

Response to Critics

Douglas J. Den Uyl
Liberty Fund, Inc.

Douglas B. Rasmussen
St. John's University

“The perfect man needs to inspect his moral habits continually, weigh his actions, and reflect upon the state of his soul every single day.”
—Maimonides, *The Fourth Chapter*¹

1. Introduction

We are very pleased to have our book, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (hereafter, *TPT*),² be the subject for a symposium in *Reason Papers*. *Reason Papers* is a journal of high standards and quality contributions as we see from these comments on our work. We are pleased not only because of the quality of this journal, but also due to our long association with it. One of us had an article published in the first (1974) issue of this journal. The other had an essay published in the second issue. Over the years, each of us has, on different occasions, published in this journal, and at other times, we have jointly published articles as well. Furthermore, in 1993, our book, *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Basis for Liberal Order*,³

¹ Maimonides, “The Fourth Chapter,” in *The Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, ed. Raymond L. Weiss and Charles Butterworth (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), p. 73.

² Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen, *The Perfectionist Turn: From Metanorms to Metaethics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2016).

³ Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Liberty and Nature: An Aristotelian Defense of Liberal Order* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991).

was the subject for a symposium. In many respects, we find ourselves having come full circle, and we are appreciative of the opportunity to have our views considered in detail by this journal. We would like to thank the editors for their professionalism and courtesy in this regard.

2. Not Seeing the Forest for the Trees: A Response to Elaine Sternberg

We thank Elaine Sternberg (hereafter, ES) not only for these comments,⁴ but also for the many comments and suggestions she has made to us over the years on our various works. We have always found her comments to reveal what is crucial and of importance in what we are trying to accomplish and to raise helpful questions and objections. However, in this case ES has missed the general import of Chapter 8, “Entrepreneur as Moral Hero,” and, regrettably, failed to engage with its central message.

ES does not relate Chapter 8 to the rest of *TPT*. We make it more than clear in the very beginning of this chapter that since we have been operating on a theoretical plane throughout the work and since ethics is meant to issue in action, we need to illustrate further what is involved in a theory that rejects the juridical model of ethics and makes the exercise of one’s own practical wisdom the centerpiece of the ethical life. In order to do this, we consider many of the different features that are associated with being an entrepreneur—our point being, of course, that to exercise one’s own practical wisdom involves being entrepreneur-like in many respects.

We note that “ethical knowledge is concerned with guiding the conduct of an individual human being in situations that change and are not the same from individual to individual—which is to say, that it is concerned with the contingent and particular” (*TPT*, p. 67). By considering the views that Israel Kirzner, Scott Shane and S. Venkataraman, Friedrich Hayek, Joseph Shumpeter, and especially James Buchanan have about entrepreneurship, we illustrate the entrepreneur-like features of practical wisdom in dealing with circumstances that are contingent (and particular) for individualistic perfectionism. Here is a summary of what we show:

⁴ Elaine Sternberg, “Metanorms, Metaethics, and Metaphor: Heroic Confusions in *The Perfectionist Turn*,” *Reason Papers* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 8-21.

- (1) Being practically wise is not merely an optimization process. Human flourishing is not so much a matter of using known resources in their most effective manner, but is more like discovering means that are unknown or partially unknown to us.
- (2) Practical wisdom is not manifested in abstract universal principles, but in a knowledge that is tailored to ourselves and circumstances.
- (3) In order to attain the flourishing or self-perfecting life, practical wisdom might need to break down, reorder, and rework one's value hierarchies.
- (4) The life of practical wisdom involves risk, which involves learning how to deal with consequences and their effects upon our lives. As a result, the life of practical wisdom involves finding the mean between dogmatism and incontinence.
- (5) The life of practical wisdom involves uncertainty and discontinuity, for example, finding the appropriate course of conduct for each new set of circumstances.
- (6) Practical wisdom includes, as one of its central tasks, the process of discovering how to reconcile discontinuities with innovative restructuring of value relationships.
- (7) Though the insight into the contingent and particular that characterizes practical wisdom is direct (not discursive), there is nothing about this process that is epistemologically passive. By noting the entrepreneur-like features of insight, we make it clear that knowing is not an activity that occurs apart from alertness, creativity, imagination, thoughtfulness, and persistence. It takes us away from any view that makes such insight something that happens to one rather than something one does.
- (8) Being practically wise involves seeing one's own nature and external environment as the ultimate source of moral opportunity.
- (9) The measure of success—"profit"—for practical wisdom is an integral unity, an integrity or continuity, that is a defining quality of one's life as a whole.

Human flourishing is an entrepreneurial activity in many important respects. There is an illuminating analogy between the entrepreneur and the practitioner of practical wisdom or insight.

