**Pablo Gilabert “Perfectionism and Dignity”**

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**1. Introduction**

Perfectionism about well-being is, at a minimum, the view that people’s lives go well when, and because they realize their capacities. It is common to link perfectionism with an idea of human essence or nature, to yield the view that what constitutes people’s well-being is the development and exercise of characteristically *human* capacities. In section 2, this paper considers the very serious problems associated with the idea of human nature or essence, and argues that perfectionism would be more plausible if it abandons reliance on it and focuses instead on the unfolding of some valuable capacities that need not be unique to, or shared by all human beings. This revised perfectionism is evaluative all the way down, pragmatic but not unprincipled, and holistic. In section 3, the paper develops this account in terms of the dignitarian approach—the view that we have reason to organize our personal and social life in such a way that we respond appropriately to the valuable features of individuals that give rise to their dignity. Dignity is a non-conventional, normative status based on a diverse and disjunctive set of valuable capacities. The dignitarian approach helps develop, defend, and identify the implications of the revised perfectionism suggested in the previous section while also allowing us to make sense of the role of some generalizations that animated some of the plausibility of traditional perfectionism—and this without the pitfalls of reliance on an idea of human nature. On this paper’s proposed view—Dignitarian Perfectionism—human individuals’ well-being consists, at least in part, in developing and exercising the capacities at the basis of *their* dignity.

**2. Revising perfectionism**

What is perfectionism about well-being?[[1]](#footnote-1) Three key components of it, as it has been traditionally understood, are the claims that the well-being or good life of (or the non-instrumental good for) a living entity x depends on x’s nature, that x’s nature involves a certain set of capacities, and that a life lived according to these capacities involves (for x) goodness. Applied to the human context, we get the following view:

**Traditional Perfectionism about human well-being:** “The good life for a human is determined by human nature. Human nature involves a set of capacities. The exercise and development of these capacities is good for humans.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Perfectionism is appealing. We often think that our life is going well when we unfold rather than squander our powers, and that it is going badly when we diminish or destroy them. Perfectionism explains this judgment. Perfectionism also seems to avoid the most serious problems of hedonistic and desire-satisfaction theories. Unlike the former, it is not committed to taking experiences of pleasure as the only determinant of well-being. Alicia is doing better than Betty if both are experiencing the same amount of pleasure but Alicia is not, and Betty is, plugged to an experience machine—so that Alicia is, but Betty is not, actually engaging in the activities she rejoices upon. Perfectionism meets the Euthyphro-style challenge that besets desire-satisfaction theories. It gives the intuitively correct answer to the question: “Is this activity good for you because you desire it or you desire it (or should desire it) because it is good for you?” Picking the second option, it judges desires as appropriate only if they track what is of value for the agent (which, in the case of perfectionism, is the development and exercise of certain capacities). Perfectionism is similar to the objective list theory (the view that well-being consists in engagement with certain objective goods—goods which are not dependent on desire or other attitudes). This is so because the development and exercise of capacities it recommends is seen as valuable independently of whether the agent desires it. But perfectionism is a distinctive theory. The specific merit would be to offer an explanatory account of what unifies the items in the objective list of goods and gives them prudential significance.[[3]](#footnote-3) The list is to be made up of items that enact the development and exercise of the capacities of persons.

Now, the critical fate of Traditional Perfectionism as stated depends on its being able to provide a compelling account of human nature and of its connection to well-being. As it turns out, the common proposals in this respect face very serious objections. Here are three important examples.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Perfectionism could first adopt a “uniqueness criterion of human nature,” according to which a capacity is part of human nature if and only if it is unique to humans (i.e., all humans have it but no non-humans do). However, it might turn out that there isn’t much to human nature in this sense, as most (and perhaps all) capacities of human beings are also held to some degree by other entities. And, even if there were some capacities unique to human beings, it is not clear that all and only the activities developing or exercising them are constitutive of human well-being. Arguably, the capacity for pleasure, if fulfilled, contributes to human well-being even though according to this version of perfectionism it should not be taken into account because it is not a distinctively human capacity.[[5]](#footnote-5) And some uniquely human capacities might be irrelevant for human well-being. Certain features might even be quite worrisome morally.[[6]](#footnote-6) For example, humans may be distinctly capable of willfully imposing psychological torment on others, but this kind of cruelty is not intrinsically valuable. If moral virtue is part of well-being, this is problematic. It would also be problematic if morality is, at least in part, to be focused on enabling people’s development and exercise of their capacities.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Perfectionism could then try an “essence criterion,” according to which a capacity is part of human nature if and only if it is essential to humans (i.e., no human can lack it). But a perfectionism relying on this criterion seems to be both too inclusive and too restrictive. Some capacities essential to human beings, such as being able to block the sun from others’ view, might be irrelevant to well-being; and some capacities which are relevant to well-being, such as the ability to engage in practical reasoning, are not essential to humans—the capacity to engage in practical reasoning is very important in the pursuit of well-being for those who have it, but some human beings do not have it. (We will discuss the essentialist view in more detail below.)

The uniqueness and essence proposals proceed in a strict sequence from a value-neutral depiction of human nature to judgments about well-being. In view of the problems with these views, perfectionists could deploy a different approach that relies on the method of reflective equilibrium. On this proposal, we could “use our judgments about well-being to inform our theory of human nature”.[[8]](#footnote-8) This would help us identify the capacities that are well-being relevant (i.e. those that we find reasonable to mention when justifying our judgments about the activities that contribute to well-being). The problem here is that a perfectionism relying on this criterion would seem problematically circular. The theory states that human nature determines facts about well-being, but the reflective equilibrium method allows for the former to be determined by the latter.

Is there any way to repair the perfectionist account to avoid these objections? I think that there is one, although it will involve significant changes in the theory. Here is a statement of the proposed view:

**Revised Perfectionism about human well-being:** The good life for human individuals is determined by their valuable features. The valuable features of the individuals considered involve a set of capacities. The development and exercise of these capacities (their unfolding), in some appropriate overall schedule, is good for them.

In what follows, I list the changes introduced by Revised Perfectionism, and explain how they help counter the objections to Traditional Perfectionism.

**2.1. Based on features of individuals rather than on what is distinctive of species**

Revised Perfectionism takes the well-being of human beings to engage features of human beings, not what makes them a distinctive species. This eliminates the problems faced by the uniqueness criterion. The move is not ad hoc, because what we are after is an account of what makes life good for human beings given what they are, and what human beings are includes *everything* they are, even if some of it includes features that also other entities have. There could be overlap between the well-being sets of different species—the fulfillment of the capacity for sensory perception, or for pleasure, features in several. But the items in the intersection are bona fide items in the intersecting sets.

**2.2. Evaluative all the way down**

According to Revised Perfectionism, the identification of the features of human beings that are well-being relevant is not merely descriptive. Not everything that is found in human beings—whether essential to them or not—gives rise to reasons to maintain it or further it. Only a subset of it is relevant. This evaluative focus helps counter the problem of excessive inclusiveness faced by the essence criterion. It is not the case, however, that the view must then suffer the problem of circularity allegedly faced by the reflective equilibrium approach to human nature. First, the proposal is not circular if “determines” is understood differently in each instance of the pair of claims cited above. When facts of well-being “determine” (the relevant subset of) human nature, they do so in the sense of providing evidence for recognizing what counts as (the relevant subset of) human nature. And when (the relevant subset of) human nature “determines” facts about well-being, it does so in the sense of grounding or explaining what makes something good when it is. The reflective equilibrium method is here used as an epistemic device to clarify and systematize our views about well-being. The fact that it seeks coherence between several considerations does not mean that all the supporting relations at play are of the same kind.[[9]](#footnote-9) Secondly, on my proposal, we do not use reflective equilibrium to figure out what human nature is, but to identify the features of human beings that are relevant to their well-being. So, the relations of determination are to be stated more narrowly to hold between judgments about well-being and some features of the people about whose well-being we are reflecting.

