

PERFECTION AND SUCCESS

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According to reductivist axiological perfectionism about well-being (RAP), well-being is constituted by the development and exercise of central human capacities. In defending this view, proponents have relied heavily on the claim that RAP provides a unifying explanation of the entries on the ‘objective list’ of well-being constituents. I argue that this argument fails to provide independent support for the theory. RAP does not render a plausible objective list unless such a list is used at every stage of theory development to shape the details of the view. Absent such motivated fine-tuning, RAP even fails to provide a satisfying account of two supposed paradigm cases of perfectionist value: achievement and knowledge. Thus, if RAP is to be defended, it must be defended directly by providing reasons for accepting the axiological principle at its heart. It cannot be defended, indirectly, by pointing to its attractive implications.

Reductivist axiological perfectionism about well-being (hereafter *RAP*) claims that human well-being is constituted by the development and exercise of central human capacities.¹ *RAP* is most prominently associated with Thomas Hurka (Hurka 1993).² More recent defenders include George Sher, Gwen Bradford,

1. The view tracks its origins to Aristotle’s idea that *eudaimonia* consists in excelling at the peculiar function (*ergon*) of human beings. However, *RAP* should not be confused with Neo-Aristotelianism as defended and developed by authors such as Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse, Judith Jarvis Thomson, and Michael Thompson (Hursthouse 1999; Thompson 1999; Foot 2003; Thomson 2009; cf. Moosavi 2022). These authors are not engaged in debates about well-being but rather are developing a concept of goodness of a kind. Moreover, they operate with the explicit assumption that (*human*) *nature* is an inherently normative concept. By contrast, the ambition of *RAP* is to derive normative claims about what increases the well-being of individual human beings from a descriptive account of human nature and a single normative principle (namely *The Perfection Principle*, to be introduced in section 1). This is what makes *RAP* a reductivist theory (though one that stops short of the ambition to derive an ought from an is).

2. Hurka would protest his perfectionist theory being called a theory of well-being. He has repeatedly argued against the use of concepts like well-being and ‘good for’ (Hurka 1987; Hurka

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Sukaina Hirji, and Michael Prinzing (Sher 1997; Bradford 2015; Hirji 2018; Prinzing 2020). Although Richard Kraut explicitly rejects RAP's reductionist ambitions, his *developmentalism* is a close relative to the view (Kraut 2007; cf. Kauppinen 2008).

There are two different ways of arguing for RAP. What I call a *direct* argument consists in providing reasons for the central normative principle at the heart of the view, that is, the claim that human well-being is constituted by the development and exercise of central human capacities. By contrast, *indirect* arguments claim that we should accept RAP because it has attractive implications. In particular, RAP promises to provide a unifying explanation of the items that typically make up so-called *objective-list theories* of well-being (Fletcher 2016: 77). Thus, RAP seems like an attractive option for those who find subjectivist theories of well-being (such as hedonism and desire-satisfaction theories) descriptively inadequate, and objective-list theories insufficiently systematic (Sher 1997: 219). Recent defenders of RAP have increasingly leaned on this line of thinking. As Bradford, who provides no direct arguments for RAP, puts it:

The main feature that makes perfectionism a superior theory is that it provides a unifying explanation for our good. (Bradford 2021: 590)

The aim of this article is to undermine this line of argument. To this end, I show that it is very doubtful that RAP actually produces an attractive objective list of well-being constituents. RAP can be made to fit with a plausible list, but this requires fine-tuning the details of the view in an ad-hoc manner, that is, by relying on the desired list when making theoretical choices in filling out the details of the view. While such motivated fine-tuning might be justified if we have sufficient independent reason to accept RAP, it undermines the indirect argument for RAP. If the details of RAP are massaged to make the view fit with a plausible list of well-being constituents, this fit itself cannot be considered an independent argument for RAP. Thus, what the arguments in this paper show is that RAP must be argued for directly if it is to be defended at all.

