Advancing Value Pluralist Approaches to Social Policy Controversies: A Case Study of Welfare Conditionality

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Abstract

'Value pluralism' is a strand of analytical philosophy that posits the plurality of morally significant values. By enabling systematic mapping of the diversity of moral registers within which social policy concerns might legitimately be considered, we contend that value pluralist-inspired analysis can aid constructive policy dialogue. Our argument is founded on four claims: first, as a matter of normative principle, value pluralism represents a defensible ethical standpoint; second, as a matter of fact, people are attracted to a plurality of moral values; third, as a matter of democratic legitimacy, pluralism offers a means of (partially) reconciling rival moral claims; fourth, as a matter of political strategy, pluralism offers a pragmatic approach that can engage protagonists on their own terms. To demonstrate its efficacy, we apply this pluralist approach to the vexed question of welfare conditionality, which we interrogate via six normative perspectives (rights, utilitarianism, contractualism, communitarianism, paternalism and social justice).

Introduction

Many if not most social policy challenges pose not only technical questions (about the best means to agreed ends) and political questions (about which coalition of interests can gain sufficient power to implement their policy agenda), but also fundamental *ethical* issues, pertaining to deeper concerns about the rightness or wrongness, or goodness or badness, of societal arrangements. These ethical questions often tap into our most deep-seated personal views about how society ought to be organised, meaning that debates can sometime seem stuck at an impasse between profoundly opposed factions. This paper seeks to signal a philosophically-informed route to more constructive dialogue in areas of profound tension in social policy, reflecting our view that political and moral philosophy provide effective yet underused tools to address ethical questions within social policy.[1]

Our central aim is to explicate the attractions of 'value pluralism' as a substantive moral orientation, and the empirical, democratic and pragmatic reasons to deploy it in social policy analysis, as laid out in the next section. To demonstrate the power of this pluralist ethical framework, we then consider the vexed question of welfare conditionality via the lens of six key normative perspectives (rights, utilitarianism, contractualism, communitarianism, paternalism and social justice). The remainder of the paper applies this pluralistic perspective to what we view as the main morally-relevant questions in determining the justifiability or otherwise of welfare conditionality. We conclude by reflecting on the potential of value pluralism in social policy analysis, focusing on the importance of clarifying normative and non-normative sources of disagreement, triangulating multiple moral perspectives to build robust support for particular policies, and understanding diverse value orientations to clarify the basis of polarisation in policy debate.

Value pluralism and social policy

Value pluralists endorse a view of ethics that recognises that there are a "plurality of morally significant values" (Wolf, 1992, p.785). It is important to note that value pluralism does not entail moral relativism – that is, the view that there are no universal moral truths (Wolf, 1992; Galston, 2002), far less 'subjectivism', the notion that morality represents merely the expression of emotional attitudes (Wolf, 1992). On the contrary, it represents a commitment to the objectivity of a multiple, but finite, set of morally relevant fundamental values (Berlin, 2002). Crucially for our purposes here, value pluralism stands in contradistinction to 'monist' theories that see all forms of goodness or rightness as reducible to a singular measure or meta-value (Galston, 2002, p.4). Utilitarians, for instance, view ethics as fully explained by attention to the level of collective wellbeing different courses of action achieve. A rights-based deontological perspective, on the other hand, interprets the source of fundamental ethical value as lying in people's basic rights and "morally protected sphere of individual autonomy" being respected at all times (Nagel, 2021, p.5).

Pluralists hold that these and other monist approaches can only ever hope to capture part of the 'moral truth' (Wolf, 1992; Wolff, 2015). This proposition is linked, at the social policy level, to the insight that the 'good society' has to be judged on multiple criteria, not by a single standard, with a balance struck between a range of (often competing) social objectives, such as the protection of personal liberty, the advancement of social justice, the nurturing of social cohesion, the pursuit of economic prosperity, and the establishment and institutionalisation of democracy (Miller, 1999; Wolff, 2015). Reductionist, monist approaches can thus be obfuscatory as well as partial in their intellectual impact, as was famously argued by Isaiah Berlin:

"... the belief that some single formula can in principle be found whereby all the diverse ends of men can be harmoniously realised is demonstrably false. If as I believe the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, the possibility of conflict - and of tragedy - can

never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social. The necessity of choosing between absolute claims is then an inescapable characteristic of the human condition." (2002, p.214)

It is surprising, in this light, that rights-based perspectives have come to carry such sway within social policy scholarship as the predominant normative lens via which to defend the welfare state (see below and e.g. Dwyer, 2000; Dean, 2015), and part of our goal in this paper is to explicate alternative perspectives to it.