Chapter 8 is thus not an attempt to formulate definitions of entrepreneurship or profit. Nor is it an attempt to settle disputes among economic theorists as to whose account of entrepreneurship is best. Nor does it examine the nature of prices or unearth the nuances of the mathematical concept of discontinuity. As we make clear, the chapter is not meant to glorify the entrepreneur or engage in a discussion of the nuances of the term “hero.” These considerations may be worthwhile, but they are not what this chapter is about. Indeed, if it were, at least another book would be required.

Nor need we take up any of these activities in order to make our simple analogy. As we implied initially, much of what ES has to say, though certainly important in some contexts, is simply beside the point here. In fact, when we presented this chapter to a room full of economists, many of the nuances associated with the term “entrepreneur” were brought out. Rather than being a failing of the chapter, these senses were taken to highlight an interest in the analogy on their part and ours. In fact, *given our purpose*, the fact that Shumpeter may differ from Kirzner who may differ from Buchanan who may differ from someone else is a positive for us, since we are not trying to settle the meaning of entrepreneur among economic theorists.

Because ES “fails to see the forest,” there is little point in commenting in detail on each aspect of what she raises. No doubt some things might have been more carefully or clearly stated by us. Frankly, though, some of what seems unclear to her does not seem so to us, and in some places, she wrongly fails even to give us the benefit of the doubt. Consider ES’s claim that Chapter 8 moves from a consideration of the nature of human flourishing to an examination of the nature of entrepreneurship.⁵ This ignores what we explicitly state is our aim, as we note in our section title: “On the Analogy between Entrepreneurial and Ethical Conduct.” Moreover, to illustrate further how she does not realize the aim of this chapter, consider her comment: “What Chapter 8 actually shows, is that various features that different economists consider to be essential for their diverse understandings of the entrepreneur, *are also exhibited* in substantially modified form by ethical agents.”⁶ Yet, this characterization of our chapter, despite its claim about “substantially modified form,” is nonetheless all that we needed to do to illustrate how practical wisdom in individualistic

⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

perfectionism is to be understood. We are not trying to argue for an identity between the activities of an entrepreneur and practitioner of practical wisdom, but only that they share at a certain level of abstraction some essential features, which we listed above.⁷

ES's commentary on the term "hero" is another example of her missing our point. Perhaps the title could have been written in a better way, but it is clear from the context that we are overstating the term in order to be provocative and suggestive, not precise. This might violate some norm ES has about doing philosophy, but it does not violate ours, or we would not have left it there.

In ES's discussion of "third-degree opportunities" (TDOs), we cannot find where we say these are "unethical."⁸ We do note that "golden opportunities" are (or "third degree opportunism" is) not ethical (*TPT*, p. 294). Yet it is clear from the context that what bothers us about *some* TDOs is the same thing that bothers Rose, namely, the incentive to violate trust and take advantage of "golden opportunities." ES is right that the mere presence of TDOs is not only not a problem, but even a good thing in trust communities. However, our intent here in discussing the issue was in situations where TDOs may not have strong trust communities. This context was simply ignored in favor of a reading that is clearly not a part of our intention.

This is also the case with ES's commentary on "insight," which trails off into a discussion of optimization.⁹ It is clear how we are using insight and optimization here, even if, in ES's view it is not the correct understanding of the terms (although one reading of her own footnotes 19 and 20 support our view). Furthermore, our point is not so much a matter of insight and optimization not being maximization, but rather that they are not to be viewed as merely the efficient use of means to ends.

Yet apart from "correcting" our definitions, it's not in the end clear what purpose is being served by ES's comments, since the forest

⁷ Moreover, the conduct of a practically wise individual is more like the conduct of an entrepreneur, as understood in various ways by economists, than that of some moral or legal authority, as the juridical model of ethics requires. This is also the chief point of contrast between the worlds of E ("the" economist) and of L ("the" lawyer), which ES also fails to grasp.

⁸ As ES claims is our claim on *TPT*, p. 303; see Sternberg, "Metanorms, Metaethics, and Metaphor," p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-16.

is not at all confusing. We may have a number of failings as authors, but the unclarity ES perceives may be a function of her failing to see the overall intent of the chapter in context.

Ultimately, however, we want to thank ES for proving our chapter a success. For we drew the analogy to evoke precisely the kind of further reflection on the matter she exhibits. Despite her continually referring to how confused we are, she both understood the point we were making and managed in her own way to make further distinctions that might help others reflect on the similarities and the importance of the analogy itself. This is precisely what analogies are designed to do.

