

Individualistic Perfectionism and Human Nature¹

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1. Introduction

There has been a resurgence of interest in neo-Aristotelian and neo-Stoic ethics in recent years. Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen's new book, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics*,² is the latest addition to this literature.³ The authors defend what they call an "ethics of responsibility," the core idea of which is *individualistic perfectionism*. The four main ideas of individualistic perfectionism are as follows:

- (1) Being virtuous is good for the virtuous person, and not only for others.

¹ This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the American Association for the Philosophic Study of Society at the Eastern Division American Philosophical Association, January 5, 2017.

² Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2016). All parenthetical citations in the text are to *The Perfectionist Turn*, unless otherwise specified.

³ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Neera K. Badhwar, *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Paul Bloomfield, *The Virtues of Happiness: A Theory of the Good Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Mark LeBar, *The Value of Living Well* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Daniel C. Russell, *Happiness for Humans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

- (2) Both virtue and flourishing are somehow grounded in human nature.
- (3) All our values and reasons are ultimately grounded in our own flourishing.
- (4) Although there are generic goods and virtues that all flourishing human beings must have, the weight of these goods and virtues in each person's life depends on the individual's nature and her circumstances. This is the individualistic element of their theory.

These claims are familiar to readers of ancient ethics and contemporary neo-Aristotelian and neo-Stoic work; what's new and interesting are the arguments that Den Uyl and Rasmussen offer for them. In emphasizing the individualized nature of flourishing, the authors successfully meet a challenge from subjectivists who think that an objective account of flourishing must ignore the individual's own nature and interests.⁴ Although they are not the first to argue that flourishing is individualized, I think they do an exceptionally good job of explicating and defending the claim, so my discussion of it will be brief.⁵ I will focus on their arguments for the relationship of flourishing to virtue and the relationship of both to human nature, and on their claim that all of our values and reasons are ultimately grounded in personal flourishing.

2. Relationship of Virtue to Flourishing

The authors argue that there is no ontological gap between being a good or virtuous human being and being a flourishing human being (p. 33). Both goodness and flourishing are grounded in our nature as rational animals, and neither can be understood apart from the other. The "first existential condition" we all face is the necessity of making a life for ourselves (p. 7). We have a natural end (or *telos*)

⁴ L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Daniel M. Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Valerie Tiberius and Alicia Hall, "Normative Theory and Psychological Research: Hedonism, Eudaimonism, and Why It Matters," *Journal of Positive Psychology* 5, no. 3 (May 2010), pp. 212–25.

⁵ For other defenses, see Russell, *Happiness for Humans*, and Badhwar, *Well-Being*.

to which we are naturally attracted, and this end is our own flourishing (p. 45). Our basic responsibility on an ethics of responsibility, as Den Uyl and Rasmussen call their theory, is to construct an integrated self, a self in which “there is no division between the acting, willing, and being of the self” (p. 9). A flourishing self must be an integrated self, and an integrated self is a self that we perfect through self-direction. The fundamental issue on an ethics of responsibility is to become a certain kind of person, and not, as on an ethics of respect-for-persons, to have the right kind of relationship to other persons or, even, to ourselves. This is not to say that the right kind of relationships are not important, but rather, to say that “the foundational well-spring for ethical action and judgment” is the *telos* of flourishing (p. 8). On an ethics of respect, by contrast, ethical norms arise from the fact that we have to live with others (p. 2). However, having a natural *telos* does not imply that there is something in us that pushes us toward self-perfection. We have to exercise our capacity for self-direction ourselves.

