Perfectionist ethical theories ground moral demands in the perfection or full realization of one’s essential nature.¹ Perfectionism has a rich history. Perfectionist ideas can be found in Aristotle, the Stoics, Maimonides, Aquinas, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, von Humboldt, J. S. Mill, F. H. Bradley, T. H. Green, Nietzsche, and Marx, among others. Though individual perfectionist figures have received significant attention, their perfectionism has not always enjoyed the same focus. Perfectionism has not been studied thoroughly as a distinctive tradition, and it remains a neglected option in contemporary moral and political philosophy.² This neglect may reflect doubts about the justification, content, and implications of perfectionist ideals.

Different conceptions of perfectionism result from different conceptions of human nature. Some perfectionists and their critics understand human nature as a biological kind. However, that conception of perfectionism gives rise to legitimate foundational doubts about whether there is anything substantive that is essential to human nature and whether, if there is, it would be normatively compelling. A different strand in the perfectionist tradition grounds perfectionist ideals in a normative conception of human nature as involving personal-ity or agency. Normative perfectionism is a distinctive conception within

¹ An earlier version of this material was presented at Sheffield University as part of a 2014 conference on Post-Kantian Perfectionism; a 2015 University of Pennsylvania conference on Ancient and Modern Conceptions of Happiness; Ohio and St. Louis Universities; a 2016 UCSD conference, Perfectionism: Ancient and Modern; the Chinese University of Hong Kong; and the 2019 Pacific Division Meetings of the APA. I would like to thank members of those audiences and especially Karl Ameriks, Anne Margaret Baxley, Chris Bennett, Alyssa Bernstein, Gwen Bradford, Rosalind Chaplin, Andrew Chitty, Gordon Finlayson, Dan Haybron, Tom Hurka, Terence Irwin, David James, Jan Kandyli, Jonathan Knutzen, Charlie Kurth, Hon Lam Li, Kathryn Lindeman, Hendrik Lorenz, J. P. Messina, Susan Sauvë Meyer, Doug Moggach, Stephen Palmquist, Andrew Payne, Robert Stern, John Škorpiski, Alan Thomas, and Eric Watkins for helpful comments and input. Revisions benefited from the input of three anonymous readers. Special thanks go to Don Rutherford, with whom I co-taught a graduate seminar on ancient and modern perfectionism in 2016 and from whom I have learned much about the perfectionist tradition.

² An important exception to this general neglect is Thomas Hurka, Perfectionism (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Though Hurka’s primary focus is systematic, he makes a number of interesting historical claims about the perfectionist tradition.
the perfectionist tradition, and it is arguably more robust normatively than conceptions appealing to a biological conception of human nature. Aristotle, J.S. Mill, and T.H. Green are normative perfectionists and make distinctive contributions to that tradition.3

We can begin to redress the neglect of the perfectionist tradition by reconstructing and assessing the essentials of this normative perfectionist tradition. Part of that task involves engaging Kantian doubts about perfectionism. Kant was a critic of perfectionism, and it is worth considering the prospects of normative perfectionism to address his concerns.4 Kant makes two kinds of criticism of perfectionism that deserve our attention. First, there is his worry, especially in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, that the perfectionist and eudaimonist traditions must be heteronomous and cannot express requirements of practical reason. Grounding moral requirements in perfectionist ideals, Kant claims, generates *hypothetical, rather than categorical, imperatives*. Second, there is Kant’s claim in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that we must accept a *moral asymmetry* in which we aim at our own perfection but at the happiness, rather than the perfection, of others. In defense of this asymmetry, he argues that perfecting another subverts the other’s status as a rational agent.

I want to explore the historical and systematic resources of normative perfectionism to address these worries. First, insofar as the normative perfectionist grounds perfectionist ideals in the normative category of personality or agency, rather than a biological category of humanity, it can represent perfectionist demands as categorical imperatives. This is clearest in Green, who self-consciously tries to synthesize Greek and Kantian ethical traditions. Second, the importance of autonomy in normative perfection explains why there are special constraints on how we can promote the perfection of another. This perfectionist recognition of Kantian concerns is nicely illustrated in Green’s brand of liberalism and in Mill’s defense of autonomy and skepticism about paternalism.

Seeing how normative perfectionism can answer these Kantian worries by appeal to moral personality paves the way for seeing perfectionist strands in Kant’s own ethical theory. Despite his doubts about other forms of perfectionism, Kant appeals to moral personality as both ground and content of moral requirements, which is reflected in the Universality and Humanity formulations of the Categorical Imperative. This allows us to identify a possible perfectionist reading of Kant’s own ethical theory.

However, because the normative perfectionist, like Kant, grounds moral requirements in rational nature, she too must face the worry that Kantians face about the incompleteness of the appeal to rational nature. Hegelians and others have complained that Kant’s appeal to rational nature to ground moral requirements is formal and empty. Likewise, if we conceive of moral personality, as the normative perfectionists do, in terms of reasons-responsiveness, we may worry that the perfectionist appeal to rational nature must be incomplete and requires supplementation with a list of objective goods or reasons that can guide rational choice. A radical version of the incompleteness worry treats the appeal to rational nature as empty and without content. By contrast, a moderate version of the incompleteness worry grants that the appeal to rational nature has content but insists that it provides incomplete ethical guidance unless supplemented by a list of non-perfectionist goods or reasons. However, the appeal to rational nature has content, which means that it is the moderate version of the incompleteness worry that we need to take seriously. I explore more and less concessive perfectionist replies that assign perfectionist elements smaller and larger roles within the personal good. Though I am sympathetic with the less concessive position staked out by pure

3. I focus on Aristotle, Mill, and Green as exemplars of normative perfectionism both because their normative perfectionism is reasonably clear and because I know them best, not because I assume that they are the only normative perfectionists.

perfectionist theories, even the more concessive replies by mixed theories assign perfectionist ideals an important role. Defending these claims takes the normative perfectionist beyond explicit Kantian resources, but provides a defense of the importance of rational nature that both the normative perfectionist and the Kantian need.

Finally, it’s worth noting the resources of normative perfectionism to explain the rational authority of its demands. Like Kant, the normative perfectionist grounds normative demands in our nature as rational agents, which promises to defend the rationalist claim that agents have categorical reasons to satisfy perfectionist demands.

This discussion of normative perfectionism addresses the intersection of a normative perfectionist tradition that includes Aristotle, Mill, and Green and the Kantian tradition. As such, it involves many moving parts, each of which is potentially quite complex. Even if the perfectionist reading of Aristotle is reasonably familiar, a perfectionist reading of Mill may seem heterodox, and Green’s ethics of self-realization is not familiar to many readers. Given the complexity of Kant’s own ethical theory, such a comparative study may seem misguided. However, it is possible to isolate the essentials of these two traditions without significant distortion for comparative purposes. The value of comparing the two traditions and assessing their differences compensates for the need to be selective in the coverage of each tradition, or so I shall argue. This comparative study is part of assessing the prospects of normative perfectionism.

1. The Essentials of Normative Perfectionism

Though the perfectionist tradition is heterogeneous, most perfectionist theories understand the fundamental ethical demand to be the realization and perfection of one’s nature. In this way, perfectionism rests on claims about human nature. Different perfectionist theories understand human nature and its perfection differently.

It is common to understand claims about human nature as involving a biological kind—human being. Aristotle defends a conception of eudaimonia or happiness that is a form of perfectionism by appeal to claims about the human function, and one might think that he understands the human function in biological terms. Thomas Hurka is a contemporary perfectionist who understands the perfectionist appeal to human nature as an appeal to a biological essence for human beings, grounding perfectionist goods such as knowledge, creativity, achievement, and athleticism in our biological essence. However, grounding perfectionist ideals in a biological conception of human nature is problematic in at least two ways.

First, on familiar conceptions of species membership, there is no substantive human essence. For instance, a common conception of species membership is reproductive closure or the capacity to interbreed. But the organisms linked by reproductive closure do not pick out a particular set of phenotypic traits or capacities as essential to human beings. Alternatively, species membership is sometimes understood in terms of common lineage with members of the same species all being organisms with a common ancestor who are sufficiently similar genetically. But common lineage does not pick out a particular set of phenotypic traits or capacities as essential to human beings.

Second, neither conception of Homo sapiens is likely to pick out all and only the capacities that we think of as distinctly valuable or normative. Admirable traits such as rationality, creativity, and sociality need not be possessed to a high degree by all human beings on reproductive closure or common lineage conceptions of our species.

Biological conceptions of human nature might eschew appeal to a substantive conception of species membership and instead appeal to characteristic activities of the species. However, the challenge is to identify valuable traits that have a biological basis. There are many

7. For one example of this approach, see Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001).
traits characteristic of humanity, such as deviousness, cruelty, and schadenfreude, which do not seem normatively significant. To avoid this problem, we might appeal instead to valuable or attractive human traits, such as cooperation, creativity, and friendship. But without some biological ground for selecting these traits, the resulting theory does not involve a biological conception of human nature, and the appeal to human nature seems to do no explanatory work.8

One possibility is to appeal to characteristic capacities and activities of the species that are the product of natural selection. Compliance with familiar other-regarding norms of cooperation, honesty, fidelity, fair play, and non-aggression is mutually beneficial, and so there is a case for thinking that these cooperative virtues might have been selected for genetically or culturally. But there are many traits that we have because they conferred selective advantage on our ancestors in hunter-gatherer tribes that it would be problematic to regard as good for us now or as providing us with reasons for action. For instance, there is some evidence that automatic affective discriminatory attitudes toward outsiders have a heritable basis in the amygdala or prefrontal cortex and likely proved to be adaptive traits for our ancestors who lived in small homogeneous tribal communities.9 But the biological basis of racism and xenophobia does not provide a normative ground for those traits. A history of selective advantage seems neither necessary nor sufficient for normative significance. If we insist on understanding human nature as a biological kind, the foundations of perfectionism appear problematic.

A more promising way to ground perfectionist ideals is by appeal to human nature understood as a normative kind, rather than as a biological kind. On this kind of view, perfectionist ideals are relative, not to our nature as human beings, but to our nature as persons or agents. Aristotle, Mill, and Green, I believe, are all normative perfectionists.10 Space constraints preclude reconstructions of the details of their ethical theories, but we can highlight some relevant aspects of their versions of normative perfectionism that bear on the articulation and defense of normative perfectionist essentials.

