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The Limits of Spinoza's Perfectionism

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Spinoza is often described as aa moral perfectionist—one who accepts an account of the good centered on the development of our natural capacities. Perfectionists typically accept a *perfectionist theory of value*, on which the properties of good and evil are grounded in a normative property of perfection. Yet I argue that Spinoza rejects a perfectionist theory of value because he believes it conflicts with the doctrine of necessitarianism. This leads him to conclude that attributions of perfection in ethical contexts must be regarded as fictions. If Spinoza is indeed a moral perfectionist, his perfectionism must be grounded in a theory of value that is not itself perfectionist.

Spinoza is often described as a moral perfectionist.[1] Perfectionist ethical theories offer an account of the good life in terms of the development of our natural capacities.[2] In *Ethics* 4 and 5, Spinoza offers an ethical theory that unfolds along these lines, with an emphasis on the perfection of the intellect. He defines good and evil in terms of a 'model of human nature' that establishes a standard of perfection: "I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves […] men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model" (4pref | G II/208, 545). This standard informs his account of the highest good as the knowledge of God (4p28). For Spinoza, this knowledge leads to the greatest happiness, which lies in the perfection of the intellect: "In life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, *or* reason. In this one thing consists man's highest happiness, *or* blessedness. Indeed, blessedness is nothing but that satisfaction of mind that stems from the intuitive knowledge of God" (4AppIV | G II/267, 588). Thus, the *Ethics* charts a path culminating in a state of happiness that consists in the perfection of the intellect achievable by knowing God. I will call this Spinoza's *Perfectionism*.

[1] Recent monographs on Spinoza's ethical theory, including LeBuffe 2010a, Kisner 2011, Sangiacomo 2019, Youpa 2020, and Nadler 2020, stress its perfectionist elements. Schneewind 1999 lists Spinoza among perfectionists such as Descartes, Malebranche, and Leibniz. And Smith 2023 argues that Spinoza's ethical theory belongs in the eudaimonist tradition, of which perfectionism was the dominant expression in Spinoza's century. Irwin 2008, 179-80, on the other hand, is skeptical that Spinoza defends a conception of human agency required to defend a perfectionist ethics.
[2] For contemporary defenses of perfectionism, see Hurka 1993, Foot 2003, and Brink 2008, 2019.

Yet reading Spinoza as a moral perfectionist is not so straightforward a matter. Perfectionist ethical theories typically take goodness to be *grounded* in the perfection of our nature. That is to say, they affirm a *perfectionist theory of value* on which the property of goodness is explained in terms of the property of perfection. But it is doubtful whether Spinoza could accept such a theory. Doubtless, perfection is a key metaphysical notion for Spinoza. It is central to one of his arguments for the existence of God (1p11s). And in *Ethics* 2, he defines perfection in terms of reality (2D6). Yet when it comes to ethical contexts, Spinoza appears skeptical that the notion of perfection has explanatory value. He makes this clear in the Preface to *Ethics* 4, right before outlining his model of human nature: "Perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking, i.e., notions we are accustomed to feign [*quas fingere solemus*] because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another" (4pref | G II/207, 545). If these notions are meant to ground value and provide the foundations for Spinoza's ethical theory, they appear to leave much to be desired.

The puzzle, in short, is that Spinoza seems to undercut his Perfectionism with a critique of the notion of perfection itself. If perfection and imperfection are in fact only "modes of thinking […] we are accustomed to feign", then Spinoza seems to reject a theory of value normally regarded as central to moral perfectionism. But this rejection would lead to significant questions about how his ethical theory should be understood.

Many scholars attempt to solve this puzzle by arguing that Spinoza's critique of perfection is significantly qualified. They claim that the critique targets not the notion of perfection itself but only a false *conception* of it. We must read Spinoza not as undermining moral perfectionism itself but instead as *replacing* a false form of it with the true one. The true form, on this reading, is based on an accurate view of our essence as a finite power to persevere in being (3p6-7). Increasing this power constitutes the perfection of our nature, and provides the metaphysical foundations of value.

I will refer to this as the *Value Perfectionist Reading*.[3] Because this reading implies that Spinoza is a value *realist* who regards good and evil as objective properties—as properties whose instances do not directly depend on any individual's mental attitudes—I call the general, realist interpretation that relies on this reading the *Objectivist Interpretation*.[4]

In this paper, I argue that the Value Perfectionist Reading is wrong. Spinoza cannot accept a perfectionist theory of value because he rejects a normative notion of perfection I call the *notion of perfection as realization*. Perfection as realization is a metaphysical notion that indicates (i) the attainment of our natural end of (ii) fully actualizing the properties essential to our natures. As we will see, this conception of perfection is central to the Aristotelian tradition, serving as the ground of all value. Yet Spinoza maintains that all judgments of perfection as realization are *fictional*. For Spinoza, our perfection does not consist in the realization of our natures but simply in our power, which he takes to be a purely descriptive property, not a normative one. So, while attributions of perfection can be true, they imply nothing on their own about the good. I conclude that the value perfectionism reading fails. If Spinoza is indeed a moral perfectionist, he defends a heterodox form of perfectionism that is not based on a perfectionist theory of value.

I proceed as follows. In Section 1, I outline the Value Perfectionism Reading and explain how it relies on the notion of perfection as realization. In Section 2, I present the textual evidence

[3] For recent defenses of the Value Perfectionist Reading, see especially Nadler 2006, 2015, 2019 and Youpa 2010a, 2010b, 2020. For endorsements of central aspects of the reading, see Viljanen 2011, Ch.5, and Steinberg 2014, 179 and 183-4, 2018, 15-16, 2021, 435-6. Though he does not mention perfectionism, Marshall 2017 argues that Spinoza is a moral realist for reasons that would lead Spinoza to accept a perfectionist theory of value. Finally, Miller 2005, 165 168-70, 2014, 122-23, 2015, 154-55 and 168-69, and Kisner 2010, 2011, Ch.5, both support parts of the reading.

[4] The Objectivist Interpretation includes more than just the Value Perfectionist Reading. It also involves a reading of Spinoza's theory of *evaluative judgment*, which he offers in *Ethics* 3. On this theory, our desires determine us to judge things good or evil (3p9s), and we judge to be good or evil only what we perceive to lead to joy or sadness (3p39s). This theory does not initially appear to be friendly to a perfectionist theory of value. On the Objectivist Interpretation, Spinoza holds that our desires (as well as our feelings of joy and sadness) provide *evidence* of value—of increasing perfection—and so provide defeasible justification for our value judgments. I criticize this reading elsewhere, calling it the *Epistemic Reading*. In Section 5, I sketch more promising readings of Spinoza's remarks in *Ethics* 3.

from the Preface to *Ethics* 4 that Spinoza deems perfection as realization a fiction, and so rejects a perfectionist theory of value. Though I take this conclusion to be correct, it cannot be established on the strength of 4 Preface alone. For this reason, I examine two further arguments Spinoza makes that target the notion of perfection as realization, one indirect and the other direct.

In Section 3, I discuss Spinoza's indirect argument, offered in correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh. This argument critiques the notion of *privation*, which is closely linked to the notion of perfection as realization. Spinoza argues that judgments of privation are fictional because they confuse an individual's particular nature with a general definition of human nature, leading us to falsely suppose that the individual's nature is realized to the extent that she resembles the general definition. That is, Spinoza argues that the notion of privation is fictitious because it relies on the notion of perfection as realization, which is itself fictitious.

In Section 4, I discuss Spinoza's direct argument against perfection as realization, which occurs in the Preface to *Ethics* 4 and in earlier works. In short, Spinoza argues that necessitarianism rules out the existence of purely potential properties. But as Spinoza understands it, the conception of perfection as realization presupposes such properties, as it indicates the transition of essential properties from potentiality to actuality. Since there is no sense in which our essential properties can be merely potential, the conception of perfection as realization is a fiction.

I conclude that Spinoza does not hold a perfectionist theory of value, leaving the Objectivist Interpretation without an explanation of how he might ground value properties independently of our mental attitudes. Accepting this argument, it remains true that Spinoza's ethical theory displays a perfectionist structure. In Section 5, I sketch how we might think of Spinoza's Perfectionism independently of a perfectionist theory of value. In short, we might understand Spinoza's moral perfectionism as grounded in a theory of value that is antirealist rather than realist.