But how should we direct ourselves? What is our guide in this process? The authors argue that our guide is virtue, especially the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. Practical wisdom enables us to use the right means to achieve the right ends, which include the generic human goods as well as the moral virtues, and to integrate all into a coherent whole (pp. 54-61).⁶ Practical wisdom also shows that flourishing requires self-understanding, that is, an understanding of our own capacities, talents, and interests. This, in turn, requires an understanding of other people and of our social and natural environment. Self-understanding is crucial to self-perfection and flourishing because we can flourish only if we live in a way that is appropriately responsive to our own basic capacities and interests in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

In short, the moral virtues of integrity, temperance, justice, etc. and the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom (hereafter simply

⁶ Note that, on Aristotle’s view, practical wisdom is the virtue that entails, and is entailed by, all of the other virtues; see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. IX. So if you have practical wisdom across the board, it follows that you already have all of the other virtues across the board. Hence, it is not a means to the other virtues. But perhaps Den Uyl and Rasmussen believe, as I do, that we can have practical wisdom in some areas of our lives and not others (see Badhwar, *Well-Being*, chap. 7), in which case practical wisdom in some areas *can* show us how to grow in practical wisdom and moral virtue in other areas.

“virtues”) are necessary for flourishing both because they are instrumental means to the generic and individual human goods that are necessary for flourishing and because they are partial realizations or constituents of it (pp. 38-39). On this view, it follows that the virtues are necessary, but not sufficient, for flourishing. We also need what Aristotle calls “external” goods, such as friendship and knowledge (or, at least, knowledge of important things). Finally, since we all have different interests and talents, we also need goods that fit our interests and talents, such as, for example, philosophy to a Socrates (p. 171) or basketball to a Michael Jordan. Hence, if we were deprived of friendship or some interest central to our lives, such as philosophy, our lives would cease to flourish, or at least, would be much diminished. Indeed, Den Uyl and Rasmussen argue that, because we are social beings, even the loss of other people’s regard can diminish our flourishing (p. 188). As I would put it, it is such external goods that are the chief sources of that emotional fulfillment called happiness, and happiness is an essential component of flourishing. Virtue is not enough.

This view is in line with Aristotle’s recognition of the role of external goods and fortune in flourishing. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle declares that great misfortunes can undermine the *eudaimonia* of even the most virtuous person (*NE*, Bk. I, chap. 10, 1100b25–1101a8). What remains untouched is only his virtue. Conversely, he says, “many strokes of good fortune” are an adornment on a *eudaimon* life and make it even more *eudaimon*.⁷

However, Den Uyl and Rasmussen don’t consistently acknowledge that any external goods are essential for flourishing. Indeed, like the Stoics, they typically *identify* flourishing with virtuous activity. As they say, flourishing just *is* “the exercise of one’s own practical wisdom” (p. 33; see also p. 52), and since practical wisdom entails all of the moral virtues, flourishing just is the exercise of the virtues. Again, our very *telos*, earlier identified with

⁷ In *Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986), John Cooper argues that, for Aristotle, external goods are only material for virtuous activity. Whether or not this is the correct interpretation of Aristotle, there is no reason to think that the claim is true. External *bads* are also material for virtuous activity. In any case, my point here is simply that, in the passages just discussed, Den Uyl and Rasmussen clearly hold that external goods like friendship and others’ regard are essential for flourishing in their own right, and not merely as material for virtue.

flourishing, is now identified with “deployment of practical wisdom” (p. 323). When we actualize our potentialities through the exercise of the virtues, we perfect ourselves, and self-perfection is what flourishing consists of (see, e.g., pp. 53, 64, 174, and 184). A good, that is, virtuous, human being is a flourishing or perfected human being (p. 172). For each individual, her or his own virtue or self-perfection or flourishing is what has ultimate value for her or him.

One problem with equating flourishing with virtue, as already noted, is that it is incompatible with the view Den Uyl and Rasmussen defend in some places, namely, that flourishing requires external goods and not only virtue. Another problem with it is that it is wildly implausible. For if flourishing is identical to virtue, then neither the unfortunate consequences of our own or others’ actions, nor those of cruel nature, can make any difference to our flourishing. Neither, of course, can good fortune. All that matters is our own actions and attitudes. If we respond to a personal tragedy virtuously, we continue to flourish, and if badly, we don’t. The tragedy itself makes no dent in our flourishing. The loss of our children is no more important to our flourishing than the loss of our tables and chairs. In Lawrence Becker’s words, Stoic sages, that is, the fully virtuous, “must be able to say of everything other than their virtue (friends, loves, emotions, reputation, wealth, pleasant mental states, suffering, disease, death, and so on) that it is nothing to them.”⁸ For everything other than our virtue is part of the circumstances or matter of our actions.

