

concepts of personal desert and compensatory justice will find this commitment somewhat hollow. Nevertheless, these essays provide a stimulating exploration of one line of enquiry, and a fine exemplar for applied philosophy from any perspective.

**Ian Chowcat**

Open University, UK

**George Sher**

*Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics.*  
New York: Cambridge University Press 1997.  
Pp. 251.

US\$54.95 (cloth: ISBN 0-521-57068-9);

US\$18.95 (paper: ISBN 0-521-57824-8).

**Michael J. White**

*Partisan or Neutral?*  
*The Futility of Public Political Theory.*  
Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1997.  
Pp. 193.

US\$52.50 (cloth: ISBN 0-8476-8453-9);

US\$21.95 (paper: ISBN 0-8476-8454-7).

The ideal of the neutral state is a long-established and long-contested feature of liberal political philosophy. According to this ideal, the state should deal with the plurality of citizens' understandings of the good by refusing to take sides: it should legislate based on reasons that are or ought to be compelling to every citizen, whatever their religious or moral commitments. This ideal is tied to a pluralistic conception of legitimacy, whereby basic political institutions are legitimate only if justifiable to the diversity of reasonable citizens.

George Sher and Michael J. White both seek to challenge the liberal ideal of neutrality, and to deny connections between neutrality and legitimacy. Sher criticizes various defenses of state neutrality, arguing for a perfectionist alternative that he suggests is rationally warranted (and thereby legitimate in pluralist terms). White advances a critique not only of liberal neutrality, but of political theories that thin down their claims in pursuit of pluralist legitimacy; he instead proposes that we treat politics as a partisan contest of normative views.

Notwithstanding the wealth of recent philosophical discussions of liberal neutrality, Sher's book offers a useful contribution to debate, perspicuously

laying out various defenses of the ideal and considering these with analytical rigor. His proposal is that 'by combining some state efforts on behalf of the good with some liberal strictures against state excess, we may hope to increase significantly the likelihood that many citizens *will* live genuinely good lives' (3).

Sher denies himself one easy riposte to neutralism — that state actions inevitably favor some groups over others — noting that plausible liberal approaches treat neutrality as a property not of outcomes but of action-guiding *justifications* for laws, policies, or actions. He takes up a series of defenses of neutralism, beginning with those based on autonomy: we each must formulate, execute, and monitor our own life plans, and state perfectionism preempts this autonomous choice. A first version of this defense appeals to the value of living autonomously, but Sher counters that all political arrangements non-rationally shape preferences, and so a government doesn't further diminish autonomy by shaping preferences in light of a particular conception of the good. A second version of the defense appeals to the imperative of respect for autonomy as a constraint on the pursuit of value; under this rubric, Sher shows problems with Rawls' neutralist veil of ignorance and Dworkin's defense of neutralism as a way to avoid double-counting preferences. Sher next takes up pragmatic defenses of neutrality: he concedes dangers posed by the perfectionist state, but points out that safeguards warranted by a 'liberalism of fear' such as Shklar's — the separation of powers, an independent judiciary, and legally entrenched rights, for example — are not premised on neutrality. Finally, Sher takes up epistemological arguments for state neutrality, which suggest that the state should not try to promote the good because we can't reliably know what it is. He points out that general and moral skepticism cannot ground neutralism, itself a normative view; yet a skepticism that applies to the good and not the right finds little plausible ground for this epistemological distinction.

With these treatments of arguments from autonomy, prudence, and skepticism, Sher persuasively de-couples legitimacy from neutrality, leaving it open for the state to legislate on the basis of some substantive conception of human flourishing. The second task Sher sets himself in *Beyond Neutrality* is specifying a defensible perfectionism — defensible not only to adherents of some particular moral doctrine, but to any reasonable person.

Sher's perfectionism centers upon human capacities that are inherently good because, when successfully exercised, they further "certain very abstract goals that (virtually) all humans unavoidably seek' (11). Fundamental capacities include understanding the world, acting rationally, forming close relationships, decency, and good taste. Each fundamental capacity connects to near-universal and near-inescapable goals: taste and decency, for example, allow receptivity to aesthetic, moral, and cognitive reasons. Sher's theory is pluralistic, since its elements admit of multiple specifications and orderings, but is also meant to be objective and sufficiently determinate to guide political practice.

