



## Review Article

# The Limits of the Explanatory Power of Developmentalism\*

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### Abstract

Richard Kraut's neo-Aristotelian account of well-being, Developmentalism, aspires to explain not only which things are good for us but why those things are good for us. The key move in attempting to make good on this second aspiration involves his claim that our ordinary intuitions about what is good for a person can be successfully explained and systematized by the idea that what benefits a living thing develops properly that living thing's potentialities, capacities, and faculties. I argue that Kraut's understanding of such proper development plays no serious constraining role in shaping the details of the account. If this is correct, Developmentalism lacks the potential to explain or vindicate the intuitions about what is good for us that it champions. In effect, Kraut offers us a list of things that he claims benefits a person, but he lacks a theory of what those things have in common such that they benefit him.

### Keywords

Kraut, well-being, Aristotelianism, Developmentalism, *What is Good and Why*

Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, Harvard University Press, 2007.

Kraut claims that what is good for a living thing is to flourish. Living things flourish "by developing properly and fully, that is, by growing, maturing,

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making full use of the potentialities, capacities and faculties that (under favorable conditions) they naturally have at an early stage of their existence” (p. 131). He goes on to tell us that “a flourishing human being is one who possesses, develops, and enjoys the exercise of cognitive, affective, sensory, and social powers (no less than physical powers)” (p. 137).

Kraut is explicit about some aspects of his methodology for defending Developmentalism. He writes:

Developmentalism does not begin with an a priori commitment to the idea that whatever nature gives us must be good for us (p. 146).

The idea behind Developmentalism is not the absurd thesis that we should set aside any thoughts we have about human good and substitute for them a theory of good derived from animal behavior. Rather it rests on the plausible assumption that a theory is strengthened when it is made more general and systematic. If a theory of goodness can fit its account of human well-being into a larger framework that applies to the entire natural world, that gives it an advantage over any theory that holds that “G is good for S” is one kind of relationship for human beings and a different kind for all other creatures (p. 148).

The argument is not that we have certain powers and inclinations when we are young, and therefore their development must be good for us. Rather, we notice as we systematize our thoughts about what is good, that they fall into a pattern, and the notion of an inherent power waiting to be developed plays an organizing role in that process of systematization. (p. 165)

Kraut claims two key virtues for Developmentalism. First, it is able to systematize and explain our commonsense intuitions about what is good for a human. Second, it is able to do so within a convincing broader framework that explains what is good for all living things. These two claims are the cornerstone of Kraut’s case for Developmentalism. (I assume that Kraut would want to add that Developmentalism not only systematizes and explains our intuitions but also vindicates them. An error theory about an area of discourse might say that the best systemization and explanation for our thinking in an area shows our intuitions to be systematically mistaken.)

But there are reasons to be concerned about Developmentalism’s ability to vindicate and explain our intuitions about what is good for humans. Obviously, without further elaboration, Kraut’s list of capacities and faculties relevant to flourishing is quite vague. After all, “developing properly” might convey little more than the notion of “improvement” and a thing’s “potentialities, powers and capacities” might convey little more than the notion of “something that the living thing can do or be”. It is not a surprise that what is good for a living thing involves improving things that it can do or be. Without further elaboration, the framework would be incapable of resisting much that anyone might want to say about what is good for humans. Even the villain of the book, the

desire-based theory of well-being, seems compatible with the theory when it is at this level of abstraction since it is among our capacities to form and attempt to satisfy our preferences.

The hope for Developmentalism to realize Kraut's aspiration of being able to be able to explain why what is good for us is good for us rests on its ability to move from his list of highly abstract and general capacities to a more specific account of exactly which human capacities are relevant to our flourishing and what sort of alterations count as the right kind of development. Humans have a great many capacities. How does Developmentalism propose to turn this highly abstract list into a contentful theory that could systematize and explain our commonsense intuitions? This will be our central question. While Kraut is clear about his methodology on some points, he is not clear about his methodology on this point.

Kraut's announced methodology would seem compatible with three importantly different models for the relationship between intuitions about what is good for humans and Developmentalism—three different ways of making use of intuitions about what is good for humans in vindicating a more contentful account of the relevant human capacities. The rest of this paper will consider the merits of Kraut's view understood along the lines of these three different models. To preview what is coming, I think the first two models are unsuitable for Kraut's aims. I think Kraut should embrace the third model I offer as offering the best prospects for his theory. I go on to consider some problems for Kraut's Developmentalism when it is understood most sympathetically along the lines of the third model.

