

Wolff, the Pursuit of Perfection and What We Owe to Each Other: The Case of Veracity and Lying

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abstract. My chapter deals with an important part of how Wolff pursued the normative ambitions of his ethics in giving practical guidance with regard to specific moral issues. I first consider how Wolff's ethics tackles the duties to others, which traditionally represent a difficult issue for moral perfectionism. In this regard, I argue that Wolff's strategy combines two aspects: (a) he includes in perfection non-active aspects and (b) operates with an agent-neutral notion of perfection, in spite of important passages that might suggest differently. I then focus on Wolff's treatment of the duties concerning veracity and lying, and show how it follows that general strategy. Combining its two aspects, Wolff examines specific moral issues by adopting a non-welfarist notion of benefit and harm as the standard that can give guidance about practical cases.

keywords: perfectionism, duties to others, veracity, lying, harm

1. Introduction

Time after time, Wolff emphasized that the firm foundation of his ethics rendered it more capable of providing moral guidance than competing accounts of morals. He aims to achieve this primacy in the arena of normative systems that attempt to give specific practical guidance. As he writes in the *Ausführliche Nachricht*, he has "treated morality in such a way that theory and *practice* are constantly connected" (AN §135).¹ Wolff's emphasis on his action-guiding ambition for moral theory is already central in his *German Ethics*, where he claims to have devised rules with "great and extensive" practical utility in moral life (DE §772). This practical advantage should thus be a distinctive feature of Wolff's ethics, and a major topic for interpreters. Wolff's emphasis on the practical purpose of his ethics implies that he intends to provide a clear set of moral rules and standards of morality that can guide agents' conduct.

¹ A later, often quoted, statement of the same ambition appears in a 1750 letter, in which Wolff stresses that his ethics is "entirely pragmatic" (quoted in Lenders 1979: VI).

However, despite Wolff's stated aim for his ethics, existing scholarship has barely touched on how Wolff pursued that aim, instead devoting most of its attention to general foundational issues. One aim of this chapter is thus to illuminate this aspect of Wolff's project in practical philosophy. To that purpose, I shall consider how he develops specific moral standards and rules in the normative sections that comprise three of the four parts of the *German Ethics*.

A further reason to explore the features of Wolff's ethics in relation to his doctrine of duties is that it represents an impressive attempt of unfolding a perfectionist moral theory. Until now, Wolff has rarely been explored from this angle, despite the growing interest in moral perfectionism and its history.² A proper exploration of the various forms of the central ideas of perfectionism should certainly include Wolff's conception, which is probably the most extensive and comprehensive account of perfectionist ethics, and its distinctive place in the history of moral perfectionism should be investigated. With this larger aim in view, I shall examine how Wolff develops his general account of morality with respect to an important range of duties. Thus, another aim of this chapter is to explore the place of Wolff's normative theory within the long and various history of moral perfectionism.

This twofold aim can be pursued by focusing on a specific—but nevertheless central—issue, namely Wolff's treatment of other-regarding moral demands. While these are obviously crucial for any normative ethics, duties to others are a vexed question for any version of moral perfectionism, “because on any view perfectionism gives a central place to self-regarding duties,” and the proper role of obligations to others within a perfectionist framework is controversial (see Hurka 1993: 62). It is not straightforward to account for what we owe to each other from a standpoint based on what we owe to ourselves and our capacities. This is a well-worn issue for perfectionist ethicists from Aristotle to T.H. Green to the current discussion, and it thus provides a helpful angle from which to appraise Wolff's moral perfectionism, as well as its ability to give practical guidance. Does Wolff argue convincingly for the specificity of other-regarding duties within his general perfectionist view? Does his account provide clear standards by which to assess specific practical problems?

² See primarily Hurka (1993) and, more recently, Den Uyl and Rasmussen (2016) and Brink (2019). To the best of my knowledge, Brink (2019) is the only exception to the complete disregard for Wolff's ethics in the re-appraisal of historical versions of moral perfectionism and their features. Moggach (2009) has investigated the political aspect of Wolff's perfectionism. On the other hand, Klemme (2007) has sketched an assessment of Wolff's “ethics of perfection,” but without considering it as an instance of moral perfectionism.

Here, I shall examine Wolff's construal of duties to others in the normative section of the *German Ethics*.³ I shall first consider how Wolff presents the relation between one's own perfection and the perfection of others, before focusing more specifically on how this unfolds in his view of the relationship between self- and other-regarding obligations. Finally, to shed light on how, when, and in what terms Wolff's moral agent is supposed to contribute to the perfection of others, I shall briefly consider, *pars pro toto*, Wolff's treatment of the duties concerning veracity and lying. This is a significant case that, as I shall show, reflects the general features of his theory of the duties to others.