I begin by presenting RAP in more detail, explaining its structure, and demonstrating how some of its proponents propose to account for the value of knowledge and achievement (section 1). In making the charge that RAP fails to produce a plausible list of well-being constituents, I recount two familiar objections to the view and explain how responding to these objections makes it more difficult for proponents of RAP to rely on the indirect argument (section 2). I will

2021). However, he is clearly interested in the same questions as well-being theorists. Thus, either RAP and all its competitors are best understood as theories of well-being, or all of them are best understood as theories of what is good simpliciter (as Hurka would have it). I will follow currently dominant convention and conduct my argument using well-being terminology.

then add a new objection by showing that RAP fails to account for two supposed paradigm cases of perfectionist goods: achievement and knowledge. The argument is simple: both achievement and knowledge require success, but RAP is not sufficiently sensitive to the difference between success and failure (section 3). I explore possible responses on behalf of RAP and show, again, that they involve giving up on an indirect defense (section 4). Section 5 provides a birds-eye view of the dialectic up to that point. This is followed by a brief conclusion and a coda that draws attention to a parallel to my argument with Cicero's objection to the Peripatetics in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*.

1. The Structure of RAP

Dale Dorsey helpfully clarifies the structure of RAP as follows (See Dorsey 2010: 62):

All proponents accept

- (1) *The Perfection Principle (PfP)*: If a human being develops and exercises one of those capacities that are central to human nature, this state of affairs is good for them.

In addition, the theory needs to provide

- (2) An account of which capacities are central to human nature. This should include both a criterion (or set of criteria) for centrality³ and a list of capacities that meet it.
- (3) An account of development and exercise. This can be a general account that applies to all central capacities or a specifically tailored account of development and exercise for each capacity.

The full theory then produces a list of developed and exercised central capacities. Ideally, this list would match an intuitively plausible list of contributors to well-being.

For RAP to fulfill its reductivist ambitions, steps 2 and 3 in this program must be developed without bringing in further normative judgements. For example, it would be illegitimate to develop an account of which capacities are central to human nature by thinking about which capacities are good to develop and exercise. As Sher puts it:

3. PfP is formulated in terms of 'central' human capacities to remain neutral about disagreements arising here. Proponents of RAP disagree about what the criterion should be (essential, distinctive, fundamental, etc.) (see, e.g., Hurka 1993; Sher 1997; Bradford 2015).

My argument would be circular if I maintained both that what makes an activity inherently valuable is that it exercises a fundamental capacity and that what makes a capacity fundamental is that its exercise is inherently valuable. (Sher 1997: 202; cf. Bradford 2013: 2166–67; Hurka 1993: 18–19).

Similarly, an account of development and exercise must not help itself to normative judgements about valuable ways of developing and exercising a given capacity. The recognition of this point might be what prompted a shift in terminology in Bradford's work. In earlier publications she identified her brand of perfectionism as the view that what is valuable is the "excellent exercise" of central human capacities (Bradford 2013; Bradford 2015). In more recent work, she instead mostly speaks of simply exercising those same capacities (or, alternatively, of "developing" or "manifesting" them) (Bradford 2017; Bradford 2021). Since "excellent" is an evaluative term, inserting it into step 3 of RAP would invite the interpretation that we should use normative considerations in filling out the details of the view. This, again, would go against the reductivist ambition of RAP.⁴

Of course, reductivism is not an all or nothing affair. One could temper RAP's reductivist ambition by allowing normative judgements to come into play to some degree at either or both of steps 2 and 3. One way this may look is that PFP together with a metaphysical account of human nature and its constitutive central properties delivers the broad contours of the view, with the details being filled out by further normative judgements about which ways of developing and exercising these central capacities would be "excellent". This modest reductivism is arguably Hurka's *modus operandi* in *Perfectionism*. He doesn't, for example, claim that designating theoretical rationality as a central human capacity points uniquely to knowledge as the corresponding value, but rather that knowledge is the most valuable among a range of plausible interpretations of what it means to exercise theoretical rationality to a high degree (Hurka 1993: 112–13).

