



## Prudential Perfectionism: A Refinement

**ABSTRACT:** *Perfectionism, the view according to which the good for an  $x$  is constituted by flourishing as an  $x$ , is a venerable account of the good, the popularity of which has only grown in recent decades. In this paper, I assess the merits of perfectionism in its traditional form, and argue in favor of a refinement. Specifically, I focus on traditional perfectionism's account of the Central Axiological Category (CAC)--the kind (" $x$ ") that subjects fall into for the purposes of determining their good. I argue that shifting our understanding of the CAC from the traditional human category to the category of valuer is faithful to the most significant perfectionist insights, and does not succumb to the numerous and substantial challenges for the traditional understanding.*

Some things are good for me. Some things are good, also, for my cat. But the good things for my cat (frisky play, bird predation) seem to be very different than the good things for me (success at projects, valued relationships, and so on) (Pace Lin (2018)). Surely at least part of the explanation for this commonsense thought is that my cat and I are very different creatures, with different capacities, temperaments, and proclivities.

Prudential perfectionism, the theory according to which the good for an  $x$  is flourishing as an  $x$ , does an extremely good job at capturing these intuitions. Traditionally, the thought runs that flourishing for the sort of creature I am (human, say) is different than flourishing for the sort of thing my cat is (feline, say), hence the differences in our good. However, perfectionism in its traditional guise has faced a number of challenging objections. In light of these, and a new puzzle posed here, I'd like to suggest a refinement to perfectionism as it is most traditionally understood. The refinement specifically focuses on the perfectionist understanding of the most significant evaluative category into which people belong. Typically, this category is thought to be "human". But human beings are lots of different things and, or so I argue here, perfectionism is improved by refusing to treat *being human* as the most significant category into which human beings fall, at least for the purposes of determining their good. My refinement proposes to treat the most axiologically significant category, for the purposes of prudential perfectionism, as the category of "valuer".

I claim that this refinement is worth exploring in part because it retains what is fundamentally plausible about a perfectionist proposal without succumbing to a number of pitfalls for the view. Notice an important limitation in the argument of this article. While I will point out where I think this view succeeds in comparison to other forms of perfectionism, whether perfectionism as a whole is a view worth endorsing is left to the side here. And hence the conclusion of this article should be understood



merely to indicate a novel and plausible iteration of the perfectionist insight, rather than an argument that we should accept the view in all its glory.

The organization of this article will be as follows. In §1 I will discuss what I take to be the more traditional form of perfectionism. §2 offers three objections to that view I take to motivate the search for refinements. In §§3-4 I discuss the refinement I propose here, and its advantages relative to perfectionism in its more traditional form. §5 concludes.

## 1. Traditional Perfectionism

Few things about perfectionism are undisputed. Indeed, even the concept of which perfectionism is a conception is not generally agreed upon (Hurka 1993: 17-18; Dorsey 2010: 60). But for the purposes of this article, I'm going to assume that perfectionism is a theory of the prudential good, the good *for* a person (hence the titular "prudential"). With this in mind, we might lay out what I call "bare bones" perfectionism in the following way:

*Bare Bones Perfectionism*: the good for an  $x$  is flourishing as an  $x$ , i.e., developing and exercising the characteristic  $x$ -based capacities with excellence.

Bare Bones Perfectionism is, well, *very* bare bones. As yet, it is underspecified with respect to any given welfare subject. However, it is not contentless. Bare Bones Perfectionism offers a substantive picture of the good: what bears intrinsic value for any  $x$  is that  $x$  flourish as an  $x$ —that is, develop and exercise the characteristic features of  $x$ -hood. Furthermore, Bare Bones Perfectionism can helpfully tell us why my good should be different than my housecat's. After all, the characteristic capacities of cats, and their excellent exercise, is clearly different than the excellent exercise of characteristic human capacities.

Notice that Bare Bones Perfectionism is in some ways similar to Michael Prinzing's preferred understanding of perfectionism. Prinzing writes that, according to perfectionism, "facts about the sort of being that one is (i.e. one's nature) reveal ideals whose fulfilment constitutes one's well-being," (2020: 706). Prinzing develops this as a "second-order" view, which is purely explanatory, e.g., explaining elements on the "objective list" and other welfare theories. According to Prinzing, perfectionism is fully compatible with other first-order welfare theories, including the "Big Three" of hedonism, desire-satisfaction, and the objective list (2020: 706), and indeed helps to provide an explanatory backdrop for those views when explanation would otherwise give out. And though my understanding of Bare Bones Perfectionism is similar to Prinzing's account of perfectionism, I construe Bare Bones Perfectionism as a first-order approach, rather than a purely explanatory view. To see this, note that Bare Bones Perfectionism, unlike Prinzing's explanatory perfectionism, is not neutral when it comes to the selection of intrinsic value

bearers:<sup>1</sup> it says that flourishing as the sort of thing I am is what constitutes my good. It just, as yet, doesn't fill in what I am.

But what am I? Or, perhaps more tractably, what am I *for the purposes of understanding my prudential good*? This is the “*x*” in the statement of Bare Bones Perfectionism. The selection of the “*x*” for any particular creature is a determination of what I shall call the “Central Axiological Category” (CAC)—the category into which that creature falls that is most significant for its good. And it is important for any form of perfectionism that it selects the proper CAC. For instance, while it may be true that the good for, say, a human is flourishing as a human, it may well be false to say that the good for a carbon-based lifeform is to develop and exercise the central capacities of carbon-basedness, *mutatis mutandis* for being necessarily self-identical, or a fan of the Toledo Mudhens, despite the fact that any given individual may well fit into such categories. Hence picking out the correct category into which creatures fall *for the purposes of determining their good* is crucial for any perfectionist approach.

