

# Thomistic Approaches to Welfare Theory

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## Thomistic Approaches to Welfare Theory

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this work is primarily to defend the Thomistic approach to well-being on three fronts. First, it is often said that objective theories of well-being are vulnerable to the objection that, if well-being is objective, someone's good might not sufficiently resonate with him or her. That is, objectivist theories suffer because they fail to meet the "internalist" constraint. I argue, however, that a Thomistic theory of well-being—objective though it is—is not vulnerable to this criticism. Second, it has been argued that perfectionist theories of well-being (like Aquinas') cannot accommodate the intuition that pleasure and "cheap thrills" positively contribute to human well-being. I argue that a Thomistic theory of well-being can indeed affirm the intrinsic goodness of pleasure and "cheap thrills." Finally, I argue—against the objections of other scholars—that a singular analysis of relational goodness (i.e.  $x$  is good for  $y$ ) is possible. This singular analysis is grounded in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and, I believe, can helpfully inform our discussions about human well-being.

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## Paper 1: Subjectivism, Internalism, and Thomistic Theories of Value

### I. Introduction

Welfare internalism holds that “for any intrinsic good  $\varphi$  for a person  $p$ , it must be the case that  $\varphi$  ‘fits’  $p$ , *resonates* with  $p$ , fails to *alienate*  $p$ , and so forth.”<sup>1</sup> While philosophers vary on how to best characterize the relationship between a person and his good, the motivation behind welfare internalism is widely shared: a person’s good should not be alien to him.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the internalist claims, there must be some link between a person’s evaluative perspective—whether that be cashed out in terms of desires, values, motivations, judgments, or pro-attitudes—and his good.

Philosophers who defend subjectivist theories of well-being often cite welfare internalism’s intuitive appeal as a reason for the plausibility of subjectivism. A commitment to welfare internalism is, as one philosopher puts it, at the “heart of subjectivism.”<sup>3</sup> It is easy to see why welfare subjectivism and welfare internalism tend to go hand-in-hand. Subjectivist theories of well-being hold that a person’s values, desires, or pro-attitudes determine what is good for him.<sup>4</sup> When intrinsic goodness is a product of one’s values, desires, judgments, or pro-attitudes,

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism," *Noûs* 51, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Connie S. Rosati, "Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of the Good," *Ethics* 105, no. 2 (1995); Peter Railton, "Facts and Values," in *Facts, Values and Norms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism," 200.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g. David Sobel, *From Valuing to Value : A Defense of Subjectivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 261.

a link between those values, desires, judgements, or pro-attitudes and one's good is clearly present.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I will argue that the truth of welfare internalism—a premise I here leave unquestioned—does not suggest that well-being is in fact subjective.<sup>6</sup> Other philosophers have, of course, acknowledged potential consistency between objective theories of well-being and welfare internalism.<sup>7</sup> But objectivist philosophers rarely attempt to incorporate welfare internalism into their welfare theories; they often either dismiss welfare internalism or pass over its possible compatibility with objectivism rather quickly.<sup>8</sup> Greater care should be given by objectivist philosophers to explain how objectivist theories might satisfy welfare internalism. Insofar as many philosophers take welfare internalism to be “deeply plausible,” an objectivist theory suffers insofar as its compatibility with internalism is not articulated. At the same time, objectivist theories of well-being can avoid certain problems that subjectivist theories often encounter. As such, I find great appeal in a welfare theory that can plausibly blend the virtues of

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<sup>5</sup> Dale Dorsey, "Why Should Welfare 'Fit'?", *Philos. Q.* 67, no. 269 (2017). This is not to say that a welfare theory will necessarily identify the correct link between the agent's values, desire, judgments, or pro-attitudes and his good.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Andrew Sarch, "Internalism About a Person's Good: Don't Believe It," *Philosophical Studies* 154, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>7</sup> David Brink, "The Significance of Desire," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics Volume 3*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 6; Dorsey, "Why Should Welfare 'Fit'?"

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 18; Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23-24. Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25-26. However, David Brink and Mark Murphy have developed objectivist lines of reasoning which, like the theory I offer in this paper, incorporate a version of internalism. See Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 81; Brink, "The Significance of Desire."

objectivism with the intuitive appeal of welfare internalism. One such theory—the one I find most compelling—is the welfare theory found in the work of Thomas Aquinas.

A brief road map. First, I will lay out a general framework for understanding welfare internalism, especially within the context of subjectivist theories of well-being. For the purposes of this paper, I accept the premise that internalism is compatible with a less-than-direct link between an agent and his good; all that matters is that an agent *would* take the right evaluative attitude towards his good in the right circumstances. I will then show how the Thomistic theory of welfare can fit into this framework, and that it does not run the risk of alienating an agent from his good any more than does the average subjectivist theory. I then clarify a few points that might draw objections. Finally, I argue that, at least in one respect, welfare objectivism avoids a serious problem faced by welfare subjectivism; in fact, it might be the case that welfare objectivism—at least of the Thomistic variety—is *less* alienating than most subjectivist theories.

## II. The Good-Value Link and Theories of Value

Dale Dorsey argues that there are two key “building blocks” of welfare subjectivism. The first building block is the good-value link:

*Good-Value Link:* for any object, event, state, etc.,  $\phi$  and agent  $x$ ,  $\phi$  is good for  $x$  only if  $\phi$  is valued, under conditions  $c$ , by  $x$ .<sup>9</sup>

The good-value link is Dorsey’s formulation of welfare internalism. While not all philosophers characterize internalism in terms of value, Dorsey’s approach is intended to accommodate a broad range of internalist and subjectivist theories. After all, philosophers might disagree about

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<sup>9</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism."

what it means to value something. Thus the second building block of subjectivism (or rather, any welfare theory that accepts the good-value link):

*Theory of Value:* for any object, event, state, etc.,  $\varphi$  and agent  $x$ ,  $x$  values  $\varphi$  insofar as  $x$  takes relation  $r$  towards  $\varphi$  under conditions  $c$ .

The number of variables within these two building blocks allows for a wide variety of subjectivist welfare theories—some more (or less) plausible than others.

The simplest form of subjectivism (given these building blocks) is one that characterizes conditions  $c$  as the actually-existing conditions in which an agent finds himself. For example, in a simple desiderative theory (i.e. one in which relation- $r$  is desire), an agent's actual, present desires constitute his actual, present values. Thus, only those things that he actually, presently desires can be good for him. This view is simple and straightforward. It also superficially retains an agent's autonomy over his good—a feature of welfare theories that subjectivists find appealing. However, a brief reflection demonstrates that this simple form of subjectivism is not very plausible.<sup>10</sup> One might desire to (due to ignorance) drink from a polluted river; one might irrationally desire to avoid the dentist; one might have deviant sexual desires—yet most philosophers would reject a welfare theory that counts satisfying these desires as good.<sup>11</sup>

To understand how philosophers often address this issue, it may be worth briefly discussing different kinds of value. As rational agents, we value certain things. But the things we value are valued in different ways. First, there are some things that we value for the sake of

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that such a view is indefensible. Rather, the view requires some defending. See Chris Heathwood, "The Problem of Defective Desires," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>11</sup> The examples are taken from Heathwood. *Ibid.*

something else; these are valued only instrumentally. Second, there are some things we value for their own sake; these are valued intrinsically. Third, there are some things that we value because their realization would be an instance of something we intrinsically value.<sup>12</sup> When discussing well-being, philosophers are typically concerned with the second and third kinds of value. After all, things we value instrumentally derive their goodness entirely from those things (or instances of those things) we value intrinsically.