Aristotle. Like other Greek ethicists, Aristotle is a eudaimonist, treating the agent’s own eudaimonia or happiness as the central or foundational element in ethics.11 In the first book of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle identifies the final good with eudaimonia or happiness and recognizes three main formal constraints on eudaimonia—that it must be complete or lacking on nothing, that it must be suitable for the sort of beings we are, and that it must be comparatively stable and within our control.12 Eudaimonism implies perfectionism insofar as the content of eudaimonia is constrained by assumptions about human nature. Aristotle’s eudaimonism makes him a perfectionist insofar as he explicitly develops the suitability constraint on eudaimonia by appeal to the human function (NE 1.7). The function argument draws on the taxonomy of characteristic activities and souls in De Anima. Though sometimes interpreted in biological terms, that tax-

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In On Liberty, he defends individual rights to basic liberties, but he tells us that these individual rights have a utilitarian foundation based on "utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (OL I ii; CW XVIII 224). This progressive conception of happiness is reflected in the distinction between higher and lower pleasures in Utilitarianism, in which he argues that a life exercising one's rational and deliberative capacities — Socrates dissatisfied — is discontuously better than a life containing only lower pleasures — the pig or fool satisfied (U II 3–6; CW 210–12). A perfectionist reading of the higher pleasures doctrine receives further support from the dignity passage, in which Mill explains the preference of competent judges for higher pleasures by appeal to their sense of the dignity of a life of complex and higher activities (U II 6; CW X 212). Here, Mill claims that it is the perception of the value of these activities that explains the categorical preferences of competent judges. A perfectionist commitment to self-realization informs On Liberty's defense of individual autonomy and experimentation in lifestyle as necessary and important aspects of self-development. This is a normative conception of human nature and happiness, because it depends on our capacities for self-government that Mill says are requisite for our being responsible and, hence, moral agents (A System of Logic VI.ii.3; CW 839–42). It is these capacities that mark us as progressive beings. Mill's appeals to these claims about human nature and happiness make him a normative perfectionist, and his perfectionist conception of happiness shapes a great deal of what is distinctive in his contributions to the utilitarian and liberal traditions.15

Green. In the Prolegomena to Ethics, Green aims to synthesize the best elements in ancient and modern ethical traditions, in particular Aristotelian and Kantian claims.16 He criticizes hedonist conceptions

13. I assume a comprehensive conception of eudaimonia best captures the first nine books of the Nicomachean Ethics, even if book X introduces an alternative strict intellectualist conception.

14. The definitive edition of Mill's writings is Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, 33 volumes, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965–91) (CW). To facilitate common reference among readers using different editions of Mill's most popular works — for instance, Utilitarianism (U) and On Liberty (OL) — I will refer to those works using natural divisions in his texts, such as chapter, section, and/or paragraph. But I will also refer to Mill's works using volume and page number in his Collected Works.
of desire, the will, and the good. Following Butler and Kant, he argues that agents have capacities for practical reason that allow them to distinguish between the intensity and authority of desire, to deliberate about their ends, and to regulate their actions according to these deliberations. In doing so, he explicitly criticizes Kant’s appeal to transcendental freedom and defends a compatibilist understanding of the will. Green understands acting on superior principles in terms of acting on a conception of one’s own overall good and interprets the agent’s own good in terms of self-realization. Because the demand for self-realization is grounded in features of moral personality or agency, Green regards its dictates as categorical, rather than hypothetical, imperatives. Proper self-realization requires a constitutive concern for others that should be genuinely cosmopolitan in character, involving respect for all other rational agents. Hence, Green accepts Kant’s Humanity Formula of the Categorical Imperative, but he understands these moral demands as grounded in self-realization.17

In all three cases, but most clearly in Green, perfectionist ideals are grounded in a conception of moral personality, understood in Butlerian terms as the capacity to distinguish between the power and authority of passion and desire (Sermons II 14).18 This involves capacities to distinguish oneself from one’s desires, frame the question of what one ought to do, deliberate about the merits of alternatives, and regulate one’s actions in accordance with one’s deliberations. Moral personality, on this view, involves a form of reasons-responsiveness.

Interestingly, Green thinks that moral personality or agency involves just one form of reasons-responsiveness. He thinks that we are rational agents engaged in both thought and action. Rational agency requires moral responsibility, which requires one form of reasons-responsiveness. But rational agency also requires epistemic responsibility, which requires a parallel form of reasons-responsiveness (PE §§84, 120, 125).19 To be epistemically responsible, one must be self-conscious and able to distinguish appearance and fact, reason about the credentials of one’s appearances, and regulate one’s beliefs and epistemic behavior in accordance with this reasoning. Epistemic and moral responsibility are both parts of agency or personality, and so a unified conception of agency requires both forms of reasons-responsiveness.

These are the essentials of normative perfectionism, and there are many different ways of developing these essentials, reflected, for instance, in some of the differences one finds among Aristotle, Mill, and Green. In effect, there are different choice points in the architecture of normative perfectionism. Some of those choice points are not directly relevant to the comparative agenda in this essay. However, three such choice points deserve brief discussion now and will be significant later.

First, perfectionism has often been understood as a claim about the good, typically about the personal good — that is, what in itself makes someone’s life better for his or her own sake. But it could also be understood as a claim about practical reason — that is, what constrains and regulates an agent’s reasons for action. Perfectionism might be understood as concerning both the good and practical reason if we accept a broadly teleological conception of practical reason. This seems to be a point of normative architecture on which Aristotle, Mill, and Green all agree. They offer perfectionist conceptions of the personal good that informs their conceptions of practical reason.

Second, perfectionism might be understood in agent-relative or in agent-neutral terms. Aristotle and Green are perfectionist eudaimonists, who understand the fundamental perfectionist demand to be for the agent to promote her own good. Their perfectionism takes a

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19. This reverses Green’s actual order of exposition, since he introduces the role of self-consciousness in epistemic responsibility at the end of Book I (PE §§84; cf. §§120, 125), which sets the stage for his introduction of self-consciousness in moral responsibility in Book II (PE §§85–86, 92, 96, 103, 107, 220).
fundamentally egocentric or agent-relative form. By contrast, Mill is a perfectionist utilitarian, who understands the fundamental perfectionist demand to be for the agent to promote the general happiness, understood in terms of the nature of progressive beings. This is an agent-neutral conception of perfectionism. This is an important difference in normative architecture. But it may turn out to be substantively less important than it first appears if the eudaimonist recognizes the common good as a constitutive commitment of self-realization, as both Aristotle and Green do, and the utilitarian recognizes the importance of various forms of partiality in the promotion of human perfection, as Mill does.

Third, cutting across the distinction between egocentric and impartial concern is a distinction in how one should be oriented toward the value of rational nature, whether one’s own or another’s. One option is to promote rational nature overall, whether within a life or across lives; another option is to honor it on each occasion. Honoring rational nature may require that one forego promoting it if the only or best way to promote rational nature would require failing to honor it on a particular occasion. One could treat the value of rational nature symmetrically in intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts, either promoting or honoring it both within lives and across lives. Alternatively, one could treat rational nature asymmetrically in intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts, for instance, promoting it within lives but honoring it across lives. Presumably, any such asymmetrical treatment of rational nature requires some kind of special rationale or justification. Normative perfectionism, as such, might remain agnostic about whether rational nature should be promoted or honored, treating this issue as a choice point within normative perfectionism.

However, normative perfectionists have tended to favor promoting rational nature, at least intrapersonally. After all, the full realization of one’s essential nature seems to involve its maximal pursuit and promotion. For instance, consider two different anti-paternalism principles and their attitude toward selling oneself into slavery. This involves the use of one’s normative powers to abdicate permanently one’s future use of those normative powers. Honoring an agent’s normative powers would require permitting self-slavery, but promoting an agent’s normative powers would permit a policy forbidding self-slavery. As we will see in §3, Mill discusses this issue (OL V 11; CW XVIII 299) and endorses the prohibition on self-slavery, claiming that this is a principled exception to the usual prohibition on paternalism, because the very same values that normally speak against paternalism here speak in favor of it. Here, Mill advocates promoting rational nature as part of its full realization, at least intrapersonally.

Given this brief summary of the essentials of normative perfectionism, we are in a position to explore how that doctrine can respond to worries about the justification, content, and implications of perfectionism, especially as we encounter those doubts within the Kantian ethical tradition.

2. Are Perfectionist Ideals Requirements of Reason?

We might begin with Kant’s doubts about the ground or justification of perfectionist ideals. Famously, he thinks that all previous moral philosophies are heteronomous insofar as they base morality on human nature, sentiment, inclination, interest, or perfection (G 4: 432–33).


As such, such conceptions generate only hypothetical, not categorical, imperatives:

Wherever an object of the will has to be laid down on the basis for prescribing the rule that determines the will, there the rule is none other than heteronomy; the imperative is conditional, namely: if or because one wills the object, one ought to act in such or such a way; hence it can never command morally, that is, categorically. Whether the object determines the will by means of inclination, as in the principle of one’s own happiness, or by means of reason directed to objects of our possible volition in general, as in the principle of perfection, the will never determines itself immediately [... [G 4: 444]

Though Kant distinguishes happiness and perfection as ends here and elsewhere (G 4: 442–43; KpV 5: 39–41), it is significant that his criticism treats them together. Moreover, some of his actual and potential eudaimonist targets provide perfectionist conceptions of happiness. This is clearly true of both Aristotle, whom Kant does not discuss, and the Stoics, whom he does. Indeed, as long as the eudaimonist grounds his conception of eudaimonia in human nature, he is a perfectionist, and as long as he grounds his conception of eudaimonia in an agent’s rational nature as an agent, he is a normative perfectionist.

Kant’s discussion of eudaimonism focuses on the Epicureans and Stoics, curiously omitting Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He is critical of eudaimonist theories for identifying virtue and happiness and consequently treating morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives (G 4: 425, 441–45; KpV 5: 20–28, 35–36, 111–12). Insofar as normative perfectionists base morality on a conception of a person’s good or happiness, as Aristotle, Mill, and Green do in different ways, these perfectionist theories should also be guilty of conceiving morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives.

Kant conceives of happiness as consisting in the pleasure attendant to the satisfaction of desire, and this influences his view about empirical motivation, which he regards as prudential and ultimately hedonistic, insofar as inclination aims at pleasure (KpV 5: 21–23). This helps explain his concerns about both Epicureanism and Stoicism. Kant thinks that both the Epicureans and Stoics identify virtue and happiness, but that they recognize different explanatory asymmetries between these concepts. He regards the Epicureans as explaining virtue in terms of happiness, hedonistically conceived. So he understands them as defending virtue as instrumentally valuable for producing pleasure and treating moral requirements as hypothetical imperatives. By contrast, he understands the Stoics as explaining happiness in terms of virtue, which he regards as an improvement on the Epicurean view (KpV 5: 111–12). However, he understands the Stoics as identifying happiness with the pleasurable consciousness of virtuous action, and so he thinks the Stoics still mistakenly identify rational and empirical concepts.

