Problems for Perfectionism

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Perfectionism, the view that well-being is a matter of developing characteristically human capacities, has relatively few defenders in the literature, but plenty of critics. This article defends perfectionism against some recent formulations of classic objections, namely, the objection that perfectionism ignores the relevance of pleasure or preference for well-being, and a sophisticated version of the 'wrong properties' objection, according to which the intuitive plausibility of the perfectionist ideal is threatened by an absence of theoretical pressure to accept putative wrong properties cases. The article argues that these objections are unsuccessful, but introduce a new worry, the *deep problem*: perfectionism fails to offer a satisfying foundational justification for *why* developing the human essence is valuable. The article responds to the deep problem, ultimately arguing that it is a puzzle put to all theories of well-being to provide a justification for their normative significance.

Perfectionism, the view that well-being is a matter of developing characteristically human capacities, is one of those theories that many philosophers acknowledge and discuss, but relatively few philosophers actually *defend*. It's the subject of a few books, but not as many articles. It's the butt of many objections, but not at the helm of many replies. For a compelling and attractive theory with such illustrious parentage including Aristotle and even Nietzsche, it deserves its philosophical bastions. In this article, I defend perfectionism.

The idea that our good involves developing excellence in our characteristically human capacities has captured the imagination of many philosophers.[1] Aristotle is credited as the grandfather of the notion that what characterizes us as human beings is the starting point for our good, and flourishing as human beings is a matter of the excellence of our most central human characteristics. Aquinas, Spinoza, Hegel and Nietzsche are all also considered to have views that can be read as perfectionism. There are even perfectionist elements to be

[1] Precise details differ across various conceptions of perfectionism, but for now, I will take perfectionism as the view that the exercise and development of characteristically human capacities is good. The most extensive articulation of perfectionism is Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford, 1993). See also D. O. Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T. H. Green* (Oxford, 2003); George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality* (Cambridge, 1997); Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why* (Cambridge, 2007); Gwen Bradford, 'Perfectionism', *Routledge Handbook for the Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (London, 2016), pp. 124–34.

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found in John Stuart Mill, and even Hume can be seen as a kind of perfectionist.[2]

The spirit of perfectionism is also present in the popular imagination. Human excellence is lauded in many domains of culture, including sports, art, creativity and ingenuity in the form of championship tournaments, literary awards and Nobel prizes. Some of the most popular television shows in recent years have involved competitions of excellence, where talent is showcased, effort and perseverance are lauded, and failure and incompetence are derided. We encourage our friends and loved ones to cultivate the best aspects of themselves so that they may flourish and excel.

Many people who are attracted to the idea that achievement, knowledge and friendship are constitutive parts of our good are drawn to the Objective List Theory. The Objective List Theory of well-being captures these intuitions, and holds that there is a plurality of goods that are constitutive of well-being.[3] Yet there is a sense in which Objective List Theory is unsatisfying: it is a mere list, after all, and hardly a theory. This is where perfectionism gains much of its motivation. Perfectionism provides a unifying explanation that captures much of what we want in the objective list view. Knowledge and achievement, for instance, are good because they are manifestations of the exercise of human capacities. Perfectionists typically take *rationality* as among the human capacities – knowledge is the exercise of our theoretical rationality, and achievement is the exercise of our practical rationality. Thus the objective list items are explained: they are manifested in the exercise of human capacities – 'what is good, ultimately, is the development of human nature'.[4] As a result, perfectionists can justly claim that the view does well in so far as it not only succeeds in capturing the compelling intuitions of the goodness of the objective list items, but it also has the theoretical virtue of being unified, and as a result is a superior theory.

But objections arise, and currently languish in the literature, no perfectionists having yet to come to their own defence. This is what I do in this article. In the first section, I take up the objection that perfectionism counterintuitively undervalues the relevance of pleasure and preferences. In the second section, I take up a sophisticated version of the 'wrong properties' objection, according to which the intuitive plausibility of the perfectionist claim is threatened by a lack

[2] For a discussion of Mill, see Brink , *Mill's Progressive Principles* (Oxford, 2013). On Hume, see Dale Dorsey, 'Objectivity and Perfection in Hume's Hedonism', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53 (2015), pp. 245–70.

[3] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984), p. 499.

[4] Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 3.

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of theoretical pressure to accept putative wrong properties cases. In the final section of the article, I discuss a new and troublesome worry for the view, what I call the *deep problem*.

Now, you'll notice that I'm here talking about perfectionism as an account of 'our good' or 'well-being'. Proponents of perfectionism in the literature differ in their understanding of just what perfectionism is a theory *of* – Hurka's perfectionism is explicitly described as a theory of a good life and *not* well-being, whereas Kraut's 'developmentalism' perfectionist theory is explicitly a theory of well-being.[5] But both of these theorists and other perfectionists may be taken as having a similar target in mind, even if it is not the same in the end. I myself am unsure of exactly the best way to construe perfectionism, but in this article, I'm giving it a fighting chance as a theory of well-being, which I will also occasionally refer to as 'our good'. Let us now turn to consider our first objection.

COUNTERINTUITIVE UNDERVALUING

A classic complaint is that perfectionism gives counterintuitive verdicts in cases where the relevance of pleasure or preference is ignored. Haybron presents a case of the first kind.[6]

> *Angela*. Angela is a high-ranking diplomat, contemplating retirement that will bring her much enjoyment and relaxation. But a new mission arises in which she is needed at a post overseas where her considerable skills will be invaluable, and it will be extremely challenging.