Let's call the first way of understanding what role commonsense intuitions play in moving from the highly abstract understanding of human capacities to a more contentful theory, the Top-Down model. The idea here would be that Developmentalism owes its plausibility to its ability to explain our intuitions about what is good for humans, but such intuitions do not help determine which are the relevant capacities and powers. On this account, the resources of the theory to provide content to the vague list springs primarily from the analogy between the flourishing of plants, animals, and humans. That is, the main way we provide content to the vague list of capacities and faculties is by more careful attention to what contributes to the flourishing of a living thing generally, together with attention to the essential features of the species whose flourishing we are investigating. So we would be wondering which features of humans are most closely analogous to proper growth and development in plants and animals. We would appeal to plausible conceptions of the essentials of the human soul for an account of what our central capacities and faculties are and argue that that list of essential human features bares a serious

relationship to the features of plants and animals relevant to their flourishing. Using primarily such tools we would develop a more contentful list of relevant human capacities and faculties and then see if developing items on that list plays a useful role in systematizing, vindicating, and explaining our commonsense intuitions about what is good for a person.

It is important to see that this model retains Kraut's commitment to not merely bow down to nature but rather to assess it since this model claims that the justification for the theory is not merely that nature has made us such and such but rather that nature so understood explains our commonsense intuitions about what is good for us. This model does avoid an "a priori commitment to the idea that whatever nature gives us must be good for us." The theory is seen as answerable to intuitions about what is good for humans, and plausible only if it fits with such intuitions, but the list of relevant capacities is not constructed in light of such intuitions. The reason it is impressive and potentially explanatory for the theory to be able to accommodate our commonsense intuitions stems from the fact that the theory's list of relevant human capacities is not built so as to accommodate such intuitions. Furthermore, such a model need not assume that we first determine how Developmentalism applies to plants and animals and understand the human case by analogy with those other cases. Nothing prevents this model from working out simultaneously how Developmentalism applies to each species. However, as I understand it, the resulting view would owe an account of the serious analogy between the sorts of capacities relevant to human flourishing and the sorts of capacities relevant to the flourishing of other species.

While the Top-Down model has appealed to other neo-Aristotelians such as Foot and Hursthouse, Kraut is best interpreted as not following this model.<sup>1</sup> Kraut not infrequently adjusts his understanding of the relevant capacities in light of cases without a convincing defense of such an adjustment other than that it allows the theory to not conflict with the common intuition. The central problem with the Top-Down model for Kraut's purposes is that it does not fit very well with how he argues. Let me try to illustrate this claim with two quick case studies. I claim these case studies form a more general pattern of not following the Top-Down model. We will see further reasons to not attribute the Top-Down model to Kraut when we consider the third model below.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Oxford University Press, 2001; Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1999. For a critical assessment of these works see David Copp and David Sobel, "Morality and Virtue: An Assessment of Some Recent Work in Virtue Ethics", *Ethics* 114 (April 2004).

Consider, as our first case study, Kraut's claim that enjoying something is a necessary condition for that thing being of benefit (pp. 127–8). This important and sweeping structural claim is not defended by arguing that only such instances bear the right sort of analogy with what benefits living things generally. In fact, this claim is established prior to and independently of Kraut's Developmentalism. There is no effort to argue that only that which a person enjoys can promote an already established list of potentialities, capacities, and faculties. As a second case study, consider how Kraut argues against the view that the development of our destructive capacities is part of what is good for humans. He does not show us how the general analogy with what is good for living things generally speaks against allowing this sort of development. Rather, he just says that when we think about whether such development is beneficial we can "see no merit" in the idea that it is (pp. 190–1). Kraut is here relying on bare intuitions about what benefits a person and seemingly unconcerned about demonstrating that he can derive such judgments in a Top-Down manner. The Top-Down model, whatever its merits, is a poor fit with Kraut's argumentative strategy in the book.<sup>2</sup>

