

Three Arguments for Perfectionism - Forthcoming in *Noûs*

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Perfectionism, or the claim that human well-being consists in the development and exercise of one's natural or essential capacities, is in growth mode. With its long and distinguished historical pedigree, perfectionism has emerged as a powerful antidote to what are perceived as significant problems in desiderative and hedonist accounts of well-being. However, perfectionism is one among many views that deny the influence of our desires, or that cut the link between well-being and a raw appeal to sensory pleasure. Other views include, for instance, the "objective list" view,¹ the so-called "restricted achievement" view,² and various hybrid views that combine an appeal to desire or pleasure with an objective standard of evaluation *of* those desires or pleasures.

In this paper, I attempt to deflate three important arguments for perfectionism in contrast with its competitors. Each of these arguments has appeared, in some form or other, in the historical record. Some have been given sophisticated and compelling restatements with the benefit of our contemporary conceptual apparatus.³ Unfortunately, none have the power to support the claim that the good life is one that develops an agent's natural or essential capacities. And though I will focus only on three here, the failure of these arguments suggests general defects in a perfectionist view, and

¹See, for instance, Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing versus Desire Satisfaction" in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999). Both James Griffin and Derek Parfit list so-called "objective" theories as theories of well-being. See James Griffin, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), appendix I.

²Cf. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 12; T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 3; for the "unrestricted achievement view", see Simon Keller, "Welfare and the Achievement of Goals" in *Philosophical Studies* 121 (2004).

³The most perspicuous example is Thomas Hurka's *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

should be widely worrisome.

The paper will be organized as follows. Section 1 will provide a brief description of perfectionism *in general*. In §2, I discuss an important argument for perfectionism, given by Thomas Hurka, but also reflected in (some interpretations of) Aristotle: the *essence* argument. The second is found in the writings of Kant, T. H. Green, and is developed in its recent formulation by David Brink. This is the *agency* argument. Finally, I will discuss an argument that all perfectionists share, the *intuitive* argument: the argument that perfectionism, as opposed to its rivals, better conforms to our overall judgments of the goodness of lives. I argue that the essence and agency arguments do no independent work for perfectionism, but totally rely on the implicit assumption of the success of the intuitive argument. This result is untenable for the final argument. The intuitive argument cannot support perfectionism on its own. Or so I shall argue.

1. *What is Perfectionism?*

In understanding perfectionism, two questions are crucial to answer. First, what *concept* is perfectionism a *conception* of? Second, what is the structure of this conception?

First thing's first. For Hurka, perfectionism is an account of the "good life," but in a moral, rather than prudential sense. It is the life that humans ought to seek regardless of their contingent desires or inclinations. This claim is also reflected in Kant.⁴ But rather than as a strictly moral demand, one might construe perfectionism as an account of well-being or the personal good. Hurka, however, resists characterizing perfectionism in this way.

Well-being itself is often characterized subjectively, in terms of actual or hypothetical desires. Given this subjective characterization, perfectionism cannot concern well-being. Its ideal cannot define the "good for" in a human because the ideal is one he ought to pursue regardless of his desires. In my view, perfectionism should never be expressed in terms of well-being. It gives an account of the good human life, or of what is good in a human, but not of what is "good for" a human in the sense tied to well-being.⁵

⁴See Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 6:386-9, 518-9. See also the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 4:423.

⁵Hurka, 17-18.

Of course, it is up to the perfectionist to determine which concept his conception is to be a conception of. It is perfectly open to the perfectionist to reject perfectionism as a conception of welfare, for instance. But Hurka's rejection of perfectionism *qua* theory of welfare is unmotivated. Indeed, he seems to suggest that perfectionism cannot be an account of welfare because welfare is subjective. But this is certainly up for grabs. Indeed, that welfare is subjective has been disputed not only by perfectionists, but others as well (including the objective-list and various hybrid views noted above). Nevertheless, Hurka's rejection of perfectionism as a theory of well-being does not simply stem from his stipulation that a theory of well-being ought to be subjective. Rather, Hurka rejects the notion of "well-being" as a concept that stands in need of *any* specifying conception. According to Hurka, well-being is meaningless apart from theories of well-being, and apart from the notion, with which he identifies perfectionism, of a "good life" *tout court*.⁶

We should reject Hurka's refusal to countenance well-being as a specific philosophical concept that permits of better and worse conceptions. Well-being appears necessary for other crucial normative concepts. Well-being maintains a strong link to inquiries about prudential reasons. It appears that we have prudential reason to do what is in our interests, what increases our overall well-being. We may *or may not* (depending on the specified conception) have prudential reason to live a "good life" *tout court*. Insofar as we have considered judgments about what is in our interests, or judgments about our prudential reasons, we will thereby have considered judgments about welfare. And it appears that many of our considered judgments about welfare are susceptible to a perfectionist analysis. Richard Kraut, for instance, notes that some of our "actual or hypothetical" desires appear not to be in accordance with our own well-being, including a compulsive desire to smash icicles.⁷ Perfectionism has a seemingly plausible story to tell: a life spent smashing icicles is not compatible with one's nature *qua* human agent. In speaking of perfectionism here, then, I will assume that perfectionism forms an account of welfare or well-being.⁸

Now to the second question. What is the structure of perfectionism as an account of welfare or well-being? Perfectionism is *objective* rather than *subjective*—on a perfectionist view, certain activities, achievements, etc., are

⁶Hurka, 194n17.

⁷Richard Kraut, "Desire and the Human Good" in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 68 (1994), 41-42.

