



**DISCUSSION NOTE**

**WORKING HARD AND KICKING BACK:  
THE CASE FOR DIACHRONIC PERFECTIONISM**

BY ANTTI KAUPPINEN

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## Working Hard and Kicking Back: The Case for Diachronic Perfectionism\*

Antti Kauppinen

LET US LOOSELY DEFINE WELFARE perfectionism as the view that well-being consists in the (enjoyable) exercise of the capacities that are characteristic of one's biological species. A dog does well when it does the sort of things that exemplify dogness, and we people do best when we make use of our various human capacities – rational, emotional, social, physical, and so on. In doing so, we manifest a kind of excellence or perfection.<sup>1</sup> In his recent “Well-Being and Virtue” (this *Journal*, vol. II, no. 2), Dan Haybron challenges perfectionism, in part relying on a putative counterexample. In this note, I will argue that this type of counterexample is avoided by understanding perfection diachronically, which is independently motivated anyway. Consequently, we do not have a new reason to dismiss perfectionism as a theory of well-being and relegate it to some secondary role, such as an account of what kind of life it is good to lead, as Haybron suggests.

As Richard Kraut points out in his *The Ethics of Well-Being*, perfectionism need not involve any sort of dubious inference from the natural to the good. Rather, it should be thought of as a theory that best unifies the phenomena we are trying to understand (Kraut 2007, 146–147). We have a set of intuitions about cases, and perfectionism captures the ones that withstand scrutiny. Perfectionism can thus be defended just in the same way as other theories of prudential value in terms of reflective equilibrium. This strategy, however, renders it vulnerable to counterexamples. In his paper, Haybron presents the following central case:

Consider then the case of a high-ranking career diplomat for the UK, Angela, who is contemplating an early retirement at the age of 62: having served her country with great distinction for many years, Angela has come into a good deal of money through some canny investments and a bit of luck. She has all but decided to retire with her husband to a villa in Tuscany, and could do so very comfortably on her earnings. ... She correctly envisages that a life there would be tremendously satisfying, occupied largely with good company and food and drink, walking the countryside and catching up on her reading – in short, kicking back and just enjoying life. It would certainly be a welcome and much-deserved respite from her demanding career in diplomacy: while rewarding in its own way, the schedule is hectic, and by now she has

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<sup>1</sup> I will avoid the term “virtue” here, since it has such a clear moral connotation. In my view, perfectionism should not make it a matter of definition that to manifest excellence is necessarily to be virtuous in the moral sense. That is rather an optional commitment that requires substantial argument.

had enough of it. Before she can settle on her plans, however, a political crisis arises overseas and she is asked to take an important post where her considerable wisdom and skills would be of great use. ... Naturally, the assignment would be taxing and heavy on travel, and frequently would involve dealing with unwholesome individuals about matters of extreme gravity, often calling for a fair measure of anger and indignation on her part.

...

[S]he accepts the assignment, also without regret: the stakes are high enough that she feels they are probably worth it. She goes on to serve admirably and with a good deal of success in sustaining the peace, but another six years pass before she can take her retirement, which lasts five relatively sedentary but agreeable years before a massive stroke suddenly takes her life. (Haybron, "Well-Being and Virtue," 8)

Haybron takes it that Angela would be better off retiring early, because that would bring her the most happiness and satisfaction at this point in her life. This poses a challenge to perfectionism:

For, by any reasonable measure, the diplomatic assignment involves greater perfection: it is obviously more virtuous, more admirable, and remains so over time — this is not a case of virtuous sacrifice that inhibits future perfection. And the position involves a greater degree of human functioning; she more fully exercises her capacities, functioning more fully qua human being than she would as a retiree. While the life of pleasant retirement has its own perfections, there is no credible sense, nonmoral or otherwise, in which Angela, or her activities, would exhibit more excellence on the whole if she retired. (9)

In a nutshell, the argument is this:

