

Raz, Autonomy and Mill's Qualitative Superiorities

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

In the fascinating book whose anniversary we are here to celebrate, Joseph Raz writes that in many "ways the argument (of *Morality of Freedom*, MS) seeks to re-establish some of the basic tenets of Millian liberalism." (Raz 1986, 367) More specifically, Raz re-interprets Mill's harm principle so that it "allows perfectionist policies as long as they do not require resort to coercion." (420)

Those who are familiar with *On Liberty* are well aware that John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill were, like Raz, *ethical perfectionists* but that they were decidedly more sceptical about *political perfectionism*. A good part of their scepticism is easily explained by the shortcomings of the political systems they were confronted with. However, their reservations were also based on their particular version of ethical perfectionism.

Not a few philosophers are highly critical of perfectionism, be it political *or* ethical. In this talk I will try to defend ethical perfectionism against the charge that it is dogmatic and disrespectful and then go on to draw some conclusions for political perfectionism. Many, maybe most thinking people find the claim that one can objectively rank the value of lives in the name of a purportedly true philosophical theory deeply problematic. This is the *dogmatism charge* against ethical perfectionism. Applying such dogmatic judgements to types of people, or maybe even worse, to concrete persons is a grave form of disrespect. This is the *disrespectfulness charge* against ethical perfectionism.

It must be shocking for committed ethical anti-perfectionists that Raz calls certain conceptions of the good "worthless", "demeaning" or "empty". In the first two sections of my talk, I will argue that such statements can be true or false and that we are able, as individuals and as a species, to obtain fallible *ethical knowledge*.¹

In the third section I will turn to political perfectionism. Today, the representative government of many countries is more inclusive than in Mill's times. Formerly excluded

¹ If you tell me that my life is worthless, objectively speaking, you are almost certainly wrong; however, you are wrong not because you disrespect my own views about my life's worth but because it is not true that my life contains no value.

groups, like women or proletarians, have many more opportunities to be heard and get influence. For this reason, we can, perhaps, tone down our scepticism about the proper use of state power. Nonetheless, I shall argue that John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill were right to be sceptical about perfectionist policies.

I. Ethical perfectionism plausible

Dear ladies and gentlemen, to use James Griffin's wonderfully succinct definition, ethical perfectionism asserts that there "are prudential values that are valuable in any life." (Griffin 1986, 70) Some anti-perfectionists think that it is relatively simple to find perfectionism's flaw. Let us look at some Neo-Aristotelian list of prudential values that are purportedly valuable in any life. The list contains "good health, practical reason, social interaction, and artistic expression". Perfectionists tell other people, Sarah Conly complains, that their life would be better with more of these values – "no matter how much they hate it." (Conly 2013, 107) That is dogmatic and disrespectful. It cannot be true, her reasoning goes, that it is better for me to live a life which I utterly hate. To my mind, this is a good point, as far as it goes. But ethical perfectionists can easily accommodate the intuition by taking pleasure aboard. I suspect that most modern perfectionists include enjoyment in their list. At any rate, Griffin's list contains pleasure, and so does Thomas Hurka's (2011, 31-52) "guide to what really matters" (this is the subtitle of his book *The Best Things in Life*).

The point is worth mentioning because if pleasure matters it also matters whether someone hates or loves a particular way of living. It is, of course, conceivable that a particular version of ethical perfectionism assumes that, for instance, artistic expression is lexicographically prior to pleasure so that no amount of displeasure can outweigh a minimal gain in the artistic expression. I agree with Conly's point that such a *perfectionist conception* would be very implausible. But obviously this is not an argument against ethical perfectionism per se.

According to another important criticism, perfectionism is problematic because it imposes external standards on people. This *dogmatic monism charge* takes issue with the idea of an interpersonal ranking which ignores that people have divergent ideas about what gives value to human life in general and to their own lives in particular. I think that the dogmatic monism charge it is mistaken with regard to the version of perfectionism I want to defend.

Let me start with a bit more terminology: The core of perfectionism is the view that one can objectively rank human lives as better or worse. Perfectionists in the core sense are not committed to the claim that they or someone else positively knows how this objective ranking looks like; but they believe that such a ranking exists and that we can acquire at least some knowledge about its form.

