

Human Flourishing, Liberal Theory, and the Arts: A Liberalism of Flourishing

Menachem Mautner,
New York: Routledge Publishing, 2018,
ISBN 9780815396208

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This book provides an interesting and much-needed discussion of the relationship between aesthetics and liberal political philosophy. Some political theorists neglect art, seeing it as something that we all vaguely know to be important, but which should not be afforded extensive discussion when more pressing topics should take priority.¹ Menachem Mautner shows how this view is misguided, and that understanding and enjoying the arts is an essential aspect of human flourishing and moral development. Even if you have reservations about Mautner's preferred variety of liberalism, or some of his specific arguments and policy recommendations, the author has done a fine job of showing that liberal philosophers should take the arts more seriously in general – particularly the unequal access to art in modern societies. The book is also noteworthy for the way in which it beautifully combines different approaches; Mautner employs ideas from analytic political philosophers, aestheticians, sociologists, and continental political theorists. The book will undoubtedly be important reading for all those interested in liberal theory, aesthetics, and the connection between politics and art.

In the first two chapters, the book analyses different variations of “the liberalism of flourishing”, a form of liberalism often associated with 19th century theorists such as JS Mill and TH Green. Chapter three makes an interesting case for the attractiveness of this kind of liberalism compared to the alternatives, such as autonomy-based liberalism (see, e.g., pp.77-78). Next, Mautner makes the case that engagement with “true art” is essential for intellectual and moral flourishing. Finally, he argues that the state should therefore provide extensive support for the arts, and that art, being strongly tied to emotions and “big meaning”, can mitigate the “threat” to liberalism posed by some religious groups.

One difficulty for Mautner is, of course, how to define the term “art”, or at least to give an account of what constitutes good art. Throughout chapter four, he gives the sense that we have a general intuitive grasp of what true art is, and there is no need to be precise about the philosophical nuances. However, he later says that “...in the course of their leisure, adults engage...with various cultural products...these products are much more of the entertainment type than art.” (p.109) The issue is that, in some passages at least, the author seems to be assuming a fairly narrow definition – so that “art” is defined to exclude most things that are not “high culture”. This is the famous “lofty approach” to cultural policy which, in Ronald Dworkin's words, “...insists that art and culture

1. The book gives Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, and Bruce Ackerman as examples. See Ronald Dworkin, “Can a Liberal State Support Art?”, in *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 221-222.

must reach a certain degree of sophistication, richness, and excellence in order for human nature to flourish, and that the state must provide this excellence if the people will not or cannot provide it for themselves.”² Of course, not all proponents of state support for the arts take this path, and many of them have advocated using a more inclusive definition of the arts, so that we make room for (e.g.) popular culture, folk arts, and minority arts.³ If Mautner is advocating something closer to the lofty approach, I think he can be criticized for failing to provide a detailed justification for this. To be fair, Mautner does not always write as though all good art must be highbrow (see p.114), so perhaps we should simply fault him for not being clear enough on this point.

A different problem is that the book sometimes chastises autonomy-minded liberalism for neglecting positive freedom and the material and cultural conditions that will allow flourishing (see, e.g., pp.64-68). But on the other hand, it also often treats Joseph Raz as a liberal theorist who has taken concerns about flourishing into account (see pp.80-81). Given that Raz is one of the classic advocates of autonomy-based liberalism, however, it appears that more discussion of these issues is necessary. Autonomy-minded liberals may well challenge the book’s implication that they endorse a “legalistic” view of politics that neglects questions about “big meaning” (see especially chapter 6). They will likely remain unconvinced that perfectionist (or even anti-perfectionist) autonomy-based liberalism cannot take concerns about art and human flourishing seriously enough.⁴

There are, of course, many other difficult questions for this book; this is hardly surprising, given the ambitious and wide-ranging nature of the project. None of this, however, detracts from its interest and originality.

2. Dworkin, “Can a Liberal State Support Art?”, 221-233.

3. See Margaret Wyszomirski, “Controversies in Arts Policymaking”, in *Public Policy and the Arts*, eds. K. Mulcahy and C. Swaim (Boulder: Westview 1982), 13-14.

4. See Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), esp. 422; see also Ben Colburn, *Autonomy and Liberalism* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2010).

Book Review

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