The problem with simple forms of subjectivism is that human beings are fallible. Specifically, we can fail in our pursuit of what we value.<sup>13</sup> Most of us agree that our desires, beliefs, attitudes, and preferences may be ill-formed, irrational, inconsistent, repugnant, and the like. We may take something to be instrumentally valuable, when in fact it won't get us closer to anything we value for its own sake. Perhaps we take the relevant *r*-relation towards something we assume to be intrinsically valuable, only to discover that it won't make us any happier, any more satisfied, or any better off. Perhaps the sports car I foolishly buy brings me no closer to the popularity I crave; the ice cream I buy to satisfy my sweet tooth turns out not to be the instance of pleasure I originally imagined it to be. I may think that committing myself to a particular vocation would be an instance of meaningful work—which I value—when in fact it would not. In each of these cases, I clearly value *something*. Otherwise, I would not take (or consider

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<sup>12</sup> This is often taken to be a distinct category from the first and second. Assume that to value is to desire something. I do not intrinsically desire to give my friend \$5, but I do have an intrinsic desire to be just; if I owe him \$5, my giving him the money is not instrumental to my being just, but is itself an instance of me being just. Tim Schroeder, "Desire," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<sup>13</sup> It seems that Heathwood must deny this. Papism aside, I am generally suspicious of claims of infallibility. That said, Heathwood's position is not too far from the old scholastic dictum: *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

taking) any action towards it. But in each of these cases, when I obtain what I *thought* I valued, I ended up no better off.

One way of explaining this problem is by distinguishing between *actual* and *apparent* values. That is, what strikes us as worth pursuing in a given moment might not—under more ideal circumstances—really be all that valuable. Many subjectivist philosophers, in recognizing this fact, have argued that conditions *c* in their respective theories of value ought to be counterfactual, idealized conditions. That is, a person's *actual* values are those that he would have the right *r*-relation to in conditions that diminish the problems surrounding human fallibility. For example, Richard Brandt appears to argue that someone (actually) values something insofar as he would desire it after “cognitive psychotherapy” provides him with full and vivid exposure to logic and the relevant facts.<sup>14</sup> David Lewis suggests that an agent (actually) values something “just in case [he] would, under conditions of full imaginative acquaintance with the alternatives, desire to desire it.”<sup>15</sup> Dale Dorsey maintains that an agent (actually) values something if he believes it to be good under conditions of consideration and coherence.<sup>16</sup> Connie Rosati argues that an agent (actually) values something if he would desire it in certain (unspecified) idealized conditions he (actually) cares about having.<sup>17</sup> The possibilities

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 113.

<sup>15</sup> David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 63 (1989).

<sup>16</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism," 203-08.

<sup>17</sup> Rosati, "Persons, Perspectives, and Full Information Accounts of the Good," 403.

are endless, but the goal in each case is the same: to have a theory of value that avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of fallibility and alienation.

As a result, most subjectivists accept the premise that a certain amount of idealization within a theory of value does not impermissibly alienate an agent from his good. So long as one's welfare theory retains a direct connection to an agent's values, welfare internalism remains satisfied.<sup>18</sup>

What I wish to point out in this paper is that both building blocks of subjectivism—the good-value link coupled with a theory of value—may harmoniously exist within an *objectivist* theory of well-being. That is, a theory of well-being can simultaneously link an agent's good with his values while recognizing certain things as categorically, objectively good for us as humans. As objectivist theories of well-being are often criticized for their inability to accommodate the good-value link (or the “deeply plausible thought,” or the “internalist constraint,” etc.), an objectivist, internalist theory of well-being would show that such criticism is misplaced. And such objectivist, internalist theories are not only possible in principle—they have been defended at various times throughout the history of philosophy. In the following section, I argue that this is true of Thomas Aquinas' theory of natural law.

### **III. Thomistic Theories of Value**

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<sup>18</sup> Dorsey goes on to argue that theories that use idealized, counterfactual conditions *c* in the good-value link are less successful at satisfying the “deeply plausible thought” that a person's good should not unduly alienate her. Without engaging much with this argument, I will assume that, for purposes of the good-value link, conditions *c* must be actual, present conditions. Dorsey, “Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism,” 212.

I argue that Aquinas' natural law theory satisfies welfare internalism; that is, it affirms and incorporates the good-value link. There are, I believe, a number of ways to faithfully characterize Aquinas' theory. I will examine two possible characterizations: one grounded on what Aquinas calls "natural inclinations," and another based on our beliefs about what is good or bad for us. What follows is a brief sketch of Aquinas' view, in order to show that it does, in fact, satisfy welfare internalism.

In an oft-cited passage in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas describes natural law as a rational creature's participation in God's governance of the universe.<sup>19</sup> To put this in more prosaic language: rational creatures must actively pursue their God-given ends ("ends" in the teleological-metaphysical sense) through the use of reason and judgment. But we do not operate in the dark. Obviously, as a Christian, Aquinas believes that God has revealed certain principles that we ought to live by in pursuit of our ends.<sup>20</sup> But more importantly—for this essay—Aquinas believes that, to a certain extent, some basic principles of rationality are (to use St. Paul's phrase) written "in our hearts."<sup>21</sup>

Aquinas argues that we, using reason, can ascertain what is prudentially good and bad for us.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the first principle of practical reason—that good is to be done and evil avoided—is

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New Advent, 1920). I-IIae, Q.91 a.2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, I-IIae, Q.91 a.4.

<sup>21</sup> Romans 2:15.

<sup>22</sup> I use the term "prudentially" here, though I am not convinced that Aquinas recognizes the distinction between moral and prudential goodness. Both morality and prudence, as far as Aquinas is concerned, deal with what ought to be done—that is, what is good—all things considered.

immediately self-evident.<sup>23</sup> This is because, at least for Aquinas, part of what it means to be good is to be worth doing.<sup>24</sup> In this context, goodness and badness are formal notions—the terms simply track what is to be done and what is to be avoided.<sup>25</sup>

The question then becomes, what is it that is intrinsically good for us? What, in particular, ought to be done (at least, prudentially speaking)? Following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that all created things have, by their nature, a certain *telos*, that *telos* being the thing's perfection or fulfillment.<sup>26</sup> What constitutes this *telos* becomes evident upon observation of the thing's natural tendencies and inclinations.<sup>27</sup> As we recall from our first introduction to Aristotle's teleology, an acorn's inherent, natural tendency (which a biologist might describe) is to become an oak tree—and a strong, healthy one at that. Humans are analogous insofar as we too have natural inclinations that draw us towards our perfection or fulfillment. The disanalogy is evident when we recall that rational creatures must actively choose to pursue the objects of their natural inclinations; we must choose to pursue the perfection or fulfillment proper to our nature.<sup>28</sup> And as Aquinas points out, we are not inclined towards these objects by mere

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<sup>23</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae, Q.94 a.2.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> I understand that not all contemporary philosophers take this formal approach to goodness. But it is this understanding of goodness that—I believe—renders the scholastic “guise of the good” doctrine plausible.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae Q.1, a.6.