How can we rank human lives? First, we need some specification as to what makes life valuable and how different values are related. I will call this specification a *general ethical conception*. For instance, a general ethical conception may state that pleasure, achievement, social relations and knowledge are intrinsically valuable and that pleasure is more important than knowledge and achievement. A general ethical conception can be represented by a mathematical function. If the conception is an objective list with numerous entries, we need a multi-dimensional *ethical function* which describes how changes in one or more dimensions affect life's goodness. For instance, one could say that, ceteris paribus, the non-moral goodness of someone's life is a monotonically nondecreasing function of pleasure. This, of course, is debatable since some perfectionists are moralists and may think that more *Schadenfreude* makes someone's life non-morally worse.

When we ponder how to live, we pose the *personal ethical question*. We know that we can shape our lives to a certain degree and we want it to be as good as possible (or at least sufficiently good). In the course of considering alternatives, we produce intrapersonal rankings of our own possible lives. In order to do that we form ideas about what is within reach. What is one's starting point in society, what are one's talents, what are one's tastes? We sketch, possibly very roughly, a *life plan* which shows a way from our actual to our possible life in the future. We adapt our life plan when we definitely lose options or when unexpected prospects open up. Maybe we overrated or underrated what we are capable of. Perhaps we were lucky in some situations and unlucky in others. Thus our personal ethical conception contains beliefs about value and beliefs about accessibility. Our *personal ethical conceptions* comprise, possibly very roughly, general ethical conceptions. We are looking for the most valuable life within our reach. Again, the personal conception can be represented by an *ethical function*.

That much for terminology. I shall now turn to my first thesis which I call *common ethical cognitivism*. Common ethical cognitivism asserts that all of us approach the ethical question in a cognitivist spirit. As Raz puts it, people "adopt and pursue goals because they believe in their independent value, that is their value is believed to be at least in part independent of the fact that they were chosen and are pursued." (Raz 1986, 308)

When we think about how to lead our lives we usually do not assume that some plan promises the best possible life for me because *I think* it is the best possible life for me; neither is a plan worthless because *I think* it is worthless. The goodness of my life is, to a certain degree, thought to be independent of my beliefs about the goodness of my life.² Even Sarah Conly seems to agree: "The problem with perfectionism", she writes, "is not with individuals who have beliefs about objective value and wish to live according to those beliefs; this is not only not a bad thing, it is hard to imagine living in any other way." (Conly 2013, 103)

If I understand her correctly, Conly advocates a kind of error theory, comparable to the one of Mackie in the realm of moral philosophy. She concedes that people are natural perfectionists, so to say, in that they inescapably form beliefs about objective value. But I take her point to be that these beliefs, without which we cannot live, are mistaken without exception because there aren't any objective values.³

Apart from cognitivism, perfectionism requires a kind of *success theory*. It demands that we can obtain at least some knowledge about the objective ranking of human lives. Some aspects seem obvious. We do not want to be kept in solitary confinement or exist in perpetual agony. Other aspects are far less clear. Our "a priori knowledge" about what will make our lives more or less valuable is limited, however. It does not give us enough orientation in life to know that one does not want to end up in solitary confinement. We form beliefs about better or worse plans of life on an *a posteriori* basis which is empirical, and thus, fallible.

² Possibly the belief that my life is not as good as it could be depresses me and thus makes my life worse. However, the cognitivist intuition is *not* that my beliefs about my well-being have no repercussions whatsoever on how good my life is. The *common cognitivist intuition* is that my value beliefs, which inform my conception and my life plan, can be objectively more or less appropriate. When we ponder over what the best possible life for ourselves could be, we try to figure out what really matters and what seems to be within reach.

³ Note that anti-perfectionists are frequently pointing out that perfectionism disregards the point of view of the individual judged. However, if common ethical cognitivism were correct, one could at least say that perfectionism takes our common cognitivist intuition seriously.

I am now ready to formulate my second and third thesis. On the one hand, we are aware of the fact that we can get our ethical conception right or wrong or partly right and partly wrong (*fallibility intuition*). On the other hand, all or almost are convinced that it is possible to obtain at least some ethical knowledge (*obtainability intuition*).

Together with the first thesis, common ethical cognitivism, the fallibility intuition and the obtainability intuition give us the conclusion that we are natural perfectionists. Natural perfectionism claims that we are naturally taking a perfectionist stance when we try to answer the ethical question. "Taking a perfectionist stance" means that we are cognitivists with respect to ethical statements and that we trust a success theory yet accept fallibilism. In order to vindicate the natural perfectionist stance, a success theory will actually have to be defended, and I will try this in the second section. But for the moment, let us assume that we can formulate criteria of validity for ethical conceptions and that we can acquire ethical knowledge.

