

On the Limits of the Limiting Virtues—the Role of Practical Wisdom

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On this date [September 4, 1993], New York Yankees' pitcher Jim Abbott, who was born without a right hand, tossed a no-hitter against the Cleveland Indians at old Yankee stadium.¹

One of the reasons so many love sports is because of stories like Jim Abbott's. His example provides inspiration for dealing with life's challenges. Indeed, human history is full of stories of people whose intelligence and passion manifest the courage, integrity, discipline, and tenacity needed to overcome their limitations and attain excellence. Not only do we find overcoming of limitations in the pursuit of excellence inspiring in particular fields of human endeavor—such as the arts, sciences, and business—but more generally in the pursuit of human good. This is especially so when the aim of the moral life is understood as a process of self-perfection, because this demands not only that we overcome our limitations but also develop those moral virtues that will help us to know and feel that we have what it takes to overcome the many obstacles we face. So, there is a need for virtues that will assist us in this enterprise of overcoming our limitations. I will say more about this shortly.

I mention the importance of overcoming limitations because I am at the same time thoroughly sympathetic with the overall theme of David McPherson's fine book, *The Virtues of Limits*. McPherson argues that one not only needs to understand that there are existential limits on what may be achieved in the pursuit of human good but also that this pursuit calls for such "limiting virtues" as humility, reverence, temperance, contentment, neighborliness, and loyalty. This theme strikes me as commonsensical, realistic, and true, and in what follows I will seek to locate it in a view of human perfection that I and my colleague, Douglas J. Den Uyl, have developed over the years.² My aim will be to show briefly how McPherson's theme is congenial to a view that emphasizes the pursuit of self-perfection as the overarching end of human life, and to note that the key to combining all of the necessary virtues into their proper balance for a person belongs to the master intellectual virtue of practical wisdom. What I am offering, then, are some considerations inspired by McPherson's book more than a detailed commentary of it.

To begin with what should be obvious, self-perfection does not aim to be God-like. When we speak of individuals perfecting themselves, we are not speaking of becoming immune to degeneration, incapable of harm, infallible, or in any sense transcending the human life-form—that is, human nature. In fact, it is just the opposite. Self-perfection is a process that consists in actualizing those potentialities

that make us human and that we actualize and specify in individual ways. We are in effect trying to become fully human. Moreover, self-perfection involves the idea of a thing having a nature, which is its end (*telos*) or function (*ergon*), because “perfect” comes from the Latin *perfectus* and its Greek counterpart *teleiois*. Natural goodness is a reality. This is so because there is no ontological gap always and everywhere between what is and what is valuable when it comes to living things.³

Accordingly, the “Promethean Ideal” that McPherson describes in which human beings play God and make of themselves what they will subject to no moral limitations is the antithesis of an ethics that argues that the pursuit of self-perfection is the overall aim of human life. Such an ethics would uphold McPherson’s statement that “when we have nothing to affirm or behold outside of our own will—i.e., nothing considered as being of intrinsic value and demanding our appreciative attention—then we can come to find that we have *nothing to will*” (2022, p. 24). The self-perfected life is essentially self-directed, but it operates within the limits of one’s nature. Knowing what one can and ought to do provides the ontological context that affords meaning and purpose to an individual’s self-directed acts.

The perfection of the individual human being is based on a consideration of those goods and virtues that constitute human good, or as many neo-Aristotelians⁴ put it, “human flourishing.”⁵ These goods and virtues are valuable not because they are chosen or desired but rather because they are both productive *and* expressive of the flourishing human life. Human flourishing is the most final end for an individual and is not sought for the sake of anything else because it includes other final ends. It is an “inclusive” (not a “dominant”) end in that it does not instrumentalize the worth of everything else. It comprises basic or “generic” goods and virtues—for example, such goods as knowledge, health, friendship, creative achievement, beauty, and pleasure; and such virtues (or rational dispositions) as integrity, temperance, courage, and justice.⁶ The pursuit of these goods and exercise of these virtues are immanent activities.⁷ That is to say, they causally contribute (both efficiently and formally) to a unity that develops and sustains the powers whose exercise constitutes the actualization or perfection of a human being. They thus are done for their own sake because they are expressions or realizations—at least in part—of human flourishing. As McPherson’s argument suggests, doing the right thing and being good are but different sides of the same coin, and this allows one to find an alternative to the deontological and consequentialistic dichotomy, which until the relatively recent rise of virtue ethics has so dominated Anglo-American normative ethics.