3. Self-Perfection, Practical Wisdom, and Natural Teleology: A Response to Neera Badhwar

We thank Neera Badhwar (hereafter, NB) for her thoughtful comments and insights.¹⁰ Her own work on the sorts of issues addressed in *TPT* is highly recommended.¹¹ We think that she, for the most part, understands what we are trying to achieve, but that she does not fully grasp just how radically different is an ethics inspired by the template of responsibility. We shall address two of her major concerns: (1) the relationship between human flourishing and virtue and (2) the source or ground of what is valuable or worthy.

NB states that we have a tension in our account of human flourishing that we need to resolve. On the one hand, she suggests that our position holds that we need external goods to flourish. On the other hand, she suggests that we seem to regard flourishing as being the exercise of virtue alone, particularly the exercise of practical wisdom. The latter view she claims is “wildly implausible. For if flourishing is identical to virtue, then neither the unfortunate consequences of our own or others’ actions, nor those of cruel nature, can make any difference to our flourishing. Neither, of course, can good fortune.”¹² If we are to avoid adopting a wildly implausible view, then we must revise our account of the nature of human flourishing to include a place for fortune. However, if we do that, we tend to contradict our emphasis

¹⁰ Neera Badhwar, “Individualistic Perfectionism and Human Nature,” *Reason Papers* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 35-43.

¹¹ See, e.g., Neera Badhwar, *Well-Being: Happiness in a Worthwhile Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹² Badhwar, “Individualistic Perfectionism and Human Nature,” p. 26.

on virtue alone being what constitutes flourishing. Her overall claim, then, is that we tend toward a Stoic conception of flourishing rather than one where external goods matter significantly.

a. Relationship between human flourishing and virtue

NB recounts the story of Angela, as told by Daniel Haybron (which we examine in detail in *TPT*), which purports to show that virtue and self-perfection can be separated from flourishing. NB seems largely to agree with our response to Haybron, except that she concludes that “‘being a good entity involves activities that are in principle good for it’ doesn’t entail that its good is identical with such activities.”¹³ In the case of Angela, her choice to stay in the diplomatic career could turn out so badly that her flourishing would suffer. Hence the “good Angela” is doing things that are not good for her.

We certainly ground human flourishing in self-perfection and regard human flourishing as the exercise of one’s own practical wisdom, but we do not regard this as entailing the Stoic view that external goods are irrelevant to flourishing. We have five reasons for saying this.

First, there is a *non sequitur* in NB’s argument. It assumes that if one grants that fortune can affect the existence of human flourishing, then human flourishing cannot be identified as the exercise of one’s own practical wisdom, but must also include good fortune as part of the nature of human flourishing. However, this confuses a consideration for whether something exists with a consideration of what something is. There is a difference between noting what might be necessary for the existence of human flourishing and what is necessary for human flourishing to be human flourishing. There is a difference between fortunate circumstances, which may be necessary for the existence of human flourishing, and those activities for which one is responsible that are constitutive of the nature of human flourishing. Unless one wants to adopt the wildly implausible doctrine of internal relations, which would make every possible circumstance that could affect the existence of human flourishing part of its very nature, it is a mistake to assume that fortunate circumstances without qualification must be included in the account of what human flourishing is. In a very real sense, one’s “circumstances” are often a function of one’s practical wisdom. Thus, there is nothing about explicating the nature of human flourishing in terms of practical wisdom that requires adopting the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Stoic view of human flourishing. That all depends on how one understands “fortune” and “circumstances.” (We shall return to this point below.)

Second, fortune is, at least by many definitions, not something for which we are responsible. It cannot be part of any moral standard we use to direct our conduct. Moral standards for human beings must be based on what is in principle possible for human conduct. The question under this way of looking at things thus becomes one of whether things beyond our control can affect flourishing. In NB’s world, flourishing seems to be disconnected from what we ought to do which, it seems to us, allows Haybron’s point to creep back in. In our conception of flourishing, mistakes, tragedies, obstacles, and the like (not to mention good fortune) cannot be excluded by definition from the activity of determining what one ought to do and thus excluded from what it means to flourish. (More on this below.)

Third, it does not follow from this that the Stoic claim that moral goodness is confined to an act of will alone is true. Rather, we are flesh-and-blood living things with appetites and desires who exist in space and time, surrounded by an external world with which we are engaged, and as such, can indeed be affected by fortune. Any discussion of attaining one’s flourishing or self-perfection must be done from this ontological context. As Henry B. Veatch notes in this regard, it is by exercising the intellectual and moral virtues that a human being can assure himself of “as happy and as full life *as circumstances will permit*.”¹⁴ The Stoic position is intent upon removing us from the effects of the external world upon ourselves, whereas our position is to embed ourselves fully in that external world.