Anti-perfectionists may object that natural perfectionism is not perfectionism properly speaking. Perfectionists, they imagine, want to judge other people's lives with *alien* standards, that is with standards indiscriminately applicable to all persons. As I see it, these fears can be stilled. As mentioned earlier, ethical perfectionism asserts that there "are prudential values that are valuable in any life." (Griffin 1986, 70) A general ethical function specifies what these values are and how they hang together. For the sake of illustration, let us assume that according to Michael's general ethical function two units of pleasure outweigh the sacrifice of one unit of achievement. On the basis of such a general function Michael opines that it is better to be a nurse at ease in his job than a frustrated practitioner. Michael's friend Philip happens to be a frustrated practitioner. Does Michael's general ethical function commit him to believe that Philip's life is worse than it could be? Not necessarily. The answer depends on whether Michael thinks that "being a nurse at ease in his job" is a possible life for Philip. This, in turn, hinges on Philip's personal characteristics. If he would be the kind of guy who is frustrated in *any* job, for instance, being a practitioner might be just fine for him. Thus, if Michael wanted to say that it would be better for Philip to be a nurse he would have to propose a *personal ethical function* (for Philip) which allows to rank Philip's possible lives. Let us assume that Michael proposes such a personal ethical function for Philip.

On the one hand, Michael's standard of judgement is, as ethical perfectionism requires, an external one; its appropriateness does not depend on Philip's own actual conception of the good. On the other hand, if the statement "you would have a better life as a nurse" were true indeed, the standard used would not be *alien* to Philip. For it would be the objectively better life plan for *this particular person*. Of course, Michael's personal ethical function for Philip could get important value relations wrong; but so can Philip's. This is what natural perfectionists want to be able to say. Whether and, if so, in what regards and to what extent *objective interpersonal rankings* are possible or desirable is a question beyond the purview of natural perfectionism. For natural perfectionism is concerned with the ethical question, with the question how to live. And it is difficult to see how interpersonal comparisons along the lines that the lives of nurses at ease with their jobs are better than the lives of frustrated practitioners contribute to answering the ethical question.

I shall say a little bit more about natural perfectionism now, while discussing the disrespectful charge.

Let me begin with the hopefully unproblematic thesis that *Michael* is generally the person who knows best what makes *Michael's* life valuable or worthless. I shall call this the *supreme competence thesis*.

It is tempting to vindicate the disrespectful objection with supreme competence. One could argue that supreme competence precludes the existence of an objective value ranking. If I know best what conception of the good suits me, then my judgements are unappealable, so to speak. But if one's own judgements are unappealable, an anti-perfectionist may argue, *Michael's* considered judgments express what is constitutive for the value of *Michael's* life. Upon closer examination, though, this seems implausible. Even if I am supremely competent, I am not infallible. The supreme competence of my judgements about the worth of my actual conception of the good does not preclude the existence of a conception which would be better for me.

So far, I can see nothing disrespectful in natural perfectionism. But perhaps I looked in the wrong place. Perhaps what is disrespectful about ethical perfectionism is not the core notion of an objective ranking but the idea that other people are entitled to judge the value of *Michael's* life. If *Michael* has supreme competence, *Michael* should also have *supreme authority* regarding judgments about the value of his own life, it might be thought. Whereas

the thesis of supreme competence is empirical, supreme authority is a normative claim. In *On Liberty* supreme authority is expressed by the notorious phrase "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign." (Mill 1859/1977, 224) Supreme competence supports supreme authority. An important reason why the referee has supreme authority on the pitch consists in her supreme competence.

One could maintain that your opinion that my life is worse than I think disrespects my *supreme authority*. It is like arguing with the referee. However, arguing with the referee is not wrong because the referee never fails. We know that he fails. It is wrong because arguing with the referee disturbs the game. So I can see that, as a requirement of peaceful co-existence, it is frequently mandatory not to speak one's mind.⁴ However, under the assumption of fallibility neither thinking nor saying that one deems some conception of the good to be entirely or partially wrong seems disrespectful per se.