While value pluralism is a philosophical concept, psychologists have bolstered its empirical foundations by mapping the 'moral foundations' that people draw upon when thinking about ethics in practice. Haidt and Graham (2007), for example, have highlighted that people's moral foundations extend beyond philosophers' – and we would add social policy scholars' – traditional concerns with justice, rights and fairness, to "group-level moral concerns" such as authority, loyalty and tradition (Graham et al., 2011, p. 367).

This evidence that, as a matter of political and psychological fact, people are attracted to a plurality of moral values, bolsters the democratic argument for social policy underpinned by value pluralist-style analysis (Miller, 1999). Berlin was pessimistic regarding the incommensurability of such divergent values in policy and practice (see above). However, our pluralist approach is also inspired by Nagel (1979), who more optimistically argued that "Radical disagreement about the basis of ethics is compatible with substantial agreement about what the important factors are in real life" (p.141). Galston (2002) also saw potential for reasonable and constructive debate about policy dilemmas in the face of plural values. "Deliberative argument", he argued "can provide reasons for choices among qualitatively different claims even when no common measure of value is available" (Galston, 2002, p.35). In other words, people may agree on what is ethically permissible, or required, in concrete cases, even though they arrive at this judgement for quite different reasons. One pertinent example is Deacon's (2004) analysis of the then UK Labour Government's policies on anti-social behaviour targeting social tenants. Deacon found that three distinct normative frameworks – contractualist, paternalist and mutualist – could be engaged to justify these policies, despite many in the academic social policy community viewing them as oppressive interventions.

By systematically examining contentious matters of social policy via multiple ethical lenses, such analysis lends weight to the pluralist case by illuminating the powerful moral intuitions that each perspective taps into (Nagel, 2021). Moreover, in demonstrating that similar moral conclusions on specific matters of policy can be reached via very different ethical routes, they reinforce the pragmatic value of the pluralist approach. Even for monists, convinced of the reducibility of all normative considerations to one fundamental value, there may therefore be good *strategic* reasons to 'reach across the aisle' beyond their preferred ethical repertoire, in order to engage those with different normative orientations but with whom common ground may be found in particular cases.

Consistent with Berlin (2002), and other key pluralist thinkers including Miller (1999) and Ignatieff (2000), our proposed approach to social policy analysis lays strong emphasis on the interdependence of moral reflection, logical deduction, and empirical evidence in progressing contentious social policy debates. In

particular, some apparent ethical disagreements reflect errors of logic, which can be corrected, or conflicting factual assumptions, which are apt for empirical testing. Close attention to these non-normative matters as part of more systematic ethical analysis of social policy allows us to identify the narrowed territory where genuine values-based trade-offs, or 'tragic choices' (Berlin, 2002), might be required. In the sections that follow, we seek to pull apart these strands of the highly polarised debate on welfare conditionality, foregrounding the presence (or absence) of fundamental value-disagreements that undermine effective policy debate in this area.

Welfare conditionality: the view through distinctive ethical lenses

Welfare conditionality, which links access to welfare goods and services to behavioural requirements, has become a mainstream policy tool globally. A central component of social security policy across advanced welfare states, from the so-called 'liberal' regimes of the UK, Australia and the US, to the social democratic welfare regimes of the Nordic countries (Immervoll et al, 2020), conditionality also plays a core role in the evolving social protection systems of the Global South, most often in the form of Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) (Fiszbein et al., 2009). While conditionality attached to cash benefits usually requires recipients to seek work, CCTs, and some conditional policies in Australia, focus instead on health or education-related behaviours, such as ensuring that children are appropriately immunised or attending school (Bastagli, 2009; Taylor et al., 2016).