2. The Pursuit of Perfection in What We Owe to Others

Wolff's treatment of duties to others provides a helpful perspective on the role of perfection in his moral theory beyond the general foundational statements. It allows us to examine his development of a perfectionist ethics in one crucial area: how the fundamental demand for perfection plays out in other-regarding conduct. Wolff's general formulations of the main moral principle, set out at the beginning of the *German Ethics*, already suggest some friction around what grounds the distinction between duties to self and duty to others. In §12, the general rule is formulated as "Do that which makes you and your state or that of others more perfect." However, in §19, the content of the law of nature is phrased, in spite of an explicit reference to §12, in merely self-regarding terms: "Do that which makes you and your state more perfect." Along the same lines, "the perfection of ourselves and of our state" is later defined as "the end [*Absicht*] of our actions" (DE §40).⁴ This apparent emphasis on prioritizing one's own perfection can be regarded as corresponding to the priority of duties to oneself as expounded in the *German Ethics*, which is also expressed in the outline of the work.⁵ A primacy of self-perfection in fact characterised the early development of Wolff's notion of perfection in moral philosophy, at a time in which he construed perfection quite simply as

³ In line with the focus of the volume, this chapter will mostly deal with the first main version of Wolff's moral philosophy provided in the *German Ethics*. Besides a few specific references, an in-depth exploration of the further developments or differences in the later Latin works, the two-volume *Philosophia practica universalis* and, most importantly, the five-volume *Ethica* is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴ The first-person plural in DE §40 might also be read as encompassing all readers and all human beings, as in "we all." Yet, homogeneity with most other passages, in which Wolff contrasts "ours" with "other people's," makes that reading less plausible.

⁵ On the pre-eminence of the duties to oneself in Wolff's conception (at least in the *German Ethics*), see the chapters by Clemens Schwaiger and Paul Guyer in this volume.

“the greatest perfection of oneself”, as he puts it in a 1705 letter to Leibniz.⁶ Wolff overcomes the risk of a patent inconsistency concerning the role of the perfection of others only in the content of the basic moral rule in his phrasing of the Latin system, as the *Philosophia practica universalis* clearly states that the final end is “perfection of oneself and of others” (PPU II §28; emphasis added).⁷ However, this is not a straightforward move toward clarification, because the purely self-regarding formulation of the principle of perfection remains present in the *Philosophia practica universalis*.⁸

Wolff’s ambivalence about how to refer to the perfection of oneself and others is not limited to an ambiguity in his formulations of the law of nature. It is symptomatic of the deeper issue of whether the perfection to which actions should aim should be understood in agent-relative or agent-neutral terms. If we understand perfection as agent-relative—that is, in individual terms as the perfection of one particular agent—the pursuit of one’s perfection can easily conflict with the aim of promoting the perfection of others. If, instead, it is understood as agent-neutral—that is, as the perfection of humanity in all of its members—then it can be regarded as the common goal of all agents, which can be pursued without any friction between self and others.⁹

Now, we could read many of Wolff’s explicit statements as suggesting that perfection should primarily be understood as *individual* perfection, as we already saw in the crucial sections 19 and 40 of the *German Ethics*. Yet, an agent-relative conception is not consistent with other aspects of his view, nor with all of his formulations. In several significant cases, Wolff presents his principle of morality in agent-neutral terms. For instance, in his 1721 lecture on *The Practical Philosophy of the Chinese*, Wolff credits the Chinese with a clear awareness of the underlying demand to direct actions “to the highest perfection of oneself and of others” (Mel. III, 106; emphasis added; cf. RP II.VI §23, §199). He then elaborates on that claim by arguing that his theory allows us to understand the content of that demand as the “direction of free actions to the perfection of the whole world” (Mel., III, 107; emphasis added; cf. 113). As early as a brief summary of the *German Ethics* published as a ‘review’ in the *Acta Eruditorum* (as was the custom), Wolff expresses a similar thought: “the perfection of the whole human race ought to be considered in the actions of all humans taken simultaneously” (GW

⁶ See Leibniz and Wolff (1860: 37). See also Campo (1939: 439, 443).

⁷ See Schwaiger (1995: 101).

⁸ See PPU I §152: “The law of nature obliges us to perform action that strive for the perfection of ourselves and our condition and to omit action that strive for the imperfection of ourselves and our condition”.

⁹ On the difference between agent-relative and agent-neutral conceptions of perfection, see Hurka (1993: 60).

38.3: 1192; emphasis added). The “fundamental law of nature” is again phrased in corresponding terms in the *Ausführliche Nachricht*: “the human being should do that which adds to the perfection of the world” (AN §137, 394; emphasis added). Moreover, as Clemens Schwaiger has observed, an important feature of Wolff’s view is that a subject is given pleasure by the intuition of any perfection, one’s own or others’ (see PE §511),¹⁰ further strengthening the agent-neutral character of Wolff’s understanding of perfection.