But, again, maybe I looked in the wrong place. Maybe what is disrespectful about natural perfectionism is not that it entitles other people to judge the value of my life but that it unduly ennoble such judgments. Giving an opinion on my conception of the good is one thing; claiming that one knows better on the basis of philosophical considerations is quite another. A critic may concede the possibility of error vis-à-vis one's own conception and thus agree that it is not disrespectful per se to express doubts regarding the value of another person's conception. But anti-perfectionists may insist that it is disrespectful to claim to *know better* what is good for another person and to arrogate supreme competence regarding other people's life plans. There is something to this. Yet, I doubt that it works as an objection to natural perfectionism. Dogmatism is certainly an unpleasant trait, and it might be the case that perfectionism disproportionately attracts dogmatists. However, it is neither dogmatic nor disrespectful of you to be *convinced* that my conception of the good is seriously flawed as long as you do not deny my supreme competence and the existence or possibility of reasonable disagreements.⁵ If you believe that pleasure, knowledge,

⁴ But it would be very strange to claim that forming an opinion on the value of someone's life would be disrespectful, even if we were to acknowledge the supreme authority of the individual regarding judgements about one's own life. If political or religious authority is based on or connected to the pretence of infallibility, then the mere thought that the judgement of the religious or political leader may be wrong might be considered as disrespectful from the viewpoint of the purportedly infallible authority.

⁵ Perhaps, you think that I would be better off if I could come to see the value of being a connoisseur in some field, let's say wine. Like the Mills you are convinced that more refined tastes are more enjoyable. Furthermore, you are absolutely certain that this is so. You pity me a bit because I am a devoted beer-drinker with strong opinions about pretentious wine types. And, of course, I resent your condescendence.

achievement and meaningful relationships make human life valuable, it is not disrespectful or arrogant of you to think of my life as being not so good as it could or should be. It would be arrogant and disrespectful, though, if you were to deny your own fallibility and the possibility or even likelihood that my conception of the good contains what the Mills call partial truths.

I conclude that the disrespectfulness charge does neither vindicate the rejection of natural perfectionism nor the rejection of perfectionist conceptions of the good life in general. Nonetheless, the charge points to a potentially problematic aspect of perfectionism. It is disrespectful to be a *dogmatic* perfectionist and to deny that other conceptions of the good may contain valuable insights. My guess is that perfectionism has a bad reputation partly because perfectionists make inflated claims of certainty. Anti-perfectionists are right to point out that we have to be very careful when judging others. We may hurt feelings; we may depress people; we may be disrespectful; and, frequently, we simply may not know what we are saying or what we are talking about. But I do not think that is an inherent flaw of natural perfectionism. Moreover, I think that frequently anti-perfectionism is partly the result of a wrong diet of examples. We should not forget that often we try to uplift or console other people by pointing out that their life contains more valuable properties than they think. When anti-perfectionists reject statements like "your life is *worse* than you think (because you measure its value on the basis of inappropriate standards)", they should, by parity of reasons, also reject statements like "your life is *better* than you think (because you measure its value on the basis of inappropriate standards)". I assume that anti-perfectionists have nothing against trying to console or uplift others in that manner. So, maybe, they are no anti-perfectionists, after all.

II. Ethical knowledge obtainable

Dear ladies and gentlemen, the second section is devoted to the question how individuals and societies obtain ethical knowledge. Ethical cognitivism leaves room for an error theory according to which all ethical beliefs are false. Thus, a defence of natural perfectionism has to make a case for a success theory of ethical knowledge. A satisfactory success theory should defend two claims: First, that at least some elements of *general ethical conceptions* are appropriate, second, that, for most of us, at least some non-general elements of our

personal ethical conceptions are adequate. Simply put, an ethical success theory vindicates statements such as "understanding is an intrinsic value" or "I used to be obsessed with money, but now I know better."

A personal ethical function represents a person's beliefs about aspects which make his or her life valuable. Given one's personal resources – one's talents, one's tastes, one's position in society, one's fortune or lack thereof – one tries to maximise or satisfice one's personal ethical function. "Persons differ not so much in basic values as in their capacity to realise them" (Griffin 1986, 70), says Griffin. This is plausible, as far as it goes. But people also differ in their opinions about how to balance and trade-off different values in cases of conflict. *Michael* wants to be a sufficiently good accountant and an excellent father, and *Philip* vice versa. My guess is that there is decidedly less disagreement about the *entries* on the list of "objective values" than on the question how they *affect* the result of the general ethical function. Is a bit more artistic accomplishment or athletic prowess worth a huge sacrifice in personal relations and pleasure? In my view, these are the difficult ethical questions.

