**Chapter 4 *Fortifying Natural Perfectionism***

In the last chapter, I argued that (ultimate intrinsic) goodness consists – metaphysically, rather than as an artefact of linguistic usage – in natural perfection. Goodness just *is* natural perfection, in the sense that an organism’s manifold functions must be completed or fulfilled in order that its constitution, as a whole, be in good order. I unpacked this functionalist schema using Aristotle’s famous function argument, whose main lineaments, I argued, are still cogent. They can withstand, that is, not only the rival and incompatible functionalist schemata proposed by philosophers of evolution, but also the pseudo-Aristotelian (and effectively neo-Kantian) apparatus of life forms proposed within the Foot/Thompson theory of ‘natural goodness’. But this still leaves key questions and criticisms unanswered. In Part III, I shall treat generic, root-and-branch challenges to NP, such as the supposed fact/value dichotomy, the transhumanist project and anti-ablism. At this juncture, however, I want to tackle more modest (if no less pressing) concerns. For instance, even if NP is well-founded, why should we care about, let alone seek, the natural perfections? How does being naturally perfected relate to the ‘good life’, in the sense of personal well-being? And how does NP fare vis-à-vis other forms of perfectionism? All these questions and more will be addressed in this chapter.

The plan of action is as follows. I shall start by elaborating four constraints on goodness as natural perfection, to help situate it as a theory. These will focus on the natural perfections’ mutual coherence, their eudaimonistic aspect, their relation to scientific discovery and why they are not open-ended or unlimited in character. Having laid this groundwork, I shall go on to look at three alternative perfectionist theories: those of Thomas Hurka, George Sher and Richard Boyd. Although Boyd would not count himself as a perfectionist, his notion of goods as tantamount to ‘homeostatic property clusters’ is sufficiently close to my naturalistic project that it deserves careful scrutiny. Having distinguished NP from these alternative projects, I shall then unpack three formidable anti-perfectionist critiques: those of Dale Dorsey, Philip Kitcher and a general stance I shall call ‘analytic existentialism’. While Dorsey’s critique is aimed at perfectionism *simpliciter*, Kitcher’s is prompted by Hurka’s perfectionism in particular. Kitcher’s anti-perfectionist critique is nonetheless sufficiently wide-ranging that its proper target transcends any particular form of the theory. Having first canvassed three alternative perfectionisms, then fended off three anti-perfectionist critiques, we will be in a stronger position, come Part II, to detail the particular categories of natural perfection. We will, that is, have fortified NP sufficiently to move from the level of determinable – viz. ‘natural perfection’ – to its various determinates (bodily, intellectual, framing perfection, etc.)

**4.1 Four Constraints**

The first constraint I want to consider is coherentist in form. I use ‘coherentist’ here not to pick out an epistemological position – one contrasting with ‘foundationalism’ – as if the natural perfections were justified solely in virtue of their mutual coherence. No: we already have a working theoretical ‘foundation’, in the shape of the functionalist schema. Rather, the role of coherence here is essentially supplementary and clarificatory. How so? On the one hand, the natural perfections need *not* cohere at the token level, in the sense of being compossible within one life. For human lives are so limited in time and resources that we all have to choose which particular perfections to pursue, and those pursuits will exclude others. *Pace* Marx’s ideal of the maximally well-rounded life,[[1]](#footnote-1) no one can be both an athlete (say) and a concert musician and a theoretical physicist. On the other hand, however, the natural perfections must be compossible at the type level. This is because they are not relative to individual preference or desire, but actualisations of human nature, and thus good irrespective of our personal attitudes or affects (as I shall unpack below). It follows that if some natural perfections were, in principle, incompatible with others, our nature itself would be incoherent. Lastly, the natural perfections must cohere in the sense of not being essentially directed at, grounded in, produced or constituted by natural bads – or even show themselves *liable* to these relations. To use Aristotelian terminology, a natural perfection cannot, as such, be finally, formally, efficiently or materially related to a natural bad or bads, or constitutionally disposed to such relations. This constraint is peculiarly salient, as we shall see, when it comes to the ‘evanescent’ goods of autonomy, pleasure and well-being.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second constraint concerns well-being, or better, *eudaimonia*. As we saw in § 2.4 and § 3.3, some philosophers – such as Kraut, Hursthouse, Foot and Thompson – construe the latter as ‘flourishing’, where this suggests determinate, observable criteria for ‘doing well’. But at least in the human case, this ‘flourishing first’ approach looks naive. While such criteria may supervene, and supervene demonstrably, on our most basic bodily functions – such as respiration or digestion – human psychology is just too complex a thing from which to ‘read off’ flourishing. Moreover, since our higher functions are characteristically difficult to engage and realise – think of the sweat involved in understanding calculus, achieving athletic prowess or becoming a proficient pianist – many, if not most, natural perfections will be greeted with what I call ‘refractory’ desires. Even if we endorse them in principle, that is, we are averse to them in practice. And this means that any theory that infers, straightforwardly, from the natural perfections to well-being is far too quick. Why pursue them, then, it might be asked? More sharply, why encourage our children to pursue them, given their well-being is peculiarly dear to us? The answer is that they *are* perfections, and hence goods, and our desires are therefore under a constitutive requirement to align with them as goods.[[3]](#footnote-3) If this ‘endorsement constraint’ (as I called it in § 2.4) is satisfied, and satisfied fully (viz. both cognitively and affectively), the natural perfections will contribute to *eudaimonia* – but not before or otherwise.[[4]](#footnote-4) This might be considered a fault in NP, as if well-being should be available more easily. But given the recalcitrance of human psychology, and the practical hardships involved in attaining many of the natural perfections, this is simply unrealistic. Genuine well-being cannot be had on the cheap.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The third constraint relates to the sciences. Let us assume that the sciences, especially the ‘natural’ sciences, are paradigmatically truth-delivering forms of enquiry.[[6]](#footnote-6) It follows that NP will have to be peculiarly sensitive to, and thus constrained by, their deliverances. This is patently true ‘downstream’, as it were, where we seek to unfold natural goods like health. If biology tells us that a certain dose of iodine, for instance, is good for our health, then any dosage below or above that will be naturally imperfective. Likewise, if brain science tells us that the brain functions optimally within a certain temperature range, then those seeking the natural perfections of knowledge or understanding would do well to avoid temperatures outside that range. Something similar applies, furthermore, to scientific discoveries ‘upstream’. Functional biology, for instance, is essential to pinpointing the functions of organic systems, as well as the different ways those systems evidence either success (perfection) or failure (imperfection). Similarly, and as we shall see in detail in Part II, the non-‘natural’ sciences afford much food for thought about natural goods that lie beyond the strictly organic sphere. When it comes to intellectual goods, for example, disciplines like Philosophy and Cognitive Science help us think more carefully about the difference between ‘mental states’ like perception, belief, knowledge and understanding.[[7]](#footnote-7) As to the status of History, Literature and the other ‘Arts’, we may well have to tread more carefully, given they are subject to culturally highly contingent (and hence normatively less reliable) formation. But such modes of enquiry and endeavour can nonetheless supply at least excellent *illustrations* of the natural perfections and imperfections, some of which I shall draw on in Part II.