Fourth, practical wisdom is for us not merely an intellectual exercise, but also involves action in and upon the world in which we live. As we note in many places in *TPT* (and in our previous works), the life of practical wisdom, which includes the attending moral virtues, is concerned with the coherent achievement, maintenance, exhibition, and enjoyment of what we have called the generic, constitutive goods of human flourishing in their *particular* manifestations (*TPT*, p. 54). It is through practical wisdom that the generic goods are made determinate and real. Indeed, these generic goods do not become actually good for one apart from the exercise of one’s own agency. The flourishing or perfecting life is thus concerned

¹⁴ Henry B. Veatch, *Rational Man* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 128, emphasis added.

with attaining and enjoying these goods in a manner appropriate for oneself as best the circumstances will permit.

Fifth, the determination of what can or cannot be achieved in the concrete is not something that can be determined from one's philosophical armchair, but is something determined by practical wisdom itself. Even more, it is not something that is necessarily the same for each person. Which circumstances will diminish or destroy (or enhance or conserve) human flourishing is, except in extreme cases, highly individualized. Even in extreme cases, it is not always clear what can be said in general about fortune. Consider, for example, the case of Alexander Solshenitsyn who turned the Soviet Gulag into an opportunity for moral development.¹⁵ He had some control over some areas of his life and thus was able to integrate the circumstances into a unique form of flourishing. Obviously, what this illustrates is not the usefulness of coercion in creating moral excellence, but the pluralistic character of human flourishing¹⁶ and the vital importance of one's moral character.

NB seems to have what might be called a snapshot view of flourishing: things that, in the abstract, seem to benefit one contribute to flourishing, while things that harm one do not. We know this because each time a benefit or cost comes our way, we are either enhanced or diminished—that is, we are “flourished” or “unflourished.” A given benefit or cost, though, does not define flourishing. Flourishing is determined by how we manage those benefits and costs. We learn next to nothing about a person's flourishing by being told that he has suffered some tragedy or made a mistake or, by contrast, that things turned out better than expected. Flourishing is a process, not a static and discreet state of being. What people do with such events is what matters, and that is why the virtues matter.

Furthermore, there is the sense in NB's critique—perhaps due to the language typically used by philosophers—that there are “external goods” (or bads) and internal activities, such as character traits (virtues), which are separate from those external goods. We then

¹⁵ Alexander Solshenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973).

¹⁶ See Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty: A Perfectionist Basis for Non-Perfectionist Politics* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), p. 94.

have to find out how these two might be connected. As we noted above and in our response to Haybron in *TPT*, however, our “internal” states are already connected to the external world, which is especially true of practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is *about* something, and so are the other virtues. In the abstract, the goods and harms may be what the Stoics called “indifferents.” In concrete reality, our virtues are exercised in some particular way on particular things, people, and events. The Stoic solution to *regard* the world around us indifferently is neither required by us nor implied by our position. Angela may have made a mistake, so let’s see how she deals with it before we say anything about her flourishing. That she was diminished by it is clear. That it defines her flourishing is not. An understanding of flourishing which required the absence of pain, mistakes, obstacles, and their opposites is, to say the least, wildly implausible.

If one looks at the world the way NB seems to in her criticisms of us, where benefits alone define flourishing and disadvantages alone define lack of flourishing, then it becomes difficult to imagine that anyone before our time was able to flourish or flourish as well—at least relative to us. For the level of wealth and convenience we enjoy surpasses most of what human beings have known previously. Yet there seems to be something wrong with saying that people prior to our time could not flourish at the level we do because they were missing out on benefits we now enjoy. Material well-being may ease the path to flourishing, but as just noted, it is not the stuff of flourishing itself.

b. Source or ground for what is valuable or worthy

In the section on human nature, NB seems to hold two principles that we would certainly reject. The first is that practical reason can be satisfied with what seems to be true without the need to concern itself with what is true. The second is that human nature has just as many propensities for bad things as good, so we cannot speak of the human good as being grounded in human nature, because that very same nature can produce the bad.

With regard to the first case, that people *can* hold views that seem to them to be true, but which are false, is incontrovertible. By the very fact of the distinction, we can distinguish the seemingly true from the true. Given that, it would be the case that the *virtue* of practical wisdom would involve seeking to separate the true from the seemingly true. To say otherwise would suggest that in practice what seems to be true is as good as what is true. Yet we need but recall Plato’s *Meno* to see the problems with such a view.