Perfectionism appears to entail that it would be better for Angela to accept the new post, where greater perfection awaits. But, says Haybron, this is counterintuitive: '[n]o one would dream of begrudging her the comfortable life she had begun to set before herself'.[7] Dorsey presents a similar objection, highlighting the significance of preference.[8]

> *Ronald*. Ronald has remarkable talent as a theoretical physicist, and has the opportunity to flourish in a career as a physicist. However, Ronald strongly prefers to pursue his passion – farming.

Ronald exercises less of his rational capacities farming than he would were he a physicist *ex hypothesi*, and as a result, perfectionism says

[5] See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 17 and Kraut, *What is Good*, p. 6.
[6] Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 161–2.
[7] Haybron, *Pursuit*, p. 161.
[8] Dale Dorsey, 'Three Arguments for Perfectionism', *Noûs* 44 (2010), pp. 59–79.

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that Ronald's life as a farmer isn't as good as it would be as a physicist. The complaint is that surely Ronald's desire to do what he wants with his life is relevant and perfectionism fails to capture this.

Let's be careful to separate two distinct concerns. The first is the question of whether or not perfectionism is able to capture the relevance of pleasure or preference *at all* in its own terms. The second concerns the *relative weight* of various goods, that is, how much additional exercise of rationality might outweigh an additional amount of some other good, perfectionist or otherwise. Could a very slight increase in exercise of rationality outweigh an appealingly large increase in pleasure? But this latter question shouldn't send anyone to panic stations. There is nothing worrying about asking for a scale of the relative weights of perfectionist (or other) goods. Any view that acknowledges different sources of good at some point or other will find itself with this task and it's not an objection to a view to point out that it needs such a scale.[9] For this reason I won't take on this concern here.

The more pressing challenge is whether perfectionism can account for the relevance of pleasure or preference *at all*. Perfectionism is the view that our well-being is a matter of the exercise of our central characteristic capacities. But just how can this view capture pleasure or preference?[10]

First, let's look at pleasure.[11] The most obvious starting point is to incorporate something along the lines of capacities to experience pleasure, as several perfectionist accounts do. For example, Richard Kraut explicitly includes the 'affective capacities' in his account.[12] Antti Kauppinen also holds that perfectionism involves the enjoyable exercise of characteristic capacities, and he directly responds to *Angela*

[9] Indeed, perfectionists have already made headway here, in particular Hurka, *Perfectionism*, pp. 84–98 and Antti Kauppinen, 'Working Hard and Kicking Back: The Case for Diachronic Perfectionism', *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* (2009), pp. 1–9.

[10] A perfectionist might simply reject monism, as Hurka does, in *Perfectionism* and *The Best Things in Life* (Oxford, 2011), and hold that perfectionism gives an account of *some* of our good, while pleasure, preference, and perhaps some other goods are explained in a different way. But rejecting monism robs perfectionism of its most attractive feature: its unifying appeal. The superiority of perfectionism over objective list theory is its unification of the elements of well-being.

[11] Aristotle, who is often read as a perfectionist, holds that the truly excellent exercise of our capacities is very pleasant. The truly virtuous enjoy deploying their virtues. But this Aristotelian approach doesn't resolve the Angela case, since passive, creature comforts, such as those enjoyed by Angela in her retirement, are not valuable on this view. Perhaps she does also enjoy exercising her perfectionist capacities in her diplomatic duties, but in this case what's at issue is the relevance of the pleasure of the creature comforts of retirement.

[12] Kraut, *What Is Good*, p. 137.

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by arguing that the time of life at which we exercise particular capacities shapes their value.[13]

A drawback of including something as broad as 'affective capacities' on a perfectionist account is that there seems to be no reason to restrict the affective capacity to only pleasant affect – after all, we have the capacity to feel great sorrow, pain, fear, and so on. Presumably the exercise of the affective capacity would involve all of these feelings, and therefore they would all be *good* for us. Of course, there is certainly a sense in which it is healthy and good to feel sorrow, pain, fear, and so on, when appropriate, but nevertheless it's not plausible that it is good *all told* to be in one of these states.

Instead, a better approach capitalizes on the more nuanced observation that it is fundamental to our nature *to pursue pleasure and avoid pain*.[14] This more sophisticated approach is appealing because the more characteristically human relationship with pleasure and pain is to seek one and avoid the other.[15] By incorporating the capacity to seek pleasure and avoid pain, perfectionism entails that we fare well when we attain pleasure, and avoids the parallel claim that we fare well when we experience pain – quite the contrary, since we will be failing in the exercise of this capacity to avoid it.

But one might object that this is not a capacity of the relevant sort. Perfectionism is only interested in capacities to engage in activity and not *passive* capacities, such as the senses or digestion. Passive capacities are not relevant for perfectionist well-being on grounds of its Aristotelian roots, where flourishing essentially involves *activity*. Hence only capacities that are active are directly relevant for our good.[16] And so one might object that a capacity for pleasure is similarly merely passive and not active in the relevant way for perfectionist

[13] Kauppinen, 'Working Hard', p. 1. Kauppinen's insight is that 'it is not only the present and future exercise of capacities that matters for perfection, but also their past exercise' ('Working Hard', p. 2). He provides two different rationales for this approach (both equally good on his view): first, the 'star turn' view, according to which a life is better when it is well-rounded, meaning that each of our various capacities has its moment in which it excels, including the capacities for social and emotional activity that Angela would exercise during her retirement; second, the 'animal nature' view, which holds that the nature of our species has a 'natural rhythm', and so it is better for us to exercise certain capacities at certain times. This would indeed capture the intuition that Angela fares just as well or even better in retirement, but the concern about the details of affective capacities that I consider next raises questions for this approach, since presumably our capacities for pain and sadness have their due time as well.