1 Spinoza's on Perfection and the Objectivist Interpretation

The Objectivist Interpretation takes its starting point from the Preface to *Ethics* 4, where Spinoza defines good and evil in terms of a model of human nature: "I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves. By evil, what we certainly know prevents us from becoming like that model. Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model" (4pref | G II/208, 545). On a natural reading, this passage states a perfectionist theory of value centered on the realization of our nature. The good is what increases our perfection, which is understood in relation to the ideal condition of our nature. Thus, Andrew Youpa describes this as "a perfectionist theory of value [that] grounds the nature of goodness and badness in an exemplar of human nature" (Youpa 2020, 47). Steven Nadler agrees: "What makes something good in the truest and fullest sense of the term is that it so improves the power of an individual as to bring it closer to the ideal condition of its nature—in the case of human beings, it helps one become more like the "more perfect human being" that is, in Spinoza's words, the "exemplar of human nature"" (Nadler 2019, 174). I call this the *Value Perfectionist Reading*.

To know what the realization of our nature consists in, we must know what our nature is—what Spinoza also refers to as our 'essence'. Spinoza distinguishes between the 'formal' and the 'actual' essence of individuals. An individual's formal essence is a kind of blueprint for what the individual is and does. Under the attribute of extension, this will consist in a particular ratio of motion and rest.[5] By contrast, Spinoza claims in the *conatus* doctrine that the actual essence of an individual is the power by which it perseveres in existence: "Each thing, as far as it can by its own

[5] See the *Physical Digression* in *Ethics* 2, particularly L1 and L5.

power, strives to persevere in its being" (3p6 | G II/146, 498) and this striving "is nothing but the actual essence of the thing" (3p7 | G II/146, 499). The actual essence of each individual is a power to continue existing in its particular form, which Spinoza also refers to as its 'power of acting'.[6]

On the Value Perfectionist Reading, Spinoza understands the realization of our nature in terms of *power*. Indeed, Spinoza defines perfection in terms of power and reality: "By reality and perfection I understand the same thing" (2D6 | G II/85, 447), and "the perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature and power" (1app | G II/83, 446).[7] In 4 Preface, he analyzes an individual's perfection in terms of her power of acting: "[W]hen I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and the opposite […] we conceive that his power of acting, insofar as it is understood through his nature, is increased or diminished" (4pref | G II/208, 545-46). For Spinoza, then, an individual increases in perfection if and only if her power of acting increases.

This identification of perfection with power informs Spinoza's definition of the good at the beginning of *Ethics* 4: "By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful [*utile*] to us" (4D1 | G II/209, 546). The 'useful' refers to what increases our power of acting: "We call good, or evil, what is useful to, or harmful to, preserving our being (by 4Dl and 4D2), i.e. (by 3p7), what increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our power of acting" (4p8d | G II/215, 550). This account of the good is on display in Spinoza's *dictates of reason*—a set of claims about how reason directs action. For Spinoza, reason leads us to perform actions that really are useful, or that really increase our power of acting: "Since reason demands nothing contrary to nature, it demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead man to a greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can" (4p18s | G II/222, 555).

[6] Spinoza treats our striving to persevere and our power of acting equivalently. See, e.g., 3p37d, 4p4d, and 4p20d.
[7] On the identity of reality, power, and perfection, see also the General Definition of the Affects.

The identity of perfection and power, then, seems critical to Spinoza's ethical theory. Yet it also poses a challenge to standard readings of it. On the Value Perfectionist Reading, Spinoza accepts a perfectionist theory of value—he grounds value properties in the property of perfection. Within his rationalist metaphysics, value properties, like all properties, must be explained in terms of fundamental features of reality. If this is so, then Spinoza must accept a metaphysical property of perfection that is *normative*, or suitable to ground value properties.[8] And the Value Perfectionist Reading must attribute to Spinoza a normative conception of power or reality.

But it is not at all clear that Spinoza regards power or reality as normative. For Spinoza, to have power is to exist and be the cause of effects. The essence of God is power, and all other things are simple expressions of this power: "God's power, by which he and all things are and act, is his essence itself" (1p34d | G II/77, 439), "whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God, which is the cause of all things. So (by 1p16), from [NS: everything that exists] some effect must follow" (1p36d | G II/77, 439). If perfection is simply power, it follows that perfection indicates a thing's existence and its being the cause of effects.[9] But this seems to be a descriptive property, not a normative one.[10] It is by not an obvious metaphysical ground of value.

[8] Defenders of the Value Perfectionist Reading standardly accept this claim. See e.g., Youpa: "For even though ethical properties are identical to metaphysical properties, central metaphysical properties are irreducibly axiological" (Youpa 2020, 93). Youpa argues that Spinoza regards some metaphysical properties as inherently normative. By contrast, contemporary defenses of value perfectionism normally employ the method of *reflective equilibrium*. They argue that perfectionism best captures our intuitions about value in a way that also makes sense independently of these intuitions. See e.g., Hurka 1993, 32, and Brink 2019, 25. Spinoza's commitment to the explicability of all things in terms of fundamental metaphysical properties rules out reflective equilibrium as a possible tool in his ethical theorizing.

[9] Accordingly, some scholars argue that Spinoza's definition of perfection in terms of reality empties the notion of perfection of any normative content—flattening it, as it were, onto the purely descriptive notions in terms of which he accounts for the essences of God and of all things. See e.g., Newlands 2017 and Carriero 2018.

[10] Against this, Marshall, 261-3 and maybe Youpa 2020, 70 both suggest that Spinoza regards reality as good in itself. Yet Spinoza consistently describes goodness and perfection as *relational* notions. And in the CM, he expressly rejects any unconditional good: "[T]hose who eagerly seek some Metaphysical good, needing no qualification, labor under a false prejudice, for they confuse a distinction of reason with a real or modal distinction. They distinguish between the thing itself and the striving that is in each thing to preserve its being" (CM I.6 | G I/248, 314). This seems to rule out any interpretation on which Spinoza accepts a kind of 'primitive' normativity that is identical with reality itself and that requires no further analysis.

To address this point, the Value Perfectionist Reading maintains that an individual's power is more than simply her ability to exist and cause effects for Spinoza. It also and more importantly constitutes the *realization of her nature*. Understood as realization, our perfection indicates (i) the attainment of our natural end of (ii) fully actualizing the properties that pertain to our natures. To perfect ourselves in this sense involves approaching a state we strive by nature to attain, becoming fully what we have the potential to be. To distinguish it from a conception of perfection as power, I refer to this way of understanding perfection as the notion of *perfection as realization*.[11] So, on the Value Perfectionist Reading, Spinoza considers increases in our power to be normative because they constitute the realization of our nature. The notion of perfection as realization identifies the metaphysical property that grounds the properties of good and evil.

Understood in this way, Spinoza fits squarely within the Aristotelian perfectionist tradition. Theorists in this tradition hold that goodness must be understood in terms of the realization of ends set by our natures. For Aristotle, human happiness consists in activity of the soul in accordance with reason because this constitutes the perfection of our rational nature (NE I.7, 1096b15-98a21, 7-9).[12] To the extent that we exercise our natural capacity for rational activity well, or virtuously, we 'complete' or perfect our natures: "[W]e are by nature able to acquire [the virtues], and we are completed [*teleios*] through habit" (NE II.1, 1103a19-26, 18).

[11] Some interpretations of the *conatus* doctrine support the Value Perfectionist Reading. Teleological readings of the doctrine take our essential striving to be *for the sake of* increasing in power, consistently with the claim that maximum power is our natural end of full actualization. See, e.g., Curley 1988, 1990, Garrett 2018a, 2018b, and Sangiacomo 2016a. Some non-teleological readings of the *conatus* doctrine also support the Reading. Viljanen 2011, Ch. 5 argues that our essential striving consists in an affirmation of our essence *and* of all the properties that follow from it. Maximum power is the full realization of our nature because it is the complete expression of all the properties entailed by our essence. Steinberg 2018, 15-16 also accepts this non-teleological reading friendly to the Value Perfectionist Reading. It is important to note that my argument against the Value Perfectionist Reading does not target any of these interpretations, though it may have implications for them. I do not aim to establish a particular reading of the *conatus* doctrine, or to argue against others. Rather, I aim to show that Spinoza rejected the notion of perfection as realization in terms of which the Value Perfectionist Reading takes Spinoza to analyze the notions of good and evil.