Though Kant’s understanding of Epicurean ethics is largely correct, his understanding of Stoic ethics is mistaken. The Stoics identify happiness with virtue, understood as the expression of our rational nature (DL vii 84–89; Fin iii 11, 20–21, 26–28). In identifying virtue and happiness, they insist that virtue is sufficient for happiness and deny that fortunate outcomes and circumstances are genuine goods, treating them as preferred indifferents (DL vii 102–108; Fin iii 53–54, iv 20, 69).

22. For a non-hedonistic interpretation of Kant’s conception of happiness, see Andrews Reath, “Hedonism, Heteronomy, and Kant’s Principle of Happiness” Pacific Philosophical Quarterly 70 (1989): 42–72. Reath reads Kant as understanding happiness in terms of the satisfaction of desire, but I don’t think that this does justice to Kant’s insistence that desire aims at pleasure. In any case, the resolution of this debate would not much affect the merits of Kant’s own conception of happiness or his understanding of Greek conceptions, as both hedonistic and desire-satisfaction conceptions of happiness represent demands of prudence as hypothetical imperatives.

While the Stoics may believe that the virtuous person will experience pleasure in the course of practicing virtue, this is a by-product of virtue and not to be confused with it (DL vii 86; Fin iii 17). The Stoics identify happiness with virtue, conceived as a life realizing one’s rational nature, not with pleasurable consciousness of one’s virtue. It is Kant’s own hedonistic conception of happiness that leads him to misunderstand Stoic happiness.

Kant’s criticisms of a morality of happiness reflect mistaken assumptions about the hedonistic character of happiness. Though the Epicureans were hedonists about happiness, the Stoics were not. Plato and Aristotle, whom he does not discuss, also reject hedonism. Unlike the Stoics, they do not identify happiness and virtue, denying that virtue is sufficient for happiness, because they recognize the value of externals. However, like the Stoics, they regard virtue as the controlling element of happiness, such that one is always better off choosing virtue, whatever its opportunity costs (Republic II, esp. 357b–367e; NE I.7–I.13). Also, like the Stoics, they think that virtue normally affords pleasure, so that pleasure is a typical by-product of virtue (Philebus 63e3–6, Laws 662b1–663d5, 734b8–e1; NE 1153b15–18, 1174b20–33, 1176a16–19). This means that Kant’s criticisms of perfectionist eudaimonism rest on a mistaken understanding of their conceptions of happiness, reflecting Kant’s own hedonistic conception of happiness.

Though eudaimonists can be perfectionists, Kant distinguishes perfectionism and eudaimonism, associating perfectionism with Leibniz and Wolff (G 4: 442–43; KpV 5: 40–41). When he distinguishes them, he suggests that perfectionism involves a lesser mistake than eudaimonism, but a mistake nonetheless (G 4: 443; KpV 5: 40–41). Kant claims that a perfection is a “material principle” external to the agent’s will and so cannot generate categorical imperatives (G 4: 444; KpV 5: 41).

His exact understanding of the perfectionisms of Leibniz and Wolff is unclear. Leibniz’s ethical writings are scattered and they mix perfectionism and eudaimonism:

Wisdom is nothing other than the science of the happiness or perfection of human beings; and the most general and architectonic of this knowledge is to show how human beings can strive for that perfection of which they are capable by nature. This should not be interpreted as if a highest degree of human perfection can never be attained, since the nature of happiness, rather, is never to be impeded in further progress to more or greater goods.

Perfection involves unity amid diversity, and God represents absolute perfection. For Leibniz, an agent’s perfection is explained in terms of her acting in accordance with the same principle that governs God’s will — the realization in understanding and action of the greatest possible objective harmony or perfection. Wolff also mixes perfectionism and eudaimonism:

The law of nature is the means by which man attains the happiness of which he is capable through his natural powers in this life. Now, because the law of nature requires the perfection of us and our condition and because this perfection is the final goal of all free action, man, wanting the happiness he can achieve through his natural powers

26. G.W. Leibniz, Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe, Reihe 6, Band 4, 975, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1999) [Complete Writings and Letters, series 6, vol. 4, Akademie page 975]. Thanks to Don Rutherdale, who brought this passage to my attention and provided a translation.
in this life, must set as the final goal of all his free actions the perfection of his inner and outer conditions.\textsuperscript{28}

Also like Leibniz, Wolff regards perfection as a kind of unity — “agreement of the manifold” — and treats human perfection as a will that maximizes internal and external harmony.\textsuperscript{29} Both Leibniz and Wolff seem to conceive of perfection in terms of metaphysical relations of order, harmony, and agreement. Kant objects to these perfectionist claims, claiming that they make morality dependent on a material principle, which renders morality heteronomous. The worry seems to be about making morality conditional on an ideal that is external to rational agency itself.

Kant may see the perfectionisms of Leibniz and Wolff as making morality depend on an objectionable material principle, because of the role they give to pleasure. For instance, Leibniz recognizes the end as happiness, which he treats as enduring joy or pleasure: “In morals I set up our happiness [felicitas] as an end; this I define as a state of enduring joy [laetitia]. Joy I define as an extraordinary predominance of pleasure [voluptas] ....”\textsuperscript{30} However, the context of this passage suggests the more Stoic conception of happiness in which pleasure is understood as consequential on and a by-product of the perfection of one’s rational nature. After identifying perfection with a kind of harmony, Leibniz claims that from this “sense of harmony, that is, observation of agreement [consensus] might bring forth pleasure.” And after the apparent commitment to hedonism (quoted above), he insists that “pleasure is the sensation of perfection.” Elsewhere, Leibniz makes a similar perfectionist claim about pleasure, claiming that “pleasure is nothing other than the feeling of an increase in perfection.”\textsuperscript{31} On this reading, pleasure is consequential on virtue, understood as the expression of one’s rational nature, not the ground of it.

Wolff is even clearer that happiness, which he understands in terms of pleasure, is consequential on the highest good, which he understands to consist in perfection:

[T]he highest good of man or his blessedness is rightly explained as an unhindered progress to greater perfections. … He who progresses unhampered from one perfection to another and avoids imperfection, and is aware of this, has an intuitive awareness of perfection. Intuitive knowledge of perfection affords pleasure or enjoyment; so he has continuous pleasure. So the highest good or blessedness of man is connected with happiness.\textsuperscript{32}

Because Leibniz and Wolff treat pleasure as consequential on the perception of perfection and hence as a by-product rather than ground of duty, the importance they attach to pleasure should not render their views heteronomous.

However, Kant may think it is their form of perfectionism, rather than any apparent commitment to hedonism, that renders their views heteronomous. For he sees them as perfectionists who conceive of perfection as a metaphysical principle concerned with unity and harmony in nature that determines the content of the rational will (\textit{Lectures Mrongovius} 29: 622). He regards this as making the rational will dependent on something other than itself, which results in heteronomy. Only moral perfection — understood as the full realization of one’s capacities in rational willing — can serve as the ground of duty (\textit{Lectures Collins} 27: 265–66, 470).

Here, Kant assumes both that Leibniz and Wolff conceive of perfection as a metaphysical principle of unity, order, or fittingness and


\textsuperscript{29} Wolff, \textit{Reasonable Thoughts}, 341. Also see Christian Wolff, \textit{German Metaphysics, Reasonable Thoughts about God, the World, and the Human Soul}, §157, quoted in Schneewind, 349.

\textsuperscript{30} Leibniz’s letter to Wolff of 18 May 1715 in \textit{Philosophical Essays}.


\textsuperscript{32} Wolff, \textit{Reasonable Thoughts}, 338.
that a rational will cannot be determined by any principles—goods or reasons—outside itself, no matter how objective these principles are. Later, in §5, we will examine how much ethical content rational agency itself can provide without appeal to objective goods or external reasons. If the normative perfectionist must eschew any appeal to principles external to moral personality itself, Leibniz and Wolff might not be normative perfectionists. 33

But Green is a normative perfectionist who bases morality on the very capacities for reasons-responsiveness that make us agents, which allows him to meet Kant’s strictures on categorical requirements. Because Green sees himself as preserving what is defensible in Kantian ethics and reconciling it with Greek eudaimonism, it is no surprise that he is clearest about how the perfectionist can recognize categorical imperatives:

At the same time, because it [self-realization] is the fulfillment of himself [as an agent], of that which he has in him to be, it will excite an interest in him like no other interest, different in kind from any of his desires and aversions except such as are derived from it. It will be an interest as in an object conceived to be of unconditional value; one of which the value does not depend on any desire that the individual may at any time feel for it or for anything else, or on any pleasure that … he may experience …. [T]he desire for the object will be founded on a conception of its desirableness as the fulfillment of the capabilities of which a man is conscious in being conscious of

33. On one reading, Leibniz and Wolff are metaphysical, rather than normative, perfectionists, because they conceive of perfection as a metaphysical principle of unity, order, or fittingness, rather than as a normative principle of moral personality or rational agency. This would make their perfectionisms in some ways more akin to the rational intuitionist tradition that includes Samuel Clarke, John Balguy, and Richard Price. For discussion, see Terence Irwin, The Development of Ethics, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007–09), vol. II, ch. 43 and Stefano Bacin, “Rationalism and Perfectionism” in The Cambridge History of Moral Philosophy.

34. Thanks to Rosalind Chaplin for drawing this passage to my attention.

himself …. [Self-realization] will express itself in [the] imposition … of rules requiring something to be done irrespectively of any inclination to do it, irrespectively of any desired end to which it is a means, other than this end, which is desired because conceived as absolutely desirable. [PE §193]

Because the demands of self-realization depend only on those very capacities that make one an agent and do not depend on conditions extraneous to rational agency, they are categorical, rather than hypothetical, imperatives.