[14] George Sher makes this suggestion in *Beyond Neutrality*, p. 229.

[15] Of course, such a capacity is not *unique* to human nature, but there is very little reason to adopt a perfectionist account that insists that the relevant capacities are those that are unique (see Hurka, *Perfectionism*, pp. 10–11).

[16] Obviously the senses and digestion are relevant for well-being, but instrumentally so.

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well-being. But we can easily see that this is not the case: the idea is that it is a capacity *to pursue* pleasure and avoid pain – it is an active capacity, and therefore an excellent candidate to be incorporated in a perfectionist account.

Of course more could be said to develop this approach in greater detail, but the important point to be made now is this: it's just not true that no conception of perfectionism has the resources to capture the intuition that pleasure is relevant for well-being.

Before turning to the relevance of preference, we need to acknowledge that there is an important significance to the compellingness of *Ronald*. It is a compelling case because *even in perfectionist terms*, Ronald as a farmer has a very high degree of well-being. Dorsey's stipulation that Ronald uses his rational capacities less as a farmer than he would as a physicist is important, because it is far from obvious that a typical farmer would indeed exercise his rational capacities to a lesser degree than a physicist. One might suppose that the physicist exercises rational capacities to a greater degree because physics requires a great deal of exercise of *theoretical* rationality. But that's not to say that Ronald exercises his practical rational capacities any less. In this respect, the objection is in the spirit of a classic elitist objection: perfectionism says that the life of a theoretical physicist is a better life than the life of a farmer, and this claim is objectionable because it snobbishly overvalues rationality. But we should not overlook the fact that farming requires enormous amounts of rationality – *practical* rationality.

Although there has been a philosophical tradition of placing the activities of theoretical rationality above those of practical rationality, there aren't obviously good arguments that support this hierarchy. One of the appealing developments of many perfectionist accounts is to give the two capacities equal weight.[17] An appealing result is non-elitist pluralistic output, since 'there are many different ways of exercising one's deliberative capacities well'.[18]

The life of a farmer may indeed have just as much perfection as the life of a theoretical physicist, just as the life of a successful small-business owner or professional may have just as much perfection as the life of an academic historian or scientist.[19] Moreover, assuming that a farmer exercises his physical capacities considerably more than

[17] Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 86.

[18] Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good*, p. 126. See also Brink , 'The Significance of Desire', *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 3, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford, 2008), pp. 5–45.

[19] See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, and *Best Things*, as well as Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good*.

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a physicist, the farmer's life has additional value from this domain as well. So, even if *ex hypothesi* Ronald's life as a farmer is not as good as the physicist alternative, he fares extremely well as a farmer nonetheless. This is why we are inclined to say that Ronald fares well as a farmer – because he does.

Regardless, perfectionism can account for the intuition that preference is relevant. Now, one might think that the most straightforward way of doing this would be to develop a perfectionist account that incorporates a capacity to satisfy preferences, but this is not the best approach since there is no such single capacity – preferences can be satisfied in a wide variety of ways, many having nothing to do with our own activities.

Instead, the best approach for perfectionism is not to incorporate preference directly. Rather, we can account for intuitions about the relevance of preference by appealing to the significance of *autonomy*. Several perfectionist accounts on record already include autonomy as a perfectionist capacity. Autonomy plays a central role in T. H. Green's perfectionism, for example, and Mill describes exercising autonomy as a fundamental feature of human being.[20]

How can autonomy capture intuitions about preference? To begin, let's take autonomy as a matter of a capacity to direct one's own activity in response to reasons. The argument then might go that Ronald's life as a farmer would be better for him because he directs his own life to a greater extent when he becomes a farmer and thereby exercises his autonomy. But one might think that if autonomy is a matter of responding to *good* reasons, Ronald fares *worse* in terms of autonomy if he chooses to become a farmer since he chooses the life that is less good for him. That is, there is less perfectionist good in being a farmer than a physicist, and choosing to be a farmer over a physicist is doing what one has *less reason* to do. Ronald is not responding to what he has most reason to do (namely become a physicist), therefore he is not exercising his autonomy well in choosing to become a farmer. If so, the appeal to autonomy would not capture that Ronald fares better as a farmer. However, this is not the full story. Given that Ronald *prefers* to be a farmer, his desires generate reasons, and so on balance there is, in fact, *more* reason to be a farmer.[21] We now have the perfectionist explanation

[20] For Green's account, see Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good*, and T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. D. O. Brink (Oxford, 2003). For a discussion of Mill, see Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, and John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New Haven, 2003). See also Hurka, *Perfectionism*, p. 148.

[21] Alternatively, if you reject the view that desires can generate reasons, as some do, presumably doing something one prefers will be more pleasant, and so the additional pleasure that Ronald will enjoy in being a farmer *also* gives him further reason to be a farmer, and so there is more reason to be a farmer. Indeed, if being a farmer weren't going

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to capture how Ronald as a farmer fares better in perfectionist terms: because in doing so he is responding well to reasons and therefore exercising his autonomy.