This, needless to say, is rather far removed from any non-philosophical conception of flourishing, any conception that people actually live by. So it is a special problem for a theory that purports to be based on human nature as it is, not as the theory wishes it to be. Why, then, do Den Uyl and Rasmussen hold this view? In the next section, I consider their argument.

3. Relationship of Flourishing and Virtue to Human Nature

I’ll start by discussing their response to a challenge to perfectionism raised by Daniel Haybron in his *Pursuit of Unhappiness*, a response that illustrates the strength of their individualistic perfectionism. Then, I will sketch a variation on this

⁸ Becker, *A New Stoicism*, p. 8. This Stoic view, as I argue in my *Well-Being*, pp. 207-11, is thus rather inhuman. And in making virtue alone essential for flourishing, it actually ends up robbing virtue of importance because it treats success in achieving our goals as unimportant.

example that illustrates the problem with their view that flourishing is identical with virtuous activity.

Haybron uses the example of a seasoned diplomat he calls Angela to argue that perfectionism gives the wrong answer about the nature of flourishing. Angela has been looking forward to a well-earned retirement after years of stellar service, but at the last minute she is asked to stay on to avert a crisis in a foreign country. Haybron argues that perfectionism requires that she stay on because doing so would more fully exercise the capacities that are central to her as a human being, namely, her rational capacities, but retirement is more conducive to her flourishing because it is more emotionally fulfilling. Perfection and virtue pull in one direction, flourishing in the other.

Den Uyl and Rasmussen rightly question this claim (pp. 183-86). Staying on as a diplomat would not necessarily require a greater exercise of Angela's rational capacities and virtues—practical wisdom can be exercised in retirement as well as in work. However, staying on as a diplomat would also not necessarily constitute a sacrifice of her well-being. It all depends on her interests and circumstances. Indeed, on Haybron's own description of Angela, it seems that taking on the more challenging task would be more fulfilling for her.⁹ Haybron's argument might be fatal to a non-individualistic form of perfectionism, but not to an individualistic perfectionism that takes into account the individual's own particular abilities, interests, and talents.

Suppose, however, that Angela's diplomacy fails terribly through no fault of her own, and she regrets not retiring. She acts honestly, courageously, tactfully, and skillfully in her negotiations with, let's say, the tyrant of the country in crisis, but her very virtue throws the tyrant into a conniption fit, and everything ends in disaster. She is, to put it mildly, thoroughly frustrated, and deeply regrets her decision to take on the task. Commonsensically, Angela's decision led to a diminishment of her flourishing, but insofar as Den Uyl and Rasmussen equate flourishing with virtuous activity, they must deny this.

What is their argument for this counterintuitive position? They provide their reasons in a chapter aptly named "Because," where they argue that "goodness is conformity of a living thing to its nature" (p. 222). A living entity's life-form, the kind of thing that it is, "provides

⁹ I give essentially the same analysis of this example in my *Well-Being*, pp. 207-8.

the *telos*,” and its “being a good entity involves activities that are in principle good for it” (p. 220). Hence, there is no ontological gap between the goodness of a living thing and what is good for it: “In general, then, life-forms are ‘meant’ to be an integration of ‘good for’ and ‘good of’” (p. 224).

However, the fact that “being a good entity involves activities that are in principle good for it” doesn’t entail that its good is identical with such activities. For both the consequences of its own good activities and the consequences of the actions of others and of nature can be bad for it. A rose bush can be functioning perfectly well, but if someone pours bleach on it, it withers. Likewise, a human being can be living perfectly virtuously, but if disaster strikes, it can rob her of all of her external sources of happiness. Recognizing that the good for an entity requires more than its own good actions is perfectly compatible with denying an ontological gap between its goodness and what is good for it.

