

## MORAL PERFECTIONISM: ETHICAL THEORY FROM A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

CARLOS MOUGÁN

**Abstract:** This article tries to rescue the perfectionist approach to moral theory from the pragmatic tradition and inspiration. Based on the philosophy of Dewey and taking into account authors like H. Putnam or S. Cavell, it tries to defend the idea that pragmatism allows us to understand moral perfectionism in a new way. In that way, perfectionism is bound to a certain interpretation of practical rationality, and a new understanding of moral objectivity and human subjectivity. Finally, moral perfectionism is not a theory that aims to solve all moral dilemmas but provides an understanding of how to face up to the problems of ordinary moral life.

**Keywords:** Pragmatism; perfectionism; moral theory.

*Keep Ithaca always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you're destined for.  
But don't hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you're old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you've gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.*

*Ithaca gave you the marvellous journey.  
Without her you wouldn't have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.*

K.Kavafis

The idea that we should improve ourselves and the world we live in is not exactly in vogue. Conformism, the private search for pleasure and well-being, the profit motive and the satisfaction of a comfortable life in developed societies make many lose sight of the reasons for making an effort to improve morally, both on an individual level and collectively. Anti-perfectionism is not only a possible trend in society and human relationships, shown in the lack of personal and collective exigency, in the renunciation of making our lives intelligible and

significant, but it has also largely taken over philosophical discourse. If indeed philosophical tradition has generally been perfectionist, what currently prevails is anti-perfectionism. Anti-perfectionism is presented as a logical consequence of the post-modern rejection of reason and the affirmation of a plural, diverse and contingent world.

Perfectionism, usually linked to the search for permanent, universal and rational foundations, and pragmatic theory, commonly associated with contextualism and particularism, seem at first sight to be irreconcilable enemies. If the great moral theories throughout history have been perfectionist, it is because they have fled from fate and contingency, because they have sought the meaning of moral life in principles, norms and duties. Perfectionists have historically and generally been anti-contextualists.

On the other hand, pragmatic moral theory has stressed the importance of context, the relevance of the agent in the determination of moral deeds and the contingency of goods and values. Therefore, if goods and values are particular and contingent, if the significance of moral action is always dependent on the context, how can a concrete course of action be prescribed? Why make an effort to do good and achieve a better world?

Our perspective is to show that pragmatic moral theory in general, and Deweyan ethics in particular, are appropriate to defending perfectionism in a new way, a way that not only does not oppose contextualism, but that identifies within contextualism the means to redefine perfectionism itself.

## **Perfectionism, Particularism and Objectivity**

Without doubt, the major reference for attempts to rehabilitate perfectionist moral philosophy is Aristotle. In a certain sense, we could say that he defines the framework within which perfectionism is theoretically circumscribed. Therefore, in contrast to first impressions, perfectionism does not allude to the attainment of a utopian state far removed from human reality. On the contrary, and at least in the sense that we want to defend here, perfectionism acquires relevance given that we lack external references which show us the path of evolution or improvement. Good, to which all humans should aspire in order to improve our lives, is not fixed and external. Aristotle makes perfectionism a moral theory that seeks improvement without resorting to transcendence, and that is based on the situational, contingent and fragile character of the human condition and its goods. Aristotle situates “human flourishing” in the perspective of growth from the interior, in relation to the genuine scope of what is human: its finite, temporary and social nature. Interpreting Aristotle in this way, it is possible to show that perfectionism aims to achieve the best possible development within the specific characteristics of the circumstances in which we find ourselves and assumes that good is not unique nor definitive, but situational, concrete and specific.

The Aristotelian aim of saving practical rationality in the ancient world by showing its possibilities in contrast to the type of theoretical knowledge characterised by the permanence and stability of its objects, reappears, with a new perspective, in pragmatic philosophy. Differing from the Aristotelian view, it understands that this is not a derived or diminished type of rationality in comparison with true rationality. The pragmatic position bases itself on the fact that humans act in a world which is only known, and ontologically structured, through our action and the conceptual resources used in the course of such action. There is no starting point which is neutral, external to or separate from the action we human beings take. As a consequence, we find ourselves in a situation which unfailingly has valorative and qualitative

aspects which have to be modified, repeated or rejected. Rationality becomes the capacity to transform situations, of any type, into others which are qualitatively better, more satisfactory, more harmonious, and so on.