We might consider how Green’s conception of normative perfectionism can respond to a dilemma that Kant poses for the perfectionist in the Preface to the first edition of Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason. 34 After rejecting attempts to ground duty in a hedonistic version of self-love, Kant considers two alternative grounds:

But then there are only two determining grounds left: one that is rational, namely one’s own perfection; and another that is empirical, the happiness of others. Now, if by the first they do not already understand moral perfection, which can only be one thing (namely a will unconditionally obedient to the law), in which case they would however be defining in a circle, then they must mean the human being’s natural perfection inasmuch as it is capable of enhancement; and of this perfection there can be many aspects (such as skill in the arts and sciences, taste, physical agility, etc.). But these are always only conditionally good, that is, good only on condition that their use does not conflict with the moral law (which alone commands unconditionally); hence natural perfection cannot be, when made into an end, the principle of the concepts of duty. [Religion 6: 4n]
If perfection is understood as moral perfection, then grounding duty in perfection is circular. If perfection is understood as natural perfection, then grounding duty in perfection is heteronomous, because natural perfection is empirical and only conditionally good. But this is a false dilemma, because Kant’s alternative conceptualizations of perfection are not exhaustive. If perfection is understood as personality or rational nature, as the normative perfectionist conceives it, then perfection can ground the good or duty in a distinct normative concept that is not empirical in Kant’s sense. Indeed, as we will see shortly (§4 below), Kant’s own ethical theory gives rational nature an important role in grounding the Categorical Imperative. If so, Kant’s own ethical theory shows the possibility of a form of normative perfectionism that is neither circular nor empirical.

Kant’s critical target is the attempt to found morality on an empiricist conception of human nature that is prior to and independent of reason. But he has no reason to reject attempts to found morality on a normative conception of human nature that understands human nature in terms of rational agency or reason-responsiveness. But then it seems that Kant’s criticisms of perfectionism are misplaced when applied to normative perfectionism.

3. Can We Aim at the Perfection of Another?

Turning to issues about the content of perfectionist ideals, we might ask what conception of moral demands normative perfectionism supports. That is a large topic, the details of which are beyond the scope of this essay. But it seems fair to say that an agent has reason to develop her own normative competence, in which her agency consists, and to pursue a life that exercises her rational agency well in activities that embody deliberative control and reasons-responsiveness. For instance, we might agree with Aristotle and Mill that we have reason to pursue active lives that exercise our distinctive capacities for practical reason, rather than lives of mere contentment or animal satisfaction. Among other things, such a life will assign priority to higher pleasures. If normative perfectionism takes an agent-neutral form, as it does for Mill, or if it recognizes the common good as an important part of self-realization, as it does for Aristotle and Green, then an agent also has reason to promote the normative perfection of others.

This limited claim about the content of the perfectionist demand to perfect one’s own rational nature and that of others is sufficient to pose a conflict with Kant’s insistence in the Metaphysics of Morals on a fundamental self/other moral asymmetry in which we aim at our own perfection but at the happiness, rather than the perfection, of others. In the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant describes the basic ends that are our most fundamental duties as “one’s own perfection and the happiness of others” (MM 6: 385). In commenting on this asymmetry, Kant insists on distinguishing the ends of perfection and happiness and defends two claims. First, he claims that one can’t be under a duty to promote one’s own happiness, because each agent necessarily desires his own happiness, and one can only be under a duty if one can have contra-moral motivation (MM 6: 386; cf. KpV 5: 20, 37). Second, Kant claims that the duty of perfection is to make one’s free choices conform to duty, but while one can make one’s own choices freely conform to duty, one cannot make another’s choices freely conform to duty (MM 6: 386–87).

This self/other asymmetry is puzzling in several respects. First, it’s puzzling insofar as it grants that one’s most fundamental duty to oneself is to perfect oneself. It’s hard to see how that half of the asymmetry is compatible with his critique of perfectionism as yielding only hypothetical imperatives, unless he understands perfection in terms of personality or rational nature, as the normative perfectionist does. Second, we might question Kant’s grounds for recognizing this asymmetry between duties to self and to others. Here, we might question the first prong of Kant’s asymmetry, viz. that we can’t aim at our own happiness. However, it is the second prong that threatens perfe-

35. Even if all agents desire their own happiness, that doesn’t show that they desire only their own happiness. But then agents may well be motivated contrary to a duty to promote their own happiness. Moreover, we might wonder if it’s true that you can’t be obligated to do something you are disposed to do. I am obligated to nurture and care for my children even though I am disposed to do so. I would still be obligated to do so even if I couldn’t help but do so.
Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition

Formula of the Categorical Imperative: “Act so that you treat humanity [personality], whether in your own person or that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means” (G 4: 428–29). In commenting on the Humanity Formula, in both its application to duties to oneself and to others, Kant insists that our actions must not only not conflict with humanity but also harmonize with it (G 4: 430). In the case of duties to others, this requires making their ends our own:

Now, humanity might indeed subsist if no one contributed to the happiness of others but yet did not intentionally withdraw anything from it; but there is still only negative and not a positive agreement with humanity as an end in itself unless everyone tries, as far as he can, to further the ends of others. For, the ends of a subject who is an end in itself must as far as possible be also my ends, if that representation is to have its full effect in me. [G 4: 430]

But if another agent’s end is his own perfection, then the Humanity Formula implies that I should make his perfection my end. Yet, this conflicts with the self/other moral asymmetry Kant recognizes in the Metaphysics of Morals.

Interestingly, Green agrees with Kant, both in accepting the moral symmetry of the Humanity Formula of the Categorical Imperative, and its injunction to aim at the perfection of others, and in having doubts about whether one person can promote the perfectionist good of another directly. He expresses this second point in his essay "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract:"

[1] It is the business of the state, not indeed directly to promote moral goodness, for that, from the very nature of moral goodness, it cannot do, but to maintain the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible. [Works III 374]

In Green’s view, a liberal state not only has negative duties not to interfere with the basic liberties and opportunities of its citizens, but also

tionism, inasmuch as it claims that I cannot have a duty to aim at the perfection of others. Kant claims that your perfection consists in your making your free choices conform to duty, and I cannot do this for you:

So too, it is a contradiction for me to make another’s perfection my end and consider myself under an obligation to promote this. For the perfection of another human being, as a person, consists just in this: that he himself is able to set his end in accordance with his own conception of duty; and it is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty to do) something that only the other himself can do. [MM 6: 386]

Here, Kant associates perfection with moral personality, which he thinks explains why one cannot make another’s perfection one’s end. He seems to reason as follows.

1. Moral personality implies that an agent’s perfection consists in her freely choosing to conform to the moral law.
2. I can freely choose to conform to the moral law in my own actions.
3. Hence, I can aim at my own perfection.
4. I cannot make another freely choose to conform to the moral law; that would bypass that person’s agency.
5. Hence, I cannot aim at the perfection of another.

This argument begins from a premise about the connection between moral personality and freedom or autonomy and reaches an anti-perfectionist conclusion.

However, this moral asymmetry between self and others should be surprising in light of the moral symmetry contained in the Humanity

Perhaps in that case, I wouldn’t perceive it as a burden or constraint, but I would still have a duty to do so.
positive duties to its citizens to educate them, develop their capacities, and provide opportunities in social and political life that enable them to realize their capacities as agents.

Here, Green makes sense of Kant’s admonitions against aiming at the perfection of another by interpreting them as constraints on how we can promote the perfection of others. Given the role of one’s own agency in one’s perfection, I can’t perfect others any more than I can win competitive races for them. But just as I can help another to win a race by training with her, discussing strategy, and sharing nutritional tips, so too can I help others perfect themselves by helping them develop their normative competence and deliberating with them, identifying options, discussing the comparative merits of these options, and providing them with opportunities to exercise their normative powers. I can help others perfect themselves, just not in ways that bypass their agency. If so, (5) does not follow from (4).

In effect, this is to insist on the importance of autonomy in a normative perfectionist conception of the good and the ways in which autonomy constrains paternalistic intervention in the lives of others. In this connection, Mill’s perfectionist critique of conventional forms of paternalism in On Liberty and his defense of society’s role in developing the normative competence of individuals are instructive about how a normative perfectionist might try to accommodate what is defensible in Kant’s moral asymmetry.

Mill offers some consequentialist arguments that paternalistic license is liable to be unsuccessful, failing to advance the interests of those whose liberty is restricted. Some paternalism is in bad faith, designed to benefit those who restrict liberty, rather than those whose liberty is restricted (OL V 20–23; CW XVIII 306–10). Even when paternalism is in good faith, it is likely to miss its mark, because agents are generally more reliable judges of their own interests than others (OL IV 12; CW XVIII 283). Important as these arguments are, they provide no principled objection to paternalism — no objection to successful paternalism that genuinely advances the interests of the person whose liberty is restricted by paternalism. However, Mill’s perfectionist assumptions about happiness provide him with a more robust defense of autonomy and critique of paternalism. If a person’s happiness consists in the exercise of her normative powers and capacities for practical reason, then a principal ingredient of her own good must include opportunities for responsible choice and decision-making. Mill develops this perfectionist argument against paternalism in Chapter III of On Liberty:

He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold his deliberate decision. And these qualities he requires and exercises exactly in proportion as the part of his conduct which he determines according to his own judgment and feelings is a large one. It is possible that he might be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm’s way, without any of these things. But what will be his comparative worth as a human being? [OL III 4; CW XVIII 262–63]

Here, Mill’s normative conception of human nature explains why self-determination is an important part of a person’s good that paternalism necessarily undercuts.

However, Mill’s perfectionism does not endorse a blanket prohibition on paternalism. As we noted earlier, one exception to the usual prohibition on paternalism that Mill recognizes concerns a prohibition on selling oneself into slavery:

The ground for thus limiting his power of voluntarily disposing of his own lot is apparent, and is very clearly seen in this extreme case. ... [B]y selling himself for a slave,
he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it beyond that single act. He, therefore, defeats in his own case, the very purpose which is the justification of allowing him to dispose of himself. [OL V 11; CW XVIII 299]

Mill represents this as a principled exception to the usual prohibition on paternalism, because the very same values that normally speak against paternalism here speak in favor of it. If the usual reason we oppose paternalism is out of respect for the normative powers of the agent, then respect for those normative powers gives us special reason to prohibit the use of those normative powers to permanently undermine all future use of those same powers. This requires Mill to treat autonomy as a value to be promoted, rather than honored, and to recognize the permissibility of autonomy-enhancing forms of paternalism.36

It’s interesting to compare Mill’s extended critique of paternalism with Kant’s brief remarks in “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But it is of No Use in Practice,” where he describes a government that paternalistically coerces citizens to be happy as “the greatest despotism thinkable” (8: 290–91). Given Kant’s own subjective conception of happiness, his critique of paternalism targets what is wrong with aiming at another’s happiness in ways that bypass her own agency. What explains these reservations is respect for her autonomy and agency.37 But then the problematic character of paternalism would seem to give us reason to treat each other as moral persons. That’s a reason to aim at their perfection in a way that requires us to consult and engage, rather than bypass, their agency.