The fourth and final constraint concerns how fixed the natural perfections are in number and content. As I indicated in § 2.3, note 41, Chappell holds the ‘Dynamic Thesis’ that ‘the horizons of what [humans] are and … do are open in a radical way’ (Chappell 1998: 44). By this he means that ‘It’s not merely possible for humans to discover (or create) new instances of basic goods. They can even discover new types of basic goods’. As examples, he cites ‘art’ and ‘justice’, purported basic goods that arose at particular times: both, notably, a long time after humans themselves arose.[[8]](#footnote-8) He infers that ‘The list of basic goods … is in fact impossible to close while humans are still developing as a species’. For NP, however, this view is ill-founded, since the categories or types of natural perfection flow from human nature. It follows that, so long as our nature remains the same, the same array of natural perfections will be open to us in principle – even if not in practice.[[9]](#footnote-9) Now it is a real question whether we will be able to overcome or somehow replace our nature, a question I shall tackle in chapter 12 (where I discuss transhumanism). But until that time, the types of basic good will remain necessarily the same. Even if the transhumanist project succeeds, moreover, the eventuating goods will be only very dubiously *human* goods. For, by hypothesis, it will not be humankind – but rather some kind of successor creature – who pursues and enjoys them. And this lends an added layer of incoherence to Chappell’s notion that new types of *human* good can arise in future. All in all, then – bar a radical transcendence of human nature and its concomitant teleology – NP must deny the claim that ‘there may yet be entire forms of basic good waiting to be discovered’.

**4.2 Alternative Perfectionisms**

Having laid out four constraints on NP – coherentist, eudaimonist, scientific and what could be called ‘anti-dynamist’ – I want now to unpack three alternative perfectionisms, in order to see both where and why they are incompatible with NP. The perfectionist theories I shall look at are, as I indicated above, those of Thomas Hurka, George Sher and Richard Boyd. Let us take Hurka’s nominally ‘Aristotelian’ perfectionism first, since it is the most prominent theory among the three.

**4.2.1 Hurka’s Perfectionism**

Hurka explicitly repudiates any variety of Aristotelian functionalism or teleology from the outset. As he puts matters, ‘Whether it is theologically grounded or not, talk of a ‘human function’ is highly contentious; few accept it today … to develop a metaphysically plausible theory, we should reject it’.[[10]](#footnote-10) The references to contentiousness and implausibility here suggest that, like Williams and MacIntyre,[[11]](#footnote-11) Hurka simply assumes that post-Darwinian naturalism has rendered any form of natural teleology untenable. But he also moves beyond mere assumption, mounting a more considered critique of Aristotelian natural ends. As he writes, Aristotelian teleology envisions ‘the development of human nature [as] each human’s ‘end,’ in three senses. It is his metaphysical purpose, perhaps given him by God; it is what he actually strives for or desires; and it constitutes, by logical necessity, his good’.[[12]](#footnote-12) These respectively metaphysical, psychological and meta-ethical commitments of ‘traditional’ perfectionism are, however, and as Hurka adjures, mere ‘accretions’ to genuine perfectionism. For the latter can, on his view, do without the former’s bogus ‘metaphysical purposes’, its notion of ‘psychological compulsion’, and its supposedly ‘conceptually true’ ‘ideal’. With this threefold critique in place, Hurka moves on to develop his own, avowedly ‘stripped-down version’ of perfectionism.[[13]](#footnote-13) But what are we to make of his critique itself?

On all three counts, it fails to capture or undermine NP. First, to speak of metaphysical ‘purposes’ in this context is misleading. It would have analytical bite, perhaps, if NP were theistic in form – but it is not. Instead of natural ‘purposes’, NP is committed to natural ends; and no agent need either formulate, impose or implement those ends for them to exist. Rather, and as I argued in § 3.1, they inform the human essence irrespective of the purposes agents happen to formulate or act upon. Second, and partly as a corollary of this, natural ends, according to NP, need not be desired or striven for, let alone exert any psychological ‘compulsion’. Far from it. As I argued in the previous section, our ‘refractory’ desires ensure that, even where natural ends are acknowledged and affirmed, humans often backslide or find themselves averse to such ends in practice. Third, natural ends are not given by logical or conceptual necessity. Rather, they are contingent on our natural functions, and – as we shall see in chapter 12 – if these were to change radically, so would our ends. In this way, the ‘ideal’ Hurka speaks of is contingent all the way down. Most unfortunate for him, however, is the fact that, in setting out his own perfectionist theory, he makes liberal use of functional notions himself. He refers, for example, to ‘developing human nature’, ‘exercising essential human powers’ and ‘develop[ing] what makes us what we are’; he approves, moreover, of the ideal of a ‘fully human’ life.[[14]](#footnote-14) At a more fine-grained level, he speaks of the good of ‘bodily health’ as consisting in ‘all our bodily systems function[ing] in an efficient, unrestricted way’.[[15]](#footnote-15) By parity of reasoning, ‘poor organic functioning’ is, he avers, a natural bad, since such lack of ‘full activity’ or ‘unimpeded operation’ detracts from the ‘completeness of a human life’. In all these ways, and despite his explicit critique, Hurka helps himself to notions that are inextricably functional and teleological.

Despite this *de facto* indebtedness to a robust, teleological essentialism, Hurka’s *de jure* view remains opposed to it. What does he put in its place? In its place he puts a ‘double approach’, which consists in both an ‘intuitive’ and an ‘explanatory’ elucidation of the human essence.[[16]](#footnote-16) The former, Kripkean, method specifies this essence with the help of thought experiments. Taking the example of gold, Hurka says we can discern its essence as a natural element by using our imagination. Would substance x remain gold if, for instance, it ceased to have atomic number 69? Or would it remain gold if its shiny yellow appearance changed to (say) grey? Our imagination answers ‘no’ and ‘yes’ to these questions respectively; ergo, he claims, atomic number rather than colour is an essential property of gold. The explanatory method, derived from Hilary Putnam, rests, by contrast, not on intuition or appeals to imagination, but squarely on scientific explanation. As Hurka outlines things, the latter identifies what properties are essential to x by determining whether they play a ‘central role’ in scientifically sponsored explanations concerning x.[[17]](#footnote-17) Recurring to the example of gold, he points out that its ‘inner constitution’ explains its phenomenal properties, rather than the other way round. It follows that atomic number 69 is essential to gold, not its colour. Acknowledging that this scientific route to determining essential properties looks surer than intuition, Hurka grants that the latter method may just drop out as redundant or unreliable. After all, insofar as it *is* sure in its deliverances, intuition appears to ‘reflect prior explanatory knowledge’, rather than supply a genuinely distinct method of its own. Be that as it may, Hurka concludes we can be most confident in our essentialist judgements when both intuitive and explanatory methods concur.