Sher can't, however, have it both ways: his perfectionism can't tenably claim both objective defensibility and sufficient determinacy to do political work. The very abstract level at which capacities and goals are described allows appropriation from a diversity of moral perspectives: a Kantian will not deny that acting rationally is important to attaining fundamental life goals, nor will a utilitarian, nor will a Catholic natural lawyer. Yet the very abstraction that allows Sher's perfectionism to fit with a diversity of moral perspectives makes it inert: only when interpreted in terms of a thicker conception of the good can it guide political decisions on such things as public assistance, educational policy, or regulation of the entertainment industry (246). Any perfectionism that seeks pluralist legitimacy is caught on the horns of a dilemma: either it attains legitimacy at the cost of ability to guide practice, or is action-guiding but thereby illegitimate in pluralist terms.

Sher may be right that perfectionism is no more impositional than state neutrality: each allows citizen identities to be formed, and choices to be rewarded, so as to favor some life courses over others. But questions about power seem warranted in *both* cases: whose values are favored by a particular political dispensation? Whose protests count? What ways of life are being cultivated out of existence? And in the case of a deliberately imposed perfectionism, in whose eyes is this vision of perfection warranted or unwarranted?

One of Sher's defenses of perfectionism is that today's imposition can become tomorrow's choice: insofar as perfectionism changes ways of life, it also can lead agents to prefer its conception of the good. Once the state's conception of the good comes to be favored by citizens, the perfectionist state lives up to the norm of pluralist legitimacy. Indeed, Sher could bite the bullet of cultural specificity and claim that while a suitably value-laden version of his perfectionism would not persuade human beings as such, it is already persuasive to citizens of contemporary liberal democratic states. Sher, in other words, might seek to avoid the horns of the dilemma sketched above by filling out his perfectionism to reflect an existing overlapping consensus. This route to pluralist legitimacy is well-worn by 'political liberals' like Rawls and Larmore, who seek to develop an action-guiding conception of justice by teasing out the shared public understandings underlying already-legitimate liberal intuitions and practices.

Michael White targets precisely this strategy of justification. He concedes that many liberal policies and principles are accepted from diverse moral and religious perspectives, but denies that this overlapping acceptance evidences shared public values: liberal practice is best understood as a set of unsystematic and piecemeal compromises, accepted by different groups for different, prudential reasons. White's central criticism of political liberalism is that it claims to spell out principles underlying liberal practices, but 'typically, the "theoretical infrastructure" proves to be more controversial than the collection of doctrines or practices comprehended in the compromise that the theory is supposed to secure and stabilize' (9).

This critical point is cogent and important, but could in fact be made quite briefly; instead, White reiterates it through chapters of quirky prose, exces-

sively lengthy quotations, and hasty characterizations then rejections of complex philosophical positions. (White, for example, assimilates Habermas' theory to Larmore's, and takes a quick refutation of the latter to dispense with both; one has to question the seriousness of a project that rejects Habermas' whole approach to normative justification without reference to a single Habermasian argument or text.) White makes interesting points about certain liberals, but the overall impression is less of a concerted book-length argument than a demonstration of the breadth of White's historical, political, and philosophical preoccupations.

Notwithstanding these weaknesses, the constructive argument offered toward the end of *Partisan or Neutral* in fact offers an instructive counterpoint to Sher. Where Sher seeks a rationally warranted perfectionism, White sets aside the very ideal of pluralist legitimacy. Political liberalism is not publicly justifiable in the way it hopes, but this just puts it 'on all fours' with any other partisan doctrine: political justification is an inherently sectarian affair. (In the last chapter of the book, White articulates the Catholic 'paleo-natural law theory' he himself favors.)

The political liberal project of legitimating determinate, action-guiding principles may fail in the way White suggests, but liberalism generally is motivated by the recognition that struggles over values can go well or badly. White is happy to see modern politics as 'civil war carried out by other means':

According to my relatively benign interpretation, this is simply a matter of the normal nitty-gritty business of democratic politics as compromise and acquiescence, the piecemeal, contingent, and revocable formation of alliance, agreements, and *modi vivendi*, and the forging of consensus when we can. (164-5)

It's important to note, though, that these 'other means' can range from respectful debate to bitter partisanship to the legal suppression of minority religious or cultural practices. Measures across this range may be accepted, in particular cases, on prudential grounds — especially when civil war by war-like means looms as the alternative. But reducing legitimacy to this sort of *realpolitik* — where 'the only public justification for much of the political process and its output is its political workability' (165) — too hastily dismisses the democratic aspiration at the heart of a pluralist standard of legitimacy. Political philosophers do well to reflect on better and worse ways that partisan perspectives may contend. What sorts of institutions tame partisanship and conduce to the discovery of common or convergent goals? What norms of discourse and justification allow successful intercultural dialogues? What citizen virtues and capacities allow pluralism to take on its least bellicose forms? What dangers lurk in public struggles over state enforcement of values, and what sorts of safeguards can temper these dangers?