<sup>27</sup> There is a possible exception, insofar as Christians believe that God has, through grace, offered humans a share in perfection and fulfillment beyond our natural capacities and towards which we may not naturally tend, since the end is beyond the reach of our nature. I leave this discussion aside for the purposes of this paper.

<sup>28</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae Q.91, a.2.

happenstance; we are drawn to them because they are good for us.<sup>29</sup> That is, because we are the kind of beings we are, the objects of our natural inclinations are—at least to some degree—perfective and fulfilling of us. And insofar as we pursue them, we implicitly recognize this fact.

Aquinas provides a short, cursory list of objects of our natural inclinations. The list is by no means exhaustive, but the examples he provides illustrate the broad range of objectively good things available for human pursuit. Some of our natural inclinations are instinctual and animalistic; we are drawn towards goods like food, health, and sex, self-preservation.<sup>30</sup> Other inclinations are proper to rational agents as such: the desire for knowledge, interpersonal harmony, justice, rationality, and the like.<sup>31</sup> Philosophers have, of course, disagreed about whether Aquinas' list is correct or complete, but correctly identifying the objects of our natural

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, I-IIae Q.94, a.2.

<sup>30</sup> I am here only concerned with intrinsic goodness or badness of these things, which depend on their fittingness to human beings as such. Obviously, there can be morally good and bad ways to pursue these goods; it is the job of the moral philosopher to specify under what conditions such a good ought to be sought, at least morally speaking. See John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>31</sup> As a matter of mere terminology, philosophers disagree about whether our inclination to such things should be called “natural inclinations.” Often, scholastic and neo-scholastic philosophers distinguish between natural inclinations (tendencies of things according to the laws of physics, chemistry, and—to an extent—biology), sensitive appetites (tendencies of things towards goods apprehended by the senses), and the rational appetite (tendencies of rational beings towards intellectually apprehended goods). See Bernard J. Wuellner, *A Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy*, 2d ed. (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1966). I see no need to draw such a distinction for the purposes of this paper. Because humans are—by nature—physical, biological, sensate, and rational creatures, I will group all inclinations stemming from human nature as “natural inclinations.”

inclinations is immaterial to this essay.<sup>32</sup> In any case, the basic point is: those things that are intrinsically good for us are those that satisfy our natural inclinations.

This, then, is the backdrop for Aquinas' theory of practical reason. Aquinas argues that every properly human act—that is, every rational act—is undertaken for the sake of some intrinsic good.<sup>33</sup> After all, we act because we seek the perfection, fulfillment, and happiness (in the Aristotelian sense) that our nature inclines us towards. And it is just those objects of our natural inclinations that offer the perfection, fulfillment, and happiness we seek with each action. A quick reflection may illustrate (though not prove) this point. The act of counting blades of grass within scientific inquiry strikes us as rational and “worth doing” (though perhaps not by us). Insofar as we take that action to be rational or intelligible, we presumably intuit that there is some objective good sought by the action—for example, scientific knowledge. At the same time, counting blades of grass “for its own sake” likely does not strike us as rational and intelligible; this indicates that there is no intrinsic good the grass-counter is seeking in his action (at least, so far as we can tell). So either the person counting the blades of grass for its own sake is acting irrationally—i.e. not engaging in a truly human act—or is doing so under a misunderstanding of what his good consists in.

Two quick clarifications. First, none of this is meant to imply that humans always correctly pursue the objects of their natural inclinations. Even if we correctly identify the proper object of our natural inclinations, we may choose improper or ineffective means to obtain that

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<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, 96-135; John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 81-92.

<sup>33</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae Q.8, a.1.

object.<sup>34</sup> For example, assume someone rightly acknowledges that knowledge is intrinsically good for him; he may still choose means (perhaps culpably, perhaps innocently) that will not get him any closer to knowledge. Perhaps, in his quest for knowledge, he develops a desire to read books on astrology. His desire is rational insofar as he pursues an object of a natural inclination—i.e. knowledge—but he has chosen the wrong path in his pursuit. Similarly, someone might mis-identify something as intrinsically good. The same curious astrology student may take the study of astrology *itself* to be an instance of knowledge that is good-in-itself. In each of these cases, the student is presumably operating on a mistaken belief about the scientific merits of astrology, but he is still pursuing the object of a natural inclination.<sup>35</sup>

Second, Aquinas leaves open the possibility that humans will develop non-natural inclinations that may take precedence over their natural inclinations.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, passions may arise in humans such that they act contrary to their natural inclinations.<sup>37</sup> Thus our natural inclinations might end up being ignored, neglected, or otherwise unpursued (or at least, less emphatically pursued) because of our attachments. For example, someone might pursue wealth at the expense of health, family, or justice. Even if he acts with perfect instrumental rationality—that is, he always chooses the most effective means of acquiring wealth—he is nevertheless irrational insofar as he does not act for the sake of some intrinsically valuable good. After all—as Aquinas and Aristotle remind us—money has only instrumental value.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, I-IIae Q.13, a.3; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, vol. III (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), I-IIae Q.13, a.3.

<sup>35</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, Q.27-44.

<sup>36</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae Q.71 a.2; Q.91 a.6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, I-IIae, Q.77.

<sup>38</sup> *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. C. I. Litzinger (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), I ¶ 70.

By claiming that every rational action is undertaken for the sake of some intrinsic good, or that all of our natural inclinations direct us towards some intrinsic good, Aquinas is not claiming that we always succeed in obtaining such a good. Nor does he even claim that the conscious object of our pursuit is, in fact, intrinsically good. Rather, it is simply that we are naturally inclined towards our perfection and its constitutive goods, whatever they are. And it is those objects of our natural inclinations in which our perfection, fulfillment, and happiness consist. But we can fail both in our knowledge of what those goods are, and in our pursuit of them.

The point is that Thomas Aquinas—an objectivist about well-being—has a theory of value amenable to welfare internalism. Given what has been discussed about natural inclinations, the Thomist might put forward something like the following:

*Thomist Theory of Value 1:* for any object, event, state, etc.,  $\varphi$  and agent  $x$ ,  $x$  values  $\varphi$  insofar as  $x$  has a natural inclination towards  $\varphi$  under conditions  $c$ .

This formulation is, of course, incomplete. The Thomist must still specify conditions  $c$ . But I'm not sure that it matters how  $c$  is characterized in this context. After all, the term "natural inclination" refers to just those inclinations that are natural to or inherent in beings by virtue of the kinds of things they are. Presumably, such inclinations would exist in all relevant conditions, assuming we hold the agent's nature constant. But for the purpose of this argument, conditions  $c$  can be idealized as necessary in order to render the argument plausible. As we have seen, such idealization appears to be a commonly accepted move among subjectivist philosophers; as such, idealization within a theory of value does not intolerably alienate an agent from his good.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism."

Equipped with this theory of value, the Thomist can retain both an objectivist theory of well-being *and* affirm welfare internalism. After all, it is only those goods that  $x$  has natural inclinations toward that count as good for him. At the same time, which goods  $x$  has natural inclinations towards is determined ultimately by objective facts about human nature.

An alternative theory of value is also available to the Thomist.<sup>40</sup> Without even specifically mentioning natural inclinations, the Thomist might accept something like the following:

*The Thomist Theory of Value 2:* for any object, event, state, etc.,  $\varphi$  and agent  $x$ ,  $x$  values  $\varphi$  insofar as  $x$  judges  $\varphi$  as good under conditions  $c$ .