Clarifying whether Wolff’s understanding of perfection should be read as agent-relative or agent-neutral is crucial if we are to make sense of his take on the relationship between duties to oneself and duties to others. The two aspects of the notion of perfection would appear to yield conflicting normative implications. On the one hand, an agent-relative construal of perfection is consistent with Wolff’s claim that duties to the self enjoy primacy over the duties to others. Wolff is especially adamant on this in the Latin *Philosophia practica universalis*: “If the duty towards oneself and the duty towards others conflict with each other, then the duty towards oneself wins out” (PPU I §229). Such a conflict means that an agent can pursue the perfection of another person “only with the neglect of his own [perfection] or with his own imperfection” (PPU I §229). Wolff stresses that this general priority principle is of the utmost importance in both moral theory and moral practice (see PPU I §229A).¹¹ In the earlier *German Ethics*, his view was less explicit, but it was, in fact, the same. Accordingly, in cases of apparent conflict between a purported duty to others and a duty to oneself, the latter quite simply has priority. More precisely, when the other person “wants to make me unhappy,” (DE §867) no duty to her even applies. In general, then, the demands regarding oneself determine the boundaries within which the duties to others can apply (see *Institutiones* I.II § 44). In this regard, Wolff appears to suggest an agent-relative understanding of perfection, insofar as the demands in question concern the perfection of an individual agent as distinct from others. Thus, it would be entirely possible for there to be a conflict between the pursuit of perfection for different agents, although such situations can be addressed by prioritizing duties to oneself. That priority, in turn, hints at an agent-relative notion of perfection.

On the other hand, Wolff seems to suggest an agent-neutral understanding in his repeated insistence that duties to the self and duties to others are “identical [*einerley*]” (DE §768; see NV §133). Thus, the general demand that encapsulates our obligations to others is to

¹⁰ See Schwaiger (1995: 131f.) and (2018a: 260). Schwaiger has also suggested that this claim represents an innovation with respect to Leibniz’s views. However, this is arguably an overstatement, because Leibniz already held that the perfection of any human being produces pleasure. See Frey (2016: 621).

¹¹ On Wolff’s view on the possible conflict of duties, see Gelfert (1907: 29f.), who, however, does not consider the specific issue of a duty to oneself clashing with a duty to others.

love others as much as ourselves (see DE §796; NV §136), which leads Wolff to reclaim the Golden Rule as a moral principle (see DE §§822–3). Importantly, by arguing that duties to the self and duties to others are “identical,” Wolff holds that their substantive normative content is the same,¹² because he maintains that we owe to others just what we owe to ourselves (DE §768; AN §§149, 431). Furthermore, what we owe to ourselves even helps us to grasp what we owe to others (see DE §768). Even more demanding, Wolff goes so far as to maintain that we ought to regard others as though they were the same person as ourselves (DE §796). In this respect, Wolff’s view of moral duties to others suggests an agent-neutral understanding of their content that stresses the continuity between one’s perfection and the perfection of others. Self- and other-regarding notions of perfection belong together in the all-embracing task of pursuing the perfection of the world at large (or perfection period).¹³

Wolff thus employs an agent-neutral notion of perfection as an important element of his strategy to accommodate duties to others under the general demand of perfection issued by the fundamental law of nature. In his view, that demand can be fully consistent only if it requires all agents to pursue the same overarching final end, namely the full development of human nature in each individual. However, this does not describe Wolff’s full strategy to develop his treatment of duties to others. The possibility of a perfectionist account of other-regarding duty is challenged on another front.

This second challenge relates to agency. If the final aim in question is the perfection of rational subjects, this seems to suggest that it must be *active*. The perfection of agents would lie in the full development of their agential capacities (see Hurka 1993: 59f.). How can one pursue something that consists in the exercise of a capacity or power from the outside, so to speak, if we are not the agent with that power? If perfection is primarily active, how is it possible in principle to have the perfection of other agents as a goal, when any impact one can have in furthering this goal is at best indirect? Wolff shows his acute awareness of this issue when he clarifies that duties to others by definition concern only what others cannot achieve alone: “That which the human being can achieve by means of his own powers he does not need to demand from others” (DE §769). Such duties necessarily concern what lies beyond the sphere of their own agency. I shall now show that a substantial part of Wolff’s strategy in dealing with duties to others should be understood as a response to that fundamental worry. His attempt at a solution is arguably one of the distinctive features of his version of moral perfectionism.

¹² On this, see Michael Walschots’ contribution to this volume.

¹³ On this crucial issue, see the chapter by Timothy Rosenkoetter in this volume.

The crucial passage here is §767 of the *German Ethics*, where Wolff begins his treatment of the duties to others. Wolff first maintains, with reference to §12, that a human being is “obligated to all actions by means of which he can promote perfection of others *and their state*” (DE §767; emphasis added). Echoing §12, Wolff thereby extends the notion of perfection to include non-active elements alongside active ones, namely the state or condition of other agents. In the next section, he then clarifies that this includes both the internal and the external state of an agent, that is, her entire condition (see DE §768). Thus, the general demand to promote the perfection of others is not developed as the requirement to contribute directly to the exercise of their capacities, but rather to contribute to the improvement of their condition.

