

Self-Formation and Other-Regarding Concern:
Commentary on Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B.
Rasmussen's *The Perfectionist Turn*¹

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Let me begin with two remarks from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Here is the first:

We are related to our friend as we are related to ourselves. . . . Whatever someone regards as his being, or the end for which he chooses to be alive, that is the activity he wishes to pursue in his friend's company. Hence some friends drink together, others play dice, while others do gymnastics and go hunting, or do philosophy.²

Of course, these activities are not all mutually exclusive (though philosophy and gymnastics might not be compossible). That aside, here is the other (related) remark:

The wise person is able, and more able the wiser he is, to contemplate even by himself; . . . though he presumably does it better with colleagues . . .³

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

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999 [c. 325 BC]), IX.12, 1171b33–1172a5, with some minor changes.

³ *Ibid.*, X.7, 1177a34–1177b2, with some minor changes.

I start with these remarks for two reasons: First, I wish to note with appreciation the philosophical richness of Den Uyl and Rasmussen's *The Perfectionist Turn*,⁴ which is obviously the fruit of a long philosophical friendship. This speaks to Aristotle's point that although we can contemplate alone, presumably we can do it better with friends or colleagues. Second, the above remarks about friendship—especially the thought that “we are related to our friend as we are related to ourselves”—are suggestive of the theme that I want to take up here in my commentary on the book, namely, the relationship between self-regarding and other-regarding concern.

There is a lot in the book with which I am in agreement, especially the broadly Aristotelian approach to ethics that aims at the good life (*eudaimonia*), and there is also much that I learned from it. However, I want to offer some critical comments on the central distinction that is made between two basic “templates” (i.e., “orientations,” “frameworks,” or “approaches”) in ethics: the “template of respect” and the “template of responsibility.” Den Uyl and Rasmussen favor the latter template, though I find the dichotomy itself problematic, and in what follows I explain why.

For the template of respect, as Den Uyl and Rasmussen understand it, “the necessity of living among persons is taken to be the principal reason for developing norms of conduct—even with respect to ourselves,” whereas for the template of responsibility, “the source of all norms—even those concerning our life among others—derives from the existential fact that we must make something of our lives” (p. 2). In other words, the template of respect gives primary emphasis to *other-regarding concern*, with self-regarding concern being derivative, whereas the template of responsibility gives primary emphasis to *self-regarding concern*, with other-regarding concern being derivative.

The two templates, according to Den Uyl and Rasmussen, “are not two theories of ethics, but approaches within which theorizing will take place” (p. 3). For instance, they classify both Kantianism and utilitarianism under the template of respect, while they regard Aristotelian virtue ethics as falling under the template of responsibility (p. 4). However, this categorization is a little forced. In regard to utilitarianism, though it does give primary emphasis to other-regarding

⁴ Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2016), p. 2. Hereafter, all references to *The Perfectionist Turn* will be cited parenthetically in the text.

concern, it seems better to speak of a template of considerateness rather than respect, since the utilitarian is concerned with maximizing pleasure (or preference-satisfaction) and minimizing pain (or dissatisfaction). The requirement of respect corresponds to that which has dignity or nobility and is thus respect-worthy. These are categories of intrinsic value that the utilitarian does not recognize (since he or she thinks pleasure or preference-satisfaction is the only intrinsic value, and it is odd to think that pleasure as such or preference-satisfaction as such is respect-worthy). The template of respect does seem to have clearer connection with a Kantian approach to ethics, especially given the emphasis on human dignity. I don't think it is right, though, to say that Kantianism gives primary emphasis to other-regarding concern, with self-regarding concern being derivative. Kant recognizes perfect and imperfect duties to self and to others, and both are rooted in an account of our dignity as human beings.