In the case of moral knowledge, the question is how to harmonise the different elements that intervene in a certain situation. Moral problems are not those in which one has to choose between what is good and what is not, but those in which goods, norms and virtues come into conflict and those in which the task of intelligence is to find the course of action that can be used to transform the situation. On this point, Dewey highlighted the fact that the defect in the various moral theories lies in their excessively theoretical nature, the aim of finding a unitarian point of view with which to establish criteria and judge what is good or bad, right or wrong, independent of the contingencies of practice and the evolution of circumstances. Dewey's proposal underlines the fact that we do not need a reason that establishes rules, principles and norms, but an intelligence that is more concerned with and open to the different elements that form moral reality and the demands made by each situation. In this interpretation, moral wisdom is intrinsically related to the difficulty and uncertainty of situations (Dewey LW 7:166). For Dewey, the new perspective on morality does not aim to negate the traditional—deontologist or utilitarian—theories, but to reinterpret them, taking into account the role of the agent and of situational intelligence.

It is not surprising then that the proximity between pragmatism and moral particularism has been stressed (Misak 2007, 1). The following characterisation of particularism also expresses the point of view contained in Dewey's moral philosophy: "Ethical particularism is the view that sound moral judgements issue from the exercise of a sensibility that transcends codification into rules or principles... Moral judgements demand sensibility to the salient moral dimensions of particular cases, and this cannot be properly anticipated by moral principles" (Bakhurst 2007, 122).

Now, as Bakhurst himself mentions, the proximity between ethical particularism and pragmatism has to be analysed. On the one hand, it is clear that we should leave aside eliminationist particularists: those who believe that moral principles should be abandoned. Dewey does not reject such principles, but accentuates their instrumental character. On the other hand, new pragmatists, according to Misak's classification, rehabilitate what singularised classical pragmatists: the "objective dimension of human inquiry". So, "One of the pillars of the new pragmatism is the thought that standards of objectivity come into being and evolve over time, but that being historically situated in this way does not detract from their objectivity" (Misak 2007, 2)

It is at this point that moral perfectionism becomes significant in relation to pragmatic moral theory. It highlights the normative dimension of such theory: that is, the reference to the existence of objective moral qualities and to the characterisation of moral rationality as the effort for the achievement of goods. Here it would be useful to take up the distinction made by Steven Wall (2007) who believes it is possible to distinguish between two types of perfectionism. On the one hand, we have what he calls "*human nature perfectionism*" to refer generally to accounts of the human good that relate perfectionist goods to the development of human nature". On the other hand, he states that, "we can use the term *objective goods perfectionism* to refer generally to accounts of human good that identify perfectionist goods without relating them to the development of human nature". Though the majority of recent developments in the field of perfectionism from an Aristotelian perspective have pursued the first of these lines, as in the cases of Hurka (1993), Hurthouse (1999) or Nussbaum (1992), the interest of pragmatism, and of J. Dewey in particular, is that it undertakes a philosophical defence of perfectionism from

the second standpoint that Wall highlights, that is, a perfectionism of objective goods without reference to a closed description of human nature.

In the case of pragmatism, we would be considering a form of moral objectivism that, in accordance with Putnam's characterisation, is based on the collapse of the distinction between facts and values to achieve a redefinition of normativity in an "internalist" way (Putnam 2004). It is not possible to leave moral values aside to find a point from which to judge or situate morality. This is Dewey's conception. For him, human experience is, in itself, an aesthetic and moral experience. For that reason, he stresses that tertiary qualities, those that modern philosophy considered subjective because they were qualitative, are more objective than those that are traditionally considered as such, like substances or their relationships. The fact that intelligence is situational and that goods are found within the context of practice does not mean that we cannot highlight the characteristics of an experience which could make it valuable from a moral point of view. According to Pappas, for Dewey, moral experiences are those which are meaningful, which lead to free and open communication, that contribute to cooperation, to generous receiving and sharing, and to the exchange of ideas and experiences to which everyone contributes and with which everyone counteracts their individual limitations. The objectivity of morality lies in these qualitative aspects of experience, openness, inclusivity, diversity, flexibility and interaction (Pappas 2008, 298), for which it is unnecessary to call on any external or transcendental principles. In any case, "The truth of this claim may be intuitively obvious to those who have had the opportunity to be part of this kind of interaction" (Pappas 2008, 297). In short, it is the qualitative aspect of experience which we can use to show its objectivity.