⁸This is a common interpretation of perfectionism; it is found in Kraut, George Sher, T.H. Green, David Brink, Aristotle (on some interpretations), and others (including various critics of perfectionism).

intrinsically valuable in a way that does not depend on an agent's responses (desires, etc.). But it would be a mistake to identify perfectionism simply with the claim that certain activities or achievements are good in themselves, such as excellent theoretic, aesthetic, or practical achievements. Though perfectionism implies this conclusion, defining perfectionism in this way would fail to distinguish perfectionism from the *objective list* view, which also embraces these particular activities and achievements as constitutive of a good life. The unique perfectionist claim identifies the good with the fulfillment of one's nature: the good life for an x is identified by the core facts about what it means to be an x , by the core account of x -hood. For humans, perfectionism declares that the best life is determined by the core account of what it means to be human. Developing and exercising those properties or capacities that form what it means to be human yields a good life for a human. But in principle perfectionism could be applied to any creature. The best life for a cat depends on the sort of creature a cat is—developing and exercising those capacities that make a cat a cat is what makes for a good cat life.

Perfectionism as applied to humans comes in different forms. Perfectionists differ on what *precisely* the relevant capacities are, and what *precisely* the relevant x is. For Hurka, the relevant properties are picked out by a restricted set of the *necessary* or *essential* features of humans. Hurka rightly notes that humans have a wide range of necessary properties, not all relevant to moral inquiry. So Hurka settles on those properties that are “essential to humans and conditioned on their being living things.”⁹ For T. H. Green, the relevant specification of the core properties will come via an examination of what makes humans moral, deliberative agents.¹⁰ These accounts can come apart. It is possible that what makes us moral agents is not an essential property of us *qua* human beings. George Sher's account of perfectionism does not follow the above schema by the letter, but he suggests that the relevant elements that make a good human life good are those that fulfill “near-universal” and “near-unavoidable” goals.¹¹ One might put this, however, in terms of the schema above. What it (nearly always) means to be human is to have certain goals. The fulfillment of those goals, then, will form the good for humans.

So what *are* the relevant capacities and properties that form the ac-

⁹Hurka, 16.

¹⁰See T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. Brink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹¹George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ch. 9.

count of a good life on a perfectionist account? Generally, perfectionists endorse the value of the development and exercise of our rational, deliberative capacities.¹² For Hurka, the human essence will include both theoretical rationality and practical rationality.¹³ Aristotle holds a similar view, though he expresses it somewhat differently. For Aristotle, activity that is distinctively human is activity that expresses the “rational part of the soul,” or the part of the soul that has reason, as opposed to the appetitive parts of the soul. Hurka also believes that certain physical capacities can form relevant perfectionist achievements. According to Hurka, being physically embodied is essential to humans as living things.¹⁴ Though Hurka does not go into great detail about these capacities, presumably they will include being free of disease, developing one’s strength and athletic capacities, etc.

The value of our rational and deliberative capacities are also reflected in the account of humanity specified by Green. For Green, our capacity as moral agents allows us to deliberate about the structure of our ends. Rather than simply being dictated by our immediate desires, humans *qua* morally responsible agents have the ability to rationally deliberate about their desires, to conform their desires and actions to a conception of the good. On this picture, it is this rational, deliberative capacity that forms the account of the good on Green’s perfectionism. Green calls the achievement of these valuable states “self-realization”. Because moral personality consists in being able to deliberate about one’s ends, to subject them to rational and normative scrutiny, and because this version of perfectionism suggests that the account of *x*-hood is humanity *qua* responsible moral agents, this view yields that “a life of activities that embody rational or deliberative control of thought and action”¹⁵ is the perfectionist ideal.

Thus a complete perfectionist account of welfare will include three separable claims:

1. *Perfectionism*: The good life for an *x* is determined by the core account of what it means to be an *x*.
2. *Identification of the Core Capacities*: The core account of what it means to be an *x* involves a specific set of capacities, $\{a, b, c\}$.

¹²See Aristotle, *NE* 1098a; Hurka, chs. 4, 7-9; David O. Brink, “The Significance of Desire” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* v. 3, ed. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); David O. Brink, “Mill’s Deliberative Utilitarianism” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21 (1992).

¹³Hurka, 39.

¹⁴Hurka, 38

¹⁵Brink, “Editor’s Introduction” in Green, “Prolegomena to Ethics”, op. cit., xl.

3. *Fulfillment of the Core Capacities*: A life lived according to capacities $\{a, b, c\}$ involves certain specific activities $\{q, r, s\}$.

All perfectionists share (1). Indeed, perfectionists mostly agree on the identification of the core capacities—(2)—although there is some variation. Aristotle identifies the core capacities as the activity of the rational part of the soul; Hurka suggests the core capacities are one’s capacity for theoretical and practical reason and one’s capacities as a physically embodied being; Green and Brink suggest that the capacity for practical reason—“deliberative control of thought and action”—forms the core account of a perfectionist life for a human. However, perfectionists appear to disagree significantly when it comes to (3). For Hurka, the fulfillment of the core capacities involves a *complex, unified, and well-rounded* life.¹⁶ For Brink and Green it is a life chosen as a result of one’s practical reason, that exercises one’s deliberative capacities, and that lives in accordance with the common good.¹⁷

The distinction between (2) and (3) might be illustrated by Aristotle’s perfectionism. Though his interpretation is controversial, Richard Kraut writes that, for Aristotle,

the ultimate aim of human life, and the proper function of human beings, is to use reason well, and this goal can be reached in either of two ways: ideally, by leading a philosophical life and making contemplation one’s highest aim; but if that option cannot be taken, then we do best by fully developing the practical virtues and exercising them on a grand scale, in the political arena.¹⁸

This account of Aristotle’s view clearly represents the distinction between the three claims. The *function* of a human being is “to use reason well,” which forms the content of (2). One *does this* by living a life of philosophical contemplation or statesmanship; this is the content of the perfectionist life. The perfectionist life will be valuable, according to Aristotle, because it conforms to the unique function of human beings.

Critics of perfectionism often fail to distinguish these claims, to perfectionism’s disadvantage. For instance, in a recent article Daniel Haybron has claimed to show that “perfectionism is false.”¹⁹ But Haybron’s strategy for

¹⁶Hurka, chs. 7, 9.

¹⁷Green, §§183-200; Brink, “Editor’s Introduction”, xl-xlii; Brink, “Self-Love and Altruism” in *Social Philosophy and Policy* 14 (1997).