As to the second principle, it is based on a failure to consider adequately our extensive arguments in Chapters 5 and 6 that support a *teleological* conception of human nature, which involves an examination and critique of the so-called naturalistic fallacy. We show how individualistic perfectionism does not commit any such alleged fallacy, and indeed how there is both a basis for natural goodness and a way to understand human good in terms of it:

Life-form is the decisive factor It explains the desirability of actuality The form of a living thing determines what potentialities are to be actualized if it is to be good, and it is its life that provides the need for their actualization. Life-form provides direction to the process; in a word, it provides the telos. (*TPT*, p. 220)

Consequently, because of the human life-form, “a correct description of a human being is inherently value-laden. There cannot be any neutral or ‘bald’ facts about human nature that are devoid of value implications. . . . We are thus not deriving ethical norms from ‘first nature’ facts, so much as discovering the normative dimension within those ‘facts’” (*TPT*, p. 190). One does not commit the naturalistic fallacy in noting that basic drives and inclinations provide a basis for a general understanding of what is good for a human being, as, for example, we find in the lists of generic goods and virtues noted by thinkers ranging from Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas to John Finnis (see *TPT*, p. 38 n. 12). As Aristotle notes, it shows a want of education to think that everything must be proven.¹⁷ This is especially so regarding the generic goods and virtues for human beings (e.g., goods such as knowledge, friendship, health, and pleasure, and virtues such as temperance, courage, honesty, and integrity). When understood in a teleological context, to offer such lists is not to beg the question, but to note what is evident—but more on teleology below.

We also in Chapters 5 and 6 provide the basis for a claim that NB openly rejects. We hold the following: “For living things, there is no ontological separation between what is a good entity and what is

¹⁷ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), I.3.1094b23-27, and Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1968), IV.4.1006a5-10.

good for that entity. For living things, being a good entity involves activities that are in principle good for it” (*TPT*, p. 220). NB claims that what is good for a living thing is not entailed by its being a good living thing, because “the consequences of [a living thing’s] own good activities and the consequences of the actions of others and of nature can be bad for it.”¹⁸ Yet, her claim is a *non sequitur* and is based on the very same error we noted above, namely, a confusion or conflation about *whether* something is with *what* something is—for example, what is necessary for the existence of good living with what is necessary to be good living. A rosebush can function in a manner that is good for it, but the ability to pour bleach on it and cause it to wither does not necessarily show that how it was functioning was not good for it. Likewise, neither does being hit by a truck necessarily show that an individual practicing the basic virtues was not functioning in a manner that was good for her.

Moreover, we note in *TPT* that due to circumstances that are beyond its control, there can be occasions “where the activities of a living thing that would normally makes it a good instance of its kind nevertheless have results that are not beneficial” (*TPT*, p. 219). However, these occasions do not change the difference between a consideration of the existence of something with a consideration of the nature of something. Recognizing that the very existence of good living can require more than the good actions of a living thing does not show anything about what the nature of good living involves or, more specifically, provide any basis for rejecting the insight that “for a living thing to be a good instance of its kind, it must attain certain actualities that enable it to be a good *living* thing” (*TPT*, p. 219).

Accordingly, to be a good human being is to be an animal that uses her speculative and practical reason well in attaining her *telos*, that is, to use her conceptual capacity to engage in the task of discovering and coherently achieving, maintaining, exhibiting, and enjoying the constitutive, generic goods of human life. Since human beings are animals with desires, this involves the development of those dispositions (moral virtues) that will allow desires to assist them in using their practical reason to determine what is the appropriate conduct in a given situation. Overall, NB seems to have missed the basic import of Chapters 5 and 6, which is to give a natural, teleological, biocentric basis for ethical value.

¹⁸ Badhwar, “Individualistic Perfectionism and Human Nature,” p. 28.

Contrary to what NB seems to imply, reason considered apart from the external (and even internal world) is not the source or ground for what is valuable or worthwhile. Our discussion of the rational capacity of humans is only to note the modality through which the necessary goods and virtues of human flourishing are discovered and attained. We understand reason, in all of its facets and manifestations, to be in the service of the human *telos*. Reason's aim is not mere belief, but also the truth about what is and what ought to be done. We operate within a context of cognitive realism, rejecting constructivism in its ethical and epistemological forms.

Furthermore, NB seems to think that since some people do not actualize their potentialities, then our account of human good as fully actualized individual flourishers is somehow not based on human nature. However, to say that human beings have a potentiality for their self-perfection or to say that they have a natural inclination for the flourishing life, is not to say that they will necessarily choose it. Teleology is not compulsion. That there is evil and vice in the world says nothing other than that we should be vigilant against them.

The view that human beings have within them the capacity to do bad things is what might be said in the absence of any commitment to teleology, because it treats the potentiality of a living thing as simply a possibility. For while we have the capacity for virtue and vice, our potentialities in a teleological framework are toward our virtue, which is our perfection. Those potentialities are thereby the basis for making *normative* claims. Such propensities can be perverted and even destroyed, but teleology implies that we are oriented toward the good, which is also our good, and to our good, which is also the good.