This is more-or-less identical to the theory of value offered by Dorsey.<sup>41</sup> And like Dorsey's theory—and like most other subjectivist theories of value—conditions  $c$  can be idealized, counterfactual conditions. As we have seen, it is not intolerably alienating to require  $x$  to have “all the relevant facts,” to thoroughly consider the relevant circumstances, or to maintain consistent and coherent beliefs.<sup>42</sup> Nor is it intolerably alienating to require  $x$  to be acting according to practical reason.<sup>43</sup> The Thomist could adopt each of these proposed counterfactual conditions as part of this second theory of value. He may, in addition, want to also require that

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<sup>40</sup> These theories, at least for the Thomist, will be co-extensive. Because Aquinas offers an objectivist theory, conditions  $c$  in the second theory can be rigged such that the agent always values what he ought. Obviously, this move is generally not available to subjectivists, but that is partly why I find objectivism a more compelling view.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Dale Dorsey, "Subjectivism without Desire," *Philosophical Review* 121, no. 3 (2012).

<sup>42</sup> See Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*; Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism."

<sup>43</sup> Connie S. Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person," *Ethics* 106, no. 2 (1996): 305 n.15.

the agent be perfectly virtuous, in order to ensure that irrationality, lack of self-control, vice, and the passions do not unduly interfere with  $x$ 's judgment about what is good.

We can thus return to the good-value link. The good-value link is supposed to ensure that a welfare theory satisfies welfare internalism. And subjectivism is supposed to be appealing, at least in large part, because it generally satisfies welfare internalism. But we have just seen that the Thomistic natural law theory can easily accommodate welfare internalism. Whether we characterize the Thomistic theory of value in terms of natural inclinations or in terms of idealized rationality, the objectivist, perfectionist natural law theory of Aquinas satisfies the good-value link. And there seems to be no reason why other objectivist theories of well-being cannot similarly accommodate welfare internalism. After all, philosophers have long treated welfare internalism as something of a necessary condition, not a sufficient condition.<sup>44</sup> That is, philosophers who have defended welfare internalism argue that there must be some link between an agent and his good—not that the link *solely determine* the agent's good. Thus the compatibility of welfare internalism and objectivism; under Aquinas' theory, things are not good for someone solely because they are valued (though that may be how we know they are good), rather, things are valued—i.e. we are naturally inclined towards them, or we judge them as good under proper conditions—because they are perfective of us; they fulfill us. Subjectivism does not have a monopoly on welfare internalism. The subjectivist cannot, therefore, argue that

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<sup>44</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism," 80-90; Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*.

subjectivism is a more plausible family of welfare theories because it can accommodate welfare internalism. Welfare internalism can easily be found elsewhere.

#### **IV. Objections and Replies**

A number of objections might arise here. First, one might simply point out that the above theories of value are a bit vague. This is true—I have thus far provided only a sketch of possible Thomistic theories. I have not attempted to explain precisely what counts as a natural inclination, nor do I argue for any particular counterfactual conditions that a Thomist might wish to include within a theory of value.

My goal, however, was not to defend a particular view of natural inclinations or of Aquinas' precise understanding of practical rationality. Rather, I merely hoped to show that welfare internalism can be satisfied by a Thomistic theory of value. Because of the frequent disagreement between Thomistic scholars about how to identify and categorize natural inclinations, I deliberately avoided precisely specifying their nature, content, and how we know them. But I take it that a number of Thomistic theories will fit within the general framework that I described above.

Take, for example, John Finnis' understanding of natural inclinations. Finnis argues that natural inclinations are not demonstrable from abstract, speculative philosophical reasoning—we cannot start with a prior understanding of human nature and work backwards to identify our natural inclinations.<sup>45</sup> Rather, a natural inclination is a certain kind of urge or motivational force

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<sup>45</sup> Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 33.

that, if acted upon, would render an action intelligible.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, someone like Anthony Lisska argues that natural inclinations are known only through speculative reason and from a prior understanding of human nature.<sup>47</sup> Natural inclinations are an object's essential dispositional properties that must be uncovered through philosophical analysis; it is possible that such an inclination does not (implicitly or explicitly) factor into an agent's rational decision-making.<sup>48</sup> And philosophers like Mark Murphy advocate for a middle ground—that natural inclinations are those that can be recognized as inclining us towards (what we theoretically understand to be) human flourishing *and* that provide us with good reasons for acting.<sup>49</sup> In any case, natural inclinations provide the necessary link between the agent and his good. The fact that philosophers disagree about how, precisely, to characterize this relation is immaterial for the present argument.

The second objection to the Thomistic theories of value above is that they are philosophically unhelpful. In fact, it might be argued that there is some circularity present in the above analysis. One might argue that both of the theories above have some built-in normative content. As such, the theories are not terribly helpful in identifying an agent's good, since the above theories of value seem to take the good as prior to value.

Take, for example, the first Thomistic theory of value. Is it possible to give a purely descriptive (i.e. non-evaluative) formulation of natural inclinations? It seems that under any view

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>47</sup> Anthony J. Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law : An Analytic Reconstruction* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1996), 103.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, 19.

of natural inclinations described above, there must be some evaluative content informing what constitutes a natural inclination. Under Finnis' view, objects of our natural inclinations render an action intelligible—but intelligibility is a product of substantive practical reason. That is, an action is only intelligible insofar as its object already strikes us as something worth pursuing (i.e. “good”).<sup>50</sup> Under Lisska's view, natural inclinations likewise come with pre-installed normative content, since our knowledge of our natural inclinations is derived from our prior understanding of human flourishing.<sup>51</sup> And Murphy's middle-ground position imports normative content from both sources.<sup>52</sup> One might rightly argue that, under pretty much all characterizations of natural inclinations, normative content may be snuck into the first Thomistic theory of value. And the same could be said for the second Thomistic theory of value. While there is no explicit normative content within the theory itself, the Thomist—as an objectivist—must construct conditions *c* such that the agent will always end up getting the “right result.” But insofar as there is a right result to be got, the Thomistic theories of value fail to explain what makes something good for someone.

I have two responses to this objection. First, I do not believe that the above theories of value necessarily sneak in any more normative language or content than do equivalent subjectivist welfare theories. Recall that the starting point, for Aquinas, is that happiness is the end towards which all of our actions are derived.<sup>53</sup> We may fail to achieve this end for a variety of reasons—failures of instrumental rationality, failures in recognizing in what happiness

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<sup>50</sup> Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 32.

<sup>51</sup> Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law : An Analytic Reconstruction*, 103.

<sup>52</sup> Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae Q.1, a.7.

consists, failures of virtue, failures of circumstance, etc.—but nonetheless, happiness remains a chief aim. Our natural inclinations, understood at a purely formal level, are just those that lead us towards happiness (i.e. as our ultimate end). And prudential goodness is simply a measure of whether and to what extent something will bring us closer to the ultimate end of happiness. We can thus have a purely formal sketch of natural inclinations, fit for a theory of value, that does not sneak in any *substantive* normative content. This, I think, ought to satisfy objecting subjectivists. Insofar as someone—even a subjectivist—accepts Aristotle’s truism that happiness (in its formal sense) is our chief aim, then the objects of our desires, judgments, or pro-attitudes (or whatever the key relation-*r* of a theory of value happens to be) are good for us in the same way as are the objects of our natural inclinations within the Thomistic theory. That is, regardless of the theory of value, the goods related to by relation-*r* are good for us insofar as they bring us closer to—or are constitutive components of—to this formal notion we call “happiness.”