¹⁸Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 7.

¹⁹Daniel M. Haybron, “Well-Being and Virtue” in the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (www.jesp.org) 2 (2007), 4.

defeating perfectionism is to show that *virtue* is distinct from well-being. But notice that one can be a perfectionist and avoid the claim that virtue is essential to well-being. One might simply say, for instance, that the development of one's rational capacities can come apart from virtue; one could accept the perfectionist account of (1) and (2), but not (3). (Haybron's most plausible counter-examples lend themselves to precisely this response: though the life is non-virtuous, it is good because it develops to an important degree the proper account of human nature or the realization of the agent's self.²⁰) Indeed, Haybron suggests that an account of well being in which "well-being consists partly in perfection understood not as admirability but as actualization—the fulfillment of one's capacities, say, where this does not entail moral virtue" might itself be plausible.²¹ But if this is the case, it seems to me, Haybron's view is compatible with perfectionism.

This essay will address perfectionism at the heart of the beast. The question I will ask is as follows: why should we regard the core account of *x*-hood as essential to well-being? In other words, why should we believe (1)? The positions discussed here can be seen as providing answers to this question. The first argument, from Hurka, argues from the "top down": the perfectionist capacities are valuable because they are identified by the human essence, which is itself a plausible indicator of value. The second argues that the core account is good because rational agents *qua* rational agents are committed to its value. Finally, all perfectionists share an argument from the "bottom up": the capacities identified by the core account of *x*-hood are intuitively valuable, and hence support perfectionism which identifies them as good. None of these arguments are satisfactory.

2. *The Essence-Welfare Link*

Why should we accept that developing one's nature is of welfare value? Hurka insists that development of one's nature is good—perfectionism is true—because the proper account of nature is a plausible *indicator* of value. This argument runs from the "top down": developing one's nature forms an in-

²⁰E.g., Haybron's Genghis Khan case. This case shows a lack of virtue can be good, but it does not show that the life is good independently of the development of the character's specifically human capacities. Furthermore, Haybron specifically issues an argument that questions the Aristotelian move from (2) to (3) (see pgs. 11-12). I find this argument plausible, but it is no argument against perfectionism; it is an argument only that perfectionists should refrain from identifying the content of the perfectionist life with the life of virtue.

²¹Haybron, 16.

dependently plausible ideal. Hurka writes:

The goal of developing human nature, or exercising essential human powers, is deeply attractive. This is reflected in its widespread acceptance. The ideal is implicit in non-philosophical talk of living a “fully human” or “truly human” life and is endorsed by diverse philosophers. ... Some value contemplation; others value action. Some value a communal life; others value a life of solitude. If, despite these differences, these philosophers all ground their particular values in a single ideal of human nature, that ideal must have intrinsic appeal.

Some of this appeal can be explained, if nature is essence. Because each of us is essentially a human, to develop human nature is not to develop some temporary or tangential property, such as being a lawyer or hockey fan. It is to develop what makes us what we are.²²

Hurka’s move appears to be this: why should we believe that developing one’s nature is good? Answer: because nature is properly construed as essence, a being’s essential properties. And, says Hurka, there is an explanatory link between essence-development and goodness of lives: that some property is essential explains its value because developing one’s essence-development is itself a plausible evaluative ideal. For short, I will refer to this as the *essence-welfare link*.

I wish to distinguish between two ways there might be a connection between essence and welfare. The first is substantive: essence *explains* why some particular property is valuable. The other is trivial: essence merely happens to coincide with value, but is eliminable in an inquiry concerning *why* valuable properties are valuable. But there is some reason for holding that any connection between essence and welfare is merely trivial. To see this, consider the following worry: whether there is an essence-welfare link depends on what our essence is, and whether we believe that essence is good for the creature that develops it. This can be seen by noting several of the seemingly unintuitive aspects of the human essence. For instance, it appears that one essential property of humans is to take up four-dimensional space. Certainly development of this essential property fails to count in favor of the goodness of one’s life.

Hurka appears ready to accept that a raw appeal to essence, of itself, is not enough to establish the plausibility of perfectionism. Hurka intends to

²²Hurka, 32.

give an account of essence that rules out evaluatively trivial properties. Thus in order to state an account of perfectionism that doesn't pick out neutral features as good, Hurka must restrict the range of essential properties to those properties human beings possess necessarily and that are conditioned on their being living things, as opposed to things generally.²³ This rules out self-identity, taking up space, etc. Hurka writes:

A perfectionist concept of nature assigns intrinsic value to certain properties, and these must on their own seem morally worth developing. A concept of nature may fail this test by not including some properties that do seem valuable. This flaw is less serious, showing at most that perfectionism needs to be supplemented by other moral ideas. It is more damaging if a concept of nature includes properties that on their own seem morally trivial—if it gives value to what, intuitively, lacks it. This is a telling objection to the concept. A morality based on the concept will be hard to accept because it flouts our particular judgments about value.²⁴

According to Hurka, this is the “wrong properties objection.” Hurka seeks an account of the human essence that would yield the right properties. This will, according to Hurka, require us to restrict the range of the evaluatively relevant necessary properties of humanity. But this move is telling for the plausibility of the essence argument. The *reason* that Hurka is licensed to restrict the range of essential properties that are relevant for an account of the good, and not restrict them *further*, appears to depend upon which properties are picked as independently valuable of themselves. If this is the case, the essence-welfare link appears threatened. The connection between essence and welfare appears trivial: the account of essence is tailor-made to deliver plausible verdicts about value. But the essence-welfare link requires not a trivial connection between essence and welfare, but a substantive, explanatory connection. If essence is simply tailor-made in this way, essence seems to do no explanatory work; in an explanation of value, essence-development appears eliminable.

Hurka understands that his conception of essence is value-laden. But that essence is value-laden need not entail a merely trivial connection between essence and welfare (or value *tout court*, as Hurka prefers). Though

²³Philip Kitcher argues that Hurka cannot, without imposing his own intuitions, derive a notion of goodness from human essence. I agree with Kitcher, but my argument will address a different point. See Kitcher, “Essence and Perfection” in *Ethics* 110 (1999).