How can we ever hope to answer difficult ethical questions? Let me first try to give an answer to the simpler question how we can obtain knowledge about basic values. I think that Mill gave essentially the right answer in his frequently ridiculed but today rehabilitated proof of utilitarianism. In a nutshell, Mill argues that a theory of intrinsic value must be based on a theory of motivation. *X* is an intrinsic value if all or almost all non-instrumentally desire *X*. The fact that all or almost all non-instrumentally desire *X* is the best conceivable evidence, the best inductive support relation for a value belief. With Mill's help, one can explain why so many find the response to Nozick's experience machine so persuasive: If no-one *desired* to be plugged into the experience machine, that would be cogent evidence for the failure of hedonism.

So, we obtain knowledge about basic values inductively. The more people desire *X* the more likely it is that *X* is valuable. Beyond a certain threshold of agreement, we are licensed to say that we possess ethical knowledge.

We use the same approach when it comes to the more difficult questions as to how different values are related; let me mention in passing that we use this approach with less

success because the personal ethical conception is much richer in detail and more exposed to disturbing factors. I shall say more about this at the end of this section.

Raz at one point discusses the relation between the value of accomplishment and the value of contentment or enjoyment, using the example of people in different professions. He proposes the following view: "It is better to be a successful accountant than a dentist constantly struggling with a sense of inadequacy in one's profession. It is better to be a spontaneous and lively nurse, feeling at ease in one's job, than a teacher fighting a sense of estrangement from one's pupils or one's school." (Raz 1986, 342)

This is a courageous conjecture in Popper's sense. How can we test it?

From a Millian point of view, *Michael's* life plan is a hypothesis, hopefully devised by *Michael*, about the most valuable life for *Michael*. Pursuing this plan is, among other things, a way of testing a hypothesis about the good, or to use the famous phrase of the Mills', to run an *experiment in living*. How can we assess the success or failure of experiments in living?

Two success criteria come to mind. One is based on the *first person experience test*. The experience test is based on a modified version of Raz' thesis that "intrinsic values are transparent" and that a person for whom *x* is good "is content with its (*x*) presence and prefers it to its absence" (269). A contemporary witness, a victim of violence, a winner in an Olympic competition or some other person who has gone through a particular experience owns a peculiar kind of epistemic authority. They know what it is like to go through *x*. This is the intuition behind the first person experience test. In order to form appropriate beliefs about the value of a conception one has to know what it is like to live accordingly. Pursuant to the experience test, a life plan fails if it is based on wrong assumptions about what one will consistently experience as worthwhile and valuable.⁶ One should note, though, that the test result is open to interpretation. If *Michael* finds his life unbearable, this does not show conclusively that his life plan was not good. Perhaps, he was the wrong person to have this particular plan. Interpreting the results of experiments in living is frequently a social

⁶ To give an example: The adolescent Mill had an unusually comprehensive goal; he wanted to be a utilitarian reformer of the world. During his famous mental crisis, he made the painful experience that imagining perfect success in reforming the world along utilitarian lines left him cold. This insight had devastating effects on him. He reports that he felt like being a stick or a stone during his crisis and that he wanted to end his life. Pursuing the plan drove the point home to him that his original conception of the good was not worth the effort. In other words, the plan did not pass the *first person experience test* in the case of Mill.

endeavour. One must not forget, though, that the person who made the experience has supreme competence and authority. This competence and authority should be respected in particular by those who have not had the same experiences. As a general rule, it seems plausible to say: The more people run similar experiments in living with similar results; and the more they agree about how to assess these results, the more likely it is that they have acquired ethical knowledge. In *Utilitarianism*, Mill argued that we can use an experience test in order to rank the value of modes of existence, as he calls it. Thus, according to Mill we can use a kind of experience test in order to calibrate the general ethical function. I shall come back to this in a minute.

Let us now turn to a second criterion, the *observer test*. The responses to Nozick's experience machine suggest that very many people factor in the point of view of an external observer when they evaluate manners of life. I doubt that all or almost all prefer a real life like their own to a simulated life full of eternal bliss. It seems clear, though, that almost all people are not willing to trade their real life against a slightly more fulfilling simulated life. So, being real has probably a non-negligible value to almost all of us.

As a general rule, it seems plausible to say: The more outside observers find a conception and a life plan unappealing, the more likely it is that this conception is objectively unappealing and that they have acquired ethical knowledge. But heads up!