Finding the proper pursuit of basic goods and exercise of the virtues is the central concern of self-perfection, as it is for McPherson’s account of the limiting virtues,⁸ and it is here that it is vital to differentiate a personal from an impersonal approach to human flourishing. This difference is particularly evident when it comes to understanding what it means for human flourishing to be real. As a reality, human flourishing is neither a concept nor a good that exists apart from or independent of some individual human being. It is of course universalizable, because it can be known, but it is not as such a universal. Human flourishing is always and necessarily the good *for* and *of* some individual or other. This personal approach to human flourishing has many facets that cannot be considered here.⁹ So, I will instead simply concentrate on that feature of this realistic account of human flourishing that seems most relevant to understanding the pursuit and employment of the above-mentioned goods and virtues, including the limiting virtues.

Contrary to what such ethicists as John Finnis and Robert George hold,¹⁰ individual human beings are not merely loci in which basic or generic goods and virtues exist. Though these basic or generic goods and virtues when abstractly considered are generally regarded as necessary for the perfection of a human being (see Den Uyl and Rasmussen 2016, pp. 38–41), such a consideration does not reveal a preset weighting or evaluative ranking for them. It does not tell us how much time and effort should be spent in the pursuit of one good or practice of one virtue as opposed to another. Thus, there is a major role that the very identity of an individual plays in the attainment of self-perfection, because it is through an individual’s unique talents, potentialities, history, and circumstances that these goods and virtues attain their particular form and become determinate and real. As such, these goods and virtues are concrete, individualized, and personal—not abstract, universal, or impersonal.

Perhaps, the situation may be analogized as follows: There are eighty-eight keys on a piano, which also limit what one can do musically (see Den Uyl and Rasmussen 2016, p. 50n40). This neither can nor should be ignored, but this still allows for vast array of expressions of musical excellence. Having a nature that prescribes the pursuit of certain goods and the exercise of certain virtues sets a limit on what will be morally worthwhile.¹¹ This should not be ignored, but this does not necessarily preclude a wide scope of options that can express moral excellence. Accordingly, there is no one best concrete form of human flourishing *period*; there can only be the best form of human flourishing for some individual or other.¹² We have, then, individualistic perfectionism, but not subjectivism or relativism. Informally stated, one size does not fit all, but that does not mean that there is not a right size for someone.

The basic issue for individualistic perfectionism is, then, determining how to attain the appropriate form of self-perfection. For Aristotle, the solution to this problem is as follows: “Virtue . . . is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, i.e., *the mean relative to us*, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (1107a1-3, emphasis added).¹³ In other words, one has to become personally practically wise in choosing the appropriate course of conduct for oneself. One needs to discover, achieve, maintain and enjoy the basic goods of the flourishing life for oneself. One is both the agent and the object of self-perfection. Succinctly stated, human flourishing is the exercise of one’s own practical wisdom.¹⁴

Practical wisdom is more than mere cleverness in choosing the most efficient means to attain our basic goods and virtues, and it involves more than simply selecting the middle ground between extremes. It is instead the ability to discern at the time of action in regard to particular and contingent circumstances the proper weighting or balance (which is not necessarily an average) of basic goods and virtues for the individual. It determines in the particular situation and for the particular person what is morally required or appropriate. It is the intellectual insight that guides human conduct and perfects the individual. It is thus the central integrating virtue of self-perfecting human life.

The virtue of practical wisdom is the intelligent management of one’s life so that all the necessary goods and virtues are coherently achieved, maintained, and enjoyed in a manner that is appropriate for the individual human being. Such management is not merely an optimization process. One is not concerned so much with having “the most” of any constituent human good as with having the proper balance of them for oneself. Hence, there is a role for such limiting virtues as “temperance,” “moderation,” or even “contentment” in an ethics of self-perfection, because these virtues might enable one to avoid a life that is the endless pursuit of satisfaction of one desire after another—what Leo Strauss called the “joyless quest for joy” (1953, p. 251).¹⁵ This is not what the self-perfecting or human flourishing is about.