Yet, while NB admonishes us that we cannot simply read off virtues from a description of human nature, the admonishment also applies with respect to her claim about vice. One cannot simply read off human vices as being a part of human potentialities in Aristotelian terms from human actions alone. If vice were part of human potentialities, as NB appears to claim, then this would be to endorse the Roman Catholic view of original sin, which claims that though human beings are not by nature evil, they have, at least after "the fall," an inclination toward evil. The error is the same in both cases of virtue and vice, namely, to identify something is not to understand it or to see its function in its appropriate context.

We recognize that teleology is, and has been, a controversial model for describing human nature. We cannot give a full defense in this response, but neither can it be said that we fail to give any

arguments on its behalf. Much of what we do is to work within the teleological framework to see how its conception of human nature can ground an ethical theory. The working out of that model is in itself an argument in its favor, because we show its foundational nature and fend off some central criticisms.

At the end of her comments, NB wonders how we can ever get to “the other” with our apparent requirement that all values ultimately rest in oneself. We are other-oriented, she notes, often without any concern for ourselves. In large part, we deal with this very question in our Afterword. However, the general point is that in saying that all values are grounded in our flourishing, we do not say that everything is about us. We are not, as we note in our Introduction, ethical egoists. Moreover, we also make it clear that although all values are grounded in our flourishing, this does not mean that all ethical norms are of the same type or have the same function. For example, we make a case for basic negative individual rights in terms of individualistic perfectionism.¹⁹ Nonetheless, as NB notes, we are other-oriented beings, and how we manage that is an essential part of what it means for *us* to flourish. Like any human propensity, it has to be directed by practical wisdom. Doing so does not thereby lessen our concern for others or our social nature. We are still, on our account, the ones individually responsible for our actions and we can never escape that responsibility. It is precisely the endeavor to merge the individual completely into the other, even momentarily, that we intend to resist.

4. Neither Egoism nor Communitarianism, but Individualism: A Response to David McPherson

We thank David McPherson (hereafter, DM) for his careful consideration of our work.²⁰ It has been most illuminating to review his comments, for they have helped us to see both the similarities and differences of our views to those of other thinkers in neo-Aristotelian ethics. We will respond to his major comments in the order of their appearance.

DM begins by considering our account of the pre-theoretic templates (or paradigms) of responsibility and respect. He thinks that

¹⁹ See Rasmussen and Den Uyl, *Norms of Liberty*, chap. 11.

²⁰ David McPherson, “Self-Formation and Other-Regarding Concern: Commentary on Douglas J. Den Uyl and Douglas B. Rasmussen’s *The Perfectionist Turn*,” *Reason Papers* 39, no. 1 (Summer 2017), pp. 35-43.

putting utilitarianism (U) in the template of respect is a little forced, because U is concerned with maximizing pleasure or preference-satisfaction.²¹ However, this confuses U, which is a consequentialistic theory of obligation, with a particular theory of the good, for example, hedonism or desire-satisfaction. U was historically associated with hedonism, but it need not be. One can be a utilitarian and have nearly any particular theory of the good one wants. We have even heard of grafting a utilitarian theory on to an account of human flourishing (obviously not ours). Yet, what matters for the utilitarian is not what theory of the good it uses, but that it expresses ethical evaluations of actions or rules in terms of their relationship to other human beings—in this case, the greatest number. It is respect for others that moves U. On many forms of U, the individual can easily be sacrificed to what promotes overall utility among people. The individual lives for the group, in other words, which is why it belongs in the paradigm of respect.

DM also does not think it is correct to classify Kantian ethics as ultimately belonging to the template of respect, since Immanuel Kant grounds perfect and imperfect duties to both self and others in human dignity. DM forgets to consider, though, that for Kant dignity and worth do not result from a flesh-and-blood individual (a so-called phenomenal self), but only from a noumenal self, which has dignity and worth only because it is an instance of the moral law (*TPT*, p. 6). Such a self, if it can even be called a self, has nothing about it that can serve as a source of individuality. There is only the duty to respect the moral law; the moral law does not involve considerations of individuality, but only universality. Stated slightly differently, our point about Kant is this: The moral law is primary, and this places the individual at the service of the moral law. In a way, the starting point is respect for the law. This seems to us to put it squarely in the category of respect. We note that, according to Kant, oneself becomes “an other” that one respects for the same reasons one respects others. This is another reason for locating Kantian ethics in the paradigm of respect.