Traditional perfectionism holds that Bare Bones Perfectionism is true when combined with the traditional central axiological category:

*Traditional Perfectionism:* for a human being *x*, the CAC is that *x* is a human being. The good for a human, then, is flourishing as a human, i.e., to develop and exercise specifically or characteristically human capacities with excellence.

At least in the case of humans (traditional perfectionism would substitute “cat” for cats, etc.) perfectionism holds that for any human, the relevant axiological category is that this human is in fact a human. On this view, the inherent human capacities are typically (though not exclusively) understood to be inherent *rational* capacities. Hence, on traditional forms of prudential perfectionism, the good for human beings is to flourish *vis-à-vis* (i.e., develop and exercise) their particularly human capacities, in particular, rational (or other particularly human) capacities, in an excellent way.

I call this traditional perfectionism because it represents perfectionism as inherited from Aristotle, Aquinas, and many others. To begin, consider Aristotle:

But presumably the remark that the best good is happiness is apparently something agreed, and we still feel the need of a clearer statement of what the best good is. Perhaps, then, we shall find this if we first grasp the function of a human being...We have found, then, that the human function is activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason...Moreover, we take the human function to be a certain kind of life, and take this life to be activity and actions of the soul that involve

<sup>1</sup> On Prinzinger's view, perfectionism does not specify the intrinsic value bearers; it only answers the question “Why does *that* make *X* good for *P*?” (2020: 706)—it explains the value of the underlying value bearers *as specified by the first-order proposal*.

reason; hence the function of the excellent man is to do this well and finely. (Aristotle, 1097b-1098a.)

Skipping forward a bit, Hurka advocates a form of traditional perfectionism:

[Perfectionism] starts from an account of the good human life, or the intrinsically desirable life. And it characterizes this life in a distinctive way. Certain properties, it says, constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity—they make humans humans. The good life, it then says, develops these properties to a high degree or realizes what is central to human nature. (Hurka 1993: 3.)

Other advocates of traditional perfectionism include Gwen Bradford (according to perfectionism, “well-being is a matter of developing characteristically human capacities,” Bradford 2017: 344; see also Bradford 2015: 144), Antti Kauppinen (“Let us loosely define welfare perfectionism as the view that well-being consists in the (enjoyable) exercise of the capacities that are characteristic of one’s biological species” (Kauppinen 2009: 1)), David Brink (2008),<sup>2</sup> and others (Cf. Kraut 2007: 88). And it is easy to see the appeal of such a view. After all, traditional perfectionism seems to conform to a range of considered judgments. The reason, one might imagine, that a different account of the good applies to my housecat is that my cat is a cat. I’m a human. One reason why, say, pursuit of intellectual activities is good for people is that the rational intellect is a characteristically human capacity, and so on.

## 2. Challenges to Traditional Perfectionism

It would do at this point to discuss three challenges (two classic, one novel) to traditional perfectionism. And while I do not claim that there are no genuine answers to these challenges, having them on the table is useful when it comes to considering refinements, one of which I suggest in §3.

### 2.1. Over- and Under-Inclusivity

Consider, first, the problem of over-inclusivity (Hurka 1993: ch. 2). Familiar from Bernard Williams (Williams 1976: 59), the objection asks why we should believe that the development or exercise of just any old characteristic capacity we have as humans should be intrinsically good. Humans have sex without regard to season; they start fires; they are omnivores. But developing these properties seems at best value-neutral, and does not plausibly form a central account of the prudential good.

Actually this should be put a bit more precisely. Such properties do not seem plausibly beneficial *independently* of any sort of pro-attitude on the part of the prudential beneficiary. For instance, one specifically human capacity is the capacity for *agriculture*. And while to cultivate in this way is plausibly beneficial, it’s hard to

<sup>2</sup> Note that Brink, while understanding perfectionism as treating the CAC as “human”, nevertheless does not accept a *biological* understanding of human nature. Cf. Brink 2008: 34.

see how it should be beneficial for everybody, independent of their own valuing attitudes. If I couldn't care less about plant or animal husbandry, why should developing that capacity be intrinsically good for me? Thus traditional perfectionism is over-inclusive: the capacities that are central to human nature are too *broad* to support a general account of prudential value.

The key response from traditional perfectionists, predictably, is to narrow their account of human nature (i.e., characteristic human capacities) to zoom in on just those very capacities that seem to have evaluative significance. Hurka focuses on the human essence, properties that are *essential* to humans (and conditioned on their being living things) of which, presumably, conducting agricultural activities is not one. (Hurka 1993: 10–17.) Perhaps one might claim that the capacities and activities noted by Williams are less *fundamental* to being human, or perhaps some other way of narrowing the account of human nature. But however one might devise to resolve this problem, narrowing is the only option. If traditional perfectionism is overinclusive, the only way to fix this problem is to *include less*; and the only way to include less is to narrow the understanding of human nature.

But herein lies the biggest challenge. Narrowing the notion of human nature or the characteristic human capacities risks making the flipside problem worse, viz., the problem of *under*-inclusivity. To see this issue vividly, consider a key passage in *Right Ho, Jeeves*, in which Bertie Wooster, in order to avoid an escalating series of angry telegrams from his Aunt Dahlia, escaped to the Drones Club, where he “spent a restful afternoon throwing cards into a top-hat with some of the better element” (Wodehouse 1934: 24–25). I submit that this activity—or, at the very least, the pleasure gained from it—was prudentially valuable for Bertie. But the classic objection holds that no *perfectionist* theory can accommodate this proposal (cf. Arneson (1999)). After all, it's clear that Bertie is not exercising his particularly human capacities in any way, or at least any capacities that perfectionism wishes to include.