Of course, this line of argument does not show that preference satisfaction strictly as such is relevant for well-being in perfectionist terms. Rather, what I have shown is that perfectionism has the resources to capture intuitions about cases where preference seems to make a difference. Although it *appears* that it is preference satisfaction that explains the difference, perfectionism captures this difference by appealing to autonomy as the capacity to respond to reasons.

Now just to be clear, I'm not going to convince anyone who is already committed to hedonism or preference satisfaction theory that perfectionism is the best theory if they are already committed to something else. Rather, the aim is to show that there are perfectionist resources to account for the counterexamples that complain that pleasure and preference are irrelevant for perfectionist good. I have argued that perfectionism does indeed have such resources.

WRONG PROPERTIES

The classic wrong properties objection to perfectionism is that the account of human capacities entails the goodness of certain features that are highly counterintuitive. Because perfectionism relies on a descriptive account of human nature (and this is presumably a matter of fact), the view may generate some counterintuitive implications. The concern is that what turns out to be characteristic of human nature may include features that are intuitively bad, and exclude features that are intuitively good.

Dorsey presents a sophisticated version of this objection.[22] He asks us to suppose that perfectionism entails the goodness of a highly counterintuitive capacity, the disposition to develop hypothermia. He asks: would the perfectionist *feel any theoretical pressure to accept this as intrinsically good*? Quite the contrary, Dorsey contends. The perfectionist would feel pressure to revise the account of human nature. This observation threatens the independent plausibility of the perfectionist's core claim that developing human capacities is good. If it were independently plausible, then we would feel theoretical pressure

to be more pleasant for Ronald than being a physicist, one might think his preference for it would be irrational, intelligible, or otherwise strange and in any case not the sort of preference that is relevant for well-being. Since there are perfectionist resources for capturing the relevance of pleasure, we now have a complete explanation of how Ronald fares better in perfectionist terms, in being a farmer, namely because in doing so he is responding to good reasons.

[22] Dorsey, 'Three Arguments for Perfectionism'.

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to accept the implication that offbeat traits were good, not to revise the conception of human capacities.

It is a good objection, but ultimately misses the mark. Let us clarify the distinction between (a) the general claim of a view, and (b) substantive content of a particular conception of the general claim. When we state a view in the broadest terms possible, we are stating the general claim of the view. A particular conception of a general claim fills in the substantive details in a particular way. There can be multiple particular conceptions of a view, each with its own merits and weaknesses. For example, the general claim of hedonism is that well-being is a matter of pleasure. Quantitative hedonism and qualitative hedonism are two different conceptions of hedonism. Both of these conceptions fill in the details of the general claim that well-being is pleasure in specifying the kind of pleasures that are relevant and the way in which pleasure constitutes well-being, and how pleasure is aggregated. Quantitative hedonism holds that all pleasure is equally relevant for well-being and pleasure can be aggregated by multiplying intensity of pleasure by duration, whereas qualitative hedonism specifies that some pleasures are more significant than others for well-being and develops different aggregative methods. Both quantitative and qualitative hedonism are particular conceptions of the general claim of hedonism.

Particular conceptions of a view are evaluated on their own merits independently of one another. Whether or not one particular conception fails isn't a threat to the general claim, but only evidence that we need to develop the general claim with a different particular conception.[23] Objections to quantitative hedonism, for example, do not tell against the general claim, but only against quantitative hedonism as a particular conception of hedonism. If we find objections to a particular conception of a view compelling, we might find a different conception of the same view more appealing.

The general claim of perfectionism is that developing human capacities is our good. Particular conceptions of perfectionism generate the substantive content of the general claim. A particular conception of perfectionism specifies the descriptive account of human nature and which capacities are good for us to develop, as well as the details about just what it means to develop and exercise these capacities. According to one particular conception of perfectionism, for example, the relevant features of human nature are those that are *essential* to human beings, that is, all humans have them necessarily. This conception would

[23] Of course, if all possible particular conceptions of a general claim failed, this would be good evidence that the general claim is in trouble.

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potentially hold that the rational capacity, agency, and certain physical capacities, are all intrinsically good. An alternative conception rejects this approach, claiming instead that the relevant features are those that are *unique* to human beings.

Let's examine this particular conception of perfectionism that holds that the relevant features are those that are such that they are *unique* to human beings. This conception holds that those features that are found in human beings but not in other creatures are the relevant features that are intrinsically good to develop. This conception yields a list of features that potentially includes rationality, moral agency and romantic love.[24]

However, the following features are also unique to human beings: the big toe, the ability to make fire and wearing clothing. This conception therefore entails that developing these aspects of us – making fires and wearing clothing – are intrinsically good. Moreover, thereby it would be potentially bad not to develop one's capacity to make fires. We have here an instance of the wrong properties objection. The conception of perfectionism involving uniqueness yields counterintuitive features.

But is this a threat to the general claim of perfectionism? No. What is called into question is the specific conception of the general claim, namely that the relevant features of human nature are those that are unique to humans. This particular conception is clearly mistaken. It's fairly clear from these counterintuitive implications that a view that claims that the right way to understand human nature as what is *unique* to humans is not a plausible conception of perfectionism. However, the general claim of perfectionism is untouched, namely, that developing human capacities is good. Rather, we have erred in the attempt to develop the details of the specific conception of which are the relevant capacities.