Let me develop this proposal further by saying more about the issue of circularity, which is quite central in critical discussions of perfectionism. An important worry about perfectionism is that it faces a devastating dilemma. It is either prey to the so-called wrong properties objection or it is circular. If it factors as part of human nature everything that human beings necessarily are (assuming there is a non-empty set of such features), then it will include some properties that are either trivial or ethically problematic—not worthy of development or exercise. If, on the other hand, perfectionism does manage to focus only on a subset of properties which does not contain the wrong properties, then it likely is not based only on descriptive claims about what human beings are like, but also on evaluative views selecting within the descriptive set a narrower, valuable one. We get normative outputs out of explorations of human nature only if the search already has normative conditions imposed on it. This can only be avoided by relapsing into an indiscriminate picture of human nature that will invite again the wrong properties objection. Either way, it seems, perfectionism is in trouble—it is either over-inclusive or circular. And when it tries to escape either horn, it falls for the other.

How shall we respond to this worry? Is a form of perfectionism that avoids both horns of the alleged dilemma possible? I think that a strategy proposed by Hurka provides a good starting point, although I will enter two important modifications of it. This strategy consists in seeing the articulation of perfectionism as a development, or fine-tuning of an initial, independent, appealing, and general idea.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, for Hurka, the general idea that human being’s well-being consists in the development and exercise of their human capacities is an appealing idea. But it needs to be rendered more determinate by identifying the capacities that are to be developed and exercised, given that some of them might seem trivial or even problematic. The identification of the subset may or may not be evaluative. If it is not, then the problem of overinclusion can be resolved without the problem of circularity arising. If it is, the approach may still avoid circularity if the normative claims involved in the selection of the subset of properties are of a different kind from those involved in the statement of the conclusions of the theory. My version of this strategy has two peculiarities. First, it is more explicit and comital about being evaluative all the way down (Hurka seems to vacillate on this point, and much of his argument seeks a non-evaluative basis). Second, my proposal is quite different in that in the end it drops the concept of human nature altogether. Let me explain.

Regarding the first point, consider that there is a difference between two kinds of normative claims. The first says that certain features of a person are valuable, in the sense that the person would be worse off if they lost them, and that they should respond favorably to them in some appropriate, positive way. (I assume here that we focus on intrinsically valuable features.) For example, the person may have reason not to destroy, and to develop and exercise their capacities for autonomous and impartial judgment about moral issues. The second kind of claims says that the person has reason to live in certain ways, by unfolding these features in specific manners, which the claims go one to state. For example, the person may have reason to become a responsible citizen, but also perhaps a political activist, a judge, or a moral philosopher, and behave in each of these activities in conscientious, deliberative, and wholehearted ways. Now, there is no circularity because, although the claims of the first kind are not merely descriptive, they are not normative in the way those of the second are. The claims of the second kind are not taken to follow logically from the first, but to constitute substantive elaborations of them. The relation between the claims of the two kinds is one of grounding, elaboration, and warrant. That C is a valuable capacity helps explain what makes P’s unfolding of C good for P. The claim that P should unfold C in a certain way W1 rather than another W2 in certain circumstances F is, in turn, an elaboration of the view that C is valuable and that unfolding it is good for P. And the fact that it is good for P to unfold C via W1 in F is evidence that C is valuable. These relations do not display circularity, but reveal instead fruitful metaphysical and epistemic coherence and systematicity.

The second and a rather crucial point is that in this account the notion of human nature is not doing any important work. The initial, general idea that is being elaborated and articulated is not that P should unfold C because C is part of what makes P human. What is key is simply that C is intrinsically valuable and that P has it. What makes C relevant for normative argument is that C is valuable, not that it is part of human nature. Hurka’s strategy is to refine the idea of human nature to prune it of wrong properties. I suggest that we drop it altogether. What we should be fine-tuning is not an independently appealing ideal of human essence-development or unfolding, but articulating and elaborating the contents of an ideal that we should live in such a way that we unfold our valuable features.[[11]](#footnote-11) That these features are part of the human essence (even if there is such a thing) adds nothing of normative significance. In fact, it adds difficulties we have reason to avoid, as it may force us to exclude from our normative inquiry people who do not have some of the allegedly essential features but have some other, clearly valuable ones.[[12]](#footnote-12) Normative claims about valuable features are not downstream from an independent ideal about the unfolding of human essence, but they are situated at the core of a theory of well-being that recommends the unfolding of valuable features by those who have them. Features that are not valuable do not have an even prima facie title to belonging in the core to be fine-tuned. They cannot be part of an independent basis for normative argument.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The consequence of this discussion, if successful, is that the dramatic predicament we started with was spurious. We can avoid both overinclusion and circularity. Revised Perfectionism avoids the wrong properties objection by being evaluative all the way down. This account can also avoid circularity by distinguishing between different kinds of normative claims. Furthermore, it does not need to rely on sweeping statements about human nature, and thus it can avoid the problem of exclusion that arises when they are used as the basis of a theory of human well-being.

**2.3. Pragmatic (but not unprincipled)**

We can indeed abandon the need to give a general criterion of human nature. The primary task of a theory of human well-being is not the metaphysical or scientific one of defining what it is to be a human being, but the practical one of discovering what makes the life of the entities we call “human beings” good. Sure, we must have some view of human beings when we do this. But what we need is simply to identify valuable features of them. This is different from figuring out what their nature consists in. The most important thing is to respond to value wherever it lies. So, we must seek it, and respond to it, in whatever set of entities we relate to, whatever the contours of the set. It could be all human beings, or some of them. It could be non-human beings also. Here I am concerned only with human beings. But there is no fundamental restriction.

This pragmatic point of Revised Perfectionism is not unprincipled. The scope of judgments about well-being is itself a matter of normative determination. Thus, it could be problematic to say that when we consider what makes the life of a xenophobe, or a slave holder, good, we must presuppose that the capacities and features linked to those roles have positive significance. This is obvious when we link a theory of well-being to a moral theory of justice. But even at the level of prudential reasoning we do not have reason to take every capacity as a positive source of value.

The scope of judgments about well-being is often fixed by the nature of the practical exercise one is engaging in. If we are framing economic policy for a country or for international institutions, we will seek quite general accounts of the people affected—more general than if we are simply focusing on our own predicament or that of our friends. But even then, we will have reason to be attuned to important differences, and to note exceptions to our generalizations to attend appropriately to the concerns of subsets of the population through more specific policies that track their valuable capacities and the specific challenges they face. An example of this is a health care policy that has specific provisions for children and people with disabilities.

**2.4. Disjunctive**

Revised Perfectionism’s pragmatic outlook also urges us be flexible in our account of the list of the valuable capacities of human beings. The statement of the list can, at its most general level, be given by a disjunctive list.[[14]](#footnote-14) We can say that the list includes C1, C2, C3, … Cn, and add that it is not assumed that every human being displays them all. Judgments of prudential value apply to a set of human beings whenever they display at least one of them, and the content of those judgments tracks the development and exercise of precisely those which are present. So, judgments of well-being are indexed to the capacities of the human beings under consideration. Since human beings vary, some judgments which apply to some will not apply to others. Some human beings may display all of the features in the list, others C1 and C2, still others C2 and C3, and so on. What is important for a general theory of human well-being is that we have resources to make judgments about each human being, not that the judgments are the same for all. We need to be inclusive without being oblivious to difference. The practical significance of this is apparent, again, when we think about how to reason about health care policies for different people.

