

Libertarian paternalism vs. autonomy: Challenging the old ways in the era of the behavioural sciences.

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There is an old policy question that continues to draw the interest of social scientists and political theorists: should governments promote valuable options and lifestyles or would they rather be well advised to refrain from welfare-promoting policies based on (more or less controversial) ideals of the good life? *Neutralists* insist that they ought not to; *perfectionists* support such policies. Current government practice in most countries suggests that a moderate perfectionist principle prevails: *liberal perfectionism* proposes a type of welfare-promoting legislation and policy that respects value-pluralism and rejects autonomy-restricting policies, especially those that rely on coercion and/or manipulation. The tools most readily available to the liberal perfectionist are *state campaigning* (i.e. *persuasion*), *education* and *economic incentives*. At the core of these perfectionist theories often lies the idea that a human life cannot be good and fulfilling unless it is shaped and endorsed by the person whose life it is – a process commonly described in the work of Joseph Raz and others as *self-authorship*. In the last few years, a new aspect has been added to the debate on welfare-promoting policies: *libertarian paternalism* relies on behavioural economics to produce policy recommendations that promise to promote personal welfare without restricting freedom of choice. This promise *prima facie* seems similar to the basic ideas shared by most liberal perfectionists. In this paper, this similarity is briefly discussed to the end of highlighting the oft-discussed tension between freedom and government intervention in the context of welfare-promoting policies. Then, the tools of libertarian paternalism (known as *nudges*) and their effect on endorsement, properly understood for our purposes, is analysed. This part of the paper relies on a fusion of behavioural economics and normative evaluation. In light of this analysis, *state campaigning* is critically explored, as one of the

most widely used liberal perfectionist tools, as well as one of the most allegedly uncontroversial nudges. This discussion aims to shed some light on several areas of liberal perfectionist policies that were commonly understood as unproblematic but cannot be conveniently set aside given the developing discussions of libertarian paternalism and nudging across the social sciences. The paper concludes with an optimistic view of the developing relation between philosophical perfectionism and the behavioural sciences.

Keywords: behavioural economics; autonomy; nudging; liberal perfectionism; welfare policies; libertarian paternalism.