Dorsey's considerations about the wrong properties objection would only tell against some particular conception of perfectionism. But they do not threaten the general claim. Encountering a conception of perfectionism that yields wrong properties gives us reason to reject that particular conception of perfectionism. Indeed, if the capacity to suffer from hypothermia were to be generated by a specific conception of human nature, we could reasonably see this as a reason to revise the conception.[25] But it wouldn't pose a threat to the *general claim*

[24] It is highly dubitable that these features are in fact unique to humans. So much the worse for this particular conception of perfectionism.

[25] The capacity to suffer hypothermia is pretty much guaranteed not to be on the list of relevant features, largely because it results in death, which we would plausibly expect to be in tension, if not outright contradiction, with other features, seeing as this is a conception of what makes for a good life.

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of perfectionism, namely, that developing the capacities that are characteristic *in some way* of human nature is good. Its independent plausibility withstands objections to particular conceptions.

Analogous arguments can be made for other views. Take the preference satisfaction account of well-being. Counterexamples abound: the canonical stranger on a train case, for example, in which we form a desire about the life of a stranger whom we never meet again.[26] But proponents of such a view take this as an indication that the particular conception of the account needs to be revised, i.e. the details of which preferences that are relevant for well-being and to what extent. Such objections do not indicate that the general claim, that well-being is a matter of satisfied preferences, needs to be rejected. Its plausibility as a general claim remains intact.

In general, a counterintuitive example that leads us to revise the substantive content of a particular conception does not entail a threat to the independent plausibility of a general claim. Thus Dorsey's argument does not give us a reason to reject the plausibility of perfectionism's general claim.

THE DEEP PROBLEM

As much as things may be looking up for perfectionism, the worst is yet to come. Dorsey's objection when pushed further reveals a deep problem.

Recall that a central motivation to accept perfectionism initiates from the intuition that objective list items are indeed good, but need a unifying explanation. Perfectionism purports to provide such an explanation: the items on the list are good because they are instances of developing human capacities.

Yet this is not an explanation of *why* the things on the list are good. We already have strong intuitive support *that* objective list items are good. The task of perfectionism is to explain their goodness. But it's not clear just how it does the explanatory work; it unifies, but how does it explain goodness? It is a descriptive account of what is common among the things on the list. Perfectionism can identify additional items to add to the list and help us identify imposters. But it is not clear how it explains why developing the capacities would be *good*.

In fact, perfectionists go to the trouble of clarifying that the account is purely descriptive. The motivation for this move is to avoid charges of circularity, since an account that identifies which features are good to develop cannot identify those features by their goodness. To make this appeal would be to say that the features that are good to develop

[26] Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 494.

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are those features that it is good to develop. Thus perfectionists must provide an account of the relevant features by appealing to something other than their goodness. This move is warranted. But after the worries about circularity have been laid to rest, we still have a deeper question. Given that the objective list items are united in being developments of human capacities, what is it about *being human capacities* that is good? Why is this the explanation that unites the *good* features of us? What makes them not just unified, but what makes them *good*? This is the deep question. Why is developing human capacities *good?*

What can perfectionism say in response? There are several very different possible approaches. Some conceptions of perfectionism are in particularly good positions to develop an answer to ground the deep question, and I will take these up in turn. Some approaches are more promising than others. But what I will ultimately argue is that the most interesting upshot is that this is a *tu quoque* point: the deep question is a question for *all* theories of well-being and perfectionism fares no worse (perhaps even better) than other theories.

Reject the question

One possible response is just to drop the deep question altogether. The deep question asks for an explanation that is a foundation of perfectionist goods, but we might think this is unnecessary. Hurka does not see any need for a foundation and instead justifies his focus with his appeal to *structural* methodology, in contrast to a foundational approach.[27] A structural analysis explains theories by connecting concepts and principles and revealing the structures of these principles, whereas a foundational analysis explains concepts by grounding them in more fundamental principles. Kantians, for example, aspire to ground claims about morality in a foundation of the nature of rationality. Thus the aim of a foundational analysis is to explain a theory by connecting it to deeper, more fundamental concepts. Structural analysis in contrast goes broad rather than deep. It aims to explain and defend theories by showing the relationships of the concepts of the theory to one another and by drawing connections to other abstract principles. Some perfectionists, such as Hurka, engage in structural explanation by relating the elements of the good life to further general claims about human nature and development.

The distinction between structural and foundational approaches illuminates differences in demands for adequate philosophical explanation. Accordingly, if perfectionists succeed in providing

[27] See Hurka, *Perfectionism as well as Drawing Morals* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 12–22.

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compelling structural explanations, the failure to provide foundational explanations is no objection to the view. By the standards set by a structural analysis, the absence of a foundational explanation is irrelevant for the adequacy of a structural analysis.

And yet, this may not be satisfying in the face of the deep question. A structural analysis just doesn't get to the heart of the issue because it still does not explain why perfectionism is an account of good.[28] It may bolster the appeal of the theory, but the deep problem concerns the ground of normative significance.

Further theory

Rather than dropping the question altogether, we might instead shift it elsewhere. This can be achieved by grounding perfectionism in a different basis of value. On this approach, the contention is that a further theory of value explains why the development of capacities is good. We appeal to this further theory of value, not human nature, which in turn explains why our developing human capacities is good: human capacities instantiate this other value.

But then there is the puzzling question of what sort of theory of value might ground the value of human capacities. As it happens, Nozick offers an answer. His view is that the basis of value is organic unity, and he describes an account according to which developing human capacities could be valuable because doing so instantiates organic unity.[29] Organic unity is a matter of unity in diversity, meaning roughly that having value is a matter of having a certain structure that unifies diverse elements and that human capacities might be said to instantiate unity in diversity because the most advanced instances of activities in which we exercise our capacities of rationality, etc., are activities that are highly diverse, but also unified.