On the other hand, the intelligent management of one’s life is not one of intellectual and moral passivity. It involves grasping that the roots of moral opportunity are in one’s own nature and environment. One does not create such opportunity *ex nihilo*, but it is also not the case that the recognition of moral opportunity, much less moral growth, is simply given. It requires much effort and work on one’s part in discovering potential opportunities in oneself and one’s environment and actualizing them compatibly.

The measure of success for practical wisdom is an integral unity that is a defining quality of one’s life as a whole. As David L. Norton has noted about human flourishing: “The mature lifetime of the integral individual is a single act, spread over time by the condition of existence that a thing cannot present itself all at once. But in a profound sense, integrity hereby abolishes time by containing its past and its future in its present” (1976, p. 239). Integral unity involves integrating one’s values and principles in such a way that they both cohere and functionally contribute to one’s flourishing, either in developing it or maintaining it. What is directly relevant here is that our circumstances continuously challenge the continuity of our values and principles in two ways: by providing impediments to the successful realization of those values and principles, and by offering attractive alternatives that demand consideration as to their fit within our own lives. Because a given value or principle is not monadic, each one we might adopt will have some effect upon others. And if we are engaged in a project of considering our life as a whole, the degree to which values are so affected is the degree of risk we confront. The successful ethical actor is like the entrepreneur not only

in taking risks, but also managing them. As Den Uyl and I have noted: “Discovery and disappointment are every bit a part of the ethical enterprise as of the entrepreneurial. In either case, knowing what one should do does not come packaged neatly with ready-made solutions to the problems actors face; nor is one likely to develop appropriate insights abstracted from the concrete situations” (2016, p. 301). Indeed, the reverse is required. One is faced with the moral responsibility of making one’s abstract understanding of the constituent goods of human flourishing into determinate realities by finding their appropriate and concrete form and combination for oneself. This demands such virtues as independence, perseverance, courage, and intelligence.¹⁶

Nonetheless, it seems to me that McPherson’s limiting virtues certainly have a place among the virtues that constitute the self-perfecting life. Let us consider a few more of these limiting virtues:

- (1) Though one needs the virtues of courage, independence and possibly most importantly a sense of efficacy and self-worth to achieve moral excellence, one also needs to avoid hubris. Life is complicated, the world is large, and one is limited and fallible. So, there is a place for humility and of course respect for the moral constraints on one’s will.
- (2) While it is neither necessary nor appropriate to take everything in one’s life as equally serious and demanding and though the capacity to laugh at oneself is valuable in dealing with frustrating situations, it is also the case that one should avoid irreverence towards what is truly valuable or sacred. One’s moral character is for example to be taken seriously and reverentially, for it is that in virtue of which one not only does good but is good.
- (3) The moral aim of individual human life is self-perfection, but this requires neither egoism nor altruism. Relationships are not primary—be they in regard to others, the greatest number, or one’s self. Instead, the emphasis is on what kind of self one is making.¹⁷ Actions done for others or for one’s self can be both appropriate or inappropriate depending on the individuals involved and their circumstances. But none of this precludes what McPherson calls a “neighborliness” that calls us “to solidarity with concrete humanity, rather than abstract humanity” (2022, p. 75) but rejects an impersonal application that ignores considerations of time and distance as well as the loyalties we have to friends and families. Again, practical wisdom is required.
- (4) As already implied, or at least suggested, by my earlier remarks, the self-perfecting or flourishing human life is not only one that rejects desire satisfaction as the ultimate measure of human good, but it is also one that rejects the mere possession of power or money as inherently valuable. They are but means to ends. Their worth is determined only by what they are used for, and even then, their ends are not merely a matter of choice. It is thus an elemental confusion to suppose that the pursuit or employment of power and money is not subject to moral limitation. I heartily concur with McPherson’s criticism of so-called libertarians or free-market defenders who assume that it is never possible for the very selling of something to diminish or destroy its moral worth or that there are no moral limitations on what might be freely bought and sold.¹⁸ Greed is not good, and it is neither possible nor necessary to champion “capitalist acts between consenting adults” (Nozick 1974, p. 163) by contending that it is so.

