
Against Perfection

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The title of this conference invites us to think about the idea of humanity and how it might vary across time and space. I want to talk about a normative idea which has been very influential through time and across cultures and which continues to be very influential, namely the idea of perfection: the idea that we should aim at perfection. I will propose a critique of this idea and proceed in two steps. First, I will argue that it is very hard to make sense of the idea of perfection. Second, I will argue that even if we could make sense of it, we still shouldn't go for it.

1. What Could Perfection Possibly Be?

So, what is perfection? If one consults some dictionary, one notices quickly that there is more than just one use of a word like “perfect” or “perfection” (whether in English or in other languages). Here, I want to focus on one very interesting core meaning: perfection as maximal goodness. According to this idea something is perfect just in case it couldn't be better.

(a) Perfection: Absolute, Universal, and Specific

Right from the start we should distinguish between three types of perfection: specific perfection, universal perfection, and absolute perfection. Specific perfection is perfection in a specific respect or regard. For instance, some cheese knife might be considered perfect with respect to cutting cheese but this doesn't mean that it is being evaluated with respect to anything else, like, for instance, the tuning of a piano. It can be pretty useless for the latter purpose but (perhaps?) still be a perfect cheese knife. This, at least, is what specific perfection would consist in here. If we apply this idea of perfection to humans, we notice that there is more than one dimension in which humans could be evaluated for perfection (as cooks, as athletes, as entertainers, etc.). But there are also clear constraints. It doesn't seem to make any sense to ask how good humans are at barking or at emitting radioactivity. Perfection will have to be “indexed” or relativized or restricted to what the nature of humans allows for (see also below). More generally, whenever one evaluates something

or perfection one will have to focus on what the nature of that thing allows for.¹ As Iddo Landau recently observed in a somewhat different context: It would be silly to expect a dog to drive a car, expect oneself to be able to sit on a kettle, or a chair to boil water.²

However, there is also the idea, especially in some philosophical traditions, of something that has all the specific perfections: The *ens perfectissimum* in René Descartes' Fifth Meditation³, God, is supposed to be perfect in every respect. This is the idea of universal perfection. But how is this possible, given that some properties are mutually exclusive, like, e.g., omnipresence in space and time, and spatio-temporal absence?

Finally, one might go one step further and think of absolute perfection of something as perfection that is not relative to any or even all possible aspects but is rather absolute. But, one might ask, how can something absolutely perfect if not perfect as this or that? One might, perhaps reply that this would only show that one cannot have absolute perfection without universal perfection. But no, I find it very hard, to say the least, to make any sense of talk about absolute perfection. It sounds a bit like talk about things that are “absolutely to the left”, - not to the left of this or that or the other but to the left absolutely.

Let us then stick with the idea of specific perception and leave the other two ideas aside here.⁴

(b) A First Problem with Perfection Talk: Lack of a Maximum

A first problem with the idea of perfection as (specific) maximal goodness has to do with the idea of a maximum. We all know that there is no greatest natural number. And the Richter Scale for earthquakes has no upper limit. Why then suspect in the first place that goodness (be it of a moral, ethical or some other kind) has a maximum? I myself don't know of any convincing argument to that effect. Why shouldn't the “scale” of goodness lack an upper (and also a lower) bound? Consider cheese knives again. There are certainly very good ones and not so good ones. But does it make sense to talk about a perfect cheese knife? What could that mean? Couldn't a particular cheese knife always be better at cutting cheese – for instance by adapting even more smoothly to the consistency of the particular cheese? Or by cutting without changing the taste of the cheese in any way? Or perhaps, rather, by changing the taste of the cheese in a good way? In the best possible way? And what if there is more than one virtue a cheese knife could have (like ease of use, avoidance of crumbling the cheese, etc.)? There might not even be a way of aggregating all the different virtues in such a way that we can determine what, overall, is better and what is worse.

There are other cases to consider. Can there be such a thing as the perfect, maximally good work of art? Should we say, that, for instance, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony couldn't have been better? Is it already as good or better than his Ninth? Or vice versa? Did Beethoven finish any such

1. See, e.g., Hurka 1993, chs.1-4.

2. See Landau 2017, 39.

3. See Descartes 1907ff.

4. When I talk about perfection in the following without qualifying it I mean specific perfection.

composition because he thought it couldn't be any better? (I don't want to suggest at all that he thought at the end that "well, this is the best I can do – call it a symphony!"). Or consider athletics: What about the perfect athlete? Can there be a sprinter who runs the 100 meters so fast that it is not possible to run it faster (for humans)? Finally, consider moral goodness. We all have some ideas about morally good persons or even very good persons. But do we have any reason to think that there could be one person who is so good that nobody could be better? Even super-heroes can do better than they do, it seems.