Notwithstanding its Kripkean and Putnamian pedigree, this ‘double approach’ is not demonstrably superior to its Aristotelian rival. For a start, intuitions are far less reliable – especially at a fine-grained level – than the kind of painstaking, empirical, investigations that Aristotle himself conducted into natural substances and their behaviour. As Hurka himself admits, so-called ‘intuitions’ about *de re* necessity rely on actual acquaintance with types of thing, and are thus not independent in the way they purport and ought to be. More pertinently – since Hurka rests his essentialism, in effect, entirely on his second method – scientific explanations of substances like gold seem beside the point. For while its atomic number does explain the colour of gold, it is not, properly speaking, functionally directed at it, nor can it achieve that colour, therefore, to varying degrees of adequacy. This is because the sense in which explanation is afforded here is purely material.[[18]](#footnote-18) In the human case, by contrast – as in other organic cases – what we are interested in is (as I argued in § 3.2) proper function(s), and the final explanations with which these are correlated. Granted, human beings exhibit a vast range of behaviours, and these can be explained – *qua* ‘effects’ – in terms of various material or efficient causes.[[19]](#footnote-19) But this does not determine which such effects are functional, i.e. which constitute human natural goods. In other words, the model of scientific explanation upon which Hurka reposes such weight is very far from perfectionist. At best, it can pick out a panoply of behaviours and their material or efficient causes. But it cannot pick out a substance’s *functions*, and thus the natural perfections or goods toward which it is properly and finally directed. Accordingly, Hurka’s ‘Aristotelian’ essentialism devolves, ultimately, into a pseudo-essentialism, one that faces theoretical disabilities that are analogous to those faced by Cummins’ pseudo-functions.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**4.2.2 Sher’s Perfectionism**

We come, next, to George Sher’s perfectionism. Like Hurka, Sher rejects both evolutionary biology and Aristotelian teleology as foundations for his theory. The former, he argues, contravenes what he calls the ‘depth requirement’ on any viable ethical theory. This requirement holds that ‘goals’ for human achievement ‘must belong *to* a person in some suitably deep sense’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Evolutionary theory contravenes this, he presses, because it sets value on ‘the perpetuation or improvement of either the whole species or certain genetic subpopulations’.[[22]](#footnote-22) In other words, it focuses on the survival, reproduction and biological fitness of groups, and these ends seem not only ‘far too crude and undifferentiated to account for much else of what seems good’ – such as aesthetic experience or friendship – they are also just too ‘remote from particular individuals’.[[23]](#footnote-23) As to Aristotelianism, Sher maintains (like Hurka) that when Aristotle ‘advanced his essentialist conception of human nature, it was part of a much larger world-picture that was teleological throughout’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Yet ‘it is hard to see’, he continues, ‘how that picture can itself be defended, and few accept it today’. This appeal to the contemporary interpretative consensus – he cites MacIntyre’s authority in particular – is disappointing. It is especially disappointing because he admits that Aristotelian teleology not only satisfies the depth requirement – Aristotle is interested in goods at the individual level, and includes ones like beauty and friendship – it also satisfies the ‘distance requirement’, which requires goods be objective, i.e. irreducible to mere preferences or satisfactions of desire.[[25]](#footnote-25) Sher concludes, nonetheless, that Aristotelian teleology is simply untenable and hence defunct. It follows, on his view, that we need ‘an empirical substitute for a teleological essentialism – a kind of poor man’s Aristotelianism’, which will come (as he puts it) ‘at a far lower metaphysical cost’.[[26]](#footnote-26) What is that substitute?

Sher’s ‘poor man’s Aristotelianism’ is, as he suggests, metaphysically deliberately modest. It remains, nevertheless, both objective and teleological,[[27]](#footnote-27) insofar as it proposes ‘goals’ that not only transcend individual preference, desire, etc., but also satisfy his ‘depth’ and ‘distance’ requirements. In other words, any perfectionist goal must be both deeply ‘internalisable’ by the individual, and more informed than a mere urge or want.[[28]](#footnote-28) The way to satisfy these requirements, Sher holds, is to discover human goals that are both ‘near-universal’ and ‘near-unavoidable’. Now near-unavoidability alone is insufficient to guarantee depth, since pathological traits – such as the desire to feel table-legs, say – are mere ‘idiosyncratic compulsion[s]’, and therefore do not reach the level of reflexive affirmation required by depth. But when accompanied by near-universality, near-unavoidable goals attain depth, because their near-unavoidability is maximally shared with others. This non-idiosyncrasy or non-peculiarity makes their pursuit itself (virtually) unavoidable, whatever one’s character traits. And Sher thinks this makes them maximally suited to internalisation. At the same time, near-universality alone is insufficient to guarantee distance, since the fact that everyone happens to pursue a goal does not entail its informedness or worthwhileness. Add near-unavoidability, however, and the latter qualities do not (he believes) come into question: for a goal that is near-escapable is such a ‘fixed feature of our lives’ that it has to be pursued anyway. Sher concludes that near-unavoidable-cum-near-universal goals are *both* internalisable *and* worth pursuing. So they satisfy his criteria for perfectionist goals.