**2.5. Holistic**

We should be mindful of the fact that the development and exercise of different valuable capacities interact, and that given the circumstances faced by individuals, it may not be possible to fully develop and exercise them all. So, well-being requires something more fine-grained than merely activities in which the valuable capacities are developed and exercised. Revised Perfectionism captures this by saying that what is required is an appropriate overall schedule of development and exercise. Thus, for example, it could be that the capacity for self-determination is of such great importance that at least in some cases a schedule of activity that engages it significantly is better for the agent than another in which it is ignored, even if the agent ends up exercising their capacity for pleasure more. The processes affording well-being to the person will often feature the engagement of several valuable capacities, to varying extents, and in different combinations. Much of the work of practical reasoning precisely consists in figuring out appropriate schedules that deliver optimal overall prospects.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Revised Perfectionism abandons reference to human nature, and calls for an evaluative and pragmatic focus on individuals’ valuable features. Has this proposal changed the perfectionist view beyond recognition? Perhaps. If it is constitutive of perfectionism that its ground is a purely descriptive view of human nature, then the view I am proposing is not a revision of it, but a radical departure. It could then be labelled without reference to “perfectionism.” After all, what’s in a name? But I believe that the core idea of perfectionism is that people’s well-being turns on the development and exercise of their capacities. Revised Perfectionism retains this idea while developing it in a new, and more plausible way. What is needed, at this point, is to show that Revised Perfectionism, in addition to avoiding the objections faced by Traditional Perfectionism, also captures its specific merits. I propose to do this by developing Revised Perfectionism within a specific normative framework, the Dignitarian Approach. Let me explain.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**3. Developing Revised Perfectionism within the Dignitarian Approach**

Recall the strategy proposed above to overcome the dilemma between the wrong properties objection and circularity. It could be objected that its victory is purchased at the price of losing the advertised advantage of Traditional Perfectionism over objective list theories. The advantage was that perfectionism offers something more basic to explain and unify the valuable items on the lists. But if that basis, in Revised Perfectionism, is yet another set of objective values (a list of valuable capacities), then we are faced with the task of explaining and unifying them. In response, it is important, as Bradford has aptly noted, that every theory of well-being, when it hits rock-bottom, will face a problem of this kind. Desire-satisfaction theories and hedonism, for example, may similarly be visited by the question of what makes the satisfaction of desires and the occurrence of pleasure good for people.[[17]](#footnote-17) I wish to make three further points. First, the new, Dignitarian Approach suggested here has plausibility as an overarching normative framework to develop Revised Perfectionism. The task of integrating the elements in it turns out to be an important substantive one which is best stated and explored as one of the positive issues of ethical reflection (so that it is a feature, not a bug, of a theory if it forefronts its treatment). Second, the approach turns out to have great explanatory power with respect to more specific judgments about valuable forms of activity and life in different practical exercises. Finally, although the Dignitarian Approach drops the idea of human essence, it can capture the valuable roles it might have played in Traditional Perfectionism. I discuss these points in sequence.

**3.1. The Dignitarian Approach**

It could be objected that Traditional Perfectionism is not really saddled with the problems canvassed in section 2 because it can be characterized not as relying on an account of the human species but on a non-biological one about the (human) person.[[18]](#footnote-18) But then it is not clear that this is a merely descriptive account. It seems, rather, to rely on a theoretical construction devised for normative purposes. If this is the case, then it is better to be upfront and outline what the exercise consists in. The Dignitarian Approach is helpful here, providing Revised Perfectionism with a fruitful rationale.

I developed elsewhere this approach for the purposes of a moral theory of human rights and social justice,[[19]](#footnote-19) but I believe that it can be extended to prudential discussions (while also illuminating the relations between the two registers). The basics of this approach, to be engaged in the remainder of this paper, are the following. The core idea in the moral context is that we have reason to organize our social life in such a way that we respond appropriately to the valuable features of individual human beings that give rise to their dignity. *Dignity* is, fundamentally, a non-conventional, normative status of human individuals such that certain forms of respect and concern are owed to them.[[20]](#footnote-20) *Dignitarian norms* state what, specifically, the appropriate treatment would consist in in the various contexts under discussion. It is useful to distinguish between *status-dignity* and *condition-dignity*. The former is the normative status of individuals mentioned above, while the latter is the state of affairs enjoyed by individuals when the dignitarian norms relative to them are fulfilled. Importantly, an individual may have status-dignity without also having condition-dignity. Although their status-dignity ought to be responded to by treating them in ways that fulfill dignitarian norms, the relevant agents may fail to do so (and are for that reason subject to moral criticism). An example is the predicament of a slave: because they are a slave, they lack condition-dignity, but because they retain status-dignity, they should be granted freedom from slavery (which is mandated by a dignitarian norm stating their right to liberty from forced labor). Now, people have status-dignity because of certain features of them. These features constitute the *basis of dignity*. Common candidates for the list of valuable features are capacities for self-determination through prudential and moral reasoning, theoretical knowledge, empathy, social cooperation, and sentience.[[21]](#footnote-21) The content of dignitarian norms tracks these features as they are engaged in certain *circumstances of dignity*; they state desirable and feasible responses to people when they face solvable problems regarding the maintenance, development, and exercise of their valuable capacities. An ideal of *solidaristic empowerment* gathers the appropriate responses as a set of negative duties not to block or destroy, and positive duties to protect and facilitate, people’s unfolding of their valuable capacities in their pursuit of flourishing lives. The appropriate response to the predicament of the slave is to prohibit slave-labor and to create social opportunities for people to work in alternative ways in which their valuable capacities for self-determination and self-realization in cooperation with others are unfolded rather than crushed.

We can extend the Dignitarian Approach to the prudential register to develop prudential norms in addition to moral ones. Both norms specify appropriate responses to valuable capacities, the presence of which are at the basis of persons’ status-dignity. This is not a mechanical extension, however, as prudential and moral norms differ. Typically, the latter must factor in an asymmetry between self-regarding and other-regarding action. I cannot do your flourishing for you; your flourishing is your own path. Although I may have positive duties to facilitate it, I must (within appropriate moral limits) respect your right to shape your flourishing in your own way.[[22]](#footnote-22) But as I see them, the two kinds of norms are significantly related. Solidaristic empowerment is geared to supporting other people’s pursuit of flourishing lives. Importantly, the Dignitarian Approach already encodes the elements introduced in the Revised Perfectionism proposed in the previous section. Thus, for example, dignity is primarily a status of individuals, not of essentialized kinds of them. The basis of dignity is given in a disjunctive list, so that to have it an individual need only display some of the items in the list. Since different individuals display different items, and face different challenges, different specific responses will be appropriate to them. There is no assumption of a uniform human nature. Furthermore, the basis of dignity is an evaluative notion all the way down. To say that P has dignity is to hold that P has some of the valuable capacities C1, C2 …, Cn at the basis of dignity, and that (at least) P should seek life projects that support the development and exercise of their existing capacities in the contexts under consideration.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Recall, from section 2.2, the difference between general normative theses and their specification in various normative requirements. The common basic idea of responding to dignity by supporting the development and exercise of valuable capacities can be articulated in different ways for different people with different specific sets of valuable capacities and facing different challenges. There is no assumption that human flourishing will involve the same schedule of activities for every human being. Dignitarianism in fact militates against such an assumption, as the assumption leads us to fail to respond to the dignity of individual human beings. The appropriate responses must be attuned to specific configurations of different people, not to essentialized kinds or statistic types of them.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The main roles of the idea of dignity are to help identify the capacities that give rise to normative responses and to sharpen the focus on individuals rather than aggregates. The Dignitarian Approach thus provides a positive rationale for, and an appealing elaboration of, Revised Perfectionism’s evaluative focus on the valuable capacities of individuals rather than the capacities of the human species. The resulting view can be stated as follows:

**Dignitarian Perfectionism about human well-being:** The good life for human individuals is determined by their valuable features. The valuable features of the individuals considered involve a set of capacities *that lie at the basis of their dignity*. The unfolding (the development and exercise) of these capacities, in some appropriate overall schedule, is good for them.

**3.2. Substantive inquiry**

How do we develop substantive normative views about human well-being within Dignitarian Perfectionism? We start with the widest notion of the human being as *homo sapiens.* This set is made up by an evolving population, which is loosely unified by a common genealogy, interbreeding, or ecological niche-sharing, but in which internal variation (genetic, phenotypic, etc.) is characteristic rather than to be dismissed as accidental or abnormal.[[25]](#footnote-25) Within this set, we proceed to identify normatively relevant features of (biological) human beings as a matter of *scoping for dignity*. We seek to find out when status-dignity shines forth and what it calls for, and when condition-dignity is missing and can be delivered. We move back and forth between more general and more specific normative claims to develop coherent views in reflective equilibrium. The inquiry is an ongoing, open-ended one. We may revise our initial view of the list of valuable capacities at the basis of dignity when we notice that we cannot make sense of the well-being of a person who does not have them but has others we had missed, and we may revise our particular judgments about what is good for some person when we come to apply to their predicament a view of the importance of unfolding some capacities, which we obtained as a result of an independent reflection.