Perfectionists have attempted to close this gap. Perhaps the most important such attempt is Kauppinen's (Kauppinen (2009)). He suggests two different proposals that allow perfectionists to capture the value of “kicking back” as well as other, more deliberative uses of one's human capacities. He considers what he calls “Star Turn” and “Animal Nature” perfectionism. The former suggests that the various human excellences should be balanced in a life, each one having sufficient time for a “star turn” and “supporting role”. This would allow that different forms of excellence, e.g., social excellence and excellence in one's rational capacities, can each take a star turn and supporting role at different times. But it's hard to see how this would help in the case of Wooster. What excellence is displayed by throwing cards into a top hat? Perhaps social excellence (after all, it's in the company of some of the “better element”)? But even if we imagine that Bertie was entirely solitary, and displayed no forms of excellence whatsoever, it's hard to see how this enjoyable afternoon was not beneficial at least to some degree. The problem is even clearer for “Animal Nature” perfectionism, which claims that there are perfections that apply most significantly at different points of life—working hard in the prime of life, kicking back in one's dotage. But that is decidedly not what is happening in the case of Wooster's restful afternoon.

Bradford also responds to the claim that perfectionism could not accommodate the intrinsic value of Bertie's afternoon, especially given that the presumed source of the value is the enjoyment Bertie gets from tossing cards into the top-hat. Bradford writes that it is simply false that perfectionism cannot accommodate the value of pleasure. After all, or so Bradford suggests,

it is fundamental to our nature to *pursue pleasure and avoid pain*. This more sophisticated approach is appealing because the more characteristically human relationship with pleasure and pain is to seek one and avoid the other. 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. (Bradford 2017: 348.)

Bradford's suggestion is ingenious, but clearly displays the tension at issue.

The rationale Bradford suggests for including the capacity to pursue pleasure and avoid pain seems to open the floodgates for any number of valueless capacities, worsening the *over*-inclusiveness of traditional perfectionism. For instance, it is the characteristically human relationship with, e.g., sex that we give no heed to season. And so it would appear that exercising the capacity for sex without regard to season (rather than, e.g., just the capacity for sex itself) is *particularly* good. Even worse, or so it would appear, the person for whom sex is only appealing during the winter will be failing to achieve his or her human capacities and will be living a worse life as a result. Not just because he or she will be engaging in less sex overall, potentially a bad thing for a person, but because he or she is limiting sex to the winter, which seems precisely the wrong explanation for any misfortune such a person suffers.

Perhaps there are other options here, but all such possibilities seem to run into the basic problem: *if human nature is the fundamental axiological concept*, then either it accommodates the value of Bertie's restful afternoon or it doesn't. If it doesn't, well, it *doesn't*—this is a pretty clear mark against any account of prudential value. If it does, then this must be a result of an expansion of the notion of human nature that would allow it to do so—after all, if traditional perfectionism is under-inclusive, it must *include more*. But once this expansion, whatever it is, arrives, then it seems inevitable that the problem of *over*-inclusivity is going to worsen: perfectionists are at pains to avoid the problem of over-inclusivity by *narrowing* the evaluative conception of human nature. To expand it again in light of the problem of under-inclusivity returns us, I fear, to something very much resembling square one.

Thus the general problem for perfectionism here might be put in the following way. Though there may be methods by which to render traditional perfectionism *more* or *less* inclusive, the problem would appear to be that traditional perfectionism must do *both at the same time*, by both expanding and contracting the nature and role of human nature in its general account to avoid the dual problems of over- and under-inclusivity. Now, this is not an impossibility proof. Perhaps there is a “just right” understanding of human nature and its application that avoids both issues.

But, or so it seems to me, the dual problems presented here represent a decidedly difficult hurdle to overcome.

## 2.2. Traditional Perfectionism as Arbitrary

While these traditional objections to traditional perfectionism are trenchant, there is another line of objection I'd like to press here, viz., that the focus on the fact of *being human* is axiologically *arbitrary*.

To see what I mean by this, notice that Bare Bones Perfectionism could select any number of potential central axiological categories (i.e., any of number of potential “*x*”s) in fixing the good for persons. After all, there are many things that I am. I am a human being, to be sure. I am a member of the genus *homo*. I am also a philosopher. I am necessarily self-identical. I am bipedal. I am a fan of the Kansas City Royals. I am an omnivore. I have a certain ancestral heritage. I have brownish, though greying, hair. I make and use tools to accomplish tasks. I engage in capitalist economic activity. I belong to a certain race, gender, sexual orientation. So why, we might ask, is it the capacities that are specifically *human* that constitute the good for me? Aristotle, for instance, offers no argument for this, but rather simply stipulates that the “good” that we seek to investigate is the *human* good, in particular (1094b). Hurka simply stipulates that perfectionism is about “human nature” and its development, rather than any of the other things that particular humans, or other beings, might be (Hurka 1993: 3).

Now, to say that there are plenty of categories into which people may fall does not entail that the particular species category is arbitrary when it comes to prudential value. But when we compare specifically *human* nature to other potential CACs, the CAC identified by traditional perfectionism seems to lose its appeal. For instance, imagine that, instead of dying off, *homo neanderthalensis* continued to evolve alongside *homo sapiens*. While there was no interbreeding (assume for purposes of argument that this would have been impossible), there was communication, trade, and cooperation between the Neanderthals and humans. Eventually as time progressed, Neanderthals and humans came to inhabit the same societal structures, learn from each other, and form long-term friendships and associations. Their substantial social engagement led to no significant differences in intellect or linguistic capacities. Eventually humans and Neanderthals simply lived alongside each other in a modern world in the way individuals of different races do in our contemporary context (with the notable exception that interbreeding is impossible between the two species in this thought experiment). According to traditional perfectionism, for any individual in this story, it is of absolutely crucial significance to their good whether or not they are a Neanderthal or human. Because they fail to share the CAC, what is good for a Neanderthal (fulfillment and exercise of Neanderthal nature) will simply be different than what is good for a human (fulfillment and exercise of human nature). But this is absurd. While it may be of significance to any given individual human or Neanderthal whether or not they are, in fact, human or Neanderthal (for the purposes of selecting a lifelong partner, say), it cannot be so important as to provide a fundamentally different account of the nature of prudential value for them.