The incorporation of the term perfectionism into the description of pragmatic moral theory is aimed at highlighting the fact that a moral life has to be a process characterised by an increase in significance, by the transformation of situations in order to achieve a fuller, richer and more satisfying experience. Linking pragmatism, particularism and perfectionism means, on the one hand, that our moral responses must be based on the principles, values and habits which we already have, but also that they must be open to reinterpretation depending on the particular characteristics arising in each situation. The fact is that these principles, values and norms have to be interpreted over and over again, in an innovative and creative way given that they are never the result of mere application. The fact that moral improvement, moral perfection, is something to strive for, that we should try to consider things from new perspectives, take into consideration other people's points of view, be sensitive to the demands of the situation, be capable of searching for answers as the fruit of interaction and cooperation, are consequences of considering urgency, novelty, and change as central characteristics of existence. As a result, the moral task does not end when someone declares that they are in favour of certain principles or values, but when conditions are created that increase the level of sensitivity to what the situation demands and habits are formed that allow the transformation of such a situation.

In short, the defence of moral perfectionism of objective goods allows us to understand pragmatism as a type of moral particularism that conciliates the situational and practical character of human intelligence with a normative morality.

## **Perfectionism and Subjectivity**

The characterisation of pragmatic perfectionism not only rejects the existence of a definitive and distant ideal, but sees in such an ideal the negation of the possibility of personal improvement and growth. With regards to this, Dewey defended on various occasions (MW 14:154-164) the fact that the search for absolutes implies that we are unable to deal with

the problematic situations in which we find ourselves. It is the presence of distant ideals of perfection which hinders the work of intelligence. On the contrary, with "ends in view" the importance of and "attention to the possibilities of the situations we are in" increase (MW 14:177).

This is exactly one of Cavell's central revindications in the defence of perfectionism. Cavell identifies an American version of perfectionism in Emerson's thinking, a point of view that considers perfection to be found in the ordinary and that contrasts with teleological perfectionism. The essence of Emersonian perfectionism, as presented by Cavell, is that of an endless journey of self-improvement and realization whose central focus is on the here and now, on the process of achieving a later self, not necessarily the best self, a next step that emerges from the "unattainable/unattained self" (Cavell 1990, xxxv). Therefore, we should not understand perfectionism as a movement towards an established end, but as a permanent journey during which one is constantly arriving and in which each arrival is also, at the same time, a departure. We have to understand this "unattainable/unattained self" from the perspective of an endless process in which the lack of an ultimate objective is what requires us to evolve into a next, but better, self (Cavell 1990, 12). This process is never complete, not because we are incapable of achieving the next self, but because, once this self is achieved, new and different selves appear. Cavell, in his call for a perfectionism far removed from both teleology and essentialism, develops the idea, based on Emersonian perfectionism, of a new way of describing the development of self. There is no self, no central essence, that cumulatively develops or expands. This would mean accepting the idea of an essential self, a real self. This idea implies the acceptance of the fact that "the end of all attainable selves is the absence of self, of partiality" (Cavell 1990, xxxiv). There is not, therefore, a fixed path to follow, there is no place for a false or real self. This idea, Cavell highlights, seems to be an exterior imposition. We should agree, with Cavell's idea, on the need to rescue perfectionism from one of its traditional tendencies: that is, the idea that perfection is linked to the idea of the elimination of partiality, of circumstance. Classical perfectionism interpreted every stage as partial, as a moment to overcome, perhaps with the idea that each evolutionary stage of knowledge is one more step towards the ultimate aim of finding the definitive truth, ubiquitous, timeless knowledge, or if you prefer the true development of the personality.