By referring to the state of other agents, Wolff draws on the broad scope of his notion of perfection to move the main focus of his remarks in §767 seamlessly from perfection to happiness. Here, he immediately switches to the vocabulary of happiness and maintains that a human being is bound “to contribute to the happiness to others as much as is possible for him.” Wolff can regard this smooth transition from perfection to happiness as legitimate because he understands happiness as a condition that has an internal connection to perfection: as he has argued in the first part of the *German Ethics*, “only that can make man happy which is grounded on a true perfection in him and his external state” (DE §57).¹⁴ Following the terms of §767, Wolff’s treatment of duties to others focuses entirely on the specific demand to contribute to the happiness of others. The general obligation to pursue perfection is qualified, when applied to what we owe to others, as the obligation to act in a way that promotes their happiness.

Thus, Wolff does not justify any duties to others as the demand to contribute to the perfection of others’ faculties. The development or realization of the powers of other individual agents is strikingly absent in determining what we owe to them. In *that* respect, Wolff’s treatment of moral obligations displays a significant asymmetry between duties to oneself and duties to others. Wolff examines duties to oneself with regard to the development of an agent’s faculties (even more clearly in the later *Ethica* than in the *German Ethics*), while he deals with duties to others from another angle. In this respect, Wolff’s general requirement to consider the other as if she were the same person as ourselves does not genuinely correlate with his own treatment of the respective obligations. Notably, when Wolff argues that duties to oneself and duties to others are “identical” (“*einerley*”), he does so with regard to the state of both persons, that is, to non-active aspects of perfection: in this case, the sameness of duties

¹⁴ Compare Thümmig (1725: II 34 §79 and 11 §67).

would hold “since man should perform those actions with respect to himself as well as of others, by means of which the internal state of body and mind, as well as the external state becomes more perfect” (DE §768). Against such a backdrop, Wolff argues that the demand to love others as much as ourselves simply means that we ought to be as pleased with their happiness as with our own (see DE §775; see §856) and that love drives us to promote the well-being (*Wohlfahrt*) of others (see DE §776). Accordingly, a condition in which each person attains perfection is presented thus:

If all human beings would love each other as themselves, they would as a whole willingly provide that through which one could pursue the well-being of the other. No-one would lack anything. *For, as soon as one would lack something that is not in her power, there would be some who provide her with that.* (DE §777; emphasis added).

Along these lines, the achievement of the perfection of all agents would appear to correspond to the full satisfaction of every genuine need. Thus, the content of the duties to others does not concern the direct promotion of the development of others’ capacities, which would be impossible, but rather primarily concerns one’s dutiful contribution to the *condition* of others. In this respect, Wolff draws on the non-active elements of his notion of perfection to derive duties to others from the general demand issued by the law of nature.

The wider scope of Wolff’s conception of perfection, along with its importance for other-regarding conduct, stands out more clearly if we briefly consider how it relates to Kant’s criticism. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant famously observes that an agent cannot be bound to set herself the end of pursuing the perfection of others, because that would simply be impossible. It is beyond our power to exercise the faculties of other agents: “it is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty to do) something that only the other himself can do” (TL VI 386). Kant’s point is straightforward, but it does not square with the scope of Wolff’s notion of perfection. In fact, Wolff evades Kant’s criticism because, in contrast to Kant, he acknowledges no discontinuity between perfection and happiness.¹⁵ If, as I suggest, Wolff’s notion of perfection encompasses both active and non-active elements, including the perfection of an agent’s state, then Kant’s remark partially misses Wolff’s

¹⁵ On Wolff’s understanding of perfection, happiness, and their relationship, see primarily Schwaiger (1995, 2018a).

distinctive point, because it presupposes a purely active notion of perfection.¹⁶ Kant's critical remark flows from his tacit assumption that the perfection of an agent lies only in the exercise of her active powers. Notably, Johann Christian Schwab's Wolffian response to Kant's objection is based precisely on a rejection of this strict distinction: "If one is obligated to promote the happiness of another, one is also obligated to show them a new perfection in itself" (Schwab 1798: 137). If perfection and happiness are construed as mutually continuous, then because perfection is not a merely active concept, the objection does not apply. Kant's point presupposes a neat distinction between perfection and happiness, while Wolff and the Wolffians understand them as intrinsically connected—in fact as being parts of the same all-encompassing goal. Thus, Kant's remark rings hollow in Wolffian ears.