This attempt to elaborate perfectionism without a robust teleology is intriguing – but ultimately unsuccessful. To begin with, Sher’s concern with ‘depth’ or internalisation is purely psychological, and not clearly relevant to perfectionism *per se*. Indeed, although NP regards internalisation of the natural perfections as good *for* the individual, it is sometimes simply unattainable owing to individuals’ refractory desires (however regrettable that may be for their well-being). Even if one is sympathetic, however, to Sher’s concern with psychology and internalisation, his account remains flawed. For by his own admission, objective (‘distant’) goods such as reproduction and aesthetic experience cannot be accommodated within his account, since they are neither near-universal nor near-unavoidable goals.[[29]](#footnote-29) It follows that his perfectionism is seriously incomplete, leaving out goods that NP can – as we shall see in Part II – readily accommodate. A graver concern is that Sher’s criteria for perfection are not only non-necessary, but also insufficient. For when he provides his analysis of ‘fundamental goals’,[[30]](#footnote-30) he does so in terms of ‘fundamental capacities’: ‘a fundamental capacity’, he claims, ‘will be one whose exercise is both near-universal and near-inescapable’.[[31]](#footnote-31) But this seems far too capacious a definition. For on this definition, won’t laziness, hostility, rudeness or inattention count as perfections? True, Sher says 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’.[[32]](#footnote-32) And he could claim that lazy, hostile, rude or inattentive behaviour is necessarily a form of *failure*, and anyway something one only falls into, rather than deliberately setting oneself as a goal. I suggest, however, that this would be normatively to beg the question, and amount, moreover, to a fundamentally *ad hoc* attempt to shore up a pair of perfectionist criteria that are, by turns, both too narrow and too capacious to be up to the job.[[33]](#footnote-33)

**4.2.3 Boyd’s Perfectionism**

The third and last perfectionist alternative I want to consider is that of Richard Boyd.[[34]](#footnote-34) While Boyd is not himself a perfectionist, his theory of moral realism dovetails strongly with NP, insofar as it is a systematic attempt to render goods – albeit, in Boyd’s case, moral goods – in naturalistic terms. Boyd, like Hurka and Sher, assumes Aristotelian naturalism is a theoretical non-starter; unlike them, however, he is highly sympathetic to post-Darwinian scientific naturalism.[[35]](#footnote-35) Why so? The core reason is that he sees in scientific realism a promising model for moral realism. What scientific theories supply, that is, is a description of reality that is ‘largely independent of our theorizing’, i.e. reality ‘prior to thought’, and hence a description that is objective, value-neutral and empirically testable (1988: 307, 309). Such theories afford this on the basis of scientific observation, this being a far more secure route to knowledge of reality than moral philosophers’ characteristic route of ‘moral intuitions’ (310). A scientific ethics holds out the promise, in other words, of a purely ‘a posteriori and contingent’ (314) conception of moral reality, the latter being objective and empirically testable (yet also, given its subject-matter, not value-neutral). As Boyd grants, this goes directly against the Kantian ambition to ground ethics in a priori necessities. But this is all to the good, he maintains, since Kant’s project has proven delusive, incapable of delivering the kind of epistemic security Kant sought. Instead of such grand, a prioristic ambitions, we should follow the humble – yet far more fruitful – path of scientific methodology (316). With its patient, incremental approach to theory-building (319), the latter has (he submits) every chance of yielding solid results in ethics too.

Boyd labels his naturalistic moral realism ‘homeostatic consequentialism’ (§ 4.3, 329-31). Its basic claim is that there are a number of ‘important human needs’ that are satisfied by ‘important human goods’. These goods range from the medical (e.g. repair of wounds), to the social (e.g. love and friendship), to the intellectual and artistic (e.g. knowledge and musical enjoyment). As Boyd puts matters, these human goods form ‘homeostatic clusters’, in the sense that they mutually support one another – ‘when present in balance and moderation’ – and are supported by various ‘psychological and social mechanisms’, such as custom, ritual and attitudes of mutual respect. And at a second-order level, actions and character traits are morally good to the extent that they foster such goods, or the ‘homeostatic mechanisms upon which their unity depends’. Boyd compares the kind of unity at stake here to ‘automotive design’, which ensures that goods like performance, comfort and durability are both compossible and mutually reinforcing. As in automotive engineering, indeed, we specify moral goods using value-laden terms that are also empirically robust: that is, they are open to observation (332). For just as we can observe and test for durability, for example, so we can observe and test for friendship or musical enjoyment. Moving beyond engineering to science more broadly, just as certain scientific natural facts become empirically available only given particular technological or social developments, so certain moral natural facts become knowable only given analogous developments (e.g. the advent of artistic tools or political democracy respectively). All this reflects Boyd’s guiding view that ‘moral facts are mere natural facts’ (333-4), and that ‘the analogy between moral inquiry and scientific inquiry [is] to be taken *very* seriously’ (330).[[36]](#footnote-36)

Homeostatic consequentialism clearly does better than Sher in ‘coverage’ terms, since it includes (e.g.) artistic goods (which are neither near-universal nor near-unavoidable). It also does better than Chappell, since it does not infer from the historical contingency of (some) goods to goods’ being potentially categorially infinite. (Boyd’s naturalism is simply too entrenched to countenance this ‘Dynamic Thesis’.) On other fronts, however, his moral realism falters. For a start, and despite its deployment of scientific vocabulary, it offers no real *method* by which to pick out or understand important (‘fundamental’) human goods. True, Boyd’s examples are plausible, in just the way that Parfit’s or Chappell’s ‘objective lists’ are. And true, he purports to ground goods in needs, rather than mere desires or urges. But even if friendship, say, or musical enjoyment reflect certain needs, it takes more to show that these are needs the satisfaction of which constitutes a *good*. After all, there are many teleological notions – need being only one – the satisfaction of which need not, according to perfectionists, constitute a good. How can Boyd be sure, then, that he has not picked out mere desires or cravings? It is not good enough, at this juncture, simply to revert to the claim that needs are correlated with goods, and that things like friendship and knowledge are palpable goods. For this is precisely what is at issue, and is anyway not to supply them with independent, systematic grounds. In the end, it seems that the sorting mechanism for Boyd’s ‘goods’ and ‘needs’ is constituted not by theory, but by his antecedent – yet also unstructured and unsystematic – moral intuitions or commitments (cf. Sher 1997: 228). And so we are thrown back on exactly the kind of under-theorisation – albeit, this time, accompanied by the scientific patina of homeostatic clusters, mechanisms, etc. – that we saw in Parfit and Chappell.[[37]](#footnote-37)

**4.3 Anti-Perfectionist Critiques**

Having explored the alternative perfectionisms of Hurka, Sher and Boyd, and found them – for all their manifold interest and acuity – wanting,[[38]](#footnote-38) I want now to investigate three anti-perfectionist critiques: those of Dale Dorsey, Philip Kitcher and the ‘analytic existentialists’. Dorsey’s critique is complex, covering Aristotle, T. H. Green, Brink, Hurka and others; so I shall pick out only those elements of it that are relevant to NP.