In this way, the question of the characterisation of subjectivity becomes an important aspect of the rehabilitation of perfectionism. To a great extent, many of the obstacles facing perfectionism come from the characterisation of the human being as a being that is in the world, but external to it. It has been the dualism of the relationship between man and nature that has undermined perfectionist positions. If we stop considering the relationships between human beings and the world as two pre-constituted realities that have an external connection, and start considering that they are part of the same reality, then we open the door to a new perfectionist viewpoint. If we consider that the human being constitutes himself through his action, and his action is in the world, perfectionism stops being a call for moral subjectivity and is converted into a demand for the objective transformation of the world.

In the case of Dewey, given the importance of the concept of growth in his theory, this should not be interpreted as a reference to the development of internal abilities or capacities that appear independently of the situation. Growth is connected with the capacity of the individual to find solutions to the demands of situations. "The moral end is not growth (unless we take growth to be the enhancement of meaning in the present), but it is simply the consummatory resolution of a morally problematic situation" (Pappas 2008, 303). So, absence of growth implies the paralysis of the subject, a withdrawal, an inability to respond to situations, a

rejection of new paths and new richer possibilities of facing the situation. As Gouinlock indicates, growth, as understood by Dewey, has no extrinsic end and is satisfied by the growth itself, in the satisfactory outcome of situations. "The sort of activity in which growth occurs is precisely that in which a felt unity of man and nature is achieved. The ongoing process which is growth is intrinsically delightful in itself. Perfection means perfecting, fulfilment, fulfilling and the good is now or never" (Gouinlock 1994, xlii).

We can situate Murdoch's defence of perfectionism in the same way (Murdoch 2001). For her, perfectionism is a theory with which to respond to and attack the void of moral theory that seems to predominate in much of contemporary philosophy. Taking naturalist metaphysics and realist ethics as a starting point, perfectionism cannot be interpreted as the development of a subjectivity full of powers and capacities that evolve in a void, separated from the world. Murdoch would have agreed that perfectionism, understood as a type of moral realism, should interpret moral development as a process of decentring, of suppressing our ego to become part of the world, of other people's lives, of the action that surrounds us and that we belong to.

In her defence of moral realism, Murdoch indicates the importance of moral perception as an ability that is used and perfected through practice. In this way, she puts moral perfectionism in the appropriate place: in the education of capacities that favour good moral judgement. For Murdoch, it is an "indefinitely perfectible" ability. As in the case of Dewey, this ability implies the capacity to make an appropriate moral judgement for the situation that is not just the application of an abstract moral rule.

### **Pragmatic Moral Perfectionism and Democracy**

Perfectionism has been discredited in post-modernity as a consequence of its supposed connections with the rationalist and logocentric aims of philosophy and moral theory in such a way that the particular character of each individual development, of each particular good, has been ignored. The renewal of perfectionism demands a rehabilitation of the idea that the development of individual moral capacities, and the moral improvement of the situations in which we find ourselves, constitute the real meaning of philosophical reflection and that its practical significance lies in establishing the means to achieve this. Perfectionism shares with moral formalism the thesis that theory can only outline a general framework for the individual, within which moral growth can be judged. However, it shares with dense moral theories the idea that we have goods that must be specifically stated. In this way, perfectionism, despite its initially formal appearance, tells us about the content of life, how each individual's life deserves to be lived. The lives and actions that add meaning to individual and collective lives, that favour communication and cooperation, and that increase individual choice and thereby harmony, have the stamp of moral virtue, which means the greatest possibilities of development for each individual. This is one of the main features of the perfectionism defended here: that grandeur and moral excellence are not reserved for great deeds or heroes. In a broad sense, we could say that perfectionism, characterised in this way, is a moral theory for the common man. It encompasses an idea that gives direction and sense to the everyday life of the common man. What Nussbaum and Cavell aim to illustrate with a Greek tragedy and a comedy of remarriage respectively, is exactly this dimension of perfectionism, that of finding and highlighting examples of the task of moral improvement which are present in everyday life, just like in Greek tragedy or contemporary films. Such examples represent a guide that obviously has to be interpreted in each case by the agent, but which demands the individual's moral improvement as a task to be undertaken. This must be interpreted in each case by each subject, because as we