An example is provided by discussion on human flourishing in working activities. Most people have to work to make a living. Their job is thus instrumentally valuable to them. But is it intrinsically valuable too? According to critics of contemporary capitalism, working activities are far from being intrinsically desirable. In capitalism, workers face alienated labor, which is productive activity in which they:

(AL1) are dominated by others, such as the bosses under whose direction they must toil; and/or

(AL2) do not control (or even understand) the social process of production, its mechanisms, and results; and/or

(AL3) do not develop and exercise their creative powers and talents, but are instead stuck in unengaging, repetitive, and ultimately stunting schedules of operations; and/or

(AL4) interact with others, such as their fellow workers, managers, and costumers, in ways that are not mutually supportive and cooperative but are often marked by indifference and even hostility and rapaciousness; and/or

(AL5) do not count among the final aims of production the fulfilling of the needs of fellow human beings, but only the fulfillment of external goals such as subsistence and consumption; and/or

(AL6) do not garner enough social appreciation or recognition.

A normative assessment of each of these characteristics of contemporary working activities can be illuminated through Dignitarian Perfectionism. The critic could say, for example, that AL1-AL6 are problematic because they display foreseeable and avoidable deficits with respect to the development and exercise of workers’ capacities for self-management, creativity, knowledge, cooperation, and socially beneficial contribution, among others. If, as it seems, these capacities are valuable—being at the basis of dignity or closely related to it—then it would be correct to say that workers would (other things being equal) be better off if they had, and used, real opportunities to work in ways in which these capacities are unfolded. Marx would be right that it is not enough to raise workers’ wages. This “would not conquer either for the worker or for labour their human status and dignity.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Workers would need access to work in which their valuable capacities can unfold more fully—work in which they can decide what and how to produce, associate on terms of mutual respect and fellowship, and bring into the world products and services which meet the needs of others. In this normative inquiry, the critic of alienation would be drawing up lists of bads (characteristics of alienated labor) and goods (characteristics of work enacting self-development). The items in these lists would present objective bads and goods. They would be unified and explained by reference to an ideal of human flourishing at work. This flourishing would involve certain activities featuring self-determination and self-realization, in which the valuable capacities at the basis of dignity mentioned before are appropriately engaged in certain contemporary contexts of work. They would also be tailored to the specific features of individuals. Different workers with different talents and personal outlooks would do well by producing in different ways, and they would variously benefit consumers whose needs are also diverse.[[27]](#footnote-27) Each worker is to chart their project of flourishing by developing a practical schedule harnessing their various capacities in combinations that are feasible and reasonable to them.

To conclude, Dignitarian Perfectionism frames substantive inquiry without collapsing into the objective list theory. It does not do so because the list it relies on is not a list of valuable states of affairs for people (friendship, knowledge, non-alienated work and achievement, etc.), but a list of people’s valuable *capacities*. The value of the states of affairs is explained by their enacting the development and exercise of these capacities in the fulfillment of projects featuring various appropriate and complex configurations. Thus, Dignitarian Perfectionism retains the attractive feature of Traditional Perfectionism (missed by the bare bones objective list theories) of providing a unifying explanation of prudentially valuable states of affairs. It also captures Traditional Perfectionism’s insight that the good for people is centrally predicated not upon such states of affairs but the life processes in which their capacities are unfolded. The discussion of the critical appraisal of alienated work, and its positive flipside in the ideal of flourishing at work, illustrate the structure of these points and the substantive results of using this revised perfectionism.

**3.3. Possibilities and limitations**

Before proceeding withshowing how Dignitarian Perfectionism can capture other insights of Traditional Perfectionism while avoiding its pitfalls, it is worth pausing to consider two structural issues about the proposal offered in this paper.[[28]](#footnote-28)

3.3.1. The space of possibilities

The first issue concerns the space of possibilities. I want to acknowledge that, in addition to Revised Perfectionism (and its elaboration through Dignitarian Perfectionism), there could be other non-reductivist forms of perfectionism that involve a less radical departure from Traditional Perfectionism. An important example is David Brink’s recent proposal of a “normative perfectionism” (NP). NP contrasts with “forms of perfectionism that appeal to a biological conception of human nature” and instead “grounds perfectionist ideals in a normative conception of human nature”.[[29]](#footnote-29) There are important affinities between NP and the Dignitarian Perfectionism I propose. In particular, I agree with Brink that we can ground perfectionist claims in an evaluative or normative rather than a merely descriptive or biological account of the features of those whose lives we appraise. I also agree (and argued in my own way) that a perfectionist account can escape the alleged dilemma between empirical but normatively counterintuitive grounds and normative but justificatorily circular grounds.

There are, however, two important differences. The first is that, as I present it, Dignitarian Perfectionism includes an *individual-centered focus.* The basis of dignity of any human individual whose life we appraise is made up by the valuable features of this individual. There is no reference to human nature. It does not matter fundamentally whether the valuable features of this individual are constitutive of a nature this individual shares with others. By contrast, NP still presents perfectionism as making ineliminable reference to “human nature”[[30]](#footnote-30) and its “distinctive capacities”[[31]](#footnote-31)—even if it construes human nature as a normative rather than as a biological kind, focusing on evaluative features such as moral personality or rational agency instead of descriptive ones such as reproductive closure or common lineage. Second, and relatedly, my account of the basis or grounds of perfectionist claims is more inclusive. NP focuses on capacities typical of “rational nature.” In my view, these are neither necessary for nor exhaustive of the dignity of human individuals. Some individuals with severe cognitive disabilities can have status-dignity in virtue of having other capacities (such as sentience), and their lives can go better or worse depending on how those capacities are unfolded. As a result, Dignitarian Perfectionism has different, and I believe more plausible, extensional implications than NP. It allows us to make claims about the well-being of individuals who do not fit the strictures of human nature as construed by NP.[[32]](#footnote-32) This said, the two views might well converge if normative perfectionism is reformulated in a more abstract way to allow for versions of it that do not include reference to “human nature” and cast the grounds of perfectionist claims as including a wider set of valuable capacities.

As pointed out, perfectionism seems to have an advantage over objective list views insofar as it promises to provide explanatory unity to the elements of a good life whereas an objective list depicts an “unconnected heap” of goods. However, an objection to the view that the human good consists in the unfolding of valuable capacities is that it does it not really offer unity and reinvites the heap objection. This seems to be especially so because almost any activity — even the relatively passive activity of experiencing of pleasure — could be depicted as the exercising of a valuable capacity. It is not clear what constraint the revised perfectionism proposed here provides or what unity it secures.

In response, notice first that the proposed account is indeed constraining. For example, since it requires focus on *valuable* capacities, it will not necessarily take every activity to be a potential contributor to well-being. Some capacities might not be valuable at all. Second, (and as pointed out at the end of 3.2) although the account is, like the objective list theory, pluralistic regarding well-being relevant features, it provides a deeper explanation, adding a layer referring to the capacities engaged by the activities that contribute to well-being. Third, and finally, the account does offer a form of unification. It guides appraisal of how good the life of an individual is by asking whether, and to what extent, this individual’s activities feature *the unfolding of the valuable capacities* *of this individual* *in an appropriate overall schedule*. Now, it is true that since this account does not take rational agency as a necessary condition for prudential value, some activities not involving this agency (such as some forms of pleasurable activity) could be contributors to well-being. But this inclusion seems intuitively plausible. Although it makes the account broader than other forms of perfectionism, the cost of a narrower view (such as one stating the presence and engagement of rational agency as a necessary condition for prudential value) would be to miss important dimensions of human well-being. Unification should not come at this cost. It should alert us to what matters rather than forcing a simplification that obliterates important distinctions and depresses ethical sensibility. Dignitarian Perfectionism offers unification through reference to valuable capacities and their relational configurations as they are present in the individuals under consideration, while retaining an intuitively plausible openness and attunement to their diversity.