Though all conditional welfare approaches share a core logic – involving the imposition of behavioural requirements, the monitoring and verification of required actions, and the use of sanctions in instances of non-compliance (or sometimes incentives for compliance) – there is wide variation in the design and specification of these components in practice. Some conditional welfare programmes have stringent behavioural requirements (e.g. 35 hours a week job search activity, learning a new language, overcoming an addiction), harsh sanctions (e.g. permanent 'full family' sanctions in parts of the US), and quite intrusive levels of surveillance (e.g. compulsory daily visits by a support worker) (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018). In many other instances, however, conduct requirements are much more modest (two job search activities per month in Korea, for example), and sanctions relatively mild (a first warning followed by a loss of five days benefit in Sweden) (Immervoll and Knotz, 2018).

Despite the ubiquity of, and immense variation in, programmes captured under the banner of welfare conditionality, debates in this field tend to be highly polarised, even inflammatory, in style and content. Proponents see conditionality as self-evidently justified: as an "integral" component of welfare systems (Miscampbell, 2014, p.6), and as a "key element of the mutual obligation that underpins both the effectiveness and fairness of the social security system" (Oakley, 2014, p.4). Opponents, on the other hand, have characterised conditionality as "institutional barbarity against the most vulnerable people in the system" (Corbyn, 2016), and even described the underlying logic as reflective of "a government of the grotesque" (Ryan, 2014).

Academic perspectives are also divided, with a small number of scholars robustly defending the essential role of welfare conditionality (Mead, 1986; Dunn, 2014),

while others feel it can only be justified once onerous background 'conditions of fair reciprocity' (White, 2003) are met. The majority view in the social policy community, however, is firmly set against welfare conditionality, which has been variously described as "neither effective nor ethical... [and] unfit for purpose" (Wright et al., 2018, p.10), "morally dubious" (Standing, 2011, p.33), "illiberal" (Curchin, 2019, p.2) and "superfluous, pernicious, atrocious and abominable" (Freeland, 2007, p.75). Recent contributions have interpreted sanction-based reforms through the lenses of 'social abuse', 'institutional violence' and even 'social murder' (see Wright et al., 2020), and characterised sanctions as primarily a "weapon" (Redman, 2020, p.84) deployed to "degrade" (McNeill, 2020, p.295) welfare recipients.

Stepping back from these impassioned and antagonistic, positions, and inspired by Deacon's (2004) normative analysis of anti-social behaviour interventions, we now map the contours of six key perspectives which our review of the international evidence indicates are the primary ethical lenses through which welfare conditionality has been debated to date (Watts and Fitzpatrick, 2018; see also Curchin et al., 2021). While some of these perspectives have historical roots and specific points of substance in common, they are distinct in foregrounding particular rationales via which to defend or object to conditionality. In keeping with our pluralist analysis, we seek to draw out the most compelling aspects of each of these moral frameworks ('steel-personning' rather than 'straw-manning' them), while also noting the key objections they face. Crucially, we explicate their implications with regard to the moral permissibility of, or even requirement for, conditions to be attached to receipt of welfare provisions. Our desire to 'steel-person' people's positions also informs our choice of normative frameworks. We focus upon established normative traditions that a reasonable person of "general goodwill and human sympathy" (Harsanyi, 1982, p.56) could plausibly endorse, rather than assume malign intentions on the part of any stakeholders.

Rights

Rights-based perspectives are a dominant normative framing of welfare conditionality within social policy scholarship in the UK, as noted above. Such perspectives draw (implicitly) on a deontological Kantian logic that ethical value inheres in 'universalisable' duties about how we treat each other being acted upon, such that "we must regard each person... as immune from subjection to others" (Nagel, 2021, p.5), with all human beings presenting "the same stubborn and impenetrable moral surface" (ibid., p.8). The focus may be on social citizenship rights (Dwyer, 2000; Reeves and Loopstra, 2017; and Fitzpatrick et al, 2019) or human rights (Nevile, 2008; Veit-Wilson, 2009), but in both cases, rights to welfare goods and services are typically seen as non-negotiable.