In the context of this article, however, this type of view is of lesser interest. That is because it cannot be defended via the indirect argument for RAP that I am targeting here (note that Hurka's claims discussed in the previous paragraph appear in the second part of his book; he spends the first part giving a direct defense of perfectionism). The indirect argument claims that we should accept RAP because it provides an independent and unifying rationale for our value judgements. But this is not a particularly impressive feature of a view that avails itself of these value judgements during theory building.

To demonstrate the 3-part schema of RAP consider the two examples that will be critically discussed in section 3. First, here is Hurka's derivation of the

4. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

value of knowledge.⁵ Starting with PfP, he uses the criterion of Kripkean essence to generate a list of central capacities—among them theoretical rationality. He then goes on to develop an account of the excellent exercise of theoretical rationality according to which it consists in truly and justifiably believing many complexly-related things (Hurka 1993); in other words, knowing lots of stuff (Hurka does not worry about Gettier cases at this stage). Thus, Hurka seems to have generated a perfectionist explanation as to why knowledge is valuable. Bradford's derivation of the value of achievement follows the same recipe. Applying the criterion of 'characteristic' human capacities, she places both practical rationality and the will on the list of central human capacities. Exercising practical rationality means coming up with good plans for reaching our goals, and exercising the will means expending intense effort (the will is understood here as a capacity to implement choice through perseverance). And that, she claims, is also what characterises valuable achievements (Bradford 2015). Thus, she appears to have generated a perfectionist explanation of the value of achievements.

2. Charges of Descriptive Inadequacy and the Indirect Argument for RAP

Critics of RAP have argued that the view produces a counterintuitive list of well-being constituents. Most prominently, it has been argued that RAP struggles (a) to account for the prudential value of pleasure (e.g., Arneson 1999; Haybron 2010; Sobel 2010), and (b) to exclude properties the development and exercise of which intuitively seem to have little or no prudential value (e.g., Kitcher 1999; Dorsey 2010) (this is known as the *wrong-properties objection*). Proponents of RAP can respond to charges of descriptive inadequacy in three ways: *bite the bullet* and admit that the theory produces a somewhat counterintuitive list of well-being constituents; *retreat to pluralism* and hold that RAP accounts for some, but not all, well-being constituents (this option does not help against charges that the list is overly inclusive); and *adjust the theory* to bring it into equilibrium with our intuitive judgements about well-being. All three of these can be found in the literature (see, e.g., Adams 1999 and Kraut 2007 for biting the bullet and claiming that pleasure as such has no value; Hurka 2001 for retreat to pluralism and claiming that, while knowledge and achievement are perfectionist goods, pleasure is not; Kraut 2007 and Bradford 2017 for adjusting the theory to account for the value of (some instances of) pleasure;

5. From here on out, I operate with a simplified version of Hurka's view that ignores the fact that he is somewhat tentative in his conclusion that the good corresponding to theoretical rationality is knowledge.

Hurka 1993 and Bradford 2015 for adjusting the theory to rule out intuitively valueless capacities).

These three strategies are legitimate options for dealing with counterintuitive implications of RAP for anyone who is committed to PFP as a normative principle on independent grounds. They are more problematic, however, for those who want to establish PFP via the indirect argument. The argument for RAP that it generates intuitively attractive judgements about well-being is obviously weakened whenever we are asked to bite the bullet on a counterintuitive implication. Similarly, retreat to pluralism abandons much of the appeal of an indirect defense. If only some constituents of well-being are instances of PFP, RAP does not provide a unified theory well-being after all (Bradford 2017: 347).