**4.3.1 Dorsey’s Critique**

Dorsey’s first criticism is that the perfectionist recourse to essence or function must have ‘independent appeal’.[[39]](#footnote-39) That is, it must stand up and prove its worth even in the face of firm intuitions that run contrary to its evaluative upshots. Take the example of hypothermia: we have the strong intuition, Dorsey contends, that this is a bad thing in humans, and certainly that humans suffering from hypothermia experience a severe depletion in welfare. It remains the case, however, that ‘a disposition to develop hypothermia under cold conditions is essential to humanity’. In face of this belief, does it have, as Dorsey puts things, ‘at least *some* power to override recalcitrant intuitions’ to the effect that hypothermia is bad and bad for us? In short, no, it does not. And so a key test of the independent appeal of perfectionism’s essentialism – namely, ‘resistance to recalcitrance’ – fails to be met. Or take another example, that of mortality. By all accounts, mortality is part of the human essence. Indeed, in standard syllogistic, ‘all humans are mortal’ is taken to be a true major premiss. But if so, ‘On an essentialist view, mortality would not simply be instrumentally good, but intrinsically good, good in itself’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Does this essentialist belief have the ‘power to influence the value of mortality one way or the other’? No, Dorsey responds, we are still highly likely to judge human mortality to be bad *per se*. (While death may have instrumental benefits, e.g. in curtailing various sufferings, it is very difficult, he judges, to construe it as intrinsically good.) But if so, Dorsey concludes, essentialism has no evaluative hold over us, and ‘the essence-welfare link is not independently plausible enough to support a ‘top-down’ argument for perfectionism’.

This anti-perfectionist argument has *prima facie* appeal but is not, in the end, suasive. For Dorsey assumes that perfectionism amounts to no more than picking out various human essential properties, then seeing how they match or assort with our evaluative ‘intuitions’. But this shows only how far his conception of perfectionism is from that of the neo-Aristotelian. For the latter rests on the Aristotelian functionalist schema, which picks out not any old essential properties – such as ‘taking up space’[[41]](#footnote-41) – but specifically teleological essential properties. It is only these that are relevant to the kind of evaluation NP engages in. It follows that hypothermia constitutes not a functional good, but rather a functional bad, precisely because it signals and embodies a kind of physiological *mal*functioning. Dorsey obscures this fact by referring to the ‘disposition to develop hypothermia’, where ‘develop’ suggests the realisation of a positive capacity or power. But this is misleading. Hypothermia is more accurately construed as a dangerous drop in body temperature below 35 degrees centigrade, which compromises a host of bodily functions and therefore demands emergency treatment. On no construal is this a genuine perfectionist good. Likewise, to cite mortality as such a good is misconceived. Mortality, though it is the end-point of life, is not its end – at least in a perfectionist sense. Rather, and even more dramatically than in the case of hypothermia, it amounts to the final winding-down of *all* our functions. As I shall argue in § 5.1, it is consequently the antithesis of the ‘framing’ good of life, and in this way the ultimate perfectionist bad. (Hence capital punishment is the worst or most severe form of punishment.) Granted, and as Dorsey points out, mortality may well have instrumental benefits, such as ending various kinds of bodily malfunction. But as such and *per se*, it is the most radical perfectionist bad.

Dorsey’s third and final criticism[[42]](#footnote-42) takes as its target what he calls the ‘intuitive argument’, to the effect that perfectionism uniquely and non-accidentally aligns with our evaluative intuitions, lending them a convincing explanatory basis lacking in other theories.[[43]](#footnote-43) Dorsey denies perfectionism any of these virtues; but since my entire book is an exercise in refuting this denial, I shall not dwell on it here. What is salient in this context is his further claim that ‘There is a large and growing catalogue of important counter-examples to perfectionism’, which undermine its ‘intuitive *bona fides*’.[[44]](#footnote-44) He cites three. First, there is the case of Jerry, the denizen of a ‘remote desert island’, who ‘strongly desires to be a lint collector, believing it to be a noble and worthy pursuit’. Given his location, however, he is unable to fulfil his dream, and ends up irrigating his desert island instead. According to perfectionism, Dorsey adjures, this is a more worthwhile pursuit than lint-collecting. But is Jerry better off for it, having missed out on his dream? Not clearly so. Second, there is Ronald, a ‘committed subsistence farmer’, who nonetheless would also make a successful theoretical physicist.[[45]](#footnote-45) Given his temperament, however, and his views about industrialisation and epistemic hubris, Ronald rejects the latter option. Assuming perfectionism favours theoretical physics over subsistence farming – since it embodies more and more impressive rational activity – perfectionism (wrongly) condemns his choice. Third, Ronald chooses to work on a farm with a ‘very comfortable couch’.[[46]](#footnote-46) According to Dorsey, perfectionism holds that ‘difficult activities will have more value’, since they involve a greater exercise of theoretical and practical rationality. Ergo perfectionism (wrongly) recommends that Ronald work on the ‘more challenging’ – because less comfortable – farm.

All these purported counter-examples to perfectionism are, in my view, defeasible – even though it will take later chapters to show this fully. First, the Jerry example rests on an implicit hedonism or desire-satisfaction view of the good, which I argued against in § 1.1 and will criticise further in § 9.2-3. Although it is true that welfare or well-being will accrue to Jerry only if he affirms or endorses his pursuits, this is, as I argued above – via the eudaimonist constraint (§ 4.1) – only part of the story. Those pursuits themselves must, in addition, be ordered to ultimate intrinsic goods. And Dorsey has done nothing to show how lint-collection is so ordered; indeed, it is highly plausible that it is not. As to Ronald the subsistence farmer, perfectionism need not hold that such farming is a lesser good than theoretical physics. The supposed ground for this, viz. that it involves less rational activity, is disputable. Perhaps it involves less *theoretical* rational activity, but then Dorsey would have to show that theoretical reason is somehow more valuable than its practical counterpart. I think this is unlikely to be possible, an issue I addressed in the Introduction and shall revisit in § 5.3 and § 7.1-3. Thirdly and finally, there is the case of Ronald and the ‘very comfortable couch’. At work here is the assumption that perfectionism must value ‘difficult’ or ‘challenging’ activities over less demanding ones. While it is true that both Hurka and Gwen Bradford argue for such a view, I shall dispute it in § 8.4. It seems to me to rest, fundamentally, on a misconstrual of the very idea of ‘perfection’, and anyway not to acknowledge that natural bads can be just as, or even more, difficult to achieve than natural goods.