3.3.2. Potential limitations

The second structural issue I want to address concerns the potential limitations of Dignitarian Perfectionism. To judge the success of this account, we should consider whether it is extensionally adequate by yielding a view of what contributes to people’s well-being that matches the judgments we find compelling in reflective equilibrium. The account should also be explanatorily adequate by providing illuminating grounds for those judgments. As we proceed with this assessment, we should distinguish between two exercises, one concerning how well the account does as a specifically perfectionist account of well-being and another concerning how it fares in comparison to other types of account that are not perfectionist.

The focus of this paper is on the first theoretical exercise. Although I do not claim to have established Dignitarian Perfectionism, I think that the discussion offered so far (which will continue in the next section) shows that it is quite plausible and worthy of further exploration. It retains the core perfectionist thought that well-being involves the unfolding of people’s capacities, but develops this core in a way that avoids important extensional and explanatory deficits of other perfectionist accounts.

Before continuing with the last point in this exercise (in the next section), let me briefly address the question prompted by the second exercise. How plausible is Dignitarian Perfectionism in comparison to other, non-perfectionist conceptions of well-being? My aim here is not to settle this question, but to frame its exploration in such a way that the potential limitations of Dignitarian Perfectionism are explicitly formulated.

To determine how compelling Dignitarian Perfectionism is, we can identify three possible construals of it.[[33]](#footnote-33) I state them in order of decreasing ambitiousness:

(C1) Dignitarian perfectionist considerations *exhaust* the space of basic well-being considerations.

(C2) Dignitarian perfectionist considerations *dominate* the space of basic well-being considerations.

(C3) Dignitarian perfectionist considerations *are important factors or ingredients* in the space of basic well-being considerations.

Viewed along (C1), Dignitarian Perfectionism identifies all the basic considerations or factors for determining people’s well-being. (A factor is basic when its contribution to well-being is not derived from another factor.) So, any intuitively plausible considerations offered by other theories, such as hedonistic, desire-satisfaction, or objective list theories, would have to be accounted for on the basis of such factors. Thus, for example, the significance of pleasure would be explained by reference to a valuable capacity of sentience, or by noting that its object might track the exercise of other valuable capacities. Similarly, the satisfaction of desires would be significant because they involve people’s capacity to set aims for the themselves, or when their object centers on processes or states of affairs contributing to other aspects of the desirer’s flourishing. Finally, the items in a plausible objective list of goods, such as achievement, friendship, and so on, would be (as envisioned in 3.2 and 3.3.1 above) instances of the unfolding of the relevant individual’s valuable capacities to set and pursue ends, form social bonds, and so on. Dignitarian Perfectionism construed along (C1) would be falsified if there are some other well-being considerations (such as some forms of pleasure, some instances of desire-satisfaction, or some objective goods) which cannot be explained in these ways.

Construed along (C2) and (C3), Dignitarian Perfectionism would make weaker claims. Perfectionist considerations would not be seen as the only basic well-being factors but as components of a larger, plural set of basic factors. (C2) would still give a kind of priority to perfectionist factors, by saying that they constrain the significance of the other factors in this pluralist space (so that whenever there is a conflict between them, the former take precedence). Thus, for example, if pleasure is not itself a perfectionist factor while self-determination is, the former would not contribute to well-being if it comes at the price of curtailing the latter. Dignitarian Perfectionism construed along (C2) would be falsified if, or limited to the extent that, there are some non-perfectionist well-being considerations which would not be constrained by perfectionist considerations. Finally, (C3) is the weakest presentation, holding that although perfectionist considerations are irreducibly important for well-being, they could be outweighed by the other pro tanto considerations. Thus, for example, pleasure might on some occasions contribute more to well-being than self-determination, so that when they conflict on those occasions, the former might be what prudential assessment should, all things considered, favor. Dignitarian Perfectionism construed along (C3) would be falsified if perfectionist considerations are not even be a pro tanto basic factor in contexts in which they could be applied.

Although I have suggested ways in which a strong form of Dignitarian Perfectionism could be developed, it has not been an ambition of this paper to determine whether Dignitarian Perfectionism is better than non-perfectionist theories of well-being, or which of the three construals of it is best. This would require a different paper. The most difficult tasks would of course be to defend Dignitarian Perfectionism from objections to versions of it construed along (C1) or (C2). But I hope that the foregoing remarks at least frame the exploration of those tasks by identifying the conditions of falsification of Dignitarian Perfectionism for each construal. Since it is possible that it does fail in the comparisons outlined (i.e., that there are valuable capacities at the basis of dignity but their unfolding does not exhaust or dominate or contribute to the well-being of their carriers), these remarks also help to show that Dignitarian Perfectionism is indeed a substantive conception within the space of normative possibilities.

Let me conclude by noting that the space of possibilities also includes different versions of Revised Perfectionism. Two possible distinctions are the following. I presented Dignitarian Perfectionism as an elaboration of Revised Perfectionism. But there could be other elaborations which do not make use of the idea of dignity. Dignitarian Perfectionism would be only a limited version of Revised Perfectionism if we find, on reflection, that some forms of well-being involve the unfolding of certain valuable capacities but that these capacities are not part of the basis of dignity. If this were so, then the application of Dignitarian Perfectionism would have to be circumscribed to only some normative exercises. It might be, for example, that it is particularly useful in a moral theory of obligatory conduct or social justice (by helping identify what forms of support for the well-being of others is owed to them or they have a right to[[34]](#footnote-34)), but insufficient to illuminate the totality of our judgments about prudential value. Second, and finally, we could identify different possible versions of Dignitarian Perfectionism itself by providing competing accounts of the capacities in the basis of dignity. I have favored a broad version that is not narrowly focused on rational agency. But, as noted, narrower versions are indeed possible. These alternative versions are to be compared by exploring the extent to which they capture and explain instances of well-being in various specific normative exercises. As pointed out, figuring out the appropriate contents of a perfectionist account is a matter of an ongoing search for reflective equilibrium as we engage in substantive normative inquiry.

To mark openness to the further inquiry regarding the possibilities and potential limitations identified in this section, we can add to the formulation of Revised Perfectionism a rider that says that “human individuals’ well-being consists, *at least in part,* in unfolding their valuable capacities,” and expand this rider for Dignitarian Perfectionism to say that “human individuals’ well-being consists, *at least in part,* in unfolding the capacities at the basis of their dignity.”

**3.4. Accounting for the valuable role of some generalizations**

Although Dignitarian Perfectionism retains the appealing feature of Traditional Perfectionism of getting at the explanatory source of the valuable states of affairs which objective list theories prematurely stop at, its refusal to rely on an idea of human essence may seem problematic. Such an idea may have useful roles. I conclude this paper by arguing that, despite dropping appeal to human essence, Dignitarian Perfectionism can capture the valuable roles this idea might have played in normative inquiry.

Hurka says that when perfectionism focuses on human essence it appeals to “what makes us what we are” rather than on “a temporary or tangential property, such as being a lawyer or a hockey fan.” This makes perfectionism “attractive as a potential foundation of morality,” as an “ethical bedrock” with which to explain all (or most) moral requirements.[[35]](#footnote-35) Let us explore this line of thought further, and ask: In what circumstances, and for what purposes, do we find appeal to the idea of human essence or nature fruitful? And, given the problems with that idea, can we serve these purposes at least as well by deploying Dignitarian Perfectionism instead? Developing the principled pragmatist stance mentioned in 2.3, I argue that we can do without the idea of human nature and just focus on a disjunctive list of valuable capacities at the basis of dignity, as they are engaged in the relevant contexts of inquiry, while retaining whatever were the useful roles of the idea of human nature.

The idea of human nature has been used to play roles that are not valuable. For example, it has been used to ignore the well-being of non-human animals, or to cement elitist and hierarchical views of social organization which crushed the flourishing of some human beings to foster that of allegedly more fit or pure specimens of the human species. But other roles seem valuable. There are cases in which it is desirable to identify more or less general, or typical, features of human beings. I will discuss four such roles.