I don't want to go as far as claiming here that there is never any maximal specific goodness for anything. I don't know of any argument showing this. But I also cannot think of good cases where there is such a maximal goodness. This should suffice to be skeptical of the idea of perfection as such.⁵

(c) A Second Problem with Perfection Talk: It Doesn't or Might not Make Sense

Let us assume that someone is better as a knower if they know more rather than less. This should not be taken to mean that it would be better to know more unimportant things than fewer important ones. Rather, the idea is that if Hi knows everything Ho knows plus something else, then Hi is better as a knower. Perhaps one is better off as a knower not knowing certain (trivial, etc.) things; let us put this potential complication aside here and consider this question: Wouldn't someone who knows everything then be the perfect knower? Let us assume we understand what "everything" means here, that is, what the collection of all the things knowable is. Wouldn't such an omniscient knower (one of the properties of some philosophers' God) then know that, too: namely that they know all those things? So, they would know all those things and they would in addition know that they know all those things. But then it seems clear that such a being would also have to know the latter thing and so on. An infinite regress is starting here. I doubt we can even make sense of the idea of a being that can exhaust such an infinite series. So, it might well make no sense to say that someone knows everything there is to know. This raises a problem for the idea of epistemic perfection, here: perfection as a knower because however much someone knows there is always more to know.⁶ It seems then that in such cases we cannot even make sense of perfection talk.

Another doubt has to do with the idea of comparability. If something is so good that it couldn't be better, then it must also be better than some other things. So, it must be comparable to these other things in terms of goodness – as better, worse or equally good than these other things. Can one, for instance, compare friends with respect to the degree to which they are good friends? There is no doubt that some are better friends than others. Aljoshka Karamasow would most probably make a better friend than Jack the Ripper. And some might even have a best friend (not the same

5. Even if goodness had an upper bound, it might still be that nothing could ever reach it but only converge towards it as a limit; in this case one could only get closer and closer to it in such a way that for every point close to the bound there is another one closer to the bound. There is then no maximum in the sense that one couldn't be better, despite the presence of a bound. I won't look into these kinds of cases here.

6. See fn.5 on convergence towards a limit.

as a maximally good friend). But there also seem to be limits to comparability. We do use rough categories for people, like *enemies*, *people one would rather avoid (without them being enemies)*, *nice enough acquaintances*, *not so close friends*, *good friends*, *very close and good friends*, etc. Perhaps these categories have sub-categories but at some point we will reach the basic level of categorization. Let's assume the above list is the basic one. Then we don't have comparability of the quality of friends within these (basic) categories. Take any two friends who belong into the top basic category of very close and good friends. It would not be true that one is a better friend than the other nor that they are equally good as friends.⁷ Perhaps it would also not be false that one is a better friend than the other nor that they are equally good friends. In such a case, we are facing an interesting and basic indeterminacy here, as far as the quality of friends is concerned. This would also explain why it does not only sound morally fishy but even hardly intelligible to say, for instance, about one's spouse that there could not possibly be a better spouse for oneself. Sure, we often say things like "You are the greatest nanny possible" but we don't usually mean it in the strict sense. We can also go back to the music example above. Perhaps both the Fifth and the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven fall into the highest category of quality of music. But is it then really true that one is better than the other or that they are equally good (exactly equally good, that is)? Sure, you might dislike the Ninth but then it wouldn't fall into the highest category.

Now, if there is such limited comparability then one would or could still have a highest category. But "perfection" could then only mean that something falls into that category, passes a certain standard. Since there is no comparability within the (basic) category, we cannot call very close and good friends or superb works of art "perfect", except perhaps in a much weaker and secondary sense. I would doubt that one can still call this "maximal goodness".