4. Kantian Perfectionism

The normative perfectionist who appeals to moral personality, understood in terms of rational nature and reasons-responsiveness, can answer Kant’s explicit concerns about perfectionism in a way that respects Kant’s own commitments to the connections among agency, rational nature, and moral requirements. This gives us reason to take seriously a normative perfectionist reading of Kantian essentials. As we noted, Kant’s critical target is the attempt to found morality on an empiricist conception of human nature that is prior to and independent of reason. But then he has no reason to reject attempts to found morality on a normative conception of human nature that understands human nature in terms of rational agency. Indeed, Kant himself clearly wants to found morality on an appeal to rational nature. 38 Though he frequently associates morality with humanity and even formulates the Categorical Imperative at one point in terms of respect for humanity, it is clear that he must understand humanity, in this context, in terms of moral personality and the ability to set and act for the sake of ends (G 4: 428, 430–31; KpV 5: 87).39 Kant treats rational nature as both ground and content of duty.

36. Mill notes that the reasons for allowing paternalism in “this extreme case” are “evidently of far wider application” (OL V 11; CW XVIII 300). That makes this principled exception to the usual prohibition on paternalism the tip of a normative iceberg. The contours of the iceberg are not immediately clear, though there is reason to see Mill as anticipating his later arguments in The Subjection of Women, in which he argues that Victorian marriage law with its requirements that women unilaterally surrender their normative powers, including their rights of self-ownership, is a form of slavery that cannot be defended by appeal to a woman’s consent to be married (CW XXI 270–71, 323).


38. This is a central theme in Irwin’s conception of Kant’s place in the history of ethics. See Irwin, The Development of Ethics, vol. III, chs. 66–72.

39. In the Religion, Kant recognizes three “predispositions” — to animality, humanity, and personality (6: 26–28). Animality involves instinctual self-love, humanity involves reflective self-love, and personality involves the capacity to be motivated by the moral law. He concludes: “If we consider the three dispositions … according to the conditions of their possibility, we find that the first does not have reason at its root at all; that the second is rooted in a reason which is indeed practical, but only as subservient to other incentives; and that the third alone is rooted in reason practical of itself, i.e. in reason legislating unconditionally” (6: 28). The Religion distinguishes humanity and personality, as the Groundwork does not. But the Religion is later than the Groundwork, and it seems that we must read the Groundwork as identifying humanity with personality, at least for purposes of the Humanity Formula of the Categorical Imperative, if only because the Universality and Humanity Formulas are only equivalent, as Kant believes (G 4: 436), if humanity is understood as...
Kant treats rational nature as the ground of duty when he insists that duty must be knowable a priori. This may seem strange. Surely, my duties—for instance, my contractual duty to sell you my widgets—depend upon empirical facts about what I have done, for instance that I signed a contract to sell you my widgets. Kant does not deny this. But he wants to make two claims. First, he thinks that my duties apply independently of my willingness to comply. I can’t defeat an ascription of an obligation simply by pleading disinclination. Second, he also thinks that the derivation of our duties has an important a priori element. It might help to think of deriving such duties via a syllogism.

1. It is a (pro tanto) duty to keep one’s voluntary agreements.
2. I voluntarily agreed to sell you my widgets.
3. Hence, it is my (pro tanto) duty to sell you my widgets.

The duty in (3) is derived from the major premise in (1) about fidelity plus the minor premise in (2) which is contingent and known empirically. Presumably, Kant’s claim is not that all duties, including duties like (3), are knowable a priori. His claim is that the grounds of our duties, including moral principles, such as (1), are knowable a priori.

Moral requirements, Kant thinks, must depend upon essential, rather than contingent and variable, features of agents, which explains why moral requirements must express categorical, rather than hypothetical, imperatives (G 4: 416, 425). If moral requirements are not to be based on variable empirical conditions, then they must be universal. To achieve this sort of universality, Kant requires an agent to be able to will her maxims or principles to be universal. His reasoning seems to be something like the following.

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What, if anything, would we will just insofar as we are rational beings? Kant thinks that insofar as one is rational one will make rational nature one’s end (G 4: 428). Happiness, he claims, can have only conditioned or instrumental value; rational nature alone has intrinsic value that does not depend on contingent and variable circumstances. So only rational nature could be valued regardless of one’s contingent circumstances and sentiments. Rational nature is the capacity to set ends and act for the sake of ends (G 4: 428, 430–31; KP 5: 87). But then a rational agent will value activities and lives that express rational nature. And Kant might argue that a rational agent has no other basis for finding anything intrinsically valuable. Moreover, if I choose rational agency solely insofar as I am a rational being—solely in virtue of the properties of rational agents as such—then it seems I choose to develop rational agency as such, and not the rational agency of this or that particular rational being (G 4: 427). If so, then F1 directs me to be concerned about other rational agents, as rational agents, for their own sakes. This is Kant’s second main formula of the Categorical Imperative—the Formula of Humanity.

F2: Treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of any rational agent, always as an end in itself and never merely as a means (G 4: 429).

This is how he gets from ground to content and from Universality to Humanity.

Perfectionist readings of Kant’s ethics are uncommon, partly because of his critique of perfectionism and related doctrines, such as eudaimonism. But we said that those criticisms do not get traction against normative perfectionism. If normative perfectionism is an ethical theory that grounds ethical requirements in moral personality or the reasons-responsive capacity to set and act for the sake of ends, then the essentials of Kant’s own ethical theory admit of a normative perfectionist reading. For he regards both the grounds and content of moral requirements as consisting in moral personality or rational nature.

This normative perfectionist reading of Kant’s ethics suggests some tentative and partial verdicts on the choice points within the architecture of normative perfectionism. It is common to read Kant as a deontologist for whom the right is prior to the good in various ways, but if we think of perfectionism as a teleological doctrine, we may be skeptical of perfectionist readings of Kant. But we have reason to question these orthodoxies.

First, the normative perfectionist reading of Kant stresses the way in which the requirements of the moral law depend on the unconditioned value of rational nature. It’s true that the moral law issues demands and requirements that constrain our pursuit of certain goods. This is clear, for instance, in Kant’s discussion the highest good. Kant discusses the highest good most fully in the Critique of Practical Reason (KP 5: 108–10), just prior to his criticisms of eudaimonism. He describes the highest good as a complex whole consisting of virtue and happiness in which the value of happiness is conditioned by virtue (KP 5: 109–11). On this conception, the highest good includes happiness, but happiness only has value when conditioned by and in proportion to virtue. So happiness is a good whose value is conditioned by duty. But as we saw, Kant’s conception of happiness is subjective,

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41. Paul Guyer explores a perfectionist reading of Kant in “Kantian Perfectionism” in Perfecting Virtue: New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics, ed. Lawrence Jost and Julian Wuerth (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). He contrasts Wolff’s conception of perfectionism as perfecting one’s rational powers, which Kant criticizes, and a Kantian conception of perfectionism that appeals to the unconditional value of autonomy. I am sympathetic with the role of autonomy in Guyer’s interpretation of Kant, though I think the value of autonomy is itself grounded in moral personality. There are also broad affinities between my normative perfectionist reading of Kant’s ethics and Irwin’s interpretation of Kant and his relation to Aristotelian naturalism, though Irwin does not conceptualize his reading of Kant as a perfectionist one. See Irwin, The Development of Ethics, vol. III, chs. 66–72.

42. Moreover, Kant treats moral perfection as the goal of human history in his progressive view of history as the quest to perfect humanity’s rational nature (History; Lectures Collins 27: 470).

43. For a useful discussion, see Stephen Engstrom, “Happiness and the Highest Good in Aristotle and in Kant” in Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics.
consisting in the satisfaction of desires whose ultimate object is pleasure. The goods of (Kantian) happiness and normative perfection are very different. Crucially, moral personality is unconditionally good, whereas (Kantian) happiness is good only conditionally. Insofar as the ground of duty rests on the unconditional value of rational nature, a perfectionist good is arguably prior to the right.

Second, insofar as Kant can be read as a normative perfectionist, it would appear that his perfectionism is impartial, rather than egocentric. As the Humanity Formula makes clear, the fundamental moral demand is to respect the value of rational agency in every person. Concern for the rational agency of others is not derivative in the way it is for egocentric forms of normative perfectionism that we encounter in Aristotle and Green. In this respect, Kant’s perfectionism has more in common with Mill’s perfectionist utilitarianism, however much they may differ in other respects.

Third, we can ask whether Kantian perfectionism instructs us to honor or promote rational nature in ourselves and others. Many readers will assume that Kantian deontology implies that the correct orientation toward the value of rational nature is to honor, rather than promote, it. Even if this is true, it doesn’t block a perfectionist reading of Kant, because we said that whether to honor or promote rational nature was a choice point within normative perfectionism.

However, this deontological reading of Kant’s attitude toward rational nature deserves scrutiny. Promoting rational nature seems plausible in the intrapersonal case. As we saw in Mill’s discussion of self-slavery, the prohibition on selling oneself into slavery requires that we promote, rather than honor, rational agency. In his discussion of duties to oneself in the *Groundwork*, Kant says that rational nature is not just a constraint on how one leads one’s own life, but that our actions “must harmonize [zusammenstimmen] with it,” seeking “the furtherance” (Beförderung) of this end (G 4: 430). Furthering an end involves promoting it, which might require foregoing some opportunities to honor it, for the sake of its better realization.

Consider the appropriate attitude toward rational nature in interpersonal contexts. One might treat the Humanity Formula as recognizing rational nature as a side-constraint on action—never act so as to treat rational agents as mere means. Such a side-constraint may seem to impose a duty to honor, rather than promote, rational nature in others. But notice that the Humanity Formula doesn’t prohibit treating people as means—that would be a very restrictive injunction. We regularly treat people as means in civil society, making contracts and availing ourselves of the services of others. Rather, it prohibits treating people as mere means. So the Humanity Formula prohibits treating others as if they were mere tools, with no well-being or agency of their own. We must treat them in ways that reflect concern for their well-being or agency. But that does not mean that we may never treat them as means to promote the agency of others. That possibility does not seem to be ruled out by the Humanity Formula.