My primary concern here, however, is not with how to characterize Kantianism and utilitarianism. Rather, I am concerned with how best to articulate a broadly Aristotelian conception of ethics, where one aims at the good life (*eudaimonia*), where some set of virtues is said to play an important role in achieving this aim, and where the account of the virtues bears some significant resemblance to Aristotle's own account. Is such a conception of ethics best understood in terms of the template of responsibility? As mentioned above, Den Uyl and Rasmussen think so, and they describe their own Aristotelian ethic of responsibility, "individualistic perfectionism," as follows:

The human life-form consists in a determinate set of potentialities which, when actualized appropriately, amount to . . . human flourishing or the self-perfecting life. . . . [What] lies at the heart of ethics is the issue of what is worthy of being valued, which for us is ultimately an individual human being's own self-perfection; and this requires that ethics be primarily concerned with persons determining for themselves in what their individual human good concretely consists. Human good is thus grounded in the individuating and generic features of individual human beings; and it is fully immanent in their self-perfecting choices, actions, and lives. (p. 174)

What should we make of this? I agree that we should aim at self-perfection and in doing so we need to take responsibility for our own

lives. However, I don't think we should dichotomize self-regarding and other-regarding concern in the way that Den Uyl and Rasmussen suggest with their two opposing templates for ethics. I contend that aiming at our own self-perfection also includes concern for things that are "worthy of being valued" beyond this self-perfection, where their value is not merely derivative upon the value of self-perfection. Thus, I don't agree that "*the source of all norms . . . derives from the existential fact that we must make something of our lives*" (p. 2).

A key reason to think that we cannot dichotomize self-regarding and other-regarding concern has to do with the nature of proper self-formation (*Bildung*), which is a topic that I don't think receives due consideration in *The Perfectionist Turn*. On the view that I want to advance, the self only properly exists in a certain moral and social space.⁵ In other words, our identity or sense of self is *constituted* by our relationship with others, especially certain significant others (viz., family and friends, religious and cultural communities and their traditions, and so on), and by certain experiences of normative demands upon our lives, such as what we take to be respect-worthy, reverence-worthy, and love-worthy.⁶ This means that self-regarding concern will *integrally* be bound up with other-regarding concern.

⁵ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), pt. I ("Identity and the Good"), esp. chap. 2; Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996), esp. chap. 1. Den Uyl and Rasmussen do make brief mention of Taylor's idea of the "dialogical self," but they reference this in the context of a discussion of self-reflection and suggest it is equivalent to the "dialectical self" in Adam Smith (p. 8 n. 13). I think this misses how it concerns the self in social space, that is, a socially constituted conception of the self. At another point, they also do remark: "We are . . . internally shaped by our sociality as much as we confront it externally" (p. 60). However, this point is not filled out and it is not clear that it is intended to imply what I have described as the self in moral and social space, which I am suggesting challenges the dichotomy of the two templates and the view that self-responsibility can be "the source of all norms."

⁶ Taylor argues that without an orientation in moral and social space, where we place our selves in relation to certain significant others and normative demands, we would have an identity crisis and experience a kind of existential vertigo. I cannot explore this argument here, but I do find it compelling. My appeal is simply to the appearances (i.e., the phenomena) and what seems needed for making sense of our lives.

All Aristotelians would in some sense agree with this last claim. Many contemporary Aristotelians, for example, seek to justify the importance of other-regarding virtues such as compassion, generosity, justice, honesty, loyalty, fidelity to promises, and so forth by showing how these virtues are needed for promoting the “good functioning of the social group,” which in turn is important for realizing our own good as rational, social animals.⁷ Den Uyl and Rasmussen also acknowledge this point and maintain that we only achieve our good “with and among others” (p. 54; cf. pp. 11, 24, 53–54, 61, and 188). Indeed, unlike some other contemporary Aristotelians (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre), they defend a liberal political and economic order centered on individual negative rights on the basis that these rights “regulate conduct so as to establish conditions that secure and maintain the possibility of individuals pursuing their own forms of human flourishing and engaging in moral activity among others” (pp. 89 and 93; cf. p. 94).⁸ While such rights claims are seen as instrumental to achieving our own good, Den Uyl and Rasmussen also affirm a more direct connection between other-regarding and self-regarding concern when they write: “[A] significant part of human potentialities is other-oriented. *Philia* (friendship) in all its various forms of relatedness is, for example, one of the basic generic goods identified by Aristotle as an integral feature of the good human life” (p. 53).

What is missing in all of these justifications for other-regarding concern is precisely what I have described as the morally and socially constituted self, where we cannot strictly separate out self-regarding and other-regarding concern. In the case of friendship, this involves seeing ourselves, as Aristotle puts it, as “related to our friend as we are related to ourselves.” In other words, there is a “we-identification” here in which we affectively identify with our friend

⁷ See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 202. Alasdair MacIntyre also writes about the importance of participating in “social networks of giving and receiving” for realizing our own good; see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1999), chaps. 9–11.