More issues can be added here. Typically, a thing that is good in some way has more than one virtue. A good friend is someone who is helpful, empathetic, understands, etc. How are we going to compare one friend who is very good at helping, quite empathetic but not so good at understanding with another friend who is very good at understanding, ok with empathy but not quite that helpful? We would have to be able to aggregate the goodness in these different dimensions into one overall goodness (see also the example of the different virtues of a cheese knife above). There are good reasons to doubt that this can be done.⁸ Another way in which comparability might be limited has to do with the potential lack of transitivity of "good". One friend might be overall (supposing we can aggregate dimensions of goodness) better than a second friend who in turn might be better than a third friend; however, the third friend might be so excellent in a few dimensions that a threshold is crossed and they come out as better as the first friend. Potential failures of transitivity of "good" constitute a huge topic I can only mention here.⁹

Finally, one should wonder whether individual human beings can be called "perfect" (and

7. See Chang 1997.

8. But cf. for instance Hurka 1993, chs.6-9.

9. See, e.g., Fishburn 1991.

we are particularly interested in perfection for humans here). Why not? Whatever we are and accomplish is to a large degree to natural and social circumstances which are not under our control. Someone might have a particular talent for being an engineer or might have grown up in a very supportive learning environment. Suppose they then become an outstanding engineer. Isn't it rather the conglomerate of the individual and their circumstances that could, if at all, be called "perfect with respect to engineering"? Rather than the individual in isolation?

The upshot of the last few remarks is that at least in many cases it doesn't seem to make much sense at all to qualify things or beings as perfect or maximally good. This claim is stronger than the first point made above about the lack of a maximum.

(d) But Don't We Talk Like that?

One might protest and point out that talk about something being "perfect" is so common that it can hardly be misguided. I would agree but add that such talk uses the word in a different way. We say things like "That was the perfect dinner", "We're arriving at the station just in time for the train – perfect!" but what we mean is rather that something is very good, not that it couldn't be better. And even if we say something like the latter ("This weekend in the countryside couldn't have been better") we are using hyperbole. And sometimes we just mean that something is done, has been completed. A work of art might be perfect in this sense.¹⁰ It is worth mentioning here that ethicists in greek antiquity like Aristotle talk a lot about the good life but that the notion of a maximally good life that couldn't be better is absent from their theories.¹¹ Rejection of the idea of perfection is "perfectly" compatible with accepting the idea of the good, the better and the worse.

2. Would it Even Be a Good Thing?

So, we should reject the idea of perfection (the idea of maximal goodness). However, there is still another important question: What if perfection talk made sense and the idea of perfection really had application at least in many cases (and in those cases in particular which are of the greatest interest to us)? Wouldn't that thing called "perfection" be a good, a great thing? Would it? We have to ask a normative question, too, not just the "metaphysical" questions above. For that let us assume, for the sake of the discussion, that there is nothing wrong with perfection talk as such. I will very much focus on human perfection here.

(a) Radical Perfection?

Recent discussions about human enhancement and transhumanism, designer children and genetic engineering, and many other related issues¹² raise a normative question: Is human perfection

10. It is an interesting question what determines whether a work of art is done.

11. See, e.g., Aristotle 2009 and also Tugendhat 1984.

12. See for many: Sandel 2007.

a good thing? Michael Sandel¹³, for instance holds that adopting and following the idea of human enhancement (and a fortiori: of perfection) shows a lack of humility and a misplaced sense of mastery over nature, and that we should therefore reject the idea for moral reasons. I must confess that I'm not quite sure what to make of this point; I leave it open whether I should be convinced by Sandel here. But there is a somewhat related moral objection that might have some purchase. Let our imagination run wild and conceive of designer children with properties far beyond traditional humans capacities; they might have mastered 11 languages at age 2 and graduated from College at ages 4 and a half. Or think of a sprinter who has been genetically modified to such a degree that they can run the 100 meters in less than 2 seconds. Think of cyborgs who surpass us "traditional" humans in intellectual, moral and physical respects by far. Imagine you could be turned into such a cyborg within a day (and your health insurance would even cover the costs). Would you have good reasons to go for that?

One thing one should say is that if you went for it you would not be a human being anymore (not in the sense of the word "human" that we're using). You would be something else. The question then is whether it would be a good thing or at least acceptable to turn oneself into a non-human. This is an ethical question in a broad sense. I just want to raise it here and keep it open at least a bit. But let me say that the idea of giving up one core characteristic of oneself (being human) just to be better at certain things strikes me as being completely out of proportion. Why is it so important to be so much better at running or counting that one would give up one's membership in a species? Don't certain basic aspects of my life have to remain the same in order for me to be able to see myself as the same one after all? And where does a value like the value of being able to speak so many languages come from if it is not rooted in the human condition? An extremely transhuman cyborg might not care at all about speaking so many languages or any of the other things we care about. There might then be a certain incoherence in radical ideas of enhancement: One would go for it on the basis of values that are tied to the human condition and that one would lose as soon as one has transcended one's own human predicament. Perhaps the idea of this kind of radical perfection is silly more than ethically objectionable.