[12] This follows from his famous *function* argument on which the good must be understood in terms of our characteristic activity, or function. Just as a good knife is one that cuts well, and a good foot is one that allows us to walk well, so too a good human being is one who well exercises her capacities for reason. Developing our reason perfects our nature.

In the medieval period, Aquinas also argues that the good must be understood in terms of the perfection of our nature: "The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable […] Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual" (ST 1a 5.1, 53). He claims that we can actualize our natures to a greater or lesser extent, and that perfection consists in our nature's full actualization. Since we all aim at perfection, value must be understood in terms of it: "[S]ince each thing seeks its own perfection, what someone desires as an ultimate end is what he wills as his own perfect and complete good" (ST 1a2ae 1.5, 11). For Aquinas as for Aristotle, the good is understood in terms of our natural end of fully actualizing our human nature. It is only on this conception of it that the notion of perfection is normative.

Some might question whether Spinoza must accept the notion of perfection as realization to secure a metaphysical grounding for good and evil. Perhaps he holds an alternative conception of perfection that plays this role equally well.[13] If he can show that our nature consists in a power of acting that increases or decreases according to how it is affected, this may be enough to conclude that we attain a more blessed or flourishing—in a word, better—condition insofar as our power of acting increases. That is, the notion of perfection as realization does not seem necessary to ground value in the strengthening of our essential properties. So, we need not attribute it to Spinoza.

This objection undoubtedly gets something right. It is intuitive that we perfect our nature by increasing or strengthening the properties that are essential to it. And it also seems plausible that we do well, or flourish, to the extent that our nature is perfected in this sense. Yet this alone does not show that Spinoza holds a perfectionist theory of value. For on this conception of it, the notion of perfection does not itself set a *normative standard* for us. It offers no explanation of why

[13] I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

we *should* increase our power. To see this, consider that the intuitive appeal of power might have a different source—our *desires*. The prospect of increased power is related to the good because it is natural to desire. If, *per impossibile* (at least for Spinoza), we were in fact *averse* to increasing our power, it would not seem good to us. Absent some other considerations, we would have no reason to pursue it. But if this is right, Spinoza does not in fact accept a perfectionist theory of value. For the notion of perfection would play no role in an explanation of what makes things good or evil. What increases our power would not be good in itself, but only in relation to our desires.

To argue that Spinoza holds a perfectionist theory of value, then, the Value Perfectionist Reading must add something to this picture. This is the notion of perfection as realization, the idea that an increase in power is not only an object of desire but more fundamentally contributes to our natural end of fully actualizing our nature. The realization of our nature sets a normative standard for us that is independent of our desires. It is because perfection as realization incorporates this normative standard that it can metaphysically ground value. And indeed, defenders of the Value Perfectionist Reading typically argue that Spinoza's model of human nature represents one who has achieved her natural end of full actualization—a state of *maximum power*. Nadler writes:

> If every individual is, essentially and by its nature, striving to maintain its being and even increase its power, then this condition of maximal power is the ideal state toward which every individual naturally and necessarily – that is, objectively and by its nature – strives. A tree is striving to be a maximally powerful tree, and a giraffe is striving to be a maximally powerful giraffe. A human being, in turn, is striving to be a maximally powerful human being, and it is precisely such a successfully striving human being that the "model of human nature" is supposed to capture (Nadler 2019, 189-90).

Nadler claims that each individual strives by nature to become the most powerful version of itself. This relies on the notion of perfection as realization. The natural end of each individual is a state in which its essential properties are fully actualized.[14] Youpa agrees: "Our highest ideal consists in maximally actualizing our essence because maximal actualization is what our power does so long as it is unimpeded. It is in the nature of power, 'power' as Spinoza understands it, to maximize itself" (Youpa 2020, 56).[15] Maximum power is our highest ideal because it constitutes the full actualization of our nature, a state that we aim by nature to achieve.[16] Accordingly, Spinoza says that an individual's power is her *virtue*: "By virtue and power I understand the same thing" (4D8 | G II/210, 547). Understood in this way, Spinoza's moral perfectionism offers knowledge of what most realizes our nature—what allows us to achieve the highest state of virtue. And this state of virtue is the perfection of the intellect attendant upon the intuitive knowledge of God.

2 Perfection and Imperfection as Fictions: The Discussion of 4 Preface

As we saw, the Value Perfectionist Reading must attribute to Spinoza a notion of perfection that grounds value metaphysically—the notion of perfection as realization. Yet it is far from clear that Spinoza holds this conception of perfection. It is true that Spinoza defines perfection in terms of reality (2D6) and that perfection plays a key role in one of his arguments for God's existence

[14] Note that the state of full realization need not be a *universal* human nature—what the literature refers to as a 'species essence' (see e.g., Martin 2008, Hübner 2016). A fully realized nature may be an *individual* nature, too.
[15] Youpa prefers to say that Spinoza regards good and evil as 'enhancements' and 'impairments' of our nature. This is the same as saying that goodness consists in the realization of our nature, since according to Youpa what makes an increase in power an 'enhancement' of our nature is the fact that power is our actual essence: "Ultimately the 3p7 and 4D8 conception of power serves as the source of the goodness of increases in power and the badness of decreases in power. The reason that increases in power are enhancements to our nature and that decreases in power are impairments is that power is our actual essence, and there is no reason to believe that Spinoza regards this view of our actual essence as a mere subjective expression of his favorable attitude toward power (Youpa 2020, 53).
[16] See also Viljanen, who argues that individuals strive to fully realize their essences: "things exercise their power not only to exist but to exist according to their definable essences alone; or, they strive to bring about being determined by the unhindered realization of their essences" (Viljanen 2011, 127). Steinberg agrees: "striving to increase one's power or perfection is tantamount to striving to realize one's essence more completely" (Steinberg 2021, 436).

(1p11s). But when it comes to ethical contexts, Spinoza casts doubt on the epistemic status of our judgments of perfection. Most strikingly, he claims in the Preface to Part 4 that perfection and imperfection are notions we *feign* when we compare individuals to one another based on a property they share: "Perfection and imperfection, therefore, are only modes of thinking, i.e., *notions we are accustomed to feign* because we compare individuals of the same species or genus to one another" (4pref | G II/207, 545, emphasis mine).[17]

These remarks cause trouble for the Value Perfectionist Reading for two reasons. First, Spinoza maintains that perfection and imperfection are comparative notions. Yet understood as realization, perfection is an intrinsic property—one that does not require comparison between two different individuals. Second, and worse, Spinoza claims that perfection and imperfections are *feigned* notions. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza uses the term 'feign' exclusively to describe ideas of the imagination, which do not represent things as they are in themselves (cf. 1p15s 1p17s, 2p35s, 2p49s, and 5p33s.). It seems to follow that perfection and imperfection not only fail to indicate any intrinsic properties—they fail to indicate any real properties at all.

The claim that perfection and imperfection are fictions invites two questions. Why are these properties not real? And why do we call things perfect and imperfect anyhow? Taking the second question first, Spinoza maintains that judgments of perfection and imperfection indicate the extent to which things resemble our *universal ideas* of them. What invites the comparison, he explains, is the assumption that our universal ideas represent *Nature's aims*:

[17] And in this context, he qualifies his previous definition: "This is why I said above (2D6) that by reality and perfection I understand the same thing. For we are accustomed [*solemus*] to refer all individuals in Nature to one genus, which is called the most general, i.e., to the notion of being, which pertains absolutely to all individuals in Nature" (4pref | G II/207, 545). If we are 'accustomed to feign' the notions of perfection and imperfection, and we also 'accustomed' to apply them in comparing individuals' being, one must wonder about the epistemic status of the definition itself.

> [E]ach one called perfect what he saw agreed with the universal idea he had formed of this kind of thing […] They regard these universal ideas as models of things, and believe that nature (which they think does nothing except for the sake of some end) looks to them, and sets them before itself as models. So when they see something happen in nature which does not agree with the model they have conceived of this kind of thing, they believe that Nature itself has failed or sinned, and left the thing imperfect (4pref | G II/206, 544).