For Dwyer (2004), for example, the "very idea of 'welfare rights' is systematically undermined" by the "creeping conditionality" initially seen in the late 1990s, and the ubiquitous conditionality that now characterizes UK social security policy (p.265; see also Dwyer & Wright, 2014). This 'rights logic' is also evident in Viet-Wilson's critique of CCTs in which he emphasises "the categorical implications of human rights to the means for social inclusion" (Veit-Wilson, 2009, p.172) arguing that "poor people... have a categorical human right both to an adequate

income and to education and health care" (p.173) and questioning the grounds on which governments can make access to these things conditional. Freeland, similarly, highlights the inconsistency between human rights discourses, often emphasised in the development context, and the conditionality inherent within CCTs:

> "it is morally highly questionable whether a government (often encouraged by donors) can, on the one hand, proudly tell its citizens that social protection is their basic 'human right'; and then, on the other hand, threaten to deprive the neediest among them of that very 'right' if they fail to meet certain 'conditions'." (Freeland, 2007, p.77)

From this perspective welfare conditionality is seen as unethical as a matter of a priori logic. Withholding something people have a right to is, necessarily, an unacceptable rights violation. Any positive consequences (e.g. higher employment or immunisation rates) associated with such an incentive structure are irrelevant: rights are side-constraints or 'trumps' and can't be traded against other goals, including the collective good (Dworkin, 1977).

There is something undeniably compelling about rights advocates' insistence upon the dignity of persons, the 'non fungibility' of human beings, and the need to treat all of us as ends in ourselves, rather than simply the means to other people's ends. However, while this rights-orientated framework clearly carries a lot of weight within the social policy community, its absolutist and non-negotiable tenor (Waldron, 1993) can alienate wider society (including the frontline workers implementing these policies, see Sadeghi and Terum, 2020) where a more pluralist set of values prevails (Graham et al., 2011). Abstract human rights are also subject to objections regarding their philosophical foundations, and have a range of unintended negative consequences when they take a juridified, enforceable form (Fitzpatrick et al, 2014).

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism offers the main opposition to rights-based theories, conceiving of ethical choices – and policies – as those which maximise utility, welfare or wellbeing (Goodin, 1993; Kymlicka, 2002). Its intuitive appeal rests on the central proposition that the only intrinsically morally significant phenomenon is the conscious experiences of sentient beings (Goodin, 1993): any other values that appear to have moral currency are ultimately only meaningful in the instrumental service they pay to these experiences.

For utilitarians, the ethical legitimacy of conditional welfare interventions depends on their aggregate impact on overall societal welfare. The 'utilitarian calculus' must weigh in the balance welfare impacts on the full range of relevant actors, including those directly targeted by the intervention, where an assessment must be made about whether it enhances their wellbeing (e.g. by encouraging them into work that helps lift them out of poverty, or to engage with health services) or diminishes it (e.g. via the material hardship imposed by benefit sanctions). The impact of conditionality on other members of the benefit recipient's household, including any children, is also relevant, as is the impact on the wider public, including whether

welfare conditionality has any general deterrent effect on unemployment and/or welfare claims (Paz-Fuchs, 2008), and whether the public gain or lose utility by seeing welfare goods distributed in accordance with behavioural conditions.

Utilitarianism's unpopularity with many on the political Left arises from its aggregative quality and association with economistic reasoning (see, for example, Titmuss, 2018[1970]), but few can doubt that the maximisation of welfare ought to be a core objective of social policy. Moreover, what is often overlooked is that utilitarianism properly understood has strong egalitarian implications in at least two senses: equal weight must be given to each person's interests in the utilitarian calculus (Kymlicka, 2002); and the gains (and losses) of those who have least count for most under the law of 'diminishing marginal utility' (Gabriel, 2017). On the other hand, utilitarianism's disregard for the distribution of the sum total of utility and the moral equivalence attached to different sources of utility limits the appeal of the theory as a complete moral code. Another objection to monist utilitarian approaches highly relevant to our argument is that:

> " . . . impartial benevolence, the motive that is supposed to ground utilitarianism, is far too weak in most human beings to support obedience to its demanding moral requirements, which makes it unsuitable as the sole basis for human morality." (Nagel, 2021, p.6)

Contractualism

The contractualist normative lens foregrounds the value of reciprocity (Miscampbell, 2014), as opposed to utility or a one-sided emphasis on rights (Deacon, 2004), with the metaphor of the contract capturing the idea that a good or right state of affairs consists in two parties meeting their mutual obligations to one another in a fair exchange. Much policy discourse and reform associated with the development of welfare conditionality, especially in the UK, US and Australia, has emphasised a rebalancing of this hypothetical welfare contract away from the state's obligations to provide welfare services, and towards citizens' obligations to be contributing and responsible members of society (Crisp and Fletcher, 2008).