Because of supreme competence and supreme authority, it seems reasonable to give decidedly more weight to the experience test. This does not mean that one has *in any particular case* more reason to trust the experience test than the observer test. Factors like statistical significance and so forth have to be taken into consideration. It is important to keep in mind that frequently neither the experience test nor the observer test nor the combination of both show any conclusive results.⁷

In *Utilitarianism*, Mill argued that so called competent judges can help us in producing objective rankings. Competent judges are people who are qualified to compare the value of two modes of existence because they experienced both. If those who are competently

⁷ Thomas Nagel says, sometimes someone's "experiential *state* is relatively unimportant – as in the case of a man who wastes his life in the cheerful pursuit of a method of communicating with asparagus plants." (Nagel 1970/1979, 5) How does Nagel know? If pursuing a pointless project is the only way of having a sufficiently joyful life it might be best from a perfectionist point of view.

acquainted with both agree that mode of existence *A* is better than mode of existence *B*, then we have the best conceivable evidence to believe that *A* is, indeed, the better way of living. Frequently, it will be bordering on the impossible to get hold of competent judges. Competent judges must give a decided preference "irrespective of any feeling of moral obligation". I am acquainted with the pleasure of *Schadenfreude* and I am acquainted with the pleasure of benevolence but I profess myself unable to rank them, as Mill demands, "merely as a pleasure". Moreover, our objective ranking is inevitably incomplete because frequently no-one is, or can possibly even be, acquainted with two modes of existence.

But in some cases, competent judges in Mill's sense are available. For these cases, Mill argues that the verdict of competent judges is unappealable. If a majority of those, who are qualified by experience of both, judges one mode of existence to be better than the other, this judgement "must be admitted as final". In my opinion, this is implausible. I very much doubt that consensus of, say, three competent judges is sufficient to make a binding verdict for the rest of humanity. However, the larger the number of competent judges and the higher the degree of agreement between them the more plausible Mill's view becomes. If every person in the world is competent in judging two modes of existence; and if they all agree that *A* is better than *B*, then this is the best conceivable evidence that *A* is indeed better than *B*.

Mill viewed it as an "unquestionable fact" that competent judges give "a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties". Note that this is a generalisation which, in principle, could and should be tested empirically. The prediction is: Whenever competent judges compare two manners of existence of which one (*A*) employs higher faculties whereas (*B*) does not, all or almost all judges will prefer *A* to *B*. My guess is that the appropriateness of the generalisation hinges upon the interpretation of the term "employment of higher faculties". If one interprets it in a narrow sense, it is almost certainly wrong. Let us assume that in a narrow interpretation philosophy employs one's higher faculties whereas gardening does not. I doubt that all or almost all people who are acquainted with the joy of philosophy and with the joy of gardening prefer a life of philosophy to a life of gardening. The hypothesis gains plausibility, I think, if one interprets "higher faculties" in a broader sense according to which almost every human practice, if skilfully done, requires the employment of higher faculties: cooking, gardening, teaching,

conversing, playing football, dancing, joking can be done very poorly or very cleverly, considerately, creatively, circumspectly, understandingly, elegantly, inspiringly and so forth. If one interprets Mill's "employment of higher faculties" in this broader sense, it not only gains plausibility. It also opens the space for an appealing form of *ethical pluralism*.

Let me conclude this discussion with the question why our acquisition of knowledge about the appropriate conception of the good proves to be so burdensome and error-prone. A number of factors come to mind: First, to a certain degree we are all separate and diverse persons so that the opportunities for cultural learning are limited. Copy and paste will not work.⁸ Second, the search for suitable life plans has no definite target. As John Christman says, there "is no single true self guiding my life" (Christman 2009, 7).⁹ In a similar vein, Raz plausibly states that we are forming ourselves while trying out options. For this reason, we cannot simply compare the results of life experiments with an independent measure of success. Third, the number of experimental runs is relatively small. This makes it very likely that we have to stop experimenting before we are able to fix the best possible life plan. Taken together, these difficulties make a strong case to tone down expectations regarding objective rankings regarding life plans. I think that we can often say with some confidence that our life plan is good enough. Presumably, this must suffice. Natural perfectionists should content themselves with a satisficing account.

III. Autonomy-enhancing basic structure desirable

Dear ladies and gentlemen, natural perfectionists believe that we can and do obtain fallible ethical knowledge. Raz plausibly argues that a "person's well-being depends to a large extent on success in socially defined and determined pursuits and activities" (Raz 1986, 309) and that people "adopt and pursue goals because they believe in their independent value, that is their value is believed to be at least in part independent of the fact that they were chosen and are pursued." (Raz 1986, 308) The more ethical knowledge is incorporated in the

⁸ What was good for our parents does not necessarily work for us; and the social forms of our society are not necessarily those in which we can see ourselves living a good life.