A second model for turning the vague list of human functions and faculties into a more contentful account would allow a much broader role for our intuitions about what is good for humans. On this model we consult our ordinary intuitions about what is good for humans and then search for an understanding of the favored capacities and faculties so that developing those capacities would accommodate that intuition. On this model the base level intuitions about cases play a role not only in serving as data that the theory must accommodate, but also is the key element in shaping what Developmentalism's view is of the relevant capacities. Through this model, we primarily add content to the vague list of general capacities by consulting our intuitions about what is good for humans and adjust our understanding of the aspects of our capacities that are relevant to our flourishing by seeing how best to accommodate such intuitions. Call this model "Bottom Up Accommodation". Kraut might be thought to be suggesting the use of this model when he tells us that it is no coincidence that Developmentalism can accommodate a common intuition since "Developmentalism is rooted in widely accepted assumptions about what is good" (p. 181).

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<sup>2</sup> The section of Kraut's book called "Developmentalism and Flourishing: The Human Case", (pp. 135–41) gestures in directions which might afford Developmentalism a genuine Top-Down component. Yet such directions are rarely, if ever, invoked when deriving the content of Developmentalism.

The Bottom-Up model, while it fits the way Kraut deals with many cases, cannot help vindicate or explain our commonsense intuitions as it is simply built to accommodate them. Kraut insists that Developmentalism's central merit as a theory is in its ability not merely to collect intuitions about what is good but to explain why what is on the list is on the list (p. 202). Only by doing this would Kraut be able to achieve his central aim of explaining why what is good for us is good for us. But if the theory merely bows to intuitions about what is good for us in the construction of its account of what the relevant capacities are and what counts as development, the theory is in no position to explain and justify such intuitions. Thus the Bottom-Up model will also not serve Kraut's purposes.

A third model would suggest that we combine the above two models. Intuitions about cases can shape our understanding of the relevant capacities but so too can our understanding of the human soul and the analogy between the flourishing of plants and animals, and flourishing in the human case. Call this model "Reflective Equilibrium". Reflective Equilibrium has an impressive pedigree and would fit with both Kraut's use of intuitions in shaping the relevant capacities and with his aspirations for Developmentalism to explain our intuitions about what is good for humans. The introduction of a Top-Down element in reflective equilibrium allows such views to potentially explain intuitions. Since the view, understood along the lines of reflective equilibrium, is not merely a creation of our intuitions, there is something independent of our intuitions in the theory which could potentially explain them. I have nothing to say against reflective equilibrium generally. I think the hope for Kraut's distinctive account of Developmentalism rests with the third option.

In what remains I will consider Kraut's view understood as making use of reflective equilibrium in justifying its specific understanding of the relevant human capacities. I will offer some reasons to worry that Developmentalism's Top-Down component in reflective equilibrium is playing too small and vague a role. If this worry can be sustained, Developmentalism's ability to explain our intuitions would be threatened.

There is a surprising absence of a general story of how to identify what the relevant potentialities, capacities, and faculties in a species are such that we could see how to move from this abstract characterization of flourishing to a specification of what flourishing consists in in a particular species. Other neo-Aristotelians offer contentful generalizations about what makes a capacity among a particular species' relevant capacities such that we can see how they understand the analogy with other living things and how they apply the analogy to new cases in a principled way. Hursthouse, for example, says we evaluate living things based (among other things) on how successfully they reproduce

and survive.<sup>3</sup> But Kraut does not give us such a framework and the analogy between the flourishing of living things remains under-articulated and malleable. It is not doubted that there is some analogy between the flourishing of various living things. Surely there are many such analogies. But for Kraut's understanding of this analogy to play a serious explanatory role in a theory it will have to be more articulated and explicit.

There is also no attempt in Kraut's book to summarize the tentatively final set of relevant capacities and explain what they have in common or how they form a non-*ad hoc* kind or how such a set gets picked out from the point of view of what benefits a living thing quite generally. In short, I see almost no effort in making use of a Top-Down component beyond the amorphous idea that in each species, what we think is good for that species can, in one way or another, be understood as developing some capacity that the members of that species have. I take it to be clear that left merely at that, the view is too vague to resist just about anything a person might otherwise want to say about what is good for humans. And if this is right, then Developmentalism could not be said to have enough of a Top-Down component to count as an instance of reflective equilibrium.