But Nozick's view of organic unity has a relatively small subscription base. Nevertheless, the same general form of the Further Theory approach could employ a different theory of value. But just what theories might make good alternative candidates is unclear, and so the Further Theory approach is a mere promissory note. In the absence of some more plausible candidate theories, the Further Theory approach is merely a suggestion of a possibility.

[28] Although the structural approach can be fruitful, it is not a substitute for providing a foundation when pressing questions remain unanswered. No matter how compelling a structural analysis may be, it is not in a position to satisfy all curiosity. Indeed, there may be a danger of structural analysis in the absence of foundations: just how worthwhile is a structural analysis if the view that it develops is ultimately unsupportable?

[29] Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 517. It's not clear that Nozick himself endorses this perfectionist account, but he gives an account according to which his theory of value would support perfectionism.

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Moreover, one might well point out that there is a sense in which the Further Theory approach is really a rejection of perfectionism. Perfectionism traditionally construed involves the claim that human nature plays some role in the explanation of our good, but Further Theory denies this, telling us that it is the Further Theory that grounds our good and the relationship to human nature is simply coincidental.[30] Indeed, were the Further Theory the correct approach, we would need to recalibrate our understanding of the role of human nature in perfectionism.[31]

Aristotelian flourishing and teleological perfectionism

Another possible answer to the deep question in perfectionist terms can be found in the Aristotelian roots of perfectionism. The Aristotelian answer is that to develop the perfections is to *flourish*, and flourishing *just is* to live well.[32] The relation is analytic. Flourishing, according to the Aristotelian account, is a category that pertains primarily to living things.[33] For non-human living things, their flourishing is entirely a biological matter, but it's clear that biological flourishing is not a full account of human flourishing, and it is certainly not clear that it is in charge, normatively speaking. Aristotelians emphasize that human flourishing is not strictly biological, and aim to capture the intellectual and agential aspects of our nature as part of our flourishing even though these are not strictly biological.[34]

If it's analytic that flourishing *just is* our good, what further question could there possibly be? To ask whether our good is good, meaning to ask whether we have reason to pursue it in our lives as an ideal, is to misunderstand the question, surely, since our good *just is* that which we would have reason to pursue as an ideal. So the Aristotelian approach can be seen as answering the deep question in this way.

Then the challenge for the Aristotelian conception is to resolve the descriptive component of the account in a way that is a plausible

[30] Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

[31] Nevertheless, bear in mind that, even though it is now traditionally seen this way, perfectionism as a view has taken many forms, and it isn't carved in canonical stone that it absolutely must have its roots in an account of human nature. In fact, one of the first discussions of perfectionism does not classify it in a way that involves human nature – Rawls. The key features of perfectionism here appear to be 'achievement of human excellence' and so forth, but there is no mention of human nature establishing anything about the view (Rawls, *Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 285). Naturally one might very well wonder at this point just what are the key elements of perfectionism. That's a good question and I would like to know the answer as well.

[32] Kraut defends this position extensively, and argues that 'good' can be analysed in terms of 'good for' (*What is Good*). See also Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, 2001) and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Normativity* (Chicago, 2008).

[33] Kraut, *What is Good*, p. 131.

[34] Here I'm taking the 'biological realm' to mean the subject matter of biologists.

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candidate for grounding our good as a plausible ideal. If human flourishing is not strictly a matter of doing well biologically, then just what is our nature that flourishes? Since biological flourishing does not provide adequate normative guidance, the view must find a descriptive conception of human beings that lends itself to being a good candidate to ground the significance flourishing is meant to have on this account.

Yet even once equipped with a good descriptive account of human nature, there is the possibility that the Aristotelian approach has only succeeded in showing us an account of being good *of a kind*. Flourishing *as a human being* is just what it is to be a good instance of a human being. This still leaves the deep question unanswered – why is it good to be an instance of this particular kind? What's so good about that? This is particularly problematic since we are members of several kinds, and we can choose among the natures of these kinds. One might even say it is part of our nature to deliberate among our options in this very way and endorse the ends that we select for ourselves. In fact, it's in our nature to question our very nature – is developing human nature the *best way for humans to be*? Or is it better that we transcend this nature, or contravene it, or pursue some other ideal? The deep question asks to make a connection between our nature and its authoritativeness in establishing our good. Even with a successful Aristotelian descriptive account of our nature, there is the further task of explaining why flourishing is our good, and not simply being a good instance of a kind; and if it is the same as being a good instance of the kind, why this is a kind worth being. Nevertheless these are not hopeless tasks. The Aristotelian approach is promising, although precisely what it turns out to be is not obviously straightforward.

Apart from the traditional Aristotelian approach, there is a different teleological understanding of perfectionism that is in a good position to answer the deep question. This teleological perfectionism builds criteria of success into the perfectionist goods themselves. Sher's perfectionism, put roughly, holds that the human capacities have inherent goals, and so have inherent criteria of success.[35] Since human activity almost always makes use of these capacities, we are inevitably in pursuit of these goals as part of our nature. In so far as we attain these goals, we do something that is successful and therefore good. So we have an answer to the deep question: exercising the human capacities is good because doing so is a matter of attaining goals. Success in goals is good in so far as it is success; therefore exercising the human capacities is good.

[35] Sher, *Beyond Neutrality*.