Slightly less obviously, the indirect argument is also weakened when the theory is being adjusted in order to remove a counterintuitive implication. An indirect argument must assume that we are genuinely agnostic about the truth of PFP. And, in such circumstances, counterintuitive implications are a reason to give up the theory rather than to adjust it to make it fit the data. We might be able, for example, to adjust our account of human nature such that we can achieve reflective equilibrium between it, PFP, and our considered judgements about well-being. But this is worth doing only if we are independently convinced of PFP. Dorsey sharpens this point by contending that we would never change our considered judgements about well-being in light of PFP and a metaphysical account of central human capacities no matter how convincing the latter may be (Dorsey 2010: 67). To the extent that this is right, it seems that accepting PFP makes our account of human nature hostage to our judgments about well-being. And that means that the indirect argument ceases to do any work: we can no longer say that PFP's plausibility is enhanced by the plausible list of well-being constituents it generates. Rather, a plausible list is guaranteed by our willingness to change our account of human nature until it delivers a list we like.

3. The Problem with Success

While the wrong-properties objection and RAP's problem with accounting for pleasure are well-known, it has been largely taken for granted that RAP is a good account of the value of knowledge and achievement. In this section I will argue that RAP fails to account for those two well-being constituents. This is a significantly more serious charge of descriptive inadequacy than the ones alluded to above because it strikes at the very heart of the indirect argument for RAP. If RAP cannot even account for knowledge and achievement, widely

considered paradigm cases of perfectionist goods,⁶ the claim that it provides a unifying explanation for a plausible list of well-being constituents can no longer be maintained.

The simple reason why the value of neither achievement, nor knowledge is straightforwardly accounted for by RAP is that both of them involve success that goes beyond the development and exercise of our capacities. Recall Hurka's derivation of the value of knowledge. He starts with a notion of theoretical rationality as an essential human capacity. When we develop and exercise that capacity, we end up believing what we should believe given the available evidence. And, unless the evidence is misleading, we will thereby come to believe true things and acquire knowledge. However, sometimes the evidence is misleading through no fault of our own. When that happens, we might come to have justified false beliefs instead of knowledge, or we might have gettiered JTBs that fall short of knowledge. In neither of those cases is there reason to think that we have developed and exercised our theoretical rationality any less than if the evidence had not been misleading—we have simply been unlucky! Thus, Hurka's RAP does not actually value knowledge; it values skillful deliberation and justified belief.

The same line of reasoning applies to Bradford's derivation of the value of achievement. She thinks that achievement is valuable because it constitutes the development and exercise of both our practical rationality and our will, which she equates with exerting effort. I agree that, other things equal, the value of an achievement is greater if it required greater effort and practical rationality (see von Kriegstein 2017; von Kriegstein 2019). But even the best-laid plans executed with the greatest effort can fail. Bad luck can always get you. And when it does you have no achievement—even though you do have the development and exercise of practical rationality and the will. In short, the development and exercise of capacities does not guarantee success (cf. Merton 1936: 896). Knowledge and achievement both require success. Thus, RAP does not adequately account for their value.

4. Responses

The charge I levelled in the previous section is structurally identical to the problem with pleasure mentioned above. Yet again, it appears that RAP delivers an incomplete list of well-being contributors. Thus, there are the same three possible responses: biting the bullet, adjusting the theory, or retreat to pluralism.

6. When Hurka abandoned a pure perfectionist position in favor of a pluralist one, for example, he used knowledge and achievement as his examples for perfectionist goods and pleasure as his example for a non-perfectionist good (Hurka 2001: 12–13).

Unlike pleasure, however, knowledge and achievement are supposed paradigm cases of perfectionist values. This means that retreat to pluralism is clearly not an attractive option. If PfP is to play any role in explaining the items on the list of well-being constituents, it had better explain knowledge and achievement. This leaves biting the bullet and adjusting the theory. I will discuss these in turn.