3.4.1. Critical distance from existing conventions and practices

The idea of human nature allows us to gain distance from existing ethical and moral conventions, and to criticize them as unreasonable because they set back something more basic and important. Consider someone who says that they absolutely must stay in a certain job to afford some luxury items of consumption they covet and to keep their social status in a competitive milieu, even if that job demands that they work very long hours and gives them little opportunity to develop their personal talents. A critic would like to be able to explain their view that the satisfaction this person gets from luxury consumption and status in their current social milieu are less important than the self-realization they would achieve in a job in which their personal talents were more clearly engaged, the joy they would get from devoting more time to friends and family, and the benefits of partaking in social circles that were less focused on cut-throat competition and more centered on mutual support and appreciation. Or consider a blue-collar worker who says that they will vote for a right-wing politician promising to make their country great again, in part by imposing high tariffs on products imported from poorer and distant countries. A critic, although appreciative of the need of this worker to keep their job, would also want to justify their view that the blue-collar worker should consider the fact that the workers in the poorer countries also want to keep their jobs, and have similar talents and projects the pursuit of which would be hampered if international cooperation was curtailed or slanted to the disproportionate advantage of richer countries. In both of these examples, the critic would be trying to dig below the surface of circulating views about what makes for people’s good life, making claims about the objective good of developing and exercising certain valuable capacities, while also insisting that these capacities, and their importance, is quite widespread. This seems to be a laudable aim. Dignitarian Perfectionism could help the critic to do just that without any reference to human essence. It is enough to show that the capacities appealed to are broadly held by the people the critical assessment focuses on, that they are valuable, and that they are worth supporting despite their conventional underappreciation.

3.4.2. Formulation of normative claims with ample scope

In our normative judgments, we sometimes want to range widely regarding intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, and historical domains. Using an idea of human nature may help to state claims about what people have reason to do which range over expansive rather than episodic cases. But although ranging widely may indeed sometimes be a good idea, we do not need a view of human essence to do so.

Consider first the intrapersonal level. When I choose a career, for example, I am making a decision with life-long implications.[[36]](#footnote-36) To figure out whether a certain career is good for me, it would help to know what important capacities would be constant in me across time and consider whether the career would foster them well (by comparison to other career paths available). There are of course some idiosyncrasies that make me different from other people, but human nature would provide some useful information that I should pay attention to. But what I really need to pay attention to is whatever valuable capacities *I* am likely to have over the period of time considered, and cater appropriately to *them*. Some of these are likely to remain in place over my lifespan, while others may disappear or emerge in different segments of it. Some may be typically human (i.e., shared with most other human beings) and some not. My prudential reasoning does not need a picture of human nature to cover the range. Something similar happens at the interpersonal level. It is important, when developing a friendship for example, to be able to focus on features that we share with our friends and rely upon them as we figure out how to interact. But, again, what is key is that we identify our valuable capacities and pursue some projects appropriately engaging them. Some of these capacities we may share even if they are not typical of human nature. We may be an odd pair of friends. It is also important to identify what is not interpersonally shared, to build complementarities. Relationships flourish not only when the parties to them build on common features, but also when they can improve each other’s condition by unfolding features the other lacks. We enrich each other’s lives this way. (This point also applies to the discussion of larger societal settings in the next paragraph.) Since Dignitarian Perfectionism focuses on disjunctions of valuable features rather than on conjunctions of essentially instantiated ones, it gives us a better framework than human nature does.

Take, finally, the social and historical levels. We want to be able to articulate views about social justice to apply in a whole country, and also to pursue global justice. We want to use some of our commitments of justice to back judgments about historical progress, retrogression, or mere drift. Conceptions of justice need a metric of advantage, including reference to well-being, to have full content. Now, the idea of human nature may help develop this metric. If, for example, we wish to articulate a country-wide policy regarding access to dignified working conditions, or even to explain why there are global human rights to them, it might help to deploy a picture of human nature including certain general capacities for cooperation and self-determination in productive activities. These would help us explain why sweatshops conditions (in which workers are cajoled into toiling for extremely long-hours, harassed, humiliated, and pigeonholed into repetitive and stunting tasks, and all this for little reward and recognition) are bad in Dhaka as well as in Montreal. They would also help us explain why introducing labor regulations limiting domination and oppression at the workplace constitute progress rather than mere historical drift. But, again, we could do this without appeals to human essence. We could instead note that indeed there are widespread and valuable features of human beings which are present in multiple economic contexts, without having to say that they are essential of every individual of the species. Some features might not be so widespread but may still be evaluatively relevant in some contexts (such as, perhaps, some unique talents of some individuals or groups). And some features may be quite widespread but ethically repugnant (such as, perhaps, some tendencies to dominate and exploit the vulnerable). The Dignitarian Approach, with its evaluative and more flexible informational basis, would enable our reflection to range as widely as we need to make the relevant normative judgments without ignoring these points.

In navigating this combination of more or less sweeping general claims and attention to more particular configurations, it is helpful to deploy the distinction between status-dignity and condition-dignity and the distinction between the more fundamental and the more applied requirements of human flourishing, while noticing that diversity is significant across the board. Status-dignity can be stated at a quite general level by saying that individuals are owed concern and respect given certain valuable capacities of them. Generality and diversity can both be captured at this level: we can mention valuable capacities in a more or less generic language, but we can also state them in a disjunction rather than in a conjunction. Now, dignitarian norms articulate the appropriate responses with different degrees of specificity. Some dignitarian norms are quite abstract, and some quite narrow. Rights to access decent or non-alienating work may be stated in different ways. The statements at the level of the most basic principles of human rights discourse, for example, are not as detailed as the prescriptions orienting their implementation at the level of governmental policy in this or that country, or at this or that time. What is crucial is that the normative statements are framed so that the valuable capacities of different people are given their due. A picture of condition-dignity will then likely include much more detail than a picture of status-dignity. Condition-dignity involves the fulfillment of the various specific dignitarian norms that apply appropriately in the relevant contexts by addressing the specific challenges that the unfolding of the valuable features initially stated in the disjunction of valuable capacities giving rise to status-dignity calls for. But this diversity in application will not track the full sweep of what is valuable to people unless the grounding norms at the most general level already are open to that diversity (for example, via the disjunctive view of the basis of dignity). We can indeed envision forms of solidarity that foster the well-being of large groups of people. But to actually cater for the well-being of the individuals in those groups we should pay attention not only to what is valuable and common among them, but also to what is valuable but not shared. Solidarity does not require uniformity.

3.4.3. Feasibility

Dignitarian Perfectionism concentrates fundamentally on people’s valuable features (the ones at the basis of dignity). But normative judgments also need to consider the feasibility of what they recommend. Now, to make appraisals of feasibility, features of people which are in themselves evaluatively neutral, or even disvaluable, are also relevant. And here reference to some generalizations about people’s tendencies, and about their relation to their circumstances, are apposite. For example, a recommendation that people live in a way that involves extreme abnegation and self-sacrifice is likely to be frustrated by their strong tendencies to affirm their personal standpoint and interests. Scientific research in psychology and other social sciences is here quite relevant. Such research may sometimes be surprising. Thus, despite the widespread view that human beings are intensely selfish, research has uncovered not only the presence of self-regarding tendencies, but also the simultaneous and robust presence of other-regarding and altruistic motivations. Some solidaristic projects, practices, and institutions, are thus in fact quite feasible.[[37]](#footnote-37)

These empirical generalizations are indeed significant for practical reasoning. But they do not require endorsing the idea that there is a human essence, fixed and uniform across individuals. In fact, empirical research may also uncover practically significant variations. Thus, some individuals display heightened tendencies to be altruistic independently of reciprocation. And, interestingly, research also shows that societies have found ways of supporting these individuals, celebrating them and caring for their offspring in case of demise, thus extending into the future the incidence of their behavioral patterns as they have evolved biologically and culturally.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Returning to the example of well-being in labor practices, it is interesting that Marx emphasized both generality and differentiation, and that he did this both in evaluative and descriptive scientific exercises. Thus, Marx thought, on evaluative grounds, that human flourishing would require engagement in practices of creative and cooperative production. But he thought, on descriptive social-scientific grounds, that this kind of flourishing would not be feasible for the majority of people until a high level of technological development and the introduction of egalitarian property relations made it possible to avoid nasty competition over scarce basic material goods and reduced dramatically the number of hours devoted to necessary work focused instrumentally on subsistence.[[39]](#footnote-39) When depicting a socialist society, Marx also characterized it by saying that production in which people developed and exercised their creative talents would be widespread, and that in it the particular talents of each individual would be unleashed in singular ways that would defy standardization.[[40]](#footnote-40) Plausible points like these can be stated without strong claims about human essence. In fact, an evaluative view like the one favored by Dignitarian Perfectionism, coupled with statements of empirically justified descriptions, help make them more compellingly. The former trains our attention on what is intrinsically valuable in different people (such as their capacities for singular contributions), while the latter helps us find features of people and their situations that block or enable their support—some quite widespread, some more local and uncommon, but both practically important for the pursuit of well-being by real people given their own predicament.