For Spinoza, the notions of perfection and imperfection indicate the extent to which a thing has achieved the ends that Nature has set for it. Judgments of perfection involve comparing things to our universal ideas, which we regard as 'models' that represent a condition in which the things have fully achieved these ends.[18] Achieving these natural ends means fully realizing its nature.

We can see now why Spinoza may think that perfection and imperfection must be fictional notions. Simply put, he believes they rely on a false teleological conception of Nature according to which the behavior of things is explained in terms of their natural ends:

> [M]en are accustomed to call natural things perfect or imperfect more from prejudice than from true knowledge of those things. For we have shown in the Appendix of Part 1, that Nature does nothing on account of an end. That eternal and infinite being we call God, *or* Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists […] As he exists for the sake of no end, he also acts for the sake of no end (4pref | G II/206-7, 544).

[18] Earlier in 4 Preface, Spinoza provides a genetic account of the term 'perfection' on which it originally indicated whether an artefact fulfills the intentions of its author: "If someone has decided to make something, and has finished it [*eamque perfecit*], then he will call his thing perfect [*perfectam*] […] he will call it perfect as soon as he sees that the work has been carried through to the end which its Author has decided to give it" (4pref | G II/205, 543). Although I cannot defend this point here, it seems to me that this genetic account forms part of Spinoza's critique of the notion of perfection as realization by providing an etiology for the notion that roots it firmly in the imagination.

For Spinoza, Nature does not act for the sake of achieving a particular outcome but from "the same necessity from which [it] exists". We call things perfect on account of prejudice, not on account of a property they really have. So-called 'models' do not represent our natural end of full realization. They are universal ideas taken (mistakenly) for God's blueprints of creation.

It seems to follow that Spinoza rejects the notion of perfection as realization. The property of perfection can be normative only if it incorporates a natural end. Since there are no such ends, no property of perfection can be normative. Thus, the notion of perfection as realization fails to indicate a real property. This implies that judgments of perfection as realization must rely on a fiction. The fiction is that the model taken as a comparative basis for these judgments represents a state in which we have achieved our natural end of full realization.[19]

Now, I believe this is the correct reading of 4 Preface, and thus that the Value Perfectionist Reading fails. Yet before we can draw this conclusion, we must address a strong rejoinder on behalf of the Reading. The rejoinder is that Spinoza's aim in 4 Preface is not to reject the notion of perfection as realization wholesale, but only to reject a mistaken conception of it. This mistaken conception is based on the prejudice of *divine providence*, the false belief that God created the universe with a determinate set of ends in view. Spinoza dismantles this prejudice in the Appendix to *Ethics* 1. Yet rejecting the existence of divine ends does not imply that we have no ends at all. The critique of 4 Preface may target only a specific conception of what our ends are.[20] As per the *conatus* doctrine, our actual essence is power. So, our natural end consists in maximizing power.

[19] I agree here with Carriero 2018, 250-55, and Rumbold 2021, both of whom argue that Spinoza's critique in 4 Preface targets an influential medieval approach to the metaphysics of goodness that makes essential reference to natural ends. While Carriero and Rumbold correctly identify the target of Spinoza's critique, they overlook Spinoza's argument for rejecting the notion of perfection as realization—its reliance on a theory of potential beings ruled out by the doctrine of necessitarianism. I make the case for this claim primarily in Section 4, after reviewing related evidence that Spinoza regards judgments of perfection as realization as fictional in Section 3.

[20] Relatedly, Curley 1990, Garrett 2018a, 2018b, and Sangiacomo 2016a argue that Spinoza's critique of final causes is limited to medieval accounts of them that are informed by a commitment to divine providence, and leaves open an alternative account of final causes closer to Aristotle's own. I agree that Spinoza's critique primarily targets medieval

In short, on the rejoinder, Spinoza argues that judgments of perfection are feigned only when their *content* is based on the prejudice of divine providence. With the *conatus* doctrine, he *vindicates* the notion of perfection as realization with a true account of our natural end—maximum power. This conception of our perfection is immune to the critiques he offers in 4 Preface, which specifically target mistaken conceptions of what constitutes the realization of our nature.[21]

I believe this defense of the Value Perfectionist Reading fails. Spinoza rejects the notion of perfection as realization *tout court*. It follows that he cannot hold a perfectionist theory of value. In the next sections, I present two complementary arguments Spinoza offers against this notion, one indirect and one direct. First, Spinoza argues that all judgments of *privation* are false because they rely on the notion of perfection as realization. Second, he argues that necessitarianism rules out the claim that we can realize our natures to a greater or lesser extent. I conclude that for Spinoza the notion of perfection as realization is a fiction, and that the Value Perfectionist Reading fails.

3 Perfection and Privation: The Correspondence with van Blijenbergh

In his correspondence with Willem van Blijenbergh, Spinoza offers an important critique of the notion of *privation* that bears directly on his remarks in 4 Preface.[22] Within the Aristotelian tradition, a privation is the absence of a property that an individual ought by nature to have. This

accounts of final causation. But as Viljanen 2011, Ch. 5 and Rumbold 2021 point out, fundamental principles of his metaphysics strongly suggest that Spinoza intends to rule out *all* forms of final causation. To mention just one: for Spinoza, God's essence is power (1p34) that produces effects without any final causes (1app); but in the *conatus* doctrine, Spinoza claims that singular things "express, in a certain and determinate way, God's power, by which God is and acts" (3p6d | G II/146, 499); thus, it seems that our causality must also produce effects without any final causes.

[21] Youpa claims that Spinoza's critique in 4 Preface is "best understood as an attack on a specific type of model—namely the type that has no basis in anything but human imagination and passive emotion, which is to say that [Spinoza] is critical of ignorant conceptions of natural things" (Youpa 2020, 49-50). Nadler adds that, for Spinoza, "there is, in fact, an objective, non-arbitrary determination of what constitutes a more perfect or ideal human being, that is, a 'model of human nature [*naturae humanae exemplar*]' at which all individual human beings aim, at least in principle." (Nadler 2019, 189). In short, the true account of human nature provides the true account of its realization.

[22] The correspondence with van Blijenbergh took place in 1665, roughly ten years before the completion of the final draft of the *Ethics*. See Deleuze 1988, ch.2, and Sangiacomo 2016b for detailed discussions of this exchange.

'ought' is explained in terms of our natural end of fully actualizing our nature—our perfection as realization. That is, we can be 'deprived' of something only if it is necessary for our full realization.

When Spinoza argues that judgments of privation are *fictitious*, then, we should expect this point to bear on his understanding of the notion of perfection. For Spinoza, judgments of privation arise when we compare an individual's nature to a general definition of human nature. If we find that the individual lacks a property expressed by the definition, we judge her to be deprived of it. But Spinoza claims that these judgments are systematically *false*. He considers them false, I argue, because they rely on the mistaken premise that the general definition of human nature represents the full realization of a particular individual's nature. In effect, Spinoza argues that judgments of privation are fictitious because the notion of perfection as realization is fictitious.

To begin, Van Blijenbergh asks Spinoza how sin and evil could exist if God, an omnipotent and omniscient being, has created and causally sustains our natures (Ep. 18 | G IV/81-4, 355-57). Aristotelian theorists standardly replied to such concerns by analyzing evil in terms of privation, the lack of a property that an individual ought by nature to have.[23] This allowed them to maintain that God does not create evil, since a privation is not itself a property, but that evil nevertheless exists, since a privation is not simply the lack of a property—a negation—but a lack of a property that pertains to an individual's nature.[24] For example, a bird's lack of wings is a privation, and thus evil, because it pertains to the nature of a bird to fly. By contrast, lack of wings in a human being is a simple negation since flying does not pertain to human nature.

[23] The account of evil as privation was widely shared before the seventeenth century. Descartes also supported it. See Newlands 2019 for how Spinoza's rejection of privation fits into a broader shift away from medieval analyses of evil.
[24] As Aquinas explains: "not every absence of good is evil. For absence of good can be taken in a privative and in a negative sense. Absence of good, taken negatively, is not evil; otherwise, it would follow that what does not exist is evil, and also that everything would be evil, through not having the good belonging to something else; for instance, a man would be evil who had not the swiftness of the roe, or the strength of a lion. But the absence of good, taken in a privative sense, is an evil; as, for instance, the privation of sight called blindness" (ST 1a, 48.3, 269).