DM accuses us of dichotomizing self-regarding and other-regarding concerns.²² At the foundational level, though, we do not dichotomize moral or ethical obligation in terms of self and others. Such a dichotomy is already the result of having adopted the template

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

of respect that sees moral or ethical obligation as resulting from relationships—either to oneself or to others. Yet, the whole point behind the template of responsibility is that moral or ethical obligation does *not* primarily result from relationships, but from an obligation to develop oneself as an individual human being. We say:

This perspective, and the one taken by us here and in the following chapters, indicates why the template of responsibility (and more particularly, an ethics of individualistic perfectionism that we advocate) is not an egoism. Indeed, the usual way of talking about egoism is to see how a proposed action or good in some way serves the self. But this is no different than making the self something to which one has a relationship; it is just proposed as the only relationship that matters. In the template of responsibility, the issue is not how something might benefit the self, but what kind of self one is making by taking on the benefit. The artificiality of egoistic actions is not just the exclusive focus upon self, but the relationalizing of the calculations upon which the actions are based. Put in ontological terms, we are not a mere node in a network of relations, but the ground for such relations. (*TPT*, p. 9)

There is a sense in which many of DM's worries about the alleged narrowness or flatness of our account of self-perfection are misplaced when it comes to our view of self-perfection. We think that the entire egoism-altruism dichotomy is born from the template of respect, which completely socializes ethics and reduces ethical norms to a single type that are primarily "juridical" in character. Rejecting this development of Modernity is a large part of our objective. Some of DM's own comments about friendship would seem to fit with our removal of such dichotomies.

DM's most basic disagreement with us has to do with our claim that ethical or moral obligation ultimately has its source in the existential and moral fact that flesh-and-blood individual human beings must make something of their lives—that they have an obligation to self-perfect, so to speak.²³ His real target, then, is not our alleged

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

egoism, but our individualism and humanism. This is illustrated in the following ways.

First, for DM, “our identity or sense of self is *constituted* by our relationship with others.”²⁴ We state that we are social animals and our human good involves relationships with others where we act for the sake of their good (*TPT*, p. 53). Furthermore, we claim that “*philia* in all its various forms of relatedness is . . . one of the basic generic goods . . . an integral feature of the good human life” (*TPT*, p. 53). We do *not* say, though, that such relationships exhaust our human good. However, DM’s vision of human good seems to require not only rejecting egoism and atomism, but also individualism. There is, in other words, nothing the individual brings to the account of human good. What each of us *is*, our very identity, is our relationship with others. This claim strikes us as ontologically implausible, an exaggeration, and is ethically dangerous.

Perhaps we misinterpret DM in this regard, however. His point may be that we cannot account for our relationship with others and characterize ourselves in a way that separates us from others. There must be other-oriented talk that does not always make reference to the self and the self’s development.

We have two responses to this possible interpretation: (1) From what we have noted already, it should be clear that self-talk is not atomistic-talk. (2) We discuss basic aspects of this issue in our Afterword, “Big Morality.” That an agent must ultimately focus upon what he or she should do in terms of what he or she should be, is not to say that the object of one’s attention is only oneself.

Second, DM says that “the morally and socially constituted self, where we cannot strictly separate out self-regarding and other-regarding concern” is missing from our explanations of other-regarding concern, and that “it is noteworthy that [we] describe the good of friendship as being based on *our own* potentialities, rather than on the *friend’s* love-worthiness.”²⁵ Again, there seems to be exaggeration occurring. If William cannot distinguish concern for his good from Mary’s concern for her good and vice-versa, then there is nothing to ground the *relation* of friendship. Friendship (at least character or virtue friendship) is, as Aristotle notes, being “related to our friend as

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 39 and 40.

we are related to ourselves.”²⁶ Note that this requires that something’s being our good differs from something’s being our friend’s good. If there were nothing different about their respective goods, there would be nothing to relate. There would be nothing to celebrate regarding the closeness of values shared by beings with distinct and separable lives and goods. Collapsing all difference into an identity proves too much. Also, and more fundamentally, what DM does not grasp about our approach is that it is because we understand our selves so well, that we can understand our unity with another. Without that personal integrity, no unity is possible.

Furthermore, it is a *non sequitur* to say that because the good of friendship is based on one’s own potentialities (and thus the need to act for the sake of someone else’s good as well), that this requires ignoring the love-worthiness of the other. Love of others is a response to *their* goodness, and this is part of the activities that make up one’s human good. We quote Scott MacDonald’s observation: “One can seek the constituents of one’s own good for their own sakes, and also for the sake of the good of which they are constituents” (*TPT*, p. 53).

Third, DM’s fundamental point seems to be that we do not offer any criterion for love-worthiness that isn’t a reference back to the self. He thus notes that “it is helpful to appeal to Charles Taylor’s account of ‘constitutive goods’.”²⁷ He then elaborates:

The key point to see here is how our own self-perfection . . . cannot be ‘the source of all norms’ since it includes concerns for things that are ‘worthy of being valued’ beyond this self-perfection, where their value is not merely derivative upon the value of self-perfection. In fact, the relationship goes the other way, as constitutive goods constitute the goods that define for us the good life.²⁸

DM offers Taylor’s account of constitutive goods (hereafter, TCGs) as the source of any account of the good life; thus DM seeks to show not only the inadequacy of self-perfection as an account of moral norms,

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, IX.4.1166a31.