The same could be said for the second Thomistic theory of value. A subjectivist might object to importing implicit normative content into conditions *c* within the second Thomistic theory of value. But subjectivist philosophers often imply normative content within their own theories of value. Recall that Richard Brandt suggested that “cognitive psychotherapy” would be required to correctly identify someone’s values.<sup>54</sup> Cognitive therapy presupposes the possibility of a properly-functioning mind (a normative concept); Brandt’s theory is rigged to guarantee that the agent is of such a mind for the satisfaction of his desires to be good for him. The Thomistic theory is no different—like Brandt’s counterfactual conditions, the counterfactual conditions

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<sup>54</sup> Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, 113.

within the Thomistic theory are intended to guarantee that the agent is of such a mind (or possesses such virtue) that his judgments about the good properly track what is, in fact, good for him. Insofar as Brandt requires cognitive psychotherapy for an agent's *r*-relation (desire) to count as value (i.e. good for him), so too can Aquinas require virtue for an agent's *r*-relation (judgment) to count as value (i.e. good for him). Similarly, subjectivist philosophers often invoke normative terms like coherence and consistency, thereby reading into the conditions of valuing certain norms of practical reason. It is hard to see how employing such formal, normative concepts within a theory of value is so objectionable, when in fact most subjectivist philosophers employ such concepts themselves.

My second response is that this objection may simply miss the point. Even if the Thomistic theories of value snuck normative content into the theory of value in ways that subjectivist theories do not—so what? Including such normative content—even if it is substantive normative content—in a theory of value is simply not a problem within an objectivist theory of well-being. If the above theories of value were being used to (fully) *determine* or *explain* what constitutes an agent's good, and they indeed include substantive, normative content, then perhaps that would be a problem; perhaps we would then approach circularity. But the Thomistic theories above are not intended to (fully) explain or determine the source of goodness; goodness is instead determined and explained (at least partially) by a perfectionistic account of human nature.<sup>55</sup> Rather, I offer the Thomistic theories as a mere part of a larger,

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<sup>55</sup> As mentioned earlier, there is some intermural debate about this premise. But even Finnis appears to affirm it. See John Finnis, "Aquinas and Natural Law Jurisprudence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Natural Law Jurisprudence*, ed. George Duke and Robert P. George (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 19.

objectivist theory of well-being—as such, the good need not be (and cannot be) fully determined or explained by reference to an individual’s values.

## V. Assessing Objectivism and Subjectivism

The real objection, it seems, is not to the Thomistic theories of value. Rather, insofar as someone objects to the fact that a person’s good is not (fully) determined by his values, it seems that the objection is directed not at my particular welfare theory, but at objectivism itself. And it is true, objectivist theories of well-being run a greater risk of alienating an agent from his good than do subjectivist theories. But as I have shown, at least *some* objectivist theories can indeed satisfy welfare internalism, which ought to ensure the non-alienation of an agent from his good.

### A. *Do the Thomistic Theories of Value Alienate?*

Nonetheless, someone may argue that objectivist theories—such as the one I offer here—might still alienate an agent from his good, despite the fact they satisfy welfare internalism. After all, if prudential goodness is not wholly derived from an agent’s values, how can the objectivist *really* ensure that the agent is not alienated from his good?

I do not find this to be a serious problem. Or, rather, I do not think that this is a problem for objectivists any more than it is for subjectivists. In the real world, we do not know what a particular agent would take the relevant *r*-relation towards under idealized, counterfactual conditions. Suppose that both a subjectivist and an objectivist came across someone who valued nothing but self-harm.<sup>56</sup> I presume that both the subjectivist and the objectivist would deny that

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<sup>56</sup> To avoid question-begging, I do not intend self-harm to analytically entail a decline of well-being. This could be understood as physical harm, mental harm, emotional harm, so long as that does not *necessarily* require a decline in well-being.

pursuing self-harm would be good for this person. But to maintain this position, both the subjectivist and the objectivist must appeal to some criteria for goodness and badness beyond the person's actually-existing relevant *r*-relations. From the perspective of this unfortunate person, the pleas to avoid self-harm would appeal to notions of goodness and badness that at least *seem* intolerably alienating. It does not matter to the self-harming agent that he would take the proper *r*-relation to, say, physical health were he more rational, aware, or if he underwent cognitive therapy. At the end of the day, the subjectivist and objectivist are both telling this unfortunate fellow he's wrong. He will feel alienated, even if the correct theory of value determines that he does, in fact, actually value physical health. And this would be the case whether the correct theory of welfare were subjectivist or objectivist; there is no reason to think that objectivism is any more potentially alienating than subjectivism, so long as the good-value link is satisfied.

Nor does it do much good to say that the *r*-relation must be—in order to avoid alienation—something of inherent motivational force, such as desire. The first Thomistic theory above appeals to natural inclinations, which do (under most interpretations of Aquinas) have motivational force. And while it is true that the second Thomistic theory is grounded in judgements and beliefs, this should not render someone's good too alienating. It is worth noting that some subjectivists also accept theories of value based on judgments—so again, the Thomistic theory is no more alienating than its subjectivist counterparts.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Aquinas does not accept instrumentalism of practical reason. Rather, he believes that we have an inherent, natural desire for the good understood as such; thus cognitive apprehension of the good has

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<sup>57</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism."

motivational force.<sup>58</sup> For this reason, it cannot be said that a purely cognitive theory of value generates alienation from the good. So Aquinas' objectivist welfare theory does not appear to be intolerably alienating; rather, as I will argue, it could be that objectivist theories are actually *less* alienating than subjectivist alternatives.

### *B. Subjectivism and Fallibility*

The self-harm example reveals one of the reasons that I am suspicious of welfare subjectivism. Namely, it is difficult to see what a subjectivist's justification is for maintaining that an agent must be under certain counterfactual, idealized conditions for the relevant *r*-relation to count as valuing. Examine the following:

*Intuitive Fallibility:* *x* takes relevant relation *r* towards  $\varphi$  in actually-existing conditions, but we intuitively take  $\varphi$  to be quite bad for *x*.