However, to say that there are such moral limitations on buying and selling neither means nor implies that such transactions should be made illegal. As Aquinas suggests (II-II, 23, 3 rep. 3 and 80.1), there are demands of justice that are morally binding and demands of justice that are morally *and* legally binding. It is a non sequitur to attempt to reason simply from one sense of justice to the other. A political/legal order does require a connection to the ethical order, if it is to have ethical legitimacy, but the nature of the connection need not be either direct or isomorphic. One has to be aware, as McPherson himself seems to indicate at times, that there are moral limitations on what the political/legal order should attempt. I would contend that these limitations are due not only to the practical difficulties of enforcing the pursuit of virtue and the avoidance of vice—especially when human flourishing is understood in a personal fashion as has been described here¹⁹—but also due to the moral necessity of providing a legal structure that preserves and protects the possibility of an individual’s self-direction,²⁰ without which the moral life would make no sense.

What is required at this point is a discussion of the nature of the state and of political philosophy as well as how the concept of the natural rights of an individual—particularly the basic, negative rights of life, liberty, and property—may be linked to a self-perfecting life that is essentially individualized, social, and self-directed. Yet, this is really a topic for another occasion, and it has been extensively discussed elsewhere (see Rasmussen and Den Uyl 1991, 2005, 2020).

Before concluding, a few words need to be said about the so-called economic motive and creating wealth. F. A. Hayek has observed that “apart from the pathological case of the miser, . . . there is no ‘economic motive’ but only economic factors conditioning our striving to other ends. What in ordinary language is misleadingly called ‘economic motive’ means merely the desire for general opportunity, the power to achieve unspecified ends” (1944, p. 89). An individual’s life cannot be neatly divided into economic and non-economic sides that exist separately and unrelatedly to the other. They mutually affect and influence one another. Further, creating wealth is fundamentally the ability of the human intellect to transform potential resources into actual ones. This ability is what the economist Julian Simon (1981) called the “ultimate resource.” It requires effort, independence, initiative, insight, imagination, and judgment on the part of the individual, and it is one of the crucial features of a flourishing or perfected life. This ability is *as such* a constituent of the *activity* of flourishing and perfective of the individual, but of course whether wealth is used properly depends, like so many things, on the ends specified. However, when wealth is employed in a practically wise manner with the other constitutive goods of human flourishing, it is a power that is a positive good. Wealth creation is not well understood in our current culture. Having earned wealth—understood in terms of the material sufficiency—is a moral achievement and should be applauded and praised, not demeaned.²¹

To be sure, there are circumstances, for some individuals, where it can be proper for them to decrease their efforts to pursue wealth in order to pursue other constituent goods, even if it increases the chances of their being less wealthy. Without doubt, the pursuit of mere wealth has to be balanced with other worthy constituent activities if individuals are to flourish. Further, though it can be claimed that one cannot pursue any of the other constituent activities without some level of wealth, it is also the case that one cannot pursue wealth in the absence of a consideration of its role in conjunction with the other constituents of human flourishing and still be in pursuit of flourishing. Finally, such reasoning would seem appropriate for almost any worthy constituent activity of the flourishing life.

So, where does this leave us? There is this prayer:

God, grant me the serenity
To accept the things I cannot change;
Courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.²²

Surely, anything that helps should be accepted, but this prayer is nothing less than a recognition that the application of the limiting virtues must also be a matter of one’s own exercise of practical wisdom.²³

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.facebook.com/theScore/posts/pfbid02Jmq8uPoEwgCzGB2W7XRhcnUdSLXYez2JaSXcyzeL4K-Pz3FFeZryB8SzfrSS7ocvKI>
- 2 See: Den Uyl and Rasmussen, 2016; Rasmussen and Den Uyl, 1991, 2005, 2020.
- 3 For a defense of this claim, see Den Uyl and Rasmussen (2016, pp. 201-245). Also, as David S. Oderberg observes: Stones and electrons might have functions but they cannot flourish, or behave better or worse, rightly or wrongly, or be harmed, satisfied, or possess any of the fundamental normative states belonging to subjects of immanent causation, that is living things. There is no mere continuum here, but a point at

which nature is carved at the joints. Yet the normative functions of living things are as real as the non-normative functions of everything else in the cosmos. Natural goodness is as real as natural viscosity, natural harm as natural radioactivity. The fact-value distinction of Humean fantasy fails precisely because there is no way of describing the world accurately that omits natural normative teleology (2010, pp. 64-65).