However, some philosophically-grounded contractualist accounts, not least those of John Rawls (1999[1971]), emphasise the conditions that must be met in order for expectations of reciprocity on welfare recipients to hold. In this Rawlsian tradition, White (2003)[2] has argued that a series of background conditions of 'fair reciprocity' must pertain, including the minimisation of brute luck poverty, equality of opportunity, protection against discrimination, and income adequacy in exchange for productive participation (which extends beyond paid employment). On this view, the ethical legitimacy of conditional forms of welfare will depend upon the fairness of the imagined contract, and realities of the social arrangements in a particular context.

The contractualist impulse echoes the documented ubiquity of ideas of reciprocity and mutuality as constituents of morality across cultures and political divides (Graham et al., 2011). This 'something for something' ethical framing has a strong intuitive appeal amongst those coming from very different ideological standpoints (Miller, 1999; Deacon, 2004), but the sort of exacting background

conditions specified by White (2003) are seldom met in practice. Furthermore, Paz-Fuchs (2008) observes that the contractualist view seems to rest on an implausible assumption that those on either side of welfare contract – individuals on one side, the state on the other – have equal bargaining power. Contractualist thinking thus risks obfuscating very substantial power imbalances.

Communitaranism

Communitarians share contractualists' emphasis on people's obligations to one another, but reject the individualism of welfare contractualism in favour of an emphasis on community solidarity and cohesion (see Mulhall and Swift, 1996; Etzioni, 1997). Crucially, these mutual obligations are seen to arise independently of any background social conditions or required role of the state in setting a fair context. Instead, they are rooted in people's pre-existing "personal responsibility for the common good" (Selznick, 1998, p.63). While communitarianism refers to a broad set of perspectives spanning the political Left and Right, they share a strong emphasis on the common good over concerns with individual freedom, rights or wellbeing.

Such communitarian-orientated analyses entail a pro-active role for the state and social policy in promoting (through sanctions, incentives, or other social control mechanisms) ways of life that are deemed to be in line with communally shared values (Mulhall and Swift, 1996). The perspective therefore provides an obvious normative framework within which conditional approaches to welfare are justified as a means of enforcing key social rules, with regard, for example, to refraining from anti-social behaviour, undertaking paid work, ensuring that one's children attend school, accepting relevant healthcare interventions, and so on. Communitarians tend not to see inequality in itself as a social problem (Selznick, 1998), though are sometimes concerned to minimise 'social exclusion' that threatens the community cohesion they value (Gray, 2000). While this may put a limit on the severity of the sanctions employed in conditional forms of welfare, communitarian perspectives provide a uniquely strong logic for endorsing conditional approaches in societies that value reciprocity and mutuality.

Haidt (2012) has argued that we neglect the community bonds that enable human beings to peaceably co-exist, at least for the most part, at our peril, capturing the core of the enduring appeal of communitarian ethics. As a moral code, however, some forms of communitarianism can lend themselves to authoritarian styles of governance that constrain individual liberty and entrench existing power imbalances, rendering them unattractive to those who value freedom and equality as cornerstones of a decent society.

Paternalism

Paternalism, like communitarianism, places a relatively lower value on individual liberty than some of the other normative perspectives reviewed, but drawing on the metaphor of the parent/child relationship, it foregrounds the pursuit of the best interests of welfare recipients, who are seen to be acting in ways that may subvert their own wellbeing (Deacon, 2004). A distinction can be drawn between *hard*

paternalism, which employs forceful or coercive methods to induce people to act in ways considered to be in their own interests (Scoccia, 2008), and *libertarian paternalism* that seeks to non-coercively 'nudge' people towards such behaviours (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). Trading short-term pain for future gain is a key aspect of justifications for hard paternalist interventions especially, which seek to 'save people from themselves'.