The welfare theorist has a choice. He can accept that  $\varphi$  is, in fact, good for *x*, despite his intuitions. Or he can deny that  $\varphi$  is good for *x*, and instead say that the object *x* takes relation-*r* towards in counterfactual, idealized conditions is instead what is good for *x*. For the objectivist (committed to internalism), if  $\varphi$  is not objectively good, he can simply deny that *x* values  $\varphi$ ; that is, the relevant *r*-relation must exist under certain idealized conditions to count as valuing. The subjectivist may likewise want to deny the goodness of  $\varphi$ —but on what grounds? Why is a

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<sup>58</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-IIae, Q.8 a.1.

theory that denies the goodness of  $\varphi$  more plausible than one that affirms it? Beyond mere intuition, it is unclear what the subjectivist's justification is for requiring idealized conditions.<sup>59</sup>

One possible justification for requiring idealized conditions is that determining what one values—because of the nature of value—*requires* a certain level of idealization. For example, perhaps in order to understand what someone values, we must first impose something like coherence and consideration requirements.<sup>60</sup> Or perhaps to determine an agent's values, he must first have “an accurate understanding phenomenological and otherwise, of what an option would be like are responsive to the true nature of the option under consideration.”<sup>61</sup>

Fair enough. But this does not solve the problem of intuitive fallibility. Take the following subjectivist theory of value:

*Sobel-Dorsey Idealization:*  $x$  values  $\varphi$  insofar as  $x$  would take relation  $r$  towards  $\varphi$  if  $x$  adequately considered what  $\varphi$  would truly be like (phenomenologically and otherwise), and taking relation  $r$  towards  $\varphi$  is coherent with  $x$ 's other beliefs and values.<sup>62</sup>

This theory of value puts  $x$  in an epistemic, psychological condition such that his values are discernable and the available options are fully understood (in the right way). Nonetheless, we can still run the intuitive fallibility argument. Suppose that  $x$  values self-harm. Again, the welfare

<sup>59</sup> David Enoch is similarly suspicious of subjectivist idealization. He argues that there are few possible justifications for idealization; they are either inadequate or implicitly presuppose some non-subjective normative authority. David Enoch, "Why Idealize?," *Ethics* 115, no. 4 (2005). The argument here roughly tracks Enoch's argument, though I hope to close off possible responses to his argument, such as the response given by David Sobel. David Sobel, "Subjectivism and Idealization," *ibid.* 119, no. 2 (2009).

<sup>60</sup> Dorsey, "Idealization and the Heart of Subjectivism," 203-09.

<sup>61</sup> Sobel, "Subjectivism and Idealization," 345.

<sup>62</sup> This formulation can be amended to ensure that the conditions under which relation  $r$  exists are all and only those that are required for discerning values and alternatives to be chosen, as Dorsey and Sobel argued are required.

theorist has a choice: he can either accept the counter-intuitive result, or he can amend the theory of value. But for a subjectivist, any amendment to the theory must be purely formal—it cannot (necessarily) entail any *substantive* result about what  $x$  will, in fact, end up valuing. So whatever additional conditions are added—perfect instrumental rationality, knowledge of all the non-evaluative facts, “cognitive psychotherapy,” and the like—those conditions cannot *guarantee* a substantive result (such as not valuing self-harm).<sup>63</sup> Moreover, any amendment to the theory of value to avoid an undesirable result must be justified by considerations other than mere formal precision (since those are already taken into account); nor can it be grounded in a belief that the theory gets “the wrong result.” After all, at least at some point, the subjectivist must accept the infallibility of the person’s values. Thus, the subjectivist is stuck with the possibility of an agent valuing intuitively-bad things. Objectivist theories have no such problem.

None of this may worry a sufficiently committed subjectivist. But this line of reasoning forces the question: what is more likely—that subjectivism is true, or that self-harm can be good for someone? Insofar as self-harm’s goodness is implausible, so too is subjectivism. But someone committed to internalism need not fret—as we have seen, there are objectivist theories of well-being that can accept internalism. Thus, objective theories can avoid some of subjectivism’s inherent problems while adopting one of its most attractive features.

### C. *Subjectivism and Value*

Another related problem for subjectivism is that, under subjectivism, there can be no prudential, non-instrumental reason to value anything. Suppose that  $x$  believes he values  $\varphi$ , and

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<sup>63</sup> It is also unclear what the reasons could be for requiring such additional conditions, once we’ve satisfied the formal requirements suggested by Dorsey and Sobel.

thinks that  $\varphi$  would also be good for  $y$ . What reason can  $x$  give to  $y$  for valuing  $\varphi$ ? Under subjectivism, no non-instrumental, prudential reason can be given. Unlike objectivism, the subjectivist cannot explain why, as a normative matter,  $\varphi$  ought to be valued. The objectivist can:  $\varphi$  ought to be valued because (for example) given human nature, it is fulfilling or perfective of us. That is,  $\varphi$  is a partial realization of the happiness and human flourishing we necessarily seek in a human act.<sup>64</sup>

This scenario might be understood differently, however. The subjectivist might reply by saying that  $x$  is not really trying to convince  $y$  to value  $\varphi$ ; rather,  $x$  is in fact trying to point out that he ( $y$ ) *already* values  $\varphi$ . Thus,  $x$  might point to certain facts about the world, certain experiences, as well as  $y$ 's other beliefs and values in order to show that, actually,  $y$  does value  $\varphi$  and should therefore pursue it.<sup>65</sup> But this does not really solve the problem. Because  $y$  might, as a result of  $x$ 's persuasion, come to (correctly) recognize that he does, in fact, value  $\varphi$ . But if  $y$  then asks  $x$  whether he should *retain* this value—what answer can  $x$  give?<sup>66</sup> If  $x$  is an objectivist, he can reply by explaining why  $\varphi$  is, in fact, objectively good and ought to be valued. But if  $x$  is a subjectivist, he can offer no explanation. This strikes me as intolerably alienating—it seems that  $x$  is in a certain sense alienated from his good—for subjectivism can provide him no (prudential, intrinsic) reason for why he ought to retain the values that determine his good.

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<sup>64</sup> See Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Beatitude: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, Ia Iiae, Qq. 1-54* (St. Louis: Herder, 1956), 33-36.

<sup>65</sup> Because all humans necessarily value (by reason of either human nature or the nature of practical reason) the objective good, this is in fact the response that someone defending the Thomistic approach might give.

<sup>66</sup> The following argument adapts and simplifies a line of argument put forward by Mark Murphy. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, 71-76, 81-90.

If  $y$  indeed values  $\varphi$  (assuming, let's say, a perfectly idealized subjectivist theory of value), then, as a subjectivist,  $x$  can provide no (prudential) reason to continue valuing  $\varphi$ . True,  $x$  might point to a few accidental factors—sunk costs, attainability, etc. But these are mere instrumental reasons; their force is wholly derivative of whatever intrinsic reason  $y$  has to value  $\varphi$ . And under subjectivism,  $y$  has no intrinsic reason to value  $\varphi$ . We can also flip the situation; suppose now that  $y$  (correctly) recognizes that he values  $\psi$ . He then asks (perhaps because of social disapproval of  $\psi$ ) whether he should stop valuing  $\psi$ . Again,  $x$  can provide no non-instrumental, non-accidental reason for  $y$  to stop valuing  $\psi$ . (We could also assume that  $\psi$  is the only thing  $y$  values, so that any appeal to social stigma, wealth, friendships, virtue, etc. will fall on deaf ears—for  $y$  values none of those things.) This too appears alienating—there is no intrinsic “fit” or “resonance” between  $y$  and his two options: to continue valuing  $\psi$  or to stop valuing  $\psi$ . There would be such a fit under the Thomistic approach; if  $\psi$  were, in fact, objectively good, then  $y$ 's exercise of practical reason would (ideally) be responsive to that fact, and his natural inclinations would draw him towards it. But this response is not available to the subjectivist.