4.1. *Biting the Bullet*

It is unlikely that any proponent of RAP would want to concede that knowledge and achievement are not constituents of well-being. Luckily for them that is not the implication of the argument just presented. Rather, what biting the bullet would amount to is to accept that what is valuable about knowledge is shared by justified false beliefs and Gettier cases, and what is valuable about achievement is shared by effortful, competent failure. Since justified belief and effortful, competent pursuit are necessary components of knowledge and achievement respectively, the proponent of RAP could still claim to have accounted for the value of those goods. While I think that this is the reply they ought to give, it is important not to understate the argumentative cost of doing so. To say that success adds no value in either the epistemic or the practical case is to make a highly counterintuitive claim. The intuitive verdict is that achievement is better than failure and knowledge better than false belief—even when only brute luck separates the two (cf. Mathison 2018: 70–71). Success is an important part of what most people consider valuable about knowledge and achievement. Take, for example, the Wright brothers. When they finally figured out how to keep their flyers airborne, their local newspaper commended them because of

... their grit, because of their persistence, because of their loyalty to conviction, because of their indefatigable industry, because of their hopefulness and *above all*, because of their sterling American quality of *compelling success*. (*Dayton Herald*, August 18 1908, cited in McCullough 2015: 176, emphasis added.)

Without the success there might have been some value there (due to the admirable qualities listed at the beginning of the quote). But to adequately account for the value of achievement is to have a story as to why achievement is so much better than failure, and RAP does not seem to have that.

Biting the bullet on the problem with success, then, implies that the proponent of RAP is suggesting some serious revisions to the intuitive list of well-being constituents. Again, this might be acceptable for those who can produce a convincing direct defense of PfP. It is a serious problem for the indirect argu-

ment which claims that Pfp's main virtue is to produce an intuitive list of well-being constituents.

4.2. Adjusting the Theory

The third option in responding to the problem with success is to dispute the conclusion that RAP does not account for the value of knowledge and achievement. This would involve showing that, contrary to what I have argued, RAP does account for the importance of success. I will presently consider some suggestions how to do this. But, first, I would like to head off a potential misunderstanding of what my argument seeks to establish.

It might be tempting to think that my claim that RAP cannot account for the axiological difference between success and (faultless) failure implies that RAP cannot allow that external circumstances can have any influence on well-being. In other words, my argument would ascribe to RAP the strong Stoic position that our well-being depends solely on our own thoughts and actions, and not at all on how the world treats us. But the conclusion of my argument is not that strong. For all I have said, RAP can allow that unfavorable external circumstances can make a life go worse. Some circumstances make it difficult or impossible to develop and exercise one's central capacities. Someone who is enslaved and forced continuously into strenuous labor, for example, may have no chance to develop and exercise their theoretical rationality (cf. Hirji 2018: 530). Moreover, there are likely interpersonal differences regarding our central capacities. Some people are equipped with more practical rationality and willpower than others. Nothing I have said prevents RAP from claiming that those who are thusly better endowed are therefore able to develop and exercise these capacities to a higher degree and are, hence, better off. The point of my argument is not that RAP is completely unable to account for the importance of external circumstances and luck. Rather, I am making the more limited claim that, once a person has developed and exercised their central capacities to one degree or another it still matters whether success ensues. And it is this that RAP does not account for.

Or does it? Hurka considers something similar to the objection I have presented here and replies by suggesting that we can think of humans as "essentially situated" and that this helps to explain why successful relations with the world matter (Hurka 1993: 110).⁷ There are two ways of interpreting this, corresponding to stages 2 and 3 in RAP's program respectively. At stage 2 we might think that being situated in the world is a central human characteristic and that

7. The objection Hurka considers is slightly different from mine—it complains that success moves the locus of value to a complex entity consisting of person and world when it should be in the person alone.

the development and exercise of this characteristic is a perfectionist good. This would be hard to make sense of. Being situated in the world might very well be an essential part of human nature, but it is not a capacity that can be actively developed and exercised. And, as Bradford points out,

[i]t is a key feature of perfectionist capacities that they are capacities to engage in *activities*, as the rational capacity is the capacity to engage in rational activity. (Bradford 2021: 598; cf. Sher 1997: 221)

Moreover, it does not seem that we are any more situated in the world when we are succeeding partly due to favourable circumstances than when our endeavours fail on account of the way the world is thwarting our efforts. As far as I can see the only way in which we could say that a successful attempt situates us more fully in the world than a failed one, would be to rely on an independent judgement that success is better for us than failure. And to say this would beg the question in the current context.