Furthermore, it's not at all clear why the human category is any more significant than other sorts of differences that might be on display *between humans themselves*. Consider two individuals, one a member of a nomadic society, the other a member of a stationary society. While both of these individuals are human, the differences between them may constitute a difference that could influence an account of the prudential good. One might imagine saying, for instance, that the good of nomads—travel, distance, small mobile communities, and so forth—is fundamentally different than the good of stationary peoples—security, permanent shelter, roots, etc. Now, my claim here is not that it is *plausible* to hold that the good of nomads is fundamentally different than that of stationary peoples (I think it is not, or, at least, that if it is more must be said). My claim is somewhat more modest, viz., that it's hard to see why there should be a rationale for an axiological distinction between humans and non-humans and *not* an axiological distinction between *nomadic and stationary peoples*.<sup>3</sup> The latter seems no more arbitrary than the former. Notice that this proposal would still reveal a form of *perfectionism* (i.e., Bare Bones Perfectionism), but it would reject the suggestion that the axiologically significant category is found in the category *human*.

Let me sum up the argument to this point. First: it seems as though the axiological relevance of being *human* in the first imagined case seems dubious. Second: it seems as though the axiological relevance of being *human rather than*, say, being nomadic or non-nomadic seems dubious. Why, in the first case, should the development of specifically human nature rather than Neanderthal nature be the good for a person? Why, in the second case, should the development of specifically human nature rather than nomadic nature be the good for a person? Of course, one might attempt to say that, in the case of being a nomad versus a member of a stationary group, what we have is just two distinct *ways* of fulfilling one's human nature. And while this is assuredly correct, at least so far as it goes, it doesn't answer the challenge. The key is to say why the prudential good for a nomad is the development and exercise of human nature rather than the development and exercise of this person's nature *qua* nomad. This would entail that the good of nomads and the good of stationary peoples is fundamentally different. But it's hard to see why *that* particular division should have any less significance than the line between humans and non-humans, or why the latter distinction is not just as arbitrary as the former. Alternatively,<sup>4</sup> one might say that being human is somehow "more fundamental" or "more essential" to what we are than other categories into which we might fit (like nomads or non-nomads). But this argument merely pounds the table in favor of traditional perfectionism. There are many axes along which fundamentality might be determined (metaphysical? biological? conceptual? axiological?). To determine the fundamental category for the sake of the good, however, just *is* the question of the central axiological category. And to simply insist that "human" should be

<sup>3</sup> Some proponents of a form of well-being variantism, such as Alexandrova (2017), note that a proper theory of well-being can be "mid-level", which specifies well-being in terms of the specific circumstances of individuals, which can importantly include, say, their being nomadic or stationary. Cf. Alexandrova 2017: 51.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reader.



fundamental *in this way* is to pound the table for a view we have already seen good reason to doubt.

At this point, a traditional perfectionist might complain that I'm leaning too heavily on the *biological* notion of a human being in my argument that traditional perfectionism is axiologically arbitrary (cf. Kitcher (1999)). Perhaps "human nature" doesn't really mean *homo sapiens* nature, but something more broad or perhaps normatively loaded. Famously, for instance, Kant elided between "humanity" and "rational being" (Kant 1785: Ak. 4:429), and it may be that Aristotle held a similar view (though see Kietzmann (2019)). T. H. Green suggests that "human being" should be understood not in a biological sense, but as a being who is responsible for action; has the capacities of practical reason. Brink suggests that in divorcing "human nature" from the biological category, we identify the specific content of human nature in a normatively loaded manner: "An important strand in the perfectionist tradition understands the appeal to human nature, not in biological terms, but in normative terms," (Brink 2008: 34). Here Brink identifies the capacity of humans (or at least some humans) to engage in practical deliberation—the possession of practical reason.

I think this is a good move. It can certainly avoid the problematic implication that, in the above thought experiment, the good of *homo sapiens* and *homo neandertalensis* is fundamentally different. But notice that in rejecting the biological concept of "human" in favor of a "normative" concept, we have moved away from traditional perfectionism. (Call this, instead, "deliberative perfectionism".) After all, though this is a variation of perfectionism, the very notion of *human* (rather than, say, rational being or practical reasoner) simply drops out of the explanation of the good. There are plenty of rational non-humans (or at least plenty of possible rational non-humans) and plenty of humans who lack the capacity for practical reason, or indeed lack the capacity for the development of practical reason to any degree. The same holds for any other normative category one could dream up. But clearly this is incompatible with *human* being the CAC.

At this point you might be tempted to say: so what? Perhaps this just means we ought to jettison the traditional view in favor of a view that treats the CAC as rational or responsible being, etc. And, again, I think this is a good move: deliberative perfectionism is certainly a refinement of traditional perfectionism, and perhaps a superior one. But the key question, here, is *arbitrariness*. To avoid arbitrariness, the potential CAC must fix not just any old normative concept as it applies to people, but *specifically* the good for that person. And at this point in the article, I'm not going to argue against deliberative perfectionism, save to note this argumentative burden (I will return to it in §4). Like traditional perfectionism, it must show why flourishing *vis-à-vis* our *deliberative* capacities should fix our *prudential* good. I think it fails to meet this burden, but before I argue to this effect, I will discuss a variant I think succeeds.