²⁷ McPherson, “Self-Formation and Other-Regarding Concern,” p. 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

but also the dependency of self-perfection on TCGs. However, the basic issue here is just what is it that TCGs are supposed to constitute, if in understanding them we are supposed to get beyond our self-perfecting human life? What is the whole of which they are supposed to be the parts? Are these metaphysical goods that are part of the hierarchy of being? Furthermore, TCGs are supposed to be worthwhile not merely because they are desired, but because they are desirable—that is, worthy of desire. Although some TCGs make up the good life, they do not owe their worthiness to being instrumental to or constitutive of the flourishing or self-perfecting life. The fundamental question is: Why are they worthy? What makes them desirable for us? Since these TCGs have, besides a constitutive function, a motivational function, we can also ask: Why should we care about them? Why do they motivate us? DM is curiously silent on this.²⁹

Regarding our account of human good, we attempt to answer these questions in Chapters 5 and 6 of *TPT*. Yet, the point here is that the desirability and motivational character of TCGs need to be explained and justified, if we are to suppose they constitute an alternative basis for the good life. In this regard, we should note that though we do not spend much time on Taylor, we devote a considerable amount of time evaluating Stephen Darwall’s attempt to find a standard of worthiness outside of self-perfection. Perhaps TCG is a different theory, but we thought that Darwall’s was the best to get at this issue.

DM also states: “The language of ‘flourishing’ has a biological and indeed botanical connotation And so we are encouraged to see human flourishing as being on par with the flourishing of a dog or an apple tree.”³⁰ Indeed, our theory is biologically grounded. We fully endorse Philippa Foot’s claim that “life will be at the centre.”³¹ However, we note in many places and explain in detail in Chapter 6,

²⁹ DM is not entirely silent about our inclusivist view of human good. He notes (*ibid.*, p. 40 n. 9) that Taylor would call our account of constitutive goods “life goods” (which includes *philia* in all of its forms) and sees them as derivative from TCGs. However, this is the point at issue. Can an account of the goods that constitute human good make sense apart from any reference to the life-form of a human being?

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³¹ Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 5.

“Because,” that our biologically based, naturalistic approach is non-reductive. Human flourishing is not reduced to mere survival. Furthermore, this charge ignores the numerous times in the text where we discuss the self-directed character of human flourishing. It ignores our description of human flourishing as “the exercise of one’s own practical wisdom” (*TPT*, pp. 33 and 55). Finally, in our discussion of this very example, we remark that “human beings can have ends due to their nature as living beings without having to assume, as Tibor R. Machan once put it, that human flourishing is the same as the flourishing of the rosebush” (*TPT*, p. 280).

DM has a wider concern about self-formation. Since our response to NB develops our discussion from *TPT* of the example of Angela, there is no need to repeat that discussion here. We will just note that in the self-formation process, there are as many processes as there are individual human beings. Each is unique. We also note in our response to ES that despite the differences among economic theorists regarding the definition of entrepreneurship, there is an illuminating analogy between the insight of an entrepreneur and the insight of a practitioner of practical wisdom. The nine points of similarity we list in that response should also assist in understanding how we regard the self-formation process.

Finally, our ethics is an ethics of individualism, but we are not nominalists. We have presented an ethics of not only individual good, but human good. Our ethics is ultimately humanistic as well, and we think that just may be the basic disagreement between ourselves and DM.

5. Closing Remarks

In conclusion, we wish to thank again our commentators for taking the time to consider our work and the arguments we make on behalf of individualistic perfectionism. We find value in all of their comments. In ES’s we see a recognition of the value of pre-theoretic considerations. In NB’s there is an appreciation of our individualism. With DM’s, we find an appreciation for the type of ethical alternative we are offering. In all cases, we learned from the criticisms and gained a better understanding of our own position. We hope our responses provide some further clarification for our readers.

Our response opens with a quotation from Maimonides. We think it is only proper to close with a quotation from Veatch’s *Rational Man*, which serves as the epigraph for *The Perfectionist Turn*. Together, we think these capture the essence of our project:

In Aristotle's eyes, ethics does not begin with thinking of others; it begins with oneself. The reason is that every human being faces the task of learning how to live, how to be a human being, just as he has to learn how to walk or to talk. No one can be truly human, can live and act as a rational man, without first going through the difficult and often painful business of acquiring the intellectual and moral virtues, and then, having acquired them, actually exercising them in the concrete, but tricky, business of living.³²

³² Veatch, *Rational Man*, p. 132.

