

LIBERALISM AND THE CITY

Thesis submitted for the degree of "Doctor of Philosophy"

By

Avigail Ferdman

Submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

July 2015

ABSTRACT

The instances where morality is confronted with reality present some very interesting and urgent theoretical and normative challenges. One of which is that any democratic, liberal, pluralistic society has to acknowledge the fact of competing, incompatible, conceptions of the good life among its citizens. According to contemporary liberal approaches, societies can ensure equal concern and respect for their citizens by exercising state *neutrality* towards competing conceptions of the good, so as not to proclaim some group or conception of the good as worthier than others. The theoretical challenge, as this research proposes, is that the principle of liberal neutrality is often incongruent with certain social domains such as urban spatial organization, which is characterized by inflexibility, durability and mutual exclusion of options. The research offers a criticism of contemporary liberal theories, such as Political Liberalism, Comprehensive Liberalism and ‘Even-handed’ Liberalism, on the grounds that they neglect to address the challenge that spatial organization presents. This neglect highlights important theoretical difficulties in each theory.

These difficulties originate from assumptions shared by those theories, that the social world is predominantly a world of ‘both/and’ options, where the responsibility of the state is to protect the existence of these options and be neutral towards them. A more careful investigation shows that in fact, the spatial domain is an ‘either/or’ domain, in which the state has to commit to a particular conception and reject others, leading to the inapplicability of neutrality among conceptions of the good.

Political Liberalism, for example, insists on ‘public reason’—appealing to neutral reasons as the legitimate way to justify the coercive power of the state. Nevertheless, Rawlsian public reason explicitly excludes spatial organization from its scope, even though according to the criteria formulated by Political Liberalism, spatial organization ought to be included in the scope of public reason. Attempts to expand the scope of public reason to include distributive questions merely push the problem to a higher level of abstraction, that of adjudicating between universal values, which defies neutral justification.

According to Comprehensive Liberalism, neutrality means that persons owe each other the conditions for freedom of choice—a complex and opportunity-rich environment. This however is in direct contradiction with the commitment to equality of resources and state non-interference in the freedom to use one’s resources (within the bounds of

equal respect) to pursue uncomplicated, homogenous or uniform ways of life. Thus it is impossible to accommodate equality of resources with a rich background of opportunities, but prioritizing either one will inevitably rely on non-neutral justifications. Even-handed Liberalism, a version of Comprehensive Liberalism that acknowledges the inevitability of state interference in certain domains such as language regulation, cannot apply the universal framework tested on language regulation on spatial organization, since the latter requires public debate on outcomes and on the motivations of spatial policies—something which is contradictory to the requirements of liberal neutrality.

Liberal-Perfectionism is potentially an alternative to liberal neutrality, as it non-neutrally defends personal autonomy as fundamental to human flourishing. However, this approach does not provide principles to deal with ‘either/or’ decisions between different policies that could each lead to autonomy harms to different persons. The research therefore develops an alternative approach to justifying spatial organization. Its point of departure is that the state is responsible for the conditions of human flourishing, which cannot be grounded on neutral premises. Yet it retains the liberal commitment to equal concern and respect, thus is best seen as a version of Liberal-Perfectionism. The approach further draws on both Comprehensive Liberalism and Liberal-Perfectionism’s idea that human flourishing is conditioned on having meaningful choice, that this is fundamental for personal autonomy, agency and freedom. Persons that face a variety of options can make authentic choices, and, as importantly, can intelligently review and revise their own conceptions, in light of other models and ideas. Therefore, the proposed approach develops a principle for spatial policy which favours the diverse over the homogenous, even at the cost of disadvantaging homogenous preferences. Especially since spatial patterns are durable, protecting and promoting variety is all the more important for guaranteeing the real prospects for meaningful choice and human flourishing—not only for present citizens, but as importantly, for future persons as well.

Ultimately, the critique of liberal neutrality and the proposed Liberal-Perfectionist approach look promising for a wider context of distributive-justice debates, which include other public-goods that belong to the ‘either/or’ category and are characterized by mutual-exclusion, inflexibility or durability: language regulation, multicultural policies and the regulation of other non-universal public goods.

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