3.4.4. Hope and the possibility of critique

We saw that some generalizations about value-neutral, and even about disvaluable features of people may be practically relevant. The former may have to be engaged to enable desirable changes, and the latter may have to be moderated and recognized as possible limits to some projects. We also saw that the relevance of these features can be captured without reliance on an idea of human essence. Something similar holds for descriptive generalizations about the presence of the valuable features in the basis of dignity.

The identification of the widespread presence of some valuable features in people has two salient roles. The first is that it underwrites hope in human flourishing—a point linked to the one about feasibility made above. Personal and societal projects can be shown to be not only desirable but also to some extent practicable if they harness valuable features which are robust across personal and social time and space. If many people have strong tendencies to seek self-managed, creative, and cooperative production, for example, then projects aimed at unleashing these tendencies will often find a home in their emotions and practical reasoning and move them to envisage progressive change. Secondly, they will help us explain the conditions of possibility of normative critique of personal and societal circumstances in which these tendencies are set back or stunted. To pursue normative critique, agents need a higher order capacity to appreciate the value of what is compromised, and, if this critique is not to be delusional, the existence of what has that value.

But again, these important roles do not require a strong idea of human nature or essence. We could be alive to, and consciously foster valuable capacities which others have but which we do not ourselves have, and vice versa. We can help others chart projects realizing talents we lack, and even help people flourish who do not have our capacities for agential critique and planning. If we keep track of the pluralistic basis of dignity, and an individual-centered focus, these important points will not be ignored.

To conclude, the Dignitarian Approach enables us to range as widely as we need to make theoretically justified and practically relevant generalizations, without imposing a procrustean blindness to empirical and evaluative diversity that diminishes the desirability of the content of our projects, and the hope for their fulfillment.