3. Veracity, Lying, and the Pursuit of Perfection

It is helpful to appraise Wolff's understanding of the content of other-regarding duties by considering how he treats some specific examples. One interesting case is his construal of the duty not to lie, which he, like most other writers, understands as an other-regarding obligation. Thus, he examines it in the final part of the *German Ethics*, which is devoted to duties to others, in fact paying particular attention to duties to others concerning speech and verbal communication. After a chapter on duties to others in general, discussed in the previous section, Wolff focuses on "duties to friends and foes," (chapter 2 of Part IV) duties "concerning property," (chapter 3) and finally duties "in speaking and in contracts" (chapter 4). The duty of veracity and the duty not to lie are the first main topic of that chapter. They play a significant role in Wolff's treatment of duties to others and are helpful in showing his approach to specific duties in light of his general take on how other people fit in with the pursuit of perfection, without factoring in juridical issues as in the case of duties concerning property. At the same time, duties regarding veracity and lying are more specific than those concerning how to relate to friends and foes (i.e., other human beings in general). As I shall show, Wolff's remarks on veracity and lying clarify how he applies the general demand to

¹⁶ Although unaware of Wolff's conception, Diane Jeske made a rather similar point concerning Kant's view of the two obligatory ends of one's own perfection and the happiness of others, when she suggested that "because the development of our rational and other distinctively human capacities, or our 'perfection' as human beings, is an important constituent of our welfare or flourishing, we have duties to ourselves and to others to promote the perfection of our and their nature" (Jeske 1996: 269). Not unlike in Wolff's conception, Jeske's suggestion is that the fundamental asymmetry in Kant's view between duties to oneself and duties to others can be overcome by maintaining that perfection and well-being are continuous.

pursue perfection to other-regarding obligations.¹⁷ What does the duty not to lie consist in, and what makes lying wrong, in Wolff's view? If we draw only on his general formulation of the law of nature, we might simply conclude that lying is insufficient, or even harmful, to the pursuit of the perfection of others. Yet, that does not quite correspond to what Wolff says about those specific duties. Rather, his remarks on them reveal how his focus on the non-active aspects of perfection plays out in clarifying specific duties.

From the outset, Wolff's treatment of those duties centers on what he takes to be the crucial feature that determines the moral worth of lying, namely harm: "an untrue speech that amounts to harming another is called a *lie*" (DE §981). In fact, he goes so far as to claim that: "if one does not harm anyone with untrue words, but is of use to herself, that is not a lie" (DE §985). Thus, it would appear that 'no harm done, no lie' could count as a general rule. Correspondingly, in the absence of harm, the duty of veracity does not apply. In fact, avoiding harm can be grounds for hiding the truth or even for telling an untruth: if it does not harm anyone, but is rather for the best, then "it is sometimes permissible, indeed we are sometimes obligated, to tell the untruth" (DE §987). In Wolff's view, that applies, for instance, to what Fichte later called the "common example of the school"—the murderer at the door.¹⁸ Here, Wolff gives his own version of the traditional distinction between logical untruth (or *falsiloquium*) and moral untruth or lying (*mendacium*), which revolves around the notion of harm.¹⁹ What makes an untruth into a proper lie is only that it is harmful. Correspondingly, veracity is the virtue of the person who tells the truth "if it is beneficial" (DE §989). No true statement displays veracity when it is not beneficial.

Now, Wolff is not clear about precisely what the relevant harm consists in, and that lack of clarity means that his emphasis on harm as the wrong-making feature of lying can even lead readers to regard Wolff's view of those specific duties as fundamentally "utilitarian," as Martin Annen has done. Annen argues that "the main distinctive trait of Wolff's treatment of the problem of veracity" can be called utilitarian because Wolff regards the moral assessment of an untrue statement as dependent on the corresponding harm or utility (see Annen 1997:

¹⁷ A special focus on those specific duties in the Wolffian milieu is also apparent in the second volume of L. Ph. Thümmig's *Institutiones philosophiae Wolfianae* (1725), one of the first and most authoritative extensive presentations of practical philosophy following Wolff. There, the duties concerning verbal communication have even greater prominence, as they are the first specific topic in the treatment of duties to others and are neatly separated from the juridical aspects (see Thümmig 1725: II, 39 ff.).

¹⁸ "When one falsely tells an enemy where the person whom he is pursuing with a sword went." (DE § 987; compare JN III §216 A).

¹⁹ On this, see also Annen (1997: 25–8).

30). According to Annen's reading, however, Wolff's supposed 'utilitarian' take on lying is linked, arguably not without tension, to a more 'deontological' take, according to which Wolff regards certain act-types, such as lying, as intrinsically immoral.²⁰ Furthermore, those two strands in Wolff's treatment(s) of lying and veracity could be seen as marking a development in his view, with the 'utilitarian' take especially prominent in the 1720 *German Ethics*, and the 'deontological' one gaining more prominence in Wolff's later views (see Annen 1997: 39). This reconstruction of Wolff's conception could even be supplemented with the claim that such a development is connected to Wolff's aim to respond to critics who accused him of egoism.²¹ This would motivate him to downplay any feature of the *German Ethics* that could support such criticisms, and accordingly to stress that his view does not entail that considerations of utility would make any deception allowed (see JN III §349A), as, in general, considerations of utility determine the moral worth of actions (see PPU I §265).