Again, this might not convince any thoroughly committed subjectivist of subjectivism's problems. But I take it as a starting point that we ought to prudentially value what's good for us. It is difficult for the subjectivist to explain why we prudentially ought to value anything at all—beyond a mere nod to the fact that we have to value *something* in order for our well-being to improve. But this is an empty response. For one, it seems to presuppose that we ought to value our well-being, and thus may end up begging the question. But more formally speaking: valuing something is only good for someone insofar as it creates the possibility of obtaining the thing valued. Creating the possibility of obtaining thing valued, however, is not good in itself. Rather,

it is only good insofar as the thing valued is good. But, according to subjectivism, nothing is intrinsically good prior to its being valued. The conclusion: under subjectivism, there's no intrinsic, prudential reason to value anything. And I take this to be an odd result. Moreover, it seems that an agent's lack of reasons to value something are intolerably alienating, in much the same way that an agent's lack of motivational states towards, evaluative judgments about, or intrinsic desires for her good would be intolerably alienating.<sup>67</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

The point is simple: welfare subjectivism does not have a monopoly on welfare internalism. Rather, welfare internalism can be easily adopted by objectivist theories. And indeed, prominent objectivist welfare theories have incorporated at least some version of welfare internalism. Thomas Aquinas, I argue, puts forth one such theory. At bottom, there must be some real link between an agent and his good, whether we cash that out in terms of human nature (i.e. natural inclinations) or in terms of rationality (i.e. rational judgment). The Thomistic theories of value, I argue, are no more alienating than their subjectivist counterparts; there is no reason to reject Aquinas' theory (much less welfare objectivism in principle) on the grounds that it denies welfare internalism.

At the same time, Aquinas' objectivist theory can avoid many of the common pitfalls of subjectivism. Unlike subjectivism, an objectivist theory can explain *why* someone ought to value something. Namely, that it is good. And this would be the case even if it were not, in fact, valued by the person. (Aquinas, in adopting internalism, accepts that, at least on some level, good is, in

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<sup>67</sup> Rosati, "Internalism and the Good for a Person," 298.

fact, valued by us as humans—whether at the level of a natural inclination or at the level of idealized judgment—but this is, in a sense, coincident, not causal). Moreover, objectivist philosophers have justification for amending theories of value in such a way that the agent's values track what is antecedently known, believed, or theorized to be good for him. The subjectivist cannot; beyond mere formal tinkering with a theory of value in order to correctly and specify what, exactly, an agent values, a subjectivist is forced to provide a different explanation for why the theory is unacceptable *or* bite the bullet on a counter-intuitive result.

## Paper 2: Finding Pleasure and Satisfaction in Perfectionism

### I. Introduction

Welfare perfectionism holds that  $\phi$  is intrinsically good for  $x$  if and only if, and to the extent that,  $\phi$  perfects (or is a perfection of)  $x$ 's nature or certain key faculties of  $x$ .<sup>68</sup> Because  $x$ 's nature and faculties are typically defined without reference to individual (i.e. subjective) attitudes, preferences, desires, values, and mental states of  $x$ , welfare perfectionism is taken to be an objective—as opposed to subjective—theory of well-being. This is because subjective theories ground well-being in a subject's attitudes, preferences desires, values, or mental states, whereas objective theories ground well-being in facts that are, at least to some degree, independent of such subjective considerations.<sup>69</sup>

There are various forms of welfare perfectionism. After all, a full theory of welfare perfectionism would require a description or definition of  $x$ 's nature or faculties; determining the essence, core capacities, or central features of (for example) human nature is by itself a momentous philosophical undertaking, which engenders countless debate and disagreement. Two perfectionists with differing accounts of human nature, then, would likely have different substantive accounts of what is good for humans. Moreover, philosophers might disagree about how to characterize  $x$  in the first place. In the case of humans, one might disagree about whether

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<sup>68</sup> See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 4-5. See also William Lauinger, "The Strong-Tie Requirement and Objective-List Theories of Well-Being," *An International Forum* 16, no. 5 (2013): 63; Dale Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," *Noûs* 44, no. 1 (2010): 59-64.

<sup>69</sup> See "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," 61. See also Dorsey, "Subjectivism without Desire," 61; L. W. Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 39-41; William Lauinger, *Well-Being and Theism* (Bloomsbury, 2012), 4; Sobel, *From Valuing to Value : A Defense of Subjectivism*, 2.

the nature to be considered is *human* nature (i.e. the nature of a biological species), or *rational* nature (i.e. the nature of a rational decisionmaker), or any other alternate characterization.<sup>70</sup>

Finally, perfectionists might disagree about how one perfects his or her nature—what actions, occasions, or things actually perfect *x*'s nature in a way that contributes towards well-being.<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, these various flavors of welfare perfectionism share the name insofar as they maintain that well-being is constituted by the perfection or fulfillment of certain potencies.

Every theory has critics; welfare perfectionism is no exception. Many philosophers find welfare perfectionism implausible because it is arguably under-inclusive. That is, it fails to count as good certain acts, events, and things that intuitively improve one's quality of life. For example, some philosophers intuit that the satisfaction of desires—at least in some circumstances—directly contributes to well-being. Likewise, philosophers intuit that the experience of pleasure—at least in certain circumstances—directly contributes to well-being. The problem for welfare perfectionism is straightforward: neither desire-satisfaction nor the experience of pleasure seem to perfect (or be perfections of) one's nature.

This, then, leaves two options for the welfare perfectionist. He can "bite the bullet" and argue that these intuitions are mistaken; that we are wrong to think that pleasure and desire-satisfaction *themselves* impact well-being. Alternatively, he can explain how such intuitive goods—despite their apparent incompatibility with welfare perfectionism—can nevertheless directly contribute to well-being. In this paper, I advance the latter approach. In particular, I argue that at least for some perfectionists—and specifically for Thomas Aquinas—desire-

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<sup>70</sup> See Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 9-10; Brink, "The Significance of Desire," 33-36.

<sup>71</sup> See Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," 62-63.

satisfaction and pleasure *both* directly contribute to well-being, even within welfare perfectionism. Whatever other objections people may have to the philosophy of Aquinas, one cannot argue that their perfectionistic theories of well-being neglect the intuitive importance of desire-satisfaction and pleasure.

A brief roadmap. In the first section, I will present the arguments made against welfare perfectionism by its critics, in particular those who believe that perfectionism cannot accommodate our intuition that certain elements of experience—such as pleasure or satisfaction—make our lives better. I will then briefly describe two leading perfectionist theories, so we can see why such theories do in fact seem to exclude desire-satisfaction and pleasure from the conversation about what’s good for us. I will then go on to explain why certain forms of perfectionism need not reject the importance of desire and pleasure. To do this, I will sketch out—in fairly general terms—certain aspects of Aquinas’ philosophy. His account of human well-being provides a historical example of a perfectionist theory that affirms the importance of desire and pleasure. We end with the conclusion that, regardless of the substantive merits of the Thomistic approach, welfare perfectionism is perfectly consistent with the intuition that satisfied desires and pleasure tend to make our lives go better.