**4.3.2 Kitcher’s Critique**

We come now to Kitcher’s anti-perfectionist critique.[[47]](#footnote-47) Kitcher’s target is not the kind of ‘perfectionism’ that rests on an under-theorised list of what makes human lives ‘go well’ – viz. what he calls ‘bare objectivism’ – but rather one that is committed to ‘explanatory objectivism’ (1999: 59). This is the kind of perfectionism that tries to explain and justify the contents of its preferred list. At the heart of Kitcher’s critique is what he calls the ‘Reductivist Challenge’, viz. that any such explanation and justification must come to rest on ‘value-free’ ground – such as a human nature, essence or function – and that this ‘criterion of human well-being’ must not itself be justified by the values with which it is correlated (e.g. friendship, ‘intellectual understanding’ or ‘coming to appreciate artistic and natural beauty’) (60). The latter route is obviously circular, and Kitcher takes the former requirement on perfectionist theory – that our essence be ‘value-free’ or *wertfrei* – to be self-evidently justified. To illustrate the Reductivist Challenge, he cites the preference perfectionists have for intentional actions over impulsive or ‘irrational’ behaviours. While he sympathises with this preference, he counsels that ‘we ought to inquire into its basis’ (75). Far from resting on neutral ground, he contends, it reflects an antecedent value-judgement, namely, that intentional action is ‘more indicative of the kinds of beings we are and of the kinds of things toward which we ought to aspire’. This confirms, he concludes, that ‘we have no independent route to the [human] essence that will avoid prior judgment about what is valuable … the Reductivist Challenge has not been met’.[[48]](#footnote-48)

This core Reductivist Challenge raises a generic problem encoded in the supposed ‘fact/value dichotomy’, one I can address fully only in chapter 10. For the time being, however, it is sufficient to remind ourselves how the Aristotelian functionalist schema itself poses a challenge to Kitcher’s basic mode of procedure. On the one hand, he is right that teleological essentialism is hollow if its specification of human goods rests on value-judgements that find no proper or justifiable basis in the human essence itself. This would, as he argues, beg the question, since the key purchase of such essentialism is that human goods are explained and justified precisely by human nature. On the other hand, however, Kitcher’s assumption that that nature must itself be specifiable in a completely *wertfrei* manner remains unsupported. For it is integral to the Aristotelian functionalist schema that human nature is teleological, i.e. aimed essentially at certain ends that are also, inextricably, goods. It is impossible, therefore, to give a full or fully adequate description of that nature which does not itself register an evaluative element. As I shall expound in chapter 10, this is, clearly, anathema to the dominant post-seventeenth-century scientific conception of nature (or better, natures) – and Kitcher evidently inherits and affirms that conception. But it is not good enough simply to assume its cogency without further argument. Such impatience does, of course, characterise philosophers as eminent as Williams and the early MacIntyre, as we have seen already (cf. n. 11 above). But *per se*, such argument from authority is weak. And as I shall argue in more depth in chapter 10, the post-Hobbesian – or at least post-Humean – consensus on the entirely value-free nature of natures or essences (where these are admitted at all) is ultimately unsustainable.

Besides the Reductivist Challenge, Kitcher also proffers various subsidiary objections to perfectionism, of which I’ll mention three. First, he objects that perfectionists like Hurka locate perfection not only in our higher functions, but also in ‘the functions of [our] various organs and [physical] systems’ (1999: 68). The trouble is, he maintains, that ‘not all human beings develop the systems Hurka considers essential’, since some of them lack (e.g.) ‘functional nervous systems or functional respiratory systems’. It follows, Kitcher presses, that this functional view of essence is too ‘constricting’ (69). Indeed, one can imagine possible worlds in which ‘mutations of this type were the statistical norm for our species’, making a view like Hurka’s even more unreasonable and rebarbative. Secondly, if Hurka’s notion of ‘physical essence’ is too exclusive, it is also too inclusive, since ‘an overwhelming majority of human beings … grow hair, sweat, periodically yawn, urinate, shiver in the cold, [etc.]’ (70). By perfectionism’s lights, then, such trivial activities must be perfective. But this conflicts with well-entrenched intuitions, which are not dislodged in the face of perfectionism’s abstract functionalist schema. It follows, Kitcher holds, that that schema must be at fault. Third and finally, when it comes to higher, psychological functions, Hurka presupposes that other animal species lack these. But, in fact, ‘many higher primates can form beliefs about their associates, adjust their beliefs appropriately … and employ these beliefs in sophisticated ways to advance their own social ends’ (74). It follows that ‘[t]here is nothing specific to human psychology in the schemata Hurka provides’. Worse, if Hurka were to tighten those schemata – by insisting on (e.g.) ‘strong conformity to canons of evidence as a condition of human rationality’ – ‘most of us are going to fail most of the time’ to perfect ourselves. Either way, then, Hurka’s delineation of our ‘rational essence’ faces insuperable obstacles.

Although in § 4.2.1 I, too, criticised Hurka’s perfectionism, I do not think it vulnerable in the ways Kitcher outlines. First, whereas Kitcher thinks a genuine function is necessarily instantiated throughout a kind, neo-Aristotelians think otherwise. For according to Aristotle, functions have to be instantiated only *epi to polu*, ‘for the most part’, in order to be *bona fide*. It follows that those who lack proper functions or are functionally impaired are highly unfortunate, but do not constitute counter-examples to the functionalist schema itself.[[49]](#footnote-49) Imagined ‘possible worlds’, moreover, are irrelevant to deciding which functions belong properly to a species. Rather, what decides that question is painstaking empirical research, which Aristotle engaged in himself to an impressive extent (albeit without the resources of the modern scientist). Secondly, Kitcher deprecates functions like hair growth, sweating, yawning, urinating and shivering as ‘trivial’, and hence as irrelevant to perfectionism. But even if such phenomena are more *rudimentary* than (say) working out equations, they are still perfective *qua* contributing to bodily health. As I shall detail further in § 6.1, they are thus far from trivial; indeed, without them, our higher functions would come under severe threat – or cease altogether.[[50]](#footnote-50) Thirdly, Kitcher impugns rationality as the human specific difference. Either it sets the bar too high, excluding many commonly acknowledged as human, or it sets the bar too low, counting certain patently non-human animals as human. While I cannot rebut this criticism until chapter 11, it is not as serious as it looks (or purports to be). For Aristotle himself grants that some non-human animals possess analogues of rationality (cf. Connell 2021), that some humans are rationally defective and that all humans develop their rational capacities only slowly. But none of this entails that rationality is not the human specific difference, i.e. that which defines us or constitutes our essence as a species.