1. For Angela, continuing the diplomatic career involves a greater degree of exercise of characteristically human capacities from  $t$  to death than retiring early at  $t$ .
2. *Forward-looking perfectionism*: at any time  $t$ , the best option for an agent  $A$  is the one that involves the greatest degree of exercise of  $A$ 's human capacities from  $t$  to the end of  $A$ 's life.
3. So, perfectionism entails that continuing the career is better for Angela than retirement (from 1, 2)
4. But retiring is at  $t$ , intuitively, better for Angela than continuing the diplomatic career – continuing the career might lead to a *morally* better life, but it involves *sacrifice* of her own well-being, which other people should recognize in their attitudes toward Angela.
5. So, perfectionism is false as a theory of well-being. (from 3, 4)

A perfectionist might try denying 1 or 4, but they seem incontrovertible. A certain kind of perfectionist might also deny the underlying principle that robust counterintuitiveness renders a theory false, but that would mean giving up on Kraut's insight. So if there is no other kind of perfectionism than

the forward-looking one, the argument indeed goes through.

However, there *are* other possible varieties of perfectionism than the forward-looking one Haybron tacitly assumes. I will label them *diachronic*. According to them, it is not only the present and future exercise of capacities that matters for perfection, but also their past exercise.<sup>2</sup> (There is, of course, a limited diachronic aspect to forward-looking perfectionism as well: it tells us not to make use of a capacity now if it blocks future perfection, or perhaps to maximize perfection from now to the end.) I will canvass two different varieties of diachronic perfectionism, which I will label Star Turn and Animal Nature. Both seem to handle Angela and analogous cases. Briefly, the views are the following:

### **Star Turn Perfectionism**

At any time *t*, the best option for an agent *A* is the one that contributes most to the realization of a balanced pattern of exercising the various human capacities to their fullest extent in leading and supporting roles over the course of a lifetime, taking into account both past activities and future opportunities, as well as the centrality of each capacity to human nature. The timing of the use of each capacity in a leading role is up to subjective discretion, as long as a balanced pattern is maintained.

### **Animal Nature**

At any time *t*, the best option for an agent *A* is the one that contributes most to the realization of a balanced pattern of exercising the various human capacities to their fullest extent in leading and supporting roles over the course of a lifetime, taking into account both past activities and future opportunities, as well as the centrality of each capacity to human nature. The ideal timing of each activity is determined by the developmental stage of the individual and the natural rhythms of the human animal. Departures from the natural progression can be justified in the name of perfection when a) some contingency makes the exercise of a central capacity at the ideal future stage impossible (or difficult or unlikely) or b) some past contingency has prevented the exercise of a central capacity at a stage that would have been ideal.

Both suggested varieties of diachronic perfectionism can handle the case of

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Hurka acknowledges something much like this when he writes in the context of discussing well-roundedness that “At the heart of balancing is the idea that a perfection’s relative value depends on the relative amount of it one has achieved in the past. Going beyond equal weights, it says that if one excellence has been achieved more than another, the second is more important.” (Hurka 1993, 88) It should be noted that Hurka explicitly denies that his variety of perfectionism is an account of well-being.

Angela. Begin with Star Turn. It says that each excellence should get a star turn in a well-rounded life. That is, the agent's activity should centrally manifest each excellence in turn. While continuing to work involves the use of social capacities, say, they are not central to it in the same way as they are to retirement among friends, even if the very same capacities are used to the same extent. They are, so to speak, overshadowed by the others while working. On Star Turn, there should be time set for primarily social excellence, as well as aesthetic excellence and various mixes of different excellences, etc. Perhaps the extent to which the best life for an agent involves the exercise of our various capacities is determined by the relative importance of the capacities – as humans we should spend more time on intelligent activity, and perhaps intelligent physical activity like mountain climbing, than dumb physical activity, like Finnish darts.<sup>3</sup> Star Turn is indifferent to the timing of the turn. That could be left to the agent's whim or inclination, as long as the proportions are correct.