Finally, one might invoke Kant’s claims about the dignity of rational nature to show that he thinks it is a value that must be honored, rather than promoted, in both intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts. In the *Groundwork*, Kant contrasts things having a price and things having dignity:

> In the kingdom of ends, everything has either a price or dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity. [G 4: 434]

Kant goes on to say that happiness and things that produce happiness have a price, but that humanity, understood as personality or rational nature, has dignity (G 4: 435–36). Things that have a price are fungible, whereas things that display dignity are “infinitely beyond all price” (G 4: 435). We might think of dignity as a suit that trumps all other suits. With non-trump suits, it is always the highest value card that takes

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44. For useful discussion, see Thomas E. Hill, “Humanity as an End in Itself” *Ethics* 91 (1980): 84–99.
the trick. But the lowest value card in a trump suit beats the highest value card in any non-trump suit. We might interpret Kant as saying, in effect, that rational nature is a trump suit and that it is never permissible to violate or compromise rational nature as a means of promoting other goods, such as happiness, that have mere price.

We can think of this claim that rational nature has dignity as claim about value that recognizes discontinuities between the value of rational agency and other goods. In this way, Kant’s claims about the supreme value of dignity in relation to other goods could be likened to Mill’s claims in Chapter II of *Utilitarianism* about the value of higher pleasures in relation to lower pleasures when he says that a competent judge would prefer the smallest amount of higher pleasure to the largest amount of lower pleasure (U II 5; CW X 211). Just as promoting happiness for Mill will not allow trade-offs of higher and lower pleasures, so too could Kant claim that promoting rational nature will not allow trade-offs between rational nature and happiness because the former is discontinuously better than the latter.

But even if rational nature trumps other goods, there can be unavoidable conflicts in the demands of rational nature. Even if the lowest value card in a trump suit beats the highest value card in a non-trump suit, within the trump suit, the highest cardinality wins. This would imply that in situations where the claims of rational nature conflict, Kant may have reason to promote or maximize rational nature. As we saw in §3, he thinks the Humanity Formula requires that we harmonize positively, and not just negatively, with rational nature, furthering the agency of others (G 4: 430). This suggests that we should take rational nature, wherever we find it, as a value to be promoted. At least, it doesn’t rule this out.45

This discussion of whether Kant thinks that rational nature is a value to be promoted or honored in intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts has been inconclusive. But it is sufficient to establish several conclusions of interest to the perfectionist reading of Kant’s ethics. First, because the question whether to promote or honor moral personality is a choice point within normative perfectionism, the possibility of a normative perfectionist reading of Kant does not turn on how he thinks we should be oriented toward rational nature. Second, upon closer inspection, several claims that Kant is committed to honoring, rather than promoting, rational nature appear problematic. Moreover, there is some evidence that Kant thinks that the correct attitude toward rational nature in both intrapersonal and interpersonal contexts requires that it be promoted. Third, even if Kant is not committed to promoting rational nature, we can construct a form of normative perfectionism that is otherwise like Kant’s ethical theory but is committed to promoting, rather than honoring, rational nature.

5. Is the Appeal to Rational Nature Incomplete?

So far, normative perfectionism seems well positioned to address some of Kant’s explicit worries about perfectionism and related doctrines, such as eudaimonism, and to accommodate what is reasonable in Kant’s concerns. Indeed, we have seen reason to take seriously a normative perfectionist reading of some central aspects of Kant’s own ethical theory.

This makes it appropriate to address a worry that has been raised about the adequacy of Kant’s own appeals to rational nature, because normative perfectionism appeals to rational nature in many of the ways that Kant does. The general worry is that the ideals of rationality and perfection do not themselves provide complete ethical guidance. Rationality is a matter of recognizing and responding to reasons, but then rationality does not provide adequate guidance without some specification of the substantive reasons for action that a rational agent would recognize and weigh. Similarly, perfection, understood in terms of the development and exercise of moral personality and practical reason, does not seem to provide adequate guidance. We deliberate by recognizing and weighing goods and reasons. But then practical reason or deliberation seems to be an incomplete guide without

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45. Kant’s view could be not that we promote rational nature even if this means harming individual rational agents, but rather that we have a duty to promote rational agency but only in ways that never violate rational agency.
some specification of the objective goods and substantive reasons that should guide deliberation.

We can distinguish radical and moderate versions of this worry about the adequacy of perfectionism’s guidance. The *radical critique*, familiar from Hegelian criticisms of Kant, is that rationality is a formal or procedural concept and, hence, is empty or without content.\(^{46}\) By contrast, the *moderate critique* is that rational nature has content and provides some guidance but does not provide complete guidance without a specification of substantive reasons or objective goods.\(^{47}\)

We can reject the radical critique insofar as moral personality provides both the ground and content of morality. As we saw, Kant argues that moral requirements apply in virtue of our nature as agents and that what we can value insofar as we are rational agents is rational nature, which commits us to the requirement to treat rational nature always as an end and not merely as a means. This is how he gets from ground to content and Universality to Humanity. Similarly, the normative perfectionist identifies normative ideals with activities and lives that realize our capacities as agents. Content is a function of what is ruled out, and the pre-eminent value of rational nature rules out some kinds of lives. There are a variety of kinds of lives and activities in which one can exercise one’s rational capacities well. But rational nature speaks against selling oneself into slavery and discriminates between higher and lower pleasures, between the examined life and the life of sensory contentment, between a self-directed life in which one meets and copes with various challenges and a shallow and undemanding life, and between the life of an artisan who has control over the nature of her work and the distribution of her products and the life of a couch potato. Normative perfectionism can be pluralistic, recognizing a diversity of good lives exercising practical reason in comparably good but different ways, but it is not content-neutral.

By contrast, the moderate critique needs to be taken more seriously. According to the moderate critique, even if perfectionist values are not empty, they provide an incomplete ethical guide and need to be supplemented by additional non-perfectionist kinds of value or reasons. Different moderate critiques might appeal to different non-perfectionist values. Presumably, any conception of ethical guidance that recognizes a set of perfectionist goods as incomplete would be *pluralist* in character. Some familiar pluralist conceptions of the good include knowledge, achievement, pleasure, beauty, friendship, and moral goods.\(^{48}\) The moderate critique is that adequate ethical content presupposes some such pluralist conception that is not exhausted by perfectionist goods.

Adately addressing the moderate critique is beyond the scope of this essay. But we can frame how that discussion might proceed by distinguishing different kinds of response to that critique. In particular, we can distinguish more and less concessive responses, depending on how many non-perfectionist values we recognize and how important they are.

Perhaps the most concessive response would be to defend a form of *partial perfectionism* that is based on a mixed conception of the good that includes perfectionist elements. Even if perfectionism provides incomplete guidance and must be supplemented by a list of independent objective goods, even a very long list, it would still be true that our conception of the good would be incomplete if it did not recognize perfectionist goods.

A less concessive response would be to embrace a form of *dominant perfectionism* that recognizes a mixed conception of the good in which perfectionist goods are most important. There are different ways in which perfectionist goods might dominate others. First, even if we


must accept a mixed conception of the good, it might still be true that perfectionist goods are individually the most important goods insofar as they exercise the most general and important constraint on the content of an ethical life. Second, perfectionist goods might condition the value of other goods, so that the other elements only count as genuine goods when they do not offend against or compromise perfectionist elements. On such a view, perfectionist demands to develop and exercise one’s own normative powers and those of other rational agents constrain what other things might be good. Third, whether or not perfectionist goods are the most important individual goods or the only unconditional goods, they might be superordinate goods. One might distinguish between primary and secondary goods. Though perfectionist goods are among the primary goods, they may also be important secondary goods insofar as practical reason is exercised in the comparison of primary goods, the correct ordering of primary goods, and the resolution of conflicts among primary goods. If so, practical reason is an important secondary or superordinate good. If perfectionist goods are both primary and superordinate goods, then our conception of the good is arguably a form of dominant perfectionism. The case for dominant perfectionism will be even stronger if perfectionist goods are the individually most important primary goods or the only unconditional goods.

Both of these responses to the moderate critique concede that the correct conception of the good must be mixed, containing both perfectionist and non-perfectionist elements. A still less concessive response would be to defend pure perfectionism. Here, the idea would be to combine two pure perfectionist strategies — accommodation and reform. Accommodation brings apparently non-perfectionist goods under the perfectionist umbrella, explaining their value in perfectionist terms. Where accommodation is not possible, reform recommends denying that the alleged goods are genuine goods. The merits of accommodation and reform depend on how much the perfectionist can accommodate, how much requires reform, and whether the resulting reforms seem reflectively acceptable. This strategy would have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis by considering alleged non-perfectionist goods and evaluating strategies for accommodation and reform. Here, I can only sketch what such a discussion might look like.

Knowledge and Achievement. It is not hard to understand how knowledge or achievement might be understood as perfectionist values. Knowledge is arguably the state at which our capacities for theoretical reason aim, and certain kinds of achievements are what we aim at in our practical deliberations. We can understand how an appeal to practical agency might explain the perfectionist value of practical achievements, and we can understand how an appeal to epistemic agency might explain the perfectionist value of knowledge, but we might doubt that either conception of agency can explain both. This worry raises interesting questions about the ability to explain theoretical achievements in terms of practical deliberation about our mental acts and the ability to explain practical accomplishments in terms of theoretical reasoning about practical matters. But there is no need for reductive explanations of either kind, provided that normative perfectionism is grounded, as Green believes, in a unified conception of agency — one that sees rational agents as reasons-responsive in ways that make them both practically and epistemically responsible.

Pleasure. It is common to regard hedonic values as non-perfectionist values. Pleasure is to be sought and pain to be avoided in themselves, independently of their relation to perfection. Pain is often extrinsically bad insofar as it is an insistent form of consciousness that distracts one from the pursuit of one’s activities and, hence, impedes the pursuit of perfectionist goods. Indeed, if the nature of pain is to be insistent and disruptive in this way, then the perfectionist can even recognize pain as being non-instrumentally bad. The interesting and difficult question is whether pleasure is inherently good and pain is inherently bad.
independently of their effects on one’s valuable activities. Compare the lives of two artists who are each engaged in creative work, producing beautiful art, and exercising control over their professional lives. One of them appreciates the value she creates and takes delight in her art, while the other is depressed and takes no joy in her art. Clearly, it might seem, the first life is better than the second, even though they seem to realize the same amount of perfectionist value. The natural explanation for this difference in value is that pleasure is an independent, non-perfectionist value. But in this case, the pleasure that the one artist has that the other lacks appears to be a delight in her creative activity. Following the lead of Aristotle, the Stoics, Leibniz, and Wolff, we might treat such delight as an appreciation of perfectionist value, and this appreciation might seem to be a further perfectionist value. Whether all genuine hedonic goods can be fit under the perfectionist umbrella in this way is an open question.