More plausibly, we may think that being situated in the world is not its own entry at stage 2, but part of the best account of development and exercise at stage 3. We might think that, because we are not self-sufficient beings, developing and exercising any of our capacities requires not only doing everything in our power but also receiving the cooperation of the world and succeeding. A variation on that point is the suggestion that our central capacities all come with a *telos*. This suggestion is made by Sher (Sher 1997) and more recently by Bradford (Bradford 2021) (though the latter does not use the terms “telos” and “teleological”). Sher puts the suggestion like this:

The key fact is that many fundamental capacities are teleological: as we shall see, many are essentially directed at particular goals. . . . Thus, to avoid the absurd implication that virtually all lives are good, I need only insist that what has inherent value is not the mere exercise of a fundamental capacity, but rather its *successful* exercise as measured by the achievement of its defining goal. (Sher 1997: 202, emphasis in original; cf. Bradford 2021: 594–95)

I think that this strategy is the best hope proponents of RAP have to avoid having to bite the bullet on the problem with success. Yet, I am doubtful that it will succeed. To successfully answer the challenge I have posed, this strategy would have to clear two hurdles.

First, it would need to be shown that the relevant capacities are indeed teleological, and that the relevant teloi are knowledge and achievement. It is important to note that this account will have to be developed without already

relying on the intuitive judgement that knowledge and achievement are well-being constituents. As we saw above, the proponent of RAP would beg the question if the reason they gave for saying that success constitutes a higher degree of development and exercise of a capacity than failure is that success is more valuable. According to RAP the explanatory order is supposed to go the other way around. In this context Sher's phrasing in the passage just cited is somewhat suspicious: it sounds as if at least part of the motivation for positing activities as teleological is "to avoid [an] absurd inclination". Nonetheless, Sher makes a compelling case that theoretical rationality has an inherent goal. That goal is truth, as it is near inescapable that our capacities to ponder, wonder, conjecture, etc. are guided by the question whether the object of our attention is true (Sher 1997: 203). Bradford, by contrast, claims that the "whole point, as it were, of the rational capacity is to have knowledge or understanding or attain whatever it is that is the best epistemic state" (Bradford 2021: 595).

Considered as answers to my challenge that RAP does not value knowledge per se, Sher and Bradford's approaches have complementary weaknesses and strengths. Sher provides strong reasons that theoretical rationality has the telos he identifies; however, that telos is not knowledge but true belief. Thus, on his account the successful exercise of theoretical rationality is not quite the same as knowledge (Gettier cases, at the very least, would seem to qualify as well). Bradford does not have that problem, as she identifies the telos of theoretical rationality with the 'best epistemic state'; but she does not provide a compelling explanation why that would be so. As Sher points out, orienting our theoretical rationality towards truth appears inescapable. It would require a lot more argument to say the same about epistemically valuable elements beyond truth. It is telling that, for Bradford, the opposite of the telos of theoretical rationality is simply false belief—rather than some state involving an inversion of other epistemically valuable states as well (Bradford 2021: 596).

The pattern repeats itself with regards to practical rationality and achievement. Once again Sher provides a thinner notion of the relevant telos than Bradford and thus falls short of accounting for the value of achievement. In fact, he recognizes this and says that his perfectionism values not achievement but "basing one's decision on one's weightiest combination of reasons" (Sher 1997: 205). Bradford identifies achievement as the relevant telos, but it is again unclear how this thicker notion is to be justified. And, just like in the case of theoretical rationality, it is telling that the opposite of the telos of practical rationality is identified as simply "failure" rather than something more thoroughly the opposite of achievement.⁸