Note that it is important for the robustness of our intuition about the case that Angela has not, in the past, spent a whole lot of time with her family, kicking back and reading for pleasure. Imagine Angela\*, a diplomat who has been denied the opportunity to show what she's made of in the diplomatic arena, but who has instead taken it easy throughout. Now, at the threshold of early retirement, she finally gets the same opportunity as Angela in the original story. Here, I think, we'd agree that it is best for Angela\* to take the job and get to make the most of what she's capable of doing, rather than retire and continue a pleasant life of leisure. So, it matters to our original intuition about Angela that the social and emotional capacities that would be central to retirement in Tuscany have *not* played a starring role in the past in her large-scale projects. Given that they are central human capacities and she has no further opportunity to exercise them, Star Turn Perfectionism recommends chilling out. Without it, her life would be less well-rounded, and so less perfect.<sup>4</sup>

Animal Nature recommends retirement for Angela, too. It takes seriously the fact that we are members of a biological species with specific patterns of development and decay, and natural rhythms. There are certain things it is best for us to do as children, as youths, as adults, as retirees, and so on. It is these natural facts, which may be different for different individuals, that determine when we should give a leading role to this or that capacity or combination of capacities, both within shorter periods and within life as a whole.

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<sup>3</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot here defend any principle for individuating and ranking capacities, or for measuring the extent to which they are developed or used; for the purposes of this note, I will simply assume such principles can be found.

<sup>4</sup> Note that when Haybron describes Angela's retirement, he has her engaging in various activities rather than merely sitting on the couch watching television. This amounts to a tacit recognition that our intuition about the retirement's being good for Angela depends, in part, on the fact that she gets her enjoyment out of the use of heretofore neglected powers, rather than on the mere fact that she is subjectively satisfied.

Animal Nature thus leaves much less room for pure caprice than Star Turn. According to it, since Angela has arrived at a certain stage of her animal career, the excellences she is best off exercising are things like passing on what she has learned, including the mistakes she has made, to her children and grandchildren, and engaging in pleasant intercourse with others.

So, again, the undesirable consequence is avoided: looking at perfection diachronically, the option that involves the most perfection for Angela is precisely what is intuitively best for her. Angela\* would also be recommended the same, if not for the departure clauses in the formulation of the principle. As it is, given that she was not able to exercise her practical intelligence in tough diplomatic work in her prime, and that practical intelligence is such a central human capacity, even Animal Nature says that she should take on the mission, even though it would have been even better for her to do such work while younger and spend time kicking back with the family now rather than earlier.

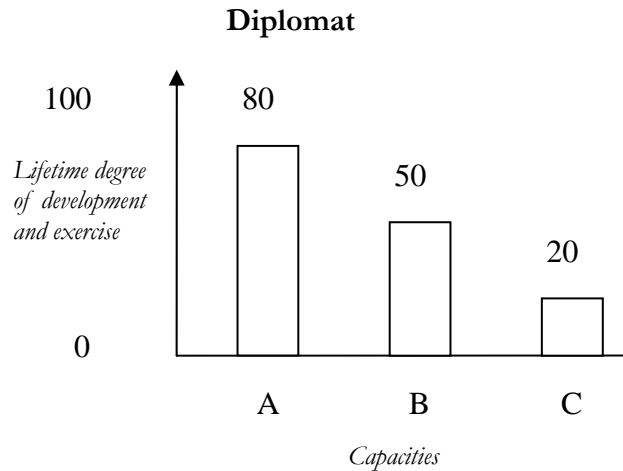
Why should a perfectionist adopt either Star Turn or Animal Nature, apart from providing a response to counterexamples? We can see the deeper rationale by considering different dimensions of imperfection. One sort of imperfection can be attributed to particular capacities and consists in a *failure to reach an ideal level* of development. Perhaps the ideal is a maximum, so that the corresponding perfection is the development of the capacity to the fullest.<sup>5</sup> A distinct kind of imperfection, however, consists in *lopsided development or exercise* of the various capacities, which is a property of the entire life of a human being. The corresponding perfection is the balanced development and exercise of the individual excellences. Maximizing perfection in this sense just means the harmonious development and exercise of capacities – which means that maximizing an individual “perfection,” or their aggregate sum, may well conflict with it. Underlying this latter desideratum is the fact that a life is not just a collection of independent capacity-exercises, but rather a more or less unified whole consisting of activities that fit together better or worse. Star Turn and Animal Nature are attempts to specify what it takes to be perfect also in this latter sense, taking into account the fact that the lives of human beings form a whole over time. Insofar as perfection, all things considered, involves *both* an ideal level of development of our different capacities *and* their harmonious exercise in life, any full perfectionist account must include some such balancing as well as maximizing principle.