have already pointed out, moral research does not consist of the revelation of a pre-established truth or norm, but of the sharpening of moral perception, something which can only be done individually throughout the course of one's life. Perfectionism shows each individual the task of interpretation that he is forced to undertake in each case: to choose what maximises his abilities, what gives meaning to his actions, what makes him more open to the world and other people, what makes him interact more harmoniously with the environment, what increases his opportunities to cooperate with others, and what increases his understanding of the world. Moral perfectionism thus seems to be a way of rejecting apathy, abandonment, the trivialisation of evil, and demanding a refinement of our sensitivity and moral reasoning.

The important thing, at this point, is Cavell's caution that the loss of the unsatisfied character, the loss of a rejection of or aversion towards self, the development of a sense of complacency, in short, the lack of a perfectionist impulse, is the main threat to democracy. In contrast to the elitist perfectionists such as Nietzsche, the singularity of pragmatic moral perfectionism, that of Dewey and Cavell, lies in understanding that the renovation of the perfectionist idea is an essential objective for democracy. In this line, Dewey warned that the main danger for democracy lies in the atrophy of moral experience, the absence of moral growth, in the stagnation of the routine, in established habits, in forgetting the spirit of the great moral victories that contributed to the establishment of democratic values. What makes his ideas stand out, is the fact that he considers moral improvement to be a collective task and not just an individual one, and that this task of increasing moral significance is, going beyond its external and institutional elements, the true meaning of democracy. "Democracy is the belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness" (Dewey LW 14:229). Dewey's characterisation of democracy from a moral perfectionist viewpoint is thus as a "way of life". In contrast to those who maintain that moral perfectionism is independent of political perfectionism<sup>1</sup>, Dewey stated that they are not independent, but are in fact two faces of the same ideal, the fight for increased significance and value.

Democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society (Dewey MW 12:186).

Democracy, for Dewey, is not a means to a future state of affairs in which good will be achieved. The objective of ethics, like that of democracy, is to improve the situation in which we find ourselves using the resources that experience has given us. Therefore, there is a rejection of the consequentialist justifications of democracy and of the attempts to find definitive criteria with which to deal with political problems. The reason for moral and political action is the improvement of the present circumstances; a process in which the application of partial and temporary ends can help to give direction and orientation. Democratic action is that which aims to improve or reconstruct experience in a way that is not given or predefined, but that aims to find the tools to transform situations within the process itself. Democracy seems then to be linked with ameliorism, with the improvement of present situations, with the enrichment of the experience of the common man, with an increase in communication and interaction. This

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<sup>1</sup> Political perfectionism, the thesis according to which the state should have the promotion of the good life among its objectives, is usually considered—especially by liberal political theorists—a separate problem from moral perfectionism (see Wall 2007).

is what, according to Pappas, we can call “to justify democracy by the quality of lived present experience.”

Democracy as experience means that the primary and ultimate test of democracy as an ideal is the amelioration of presently experienced problems. It also means that democracy strives to have certain enriching and meaningful experiences (Pappas 2008, 219).

In short, perfectionism, the effort to be better in the moral sense of the word, lacks metaphysical or epistemological guarantees, but it is exactly this, the uncertainty, the lack of security, that makes the desire to achieve a better world truly meaningful and important. Like in the journey to Ithaca in Kavafis’ poem in which the significance of the journey was not to arrive safely, but in the journey itself, the human desire for improvement is not made meaningful by the arrival at a pre-determined end, but by finding direction and sense in the very process of growth and improvement. It is the task of growth and improvement that gives direction and sense to human action in a world that is open and in a state of perpetual change.

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Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación,  
Universidad de Cádiz, Avda,  
Republica Saharaui s/n.,  
Puerto Real (Cádiz) 11510,  
Spain  
Tel.: (34) 956016254 – (34) 627928166  
E-mail: carlos.mougan@uca.es