Spinoza's response to van Blijenbergh shows that he does not share this traditional view.[25] Not only is sin not something positive for Spinoza—it is strictly speaking *incorrect* to say that we sin at all: "I say not only that sin is not something positive, *but also that when we say that we sin against god, we are speaking inaccurately, or in a human way*, as we do when we say that men anger god" (Ep. 19 | G IV/88, 358, emphasis mine). Spinoza agrees with the traditional view that sin cannot refer to a positive property. But while the traditional view nevertheless holds that it can be true to say that one has sinned, Spinoza insists that all such attributions of sin are false.[26]

Why does Spinoza maintain this? He explains that all talk of sin and evil is inaccurate because all judgments of privation are *fictional*. Spinoza outlines the conditions under which we make judgments of privation even as he holds that all such judgments are strictly speaking false:

> It is certain that privation is nothing positive, and that it is said only in relation to our intellect, not in relation to god's intellect. This arises because we express all the singular things of a kind (e.g., all those which have, externally, the shape of a man) by one and the same definition, and therefore we judge them all to be equally capable of the highest perfection which we can deduce from such a definition. When we find one whose acts are contrary to that perfection, we judge him to be deprived of it and to be deviating from his nature. *We would not do this, if we had not brought him under such a definition and fictitiously ascribed such a nature to him* (Ep. 19 | G IV/91, 359).[27]

[25] Spinoza mentions Aquinas in KV I.1, so he was aware of his work. But he likely has Descartes' discussion of error in the fourth Meditation in mind here, which employs a notion of privation that is a descendant of the traditional view: "For error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me" (AT VII 55 | CSM II 38). For Descartes, error is a privation that consists in a misuse of our free will. The incorrect use of free will results from a lack of something that by nature we should have (cf. AT VII 59-60 | CSM II 41).
[26] In the *Ethics*, Spinoza offers a revisionist account of sin as disobedience to the state, where "it is decided by common agreement what is good or what is evil" (1p37s2 | G II/238, 567). I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.
[27] When Spinoza refers to the "highest perfection which we can deduce from such a definition", he does not thereby take the notion of perfection as realization for granted. Rather, we should read this remark in light of his later definition of perfection in terms of reality (*Ethics* 2D6). The abstract definition of human nature Spinoza mentions here is one of great reality or power. But it does not follow from this that it represents the full realization of our nature.

Fully appreciating Spinoza's point in this passage will require a little unpacking. First, in line with the traditional view, Spinoza holds that the notion of privation indicates a perfection that an individual ought by nature to have. This is what it means to be deprived of something. We judge that an individual is deprived of something (and so is "deviating" from her nature) when we judge that she expresses less perfection than the general definition of human nature we compare her to—a definition we form by abstraction from observations of individual human beings.[28]

Now, there appears to be nothing problematic with comparing the nature of an individual with a general definition that it falls under. We can ask to what degree a particular human being matches our general definition of 'human being'. And it is presumably true to say that a human being who is missing a leg resembles this definition less than one who does not. Compared with the human being represented by the definition, the one-legged individual lacks a limb. Yet Spinoza insists that our judgments of privation involve a *fiction*. Why is this so?

The fiction involved in a judgment of privation, I suggest, arises from what the notion of privation itself implies. We can judge that an individual lacks something that the general definition of 'human being' possesses. Yet attributing a *privation* to her implicitly affirms something more—that the nature represented by the general definition of 'human being' is *identical to her nature*. And for Spinoza, this claim is *false*. The nature represented by the general definition is not the individual's nature, and we would not attribute privations to the individual *"if we had not brought him under such a definition and fictitiously ascribed such a nature to him* (Ep. 19 | G IV/91, 359). So, judgments of privation are based on more than a simple comparison with a general definition

[28] Note that this anticipates Spinoza's discussion of perfection and imperfection in the Preface of *Ethics* 4. Judgments of privation, like judgments of perfection in 4 Preface, are based on a comparison between an individual's nature and a universal idea that the individual falls under. As we will see, both judgments presuppose the same claim that Spinoza holds to be false—the claim that the universal idea represents the particular individual's full perfection as realization.

of human nature—they presuppose that we (mistakenly) take this general definition to specify the nature of the particular individual who is the subject of the judgment.[29]

We can see from this that Spinoza's argument against the reality of privations is also and more fundamentally an argument against the reality of perfection as realization. For the fiction that judgments of privation rest on is that of perfection as realization itself. When we fictitiously ascribe a general definition of human nature to an individual, we take the definition to represent the individual's full realization. This is why when the individual lacks a property contained in the definition, "we judge him to be deprived of it and to be deviating from his nature". Judgments of privation are fictional, then, because they are based on a notion of perfection that Spinoza rejects.

It is crucial to note that Spinoza's argument here does not turn on the *content* of judgments of perfection. Spinoza is not saying that judgments of privation are fictional when they are made in relation to a standard of perfection that fails to capture our true nature. Rather, he is saying that *all* judgments of privation are false because they rely on the notion of perfection as realization.

This last point effectively disarms the Value Perfectionist Reading's interpretation of 4 Preface. As we saw in the last section, the Reading holds that judgments of perfection are feigned for Spinoza only when their content is informed by the prejudice of divine ends. Yet from what Spinoza writes to van Blijenbergh, it is clear that his criticism in 4 Preface targets the very notion of perfection as realization. What makes judgments of privation false is not the specific definition of human nature they rely on, but the assumption that this definition represents the full realization of an individual's nature. Even a definition based on the *conatus* doctrine would not provide the ground for judgments of perfection as realization.

[29] Melamed 2011, 157-8 also draws attention to this passage and points out the difference between traditional analyses of privation and Spinoza's. Yet he maintains that judgments of privation are fictional for Spinoza simply because they rely on comparing an individual to a universal idea. If I am right, Spinoza's criticism goes beyond this in ways that are critical to grasping his conception of perfection, and thus the grounds of his ethical theory.

In further support of this point, Spinoza offers Van Blijenbergh an example illustrating how we make judgments of privation in ethical contexts. This connects his discussion of the notion of privation directly to the ethical theory he develops in *Ethics* 4 and 5:

> Similarly, when we attend to the nature of a man who is led by an appetite for sensual pleasure, we compare his present appetite with that which is in the pious, or with that which he had at another time. We affirm that this man has been deprived of a better appetite, because we judge that then an appetite for virtue belongs to him. We cannot do this if we attend to the nature of the Divine decree and intellect; for in that regard, the better appetite no more pertains to that man's nature at that time than it does to the Nature of the Devil, or of a stone. That is why, in that regard, the better appetite is not a Privation, but a Negation (Ep. 21 | G IV/128-29, 377-78).

The lustful man lacks the appetite for virtue of the pious man. We might judge that he is *deprived* of this appetite insofar as we compare his nature with the nature of the pious man. But this judgment is false, since nothing more pertains to the lustful man's nature at the time of his lust than his appetite for sensual pleasure. From God's point of view, he is deprived of nothing. So, lust is not a deprivation of a more perfect state, and piety is not the realization of our nature.

It might be objected that, at least in the *Ethics*, Spinoza accepts the existence of a *true* definition of human nature.[30] If this is right, Spinoza might have abandoned the argument against privation he offers van Blijenbergh, and its implications for the notion of perfection as realization.

Spinoza's views on human nature in the *Ethics* are not easily discerned. Some passages indeed seem to suggest that he holds a realist view. Crucially, however, his argument against the

[30] See especially 1p8s2, 1p17s, and 2p10s. Scholars defend many readings of the metaphysical status human nature in Spinoza's mature thought, some more realist than others (see Steinberg 1984, Martin 2008, Hübner 2016, Newlands 2017). I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

reality of privations does not hinge on this point. For the fiction Spinoza attributes to judgments of privation does not arise from the idea of human nature itself. As we have seen, it arises from the assumption that the idea represents the full realization of our individual natures. Put differently, Spinoza's argument against the reality of privations is compatible with there being a true definition of human nature. It is only incompatible with the claim that this definition specifies properties individual human beings *ought by nature to have*. So, if Spinoza indeed accepts a true definition of human nature in the *Ethics*, this definition does not offer a ground for attributions of privation.