As is familiar from debates concerning equality, introducing balance as a desideratum, as both varieties of diachronic perfectionism do, leads to potential trade-offs between maximizing the aggregate and maximizing balance. I will briefly sketch a way of resolving such trade-offs in order to show it does

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<sup>5</sup> For an energetic effort to develop the sort of quantitative measures needed to make the notion of maximization concrete, see Hurka 1993. I leave here open the question whether, say, physical perfection requires being *maximally* fit, or whether something less suffices.

not pose intractable mathematical or conceptual problems. Let us work with a very simple schema, where there are three essential capacities, A, B and C, each of which can be developed and exercised over a lifetime to some degree between 0 (no development or exercise) and 100 (full development and exercise).<sup>6</sup> Simple balance is achieved when each capacity is developed and exercised to the same degree. In these terms, Angela's case might look like this, were she to continue her career as a diplomat and die soon after:



Simple aggregation would yield a sum of 150 units of perfection.<sup>7</sup> But not all capacities are equally central to us as human beings, so we should weigh them in aggregation. So let us stipulate that capacity A should be weighed by 1.5, B by 1 and C by 0.8. Thus, the weighted aggregate perfection achieved by Diplomat would be  $1.5 \cdot 80 + 1 \cdot 50 + 0.8 \cdot 20 = 186$ .

Now contrast Diplomat with Early Retirement, which involves less of A but more of C (by stipulation):

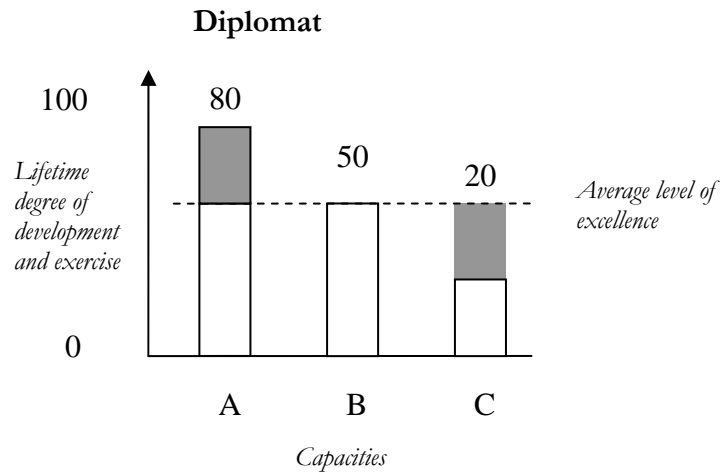
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<sup>6</sup> I will ignore the complexities that ensue from the fact that developing and exercising a capacity are two different things that interact with each other (exercise both requires and furthers development).

<sup>7</sup> This assumes commensurability, as does any talk of maximizing aggregate perfection. “Units of perfection” are naturally mere bookkeeping entities.