**4.3.3 The ‘Analytic Existentialist’ Critique**

I want to round off this roster of anti-perfectionist critiques by looking at ‘analytic existentialism’. This comes in several forms, but wherever it raises its head, it is fundamentally hostile to perfectionism (among other objectivist theories of goodness). At its most generic, it echoes Jean-Paul Sartre and other continental existentialists by performing a kind of shrug in the face of goodness. As Foot puts things, echoing such philosophers’ studied insouciance: ‘But what if I do not care about being a good human being?’[[51]](#footnote-51) ‘Care’ here straddles both attitudinal and motivational indifference, but the upshot in either case is the same – viz. that considerations of goodness (in this case, natural perfection) need not move us. This stance is typical of Sartre, for whom any constraints deriving from ‘human nature’ or ‘objective goodness’ are to be thrown off as improper barriers to human freedom.[[52]](#footnote-52) But it is typical also of ‘the muted, polite, Anglo-Saxon kind of Existentialism’.[[53]](#footnote-53) The latter is implicit in the notion of ‘stepping back’, that is, where we distance ourselves from our usual engagements and normative assumptions, and are thereby (supposedly) enabled to decide these afresh and ‘for ourselves’. This challenge is articulated most carefully by Micah Lott, who labels it the ‘*authority-of-nature challenge*’. As he puts matters: ‘Given that we are rational creatures who can ‘step back’ from our nature, why should we see human nature as authoritative for us?’[[54]](#footnote-54) Indeed, when, as Griffin puts it, ‘we step far enough back from our everyday concerns, when we see life *sub specie aeternitatis*’, we may come to the conclusion that nothing is worthwhile at all.[[55]](#footnote-55) Or take Nussbaum, who, having noted Aristotle’s view that ‘the human being is by nature a political being’, says – on behalf of the ‘serious opponent’ of Aristotle – ‘This gives us no reason not to try to climb above our nature and repudiate … parts of it’.[[56]](#footnote-56)

A key problem with analytic existentialism is that it often relies on metaphors, and metaphors whose argumentative force is unclear. When we ‘step back’ from, for instance, cases of rape, genocide or child abuse, where, exactly, are we stepping back *to*? What new ‘perspective’ does such distancing afford? As Griffin comments, ‘These steps back provide no new perspective … one can wonder whether [they are not merely] steps into confusion, steps off the edge of coherent talk about values’.[[57]](#footnote-57) They threaten to be steps into incoherence, I take it, not because fundamental debate about ‘values’ is impossible; rather, it is because such values arise in the context of the life of a particular species of animal. So to try and extricate oneself from that life, and thereby ‘climb above our nature’, courts the accusation of incoherence. As Nussbaum remarks, ‘human nature just *is* an inside perspective, not a *thing* at all, but rather the most fundamental and broadly shared experiences of human beings living and reasoning together’.[[58]](#footnote-58) Now it is incontrovertible that, as FitzPatrick points out, ‘our sophisticated reflective capacities’ allow us to ‘*transcend* our proper biological functioning in systematic and agent-directed ways’: by, for instance, building aeroplanes or rockets.[[59]](#footnote-59) Transhumanism has raised the possibility, moreover, that we can or will be able wholly to transcend our nature through technology, something I shall explore in depth in chapter 12. But if my argument so far has been cogent, technological change outside us does not have the power to alter either us or what is connatural to us. At most, it can extend what experiences, practices or activities fall under extant categories of human goodness.[[60]](#footnote-60) And, as I shall argue further in chapter 12, even if we end up altering our nature fundamentally, it will no longer be *our* nature that results. So to speak of transcending our nature in this radical, transhumanist sense – in order to discover a brave new world of *human* values – does involve a basic incoherence.

A further problem with analytic existentialism is that it relies, albeit surreptitiously, on normative debate remaining at a high level of abstraction. It sounds plausible, perhaps, to ask: why should I care about being a ‘good human being’? Or, what are ‘natural perfections’ to me? But as soon as these relatively abstract concepts are brought down to earth, and rendered determinate, such questions lose most of (if not all) their plausibility. For it just looks obtuse to ask: why should anyone prefer (e.g.) knowledge to ignorance? Or, why should I choose health rather than disease? Not that these questions are purely rhetorical, or can’t be given further, informative answers. Indeed, Part II will be an exercise, precisely, in elaborating such answers. It is just that, once one descends from the high altitude of normative theory, the claim of analytic existentialism to a more sophisticated, more disillusioned normative stance, is soon revealed for the pretence is. True, Lott’s ‘authority-of-nature’ challenge is more sophisticated than most. It holds that ‘practical reason enables us to ‘step back’ from our impulses and desires. Rather than being straightaway determined to act by our inclinations, each person can ask if she *should* act on those inclinations’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Likewise, Lott presses, ‘We can ask whether we *should* act and live in the way that is naturally good for our life-form’.[[62]](#footnote-62) It follows that there is a ‘gap between whatever is naturally good … for humans as a species of living things, and whatever is normative for us, in the sense of having a claim upon our reason’.[[63]](#footnote-63) But this strict bifurcation between reason and the natural is – at least if these are taken in an Aristotelian sense – misconceived. For natural goods such as knowledge or health are not like mere inclinations or impulses, which can readily mislead and be to our detriment. Rather, they are perfections or completions of our nature.[[64]](#footnote-64) And as such, it befits the rational agent (at least *pro tanto*) to both affirm and choose them.

It appears, then, that analytic existentialism cannot, in the end, uphold its stance of attitudinal and motivational neutrality. Its mantra of ‘stepping back’, and attempted severance of reason from natural goodness is, ultimately, more rhetorical than argumentatively serious. In another respect, though, analytic existentialism is of signal service, helping to uncover what Gwen Bradford calls the ‘deep problem’ with perfectionism – natural or otherwise.[[65]](#footnote-65) That problem centres not on attitudes or motivations, but rather on the definitional matter of why we should accept goodness as natural perfection in the first place. I shall propound a crucial part of the answer to this – at the determinable level – in § 10.3, where I tackle G. E. Moore’s famous ‘open question argument’. Before we get there, however, we need to explore things at the level of determinate natural perfections. Here I shall dig down, as it were, into human nature, and unpack the specific dimensions of its perfectibility. In and through doing so, worries nourished by normative over-abstraction should dissipate, and we will come to see that – given the array of *actual* natural perfections – any doubts concerning their goodness are less real than notional. It is to the task of unpacking the natural perfections, therefore, that I now turn.