Annen's reconstruction has the merit of acknowledging that Wolff's conception is more complex and nuanced than it first appears, or than could be expected from a simple derivation from the law of nature. However, we can better explain the distinctive features of Wolff's view of lying that Annen identifies in different terms, terms that also shed light on the general features of Wolff's perspective on normative ethics that I highlighted in the previous section. In this respect, understanding Wolff's notion of harm is obviously crucial. That concept is more elusive than it might initially appear, and it cannot be taken as an unequivocal signpost for a specific view.²² As I have remarked before, Wolff does not devote much space to its clarification. In fact, his remarks on the matter can even sound patently circular. When he explains that a lie is a false statement that produces harm to others, Wolff refers back to §824 and his claim that "the human being should not harm anyone" (DE §981). There, however, Wolff defined harm simply as the consequence of an offense (*Beleidigung*) (see DE §824). In turn, an offense is understood as any violation of a duty to others.²³ It would then appear that Wolff argues that an action violates a duty to others simply because it is harmful, which in turn means only that it violates a duty to others. Against this backdrop, the claim in §981 that

²⁰ See Annen (1997: 39). Annen hastens to add, of course, that Wolff tries to incorporate the "deontological elements" in his fundamentally utilitarian view.

²¹ On those criticisms, see Schwaiger (2018b).

²² On the elusiveness of the notion of harm, see, e.g., Bradley (2012).

²³ See DE §817: "When one acts against her duties towards another, one *offends* the other. Therefore an *offense* is [an act] that conflicts with the duties towards the other."

harm is the wrong-making feature of lying—or of any other-regarding action for that matter—is an apparent tautology.

Despite certain weaknesses in the way Wolff expresses his argument, this appearance of circularity is illusory. Wolff's general point about harm is simply that it is a moral evil, and not a physical damage that directly causes pain to a person. Harm is a morally negative consequence of an action, which violates another person and her condition in some way, as it affects her "internal or external state," thereby interfering with her perfection, broadly construed. Thus, Wolff's understanding of harm makes it apparent that he does *not* hold a *welfarist* version of consequentialism, which would revolve mainly around promoting the well-being of others by satisfying their desires, as one interpreting Wolff's view as utilitarian would assume (see, for instance, Hurka 1992: 71). The upshot would be that lying is wrong only insofar as it immediately displeases the person lied to, thereby hurting her and hindering her happiness. On the contrary, as Wolff construes it, harm—the effect of any offense—is the negative impact that an action has on another person and her perfection, where her perfection includes non-active elements (i.e., her condition).²⁴ Thus, lying is harmful insofar as it violates what we owe to others according to the law of nature by interfering with their perfection.²⁵ The benefit or harm that results from actions consists in their negative or positive impact on the pursuit of others' perfection, with regard to its non-active component. Thus, Wolff's use of those notions shows that, in a specific normative domain, the morality of other-regarding conduct does not depend on any contribution to the other agent's activity, but rather only on the impact that the conduct has on their condition. Their own pursuit of perfection might very well profit from the greater perfection of their "internal or external state" to which our actions should contribute. Indeed, we must comply with other-regarding duties on the assumption of that connection. Yet, what we owe to others with regard to speech and truthfulness can concern only their state, not the exercise of their capacities. In fact, Wolff's treatment of the specific duties concerning veracity and lying follows the terms of the crucial §767, from which Wolff's entire investigation of the duties to others unfolds.

Furthermore, Wolff points out—not only in the later works, but also in the *German Ethics*—that we can easily cognize the intrinsic immorality of lying as harmful conduct. The wrongness of lying can be known immediately on the basis of the law of nature, that is, by

²⁴ See correspondingly the important clarification on the nature of an offense in general: "Since the duties to others are actions that make the internal state of the soul and the body, just as the external, more perfect (§768); thus offenses are actions that make the internal and external state of the other more imperfect" (DE §817).

²⁵ Compare Thümmig 1725, II, 36 §93: "who acts in ways that lead to another's imperfection, *harms* her."

grasping the “nature of things,” as Wolff puts it. He observes that a liar must meet with the reprobation of others because “a reasonable subject realises the harmfulness of lies” (DE § 982). This does not make reference to the advantage of the person to whom the lie is told. In that regard, Wolff merely refers to §368 of the *German Metaphysics*, where, having defined reason as the faculty to have insight in the connection of truths, he remarks that one has acted reasonably if “one has thereby brought about advantage, or even avoided this disadvantage, etc., that is, because one has seen and considered what could result from one’s action and omission, and consequently provide *an example of one’s insight into the connection of things*” (DM § 368; emphasis added). Thus, lying can be cognized as intrinsically immoral precisely because its wrongness is grounded in the very nature of things, into which reason has insight (see DE §24).²⁶ A false statement is a lie, therefore, if and only if it is harmful to another person in this rather specific sense, and not merely because it affects her well-being and the satisfaction of her desires. We can thus see Wolff’s view as a *perfectionist* version of consequentialism, in which the moral worth of an untrue statement, like any other action, depends on its contribution to the development of human nature according to its features (see DE §3).²⁷