### 3. Evaluative Perfectionism

In light of the problems so far seen, I suggest that we explore a further refinement to perfectionism's central axiological category. Rather than insisting that the relevant

category is *human*, we should consider the suggestion that the relevant category is, instead, *valuer*.

A number of immediate differences between this view—what I shall call “evaluative perfectionism”—and traditional perfectionism spring to the fore. First, while traditional forms of perfectionism will, for instance, prize physical perfection (in, e.g., sports and athletic events), along with exercises of one’s theoretic and practical rationality (for, e.g., knowledge and understanding, rational choice, etc.), evaluative perfectionism will not, or at least will not do so *directly*. For evaluative perfectionism, whether, e.g., knowledge and understanding worth pursuing on prudential grounds will be mediated by the excellent exercise of one’s *evaluative* capacities. Of course, more must be said to fully understand what it means to exercise one’s nature as a valuer (just as more must be said concerning what it means to exercise one’s nature as a human being or rational agent). But suffice it to say, the fundamental prudentially significant capacities will be different under evaluative perfectionism.

In addition, *evaluative* perfectionism provides no assessment of the goods of *non-valuers*. Hence cats, insofar as they are non-valuers, cannot look to evaluative perfectionism for their good. But this, in my view, is no objection to the view being stated. Just as with beings who happen to be valuers, perfectionism (if it is to be plausible in the case of cats) should identify the right CAC that applies to cats, and determine the good for housecats in that way. (Perhaps *predator*? Or *domestic animal*? Perhaps a being who can feel pleasure?) I leave this as unfinished business here, but it is business that, once we reject a traditional perfectionism, must be done anyway for a wide variety of creatures whether or not one accepts evaluative perfectionism. (Indeed, it’s not clear to me that this isn’t also a problem with traditional perfectionism. If we allow that human nature is the CAC for individual humans, there’s no *entailment* that “cat nature” should be the CAC for individual cats; this is a substantive issue and one that must be argued for on a case-by-case basis.) Note that this is not incompatible with the central perfectionist insight noted at the beginning of the article: after all, we still understand the difference between my good and my cat’s good as fundamentally explained by the difference *between us as creatures*, however we then understand what “creatures” we are for the purposes of determining our good. Pursuant to this point, not all human beings are valuers, and hence the good for particular human beings may very well be different. Take, for instance, small infants or the cognitively impaired. Those who cannot (or for whatever reason do not) form evaluative attitudes will not belong to the class of valuers and hence the CAC that applies to them will be different and will be a matter for substantive philosophical investigation. But this is, once again, plausible. To begin, it would seem odd to hold that the personal good for an infant is to be judged on the standards of a developed adult valuer; rather it is plausible to hold that “infant” or “developing valuer” or something along those lines might well be the primary category that makes an axiological difference in the case of young children; the category will, or at least may, be different in the case of other non-valuers.

With all this in mind, we are now in a position to state evaluative perfectionism more precisely:

*Evaluative Perfectionism*: for any valuer  $v$ , the CAC for  $v$  is *being a valuer*. To be a valuer is to possess the relevant evaluative capacities, and the good for a valuer is to flourish as a valuer, i.e., to develop and exercise those evaluative capacities with excellence.

### 3.1. What is Flourishing as a Valuer?

Key for evaluative perfectionism is what it means to flourish as a valuer; to develop and exercise one's evaluative capacities in an excellent way. What does this mean? While there could be addenda and refinements, of course, there are a number of criteria that seem sensible on this score.

First, however, it would do to say a little bit about the sort of valuing I have in mind. Remember that the theory on offer is intended to be a form of *prudential* perfectionism, perfectionism about the good for a person. But notice that there are different—what might be called—“modes” of valuing. I might value something for the sake of myself (such as success in my career, or the pleasure of a fine meal), but I also might value things for the sake of others or for the universe, as it were, in general. I might value the preservation of the Mona Lisa, not for my sake, but for the sake of its beauty and our shared cultural heritage. If this is right, then the sort of valuing focused on by prudential perfectionism should be *prudential* valuing, in particular. It seems implausible to hold that excellence in my valuing of the Mona Lisa is a good thing for me—perhaps it is a feature of my aesthetic virtue, but it is not in and of itself a prudential good. Excellence in valuing things *for my own sake* seems the right category.

With this in mind, the first feature of evaluative flourishing is what might be called *internal* evaluative excellence—excellence in one's evaluations considered in themselves. What does this mean? Surely one requirement of internal evaluative excellence is *coherence*. I mean this to be a synchronic, not a diachronic constraint. One can excel as a valuer even though one ultimately comes to change one's mind about the value of things, so long as—more below—there are no external constraints on what it is one values. (For instance, it could be that as a high school senior I valued a career as a professional trombone player very highly; I later changed my tune and came to value a career as a professional philosopher instead. This sort of change is perfectly compatible with excellence in valuing.) There may be additional internal requirements for excellent valuing (one might imagine that one is not an excellent valuer if one values  $\phi$ , but is ill-informed about  $\phi$  (Sidgwick (1907), 121, Sobel, (2009)), fails to consider the ways  $\phi$  might be (Sobel (2009)), and so on), but I hope the general idea is clear enough for present purposes.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, there may very well be *external* forms of evaluative excellence. Most importantly, this concerns whether or not a valuer is valuing *the right things*.<sup>6</sup> It may

<sup>5</sup> One might argue that further requirements are necessary, such as, e.g., a harmony between one's first-order conative states and one's second-order conative and cognitive evaluative attitudes (Raibley (2010), Tiberius (2018)).