- 4 “Neo-Aristotelian” here means “modern theorizing which incorporates some central doctrines of Aristotle. . . . Such theorizing should critically assess his claims in light of modern philosophical theory, scientific research, and practical experience, revise or reject them where necessary, and consider their application to . . . contexts not envisioned by him” (Miller 1995, p. 336).
- 5 I will treat “self-perfection” and “human flourishing” as interconnected. See Den Uyl and Rasmussen (2016, pp. 171-200) for an account and defense of this practice.
- 6 This list does not preclude any of McPherson’s limiting virtues. Additionally, human flourishing is not atomistic, but profoundly social—not only in terms of origins, initial self-conceptions, but also personal development, e.g., various types of *philia* are central to the flourishing human life. See Rasmussen and Den Uyl (1991, pp. 66-68).
- 7 In neo-Aristotelian-Thomistic terms, self-perfection or human flourishing is an immanent activity—that is, it is an activity that has no external result but of itself is perfective of the agent that engages in it.
- 8 McPherson illustrates this when in his discussion of the virtue of humility he observes that there is also a role for proper pride, magnanimity, and the realization of the human capacity for greatness and nobility (2022, p. 29).
- 9 See Rasmussen and Den Uyl (2005, pp. 111-152) and Den Uyl and Rasmussen (2016, pp. 33-64, 70-89). This essay in various places uses with adaptations material from these sources.
- 10 Finnis states that “every human being is a locus of human flourishing” (1980, p. 22). George describes persons “as loci of human goods” (1993, p. 39).
- 11 For a discussion of how individualistic perfectionism deals with horrific cases of evil, see Den Uyl and Rasmussen (2016, pp. 320-332). Also, see Rasmussen and Den Uyl (2005; 2020) for an account of and argument on behalf of an individual basic negative rights.
- 12 The “concrete character of human flourishing is dependent on *who* one is as well as *what* one is, and it is thus not identical across persons, but unique to each one” (Den Uyl and Rasmussen 2016, p. 41).
- 13 Aquinas’s answer is at least in one instance similar. See *Summa Theologiae* I-II, 66.3, rep. 1.
- 14 For an excellent discussion of this entire point, see Den Uyl (1991).
- 15 Strauss is evidently echoing Hobbes.
- 16 Portions of the last two paragraphs and parts of a later paragraph are taken with only slight adaptation from Den Uyl and Rasmussen (2016, p. 306) and from a forthcoming essay by Den Uyl and myself entitled “Freedom and Flourishing.”
- 17 This is so because an individual human being is the foundation for such relationships and is not merely a node in a network of relations.
- 18 For a critical account and discussion of this issue from opposing perspectives by authors that see themselves as defenders of the free market, see: Brennan and Jaworski (2016) and Taylor (2022).
- 19 In fact, these practical difficulties are also moral ones, since an essential issue faced in attempting to establish an ethical basis for a political/legal order is how to do so without requiring as a matter of principle that some particular form of the flourishing human life be sacrificed to another.
- 20 Self-direction is “the act of bringing to bear one’s reason and judgment on one’s surroundings, making plans to act within or upon them, and conducting oneself accordingly. It may or may not issue in or be proper conduct” (Rasmussen and Den Uyl, 2005, p. 89).
- 21 This is not to accuse McPherson of demeaning wealth creation or to deny that many political/legal orders involve the morally disreputable practice of “crony capitalism.”
- 22 This is, of course, the prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous. Its authorship is generally credited to Reinhold Niebuhr.
- 23 I wish to thank Douglas J. Den Uyl and the editor of this volume for their assistance.

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