From the political Right, American political theorist Mead (1997) has sought to justify welfare conditionality on paternalist grounds. He views welfare claimants as 'dutiful but defeated' (Mead, 1992) – that is, accepting of society's mainstream work ethic but, in Paz-Fuchs rendering of this perspective "simply lack[ing] the will power to choose the better life" (2008, p.438). As such, they require 'help and hassle', i.e. to receive state support. Others coming from a very different perspective have argued that paternalistic interventions may be justified for vulnerable groups with high levels of identifiable support needs – for instance, people with serious addiction issues (Gregory, 2015; Watts et al, 2018).

Paternalism often provokes extreme ire in progressive circles, because it offends against the liberal principle that people are best placed to judge their own interests. Moreover, when applied via welfare provisions, it leaves the idle rich undisturbed by the attentions of the 'tutelary state'. However, it is difficult to conceive of any ethical welfare system that would exclude paternalistic concern for vulnerable groups such as young children, but also adults with severely limited capacity. The relevant question is not, then, whether paternalism is justifiable, but what are its appropriate limits (Parsell and Marston, 2016) and how do these map on to the diverse groups targeted by specific conditional welfare policies.

Social Justice

The final normative lens considered here is that of social justice, best conceived as a place-holder for a diverse set of theories that hold in common the idea that ethical courses of action or policies must achieve an appropriate balance between a range of distributive criteria. Miller (1999) offers one compelling, multi-dimensional theory of social justice, arguing that a just distribution of societal resources requires that: first, need-meeting resources must be distributed according to need (with space for democratic deliberation on what these needs are in a given context); second, in their capacity as citizens, people must be treated as equals, including being given equal access to a range of legal, political and social rights; and third, beyond these (fairly onerous) parameters, many other social resources may be allocated on the basis of desert – for instance, rewarding people for working hard.

From this perspective, conditional forms of welfare can be ethically justified if they are introduced against a background of equality of opportunity that promotes meritocracy and dampens the effects of luck, and as long as they do not lead to people's fundamental needs going unmet. This perspective thus constructs an ethically high bar for the just use of welfare conditionality, but does not imply an outright moral bar on such approaches. In fact, Miller's theory could be argued to ethically *require* forms of conditionality that ensure that legitimate forms of deservingness are recognized, if the specified background conditions are met.

Miller's social justice framework holds particular appeal from our overarching value pluralist perspective, as it pulls into one coherent whole key dimensions of some of the other normative perspectives outlined above. Specifically, it recognizes the powerful ethical appeal of the norms of reciprocity, desert and merit, often neglected in the context of the rights-dominance of mainstream social policy (see above), while at the same time acknowledging the importance of the core progressive principles of needs, rights and equality. Yet, as Miller himself acknowledges, even this multi-dimensional concept of justice is only one amongst several values that a good society must protect, and it may on occasion have to be traded-off in the name of other core values, including "democracy, individuality, or social harmony" (1999, p.17)

A pluralist assessment of the ethics of conditional welfare

The normative lenses highlighted above foreground different ethical priorities, and in many cases propose alternative decision-making procedures. How persuasive one finds each of these specific ethical perspectives, and particular combinations of them, will depend on one's own personal underpinning 'moral foundations' (Haidt and Graham, 2007).

However, looping back to our introductory comments inspired by Galston (2002) and other value pluralists, we would contend that there is more scope for working across these competing normative outlooks in dealing with real-world policy dilemmas than is sometimes assumed, with people often agreeing on what is ethically justified in specific cases via very different (even opposing) processes of moral reasoning. We would make the case that policy choices are most defensible where their aims and consequences can be considered as legitimate from *multiple* normative perspectives (Carens, 1987; Deacon, 2004). For value pluralists, such an 'overlapping consensus' (Rawls, 1999[1971]) strengthens the ethical weight of any given normative conclusions as a matter of philosophical principle (Galston, 2002). But even for non-pluralists, such 'moral triangulation', or 'incompletely theorized agreement' (Sunstein, 1995), has profound democratic and strategic benefits.

Nonetheless, there will be occasions where ethical perspectives clash rather than triangulate on concrete cases of concern, pointing in different directions with regard to the justifiability or otherwise of underlying policy aims and impacts. A value pluralist conceptual analysis will not always reveal 'hidden consensus' on relevant matters, but will also surface irreconcilable divergence. Even in these more difficult cases, however, pluralist approaches have something important to offer in the way of constructive tools for moving debate forward.