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However, this view leaves open the question of whether or not it is indeed *good* that we attain these goals. Are these goals good goals to attain? Surely success in achieving a goal is good in a way, in so far as it constitutes success, but it is far from obvious that all goals and successes are good. So our deep question is ultimately unanswered by this approach in spite of its appeal.

Normative perfectionism

Drawing from T. H. Green, David O. Brink develops a perfectionism that grounds the perfectionist goods in an account of human nature that is itself normative.[36] The central distinguishing element of human nature is *rational agency*. This addition affords the view the resources to make a Kantian-style argument that there is a rational imperative to develop one's perfectionist capacities.[37] Brink addresses the deep question more or less head on: normative perfectionism answers the deep question by purporting to establish the normative authority of perfectionist goods in so far as rational agency by its own nature generates reason to pursue its development. Brink draws from the following passage in Green:

> [Developing rational agency] will express itself in . . . [agents'] imposition on themselves of rules requiring something to be done irrespectively of any inclination to do it, irrespectively of any desired end to which it is a means, other than this end, which is desired because conceived as absolutely desirable.[38]

The idea is that rational agency will generate a categorical imperative to develop it. To illustrate, Brink appeals to an analogy.

> In so far as one is a wine connoisseur . . . one cares about developing general wine competence . . . Similarly, in so far as one is a rational agent, one cares about developing one's deliberative competence and sensitivity to reason . . . But whereas assuming the perspective of the wine connoisseur appears rationally optional, assuming the point of view of practical reason cannot be comparably optional. Anything that practical reason, as such, would endorse necessarily enjoys normative significance.[39]

[36] Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good*, *Significance of Desire*, and 'Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition' (typescript, 2015).

[37] One might think that such an approach commits the crime of circularity that perfectionist accounts are prone to – namely by building in a normative element to what needs to be a strictly descriptive account of human nature – but this is not the sense in which normative perfectionism is normative. Rather, the normative component of the descriptive account emphasizes the centrality of rational agency in human nature.

[38] Green, *Prolegomena*, p. 222.

[39] Brink, *Significance of Desire*, p. 35.

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Rational agency conceived as our nature grounds its own normative significance in that there is something of a contradiction in failing to care about one's rational nature by doing something to contravene it: there is a contradiction in using one's powers of rational agency to make plans that have the effect of destroying or damaging those very powers. Practical rationality, so goes the Kantian-style argument, would never authorize such a plan. Since rational agency is the part of us that does the planning, rational agency would never endorse a plan that undermines itself. Consequently, normative perfectionism has the resources to ground the normative significance of perfectionist goods, and so we have an answer to the deep question.

To elaborate, if we understand the good as that which we have authoritative reason to pursue, then we have an answer to why perfectionism is an account of the good – because we have authoritative reason to pursue it. These two things – the good and what we have authoritative reason to pursue – are importantly related because an answer to the question of normative authority can suffice to answer the deep question in the following way: there is a conceptual relationship between the good and what we have authoritative reason to pursue. Of course, there may be other goods beside our own, but at the very least we now have an answer to the deep question: why is this good? Because we have authoritative reason to pursue it, therefore it *must* be.

And yet this argument does not go all the way to answer what we really want from the deep question. Does the argument indeed establish that we have authoritative reason *to pursue*? Let's grant that it is established that it is irrational to contravene or diminish our rational capacity in the way just argued. But is it also therefore a requirement to develop it and irrational to not develop it? This is what we need for the deep question: our good is that which we have reason to pursue and not just that which we have reason not to contravene or to just barely maintain.

Would it be irrational to pursue a life of, say, just lounging around and watching television and not really doing much of anything? Of course, this life requires some minimal capacity functioning so that we can have a decent enough job to pay the bills, but that doesn't require *developing* capacities, but merely maintaining them at basic levels. Rationality does not require *developing* our capacities, even if it requires maintaining them at basic levels and not contravening them.

But the claim of perfectionism is that the development or excellent exercise of our capacities is our good – the *more and better they are, the better we are*. Explaining why this is the case is answering the deep problem. What we want is not simply reason to not contravene practical

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rationality, but reason to pursue it, to cultivate its development or the manifestation of its excellence. Green's argument does not establish that we have any more reason to read Shakespeare or learn a new language or write a philosophy essay than we do to, say, sit around reading pulp fiction and watching television all day long, as long as what we are doing meets the bare minimum in keeping our rational agency intact and not contravening it. Of course in so far as that constitutes caring about our rational agency, it gives us that – we have authoritative reason to preserve our rational agency and keep it intact. But the deep question asks us to ground not just a reason *not* to act in a way that contravenes rational agency, but to ground reasons *to pursue* its cultivation and development, and it is not yet clear how we get this. We have grounded instrumental reasons to favour certain kinds of projects or lifestyles over others, namely those that do the least damage to our practical agency. But this is still not fully answering the deep problem.

One thought is that the normative perfectionist's argument should go like this: given two options, one which lets the rational agency stay stagnant and the other which develops and improves it, rationality requires that you take the option that makes your rational capacity better than it would have been given the option. But specifically *why* is it irrational to forgo an option that makes the rational capacity *better* in favour of another option that leaves it unchanged? One might think to argue that rational agency is *our good* and it is irrational to choose less good over more good. This would be an excellent argument; however, it *requires* that rational agency is good in order to establish the conclusion that we have reason to promote it and this is the very thing that we are striving to explain with our answer to the deep question, namely, the goodness of rational agency. So we do not yet have an argument that we have reason to develop rational agency.