With regard to Wolff’s view, then, any supposed distinction between ‘utilitarian’ and ‘deontological’ considerations about lying (or about any other-regarding conduct) fades away.²⁸ The apparently utilitarian strand in his remarks in fact turns out to be about what is required by human nature with regard to other people. Conversely, the remarks that might initially appear ‘deontological’ are aimed at emphasizing the rationality of the duties concerning veracity and lying. The morality of such actions depends on how fitting they are to the nature of things, and to human nature in particular, and is thus neither accidental, nor contingent to the features of the particular individual agents with whom we communicate. Accordingly, Wolff remains stringent about the wrongness of *lying*, narrowly construed. The duty not to lie admits of no exceptions, which would not be the case if an assessment of the utility or harm of a statement could determine its permissibility. The wrongness of lying does

²⁶ On this aspect, see again Michael Walschots’ chapter.

²⁷ On the structural distinction between welfarist and perfectionist consequentialist theories, see Hurka (1992).

²⁸ I cannot examine here Wolff’s later works on ethics in any detail and must restrict my consideration to the *German Ethics*. However, it is worth pointing out, against what Annen’s reconstruction implies, that the transition from the earlier to the later works cannot include the rejection of a sort of utilitarianism in favor of deontological considerations, if only because Wolff never held a utilitarian view of sorts in contrast with a ‘deontological’ take. Nevertheless, other significant differences separate the later works from the *German Ethics*, as is only natural after thirty years. Their exact terms would certainly deserve closer scrutiny.

not concern act-tokens, but an act-*type*. Wolff is therefore adamant that “lying is never allowed” (DE §987). If a false statement is not morally reproachable, or even morally required (as in the case of a murderer at the door), it is because it is not a lie, as it produces no harm (see DE §987), in accordance with the definition mentioned before (see DE §§981, 985).²⁹ In this respect, Wolff’s account of those duties is internally consistent, because it is unaffected by any tension between ‘utilitarian’ and ‘deontological’ strands.

Remaining consistent with his overall strategy concerning duties to others, Wolff never justifies any of the duties concerning veracity and lying by appealing to the active elements of perfection, that is, to the exercise of the active powers of others. In fact, he does not even exploit the opportunities to do so that he creates. Notably, Wolff once hints at a promising explanation in such terms, but he neither develop it nor refers to it when he deals with duties concerning lying. When he provides examples of offense, Wolff observes: “we are obliged to help the other to acquire as much knowledge as possible” (DE §818). Hindering another’s possibility to acquire knowledge is thus an offense.³⁰ This offers Wolff a straightforward perfectionist argument to explain the wrongness of lying: lying would harm another person because it deprives her of the possibility of exercising her power to acquire true knowledge about a certain matter of fact.³¹ That would not only provide a traditional perfectionist argument for the pursuit of the perfection of cognitive activity in others, but could also easily be connected to a defining general qualification of duties to others that I previously mentioned, because Wolff connects his remark on the duty to promote as much knowledge as possible in others to his treatment of duties to oneself in §235. There, Wolff observed, if only incidentally, that not everyone can acquire knowledge by herself, and no-one can acquire every useful cognition by herself (see DE §235). Although mentioned in his treatment of duties to oneself, this remark would have matched Wolff’s general qualification describing the proper boundaries of the duties to others, that is, that they concern only what the other person cannot do by herself (see DE §769). Here, Wolff not only had the opportunity for a helpful argument for the wrongness of lying, but also a way to draw a direct correspondence between a duty to others and a duty to oneself, that is, a way to show that they are “identical.” Yet, Wolff’s examination of other-regarding duties concerning veracity and lying does *not*

²⁹ Annen (1997: 44) correspondingly points out that Wolff does not acknowledge the widespread notion of a *Notlüge*, a lie supposedly made necessary by the circumstances. On that Annen refers only to the later Latin works, the *Jus Naturae* and the *Ethica*, but the same applies just as well to the *German Ethics*, as we have seen.

³⁰ See again Michael Walschots’ contribution.

³¹ Fichte would later develop such an approach: see his *System of Ethics* (§23) and Bacin (2021: 203–8).

appeal to that perfectionist line of reasoning. Instead, Wolff deals with those duties consistently with his overall strategy of focusing merely on the dutiful contribution to the non-active elements of the perfection of other agents.