Critical here is the pluralist readiness to engage protagonists on their own terms, testing the logical and empirical foundations of their arguments, rather than getting mired in irresolvable disagreements about fundamental values. For example, opponents of conditional welfare are on indisputably firm ground challenging utilitarian advocates to evidence that these measures do *in fact* maximise societal utility, while a sincere paternalist can fairly be held to account on whether conditional policies do *in reality* benefit those targeted. Similar empirical claims or contingencies can be identified within all plausible normative frames, and establishing an agreed evidence base on these is a key first step in moving past an unproductive debate.

Proponents of conditional welfare approaches, from whatever normative perspective, must also demonstrate a logical connection between the policy aims they seek and the use of behavioural conditions as a means to these ends. In other words, are there good grounds for believing that the behaviour change sought (e.g. more job search activity) is genuinely a solution to the social problem that the intervention seeks to address (e.g. unemployment)? They must have a convincing answer to the criticism made by many, for example, that an emphasis on welfare conditionality in out-of-work benefits implies a misdiagnosis of a fundamental structural problem (weak labour demand) for a behavioural problem (unwillingness to work) (Beatty and Fothergill, 2016).

If the social problem at issue can be empirically defended as in significant part behavioural, the ethical justifiability of welfare conditionality is also dependent on there being plausible grounds for thinking that sanction-backed requirements will in fact lead to the behaviour change desired. Relevant here is the challenge laid down by behavioural economists who have highlighted the cognitive biases and boundaries that limit expected rational responses to behavioural cues such as sanctions (Darnton, 2008). These social-psychological complexities require policy designers to take seriously the worldview, context and actual decision-making processes of the individuals whose behaviour they seek to influence (Curchin, 2017). At the very least, it requires concerted efforts to ensure that welfare recipients understand the relevant behavioural demands, and have the resources and capacity to fulfil them, and evidence that they have fulfilled them. It also requires recognising, for instance, the impact of trauma, addiction and mental health conditions on people's ability to respond predictably when exposed to stressors or triggers. Existing evidence suggests that conditional welfare interventions, in the UK at least, often fail these basic tests of efficacy (Griggs and Evans, 2010; Oakley, 2014; Wright and Stewart, 2016).

The international evidence base on the impacts of welfare conditionality is limited in important respects, and is also mixed. For example, it is clear from the US case that harsh forms of conditionality attached to out-of-work benefits can effectively drive down the claimant count (Ray et al., 2014). But if no regard is had to the destination or well-being of those 'hassled off' welfare programmes, this is difficult to justify within most normative perspectives, except perhaps those versions of communitarianism which give overriding priority to the enforcement of key social rules regardless of the consequences for social exclusion, or in a utilitarian calculus that weighs public approval of such rules much more heavily than their impacts on those subject to them. With regard to programme goals that might be considered respectable from a wider range of moral standpoints, such as improved labour market outcomes and poverty reduction, the evidence base is highly variable. Some studies across the US and Europe point to positive impacts of conditionality on levels of work search, employment entry and earnings, while others identify no or negative impacts (Griggs and Evans, 2010; Ray et al., 2014), or only short-term positive effects (Hofmann, 2008; Müller and Steiner, 2008; Arni et al., 2009).

In the case of CCTs in the Global South, a stronger evidence base, often involving randomised control trials, suggests that well designed CCTs can be effective in achieving programme goals – around, for example, school enrolment and attendance, and reductions in child labour (Bastagli, 2009; Fiszbein et al., 2009; Kabeer et al., 2012; Pellerano and Barca, 2014). Even here, however, there is ongoing

debate regarding whether the *conditionality* of the cash transfers is key to these positive impacts, or whether they could be achieved by alternative less coercive means, including the provision of 'unconditional' benefits (Baird et al., 2014; Kidd, 2016).