8. For a thorough discussion of what the opposite of achievement might entail see Mathison (2018).

Second, even if it could be established that knowledge and achievement are the *teloi* of the relevant human capacities, it would remain an open question whether reaching those *teloi* would make a difference as to the degree to which the capacities have been developed and exercised. Suppose we grant, for example, that truth is the *telos* of theoretical rationality. It follows from this that directing our capacities towards truth is a necessary condition for our activity to be an exercise of theoretical rationality. We might be able to use (some elements of) what is ordinarily our theoretical rationality in other ways (though, as Sher rightly notes, such modes are difficult to sustain). But when we do that, we are not really exercising our theoretical rationality, since we are not pursuing its constitutive aim. It does not follow, however, that being successful in our pursuit of the constitutive aim of the capacity means that we are exercising said capacity to a better or higher degree. The fact that X is the constitutive goal of capacity Y does not entail that reaching X is a factor in how well that capacity was exercised. One alternative is that what matters is simply how competently the constitutive goal is being pursued.

To see the plausibility of that way of thinking about the role a constitutive goal plays, consider the following case. Two young women apply to the University of Southern California in successive years. They are both equally outstanding candidates and put together equally strong application packages. The first one of them is accepted in year 1, but the second one is rejected in year 2. The only thing explaining the different outcomes is that in year 2 an unusually large number of spots are allocated to recruits for the female crew team. Now, the first woman's admission is an achievement, the second woman's rejection is a competent failure. Accordingly, the first's life is going better in that respect than the second's life. But I would find it difficult to accept the claim that there is a corresponding difference in how much they have developed and exercised any of their central human capacities. And I think this judgement loses no plausibility when we add that the capacities in question are constitutively aimed at success. While one woman succeeded and the other failed to reach their goals, they pursued these goals equally well.

I conclude that the teleological strategy pursued by Sher and Bradford remains a work in progress. For the strategy to work, there needs to be a stronger case that the relevant *teloi* of central human capacities are knowledge and achievement, and there needs to be a more convincing case that success or failure in reaching the *telos* of a capacity is a factor in determining the degree to which the capacity has been developed and exercised. And unless these arguments can be made without relying on intuitive judgements about knowledge and achievement being well-being contributors, the indirect argument for RAP is yet again not doing any work.

5. The Dialectic

Let me bring the overall dialectic of this paper into view. What I have offered here is not intended as a decisive rejection of RAP. Such a rejection could not be made without directly attacking Pfp itself. The reason for this is that proponents of RAP can always make their theory's extension work by tweaking the account of what capacities are central to human nature or the account of development and exercise of said capacities. And, so, my point is not that there cannot be a coherent version of RAP complete with a plausible list of well-being constituents. There probably can. What I have tried to show, rather, is that Pfp stands or falls on its own merits. It cannot draw independent support from the list of well-being constituents it generates. A straightforward application of the three-step perfectionist program does not produce an attractive list of well-being constituents. The list it generates probably fails to include pleasure, and may include producing elaborate sweat-stains (Kitcher 1999: 70), or engaging in sophisticated torturing procedures. These are points others have made. I have sharpened this criticism by arguing that RAP's list of well-being constituents does not even include knowledge and achievement, the supposed paradigm cases of perfectionist value.

For those committed to Pfp on independent grounds it makes sense to develop an account of human nature, and accounts of what it is to develop and exercise human capacities, in such a way as to bring all these elements into reflective equilibrium with a plausible list of well-being constituents (this is Kraut's project in Kraut 2007). But those of us who are unsure whether to accept Pfp should not be fooled into thinking that it has the surprising ability to provide a unifying explanation of a plausible list of well-being constituents. RAP produces a plausible list only if such a list is used to guide critical choices throughout the development of the theory. This is true for attempts to make RAP account for the value of pleasure, it is true when the centrality criterion is amended with normative considerations to ward off the wrong-properties objections, and when it is claimed that to fully develop and exercise central capacities involves reaching those capacities' *teloi* which just happen to be knowledge and achievement.