The implications of Spinoza's correspondence with van Blijenbergh for his discussion in the Preface of *Ethics* 4 are clear. Even if it is based on a conception of human nature provided by the *conatus* doctrine, Spinoza's model of human nature does not represent the realization of our nature. Deviations from the model do not constitute privations, and approximating the model does not realize our natures. For Spinoza, the notion of perfection as realization is fictional.[31]

4 Necessitarianism and the Model of Human Nature

In the last section, I presented Spinoza's indirect argument against perfection as realization based on his claim that privation is a fiction. But Spinoza also offers a direct argument against this notion that explains *why* he takes judgments of privation to be fictitious. Spinoza argues that the doctrine of necessitarianism—the view that things could not be otherwise than they actually are—implies that the notions of perfection and imperfection understood in terms of realization cannot

[31] Lastly, some may question how relevant the discussion with van Blijenbergh is to Spinoza's views in the *Ethics*. For instance, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza analyzes transitions in perfection in terms of increases and decreases in our power of acting. As Deleuze 1988, 37-38 and Sangiacomo 2016b, 150-51 note, this account is absent from the exchange with van Blijenbergh. Some may argue that, with this new account, Spinoza departs from his earlier criticism of the notion of perfection as realization. But I see no reason to think this. The critique in the correspondence with van Blijenbergh is compatible with the new account of changes in power, since it is independent of the *content* we assign to realization. Whether we correctly take our nature to consist in power or incorrectly take it to consist in something else, the idea of the perfection of our nature understood as realization is a fiction.

apply to the natures of things in themselves. Since all things are necessitated to occur exactly as they do, nothing can be considered perfect or imperfect in its own nature.

As I will explain, this argument targets the metaphysical bases of the notion of perfection as realization. As Aristotelian theorists understood this notion, it presupposes that an individual's essential properties can exist in either a *potential* or an *actual* state. An individual *realizes* her nature by bringing essential properties from potentiality to actuality. But for Spinoza, the doctrine of necessitarianism implies that all properties pertaining to an individual's nature must be actual. There are no merely potential properties. An individual's essence necessarily expresses all and only the properties that pertain to it, and if an individual does not express a property, then that property does not pertain to her nature. For Spinoza, then, the notion of perfection as realization presupposes a fiction. Our natures cannot be realized to a greater or lesser extent, for they contain no potential beings that might or might not be actualized. Whatever pertains to our nature is actual.

With this argument, Spinoza rejects the notion of perfection as realization. This has crucial implications for how we should understand the model of human nature in 4 Preface. Against the Value Perfectionist Reading, the model does not represent the full realization of our natures. On the contrary—it *replaces* the notion of perfection as realization as a normative standard of practical deliberation. The model is meant to guide decision-making by offering a goal that is *not* grounded in the realization of our nature. In the last section, I briefly sketch an alternative foundation for the model drawing on Spinoza's claims about value and desire in *Ethics* 3. This alternative foundation suggests that Spinoza's moral perfectionism is not grounded in a perfectionist theory of value.

Spinoza offers the direct argument against perfection as realization in the Preface to *Ethics* 4. But ancestors of it also appear in two of his early works: the *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being* (*Short Treatise*, or KV) and the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TIE).

Starting with the early works allows us to better appreciate Spinoza's argumentation in the *Ethics*. It also suggests that the rejection of perfection as realization is a position Spinoza is committed to from early on in his philosophical career.[32]

In TIE 12, prefacing his account of the highest good, Spinoza says that we cannot attribute perfection or imperfection to an individual if we consider its nature alone. This is because all things happen in accordance with the eternal order and laws of Nature:

> [G]ood and bad are said of things only in a certain respect, so that one and the same thing can be called both good and bad according to different respects. The same applies to perfect and imperfect. For nothing, considered in its own nature, will be called perfect or imperfect, especially after we have recognized that everything that happens happens according to the eternal order, and according to certain laws of Nature (TIE 12 | G II/8, 10).

For Spinoza, perfection and imperfection are relative notions that make essential reference to something *external to* the individual's nature. This is because all things occur in accordance with the "eternal order" and "certain laws of Nature" which are necessarily produced by God's essence. In short, since all things are necessitated by God's nature, nothing can be considered perfect or imperfect, nor good or evil, when considered in itself.

This argument may seem puzzling. Why should universal necessitation imply that nothing can be called perfect or imperfect in itself? Moreover, it initially appears to contradict Spinoza's

[32] Again, it may be objected that Spinoza's early works are frequently not a reliable source of evidence for his mature views. There are many well-documented differences between the *TIE*, the *Short Treatise*, and the *Ethics*. These may include his views on perfection as realization. I do not find this concern troubling. Granted the important differences in doctrine between early and later works, there is also significant continuity between them. This includes his views on the notion of perfection as realization. I pointed out in the last section that the correspondence with van Blijenbergh anticipates points Spinoza makes in the Preface to *Ethics* 4. And in this section, I point out that Spinoza offers the same argument against the notion of perfection as realization throughout his works. This is strong evidence that he was committed to rejecting this notion.

view of perfection in the *Ethics*. As we saw, Spinoza defines perfection in terms of reality (2D6), and he claims that reality (or power) defines God's essence (1p34), as well as the actual essences of all finite things (3p7). So, it seems that for Spinoza we *can* call things perfect in themselves.

We best understand Spinoza's argument if we take it to be specifically targeting the notion of *perfection as realization*. Spinoza's point is that the doctrine of necessitarianism rules out the applicability of this notion to the natures of individuals because it implies that these natures cannot be realized to a greater or lesser extent. In other words, because necessitarianism is true, judgments employing the notion of perfection as realization must all be fictional.

To see this, it will be helpful to review once more how this notion was analyzed by theorists in the Aristotelian tradition. On this traditional view, an individual realizes her nature by bringing her essential properties from potentiality to actuality.[33] Human beings actualize their natures by developing their rational capacities, such as the capacity for grammar. This capacity is potential in all human beings but actualized only in some. So, the notion of perfection as realization relies on the existence of properties that exist in a state of pure potentiality. These are the properties that we *ought* to express in virtue of what we are. Our natures are perfect or realized to the extent that we actualize such properties, and imperfect or deprived to the extent that we fail to do so.

Spinoza's argument in TIE 12, I propose, is that necessitarianism rules out the existence of purely potential properties—properties pertaining to our nature that can remain unactualized. This is because the existence of purely potential properties implies a kind of metaphysical possibility incompatible with the doctrine. To see this, consider that potential properties must exist, since they pertain to the nature of an individual, but cannot be expressed, since they would then be actual.

[33] Aquinas, again a reliable representative of the tradition, writes: "Now, the subject of privation and of form is one and the same—viz., being in potentiality […] It is, however, manifest that the form which makes a thing actual is a perfection and a good; and thus every actual being is a good; and likewise every potential being, as such, is a good, as having relation to a good. For as it has being in potentiality, so it has goodness in potentiality" (ST 1a, 48.3, 269).

So, potential properties exist as something possible but not (yet) actual. If necessitarianism is true, however, then all individuals necessarily express the properties they in fact express and necessarily do not express any properties other than these. That is, all that pertains to the nature of an individual must be actual. Our essences contain no potential properties whose actualization would constitute the realization of our nature. Nothing can be called perfect or imperfect when considered in itself.

So, Spinoza rejects the notion of perfection as realization because he rejects the existence of purely potential properties. The upshot is that we must define good and evil in terms of a universal idea of human nature. Of course, this cannot be based on knowledge of our fully realized natures. Indeed, Spinoza claims that it is based on *ignorance* of the order and laws of Nature:

> But since human weakness does not grasp this order by its own thought, and meanwhile man conceives a human nature much stronger and more enduring than his own, and at the same time sees that nothing prevents his acquiring such a nature, he is spurred to seek means that will lead him to such a perfection. Whatever can be a means to his attaining it is called a true good; but the highest good is to arrive—together with other individuals if possible—at the enjoyment of such a nature (TIE 13 | G II/8, 10).[34]

We have no knowledge of the way things necessitate one another to exist and behave as they do. We do not know how we ourselves are necessitated to express exactly the properties we express. Our ideal of human nature is thus formed in conditions of ignorance. But even in such conditions, we still deliberate about what to do. We still seek good and avoid evil. So, Spinoza

[34] Spinoza is again using the term 'perfection' in the sense of reality, not of realization. If not, then his claim would be inconsistent with what he writes about perfection in TIE 12. Indeed, it seems plausible that whenever Spinoza writes about perfection *and* imperfection (such as 4 Preface) he has the notion of perfection as realization in mind.

introduces the ideal of human nature to serve this essentially practical purpose. It does not represent our full realization but *replaces* this state as a basis for our judgments of good and evil.