²⁴Hurka, 9.

an evaluatively relevant account of essence must be adjusted to avoid trivial or bad properties, the appeal to essence can still support perfectionism if it can plausibly be maintained that essence-development is itself a plausible ideal independent of any adjustment in light of objections. Otherwise, an appeal to essence does no explanatory work: value is explained by our considered judgments, not by an appeal to essence. Hurka admits that in order to defend perfectionism *via* essence, it *must* be the case that the essentialist ideal is plausible independent of whatever consequences it might entail (for precisely the reasons I note here).²⁵ But Hurka claims that his response to the “wrong properties objection” is simply fine-tuning of an independently plausible ideal.²⁶

One might compare Hurka’s response to the “wrong-properties objection” with the Aristotelian response to similar complaints about the infamous *function* argument in the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7. Aristotle insists that the the good for a human being is to be determined by finding the proper *function*—which might be glossed as “characteristic activity” of a human being. For Aristotle the function of a human being is a mark or indicator of value. Aristotle’s function argument has been vastly criticized. There appear good reasons to doubt a proposed function-welfare link. Indeed, there appears to be something of a slip between “the good for a human” and what it means for a human to be “doing well as a human.”²⁷ Leaving this aside, however, one might believe that the unique function of human beings will include a wide variety of things, many of which are either neutral or downright bad. Bernard Williams notes, for instance, that “If one approached without preconceptions the question of finding characteristics which differentiate men from other animals, one could as well, on these principles, end up with a morality which exhorted men to spend as much time as possible in making fire; or developing peculiarly human physical characteristics; or having sexual intercourse without regard to season; or despoiling the environment and upsetting the balance of nature; or killing things for fun.”²⁸ If these are properties picked out by the human function, they certainly appear to be the *wrong* ones.

²⁵Hurka, 31.

²⁶Hurka, 16.

²⁷Cf. P. Glassen, “A Fallacy in Aristotle’s Function Argument about the Good” in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 7 (1957). This move has been the subject of much discussion, including Jennifer Whiting’s “Aristotle’s Function Argument: A Defense” in *Ancient Philosophy* 8 (1988), and Katherine V. Wilkes, “The Good Man and the Good for Man in Aristotle’s Ethics” in *Mind* 87 (1978).

²⁸Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 64.

Defenders of Aristotle reply that Aristotle’s account of the human function is itself value-laden. Kraut insists that Williams mistakenly identifies necessary components of the human function (such as uniqueness of activity) as components that are sufficient for a proper account of that function. As Kraut suggests, what *counts* as part of our function must be unique, but it must also be, on reflection, good or choiceworthy: “the human good must be something that we desire for its own sake.”²⁹ Whiting insists that Aristotle’s notion of function is normative “all the way down”.³⁰ Just as with Hurka’s view, however, one might wonder how much evaluative work an appeal to function is doing if the appeal to function is ineliminably value-laden. However, as a way to rescue the appeal to function, one might argue that the appeal to function (or a wider appeal to “nature”) is an independently plausible ideal; this move is found in Julia Annas’ discussion of Aristotle.³¹ One might put this appeal in terms used to describe Hurka’s position: though function is value-laden, it cannot be eliminated because the development of one’s function is an independently plausible ideal; there remains a function-welfare link.

I think this move is unsuccessful. Returning to Hurka, I deny that his strategy is simply fine-tuning of a *prima facie* plausible ideal. The appeal to human essence would not be plausible but for the fine tuning in which Hurka is engaged. Without this fine tuning, the appeal to essence would be a non-starter. And if this is correct, there is no essence-welfare link. It seems to me that precisely the same should be said about the reconstruction of Aristotle offered above: the appeal to function is not plausible independently of our beliefs that the appeal to function delivers the right answers.

How should we test my claim that an appeal to essence (or function—for the rest of this section I will refer to the essence-welfare link, although the points apply in both cases) carries with it no independent appeal? One relevant test is *resistance to recalcitrance*. Consider the extent to which we are willing to revise our beliefs about value in light of a recalcitrant belief

²⁹Kraut, 318. See also Kraut, 324: “The function argument does not...say everything Aristotle needs to say in order to show that either of these two ends [i.e., the political life or the life of contemplation] can by itself adequately fulfill the role of an ultimate end, by being the goal for the sake of which all lower ends are desired. The function argument is just one element in Aristotle’s defense of the philosophical and political lives, and should not be expected to carry the entire burden of that defense.” Kraut’s suggestion is that the function argument is one important step in the argument for perfectionism, but a step that requires additional argument and reflection on the goodness of the properties themselves.

³⁰Whiting, 38-9.

³¹Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216-17.

about what is essential to humans and what is conditioned on their being living things. If such an appeal is a plausible indicator of value, we should believe that that appeal has at least *some* power to override recalcitrant intuitions. Imagine that we come to believe that the relevant essence yields some trivial property. For instance, let's imagine that we come to believe that a disposition to develop hypothermia under cold conditions is essential to humanity. What pressure would there be to accept that property as good-making? I contend: none whatsoever. Instead, the response (which models Hurka's own strategy) would be to revise that account of human essence further, such that the trivial property is avoided. In order for an appeal to essence to play a role in a reflective equilibrium, it must have at least some resistance to recalcitrant beliefs. But an appeal to essence seems not to have no such resistance.

More evidence: a claim about essence appears to have no ability to make even *slight* changes to our conception of value. Consider *mortality*. Let's say that we come to believe that mortality is a valuable property of humanity, i.e., that because a life that stretched on too long would become dissatisfying, it's better not to live forever. Assume that this is a settled matter. However, on any plausible view, *length of life* is not valuable in and of itself; extended life is good or bad based solely on what that life contains. In other words, it is implausible to believe that the length of one's life is anything more than instrumentally good or bad. But suppose that we come to believe that mortality is part of the human essence in Hurka's sense. (I'm uncommitted on this proposal.) On an essentialist view, mortality would not simply be instrumentally good, but intrinsically good, good in itself. But are we prepared to make even this comparatively small change (i.e., instrumental to intrinsic, but not "valueless" to "valuable") in our beliefs on the basis of a verdict about essence? I find this far-fetched to say the least. A claim about essence appears to have no power to influence the value of mortality one way or the other. But if so, the essence-welfare link is not independently plausible enough to support a "top-down" argument for perfectionism.