⁸ Den Uyl and Rasmussen clearly do not share MacIntyre’s view that our modern liberal political and economic order poses a significant threat to the life of virtue; see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007 [1981]), chaps. 17–18. This is a disagreement that I cannot take up here.

and his or her good such that we wish and pursue good for our friend for his or her own sake, but where this is at the same time pursuing good for ourselves since our friend's good is our good. This we-identification does not negate the individual person, but rather it involves a *communion* (etymologically, a *with*-union), which implies a unity or bond across different individuals.

What is also missing in the above justifications for other-regarding concern is an account of how others are “worthy of being valued”—that is, loved, respected, revered, etc.—for their own sake, which would cut against Den Uyl and Rasmussen's claim that what is “worthy of being valued” is “ultimately an individual human being's own self-perfection,” which, as we have seen, is also said to be “the source of all norms.” Indeed, it is noteworthy that they describe the good of friendship as being based on *our own* potentialities, rather than on the *friend's* love-worthiness. In my view, both of these contribute to the good of friendship in one's life.

In order to understand better this and the general concern about recognizing things beyond one's own self-perfection that are “worthy of being valued” for their own sake (but which, in so valuing them, also contribute to self-perfection), I think it is helpful to appeal to Charles Taylor's account of “constitutive goods.”⁹ A constitutive good is a fundamental object of “strong evaluation”: it is good not merely in virtue of being desired, but rather as something that we judge we *ought* to desire or show concern for. In other words, it places normative demands upon us: for example, demands of love, respect, admiration, awe, or reverence, in virtue of being love-worthy, respect-worthy, admiration-worthy, awe-worthy, or reverence-worthy.

Constitutive goods, as *fundamental* objects of strong evaluation, have two key functions in the ethical life. First, as the name suggests, constitutive goods *constitute* the goods (which Taylor calls “life goods”) that make up for us “the good life,” that is, a normatively higher, more fulfilling mode of life. For instance, if we regard some conception of our own human potential as a constitutive good—that is,

⁹ See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pt. 1, esp. chaps. 1 and 4. It should be noted that on one occasion in the text Den Uyl and Rasmussen also speak of “constitutive goods,” but they understand this concept differently from Taylor. For them, constitutive goods are the various goods that make up a flourishing human life, that is, the good life (p. 42). Taylor would call these “life goods,” which are derivative from “constitutive goods,” as I discuss in the next paragraph.

as demanding respect and admiration—then we can see how this constitutes certain goods that make up the good life: namely, the virtues of character and intellect whereby we fulfill this human potential. Den Uyl and Rasmussen seem to recognize a constitutive good in this domain but not in others. However, we can (and I think should) recognize other human beings as constitutive goods—that is, as love-worthy, respect-worthy, or reverence-worthy due to the dignity or sanctity of human life—and so as constituting certain goods that define for us the good life: namely, other-regarding virtues such as friendship, justice, generosity, loyalty, etc. We also can (and I think should) regard the natural world as a constitutive good—that is, as being worthy of awe, wonder, and respect due to its beauty, grandeur, intricateness, etc.—and so as constituting certain goods that define for us the good life: namely, the virtues related to care and respect for the natural world and to proper awe and wonder. Likewise, if we are theists, then we will regard God as a constitutive good—that is, as being worthy of our love, reverence, and allegiance due to God’s perfect goodness, love, wisdom, etc.—and so as constituting certain goods that define for us the good life: namely, virtues such as piety, humility, and loving devotion. In each of these cases we can see how the proper responsiveness to a constitutive good contributes to a normatively higher, more fulfilling mode of life, that is, the good life. This proper responsiveness will also require proper self-formation (*Bildung*).¹⁰ The key point to see here, though, is how our own self-perfection, on this account, cannot be “the source of all norms” since it includes concerns for things that are “worthy of being valued” beyond this self-perfection, where their value is not merely derivative upon the value of self-perfection. In fact, the relationship goes the other way, as constitutive goods constitute the goods that define for us the good life.

In addition to this constitutive function of constitutive goods, there is a second function, namely, the *motivational* function. As Taylor puts it, constitutive goods are “moral sources,” that is, they are

¹⁰ John McDowell, who explores this idea of *Bildung* from an Aristotelian perspective and shares a lot in common philosophically with Taylor, writes: “The ethical is a domain of rational requirements, which are there in any case, whether or not we are responsive to them. We are alerted to these demands by acquiring appropriate conceptual capacities. When a decent upbringing initiates us into the relevant way of thinking, our eyes are opened to the very existence of this tract of the space of reasons”; see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 82.