⁹ On the one hand, we have supreme competence and supreme authority; on the other hand, we cannot base our life plan on introspective knowledge about our inner nature.

basic institutions of our society, the better for us. For it is bordering on the impossible to have a truly good life if one's society is ethically relatively ignorant.¹⁰

Drawing mainly on Mill's resources, I argue in the following that an "autonomy-enhancing" basic structure is the best way to make a society ethically knowledgeable. My approach is largely congruent with Raz' but it also differs in important aspects. What are the elements of an autonomy-enhancing basic structure? Apart from an *educational system* which helps to develop the mental capacities needed to formulate and pursue personal goals and to respond to one's actual reasons, an autonomy-enhancing basic structure is characterised by a system of rights which entitles individuals to form their own views on all matters of life and to formulate and pursue personal goals. Individual rights are important because they help to shield the formation of judgements and preferences from distorting and manipulating forces. Mill painstakingly describes such forces in *The Subjection of Women*.¹¹ Although they are at the privileged end of distorted gender relations, men also suffer from the extant unequal distribution of power. According to Mill's analysis, the legal, political and social degradation of women is not only an injustice. Over and above, gender inequality is an impediment to human progress because it obstructs the collective acquisition of knowledge about the good. In a nutshell: Individual rights promote individual autonomy in three dimensions: They free the right holder (a) from the *dependence on the arbitrary will* of others, (b) *from the distorting influence of fear and powerlessness on the mind* and (c) from the *lack of opportunity by opening access to professions and offices*.

In *On Liberty* John Stuart and Harriet Taylor Mill investigate another *social benefit* of individual rights: Individual rights protect experiments in living. As Raz' correctly states, our well-being depends to a large extent on our success in pursuing socially defined projects. Some people are not content to reproduce given cultural patterns and to live along the lines of defined conceptions of a decent life; they are eager to try out new life styles. It is to the

¹⁰ Take, for instance, *P* who is the person with the highest degree of well-being in society *S*. *P* adopted and pursued her goals because she believed in their independent value and was remarkably successful in achieving these goals. Nonetheless, *P*'s life is worse than it could or should be if *P* lives in a society that has only limited knowledge of certain sources of value or denies some people access to these sources.

¹¹ Fear of abuse, lack of political representation, severely limited access to education, professions and offices are all factors that curb women's capacity to form judgements and pursue goals. The power relations are such that no-one can tell what women really think and want.

benefit of all members of humanity that they get the opportunity to do so because knowledge of the good can only be obtained experimentally.¹²

It is beneficial that the general results of experiments in living are publicly known, no matter whether they succeeded or failed. Understanding why an experiment in living failed or succeeded frequently contains highly important lessons for others who may want to copy or avoid aspects of it. We can learn from the experiences made in Warhol's or Owen's factories, in the Vienna Circle or the Bloomsbury Group, to name just a few. And, of course, we can learn from bird watchers, grass blade counters, Malibu surfers, wastrels and other types who appear as bad examples in philosophy books. Since we have no apriori knowledge of what the best way of living for ourselves is, and since our life time is limited and the development of our preferences highly path-dependent we profit enormously from the public accessibility of reports on experiments in living.

In short, individual rights are autonomy-enhancing and they promote the production and distribution of ethical knowledge, thereby widening the range of significant options and reinforcing the value of autonomy.

A system of individual rights is most productive in terms of knowledge production and distribution if *social virtues* such as curiosity, openness, generosity, understanding, tolerance, the ability to listen and so forth are common. The most autonomy-enhancing basic structure is presumably *not only characterised by a set of rights* which shields individuals from domination and distortion of their thoughts, feelings and desires by other people or anonymous forces; arguably, such a structure is also characterised by the *prevalence of particular epistemic and social virtues* in the population.

Let me conclude this talk with a note on political perfectionism. It might well be that autonomy and freedom of discussion is desirable from a perfectionist point of view because they help us to obtain ethical knowledge. But once we obtained it, why not close the door to further useless experiments and waste of human well-being? Mill opines that the verdict of competent judges on better modes of existence is binding. Why then should not the

¹² Experiments in living are a social benefit because they produce knowledge about the good. It is an even greater social benefit if people do not only try out new manners of life but if they share general aspects of their experiences publicly.

political authorities or the moral police use these verdicts for paternalist purposes?¹³ In fine, how stable is the relationship between liberalism and perfectionism?¹⁴

I think that Raz is right in arguing that the state or the moral police is not curbing one's autonomy if they prevent us from pursuing empty, evil, demeaning or worthless conceptions of the good. Even the arch-anti-paternalist Mill is ready to comply with some degree of perfectionist intervention: One justifying reason for coercive intervention consists in the prevention of actions which a person would undoubtedly not desire to perform if she had all relevant information. Mill gives the famous example of someone who is about to cross an unsafe bridge. Thus, he concedes the eligibility of coercive state intervention in order to prevent some forms of involuntary harm to self. Is not a mode of existence which competent judges found out to be inferior analogous to an unsafe bridge?