Notice that in making this argument I'm not imagining that our essence is different than it is. (As Hurka points out, one cannot evaluate a counterfactual involving essence.³²) Rather, I'm imagining that we come to believe that our essence contains mortality, which perhaps it may not. But this is the relevant test: if *we believe* that there is an essence-welfare link, we ought to feel at least some pressure to revise our considered judgments about

³²Hurka, 21-22.

goodness or welfare in light of a contrary belief about essence. If we believe that essence yields a counterintuitive verdict, we ought to feel some pressure to accept that verdict. But it appears we are prepared to accept *no* such verdicts. The mere fact that Hurka’s account of essence (I hereby grant for the sake of argument) delivers the right properties does not settle whether the appeal to essence is independently plausible. That can only be settled under counterfactual epistemic conditions, conditions under which we believe that an appeal to essence directs us in unintuitive ways. Under such conditions, the appeal to essence wilts. I maintain that *precisely* the same could be said of Aristotle’s appeal to function.

In this section I have argued as follows: in order for the essence argument to support perfectionism, there must be an essence-welfare link that is substantive and explanatory rather than trivial. But in order to avoid triviality, Hurka must claim that the appeal to essence maintains plausibility independent of any verdicts it might issue. But it appears that an appeal to essence does not maintain this level of plausibility. Hence any connection between essence and welfare can be trivial only. The only conditions under which the human essence (or function) is a plausible ideal are conditions under which we have already fine-tuned the notion of human essence (or function) to deliver the right verdicts.

3. *The Agency Argument*

A further argument in favor of perfectionism takes as its starting point our status as moral agents. It then proceeds to show that any moral agent is committed to valuing the development and exercise of their deliberative and rational capacities. Because, as moral agents, we are committed to the intrinsic value of that which *makes* us moral agents, what makes us moral agents will form the proper account of our good. This argument, or the “agency argument,” as I will refer to it, has a decidedly Kantian flavor; similar arguments can be found in Kant’s writings.³³ Like the essence argument, the agency argument is “top-down”: developing our nature is valuable because moral agents are committed to *valuing* it.

The version of the agency argument I will discuss here is offered by T. H. Green. This argument is remarkably sophisticated and, it seems to me, there is much in it. For Green, moral personality means subjecting one’s desires and inclinations to deliberative control; rather than simply lunging for the delicious-looking pint of beer, a moral agent will inquire whether so

³³Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 4:423, also section III.

lunging would be good and can control the desire to so lunge if the answer is no. For Green, developing one's self as a moral agent is developing one's *self*.³⁴ Hence, Green's perfectionism embraces the ideal of *self-realization*:

It is in virtue of this self-objectifying principle that he is determined, not simply by natural wants according to natural laws, but by the thought of himself as existing under certain conditions, and as having ends that may be attained and capabilities that may be realised under those conditions. ... It is thus, again, that he has the impulse to make himself what he has the possibility of becoming but actually is not, and hence not merely, like the plant or animal, undergoes a process of development, but seeks to, and does, develop himself.³⁵

Though Green's text is to some degree hard to decipher, he appears to claim that humans, insofar as they are rational agents, will treat themselves as a proper object of the will. They will ask questions about what sort of life they ought to live. In so doing, they understand that they are not simply determined by forces of nature operating externally to their own deliberation, but rather by the operation of their practical deliberation. Hence, they will seek to become what they have the possibility of becoming, rather than what nature has dictated that they *will* become. One helpful supplement to Green's understanding of self-realization above is his account of freedom or autonomy. Green's view runs as follows: "From this bondage he emerges into real freedom, not by overcoming the law of his being, not by getting the better of its necessity, ... but by making its fulfillment the object of his will; by seeking the satisfaction of himself in objects in which he believes it should be found, and seeking it in them because he believes it should be found in them."³⁶ Thus, for Green, a moral agent will find his freedom and moral agency in making the "law of his being" an object of his will. And if "the law of his being" is to determine his life by means of rational and deliberative capacities, the moral agent will make the development of these capacities the supreme object of his will.

I think Green is right to connect an account of the personal good with the objects a person believes are choiceworthy.³⁷ Surely achieving one's good involves subjecting one's desires to some sort of deliberative control;

³⁴Green, §174.

³⁵Green, §175.

³⁶T. H. Green, "The Senses of 'Freedom'" in *The Political Theory of T. H. Green*, ed. John R. Rodman (New York, NY: Meredith Publishing Company, 1964), 76.

³⁷Cf. Dale Dorsey, "Headaches, Lives, and Value" in *Utilitas* (forthcoming).

lunging after the pint of beer will not always be in an agent's best interests, and insofar as one is a moral, deliberative agent, achieving one's good will surely involve asking those sorts of questions and reigning in desires that violate an agent's sense of what is good or valuable. And if I am a rational agent (rather than, say, a mere "actor"), I will be committed to scrutinizing my desires by the use of practical reflection. But from here the waters get a bit murky. So far, the agency argument has not shown why we must reign in our desires in a *perfectionist* way. The hedonist will seek pleasure because she believes that pleasure is good—she will subject her desires to a process of deliberative endorsement, endorsement based on her *hedonist* conception of the good. Green's argument cannot establish that the "law" of an agent's being, i.e., the relevant deliberative capacities, must be the object of the will, merely that what one thinks is *good* (which may or may not coincide with "the law of his being") should be the object of his will.