Also recall the moment when Kraut considers the question of the comparative importance of the different aspects of the relevant human capacities. Kraut simply says that "there is no reason to suppose that cognitive, affective, social, and physical powers do differ in this way; they all have roughly equal weight as elements of well-being" (p. 172). This central structural claim of the theory might have been defended by appeal to more general thoughts about the human soul. Recall that Kraut claimed that it was his view that he was working with a "widely accepted classification of the elements of the soul" (p. 137). But this appeal to the parts of the soul plays no role in understanding the relative importance of the parts. Further Kraut might have tried to defend this claim of equal importance of the parts by making real use of a general framework that applies to all living things. But he does not. The most central and structural moves in working up Kraut's Developmentalism make little real use of the Top-Down model, leaving us with little understanding of the justification for the structure of the view besides its ability to accommodate our intuitions.

There are several other cases where Kraut does attempt an explanation of various intuitions in terms of a relatively narrow set of capacities which bare a closer relation to the flourishing of animals. Although Kraut never makes out

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<sup>3</sup> Hursthouse, pp. 200-2.

any general story about what characteristics the narrow set of capacities should look like to bare the right kind of resemblance to the plant and animal case, we might nonetheless think some cases are more or less clear instances that deserve to be on such a list. Kraut, then, in the following two examples, seems to aspire to an argumentative strategy which justifies some cases in terms that have a more obvious connection to plant and animal flourishing.

First, he tries to show that just as imagined exercise does not really develop our physical capacities, so perfectly simulated love which is, unbeknownst to our hero, not reciprocated, also fails to develop our relevant capacities and so fails to be of benefit. Here I think Kraut attempts an argument with the kind of explanatory form which a serious commitment to a top-down component would require, but his analogy is unpersuasive (p.163). Meryl Streep's phony but convincing love certainly might develop our capacities to interact with loved one's more successfully as would be shown by the fact that someone who had been in such a convincing but false relationship might well be much better in their interactions in their next, genuinely loving relationship as a result of what they learned from the previous phony but reasonably believed relationship. Kraut here concludes that "what is good for him is to perceive with pleasure that he is loved, and this he does not perceive" (p. 163). While that may be true, Kraut has offered no convincing reason to think such a conclusion flows from the general Developmentalist framework.

In our second example, Kraut argues to the conclusion that pain is frequently bad for us by attempting to show that pain is a kind of disease or analogous to a disease (p. 153). Again, this seems to me the right form of argumentation. Disease seems a good candidate for something which is bad for all species. But the details of the argument are unpersuasive. Kraut argues that diseases often cause pain (p. 152). This is true but does not show that pain itself is a disease or analogous to it. Kraut claims that "in a great many cases, the sensations we feel when things go awry in our bodies—chills, exhaustion, nausea, dizziness, pain—are pathologies of the sensory system" (p. 153). But these sensations are, if anything, surely the upshot of pathologies of the body and not themselves pathologies. Indeed, it might be a separate pathology to, given the pathology of the body, fail to feel these sensations. The physical system is acting as it ought, given the background condition of the body, in generating these sensations. No doctor would tell us that such sensations are themselves the disease rather than a result of some underlying disease. So again Kraut has not made a convincing case that the badness of such sensations can be well explained by Developmentalism. And without a compelling case that Developmentalism can explain why pain is bad for us, the view must be seen as offering at best a significantly incomplete account of what is good for humans.



The general point is that it takes more than some analogy or other between a capacity deemed relevant and a core capacity with obvious inter-species relevance to flourishing. The analogy must also be persuasive and I think in key cases where Kraut attempts Top-Down style arguments, his analogies are not. If such analogies could be successfully challenged, that would further undermine the claim that Kraut's Top-Down component is doing serious work in the theory.

Kraut's Developmentalism rejects the idea that what is natural to us should for that very reason play a serious normative role.<sup>4</sup> And it happily jettisons aspects of our nature that seems unappealing from the list of relevant kinds of human capacities. Kraut is astute and thoughtful in his selection of which commonsense intuitions to ally with his theory. These aspects of the view make it nimble and capable of getting answers that seem more intuitive and extensionally excellent than previous versions of neo-Aristotelism. But these virtues of the theory have been purchased, it seems to me, by the lack of a serious commitment to explicating and placing weight on the analogy between the flourishing of humans and other living things, the lack of an attempt to vindicate the broad picture of the human soul that helps establish the relevant human capacities, the heavy reliance on intuitions in shaping the understanding of the relevant human capacities, together with a failure to group together a tentative final list of relevant human capacities and explain what binds just that set together from a satisfying theoretical perspective. These features call into question whether Kraut's neo-Aristotelian framework can explain why what is good for us is good for us.