Beauty. It is sometimes said that beauty is an objective good, which can and should guide choice. On some views, beauty might well be an independent non-perfectionist good. G.E. Moore thought that if one applied his method of isolation, in which one imagines something in isolation from sentient beings to see if it has value in those situations, one would see that beauty was an objective good. If we compare a bare lunar landscape with a similar landscape containing our favorite work of art, we will see that the second world is better than the first. This fact attests to the objective value of beauty, or so Moore thought. But works of art are artifacts, created by artists and typically consumed and appreciated by audiences. For the method of isolation to evidence that beauty is an objective value, we would have to imagine that objects that are beautiful and choiceworthy when produced and appreciated by intelligent beings would still be beautiful and contribute to the value of the worlds in which they occur even when they were neither the product of creative activity nor the object of aesthetic appreciation. But this is not clear. In fact, there are two claims that Moore must establish — first, that there is beauty in a world with no sentient creatures, and second, that beauty in such a world is an intrinsic good. But both claims are open to doubt. We may regard Da Vinci’s Venus de Milo as beautiful. But the method of isolation requires us to imagine a world containing a piece of stone with the same qualitative properties as the Venus but that was neither the product of creative design nor the object of aesthetic appreciation — perhaps occurring in a lifeless world as the result of erosion. It is simply not clear that the stone in that world is beautiful. Perhaps the best case for Moore’s claim about beauty is natural beauty. Would a landscape containing the Grand Canyon be more beautiful than a spare lunar landscape even if no sentient creature ever appreciated it? One can doubt that there is beauty in worlds without sentient creatures, and even if we do recognize beauty in worlds in which sentient creatures are neither producers nor consumers of beauty, we may wonder if those worlds are better as a result. If so, we might think that beauty is a relational good and that its value lies in its relation to perfectionist values.

Friendship. Friendship might seem to be a non-perfectionist good that nonetheless ought to guide choice. However, all three of our paradigmatic normative perfectionists believe that certain forms of interpersonal association extend and complete the agent’s rational nature. Aristotle believes that in the right sort of friendship, one’s friend provides a kind of mirror on oneself and so provides a perspective that makes self-understanding and self-criticism possible, providing a kind of completion or perfection for cognitively limited beings (NE 1162a20–24, 1169b4–6, 1170a5–7; EE 1244b1–12; MM 1212b24–1213b2; Politics 1261b10–15). Moreover, he thinks that in the best sort of friendships, friends share experiences and discussion in a way that provides interpersonal psychic unity that is relevantly like intrapersonal unity. This unity, he thinks, is the basis for each regarding the other as a

50. Cf. Robert Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 93–101. Adams proposes to understand the personal good as the enjoyment of the excellent. I would add, first, that the excellent is good even when it is not enjoyed (even if it is better still when it is enjoyed), and second, that the enjoyment of the excellent is itself excellent.

second self, whose interests are part of his and for whom he cares for the other’s own sake (NE 1166a1–2, 10, 1166a30–32, 1168b1–1169a12). M2

Mill believes that friends enhance each other’s higher faculties by helping each other enlarge the menu of deliberative options and better assess the merits of the options on the menu. This is an important part of his perfectionist defense of freedom of expression and association (OL II 20–33, III 1; CW XVIII 242–52, 260–61). But it also explains the unique value he assigns to friendships among equals in his critique of Victorian sexual inequality (SW in CW XXI 293–95, 326, 334–36). Equal standing makes possible forms of personal association that foster discussion and cooperation, make each accountable to the other, and enable each to realize her higher nature. M3

Green insists that proper self-realization should aim at a common good, which includes the good of other rational agents. A self-realizing agent does not act on passing whims or passions but acts for the sake of ends perceived as valuable and perseveres on their behalf, making short-term investments and sacrifices for the sake of these ends. This is to value goals and projects in which I am involved that have some degree of permanence. Green thinks that the right sort of association with others extends this permanence in a natural way (PE §199). Indeed, Green regards interpersonal permanence as a kind of counterbalance to mortality or surrogate for immortality:

That determination of an animal organism by a self-conscious principle, which makes a man and is presupposed by the interest in permanent good, carries with it a certain appropriation by the man to himself of the beings with whom he is connected by natural ties, to the extent that they


53. I discuss the role of perfectionist values in Mill’s discussion of liberal associations and friendships among equals in Mill’s Progressive Principles, chs. 6–11.

Green claims that interpersonal permanence is an extension of intrapersonal permanence, implying that the right sort of interpersonal association makes the good of one’s associate part of one’s own. Interpersonal association undermines the popular contrast between self-love and love of others (§232) and gives each associate a reason to pursue a common good (§202).

Of course, the details of these perfectionist rationales for friendship need to be filled in and defended, but such claims promise to bring the good of friendship under the perfectionist umbrella.

Moral Goods. We might concede the promise of pure perfectionism as an account of prudential value but harbor doubts about its adequacy to explain the importance of other-regarding moral virtues, such as justice. Different forms of normative perfectionism have different commitments here. Any agent-neutral or otherwise impartial concern for rational agents will build concern for others in at a foundational level. So a perfectionist like Mill or Kant seems to have no special problem accommodating an agent’s concern for the good of others. By contrast, eudaimonist perfectionists have agent-relative or egocentric concern for the agent’s own rational agency. So perfectionists such as Aristotle or Green need to explain how a concern for others emerges within a eudaimonist framework by explaining how the rational agency of others contributes to the agent’s own rational agency. However, both Aristotle and Green do believe that an agent’s own perfection requires pursuit of a common good. My remarks above about how they provide a perfectionist explanation of friendship and other associational goods
indicate how they could begin to explain the emergent value of moral concern for the perfection of others within a eudaimonist framework.

In the context of discussing an egocentric perfectionist justification of moral concern, it is worth mentioning Green’s disagreement with Aristotle about the scope of the common good. Both Aristotle and Green think that interpersonal association provides a kind of interpersonal unity akin to intrapersonal unity and forges a common good among associates that gives each egocentric reason to care about the associate for his own sake. Green believes that Aristotle recognized the way in which justice is connected with a common good, but he thinks the Greeks had too narrow a conception of the common good. Green thinks agents have egocentric reasons to seek interpersonal permanence with wide scope:

The idea of a society of free and law-abiding persons, each his own master yet each his brother’s keeper, was first definitely formed among the Greeks, and its formation was the condition of all subsequent progress in the direction described; but with them ... it was limited in its application to select groups of men surrounded by populations of aliens and slaves. In its universality, as capable of application to the whole human race, an attempt has first been made to act upon it in modern Christendom [PE §271].

Green sees moral progress as consisting in the gradual extension of the scope of the common good, which is only complete when each respects the claims made by other members of a maximally inclusive community of ends (§§214, 216, 244, 332). Indeed, Green thinks the Humanity Formula of the Categorical Imperative provides the correct interpretation of the common good (§§202–17). In this respect, Green’s belief that an egocentric concern with self-realization can and should support cosmopolitan concern for others may seem closer to the Stoic than the Aristotelian view.54

Though the discussion of pure perfectionism and its resources has necessarily been abstract and suggestive, it shows promise for the project of extending the domain of the normative perfectionist empire. Whether all genuine goods admit of perfectionist analysis remains an open question, worth further investigation. Even if we cannot extend the perfectionist domain as far as the pure perfectionist must, there remain more concessive replies that recognize the importance of perfectionist goods within mixed or pluralist conceptions. Defending these claims takes the normative perfectionist beyond explicit Kantian resources but provides a defense of the importance of rational nature that both the normative perfectionist and the Kantian need.

Moreover, we can now appreciate a connection between these worries about the completeness of the appeal to rational nature and Kant’s first criticism that perfectionism yields hypothetical, rather than categorical, imperatives. Recall from §2 that Kant thinks Leibniz and Wolff are metaphysical perfectionists who make a rational will dependent on metaphysical principles of unity, order, and fittingness that are external to the will itself. Green promises to avoid Kant’s objection insofar as he thinks the imperatives of self-realization depend only on aspects of moral personality. In this respect, Green’s normative perfectionism appears more fully Kantian than the perfectionisms of Leibniz and Wolff. But in this section, we have seen that there is a question for both Kantians and normative perfectionists whether the appeal to moral personality or rational nature provides complete guidance without supplementation by material principles about objective goods and external reasons. If the normative perfectionist can be a

pure perfectionist, explaining all ethical content in terms of moral personality and its expression, then the normative perfectionist can answer Kant’s first criticism of perfectionism on its own terms. However, if we must accept a pluralist ethical theory, in which rational nature is supplemented with objective goods and external reasons that should guide rational agency, then we have reason to reject Kant’s demand that moral requirements depend only on rational nature.

6. The Normative Authority of Perfection

A plausible ethical conception should be *extensionally adequate*. It should accommodate most of our considered judgments about what sorts of actions and lives are good or bad and right or wrong or, failing that, provide us with principled reasons for revising our considered judgments. On this score, normative perfectionism looks promising. It provides substantial accommodation and principled reform. If necessary, we can achieve greater accommodation by treating perfectionist goods as the dominant components in a mixed conception.

In addition to extensional adequacy, a plausible ethical conception also owes us an account of its *normative authority*. Why should we care about conforming to its requirements? Once formulated, that question is not easy to answer, and many familiar conceptions do not address that question or have unsatisfying answers. For instance, it is not clear why we should care about pleasure as such, independently of its sources, objects, or consequences. Equally, given various pathologies of desire, it is not clear why we should care about satisfying desires independently of their sources, objects, or consequences.

By contrast, normative perfectionism has a more promising answer to questions about its normative authority. By grounding perfectionist ideals in a normative conception of human nature as persons or agents, normative perfectionism explains why we should care about the realization of perfectionist ideals by appealing to the very capacities that make us reasons-responsive rational agents in the first place. In this respect, normative perfectionism enjoys the same appeal as Kantian ethics. Precisely because categorical imperatives depend only on our rational nature, they promise to be demands of reason. The rationalism in Kant’s ethics is a source of its persistent attractions, and in virtue of its appeal to moral personality and rational agency, normative perfectionism enjoys a similar promise to explain the normative authority of its demands.

Some writers doubt that ethical claims derived from the conditions that are constitutive of agency enjoy rational authority, because it is always open to rational agents not to care about the demands of agency. On this view, rational agents are always free to reject demands of agency. Of course, rational agents are metaphysically free to resist what they have reason to do. But if there are demands that depend only on our rational nature as agents, then agents display irrationality when they exercise this freedom. It is rational to care about what rationality consists in, and there is something self-defeating about the agent who asks for a reason why she should conform to the demands of rational agency. If there are lives that exercise those rational capacities that make us responsible agents, subject to reasons for action, then we have reason to care about and pursue those kinds of lives.