When we raise questions about whether it would be good to "perfect" others (like in the case of designer children) we face an additional moral issue (in the more narrow sense). May we do such things to others? May we support movements towards more radical perfection? I think this depends to a large degree on whether it would be good for someone to go for this. And I have mentioned some doubts about that above.

(b) Perfection at a Human Scale?

What about perfection as humans? Susan Wolf famously argued against the claim that it would be good to be a moral saint.¹⁴ She thought that being a moral saint would be incompatible with

13. See Sandel 2007, for instance, ch.3 on designer children but also the other chapters.

14. See Wolf 1982.

having many other good things (not of lower standing). And who would like being around moral saints? If I had the choice between having the brothers Karamasow over for dinner or some moral saints (are there any?), I might well lean toward the first. One underlying question here is whether we would find a morally perfect life still worth living. Closely related to this is the general question whether failure and lack of perfection isn't a good thing in life and preferable to a life without failures or any lack of perfection. I think there is a lot to this idea. Even though we have reason to want each of our goals reached we also have reason not to want that all of our goals are reached by us (we even have good reason to want that not all of our goals will be reached by us). A life of perfection and complete success would be utterly boring and shallow, not worth living.¹⁵ As Yogi Berra famously remarked once: If life were perfect, it wouldn't be.¹⁶

But doesn't this, ironically, suggest that if a life is not perfect in one sense (in the sense of maximal goodness in each and every respect), then it is perfect in another sense (in the sense that it just has the right overall balance of success and failure)? There might be this other type of perfection but whatever exactly it involves, it wouldn't have to be maximal goodness. We would just have a case where such a (balanced) life is better than one maximally good in each and every respect.

(c) Maximizing?

But shouldn't we at least maximize what is good in the sense that we should at least try to do our best (even if that is not something that couldn't be better)? Isn't it utterly incoherent to say that something is good but that we shouldn't bring about as much good as we can? Isn't the idea of maximization perhaps even part of the idea of the good?

Classical or orthodox theories of rational decision making and rational acting claim that maximization is the rational thing to do.¹⁷ This view has a lot of intuitive plausibility. However, one still has reason to wonder why *good enough* isn't good enough.¹⁸ People have even argued for satisficing over maximizing: Maximizers tend to be much unhappier than satisficers (because they're more stressed, depressed and unappreciative of what they have).¹⁹ Applied to the idea of perfection this suggests not preferring perfection to a satisfying state or even preferring satisfying states to perfect states.²⁰ Perhaps we are most engaged and getting most out of life when we're doing what we think we "just have to do"; typically we don't then strive after perfection. And when we strive after perfection it seems, we have already started giving up on doing what is most important to us.²¹

15. See, e.g., my 2004.

16. To be precise here: He said that if the world were perfect, then it wouldn't be. However, the above thought is not far from Berra's original remark in spirit.

17. See, e.g., Resnik 1987.

18. See Simon 1983 or Slote 1989

19. See Schwartz 2004.

20. See Sandel 2007 and Slote 2013 on this side and against this Hurka 1993.

21. See Frankfurt 1988 on identification.

One last remark on the desirability of perfection. Echoing some brief remarks in the last section one could argue that if perfection is an ideal then it is an ideal not for individuals in isolation but rather for societies. This idea has something going for it but there is also a certain vagueness about it: What does it mean to have a perfect social life? One might even worry that this would risk encroaching on the good life of individuals.

3. Conclusion

I have argued that the idea of perfection is either not applicable (at least in many cases) or even lacks substance in many cases. We should give up on perfection and rather aim at doing what we think is worth doing and get engaged with it. This is much better and constitutes what truly matters. We should aim at good and meaningful lives (whatever that involves) and turn away from perfection. As one can read in John Steinbeck's "East of Eden": "And now that you don't have to be perfect, you can be good. Is that it?"²²

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22. Pierre de Coubertin proposed "Citius, Altius, Fortius" ("Faster, Higher, Stronger") as the motto for the modern Olympic Games. It is interesting that he is using just the comparative, not the superlative or maximative. It is also interesting that a much more well-known motto for the Olympic Games is something along the lines of "The most important thing is not to win but to take part".

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