Obviously Kraut himself offers quite specific intuitions about what is good and bad for humans and he contentfully tries to rule out conative and hedonist conceptions of well-being. His final view has considerable content; that is not doubted. What is doubted is how much of a role a general framework which is continuous with plant and animal flourishing plays in explaining this content. After all, plants and animals are radically different from humans. Any sensible theory of the good for humans will have to focus much more on our mental life than will an account of what is good for plants and animals. What is it exactly that the sorts of things which benefit plants and animals have in common with what benefits us? Exactly what is the analogy between the sorts of capacities in plants and animals whose development is central to their

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<sup>4</sup> Hursthouse seems to struggle with what to say on this topic. She concludes that "the idea that nature could be normative with respect to us, that it could determine how we should be, is one that we will no longer accept" (p. 220). One of the broader issues here is how neo-Aristotelians can hope to justify their theory once, like Hursthouse and Kraut, they abandon the idea that something's being natural (in some sense) is the key to vindicating normativity.

welfare and the capacities in humans whose development makes our lives better for us? Without a clear theory of flourishing which offers us a principled way of determining what counts as flourishing for any given species, there is room to wonder if we are not merely using our intuitions about what things are good for us to shape our account of what the capacities are whose development is relevant to our flourishing.

In Kraut's book, our greater understanding of the human capacities that Developmentalism sees as central to human flourishing does not stem from and deepen our understanding of the analogy between our good and what is good for all living things. This analogy is left largely unexplored. This greater understanding also does not tend to stem from a deeper illumination of the essential parts of the human soul. Beyond appealing to a particular conception of the soul and pointing out that others have shared this conception, there is little discussion of the human soul.

There is a danger of the vague notion of a living thing's potentialities, capacities, and faculties seeming to play an organizing role in explaining our intuitions because just about anything anyone would want to champion as a key component of what is good for humans can be understood as among the amorphous set of human capacities. So it is no surprise that a sensible concrete view of what is good for persons is not resisted by the overarching framework. But this is not enough to show that the framework itself is playing an important role in organizing, vindicating, and explaining these intuitions about what is good for humans. It remains to be seen whether Kraut's Developmentalism can retain its intuitive appeal while tightening up its claim to have a serious Top-Down component which could vindicate the theory's explanatory aspirations.

Lastly, consider a different limitation on Developmentalism's ability to explain our intuitions. Desire-based theories of what is good for humans build it into the theory that what is good for one must be something that one positively responds to, at least once one is accurately aware of what the option is like. It would be an alienating conception of what is good for me which claims that *x* is intrinsically better for me than *y* despite my preferring *y* to *x* while being fully appreciative of both options.<sup>5</sup> Kraut might seem to manage to accommodate this point without adopting a desire-based view by insisting that enjoying an option is only a necessary condition for that option being good for one (pp. 126–30). Recall that Kraut concedes that this notion of enjoyment is centrally a conative notion. But merely adding, as Kraut does,

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<sup>5</sup> See Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," *Philosophical Topics* 14 (1986): 5–29, p. 9.

that a necessary condition on an option being good for one is that one enjoys one's use of relevant capacities in that option does not capture many clear commonsense intuitions about what is good for one. Suppose one has a choice between two flavors of ice cream. One enjoys pistachio but one is crazy about chocolate. Other things, such as health consequences, are equal between the two flavors. Anyone would say that getting the ice cream one loves rather than the flavor one merely likes is better for one. But Developmentalism cannot explain this. Both options pass the necessary condition test. And Kraut resists tying the degree of benefit to the degree of liking (126-30). So one likes potential spouse X but is madly in love with potential spouse Y. Other things are equal. Who should I ask to marry me? Or I enjoy profession X but am wild about profession Y. Other things are equal. What profession should I aim to make mine? Developmentalism cannot explain the commonsensical answer. Perhaps Developmentalism could be modified so as to be able to get this commonsensical answer. Perhaps it could say that the more one enjoys the development of a relevant capacity, the more one is benefitted. But this again highlights the way in which we have an insufficient sense of what the constraints are that are imposed by the Top-Down component of Developmentalism.