Spinoza restates this same argument from necessitarianism twice more, once in the *Short Treatise* and again in the Preface to *Ethics* 4 itself. In KV II.4, he claims that "[w]e have already said before that all things are necessitated, and that in Nature there is no good and no evil. So whatever we require of man, must relate only to his genus, and this is nothing but a being of reason" (KV II.4 | G I/60, 103).[35] There is no good or evil in Nature since all things are necessitated by Nature's eternal order and laws. Nothing can be called perfect or imperfect in itself, and all that "we require of man" must involve reference to a genus of human nature. For this reason, Spinoza defines good and evil in terms of a universal idea of a perfect individual: "And when we have conceived an Idea of a perfect man in our intellect, that [Idea] could be a cause of our seeing (when we examine ourselves) whether we have any means of arriving at such a perfection. Therefore, whatever helps us to attain that perfection, we shall call good" (KV II.4 | G I/60, 103). The idea of a perfect man could not represent a fully realized human nature because it is premised on a rejection of the notion of perfection as realization itself.

We can now return to the Preface to *Ethics* 4 with a better understanding of why Spinoza says that perfection and imperfection are comparative, fictional notions. As he has already argued before, nothing can be considered perfect or imperfect in itself. Perfection and imperfection are terms we use to compare the natures of individuals to something else—a universal idea or genus:

[35] Spinoza describes 'beings of reason' as notions produced by the intellect that aid cognition: "Some things are in our intellect and not in Nature; so these are only our own work, and they help us to understand things distinctly. Among these we include all relations, which have reference to different things. These we call *beings of reason*" (KV I.10 | G I/49, 92). Anticipating his discussion in the Preface to *Ethics* 4, Spinoza then claims that good and evil indicate relations of agreement between things and our universal ideas of them: "[I]f one says that something is good, that is nothing but saying that it agrees well with the universal Idea which we have of such things" (KV I.10 | G I/49, 92). For more on Spinoza's view of beings of reason, see Hübner 2016.

> So insofar as we refer all individuals in Nature to this genus [of being], compare them to one another, and find that some have more being, *or* reality, than others, we say that some are more perfect than others. And insofar as we attribute something to them that involves negation […] we call them imperfect, because they do not affect our Mind as much as those we call perfect, and not because something is lacking in them which is theirs, or because Nature has sinned (4pref | G II/207-8, 545).

The perfection of things does not indicate the degree to which they have realized their own nature. Rather, we judge something to be perfect or imperfect when we compare it to the 'genus of being' under which all individuals fall. The justification Spinoza provides for this claim should by now sound familiar: "For nothing belongs to the nature of anything except what follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause. And whatever follows from the necessity of the nature of the efficient cause happens necessarily." Nothing can be called perfect or imperfect in itself because of universal necessitation, which rules out the existence of potential properties.

Having established this point, Spinoza once more offers an alternative basis for judgments of value that is *independent* of perfection as realization—a model of human nature:

> But though this is so, still we must retain these words. For because we desire to form an idea of man, as a model of human nature which we may look to, it will be useful to us to retain these same words with the meaning I have indicated. In what follows, therefore, I shall understand by good what we know certainly is a means by which we may approach nearer and nearer to the model of human nature that we set before ourselves […] Next, we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model (4pref | G II/208, 545).

Despite his criticism of the notions of perfection and imperfection, Spinoza believes that "we must retain these words" because it is useful to do so. Our use of them cannot be guided by a conception of the good as what promotes the realization of our nature, however. For Spinoza has just ruled out the notion of perfection as realization such an account would require. So, the model of human nature does not support a perfectionist theory of value—it is premised on a rejection of it.[36]

It may be objected that Spinoza in fact accepts the existence of potential properties, at least in the *Ethics*.[37] We find some apparent evidence for this in 2p8c, where he claims that things that do not exist have a kind of existence in God:

> [A]s long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes, their objective being, *or* ideas, do not exist except insofar as God's infinite idea exists. And when singular things are said to exist, not only insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes, but insofar also as they are said to have duration, their ideas also involve the existence through which they are said to have duration (2p8c | G II/91, 452).

This could be read as an account of potential properties—properties that pertain to an individual's nature without being actual. These would be things that do not currently exist, but that nevertheless have some existence in God. Spinoza could then insist that our natures are realized when these properties pass from existing in God to existing in actuality.

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[36] Spinoza also offers this argument in a letter to Henry Oldenburg written just as he was finishing the *Ethics*: "[A] weak-minded man can't complain that God has denied him strength of character, and a true knowledge and love of God himself, so that he cannot restrain or moderate his desires. For nothing else belongs to the nature of any thing than what follows necessarily from its given cause. *But it does not belong to the nature of any man that he should be strong-minded*" (Ep. 78 | G IV/326-27a, 480, emphasis mine). On the Value Perfectionist Reading, the perfection of the intellect is our highest good because it is the realization of our nature. But Spinoza holds that strong-mindedness—a necessary effect of this perfection—does not belong to the nature of the weak-minded individual. The reason is the one we have seen Spinoza offer again and again in this section. Whatever belongs an individual's nature necessarily occurs. And the weak-minded individual is not strong-minded.

[37] I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

Yet on a more plausible reading, 2p8c does not offer an account of potential properties—at least not the kind that sustains the notion of perfection as realization. Spinoza's point there is not that our nature includes properties that might or might not be actualized. Rather, it's that all things have two kinds of *actual* existence—eternal and durational. Consider that in 2p8c, Spinoza contrasts the existence of things "insofar as they are comprehended in God's attributes" with their existence "insofar as they are said to have duration". In *Ethics* 5, he claims that these two kinds of existence correspond to two ways in which things can be conceived *as actual*:

> We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, *or* real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and to that extent they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God (5p29s | G II/298-9, 610).[38]

According to necessitarianism, what belongs to the nature of a thing must be actual. But we conceive of things as actual in two ways. Considered as following "from the necessity of the divine nature", things are eternal. Their existence is unqualified. Yet considered under duration, these same things exist at "a certain time and place"—and *not at other times and places*. Properties belonging to our nature that do not exist at a certain time and place are not for that reason potential; they simply exist in relation to a different time and place. They are actual, which we can see by conceiving them "under a species of eternity". If this is right, then 2p8c does not offer a theory of potential beings, and the notion of perfection as realization remains without metaphysical support.

[38] For Spinoza, we conceive things as defined by time (5p23s) and as being present (5p29d) only insofar as we conceive them in duration. So, conceiving things "in relation to a certain time and place" is to conceive them in duration.

For Spinoza, in sum, an individual's perfection does not constitute the realization of her nature. Necessitarianism rules out the metaphysical basis of perfection as realization—potential properties, whose actualization would constitute this kind of perfection. This explains why Spinoza offers an alternative account of our judgments of privation, as we saw in Section 3. Such judgments mistakenly regard a general definition of human nature as representing the full realization of an individual's nature. And this, in turn, explains why Spinoza argues in the Preface to *Ethics* 4 that perfection and imperfection are feigned notions we use only in comparative contexts, as we saw in Section 2. Though we might find such comparisons useful, they rely on a fictitious conception of perfection. Against the Value Perfectionist Reading, Spinoza rejects a perfectionist theory of value. The properties of good and evil are not grounded in the property of perfection.

5 The Model of Human Nature Revisited

I have argued, against the Value Perfectionist Reading, that Spinoza does not accept a perfectionist theory of value. For Spinoza, perfection is not the realization of our nature but simply our reality or power—notions he understands in purely descriptive terms. Our power indicates our ability to exist and cause effects. It is a fact about our nature that on its own implies nothing about good or evil. It is thus unsuitable as a foundation for a theory of value.