The Mills discuss a question along these lines in *On Liberty*, and they arrive at robustly anti-interventionist conclusions. They refer to the realities of power and knowledge in Britain. "It is easy to imagine an ideal public" that only requires people "to abstain from modes of conduct which universal experience has condemned." (CW 18, 383) "But where has there been seen" (284) such a public in the real world? The public "of this age and country improperly invests its own preferences with the character of moral laws", they write, and thus cannot be trusted to base its intervention into the lives of others on well-established experimental evidence. I am very curious to hear more about this topic from Joseph Raz who seems to advocate a relatively intervention-prone position, compared to the Mills. "Autonomous life is valuable only if it is spent in the pursuit of acceptable and valuable projects and relationships", he writes (Raz 1986, 417) But who are the judges and what are their credentials? How does one justify judgements like this? Mill's ethical perfectionism tried to be very scrupulous with respect to the justificatory basis of such evaluations. Raz

¹³ „There is no question here (it may be said) about restricting individuality, or impeding the trial of new and original experiments in living. The only things it is sought to prevent are things which have been tried and condemned from the beginning of the world until now: things which experience has shown not to be useful or suitable to any person's individuality. There must be some length of time and amount of experience, after which a moral or prudential truth may be regarded as established: and it is merely desired to prevent generation after generation from falling over the same precipice which has been fatal to their predecessors." (Mill 1859/1977, 281)

¹⁴ The Mills write in *On Liberty* that each "is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual." (Mill 1859/1977, 226) In case this statement is meant in a descriptive sense, we have strong evidence to the contrary. In case it is meant normatively, the question must be why people should be granted supreme authority, if, as a consequence, so many live a life worse than possible.

mellows his position to some degree by restricting perfectionist policies to non-coercive forms of intervention (420). Yet, this does not solve the problem of ethical knowledge. According to Raz, Mill merits to be lauded because he showed us the limit "on the means allowed in pursuit of moral ideals." (420) To my mind, Mill is mainly worried about the liberality with which his contemporaries are willing to exploit state power in order to promote their personal tastes and opinions about the good life, even more so because he viewed his age and country as ethically shockingly ignorant in many regards. The subjection of women is a case in point.¹⁵

An ethically uneducated public in combination with a severely flawed system of political representation arguably make a very strong case against state intervention in the name of moral ideals. The Mills were occasionally gesturing at the possibility that human history will finally reach a kind of *ethically perfect stationary state* in which a society has obtained perfect ethical knowledge. Experiments in living would then have lost their usefulness.¹⁶ In such a society, one could argue, the public would be capable of competently judging what kinds of life are empty and worthless, relatively speaking. But at the same time, the only society that would be ethically enlightened enough to be entrusted with the right to use political or societal power in order to promote moral ideals would find the use of such power redundant. The state does not prohibit scientists to test the phlogiston theory and run other presumably superfluous experiments. Scientists are competent judges themselves. There simply is no need to prohibit them to do what they can well see as futile. If scientists would start to test the phlogiston theory again, I would take this not as a sign that scientists have become mad but that, for some reason, the theory deserves a second chance. Applied analogously, I contend that the only society that would be ethically competent enough for political perfectionism would be at the same time one that has no use for the promotion of moral ideals by political means.

Thank you very much for your attention!

¹⁵ „It would be vain to attempt to persuade a man who beats his wife and illtreats his children, that he would be happier if he lived in love and kindness with them. He would be happier if he were the kind of person who *could* so live; but he is not, and it is probably too late for him to become, that kind of person. Being as he is, the gratification of his love of domineering, and the indulgence of his ferocious temper, are to his perceptions a greater good to himself, than he would be capable of deriving from the pleasure and affection of those dependent on him. He has no pleasure in their pleasure, and does not care for their affection.” (CW 19, 444)

¹⁶ „As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments in living (...).” (Mill 1859/1977, 261)

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