Any evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of conditional interventions in achieving their *intended* aims must be placed in the context of *wider unintended impacts* (both positive and negative). Here it is apt to note that, in both the US and UK, harsh forms of benefit sanctions have been associated with material hardships including food poverty, debt, rent arrears, homelessness, and destitution (Lindhorst and Mancoske, 2006; Loopstra et al., 2015; Wright and Stewart, 2016; Reeve, 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2018), and negative physical and mental health outcomes (Griggs and Evans, 2010; Dwyer, 2018). Such findings seriously challenge the utilitarian and paternalistic case for these strong sanctions, and probably the contractualist case too, at least as regards those theorists concerned with the fairness of the imagined social contract (White, 2003). These negative impacts may even be seen to undermine the potential communitarian argument for strict sanctioning regimes, given their exclusionary consequences (Gray, 2000); they certainly seem fatal to any plausible social justice-based defence of these measures.

Concluding remarks

The core aim of this paper has been to advocate for the application of a value pluralist perspective to ethical questions in social policy. By offering a means to map systematically the diversity of moral registers within which social policy concerns might legitimately be considered, we would argue that this pragmatic pluralist approach can aid constructive policy dialogue and decision making. There are practical, democratic and strategic grounds to adopt a value pluralist analytical approach, even if in philosophical terms one remains a 'monist' wedded to a singular ethical measure or meta-value. A pluralist approach helps provide tools for the development of robust policies that are ethically permissible from multiple normative perspectives. Such moral triangulation, where possible, offers the surest means to pursue policy options that gain the widest public endorsement. Moreover, serious attempts at moral triangulation, even where not fully realised, shine a bright analytical light on genuine areas of irreconcilable difference, as well as on areas of (hidden) agreement, in order to maximise clarity and mutual comprehension on both. Confronting relevant matters from multiple plausible moral perspectives increases the rigour, thoroughness and scope of the ethical evaluation task.

For case study purposes, we have explored the potential contribution of six key normative lenses – rights, utilitarianism, contractualism, communitarianism, paternalism and social justice – in considering the ethical legitimacy of welfare conditionality. We have elucidated the implications of each of these perspectives for assessing the ethics of conditional welfare approaches, and sought to pull out the empirical claims and logical assumptions on which their support for or critique of such approaches depends. Rigorous testing of these non-normative elements is an invaluable first step in bringing diverse starting positions closer together when applied to concrete policy choices.

One key conclusion of our substantive case study analysis is that there is unlikely to be a single, consistent answer to the question of whether welfare conditionality is ethically 'justified'. Much turns on the context, focus, rationale and, most crucially, impacts of the specific instance of conditionality under discussion. As argued above, the harshest forms of benefit sanctions found in the US and UK are difficult to justify under most (though not necessarily all) plausible normative frameworks. However, this is far from ruling out the possibility of a broader 'overlapping consensus' of support for milder forms of conditionality that can be empirically demonstrated to benefit welfare recipients and/or wider society. Some of the CCT programmes in the Global South reviewed above may come into this category, for example, and one can envisage utilitarian, contractualist, communitiarian, paternalist and social justice arguments triangulating in support of at least some such programmes. Only those rights-based theorists, currently so dominant in UK social policy, that reject conditional welfare approaches as a matter of principle, regardless of their practical consequences, may stand outside such an overlapping consensus.

We hope to have demonstrated the utility of the value pluralist approach in contentious areas of social policy, and also that a great deal of the consensus-building work in a field like welfare conditionality can take a non-normative form, by establishing the relevant factual basis for decision making and expounding the logical consequences that flow from particular value commitments. In many cases, protagonists coming from very different moral orientations may find themselves drawing similar substantive conclusions on concrete policy questions. It is true that "pockets of indeterminacy" (Wolf, 1992, p.788) will remain even after all these avenues for reasoned debate have been exhausted. Berlin's 'tragic choices' thus cannot be avoided altogether but they can be greatly narrowed in scope.

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Notes

1 Beem and Mead (2005) and Wolff (2015) have argued from the other side that political and moral philosophers have not engaged sufficiently or in the right ways with questions of public policy.
2 We consider White here as an example of a contractualist perspective given the core relevance of the idea of a welfare contract to his work. We also recognise the influence of communitarianism, and Etzioni specifically, on White's thinking. Within our categorisation, and given his concern with equality and reciprocity, White could also be considered as a social justice theorist.

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