The next question is: What is our nature and how do we know what it is? What is the human life-form?

4. The Nature of Human Nature

Our nature or life-form is defined by our “generic human dispositions,” dispositions that “are inherently reason-giving, because they are part of what defines what is valuable” for us (p. 190 n. 37). The most important of these capacities is reason, which we exercise by choice (pp. 230-32). It is this capacity that makes us human and distinguishes us from other animals. But what exactly is reason? It is the capacity “to grasp the world in conceptual terms” (p. 231). “This capacity is expressed in speculative reasoning (the pursuit of truth) and practical reasoning (the pursuit of human good)” (p. 231). Different cultures and forms of life are all, ultimately, due to this capacity. We exercise our reason in every aspect of our lives: in planning a trip or a meal, in commenting on a book, in the pursuit of friendship and other relationships, and even in exercising our other capacities, including our physical ones.

That reason is involved in every aspect of our lives is undeniable. However, speculative or theoretical reason is exercised not necessarily in the pursuit of truth *per se*, but in the pursuit of what *seems* to the thinker to be true, and practical reason is exercised not necessarily in the pursuit of the good *per se*, but in the pursuit of what *seems* to the agent to be good. Sometimes, people are innocently mistaken about the true and the good. For example, many people,

ignorant of economics, seem to have believed Donald Trump's false claims about his ability to "bring back jobs" to America through protectionist measures, and many people seem to think that his strong-arming of Carrier was a good, patriotic thing to do. But ignorance is not always innocent. Too often people seek out only those views that confirm the beliefs they already hold, because it would be painful to discover that their deep-seated beliefs are false or because it would open them to criticism by their peer group. They choose to believe whatever is advantageous to them in some way. Think of Democrats who evade evidence for the safety of Genetically Modified Organisms, or Republicans who discovered Trump's "virtues" as soon as it became clear that he was going to win the primaries. Sadly, it is the same capacity for exercising reason that people employ when they construct elaborate rationalizations of their beliefs and actions.¹⁰

Again, some of our capacities, such as the capacities for envy and resentment, seem to be inherently negative—devoid of all value. Such capacities are not reason-giving at all. Other capacities allow us to "find" different reasons in them. For example, although most people think that the capacity for sexual pleasure gives us reason to enjoy sex for itself, some think that sexual pleasure exists only as a means to reproduction. Again, many capacities, such as the capacities to read and write, leave it open what the appropriate use of them is.

Since human nature is not all good, we have to say why what we regard as potentially virtuous in human nature is potentially virtuous, and why what we regard as potentially vicious in human nature is potentially vicious. Den Uyl and Rasmussen reject the view that we do so on a normative conception of human nature, that is, on the basis of what Daniel Russell calls "second nature," rather than on the bare, descriptive facts of "first nature," because first nature, they say, is already normatively infused (pp. 189-90). As they put it, "a correct description" of human nature is "*inherently* value-laden" (p. 190). We learn about human nature from the sciences, humanities,

¹⁰ It might be objected that insofar as people are mistaken about the true or the good, whether innocently or not, they are not using their speculative or practical reason. Reason itself is always in the pursuit of the true and the good. But if this is true, then we need to be told which faculty they are using when they are mistaken. Furthermore, whatever faculty that is, it is surely as central to human life as infallible reason. For like reason, it is a conceptual faculty that is exercised in every aspect of human life and, like reason, it distinguishes us from the other animals.

arts, and careful observation. In answer to critics who argue that a descriptive account of human nature cannot yield a specific ethical outlook, Den Uyl and Rasmussen state that

one could say straightforwardly that human living involves certain activities—for example, the pursuit of friends, the acquisition of knowledge, and *the development of dispositions (moral virtues) that require the use of one's intelligence in dealing with life's challenges*—and that a human life that did not involve activities such as these would be incomplete and defective. These general standards connected to these activities provide, then, an ethical outlook. (p. 233; italics mine)