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1. Perfectionism about well-being is different from perfectionism as a political theory. I focus on the former, although I occasionally address issues relevant for political theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Guy Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-being. An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 78. See also Dale Dorsey, “Three Arguments for Perfection,” *Nous* 44 (2010), 59-79; and Gwen Bradford, “Perfectionism,” in F. Fletcher ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 124-34. There are different specific accounts of perfectionism, characterizing human nature in different ways. For example, Hurka focuses on human persons as living beings with certain physical capacities and with theoretical and practical rationality, T. H. Green concentrates on persons’ capacity for moral, deliberative agency, and Sher highlights some “near-universal and near-inevitable” capacities featuring in human activity. Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For discussion of the history of perfectionist views, see David Brink, “Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 19.45 (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Brink, “The Significance of Desire,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* v.3, ed. R. Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5-46, at 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The following three paragraphs rely heavily on the survey in Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-being,* chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Here I take the capacity for pleasure as one of the capacities perfectionism can focus on. This possibility is mentioned by some perfectionists (see Bradford, “Perfectionism,” 131). Of course, the significance of pleasure may be taken to be outside the remit of perfectionism, and recognized in a broader, pluralist view that factors it in together, and in combination, with the capacities within perfectionist focus. For this possibility, see Hurka, *Perfectionism,* 6, 27-8, 31-2. I am not here trying to settle what the proper status of pleasure is, but merely using it as an example to make structural points about perfectionism as a type of theory. I am also not rejecting a pluralist view combining perfectionism with elements of other conceptions of prudential value. I explore these possibilities further in section 3.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bernard Williams, *Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Importantly, uniqueness is not a necessary condition for the intrinsic prudential value of a feature. If we discovered that other beings on some distant planet share human beings’ capacities for sophisticated reasoning, it would be odd to abandon the judgment that the well-being of human beings in part consists in unfolding such capacities. See Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 515-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-Being*, 83. As Fletcher notes, the reflective equilibrium method is not a particular account of what human nature is, but a proposal for how to develop such an account. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This point is missed in Dorsey’s critical discussion of reflective equilibrium as a strategy to defend perfectionism (“Three Arguments for Perfectionism,” 67). Fletcher notes briefly that the objection of circularity could be addressed by distinguishing different senses of “determine.” Fletcher, *The Philosophy of Well-being,* 90 n. 7. For the point that within a coherentist epistemological outlook different items may have different standing and roles, see Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory,” in W. Sinnot-Armstrong and M. Timmons eds., *Moral Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 137-89, at 151. Rawls (when proposing the method of reflective equilibrium), seems to recognize this. In his approach, the principles of justice explain and systematize our considered judgments about cases, and the latter are used as evidence for the latter—although the exercise is open-ended, in that we could come to revise some considered judgments clashing with principles supported by other considerations. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness. A Restatement* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 29-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hurka, *Perfectionism,* 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. How can we show that the valuable capacities appealed to need not coincide with human nature or human essence? A test is to consider whether P would be better off as a result of unfolding any of these capacities even if some other individual Q did not have them. Clearly, P should unfold their rational capacities even if Q lacks them. Another test is whether we could have reason to give ourselves the capacities when we do not have them. The answer, at least in some cases, seems to be Yes. The night vision of cats, or the sonar system of dolphins, might be examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hurka takes certain physical and psychological capacities to be constitutive of human essence. But there are individuals who lack them and whom we would still call “human beings.” For a forceful discussion of some examples, see Philip Kitcher, “Essence and Perfection,” *Ethics* 110 (1999), 59-83; 68-9 (on physical properties) and 73-4 (on rationality). Hurka says (in *Perfectionism,* 47-8) that we can recognize additional norms to respond appropriately to these “almost-human” individuals, since we can extend to them some responses that we acknowledge for the features they share with us (fully “human” individuals). This labeling leaves an awful taste in the mouth, and the indirect procedure is not necessary if we follow the more straightforward approach I suggest. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I do not want to overstate the disagreement with Hurka. Since he adopts the strategy of reflective equilibrium (*Perfectionism*, 31-2), and acknowledges that the initial perfectionist ideal may be reformulated in light of our considered judgments about the specific consequences of its application, the subsequent formulation of it after the reflective exercise may end up having a content quite similar to the one I am proposing. Still, I think that if we endorse the two modifications I proposed we would get the intuitively right results in a less tortuous manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Here my view is similar to Martha Nussbaum’s proposal in *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). I discuss elsewhere further similarities, and some important differences. See Pablo Gilabert, “The Capability Approach and the Debate between Humanist and Political Perspectives on Human Rights. A Critical Survey,” *Human Rights Review* 14 (2013), 299-325; and *Human Dignity and Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The main point is that the space of considerations of well-being is not flat and is not atomistic. When developing a holistic approach, it is important to note that the pluralist space of considerations about valuable capacities and interests regarding well-being may be uneven. For example, increases in self-determination may often be more important than increases in pleasure. Furthermore, the space is structured, so that the significance of fostering one element may in part depend on what the current situation of other elements is, and the impact of changes in the former would have regarding the latter. So, reducing pain and increasing pleasure when someone is in a state of agony is more important than doing so when they are in a neutral or positive state. And it may be less significant (or even negatively significant) when it carries a reduction in self-determination. The structure of the holistic configurations need not always be multiplicative (this would be too strong), but it is not always merely additive either, as some conditionalities (even if partial and defeasible) may hold. Thus, not every pleasant surprise is disvaluable because what happened was not previously authorized by the agent receiving it, but in some contexts (such as in sexual interactions, and in some political processes), authorization by the agent is typically an important precondition. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Another possibility is the “developmental theory” offered in Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). I agree with Kraut that the good for S (a human individual) is a matter of S’s flourishing, which in turn consists in developing and exercising S’s cognitive, affective, social, and sensory powers (p. 137). I would add that only the valuable subset of S’s powers is relevant. Kraut seems to accept this when he recognizes that we evaluate and judge nature when taking aspects of it as worth developing (147). But then he insists in talking about the good for individuals as concerned with the powers of the “species” they belong to (52, 203, 204). I suggest that we drop references to “nature” and “species” and talk only about valuable capacities. So, the flourishing at stake should be construed independently of essentialist claims. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On the pervasiveness of this “deep problem,” see Gwen Bradford, “Problems for Perfectionism,” *Utilitas* 29 (2017), 344-64, at 362-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Bradford, “Perfectionism,” 130. Kitcher says that “[t]here is an established orthodoxy among leading biologists and philosophers of biology that would dismiss any grounding of value in ‘human nature’” (op.cit., 61). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Pablo Gilabert, “Kantian Dignity and Marxian Socialism,” *Kantian Review* 22 (2017), 553-77; *Human Dignity and Human Rights*. See note 34 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See also Darwall’s illuminating idea of “recognition respect,” which is owed to persons in virtue of inherent features of them (such as their rational agency), even if they might not also merit “appraisal respect” or “esteem” when their character or behavior is problematic. Steven Darwall, “Two Kinds of Respect,” *Ethics* 88 (1977), 36–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. These features are identified at the level that is relevant for evaluative characterization. Of course, these features may, from the point of view of scientific inquiry, supervene upon the presence of more basic material systems. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. So, within reasonable limits, I am hostile to a paternalistic morality or politics that disrespects people’s self-determination. Prudential perfectionism does not imply this paternalism. That paternalism could be rejected by a form of moral and political perfectionism which takes autonomy as a central value. See, e.g., Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Steven Wall, “Perfectionism in Moral and Political Philosophy,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(2019), sect.3.4; Brink, “Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition,” 12-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. A related upshot is that we avoid any naturalistic fallacy. There is no inference from “P has capacity C” to “it is good for P to maintain, develop, or exercise C.” What we find instead at the basis of dignity (for prudential norms) are substantive conditional claims of the form “if P has capacity C, then it is good for P to maintain, develop, or exercise C.” [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Would this mean that dignity is also to be tracked for non-human animals? Yes. One should respond to valuable features giving rise to dignity wherever they exist. In the moral register, I think that the point of talk of human dignity in human rights discourse is not to cordon out human beings from the rest of nature, but to identify entitlements which people have in virtue of certain valuable non-conventional features (such as rationality, consciousness, and the capacity to act in a spirit of brotherhood—to cite Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), from alleged claims based on normatively irrelevant or less normatively weighty features like nationality, race, and so on. The rights, and the prudential interests, of human beings can overlap at various points with those of non-human animals, and each may have specific elements not shared by the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. We assume, with contemporary biologists, that species are “intrinsically heterogeneous.” For an account of this point, and a proposal that we conceive of species as “homeostatic property clusters” combining natural flexibility and explanatory integrity, see Robert Wilson, Matthew Barker, Ingo Brigandt, “When Traditional Essentialism Fails: Biological Natural Kinds,” *Philosophical Topics* 35 (2007), 189-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” in R. Tucker, ed.*, The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 80. For more on alienated labor, see Pablo Gilabert, “Alienation, Freedom, and Dignity,” *Philosophical Topics* (forthcoming). See also Jan Kandiyali, “The Importance of Others: Marx on Unalienated Production,” *Ethics* 130 (2020), 555-587. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. As envisioned in Marx’s slogan “From each according to [their] abilities, to each according to [their] needs.” This slogan sees appropriate contribution to be proportional to individuals’ types and degrees of capacity, which vary. Needs are also diverse. Marx, “Critique of Gotha Program,” in *Marx-Engels Reader,* 525-41, at p. 531. Pablo Gilabert, “The Socialist Principle ‘From Each According To Their Abilities, To Each According To Their Needs’.” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 46 (2015), 197-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This section addresses comments offered by a referee, for which I am very grateful. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Brink, “Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition,” 27. Brink argues that NP has a powerful lineage in central arguments in the works of Aristotle, Kant, Mill, and Green, among others. As he points out, exploring this lineage allows us to identify different possible forms of perfectionism. For example, it could focus on the personal good or practical reason more generally, be agent-relative or agent-neutral, and have honoring or promoting structures (Ibid., 6-7, 17-9). I would add to this helpful list of variations that perfectionism could be fundamentally individualist or aggregative. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 1, 4, 12, 25, 27, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Dignitarian Perfectionism might be hard to distinguish from NP if, like Kant, we think of rational agency as the ground of dignity. Although a proper assessment of Kant’s complex views would require a separate discussion, let me state some key points. (For fuller discussion, see Gilabert, “Kantian Dignity and Marxian Socialism”). There are indeed central similarities between Kant’s perspective and the dignitarian approach proposed here. Both have an account of status-dignity as an inherent normative standing of the highest priority, and adopt an individual-centered focus. (For Kant’s statements, see *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:434-6, 440,and *The Metaphysics of Morals,* 6:434-6, 6:462; included in the volume *Practical Philosophy*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).Both seek a link between the grounds and the content of a morality of dignity. Like Kant, I also see prudential value as conditioned by moral value, and give pride of place to self-determination. But there are important differences. The most important is that, in my construal of the dignitarian approach, rational agency is sufficient (and very important when present) but not also necessary for status-dignity. (For Kant’s view of rational agency as a necessary condition, see *Groundwork,* 4:428-9, 434-6,and *Metaphysics of Morals,* 6:434-5, 442-4). My broader view of the basis of dignity enables more appropriate responses to individuals who are incapable of the forms of agency Kant focuses on, and to directly appreciate further valuable features of those who are. Furthermore, Kant does not develop a systematic substantive account of non-moral goodness. See Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), vol. 1, 243, vol. 2, 675-7; Allen Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)*,* 67, 365n.11. Kant’s discussions of well-being tend to proceed along hedonistic or desire-satisfaction lines (or combinations of them). See Thomas Hill, *Human Welfare and Moral Worth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 168-9, 194-5. I explore a straightforwardly substantive objective account. This helps to further appreciate the singularity of various individuals’ predicaments as involving not only their free choices (when they are capable of them) but also the significance of various configurations of their plural set of valuable capacities in their circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I follow here the three possibilities identified in Brink, “Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition,” 19-25. Brink focuses on normative perfectionism; I adapt them to discussion of Dignitarian Perfectionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The connection between dignity, well-being, and justice would arise as follows. If people are rights-bearers because of their status-dignity, they have status-dignity in virtue of the capacities in the basis of their dignity, and the unfolding of these capacities would contribute to their well-being, then it makes sense to argue that they have pro tanto rights to be supported in accessing the conditions for that unfolding. For further discussion of these links, see Gilabert, *Human Dignity and Human Rights*, ch.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. On the significance of a temporally extended focus, see Anti Kauppinen, “Meaningfulness,” in Fletcher, *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Well-Being*, 281-91, at 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For extensive empirical evidence debunking the common picture of the human being as an egotistic *homo economicus*, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See on this Bowles and Gintis, op. cit. Consider also the congenial argument that the idea of a flourishing individual may best be explored by taking into account not only intrinsic but also relational features concerning the group level, so that different individuals may display different virtues which complement each other. Matthew Barker, “Diverse Environment, Diverse People,” in C. Tyler DesRoches, F. Jankunis, B. Williston, eds., *Canadian Environmental Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 99-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. On the narrowing of the “realm of necessity” concerning indispensable but onerous toil and the expansion of the “realm of freedom” in which “the development of human powers as an end in itself” unfolds, see Karl Marx, *Capital III* (London: Penguin, 1991), 958-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Marx, “Critique of Gotha Program,” 530-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)