Wolff's treatment of veracity and lying also displays the other main aspect of his overall strategy for standards of other-regarding conduct, namely his agent-neutral construal of perfection. Only this can explain Wolff's repeated insistence on the harm that lying does *to the liar*. He draws on the arguably uncontroversial fact that nobody can be pleased to be called a liar. Wolff thus observes that lying injures the reputation of the agent who is acknowledged to be a liar (see DE §982), thereby depriving her of other people's trust (see Eth. V §§547, 740). Besides this, the most likely outcome of a declaration that turns out to be a lie is that it makes its addressee hate the liar and become her foe (see DE §982; Eth. V, §547, 740). Thus, lying breaches the general duty to avoid making enemies (see DE §778). However, such remarks would seem to be out of place, or downright irrelevant, with regard to what we owe to others, which one would instead expect to be justified through considerations that concern the addressee of the action. Correspondingly, if the self-inflicted harm produced by lying were important only because it negatively affects the liar, that would merely make it hazardous conduct that runs against prudence. That would make lying a violation of a duty to the self.³²

Some might argue that the harm that the liar does to herself presupposes that her action also harms another person, according to the general definition of lying as a false statement that is harmful to another (see DE §981).³³ More clearly, however, Wolff's concern with the negative impact that lying has on the liar follows from an agent-neutral conception of perfection. In Wolff's view, that impact is not to be assessed in light of prudential considerations. Rather, he holds that it is important to grasp that lying is harmful to the liar because it hinders the overarching pursuit of perfection. Therefore, the harm to the liar also belongs in the examination of lying as a violation of a duty to others.

4. Concluding Remarks

A closer examination of Wolff's treatment of veracity and lying sheds light on how he pursues his ambition that his moral theory should deal with specific moral issues within the general framework of his normative theory, particularly in terms of clarifying what we owe to others.

³² Annen (1997: 33 f.) briefly discusses why Wolff does not consider lying as specifically pertinent to the duties to oneself.

³³ Thümmig also emphasizes the harm to the liar; see Thümmig 1725, II, 39, § 115).

Wolff singles out a feature of the relevant conduct that determines its moral worth, thereby setting an overall standard that applies to all cases at issue without exception. Such a standard is thus intended to provide an action-guiding criterion that serves the practical purpose of ethics. For Wolff, that standard is given by benefit (*Nutzen*) and harm (*Schaden*), which he construes as a positive or negative contribution to the perfection of a person. The morality of actions is thus determined through such consequences. This applies to true and false statements as much as to any other form of other-regarding conduct. Morally good ways of acting in communication with others are defined by their positive or harmful consequences. Veracity is thus understood as telling the truth (or what the speaker takes to be the truth) insofar as it is beneficial and not harmful, which makes it morally required by virtue of the law of nature. Analogously, lying is a false statement that is harmful to another person, which makes it morally wrong.

A closer look at Wolff's treatment of those duties, then, sheds light on the overall character of his version of consequentialism. His understanding of benefit and harm in the morally relevant sense proves that Wolff's consequentialism is not welfarist, but rather a form of perfectionist consequentialism, one that is focused on the impact that an action has on the (internal or external) state of a person as an aspect of her perfection. Contrary to previous readings, this entails that Wolff's consequentialism is not in tension with an alleged deontological strand in his examination of veracity and lying. The beneficial or harmful character of action types is connected to their fittingness to human nature in general, and is an intrinsic feature of them, which is in turn a matter of rational knowledge.

As I have shown, Wolff deals with the duties concerning veracity and lying in a way that displays both aspects of his distinctive strategy in accommodating what we owe to others within perfectionist framework. First, he regards the internal or external state of a person as a non-active element of her perfection, rendering it possible to construe other-regarding conduct as pursuing the perfection of others through one's actions. Second, Wolff's treatment of veracity and lying clearly shows that his strategy regarding duties to others construes perfection not merely as agent-relative, but also in explicitly agent-neutral terms. When it comes to lying, a purely agent-relative notion could not account for the significance that Wolff affords to the harm that the liar does to herself by lying to others.

Both features, which emerge in the last chapter of the *German Ethics* with regard to veracity and lying, correspond to how Wolff outlines his perspective on duties to others in general. As I argued in section two, in accounting for what we owe to others, Wolff adopts an agent-neutral notion of perfection that includes non-active elements. That tension between

two conceptions of perfection has a direct impact on the treatment of the duties to others and their relationship to the duties to oneself. The respective status of duties to oneself and duties to others is presented in conflicting terms, as Wolff maintains both that duties to oneself enjoy primacy over duties to others *and* that the two kinds of obligations parallel each other and correspond to one another in their content. Nevertheless, Wolff's incorporation of both features in his strategy concerning duties to others gives his version of moral perfectionism a distinctive shape.³⁴

³⁴ I would like to thank Ursula Goldenbaum, Paul Guyer, Tim Rosenkotter, Paola Rumore, Sonja Schierbaum, Michael Walschots, and John Walsh for their comments on the first draft of this chapter.

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