In elaborating Green's argument, David Brink writes:

But why should we think that the exercise of practical deliberation must favor lives that embody or exercise rational nature? Green, like Kant, is interested in the question what one would care about insofar as one is rational. Consider an analogy. Insofar as one is a wine connoisseur, there are determinate things one cares about. One cares about developing general wine competence ... and about the consumption and appreciation of fine wines by themselves and as parts of meals. Similarly, insofar as one is a rational agent, one cares about developing one's deliberative competence and sensitivity to reason and one chooses environments, projects, and activities that allow scope for deliberative control of thought and action. In this way the exercise of practical reason can be the object of practical reason, much as the exercise of wine connoisseurship can be the object of the wine connoisseur.³⁸

I might agree that practical reason can form an object of practical deliberation. But the question concerns why it *must*. The mere fact that, as a rational agent, I am committed to subjecting my desires to a regimen of deliberative endorsement does not entail that I ought to subject them to *this or that* regimen of deliberative endorsement. In order for the agency argument to establish perfectionism, there must be some mistake that the hedonist makes in treating pleasure as the ultimate object of her practical deliberation. A wine connoisseur is committed to developing wine competence.

³⁸Brink, "The Significance of Desire", §7.

But a rational agent is committed—if she is committed to this much—only to developing and deliberating in accordance with *some* conception of the good. It might be that I am a hedonist. I believe that the best sort of life for me would be one that is the most pleasurable, whether this is part of the core account of moral personality or not. I must still subject my desires to a process of deliberative endorsement: I will wonder whether my desires properly lead to hedonic fulfillment. Without doing that, I fail to be an agent. But, so far, I fail to see why the hedonist is wrong or mistaken in treating pleasure, rather than the development of her perfectionist capacities, as the object of her will.

Of course, even the hedonist must recognize that the capacities that make one a moral agent are valuable. Brink is surely right to this extent: *any* rational agent must value the capacities that make her rational. Without them the hedonist will be unable to subject her desires to testing for hedonic satisfaction, for instance. The exercise and development of one's rational capacities must be present in the autonomous agent, no matter what that agent's conception of the good is. But notice that this claim need not imply perfectionism. One need only be committed, say, to the value of a *sufficient threshold* of rationality and deliberative capacity in order to exercise one's ability to choose. Nothing so far has required that we develop our nature *qua* agents (in this case, our rational and deliberative capacities) to the greatest possible extent. It requires only that we develop our rational capacities enough to be able to subject our desires to deliberative endorsement, enough to decide which glass of beer would be most pleasurable, for example.

But even granting this, we need not regard this sufficient threshold of rational agency capacity as intrinsically valuable in itself. The extent to which the hedonist is committed to valuing these capacities here is *merely instrumental*; it is only *because* having these capacities leads the hedonist to subject her desires to deliberative scrutiny in the pursuit of additional hedonic satisfaction that these deliberative capacities are valuable. Of course, they often *do* lead to such satisfaction. Indeed, they are likely *necessary* for such satisfaction. But this fact by itself does not entail that these capacities are intrinsically valuable or form a part of the hedonist's good. The hedonist is a hedonist. In order to be a moral agent, the hedonist need not be committed to valuing as intrinsically valuable the core capacities of moral agency. She need only be committed to valuing them insofar as they help her achieve her own, hedonic, conception of the good.

So it seems to me that the agency argument *by itself* is missing a premise. It is missing a premise to the effect that the capacities essential to practical reason must be central to our *conceptions of the good*—without this

premise, the agency argument can establish only the requirement of deliberative endorsement, not perfectionism. One sure-fire way of supplementing the agency argument, however, is to appeal to people's conceptions of the good directly. In other words, one might illustrate the *sort* of capacities that are essential to moral agency and moral personality, and attempt to convince agents that those capacities themselves ought to be in their conception of the good. But this is a different argument. This is an intuitive argument: it is appealing to the intuitive plausibility of having one's conception of the good be a *perfectionist* conception of the good. Without this argument, the agency argument fails to establish perfectionism. Nothing about the core account of moral personality entails that moral persons must hold that the core account is itself intrinsically valuable. Whether they ought to believe such capacities are intrinsically valuable is a matter to be settled by consideration of those capacities themselves, not their status as essential to moral personality.

4. *The Intuitive Argument*

The failure of the essence and agency arguments are similar in structure. Neither argument is independently plausible, independent, that is, of a direct appeal to the value of the perfectionist capacities themselves. *The problem, however, applies to perfectionism generally:* (1) in the perfectionist scheme seems implausible without a prior commitment to the value of the capacities picked out in (2). However, the failure of these arguments might not be seen as much of a defect of perfectionism. After all, these arguments were "top-down," seeking to explain the appeal of (1) directly. But there still remains the "bottom-up" argument: explaining the appeal of perfectionism by the appeal of the case-by-case *verdicts* of perfectionism. The argument from considered judgment is significant and powerful. If perfectionism can deliver verdicts that we can get behind, this should be evidence enough that the development of our natures forms the proper account of welfare.

One perspicuous way of drawing out the intuitive plausibility of perfectionism is to compare it to a desiderative account of well-being, one that would license the quality of lives that many of us think base or unworthy of the human good. Brink, for instance, notes that we would not want our children to develop lives devoted to the dogged collection of laundry lint, grass counting, or various base or unchallenging activities. It is intuitive, according to Brink, to believe that such lives are bad though they might in fact be desired by, even pleasurable for, the person who lives them. But perfectionism, says Brink, has the proper answer: "perfectionism is well po-

sitioned to accommodate and explain the evident fact that intellectually and emotionally rich lives are unconditionally good and intellectually and emotionally shallow lives are unconditionally bad for a person with the normal range of intellectual, emotional, and physical capacities.”³⁹