If so, there is something illegitimate about the question whether rational agents have reason to do as rationality requires. There is a legitimate question about whether rational agency imposes any demands. But this is a different question whether the appeal to rational nature has content. We addressed that question earlier (§5) and argued that Kantians and normative perfectionists have promising accounts of how rational nature provides normative content. Whether the normative guidance that rational nature provides is complete is another matter.

There is a further question about the normative authority of perfectionist ideals that is worth addressing. This is a challenge not to normative perfectionism per se, but to its eudaimonist or egocentric versions. As we noted earlier (§1), nearly all of Greek ethics is eudaimonist, treating the agent’s own eudaimonia or happiness as the

central or foundational element in ethics. Eudaimonism takes a perfectionist form provided the content of the agent’s happiness depends on her nature, and it takes a specifically normative perfectionist form provided it depends on her moral personality or rational nature. Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Green are eudaimonists who are normative perfectionists. Eudaimonism implies that the virtues, including the moral virtues, must contribute to the agent’s own happiness in some way. For this reason, eudaimonist justifications of other-regarding concern are egocentric and must have an inside-out structure, grounding other-regarding concern in the agent’s own eudaimonia or perfection. This egocentric constraint gives rise to two worries.

The first worry concerns the scope of ethical concern. If ethical concern must be justified from the inside out, we may worry that the scope of ethical concern will be limited and parochial. The inside-out strategy looks most promising among friends or other members of an association that have shared history. But then it may seem as if an egocentric version of normative perfectionism could not justify genuinely cosmopolitan concern. This is a worry about the extensional adequacy of egocentric normative perfectionism. It could be met by adopting a non-egocentric version of normative perfectionism of the sort we find in Kant or Mill that makes concern for the rational nature of others just as fundamental as concern with one’s own rational nature. Alternatively, we might try to vindicate the extensional adequacy of an egocentric version of normative perfectionism by showing that it can in fact defend ethical concern with wide scope. As we saw in §6, Green thinks we can reconcile eudaimonism and cosmopolitan concern.

A second worry about egocentric versions of normative perfectionism concerns the normative authority of their account of concern for others. An inside-out rationale for other-regarding concern claims that concern for others is a way of contributing to one’s own good. This may seem like the wrong sort of reason for ethical concern for others. In his essay “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” H.A. Prichard famously objected to Plato’s eudaimonist defense of justice for providing the wrong sort of reason to be just. Prichard’s essay is complex and no doubt amenable to different interpretations. But one central strand deserves our attention. In the Republic, Plato asks “Why be just?” which we might generalize to the question “Why be moral?” Plato answers that justice is profitable for the agent because it contributes to his having a well-ordered soul. Prichard interprets this as a demand for an instrumental justification of justice. But, he thinks, moral demands ought to be done for their own sakes. If so, Plato’s question is misconceived and his answer provides the wrong sort of reason to be just. Plato’s mistake, it might be claimed, generalizes to any egocentric version of normative perfectionism.

One response to this worry about egocentric versions of normative perfectionism would be to adopt a non-egocentric version instead. A fundamentally impartial concern with rational nature does not filter concern for others through the lens of concern with one’s own rational nature. Kant or Mill might be the model for this sort of non-egocentric normative perfectionism. Alternatively, one might reject Prichard’s claim about Plato’s mistake. In Republic II, Plato can and does distinguish between something’s extrinsic consequences, which depend on more than the mere presence of that thing, and its intrinsic consequences, which depend only on the nature of the thing in question. With this distinction in hand, Glaucan and Adeimantus can be interpreted as conceding that justice is beneficial for its extrinsic consequences and asking Socrates to show that justice is good for its intrinsic consequences too. That is, they demand that Socrates show that justice is always choiceworthy in virtue of the beneficial consequences of justice itself. That is a coherent challenge, which Plato’s Socrates addresses, arguing that justice is a psychic condition whose intrinsic consequences are beneficial. If so, justice is good for its own sake or its own reward, thereby benefitting the just agent.

Similarly, Aristotle offers an egocentric justification of other-regarding virtues, such as friendship and justice, that is derivative but non-instrumental (NE 1097a26–b7). Incomplete goods are not chosen for their own sakes; they are chosen only for the sake of something else and are mere instrumental goods. By contrast, complete goods are chosen for their own sakes; they are non-instrumental goods. Unconditionally complete goods are chosen for their own sakes and not chosen for the sake of anything else. Eudaimonia is the only unconditionally complete good. This means that merely complete goods are goods in themselves but are also chosen for the sake of eudaimonia, as parts are chosen for the sakes of the wholes of which they are parts. Here, x is valuable as constituent of y; it has contributory value and is non-instrumentally good. Aristotle claims that the virtues are complete, but not unconditionally complete, goods (1097a35–b7, 1100b8–11, 1176b1–8). They are choiceworthy in themselves as parts of happiness. In making this claim, he makes explicit the sort of assumptions Plato makes about the relationship between justice and eudaimonia in Republic II, where he (Plato) values justice for its own sake and for its constitutive contribution to the agent’s own eudaimonia.

Green accepts these eudaimonist claims. He thinks that a self-realizing agent seeks interpersonal, and not just intrapersonal, permanence and that this requires pursuit of a cosmopolitan conception of the common good. Within a common good, Green claims, each cares about others for their own sakes in the same way he cares about himself (PE §§232, 236). Though Green treats the demand for self-realization as an egocentric demand, he thinks it necessarily requires pursuit of a common good that involves non-instrumental concern for others.

For these reasons, we should be skeptical that egocentric versions of normative perfectionism provide the wrong sort of reason for other-regarding concern. Their justification of concern for others is derivative, but non-instrumental. If so, then egocentrism need not supply the wrong sort of reason to be moral. Indeed, egocentrism might be an asset in addressing the normative authority of perfectionist demands. As we have seen, the normative perfectionist has an explanation of why each of us should be concerned with her own rational nature. But why should we each be concerned about the rational nature of others? Perhaps I should be concerned about rational nature as such, whether in my own person or that of another. This is what Kant and Mill believe. But it might seem that the ground of moral requirements must lie in the rational agency of each. If so, we might prefer an explanation of concern for other rational agents that is grounded in an egocentric concern for one’s own rational agency. Green thinks I should identify with my rational self because this is the self that grounds moral personality. But he also thinks that someone committed to his own rational self should be invested in other rational selves; while the former achieves intrapersonal permanence, the latter achieves interpersonal permanence. If so, egocentric normative perfectionism promises to provide an explanation of the authority of cosmopolitan concern that impartial forms of perfectionism do not.

Though egocentric and impartial forms of normative perfectionism have different resources, both offer promising conceptions of the normative authority of perfectionist demands.7

7. The Prospects for Normative Perfectionism

By contrast with forms of perfectionism that appeal to a biological conception of human nature, normative perfectionism grounds perfectionist ideals in a normative conception of human nature, understood in terms of moral personality or agency. There is an important tradition of normative perfectionism that includes the views of Aristotle, Mill, and Green. In assessing the prospects for normative perfectionism, we do well to consider its relation to the Kantian tradition. One motivation for this comparison is that Kant is an influential critic of

perfectionism, claiming that it cannot generate categorical moral requirements and that we must accept a self/other asymmetry in which we aim at our own perfection but at the happiness, rather than the perfection, of others. However, on closer inspection, neither objection is compelling as applied to normative perfectionism. Because it grounds moral requirements in rational nature, normative perfectionism can represent moral requirements as categorical imperatives. Moreover, the role of autonomy in moral personality shows that we can aim at the perfection of another, provided we do so in ways that engage, rather than bypass, her agency. So the normative perfectionist can answer Kantian doubts about perfectionism while respecting Kant’s own commitments to the connections among agency, rational nature, and moral requirements. Kant’s critical target is the attempt to found morality on an empiricist conception of human nature. But then he has no reason to reject attempts to found morality on a normative conception of human nature that understands human nature in terms of rational agency. Indeed, Kant himself clearly wants to found morality on an appeal to rational nature, which opens up the possibility of a normative perfectionist reading of Kant’s own ethical theory. That reading makes good sense of Kantian essentials, including Kant’s claim that rational nature provides both the ground and content of moral duty.

Because both Kant and the normative perfectionist appeal to rational nature, the normative perfectionist has reason to take seriously the criticism of Kantian ethics that its appeal to rational nature is empty or incomplete. We have good reason to reject the radical version of this criticism that the appeal to rational nature is empty insofar as rational nature supplies both the ground and content of moral duty. Kant can argue from Universality to Humanity, and the Humanity formula has content, excluding some conduct as immoral. Aristotle, Mill, and Green all recognize ways in which rational nature constrains the personal good and ethical demands. Even if we reject the radical claim that the appeal to rational nature is empty, we should take seriously the more moderate criticism that the appeal to rational nature is incomplete and requires supplementation with a set of non-perfectionist goods or reasons that can guide rational agency. In response, the normative perfectionist has available more and less concessive replies. Even the most concessive response implies the importance of perfectionist goods, without which a conception of the good would be seriously incomplete. The normative perfectionist might be less concessive, arguing that perfectionist goods dominate a pluralist conception of the good. Finally, the least concessive reply would be to bring allegedly non-perfectionist values under the perfectionist umbrella. Which is the best response to the charge of incompleteness depends on complex matters of principled accommodation and reform of our ethical assumptions.

Moreover, the normative perfectionist, like the Kantian, has a promising account of the normative authority of its demands, precisely because these demands are grounded in our nature as rational agents. This gives us categorical reason to act on perfectionist demands. Moreover, we can defend the normative authority of egocentric versions of normative perfectionism against Prichard’s worry that they provide the wrong sort of reason to care about others and their perfection. Egocentric normative perfectionism provides an agent with derivative but non-instrumental reason for concern for the perfection of others.

Given the breadth and complexity of the issues associated with this comparison of the normative perfectionist and Kantian traditions, this discussion has necessarily been selective and programmatic. Nonetheless, I think it demonstrates the interest and resources of the normative perfectionist tradition and its deep affinities with the Kantian tradition, despite Kant’s criticisms of perfectionism. Moreover, these two traditions have the resources to respond to worries that the guidance provided by the appeal to rational nature is seriously incomplete. These conclusions give us reason to regard the prospects of normative perfectionism as promising and worth further exploration.