These questions take us back to familiar liberal norms, if not of neutrality then of due process, fairness, and impartiality. The questions also highlight the fact that while liberal norms may not amount to an action-guiding

structure of principles acceptable to the range of groups and doctrines, these norms are more than mere compromises from disjoint perspectives. Liberalism as ideology and practice gradually changes the character of diverse groups and perspectives. We need to be aware of the impositions and injustices entailed by this liberal cultural project, but also of its positive elements. The common institutions, principles, terms, and dispositions of liberal public life are hybridized and interpreted from plural perspectives, but the resulting melange allows citizens to imagine and enact common goods amidst the rough and tumble of politics: this is not an advantage to be lightly set aside.

**David Kahane**  
University of Alberta

**Quentin Skinner**

*Liberty before Liberalism.*

New York: Cambridge University Press 1998.

Pp. xiv + 142.

US\$34.95 (cloth: ISBN 0-521-63206-4);

US\$9.95 (paper: ISBN 0-521-63876-3).

*Liberty before Liberalism* is a revised version of Quentin Skinner's Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge. Skinner's expanded lecture describes the rise and fall in England of what he calls 'neo-roman' conceptions of civil liberty and the state. Skinner reviews the English reception of neo-roman doctrine (Part I), clarifies the sources of the 'liberal' theories that replaced neo-roman ideas (Part II), and shows (Part III) how the history of philosophy can break the spell of unconsidered scholarly consensus. Philosophers too often find themselves unknowingly enchanted by values embedded in their present way of life. Skinner believes that '[t]he history of philosophy, and perhaps especially of moral, social and political philosophy, is there to prevent us becoming too readily bewitched' (116).

Skinner's distinction between 'neo-roman' and 'liberal' or 'negative' liberty will not be familiar to most philosophers. Many will remember Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between 'negative' and 'positive' liberty, first made over forty years ago in Berlin's own inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford. Berlin's 'negative' liberty meant much the same as Skinner's does: not being 'prevented by other persons from doing what I want' (113-14). But Berlin's definition (and rejection) of 'positive

liberty' as 'self-mastery' was much more opaque. In the guise of a purely neutral philosophical analysis of the concept of liberty Berlin unreflectively repeated the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century monarchist brief against older (Roman) conceptions of liberty as citizenship and equality under law. Berlin and many of his colleagues were, in varying degrees, 'bewitched' by liberal Anglo-American academic orthodoxy (116). Skinner provides the history to cast off this enchantment.

By 'neo-roman' liberty Skinner means republican liberty, as recently well described in Philip Pettit's book on *Republicanism* (Oxford 1997) (xi). Skinner's lecture provides the best existing account of the early English history and development of republican moral and political ideas. Skinner himself avoids the term 'republic' because most British readers now associate republics with the absence of kings (22-3n67). In fact, republican doctrine usually does preclude monarchy, and other forms of domination (55), but the word's central meaning requires only that government should serve the common good or '*res publica*' of all those subject to its rule. By calling this 'neo-roman' Skinner reminds his readers how much republican conceptions of liberty owe to republican Rome, and to the reading of Latin classics by English scholars and statesmen.

'Neo-roman' liberty signifies citizenship in a free society (23), which is to say an 'empire of laws and not of men' (75). Republicans believe that governments must always act for the common good (62), so that no one ever becomes subject to any other person's unfettered private will (71). Securing such government requires popular sovereignty (27), representation (not direct democracy) (32), a bicameral legislature (34), and checks and balances in the constitution (35), to guarantee just laws to every citizen alike (45). Not all self-styled republicans would endorse all these requirements of neo-roman liberty (33), but Skinner clarifies their shared understanding that liberty entails equal citizenship, in a free state (10, 23-4). Anyone without such citizenship will be dependent on the will of others, and therefore a slave (36, 46).

To call this 'liberty before liberalism' is somewhat misleading, since most authors usually viewed as early 'liberals' actually shared the neo-roman conception of what liberty should be. Skinner gives John Locke as an example (55n177), but one might add nearly all of Locke's Whig successors and contemporaries. Significant changes in the word's meaning began with Thomas Hobbes, who hoped to justify an absolute sovereign as the only legitimate source of law and justice (4). Various royalists took up Hobbes' doctrine during the English civil war, asserting that law ends, where liberty begins (and vice versa) (4-5). If so, then all states are equally despotic, including 'republics', because all states must impose laws on their citizens. Robert Filmer, Benjamin Constant, Isaiah Berlin and many others have embraced this contention, first developed to support Charles I in his fight against Parliament (60).

Skinner is the most interesting, reflective and productive historian writing in English today, and philosophers are fortunate to have the fruits of his