I will challenge the intuitive superiority of perfectionism below. My first response, however, is that without some argument that establishes the plausibility of (1) directly, such as the agency or essence arguments, the intuitive argument does no good for perfectionism. Without the “top-down” arguments, in other words, the “bottom-up” argument is powerless to support perfectionism. Assume that the development and exercise of our perfectionist capacities is as intuitive as you please. Perhaps we agree with perfectionism in every case in which it issues a verdict, and assume that these intuitions are stable. But evaluative theory is underdetermined by intuitive data. One needn’t be a perfectionist to agree about the value of these capacities. One could be an objective list theorist. Furthermore, one could be a pluralist of the sort suggested by Parfit, and developed in more detail by Robert Adams; one could maintain that the good involves the “enjoyment of the excellent.”⁴⁰ One could, it seems to me, even endorse a form of hedonism, i.e., Feldman’s “desert-adjusted intrinsic attitudinal hedonism.”⁴¹ Indeed, these alternative views can recommend that a good life will necessarily include these intuitively good capacities; Feldman’s view, for instance, might suggest that intrinsically good instances of pleasure include only pleasure taken in the exercise of objectively valuable capacities. (The Parfit-Adams-Feldman hybrid views might be unable to accommodate an intuition—if it is an intuition—that perfection yields welfare even in the absence of pleasure. Even so, a standard objective list view can support all intuitive verdicts by simply designing the list in a way that fully captures these verdicts.)

In order for *perfectionism* to be supported in light of the plausibility of developing one’s perfectionist capacities, it must be the case that perfectionism, i.e., (1), is itself more plausible than these competing alternatives. But this would require support—independent of the intuitive value of the perfectionist capacities—for the claim that developing what is in our natures is constitutive of our good. But given the failure of the previous arguments, perfectionism cannot make this claim plausibly. The plausibility of these arguments depend entirely on the value of the capacities they pick out. But

³⁹Brink, “The Significance of Desire”, §8.

⁴⁰See Robert Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 3; Parfit, *op. cit.*

⁴¹Cf. Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), §5.3.

it appears as though perfectionism is just one among many theories that can accommodate the value of these capacities.

Perfectionists might respond by noting that though (1) is not plausible independently of its particular verdicts, perfectionism possesses *theoretical* virtues lacked by these alternatives. For example, it might be suggested that though the objective list view can draw support from the intuitive nature of perfectionist capacities, the objective list view has theoretical defects that make accepting perfectionism plausible. Brink writes: “One form of objectivism is a list of objective goods, such as knowledge, beauty, achievement, friendship, and equality. Such a list may seem the only way to capture the variety of intrinsic goods. But if it is a mere list of goods, with no unifying strands, it begins to look like a disorganized *heap* of goods.”⁴²

But any old theory cannot claim a victory on the basis of theoretic unity. I might unify disparate value judgments by writing them down on a piece of paper, and claiming that the “paper theory of welfare” gains points for theoretic unification: all and only those things written on my piece of paper are part of well-being. But this would be no victory whatsoever for the “paper theory”. The appeal to theoretic unity is only successful if the theory under consideration has *explanatory* power. The “paper theory” fails this test. Being written on a piece of paper is unlikely to explain why some particular thing is valuable. But perfectionism does little better. Whether developing our nature is good for us *depends*—it depends *fully* on what is in our nature, so construed. And if this is the case, perfectionism cannot *explain* why these capacities are good for agents. Perfectionism needs support that is independent of the intuitive argument, support it appears not to have.

If the arguments given in previous sections fail to provide support for the perfectionist claim, i.e., that what is in our nature is intrinsically good for us, perfectionism is, at best, on a par with other objective views. Perfectionists, it appears, must rely on the intuitive support of the relevant capacities, but this intuitive support cannot support perfectionism uniquely. Thus even if we agree with the intuitive nature of these capacities, perfectionism *per se* can take no solace.

But this still leaves the proposal that perfectionism accommodates our intuitions better than, perhaps not all rivals, but many. But should we agree that the development of these particular capacities is intuitive? I think the intuitive case is far from a slam-dunk. There is a large and growing catalogue of important counter-examples to perfectionism; by way of conclusion

⁴²Brink, “The Significance of Desire”, §6.

I'll offer a few here.

A. Jerry

Jerry strongly desires to be a lint collector, believing it to be a noble and worthy pursuit. However, he is hampered by living on a remote desert island devoid of laundry machines. Jerry thus fails in his goal, which causes him extreme misery and melancholy. Unable to fulfill his dreams, Jerry takes up irrigation studies, and is able to successfully irrigate his desert island from a small source of fresh water. Despite this, Jerry regards his life as an extreme disappointment.

What should we think of Jerry? On a perfectionist view, Jerry's life went better for having been lost on the desert island. Rather than taking up this base and unchallenging project of lint collection, Jerry took up the very challenging project of irrigating an entire island with limited water resources. On any perfectionist view worth the name, this sort of a life is better than a life of lint collecting. But is this really true? I am unlikely to convince any devoted perfectionists to the claim that Jerry *qua* irrigationist lives a worse life than he would have lived *qua* lint collector. In any event, it is not *obvious* to me that Jerry's life is better for having been stranded. After all, lint collecting was no passing whim; he believed it to be a worthy pursuit. He actually lived a life that, by his own lights, was significantly worse. Though I'm not totally convinced that life as a lint collector would be better for him, I am also not convinced of the perfectionist suggestion.

B. Ronald

But perfectionism goes even further. For perfectionism, no matter how strongly a particular life is desired, or how strongly a particular agent believes that life valuable, that life can be bettered by another life that is better endowed with the development and exercise of perfectionist capacities. Take, for example, Ronald. Assume that Ronald is a committed subsistence farmer, a person who desires to live close to the soil, etc. Now assume that Ronald is offered the opportunity to become (and would be successful as) a theoretical physicist. But the subsistence farmer does not engage in his profession as a result of lack of options; Ronald is strongly committed to the value of living close to the soil, of evading the trappings of an industrial society. Furthermore, he is wary of the overwhelming drive of humanity to understand the deepest secrets of the universe. He regards it, and the development of the capacities that might lead to it, as a form of

hubris in the face of the almighty. So he remains a farmer. This person may maintain some rational activities, of course. But assume, plausibly, that the extent to which the subsistence farmer's life would be reflective of his rational capacities would be heightened as a theoretical physicist. (If this is not plausible, one can simply alter the case.) Nevertheless, it is plausible to believe that life as a subsistence farmer is better for this person than the life of a theoretical physicist.