Accepting this argument, it remains true that Spinoza presents the model of human nature as a standard for practical deliberation.[39] It also remains true that this model directs us to perfect our intellect, which Spinoza regards as our "highest happiness, *or* blessedness" (4appIV | G II/267, 588). Considering also his definitions of goodness and virtue in terms of our power (4D1-2, 4D8),

[39] I disagree with Bennett 1984, 296 and Scribano 2012 who hold instead that the model is a vestige of an older account of value that Spinoza abandoned by the time he wrote the *Ethics*. See Santinelli 2012 for an illuminating account of the model that stresses continuity with uses of ethical ideals in the Roman Stoic tradition, exemplified by Seneca.

and dictates of reason (4p18s) directing us to increase this power, it is clear that the structure of Spinoza's ethical theory is markedly perfectionist. This leaves us with an important question. If Spinoza rejects the perfectionist theory of value, as I believe he does, how should we understand the aim of his model? How should we understand his claims about good and evil in *Ethics* 4?[40]

We should look for answers to these questions in *Ethics* 3, where Spinoza argues that our value judgments are determined by our desires: "[W]e judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (3p9s | G II/148, 500), "By good here I understand every kind of Joy, and whatever leads to it […] For we have shown above (in 3p9s) that we desire nothing because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary, we call it good because we desire it" (3p39s | G II/170, 516). For Spinoza, we judge to be good what we desire, and because we desire whatever we take to be a source of joy, every kind of joy is good.[41] Many read these passages as offering only a theory of evaluative judgment—an account of how we form beliefs about value—that leaves open the question of the nature of value. But these remarks also lend themselves to antirealist theories that understand value itself in terms of our mental attitudes, specifically our desires. If we reject the Value Perfectionist Reading, we should explore these alternative, antirealist readings.

Some may conclude from this that Spinoza's ethical theory is not perfectionist in any sense. But this would be too quick. For as we saw in Section 1, Spinoza may retain a notion of perfection based on the property essential to our nature, power. And this might prove to be ethically relevant even if it does not support a perfectionist theory of value. Indeed, desire and perfection are linked

[40] These include seemingly objective claims like the following: "Envy, Mockery, Disdain, Anger, Vengeance, and the rest of the affects which are related to Hate or arise from it, are evil" (4p45c1 | G II/244, 571-72). Spinoza also offers remarks about perfection in *Ethics* 4 and 5 that appear to support its intrinsic value: "the greater the Joy with which we are affected, the greater the perfection to which we pass, i.e., the more we must participate in the divine nature" (4p45c2s | G II/224, 572), "[t]he more perfection each thing has, the more it acts and the less it is acted on" (5p40 | G II/306, 614). I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to say more about these passages.

[41] For Spinoza, our desires are necessarily directed to imagined sources of joy: "We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to Sadness" (3p28 | G II/161, 509).

systematically in Spinoza's metaphysics. Joy and sadness are defined as transitions in perfection: "By *Joy*, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that *passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection*. And by *Sadness*, that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*" (3p11s | G II/149, 501). To say that joy is good is extensionally equivalent to saying that all increases in our perfection—that is, in our power—are good. Yet what explains their value is not the supposed fact that our perfection constitutes the realization of our nature. Rather, it is that increases in our power are linked to our desires. The challenge is to explain how this might be.

One possibility is that Spinoza defends a *projectivist* view on which our desires necessarily but falsely determine us to attribute value properties to things that increase our power of acting. If this is right, then we might defend a *fictionalist* reading of Spinoza's Perfectionism. For Spinoza, the model of human nature is a pragmatic standard that aids us in practical deliberation. Since we necessarily regard as good what increases our power, the model is justifiable, as it reliably guides us to increase our power by seeking the perfection of the intellect. Accordingly, this is the greatest desire of the rational person: "So the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, i.e., his highest Desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which he is led to conceive adequately both himself and all things that can fall under his understanding" (4appIV | G II/267, 588). Those not led by reason will desire things besides understanding. But these 'goods' inevitably disappoint, as they depend on factors outside our control and privilege momentary and partial joys over stable increases in power as a whole.[42] It is only the rational person who attains global and sustained increases in her power, and thus is best able to realize value by her own lights.

[42] The first point informs Spinoza's figure of the 'ignorant man', who privileges joys arising from external causes—wealth, fame, sensual pleasure, and so on: "For not only is the ignorant man troubled in many ways by external causes, and unable ever to possess true peace of mind, but he also lives as if he knew neither himself, nor God, nor things" (5p42s | G II/308, 616). The second tracks Spinoza's distinction between *cheerfulness* and *pleasure* (cf. 4p41-43), two kinds of joy distinguished by whether they involve the whole body or only a part (often to the detriment of other parts). See LeBuffe 2010a, 160-67, 2010b, 321-25 for a reading sympathetic to this justification of Spinoza's model of human nature, which he presents as a 'pragmatist' justification of perfectionism. Jarrett 2014, 63-66 offers a similar reading.

A second possibility is that Spinoza defends a *subjectivist* view on which goodness must be understood in terms of the content of our desires. This differs from the projectivist view in that it allows for the truth of some claims about value. Yet it remains antirealist because it insists that value depends directly on an individual's mental attitudes. If this is right, Spinoza's Perfectionism may be based on the content of *rational* desires. The model of human nature would be justifiable because it leads us to the rational person's 'highest desire', the perfection of the intellect. This may raise questions about the *universality* of Spinoza's Perfectionism. What reason does the non-rational individual have to seek the perfection of her intellect? Is the model justifiable only insofar as we are rational? Subjectivists have various tools to address these questions. First, contemporary subjectivists frequently ground value in the desires of an *ideal* person with full information of us and our circumstances would want us to desire.[43] Second, Spinoza may have principled reasons to limit the ground of value to our rational desires, leaving out desires that not connected to reason.[44]

Making a full case for these readings is a task for another occasion. Yet this brief overview shows that Spinoza's Perfectionism might be grounded in a theory of value that is not perfectionist but antirealist. Considering these alternative foundations for Spinoza's Perfectionism is critical to determining the nature of his ethical theory. It is also significant independently of Spinoza. Many today find perfectionism a deeply intuitive way of thinking about what makes for a good life. Yet the metaphysical commitments of perfectionism might seem less intuitive.[45] For those like Spinoza who take seriously the idea of grounding an account of value in metaphysical principles, exploring alternative foundations to perfectionism might be a project worth pursuing.[46]

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[43] See Railton 1986a ,1986b for an influential example of such 'ideal advisor' theories of the good.
[44] Kisner 2010a, 104-8, 2011, 90-5, holds that Spinoza defends a *qualified* desire-satisfaction theory. He argues that rational desires alone are fully *ours* since they arise from our essential striving without external causes. Instead, Harvey 1981, 158-60, and Rutherford 2008, 499-503, are happy to concede that Spinoza's Perfectionism is not universal.
[45] See Kitcher 1999 and Dorsey 2010 for criticism of perfectionist theories of value that unfolds along these lines.
[46] I would like to thank Samuel C. Rickless, David Brink, Andrea Sangiacomo, Ying Liu, a set of anonymous referees, and the participants of the History of Philosophy Roundtable (UC San Diego) for very helpful comments on earlier

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Individual works of Spinoza are abbreviated as follows. All citations are from the *Ethics* unless otherwise specified. I sometimes to the Parts of the *Ethics* by using only their number, e.g., '*Ethics* 1' means 'Part 1 of the *Ethics*':

E	*Ethics*
EP	Letters
CM	*Metaphysical Thoughts*
KV	*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*
TIE	*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*
TTP	*Theological-Political Treatise*

In citing from the *Ethics*, I use the following abbreviations:

A	Axiom
AltDem	Alternative Demonstration
App	Appendix
c	Corollary
D	Definition
d	Demonstration
Expl	Explanation
GDA	General Definition of the Affects
L	Lemma
NS	De Nagelate Schriften van B.D.S. (an alternative formulation from a posthumous Dutch edition published the same year as the Latin *Opera Omnia*)
p	Proposition
Pref	Preface
s	Scholium

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