<sup>6</sup> One might hold that this “external” constraint can be satisfied simply by achieving “internal” excellence. Cf. Korsgaard (1997, 2009). I am skeptical of this claim, however. Cf. Street (2012).

be, for instance, that valuing the suffering of small children (however coherent) is inconsistent with excellence in valuing. It could be that a failure to disvalue one's pain on future Tuesdays (Parfit 1984: 124) is inconsistent with excellence in valuing. And so forth. Now, I say there *may* be such external forms of evaluative excellence because I'm not going to take a stand here concerning their existence. But I think it can suffice to say that *if* there are prudentially relevant, attitude-independent evaluative facts, then excellence in valuing will mean, at least in part, conforming to them. A caveat, however. Perfectionism holds that prudential value is flourishing as an  $x$ , whether that's traditional perfectionism, evaluative perfectionism, or any other. But if this is right, then perfectionism of any kind cannot sign on to the existence of extrinsic evaluative facts *that themselves take the shape of prudential value bearers*. In other words, perfectionism cannot accept that, e.g., *pleasure is prudentially good independently of anyone's evaluative attitudes* because this would entail that pleasure bears prudential value in a way that goes beyond perfectionism. So, for perfectionism, external evaluative facts must be understood in a different way. Perfectionism of any kind can hold not that there are certain external facts concerning what *bears prudential value*, but rather concerning what it is *appropriate* or *fitting* or *worthwhile* for valuers to value (Kraut (1994)). The existence of such facts seems broadly ecumenical. It seems, e.g., appropriate to value one's future Tuesday pleasure and fit to disvalue one's future Tuesday pain. It seems inappropriate to value the torture of small children, and so on. If such facts exist—again, about which I'm officially neutral here—then they will be an important aspect of the prudential good on an evaluative perfectionist view.

There is a second external aspect of flourishing as a valuer. To flourish as a valuer is not simply to *value well*. I can value all the appropriate things in the world coherently, and so on, without flourishing as a valuer. There is an important relationship between flourishing as a valuer and the *obtaining of what it is one values*. Surely one cannot be said to flourish as a valuer, no matter how appropriate or coherent one's valuing attitudes are, if what one values never obtains. Plausibly, then, flourishing as a valuer requires that the world reflects one's evaluations. After all, to value something is to be, e.g., attracted to it, committed to it, desirous of it, invested in it, and so on. But once one takes these attitudes appropriately, surely one flourishes only if those attitudes are fulfilled. Now, one might argue that this is too strong. Perhaps it is not *necessary* or *essential* to flourishing that one's values are fulfilled; perhaps it simply contributes a certain weight. I'll officially leave open this "permissive" proposal, though I prefer, and will focus on, the more "restrictive" proposal already suggested.

If this is correct, then it would appear that the following principle is plausible:

*Evaluative Flourishing*: the flourishing of a valuer  $v$  is determined by the extent to which the objects of internally (coherent, etc.) and externally (appropriate) excellent valuing attitudes obtain.

At this point a question arises. Imagine that I happen to value, for my own sake, listening to the 4th Movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony. Now, I could do this in one of two ways. First, I could buy a ticket to my local orchestra's performance and

attend the concert. Or I could wait, and my spouse will come put the record of that movement on while I sit in my comfortable chair. Imagine that I am indifferent to either method of hearing the 9th. The first method is a kind of *achievement* of what I value: I take steps for that thing to occur. The second is the mere *obtainment* of what I value—I value listening to the 9th, but I take no steps: it simply happens to occur given that my spouse has spun the relevant record. However, I'm inclined to believe that flourishing *as a valuer* does not distinguish between these two methods of the obtainment of the objects of one's valuing attitudes. In both cases, one might say, one took the necessary or relevant steps to the achievement of one's ends or values—it just so happens that in the second case there was no specific action or project required to make it occur. It is essential in this case that I am indifferent: if I preferred to attend the concert rather than having my spouse put the record on, then it would surely be flourishing to a lesser extent were I to take no steps whatsoever. Ultimately, then, it seems to me that the method by which the valued state or object obtains simply falls out in an account of what it means to flourish as a valuer—it all depends on whether or not the objects of one's evaluative attitudes, preferences, and so on obtain to the greatest extent possible.

One might think that evaluative perfectionism bears too much resemblance to, say, a form of subjectivism, such as a desire-satisfaction approach, the sort of view to which perfectionism traditionally attempts to position itself in opposition. However, there are a number of important differences here. First, even leaving aside the fact that, on the more permissive variant, merely taking the appropriate evaluative attitudes is intrinsically valuable (surely denied on a desire-*satisfaction* view), evaluative perfectionism, first, holds that the most significant fact about people is that they are valuers, not that they are *desirers*. To value something, most hold (Raibley (2010), Tiberius (2018)), is distinct from simply desiring it. (Importantly, Prinzing (2020: 710) suggests that his form of “second-order” perfectionism may be compatible with a value-fulfillment approach, of the sort accepted by Raibley and Tiberius.) Second, it remains on the table that there are inappropriate forms of valuing—to value, say, hitting a duck with a rock (Kraut (1994)) may not be to flourish as a valuer, or to fail to value one's future Tuesday bliss. Third, even if we accept the above amendments to a subjective approach, there remain important differences in how evaluative perfectionism and, say, a value-fulfillment approach characterize the fundamental *bearers* of intrinsic value. For a value-fulfillment approach, the bearers of intrinsic value will be the valued *states* themselves; if I value, say, being a parent then the state in which I am a parent bears intrinsic value for me. Evaluative perfectionism, on the other hand, treats the state in which I *flourish as a valuer* as the bearer of intrinsic value. Of course, the occurrence of valued states will certainly be a component of such a picture, but the difference in emphasis here is significant: what is doing the fundamental axiological work is not the valued states themselves, but rather *evaluative flourishing*. Thus, depending on how one understands the distinction (cf. Sobel and Wall (MS)), evaluative perfectionism is rightly referred to as an *objective* rather than *subjective* view: evaluative flourishing is good for an agent independent of any attitude one takes toward the relevant value bearer, viz., the state of evaluative flourishing.