The perfectionist might respond by claiming that one important feature of the relevant perfectionist capacities is the capacity to enjoy or to regard as valuable the exercise of one's rational/deliberative capacities. In other words, enjoyment of the excellent, as Adams puts it, is a *further* perfectionist capacity, which would be lost to Ronald and is lost to Jerry. One might also put this as a claim about choice: an important perfectionist capacity involves the use of practical reason to choose the life of perfectionist capacities. Hence one might think that even on a perfectionist view, Jerry's life *qua* irrigationist is of lesser quality than one might believe. Response: enjoyment (or choice) of the excellent is one perfectionist capacity among others; a loss of enjoyment (or the failure of choice) can hence *be made up for* by the additional development of other perfectionist capacities. As Hurka notes about the choice constraint, "Even if autonomy has some value, it cannot have so much as to outweigh," the value of, say, "all Mozart's music."⁴³ The same should be said about enjoyment. And even lacking such further excellences, it seems to me, the perfectionist is committed to saying that Jerry's life as an irrigationist is better endowed with perfectionist value than his life would have been *qua* lint collector. (Importantly, we can vary the cases in order to override the lack of enjoyment or choice on the part of the agents. For instance, we might insist that Ronald as a theoretical physicist discovers quantum gravity, or proves the existence of parallel universes, or discovers a feasible method of time travel, or something of this nature. Even in these cases, I regard Ronald's subsistence farming as better.)⁴⁴

⁴³Hurka, 149.

⁴⁴This argument could be blocked if responding adequately to one's perfectionist capacities is an essential requirement of any life of perfectionist value. One might say that choosing a life one regards as good or worthy of choice is a necessary condition of perfectionist value. But I find it difficult to see how such a claim could be supported by perfectionism, insofar as perfectionism is construed as developing those capacities that are essential to our nature. Living a life that one regards as choiceworthy might be one way to develop our rational capacities, but it is not the only way. Hurka convincingly argues that "[t]heoretical and practical perfection both develop rationality, and do so in structurally similar ways. Both are products of natural selection, and nothing in their character or origins makes one more desirable than the other. Why should rationality

C. Ronald and the Bugs

Even if one grants the supreme importance of choice or enjoyment of one's perfectionist capacities, however, any perfectionist view must say that if an agent is *indifferent* between lives of greater or lesser development of perfectionist capacities, the life with just *slightly* more perfectionist achievement wins out. Assume now that Ronald is presented not with the opportunity to become a theoretical physicist, but the opportunity to become a subsistence farmer on a slightly more challenging farm, i.e., a farm that not only has to be rid of boll weevils, but also stink bugs. Let's assume, however, that Ronald is neutral with regard to the difficulty involved in ridding farms of bugs. On reflection, Ronald doesn't care how many bugs he must eradicate. However, there is one difference for Ronald; the first farm and not the second has a very comfortable couch. The enjoyment of the couch for Ronald has no perfectionist value. We might characterize it, as does Richard Arneson, as a "cheap thrill."⁴⁵ Because Ronald is neutral between the challenges that each farm presents, and because the couch has no perfectionist value, perfectionism seems committed to suggesting that a life on the more challenging farm would be better for Ronald.

Should we agree? My intuition says no. In fact, moving to a more difficult farm would be *worse* for Ronald, not just because it would cost him his comfortable couch—though this is a significant reason—but also because it is more difficult *in a way that Ronald doesn't value*. If perfectionism is committed to the value of exercising one's theoretical and practical rationality, difficult activities will have more value; difficult activities require a greater exercise of these capacities.⁴⁶ I can understand the value of difficulty when that difficulty is sought after or prized. To the extent that one values her mountain climbing ability, she values her ability to perform difficult tasks, and the more difficult (K2, Cerro Torre) the climb, the more valuable the achievement. But perfectionism says that even in the face of pure agential indifference *vis-a-vis* perfectionist capacities, difficult activities are better. I

in conduct, in how we change the world, count less than rationality in how we form our beliefs? Why should a structure of ends have less value than a similar structure of judgments?" (Hurka, 86.) Certain forms of perfectionism might *require* that a valuable life be regarded as choiceworthy (perhaps Green's emphasis on deliberative agency lends itself to such a view: living a life that one does not choose or does not value cannot be an exercise of one's capacities *qua* moral, deliberative agent). But I hereby record my skepticism that this claim can be plausibly sustained.

⁴⁵Arneson, 120.

⁴⁶Hurka is explicit concerning the value of difficult activities. See Hurka, 123-8.

find this implausible on reflection, especially when an agent is not indifferent between two activities *tout court* (as a result of cheap thrills, etc.).

I think we should have doubts about the intuitive welfare value of developing our rational and perfectionist capacities. My doubts are not dispositive: they do not show that perfectionism suffers from insuperable intuitive difficulties. But in light of the failure of perfectionism to draw support from even a rock-solid argument from intuition, any sense in which the argument from intuition is less than rock-solid should give us significant reason to doubt that the intuitive argument supports perfectionism.

5. Conclusion

I have shown that three important arguments for perfectionism fail. Though my argument has not canvassed all possibilities, the arguments I offer here should have wide resonance against perfectionism of various varieties. Human nature under whatever description appears to be a poor explanation of value.

Importantly, I have established that any perfectionist view faces a burden. It must show that the appeal to the core account of *x*-hood is, of itself, evaluatively important. This is for two reasons. First, in order for any argument from intuition to succeed for perfectionism, there must be independent reason to believe that perfectionism (rather than the objective list view, for instance) explains and systematizes these intuitions. Second, because the argument from intuition appears to falter at several points, the appeal of human nature (or whatever *x* one appeals to) must be strong enough in itself to override the counterintuitive verdicts of such an appeal. I am skeptical that any perfectionist theory can manage this task, but I leave open the possibility that such a view might be found.