

Perfectionism: Ancient, Modern, Contemporary, and Future

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Office hours: tbd.

I'll be happy to meet or email about *any* questions or issues you would like to talk about. Just let me know. (- I generally do not, on the other hand, answer questions about papers or the exam received late the night before it is due or takes place.)

About this class

Conceptually speaking, a perfectionist philosophy is any moral or political philosophy that affirms three connected claims: that human nature is malleable, that some realizations of the potentials of human nature are objectively better than others, and that we therefore ought (in one way or another) to take the malleability of human nature into account when we deliberate about what to do, whether as individuals or as collectives.

Historically speaking, perfectionism is one of the main traditions of moral philosophy. Aristotle and Plato were perfectionists. Many of the early Christian philosophers were perfectionists. Aquinas was a kind of perfectionist. So were Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Mill, and Nietzsche. As this list shows, perfectionist ideas were part of otherwise very different moral philosophies (virtue ethics, Kantianism, utilitarianism, existentialism). In fact, until fairly recently, departures from perfectionism were the exception to the rule.

Today, by contrast, perfectionist philosophy is the exception to the rule. The consensus is that perfectionism was and continues to be coupled with a pre-scientific worldview and conception of the human being and that, once essentialism, teleological biology, and the idea that there's something unique and privileged about human beings were discarded, it seemed (and seems) that perfectionism was done for. Without some pre-scientific metaphysics, what's to back the claims that there is an end of human nature and that it is good to realize this end? How can perfectionism, which appears to license the grossest sorts of paternalism, be compatible with the commitment to freedom that is at the core of liberal democracy? It seems that the consensus is with Rawls when he, with uncharacteristic curttness, dismisses perfectionism as simply unacceptable (*TJ*, 52/46rev.).

In this class we will try to understand the history of perfectionism and therewith become able to ascertain whether it's really doomed by science. To do so, we will study the history of perfectionism. By studying its history we will get a better understanding of the varieties of perfectionism – the variety of reasons for affirming the core perfectionist ideas and the diversity of these ideas.

What I expect from you

I promise to be well prepared, to respect you and your point of view, and to do my best to make this class worth your time and effort. In exchange, I ask that you do the readings and think about

them. Come to class prepared. Always bring your book or other readings to class. Don't bring your laptop, for laptops are not permitted in this class unless you have special needs that require it.

Assignments and grading

On-line class discussion: postings and comments (30% of grade)

We will run an online class discussion in parallel to the classes. Every week, midnight before the day of the class at the latest, you will post a comment on the reading (500 words max – longer comments will be penalized). In addition, you're required to comment on at least one of the posts by other class members. The aim of this exercise is to get you thinking about the reading and to get us all discussing the key issues.

Two Papers (50%)

You're required to turn in two papers. The first (approximately 10-15 pages) should be primarily exegetical in character, that is, should have as its primary aim to articulate the argument offered by one of the philosophers we've encountered. The second (approximately 15-20 pages) should be more philosophical, that is, should engage critically with one or more of the arguments we've encountered.

Participation (20%)

Since this is a seminar, you're expected to participate in the discussion of the class. Don't worry if you don't say much, or if you feel that what you said wasn't as clever or interesting as you'd like it to be. Just voice your opinion when you have one – if you're finding it hard to come up with one on the spur of the moment, you're completely free to use the ideas that we've articulated in our discussion on Blackboard.

Readings and Schedule

All the primary readings will be found in the compendium. In addition, I strongly recommend that you acquire John Passmore's *The Perfectibility of Man* (available in various editions, free digital edition available on Liberty Fund's home-page). We meet every Wednesday from 12-3pm in 403 C. Cohen Hall (our schedule is on the following page).

Schedule

Week	Date	Reading	Assignment
36	9/8	Introductory	Get introduced
37	9/15	Plato, <i>Republic</i> (Books 1-6, 9-13), <i>The Laws</i> (Books 1-3, 8-9, 21, 26)	Blackboard post
38	9/22	Aristotle, <i>NE</i> (Books 1-2, 6-7, 10); <i>History of Animals</i> (selection)	Blackboard post
39	9/29	Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologiae</i> (selections)	Blackboard post
40	10/6	Rousseau, <i>Emile</i> (selections), <i>Discourse on Inequality</i> , <i>The Social Contract</i> (selections)	Blackboard post
41	10/13	Kant, <i>Religion</i> (part I), <i>Critique of Judgment</i> (selections), <i>Idea for a Universal History</i> , <i>Anthropology</i> (selections)	Blackboard post
42	10/20	Hegel, <i>The Philosophy of Right</i> (selections)	Blackboard post
43	10/27	Nietzsche, <i>The Will to Power</i> (selections), <i>Beyond Good and Evil</i> (selections).	Blackboard post
44	11/3	Marx, <i>The German Ideology</i> , <i>The Communist Manifesto</i>	Blackboard post
45	11/10	J.S. Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> (chap 2), <i>On Liberty</i> (chaps 1-4)	Blackboard post First Paper due
46	11/17	T.H. Green, <i>Prolegomena to Ethics</i> (selections)	Blackboard post
47	11/24	Dewey, <i>Democracy and Education</i> (selections), <i>Human Nature and Conduct</i> (selections), <i>The Problems of Men</i> (selections)	Blackboard post
48	12/1	Hurka, <i>Perfectionism</i> , Kitcher, “Essence and Perfection,” GA Cohen, “Facts and Principles”	Blackboard post
49	12/8	Wall, <i>Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Constraint</i> (chapter 1 and Part II); Sher, <i>Beyond Neutrality</i> (chapters 2, 9); Lecce, <i>Against Perfectionism</i> (chapters 1, 4, 9).	Blackboard post
50	12/15	Last class, summary and discussion: is there a future for perfectionism?	Blackboard post Final paper due