Finally, even if there are some similarities with a subjectivist approach (whether desire-based or any other), this should be embraced. Evaluative perfectionism claims that the most axiological significant category into which people fall is that they are valuers, and given that to respect one's status as a valuer is at least to bring about those things that one appropriately values, evaluative perfectionism holds that doing so is an ineliminable aspect of the prudential good. So, while there may be some vestiges of a subjective view in evaluative perfectionism, what vestiges there are are clearly grounded in the nature of people as valuers—in a *perfectionist* treatment of our evaluative nature.

### 3.2. Over- and Under-Inclusivity

Evaluative perfectionism has substantial advantages over traditional perfectionism when it comes to the problems of over- and under-inclusivity.

Start with the former. There is nothing about, e.g., agriculture that is in and of itself good for a person according to evaluative perfectionism. This is because, unless someone takes a valuing attitude toward it, it will not feature in an account of flourishing as a valuer—it has more or less nothing to do with being a valuer, whether successful or unsuccessful. Worries about further narrowing the account of perfectionism to avoid such challenges simply don't arise because the objections don't arise.

Here's a generalized argument for this. It is essential to flourish as a valuer that one actually takes the relevant evaluative attitude toward some particular thing, whether this is pain, pleasure, or setting things on fire. So long as the evaluative attitude is appropriate, coherent, and so on, then it must be that the achievement of what one *actually* values is essential to the good. But the problem of over-inclusivity is that none of these properties seem to have any axiological interest whatsoever—that is, unless someone actually cared about them. But this condition is fulfilled by evaluative perfectionism. And hence the only time a seemingly “valueless” state or object will be good for a person is when that state or object is appropriately and coherently valued by a valuer—hardly implausible.

Further, the problem of under-inclusivity does not arise. People have a tendency, though not a universal tendency to be sure, to value states of pleasure, or the goods that Bertie Wooster might obtain during his restful afternoon. Indeed, Wooster himself seems to value them quite highly. Insofar as it is clearly not inappropriate to value such states, then anyone who did so value them would be benefited by having them come about.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore—though I won't sign on to this myself—one may even go further to suggest that it would be inappropriate *not* to value states of pleasure, and hence cheap thrills of this sort would be an element of the flourishing of any valuing agent.

<sup>7</sup> A word of clarification: I mean to suggest that, in this case, what fundamentally bears value is the fact that, e.g., Wooster flourishes as a valuer. But *insofar as* he values his restful afternoon, he is benefited by having it, as this is constitutive of him flourishing, at least to a greater degree.

#### 4. Arbitrariness

Given that evaluative perfectionism can avoid the classical objections to traditional perfectionism, the question now becomes whether it can avoid the problem of arbitrariness. As I argued above, traditional perfectionism seems arbitrary in assigning fundamental axiological significance to the category of being human in particular. But, one might ask, is evaluative perfectionism any better on this score?

I return to deliberative perfectionism for a brief cautionary tale. Take Brink's reading of Green, which expresses a view onto which he ultimately signs:

Green conceives of persons as agents who are responsible for their actions. Non-responsible agents, such as brutes and small children, act on their strongest desires; if they deliberate, it is only about the instrumental means to the satisfaction of their desires. By contrast, responsible agents must be able to distinguish between the intensity and authority of their desires, deliberate about the authority of their desires, and regulate their actions in accordance with their deliberations. This requires one to be able to distinguish oneself from particular appetites and emotions—to distance oneself from them—and to be able to frame the question what it would be best for one on the whole to do. (Brink 2008: 34.)

For Green, and Brink, the CAC would appear to be *responsible agents*—agents who have the capacity to deliberate and act on reasons. Now, of course, many human beings with a personal good are, in fact, responsible agents. But here the problem arises. Why should the category of *being responsive to reasons*, or being a *responsible agent*, be the central category that determines the *good for such an agent*? Surely it is very significant that we are, if in fact we are, responsible and responsive to reasons, able to control our desires, and so on. But we have seen no reason for thinking that *that* capacity helps to explain the *prudential value* for individuals. The only thing Brink, *via* Green, commits to is the claim that we are in fact responsible agents. But this is sufficient only to establish that responsible agents is *a* category into which we fall, rather than the central *axiological* category. Offhand, it would seem that being a responsible agent, having the power to deliberate rationally about the content of one's ends, and to shape those deliberations into action is tailor-made for an account, not of the good, but of, for instance, *rational agency* or *moral responsibility* or other such cognate concepts. But one is licensed to wonder why the capacity to be a moral or rational agent is supposed to be identical with the categories that determine our prudential good. Why should the notion of moral agency be an *axiologically* significant concept? Here Brink and Green, like Korsgaard (see note 6), hold that a responsible agent will, in fact, take certain valuing attitudes, including attitudes toward valuing their own rational capacities. But notice that this is no explanation of why being a responsible agent is an appropriate CAC. It merely says that rational agents will in fact value their rational capacities—an insight perfectly compatible with evaluative perfectionism.