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1. As Marx writes: ‘[in communist society,] society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 47). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As I outlined in the Introduction when discussing the relatively marginal or peripheral role of desire within my overall account. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. NB ‘endorsement’ here is distinct from Christine Korsgaard’s notion of ‘reflective endorsement’, which holds that values are justified only because and insofar as we rationally accept them (Korsgaard 1996: 19). Rather, endorsement (in my sense) is the proper response to already existing and independent value. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In other words, neither perfection without endorsement, nor endorsement without perfection, can yield genuine well-being. Here I agree, largely, with Parfit, who proposes a ‘composite’ conception of welfare. As he puts things, ‘… what is best for people … is not just their being in the conscious states that they want to be in. Nor is it just their having knowledge, engaging in rational activity, being aware of true beauty, and the like … What is … good for someone, is to have both; to be engaged in these activities, and to be strongly wanting to be so engaged’ (Parfit 1984: 502). ‘Strongly’ here is questionable, as is Parfit’s wider idea that goods such as knowledge or rational activity need endorsement in order to *become* good themselves. Rather, we should endorse them because they are good, i.e. good already, independently of our endorsement. But otherwise this composite view seems right. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I ignore complications here to do with the ‘pessimistic induction’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Here it might be more accurate to talk in terms of *Wissenschaften*, or areas of systematic scholarly enquiry, rather than ‘sciences’ in the usual (narrow) English sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I shall pass over Chappell’s casting of justice as a ‘basic’ good, which conflicts with my own view of it as a secondary (albeit intrinsic) good. See § 1.3 on virtue ethics. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. True, ‘art’ – by which Chappell means, I take it, visual or pictorial art – requires the invention of various tools. But the good of artistic practice was always *connatural* to us: not in the sense of being itself somehow innate, but rather in that of fulfilling a particular potential that is innate. In other words, that art arose at a particular time merely reflects various potentialities in human nature that were extant all along. It just took certain technological and sociological developments to actualise them. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hurka 1993: 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See § 3.3, n. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hurka 1993: 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I introduced this at § 2.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hurka 1993: 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hurka 1993: 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Hurka 1993: § 3.4, pp. 33-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hurka 1993: 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gold’s atomic number explains the colour of gold no less than it explains (at least in part) the temperature at which gold melts, or its density. But none of these are the *function* of atomic number 69, unless – as I argued in § 3.2, and suggest below – we construe ‘function’ in the relativistic sense advocated by Cummins. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For instance, my breathing is caused by the actions of my lungs. Equally, your violent behaviour is caused by your spirited temperament. Her knowledge is caused by her rational capacity, while his procrastination is caused by his laziness. And so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See § 3.2. Cf. Sher’s critique of Hurka’s ‘nonteleological’ conception of the human essence (Sher 1997: 220-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sher 1997: 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Sher 1997: 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sher 1997: 227 and 226 respectively. Cf. ‘evolutionary goals are far too tenuously connected to individuals to be plausible determinants of how well they live’ (239). See also Hurka 1993: 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sher 1997: 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Sher 1997: 234, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Sher 1997: 240. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Sher 1997: 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Sher 1997: 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. NB ‘this goal [viz. reproduction] is clearly not one that almost all persons near-unavoidably seek’ (Sher 1997: 217); ‘can the theory be augmented to produce a yet more unified account? … [this is in part to ask] whether its account of a good life can be woven into a more comprehensive scheme that also includes (say) distributional and aesthetic values’ (Sher 1997: 244). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. This term is found at Sher 1997: 213, 216, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Sher 1997: 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Sher 1997: 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. My examples here draw on the vices, and are hence ‘moral’ in kind. I have chosen such examples, however, only because Sher’s examples tend themselves to be moral – not because I think the natural perfections *are* moral. In this respect, Sher follows Parfit, who includes ‘moral goodness’ on his ‘objective list’ of human goods (cf. Sher 1997: 201). It is unclear, though, why Sher takes Parfit as an authority – especially since Parfit is not a perfectionist himself. What is more, Parfit includes ‘having children’, ‘being a good parent’ and ‘awareness of true beauty’ on his objective list. These are all goals that, as Sher himself admits, his own theory does not count as perfective. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See ‘How to be a Moral Realist’ (Boyd 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. NB his approving references to Darwin at Boyd 1988: 324, 334. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Contra* the view that moral knowledge is harder to arrive at than its scientific counterpart, Boyd holds that ‘Locke was right that we are fitted by nature for moral knowledge … in a way that we are not so fitted for scientific knowledge of other sorts’ (Boyd 1988: 335). Our ‘fundamental needs’, in other words, are more available to us than many scientific facts – even if knowledge of both is contingent, to some degree, on technological, social and even theoretical developments. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See § 2.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. It might be asked why I have not included Gwen Bradford’s perfectionist theory here. The reason is that she does not propose a new method, working instead within a broadly Hurka-esque paradigm. I shall come to her innovative views on ‘achievement’, however, in § 8.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dorsey 2010: 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Dorsey 2010: 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Dorsey 2010: 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. His second criticism (2010: 68-72) is aimed at what he calls the ‘agency argument’, which is tantamount to Brink’s argument for ‘normative perfectionism’. Since I have already criticised this myself in § 2.2, I shall pass over it here. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Dorsey 2010: 72-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Dorsey 2010: 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Dorsey 2010: 74-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. See Dorsey 2010: 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See ‘Essence and Perfection’ (Kitcher 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Kitcher writes toward the end of his paper: ‘To meet the Reductivist Challenge one would have to specify a criterion of centrality [among perfections] in a way that was uncontaminated by judgments of value … this cannot be done without introducing just the kinds of value considerations that were supposed to be taboo’ (1999: 80). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Underlying Kitcher’s objection here may be an incipient anti-‘ablism’, which I shall tackle in § 13.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Most of these functions are also instruments to intrinsic goods (e.g. urinating), and most are also autonomic (e.g. sweating). But none of this is reason to dismiss any of them as ‘trivial’. I shall counter such misguided dismissals further in chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Foot 2001: 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. NB ‘there is no human nature … Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards. If man as the Existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes himself’ (Sartre 1958: 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Midgley 1995: 250 n. 10. Cf. Clare Mac Cumhaill and Rachael Wiseman, who, quoting Iris Murdoch, refer to ‘‘oddly familiar’ strains of existentialism (minus the glamour and the Gauloises) in Oxford moral philosophy. Both have ‘reached positions which are in some ways strikingly alike’’ (Cumhaill and Wiseman 2023: 238). [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Lott 2014: 761. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Griffin 1986: 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Nussbaum 1995: 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Griffin 1986: 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Nussbaum 1995: 121. This *contra* John McDowell’s view that human nature and its functioning affords a merely ‘external’ perspective on our lives, i.e. one that is not integral to and definitive of us and everything we do. See McDowell 1998. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. FitzPatrick 2000: 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Cf. my argument in § 4.1 against Chappell’s ‘Dynamic Thesis’ that ‘there may yet be entire forms of basic good waiting to be discovered’. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Lott 2014: 765. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Lott 2014: 766. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Lott 2014: 762. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Lott may object to this as presupposing ‘extravagant metaphysical commitments that naturalists eschew’, i.e. naturalists in the post-Darwinian sense (Lott 2014: 767). But, as I argued in chapter 3, Aristotelian teleological naturalism cannot be accused of metaphysical extravagance. It is, if anything, a repository of salutary truisms and deep common sense. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See Bradford 2017: 354-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)