Further, even if normative perfectionism succeeds in establishing a response to the deep question for rational agency, it does not ground the normative significance of other perfectionist goods beyond rational agency. Developing the capacity for theoretical rationality, the physical capacities or emotional capacities, for example, are plausible perfectionist goods, but there is no operational contradiction in failing to develop these capacities. This is a particularly disappointing drawback since a central appeal of perfectionism is that it grounds the value of a plurality of goods such as achievement, knowledge and friendship.

Yet for at least some perfectionist goods, namely achievement and knowledge, normative perfectionism has one more trick up its sleeve. First, to capture the value of achievement directly, one can say that

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achievement necessarily involves the expression of rational agency – our achievements reflect our chosen aims made manifest through our planning and agency. Second, for theoretical knowledge, normative perfectionism can point to Green's view that rational agency entails *epistemic responsibility*.[40] Rational agency is the capacity to adjudicate among the strengths of reasons, including epistemic reasons, and hence rational agency entails being a good epistemic subject.

However, this still doesn't get us all the way to what we want in an answer to the deep problem, since even if rational agency is expressed in our achievements, we still do not have the conclusion that there is reason to pursue and develop practical agency (and hence achievement) over and above merely not contravening it. The same goes for knowledge: we may have the rational imperative to not contravene rationality, but this still does not yet produce the perfectionist thesis that the pursuit of theoretical knowledge is good, i.e. that there is something *better* in pursuing the intellectual richness of Montaigne and Homer over a diet of soap operas and gossip magazines.

Even so, this approach establishes a part of an answer to the deep question in so far as it grounds authoritative reason to avoid certain ends that are damaging to perfectionist good. So at the very least we have a beginning of an answer to the deep question: conceiving rational agency as a characteristic human capacity grounds authoritative reason to shape our lives a certain way.

Tu quoque

For all that, we're left without a fully comprehensive answer to the deep question. Is this the end for perfectionism? Does it provide a possible unifying account of the Objective List Theory but nothing more significant? Do we have no reason, now, to accept perfectionism?

But that hardly follows. The deep problem is not unique to perfectionism, and we have made more headway here than just about any theory of well-being has done for itself in response to it. The deep problem raises a question that we can put to any moral theory, and perfectionism fares no worse than any other. Quite the contrary: from the perfectionist responses that I have just sketched, perfectionism is in an even better position than some other theories. Consider hedonism in the face of the deep question. Why is hedonism an account of our good? At first the answer is obvious – of course pleasure is good. This claim is so immediately plausible that the burden is on those who deny its relevance – case in point the first part of this article. In fact, if we look at typical defences of hedonism, the intuitive obviousness of

[40] Brink, *Perfectionism and the Common Good*, p. 20.

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the relevance of pleasure for good is all that's needed to motivate the theory, and subsequent defence consists of diffusing counterexamples. But intuitive plausibility is one thing and an explanation is another. *Why* is pleasure good? It's a baffling question to answer.

When Mill considers to 'what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible', he tells us: 'ultimate ends do not admit of proof'.[41] The best we can do is entertain considerations to shape our judgement. Recognizing the obvious plausibility of the desirability of pleasure is the strongest support that can be given for comprehending its goodness. But beyond this, there is no further ground to be found.

If it's the case that there is no proof or ground for 'ultimate ends' beyond the recognition of evident desirability, then the deep question is a whole lot of fuss for nothing. But why, then, does it niggle for perfectionism?

One thought is that the lingering niggle is a matter of *motivating* perfectionism rather than explaining it. The intuitive plausibility of the starting point for some accounts of the good is more immediate than others – pleasure or desire satisfaction, for example, strikes us as immediately relevant for our good and so a good starting point for a theory, barely worth questioning. In contrast, there is no such immediate plausibility for the perfectionist ideal of developing human capabilities because it is considerably more abstract. If the deep question is only a matter of *motivating* the theory, it's simply a PR problem, as it were – a question of having used effective rhetoric to describe the theory in such a way that it captures the imagination. If that's so, this isn't such a deep problem at all and perfectionism just needs a better sales pitch. It may threaten the theory's popularity, but it wouldn't threaten its truth.

But the deep question isn't simply a request for a plausible description of the theory. It's a demand for an *explanation* of the ground of the theory. Why is this theory an account of what it claims it is? Why is this an account of an ideal around which we ought to shape our lives?

Grounding a connection between the theory and the ideal therefore emerges as an essential desideratum of a theory of well-being. This isn't just a question for perfectionism, but for any theory of well-being. In this respect, perfectionism fares no worse off than any other theory – even better, perhaps, in that at least there are the starting points that I explored in the previous section, culminating in the most promising response from normative perfectionism. Although I argued that normative perfectionism's response to the deep question isn't fully

[41] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis, 2001), p. 35.

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comprehensive, it does nevertheless ground authoritative reason to shape our lives in a certain way. And this is nothing to sneeze at: how many other theories of well-being can say the same?

Overall, I have canvassed responses on behalf of perfectionism in the face of several important objections. Perfectionism is a relatively underdefended theory in the literature, and my hope with these arguments is to further foster its exploration.[42]

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[42] I'm exceedingly grateful for discussion from David Brink, Dale Dorsey, Richard Kraut, Eden Lin, George Sher, Steven Skultety, and many others, as well as audiences at the Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, the University of Mississippi and Rice University.

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