However, evaluative perfectionism suffers from no such inability to explain its connection to the personal good. I present two arguments for this. First, recall that



the sort of valuing that is under discussion is *prudential valuing* in particular: valuing *for my own sake*. Hence the specific category we're assigning to determine the good is the capacity to have a set of valuing attitudes that are specified in terms of the specifically prudential modality. And so there is an immediate, and indeed quite plain, connection between prudential value in particular and flourishing as a valuer in the sense indicated by evaluative perfectionism, viz., the relevant attitudes *just are those* that are relevant to prudential valuing, unlike the attitudes, mental states, and so on, that are significant for deliberative perfectionism, which need have no prudential content whatever. One might wonder what this "prudential modality" is. Different theorists understand this notion differently, but it's not essential to my argument that any particular one is true. Stephen Darwall, for instance, suggests that the prudential modality is just understood as what we care about *for someone's sake* (Darwall 2002: 1). Alternatively, Griffin (1985: 21-22) suggests that to desire something in the prudential mode is for it to count as part of the success of one's life. Dorsey (2021: ch. 5) holds that the valuing attitude must be directed to the good *for the person*. (Other views are suggested by Overvold (1980), Parfit (1984), and others.) Now, one might argue that some accounts on offer are circular—taking the person's own good as the object of an attitude that is then used to analyze the good (see Arneson (1999: 124). But, first, not all are; if circularity is a problem you are free to select a non-circular version. But even if there is a kind of circularity involved, this circularity need not be vicious (cf. Griffin 1985: 22). We are not, or need not be, seeking to provide a conceptual *analysis* of prudential value, and then defining that in terms of prudential value. Rather, we are offering a set of necessary and sufficient first-order conditions for prudential value: excellence in valuing in the prudential mode. Even if valuing "in the prudential mode" makes reference to prudential value itself, this does not defeat the central purposes of the view. (Cf. Dorsey 2021: 136.)

The second argument runs like this. The thesis that one's status as a valuer (indeed, a prudential valuer) has *a lot to do with one's own personal good* is in itself extremely plausible. One way to bring out this plausibility is to note the central attractiveness of insisting that a person's good not be *alienating*. (For discussion of this point, consider Rosati (1996); Fletcher (2013); Bruno-Ninõ (2022).) The *locus classicus* of this claim runs as follows:

While I do not find this thesis convincing as a claim about all species of normative assessment, it does seem to me to capture an important feature of the concept of intrinsic value to say that what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him. (Railton 2004: 47.)

Guy Fletcher amplifies this claim in the following way:

Railton's claim helpfully brings out what is wrong with certain enumerative theories. If one held that the *only* positive contributors to



well-being were things such as living in particular kinds of community, serving certain social roles or performing particular kinds of work, then one would be forced to hold that people whose lives contained these things were high in well-being irrespective of how much the person was indifferent to, or even loathed, them. Clearly, such an enumerative theory is intolerably alienating and implausible. (Fletcher 2013: 215-216.)

Notice that the claim I am making here is not that there should be any one *particular* link between a person's good and their evaluative attitudes. Rather, the claim I'm making suggests that there is a natural intuitive plausibility behind some form of "a connection" (Railton) between the evaluative category of the *prudential good for a person* and the *valuing attitudes of that person*. What this suggests, then, is that when we come to determine the central category to which people belong *for the purposes of assigning the good for them*, it would appear natural to choose a category that brings forward their nature as evaluative beings; beings that have a connection to, or alienation from, states of the world. If this is correct, then there is a strong rationale to treat the central axiological category, up for grabs when it comes to bare bones perfectionism, as the one articulated by evaluative perfectionism.

Notice that this can serve to distinguish evaluative perfectionism from deliberative perfectionism. The fact that I am a *responsible agent* does not seem to bear the same intuitive explanatory connection to a person's good that the fact that I am a (prudential) valuer does. This is, of course, not to gainsay the normative significance of the fact that I am a responsible agent. Rather, it is to suggest that deliberative perfectionism is a better conception not of a prudential perfectionism, but rather an account of the central feature of human agency and responsibility. In addition, it can serve to distinguish evaluative perfectionism from traditional perfectionism. The challenge for traditional perfectionism, when it came to arbitrariness, was to articulate some reason why the fact that I am *human* should be the category that fundamentally mediates the good *for me*. As we have seen, traditional perfectionism struggles to respond adequately to this challenge. But evaluative perfectionism does not. Why should the fact that I am a valuer be the right category that mediates my good? Answer: because the "connection" between my prudential valuing attitudes and my good is straightforwardly intuitive.

Hence we have a strong and important independent rationale—independent, that is, of its ability to solve classical challenges—for evaluative *rather than* traditional (or deliberative) perfectionism. Whatever else one might say, in other words, linking the good for a person with their ability to value things for themselves, for their own sakes, is certainly not arbitrary when it comes to understanding what constitutes the good for themselves, for their sakes.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, I have offered and explored a refinement to traditional perfectionism. The argument for this refinement is not, of course, knock-down. But I have tried to suggest the ways in which traditional perfectionism stands in need of refinement: it is

over-inclusive, under-inclusive, and, ultimately, axiologically arbitrary. If we can offer a view that retains the fundamental insights contained in Bare Bones Perfectionism without succumbing to these problems, then this view should be taken seriously indeed.

Notably I have not argued that evaluative perfectionism is the *only* proposal that can avoid the problems of the traditional view while retaining the central perfectionist insight. Perhaps there are others. But evaluative perfectionism's ability to respond to classical objections to traditional views, as well as its ability to respect something like the generalized importance of our status as valuers should afford it serious consideration in understanding the significance of *what we are* in determining our good.

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