justifications be ecumenical does not rule out all forms of perfectionism.
- (11) Therefore, republicans can point neither to the practical entailments of perfectionism (from 6, above), nor to its justificatory structure in order to disavow the possibility that republican political doctrine might legitimize a society characterized by perfectionism.

We have already discussed step seven. Proceeding in order, let us consider why republicans cannot endorse an impartiality principle.

In order to defend the non-domination principle, republicans must presumably advance a two-part argument.²⁵ First, they have to show that non-domination is a primary good—a sort of all-purpose resource any rational person would always want more of rather than less, other things equal, regardless of her particular conception of the good.²⁶ Second, having established that non-domination is a

²⁵We are grateful to Colin Bird for helping to clarify our argument here.

²⁶Pettit 1997, pp. 90–2; Lovett 2010, pp. 134–6.

primary good, republicans must further show that it deserves some degree of priority over the distribution of other primary goods (income and wealth, offices and opportunities, and so on) in our preferred political doctrine. The question thus hinges on whether there exist plausible conceptions of the good the holding of which would render it impossible for a reasonable person to accept either the asserted value of non-domination or its priority. If so, then public policies, institutions, and so forth justified with reference to the non-domination principle would simply have to be imposed on such persons, violating impartiality.

With respect to the second part of the republican argument, at any rate, Pettit has proposed what purports to be a broadly impartial argument for priority.²⁷ Roughly speaking, he argues that political doctrines will be most effective when they concentrate on as few core values as possible, and that accordingly the best values to concentrate on are precisely those whose specific promotion will in the event tend to service as wide a range of needs as possible. Non-domination is just such a good, he claims, insofar as our efforts to promote freedom from domination will necessarily have far-reaching beneficial consequences for all aspects of the social order (for instance, we may need to attend to people's basic needs so as to ensure they are not vulnerable to domination, etc.).

Not everyone will be convinced by this argument, or its purported impartiality. Even if the argument goes through, however, there remains the other issue of establishing that non-domination counts as a primary good in the first place. Republican authors propose somewhat different lines of support for this claim, variously connecting the value of non-domination to personal self-development, minimal autonomy, or human flourishing, for example.²⁸ But such arguments are bound to be controversial. Consider, for instance, a conception of the good in which freedom, fame, fortune, and so forth are regarded as meaningless, and suffering as an illusion: the best life for a human being is one of detached spiritual meditation and complete withdrawal from the public sphere. On such a view, degrees of domination have no bearing on genuine human flourishing. Indeed, from Plato and Aristotle down to the present day, many have believed it not only *possible* to lead a fully flourishing human life while subject to domination, but for some not possible *except* under such a condition. Consider a conception of the good according to which women cannot realize their special purposes in life unless subordinate to the unaccountable authority of a husband: on such a view, extending freedom from domination to women would actually make their lives go worse.

Importantly, persons holding conceptions like these might nevertheless count as reasonable in the relevant sense. That is, they might plausibly combine their particular conception of the good (rejecting the value of non-domination) with a

²⁷Pettit 2005; cf. Pettit 1997, ch. 4, and 2012, pp. 126–7.

²⁸See Maynor 2003, pp. 52–9, for a self-development argument; Laborde 2009, pp. 152–6, for a minimal autonomy argument; and Lovett 2010, pp. 130–4, for a human flourishing argument.

willingness to engage in social cooperation with others on fair terms: they might be perfectly willing to obey the law, say, and to refrain from imposing their views on others, provided perhaps they are offered an exemption from various public duties and are granted the right to organize their family life and educate their children according to their own lights. Republicans strongly committed to the priority of non-domination will not be able to accede to these demands, except perhaps as a concession to political feasibility. Public policies, institutions, and so forth justified with reference to reducing domination would in such cases have to be imposed, violating impartiality.

While republican political doctrine cannot achieve full impartiality, it can aspire to be an “ecumenical” ideal.²⁹ Let us say that an ecumenical justification is one that could be accepted by a suitably wide range of reasonable people holding diverse conceptions of the good in a given political or historical context. While a genuinely impartial justification is also (trivially) ecumenical, merely ecumenical justifications are not fully impartial: an ecumenical justification may succeed in one time and place while failing in another, and even where it does succeed, not every reasonable person will necessarily fall under its orbit.

It is easy to imagine that arguments for the non-domination principle could satisfy this weaker requirement. In contemporary western societies, for example, many will agree on the central importance of non-domination, especially once that value is shown to cohere plausibly with other central values in the western political tradition.³⁰ Indeed, the broad-based appeal of freedom from domination as a public ideal has played no small part in motivating the recent revival of the republican tradition. Crucially, however, the requirement that justifications be ecumenical does not suffice to rule out all forms of perfectionism: it rules out only those forms of perfectionism whose justifications lack broad-based support in a given political or historical context. But suppose we follow John Maynor and ground the value of non-domination in a perfectionist ideal of personal self-development, and thus explicitly characterize republican political doctrine as a “comprehensive” theory.³¹ If it is indeed true that the non-domination principle has widespread appeal in contemporary western societies, then we have some reason to expect it would be equally compelling in the same context elaborated along perfectionist lines. It follows that republicans cannot necessarily exclude perfectionism on account of its justificatory structure.

Thus we conclude that just as republicans have no ready instrument for resisting perfectionism on general and principled grounds parallel to the neutrality principle, neither do they have one parallel to the impartiality principle.

²⁹Pettit 1997, p. 96, n. 3; cf. Dagger 1997, pp. 191–2.

³⁰Pettit 1997, ch. 4; 2005.

³¹Maynor 2003, esp. ch. 4.

IV. CONCLUSION

Civic republicans face a clear choice. Either they must rest content with the possibility that their doctrine does not permit appeals to the more robust forms of anti-perfectionism, or else they must give up on their substantive arguments for non-domination and its priority. Now the first option is only a genuine problem for those republicans who feel the pull of stronger forms of neutrality and impartiality. Civic republicans who eschew such principles—and even more so those who make thoroughgoing perfectionist arguments for their views—will no doubt be unconcerned. But at least some contemporary republicans might rest uneasy knowing their central commitments prevent their adopting the anti-perfectionist principles of neutrality on the one hand, or impartiality on the other.³²

So even if our argument doesn't apply to all of the wide variety of republican theories, it should still serve two significant purposes: first, it should give the aforementioned aspirationally anti-perfectionist republicans pause over their commitments and standard justifications; and second, it should draw (or perhaps merely reinforce) a clear dividing line between republicanism and liberal anti-perfectionists. Whereas many liberals have sought to embrace various anti-perfectionist arguments—indeed, often as a cornerstone and key distinctive feature of their doctrines—republicans have not given the issue of perfectionism and its alternatives nearly so much attention. That they ought to do so is a significant upshot of our argument.

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³²Sunstein 1988, p. 1541; Pettit 1997, p. 291; Laborde 2009, p. 83.

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