It's true that people without the capacity for either friendship or knowledge lack something important, something that leaves their lives unfulfilled.¹¹ But does it not beg the question simply to assert that those who lack moral virtue lack a good that leaves them unfulfilled, or that human living involves virtue, period? Human living too often involves vice rather than virtue, and intelligence is used even by the wicked in determining the best means to their wicked goals. Moreover, wickedness or everyday badness are as deeply rooted in human nature as virtue. Just as our nature contains the seeds of virtues like temperance, justice, kindness, or honesty, it contains the seeds of vices like intemperance, injustice, cruelty, or dishonesty.¹² Alternatively, we might agree with Aristotle that by nature we are neither good nor bad, we just have a potentiality for both: As he puts it, “the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor

¹¹ I say either “friendship *or* knowledge” because it's possible that some people with Asperger's syndrome are sufficiently different from the rest of us that they can flourish without friends or, at least, without intimate friends.

¹² Gareth Cook, “The Moral Life of Babies,” *Scientific American*, November 12, 2013 (interview with Paul Bloom about his book *Just Babies*), accessed online at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-moral-life-of-babies/>; Nathalia Gjersoe, “The Moral Life of Babies,” *Guardian*, October 12, 2013, accessed online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/oct/12/babies-moral-life>. Bloom argues that the same emotions that lead to moral behavior can also lead to immoral behavior.

against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed by habit” (*NE*, Bk. II, chap. 1). Furthermore, even people with genuine friendships, a genuine passion for knowledge, and many virtues can be vicious toward those they regard as inferior to them—toward “the other.” One example will suffice: America’s slaveholding Founding Fathers. Indeed, virtue (more or less) toward those who belong to “our group” and vice toward outsiders, is the way human beings have lived for most of human history and the way many live even now. One cannot identify human nature with only the good bits.

For the same sorts of reasons, since flourishing, on both the Aristotelian and the Stoic conception, entails virtue, Den Uyl and Rasmussen cannot simply assert that human beings are naturally attracted to their own flourishing, period (p. 45). Even though the seeds of such attraction are present in normal children, they don’t always bear fruit in adulthood. There are, after all, many bad human beings and many who act according to virtue only because, and when, they fear that acting otherwise will get them into trouble. Such people regard virtue as a burden rather than as a component of their flourishing. It is not something they are attracted to. Their conception of what’s good for them is very different from the conception of (mostly) virtuous people. What needs to be shown is why the conception of flourishing or self-perfection these people hold is wrong.

One answer Den Uyl and Rasmussen give is that “[w]hat is good for a human being is what is choice-worthy” (p. 243), and what is choiceworthy is the appropriate actualization of one’s potentialities (p. 174 and elsewhere). I completely agree, but what is the argument for these claims? What makes becoming virtuous appropriate and becoming vicious inappropriate? What makes the former rational and the latter irrational? What makes virtue the mature state (p. 197) and vice the immature state? I raise these questions not so much to cast doubt on Den Uyl and Rasmussen’s claim that we can ground ethics on a descriptive account of human nature, as to indicate that they need to say more in order to succeed in their project. An answer in terms of the importance of virtue for success in acquiring and keeping certain external goods, including good relationships with others, takes us part of the way, but not all the way, since such success often doesn’t require virtue toward those in the out-group or toward those who cannot retaliate. In order to show that human flourishing requires virtue, we need additional arguments.

5. The Ultimate Sources of Our Values and Reasons

Den Uyl and Rasmussen argue that “[u]ltimately, our values, reasons, and rankings are grounded in personal flourishing” (p. 85). This claim is quite common in the neo-Aristotelian and neo-Stoic literature. It is also, I think, quite problematic. For it entails, among other things, that our *ultimate* reason for exercising the other-regarding virtues—justice, kindness, generosity—is that doing so is part of our own flourishing rather than part of other people’s flourishing. To be clear, I’m not rejecting the view that these virtues are part of our own flourishing and that this gives us a reason for acquiring them and exercising them. I’m rejecting the view that our own flourishing is the *ultimate* or *only* reason for acquiring and exercising the other-regarding virtues.