“something the love [or respect] of which empowers us to do and be good.”¹¹ In other words, when we are properly responsive to some constitutive good (e.g., our own human potential, other human beings, the natural world, or God) and see it as worthy of respect, reverence, admiration, love, etc., then this will motivate us to realize the goods it constitutes and which contribute to defining for us a normatively higher, more fulfilling mode of life.

This account of constitutive goods can also help to address the concern that Den Uyl and Rasmussen raise in the “Afterword” about “Big Morality.” Their concern has to do with whether there is something too tame about an ethical perspective founded solely on the concept of “human flourishing,” as it does not seem able to account for the extremes of good (e.g., Jesus and Socrates) and evil (e.g., Hitler and Stalin), since “promoting [or attaining] flourishing” does not seem to capture the goodness of extreme good and “impeding flourishing” does not seem to capture the badness of extreme evil.¹² Den Uyl and Rasmussen write: “The problem of big morality thus resurrects the old charge leveled against eudaimonistic ethical theories that, by not appreciating the other and by being too focused upon the self, they are too narrow” (p. 320). Their solution is to suggest that the key difference is made by the great value of individuality: extreme evil shows “an utter and thorough disregard of individuality,” whereas in cases of extreme goodness “it is almost a hyper form of individuality that is displayed and impresses us. The acts of heroism, generosity, excellence, charity, and the like are admired because the agents of these acts stand out *so* distinctly as individuals” (pp. 331–32).

My own view is that there is something too tame or overly flattening about an ethical perspective founded solely on the concept of human flourishing. The language of “flourishing” has a biological and indeed botanical connotation, given its etymological connection to “flowering.” And so we are encouraged to see human flourishing as being on par with the flourishing of a dog or an apple tree. However, in light of this, I think we may be better off without the language of flourishing in Aristotelian ethics. As Aristotle himself says, “we regard

¹¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 93.

¹² Raimond Gaita would second the concern raised here; see his *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 1998), chap. 1 (“Goodness Beyond Virtue”) and chap. 2 (“Evil Beyond Vice”).

neither ox, nor horse, nor any other kind of animal as happy [i.e., *eudaimon*]; for none of them can share in this sort of [noble] activity.”¹³ In other words, there is a major disanalogy between the good life for human beings and the good life for a dog or an apple tree. The good life for human beings, as I have suggested, should be understood as a matter of strong evaluation: that is, it is a normatively higher, more fulfilling mode of life, which involves “noble activity” and makes normative demands upon us. It is this strong evaluative dimension that we need in order to make sense of “big morality,” that is, the extremes of good and evil. We need strong evaluative categories such as the noble (or the respect-worthy), and indeed, I think also the sacred (or the reverence-worthy). For instance, the experience of great evil often involves a sense that something sacred (or reverence-worthy)—for example, human life or human sexuality—has been violated. Likewise, the experience of some great good often involves a sense of nobility or saintliness.

In either case, I don’t think an appeal to “individuality” alone is sufficient. We need to ask: Individuality of *what*? An individual car is replaceable in a way that an individual human life is not. We also need to ask: Why should *someone else’s* individuality matter to me? Additionally, why am I responsible for making something of *my* individuality? What is required is an account of how other human beings and our own human potential are constitutive goods, that is, respect-worthy, reverence-worthy, love-worthy, etc., such that they constitute certain goods (viz., different kinds of virtues) that define for us the good life. It is through failure to be properly responsive to such constitutive goods (e.g., the dignity or sanctity of human life) that great evil can occur, and it is through proper responsiveness to them that great good is achieved. Indeed, as aforementioned, when we are properly responsive to a constitutive good, we will be motivated to achieve the goods that it constitutes. Noble and saintly persons are those who are best responsive to constitutive goods, and achieving this is a matter of proper self-formation.

¹³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.9, 1099b30–32; see also *ibid.*, X.8, 1178b24–34. On Aristotle’s idea of acting for the sake of the noble, see *ibid.*, II.3, 1104b29–35; II.4, 1105a29–34; III.7, 1115b11–12; and IV.1, 1120a22–23.