Without any kind of balancing, Early Retirement involves less overall perfection than Diplomat, since it aggregates to  $1.5 \cdot 60 + 1 \cdot 50 + 0.8 \cdot 37 = 169.6$ . How, then, do we capture the idea that a balanced pattern of development and exercise counts toward maximal perfection, all things considered? Here is a simple suggestion: calculate the average level of development of the different capacities, and subtract the sum of departures from the average from the aggregate total. What this means can be seen in the following, where the grey areas represent departure from average:



In Diplomat, the average level of excellence for Angela is 50. Given that she does not develop and exercise all her capacities equally, the sum total of departures from the average is  $80 - 50 + 0 + -(20 - 50) = 60$ . Deducting this from the weighted aggregate sum, we get the *balance-adjusted weighted aggregate* of perfection, which is in this case  $186 - 60 = 126$ . This measure combines both dimensions of perfection under a single maximand, making quantitative comparison possible. Performing a similar operation on Early Retirement

yields first a total departure from average of  $60-49 + 50-49 + -(37-49) = 25$ , and consequently a balance-adjusted weighted aggregate of  $169.6-25 = 144.6$ . Thus, once we adjust for balanced development this way, we get the desired result that Early Retirement involves more lifetime perfection than Diplomat.<sup>8</sup> In general, the formula penalizes for developing one excellence at the expense of others, while nevertheless allowing that this maximizes total perfection if the resulting level is high enough to compensate for the lack of balance. This latter is a desirable consequence, since it allows someone like Einstein or Wayne Gretzky, who can achieve a high degree of perfection in the exercise of a single capacity, to be better off focusing on it. Einstein achieves more overall perfection by doing physics and neglecting physique, because given his talents, he can develop the capacities needed for the former to an exceptional degree without much opportunity cost in terms of the latter.<sup>9</sup>

Is there some further reason to deny that early retirement maximizes perfection for Angela, all things considered? Haybron might try to reject the diachronic perfectionism by appealing to the fact that admiration tracks excellence: since Angela would be more admirable if she continued to work, it is not possible that she would manifest more excellence by retiring.<sup>10</sup> To see why this line does not work, we must distinguish between *moral* admiration, which does not necessarily track perfectionist excellence, and *non-moral* admiration on the grounds that one has “made the most of her life” or “has the right priorities.” It is only in the former sense that the Angela who continues to solve crises is more admirable, while in the latter sense, I submit, the early-retiring Angela deserves our admiration, keeping in view that she has up to that moment enjoyed a “hectic” and “demanding” career in diplomacy which has not allowed her to devote herself to family and life’s little pleasures.<sup>11</sup>

I won’t attempt to adjudicate between Star Turn and Animal Nature here, nor compare them to positions defended in the existing literature.<sup>12</sup> But

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<sup>8</sup> There are many ways to fine-tune the balancing procedure. A weaker version would only deduct departures that are *below* average. This would not directly penalize for above-average exercise of intelligence, for example, and avoid the consequence that developing a capacity without cost to the development of other capacities yields only a minor benefit. The departures could also be weighed by centrality, so that overexercising an important capacity would yield a lesser penalty than overexercising a less important one, and underexercising it would give a bigger penalty than otherwise.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, an Einstein who spent equal effort playing football and doing science would not be much better at football than the actual Einstein and much worse at science than the actual one, and hence overall less excellent and worse off, even though more well-rounded. (This discussion of genius was prompted by a question from an anonymous referee for this *Journal*.)

<sup>10</sup> This was, in fact, his first response (personal communication).

<sup>11</sup> It is possible that continuing to work would be not only morally more admirable but also overall most admirable; for my case, it suffices that there is *something* non-morally admirable about early retirement in the circumstances.

<sup>12</sup> Kraut 2007 defends a view that bears a resemblance to Animal Nature insofar as it emphasizes the natural development of our capacities.

once we reject forward-looking perfectionism and embrace a fully diachronic position that looks at the balanced exercise of capacities both in the past and in the future, Haybron's counterexample loses its bite. Achieving perfection over a lifetime may sometimes require us just to kick back and enjoy.

Antti Kauppinen  
University of St Andrews  
Department of Philosophy  
University of Amsterdam  
Department of Philosophy  
[amk10@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:amk10@st-andrews.ac.uk)

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