Take, for example, Thomas Jefferson’s ownership of slaves. He needed slaves to run his plantation and support his many scientific interests which, in turn, enabled him to exercise many of his intellectual virtues. He was in no danger of reprisal from the slaves, he rarely felt guilty, and he certainly did not fear criticism from his society. What made slavery bad for him? Its injustice. But what made slavery unjust? Surely, the fact that it violated the slaves’ rights and prevented or undermined their flourishing. Hence, it’s this that constituted Jefferson’s *ultimate* reason why he should have freed his slaves. The impact of his injustice on his own flourishing was derivative from its impact on the slaves’ flourishing.

Speaking more generally, I see no reason to think that only things that are, or that we perceive to be, good or bad for ourselves, give us reason to respond to them positively or negatively, respectively. If I respond negatively to stories of the massacres in Aleppo, it’s because they are bad for the inhabitants of Aleppo, not because they are bad for me. The inhabitants’ suffering gives me a reason to make a donation to the International Red Cross, even though the inhabitants’ fate has hardly any impact on my flourishing. It might be countered that, deep down, I discern that making the donation is good for me, and that that is why I make it. But if my donation is good for me it’s only because, given the plight of the inhabitants of Aleppo, it’s the right or worthwhile thing to do. It’s not worthwhile because it is antecedently good for me, independently of its worth in light of their plight.

Or consider another example. It’s wrong for me to step on your gouty toe because it’s bad for you, not because it’s bad for me. That’s

why I apologize to you, and not to myself. My act is bad for me only because it's wrong, and it's wrong because it's cruel and bad for you. If stepping on your toe cured you of gout, and you wanted me to cure you, then it would be a worthwhile thing to do and whatever benefit I derived from it would ultimately be grounded in your good. These are examples of values or disvalues that are ultimately rooted in other people's flourishing, not our own. They become relevant to our own flourishing only derivatively.

Just as we are naturally attracted to things in the natural or artifactual world long before we know the meaning of flourishing, we are naturally attracted to and concerned about other people, long before we know the meaning of flourishing (or concern). One crying baby in the nursery sets other babies crying. The human face smiles at the human face. There is no reason to hold that when we acquire the ability to reason, the natural sociality that once led us to respond to others independently of our own flourishing, must be replaced by a sociality that is mediated by our own flourishing. We can see something as valuable to others even if we ourselves don't, even can't, value it. For example, I can recognize that music is a value to most people even if I myself am tone-deaf. This recognition gives me a reason not to be dismissive of other people's interest in music, or worse, not to destroy their music collection to make room for my precious book collection—even if they can't retaliate. In short, there is a natural concern for others that is not entirely rooted in our concern for ourselves.

Perhaps Den Uyl and Rasmussen would say that the agent-relativity of values or reasons entails that all values depend, ultimately, on their connection to the agent's flourishing. But does it? As far as I can determine, the agent-relativity of values or reasons for Den Uyl and Rasmussen consists of two ideas: (i) values and reasons are relational, that is, they are essentially values or reasons for someone-or-the-other, and (ii) they are personal, in the sense that something can be a value for me without being a value for anyone else. However, both (i) and (ii) can be true without it being the case that all values for me depend *ultimately* on their connection to my flourishing.

To conclude, Den Uyl and Rasmussen's book is a rich and dense discussion of the metaethics of virtue that, in my view, is right in its main thesis that both virtue and flourishing are grounded in our nature as rational beings. However, I've argued against Den Uyl and Rasmussen's equation of flourishing with virtuous activity, not only

because this equation contradicts their own claim in some places that flourishing requires external goods in addition to virtuous activity, but also and more importantly because it is highly implausible. I've also argued against their claim that all reasons and values are rooted, in the final analysis, in the agent's own flourishing. And I've shown why they need to say more in order to defend their claim that we can ground ethics entirely in a descriptive account of human nature.