5.1. *An Aside*

I have argued that, while RAP may be amended in ways that yield an attractive list of well-being constituents, this is worth doing only if Pfp is overwhelmingly plausible in its own right. For the argumentative aims of this paper nothing hinges on whether Pfp can carry that weight. However, and for what it is worth, I think it cannot. Pfp seems somewhat plausible to me, but it does not sway me all that

much. I think this reaction is not unusual. The notion that it is good to lead a “truly human life” is certainly familiar to many people and does not typically generate immediate resistance. But most people can be made to doubt PFP when confronted with potential counterexamples. For example, it is not far-fetched to imagine that we find out that a central human capacity is to discriminate against perceived outsiders. Now this may or may not turn out to be the case, and perfectionists might have good arguments against the idea. Nevertheless, it seems like a close enough possibility that it makes sense to pose the question whether we are more confident in judging that such discriminations are not intrinsically valuable than in judging that PFP is true. And I suspect that few people would side with PFP. More generally we might ask whether PFP is more plausible than the possibility that the essence of human nature might contain some unappealing traits that it would be best not to develop and exercise. I suspect, again, that few would side with PFP.

So, the idea of PFP as an unassailable cornerstone of reflective equilibrium seems to overstate its intuitive firepower. But be that as it may. My aim here is not to show the falsity of PFP, but merely to undermine the indirect strategy of defending it.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to deprive RAP of the recruitment tool of claiming that their theory has a surprising ability to unify the objective list of well-being constituents. I have argued that a straightforward application of the theory does not generate an attractive list. I expect that those already committed to RAP will not feel the force of that objection. That is fine by me since proponents of RAP are not my primary intended audience. Rather, I am mainly addressing those who are shopping around for a theory of well-being and might be drawn in by RAP’s promise to provide a unifying explanation of a plausible list of well-being constituents. Do not be fooled! Insofar as RAP ends up with a plausible list it is because a preconceived list is used at every stage of theory development to shape the details of the view.

Let me close with an analogy. Hedonism may or may not be able to tell a story as to why a life of moral virtue is preferable to one of self-indulgence and crime. A committed hedonist should explore this possibility. But for someone genuinely agnostic as to the truth of hedonism it would be odd to think that a major selling point of the view was that it could account for the superiority of a virtuous life. “Accept hedonism so that you have an explanation why virtue is good for you” would seem a fraudulent slogan. What I have tried to show here is that the same is true of “accept RAP so that you have an explanation of the objective list”.

7. Coda

My discussion may prompt the complaint that I am forgetting the historical roots of perfectionism. Aristotle, after all, thought that favourable external circumstances are necessary for the best life. So, how can the spirit of perfectionism require an ideal of self-sufficiency as I am seeming to suggest? I have two quick replies. First, as explained in section 3.2, my objection does allow for some influence of external circumstances. Second, in the Hellenistic period something similar to the objection I pressed here was brought forward against views like Aristotle's which claim that success adds to the good life. In *De Finibus* Cicero accuses the Peripatetics of inconsistency saying that you cannot claim both that virtue is sufficient for happiness, and that external circumstances add to or subtract from a good life. This is structurally analogous to my complaint against RAP: you cannot claim both that the development and exercise of our capacities accounts for all the value there is in our attempts at knowing and achieving, and that external circumstances can add to or subtract from said value. The peripatetic spokesman Piso answers Cicero by saying that

Virtue has a kind of heavenly excellence, a divine quality of such power that where it arises, in conjunction with the great and utterly glorious deeds that it generates, there can be no misery or sorrow. But there can still be pain and annoyance. And so I would have no hesitation in claiming that all who are wise are happy, but that one person can nevertheless be happier than another. (Annas 2001: 150)

Cicero replies:

This position of yours, Piso, is in urgent need of strengthening. (Annas 2001: 150)

I would say the same to the proponent of RAP.

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