## **II. Critiques of Welfare Perfectionism**

This, then, sets up a simple critique of perfectionism. In our daily lives, we often assume that pleasure is, all things being equal, better than pain. We assume that a life in which no desires are satisfied is missing out on something. The importance of satisfying our desires and having a pleasant go of life is straightforward and intuitive. Thus the critique: welfare perfectionism, it seems, cannot accommodate the intuitive importance of desire-satisfaction or pleasure. The life of practical or theoretical excellence—as Aristotle would have it—and the life of rational

perfection—as Kant would have it—prioritizes reason over the will, and virtuous conduct over pleasure-seeking. If the only intrinsic good is (say) rational excellence, then the satisfaction of desires or the experience of pleasure make no difference in how good one’s life is. The result would be a strange conception of welfare—one completely detached from subjective experience, pleasures, attitudes, preferences, desires, and values. Perfectionism, therefore, does not give us a plausible account of well-being.<sup>72</sup>

This argument has been framed in various ways. L.W. Sumner argues that perfectionist theories are not plausible theories of well-being because they fail to take into consideration an agent’s evaluative perspective in determining what is good for him.<sup>73</sup> Sumner claims that, because perfectionism fails to take into an individual’s perspective, it fails at a conceptual level. I take this to be an extremely strong position—most philosophers, I think, do not assume perfectionism fails at the conceptual level. Nevertheless, perfectionist theories of well-being are said to “deny the influence of our desires.”<sup>74</sup> And philosophers committed to the importance of

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<sup>72</sup> The arguments that I examine here are not the only arguments raised against perfectionism. Daniel Haybron raises an argument that is similar—like the general thrust of the argument here, Haybron points out that perfectionism delivers counter-intuitive results when evaluating the lives of certain people. Daniel M. Haybron, "Well-Being and Virtue," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* (2007): 5-10. Instead of criticizing perfectionism’s ability to accommodate things like pleasure and desire-satisfaction in general, Haybron focuses on situations in which certain kinds of experience seem more appropriate for someone given his or her life situation. While I do not intend to combat this criticism here, I think that perfectionists certainly have tools at their disposal to respond to such objections. See, e.g., Antti Kauppinen, "Working Hard and Kicking Back: The Case for Diachronic Perfectionism," *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* (2009).

<sup>73</sup> Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism," 59.

desire within welfare theories might therefore be turned off by perfectionism. Thus the challenge: can perfectionism recognize the necessity of desire-satisfaction within the good life?

A second challenge concerns the role of pleasure within the good life. Richard Arneson argues that perfectionism “denies value to much that seems worthwhile.”<sup>75</sup> For example, he points to our intuition that certain “cheap thrills” seem to make our lives go better. As Arneson explains, cheap thrills are

activities that provide pleasure and excitement without any significant effort or sacrifice on the part of the agent and also without the exercise or development of any of the agent’s significant talents. Cheap thrills are pleasures with no redeeming social value beyond their pleasantness.<sup>76</sup>

Arneson goes on to say:

I take it that the pleasures of cheap thrills will not register at all on a perfectionist measure of the prudential value of people’s lives, but I would think that if these pleasures were to disappear without replacement, the world would be immensely worse and most human lives significantly blighted.<sup>77</sup>

We might call this the cheap-thrills challenge: can perfectionism affirm the intrinsic goodness of a broad class of lesser, minor goods unassociated with effort, sacrifice, or talent? Can perfectionism recognize the intrinsic value of “cheap thrills”?

I believe that both questions can be answered in the affirmative. A perfectionistic account of well-being can accommodate simple pleasures and “cheap thrills”—and it can do so without

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<sup>75</sup> Richard Arneson, "Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16, no. 1 (1999): 120.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

devolving into an objective-list theory.<sup>78</sup> While several of the more popular perfectionist theories of welfare do deny the importance of desire and pleasure, the theory of Thomas Aquinas, which I will briefly outline in the second half of this paper, does not. And this shows, if I am successful, that perfectionism as such need not deny the importance of desire-satisfaction and pleasure.

### **III. Leading Theories of Welfare Perfectionism**

Two of the leading welfare perfectionists, Thomas Hurka and David Brink, do indeed suggest that desire and pleasure are largely irrelevant to well-being—or at least, can only play an accidental or instrumental role. The argument that perfectionism counter-intuitively neglects such presumably important things as pleasure and desire-satisfaction, then, may be well-grounded when applied to their theories. And, as mentioned previously, such arguments are intuitive. All things being equal, we often think, a more pleasant human life is preferable to a less pleasant one; a life in which more desires are satisfied is likely better than one without such satisfactions.<sup>79</sup> Neither Hurka nor Brink take this to be a compelling objection against their approaches—they simply deny that pleasure or desire-satisfaction plays a meaningful role in the quality of one's life. But this is not a necessary consequence of perfectionism. Rather, perfectionism can easily accept the proposition that satisfaction and pleasure play meaningful roles in the good life.

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<sup>78</sup> This paper assumes that a perfectionist theory is preferable to an objective-list theory insofar as perfectionism can (by reference to human nature) provide a unifying explanation of the goodness of various things. Objective-list theory, by definition, provides no such explanation. This is not an objection against objective-list theories per se (after all, perhaps there simply is no explanation for why things are good for us), but generally speaking, we tend to favor theories with more explanatory power over those with less.

<sup>79</sup> Hurka would be unbothered by this prospect, as he offers perfectionism as a moral theory and not a theory of well-being.

However, it may nevertheless still be important to explain why perfectionists such as Hurka and Brink—as well as other perfectionists with similar theories—do not find pleasure or desire-satisfaction important to well-being. In this section, I will present a brief sketch of their respective positions, presenting also their reasoning behind why they reject pleasure and desire as important.

#### A. *Thomas Hurka and the Aristotelian Approach*

In the opening pages of his 1993 book *Perfectionism*, Thomas Hurka presents the core of his theory of perfectionism:

Certain properties, [perfectionism] says, constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity—they make humans humans. The good life, it then says, develops these properties to a high degree or realizes what is central to human nature.<sup>80</sup>

For Hurka, this is the distinguishing feature of perfectionism. Various perfectionistic philosophers—including Plato, Aristotle, Marx, Kant and others—may disagree with one another about what properties actually constitute or define human nature, but they nonetheless agree that such properties are central to morality or well-being.

The relevant properties are those essential to human nature—that is, only those properties that humans possess necessarily.<sup>81</sup> This is, at least for Hurka, one of the central selling points of his theory—that perfectionism calls us to develop that which is most fundamental to us as humans. Hurka readily adopts a broadly Aristotelian view of human nature which thereby informs his understanding of the human good: “physical perfection, which develops our physical

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<sup>80</sup> Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

nature, and theoretical and practical perfection, which develop theoretical and practical rationality.”<sup>82</sup>

This results in a rather constrained view of the good; any purported good must somehow instantiate physical excellence or develop human nature as an exercise of “sophisticated rationality.”<sup>83</sup> With this in mind, it is rather easy to see why desire-satisfaction or pleasure count for nothing when it comes to well-being. As Hurka explicitly states: “[w]hatever some philosophers have claimed, our intuitions recognize that mere pleasure is not a serious value.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, “perfectionism does not find intrinsic value in pleasure, not even pleasure in what is good, nor does it find intrinsic disvalue in pain.”<sup>85</sup> Pleasure, he argues, is a purely passive phenomenon, whereas in perfectionism, “the good is largely active.”<sup>86</sup> Insofar as pleasure is simply something that happens to an agent, rather than something that the agent does, pleasure does not contribute to someone’s perfection.

This position, I should point out, is not merely a consequence of Hurka’s denial that he is engaging in welfare theory. The account of human perfection that he gives does not (obviously) hinge on whether he is employing it within a theory of morality or of well-being. Pleasure is

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 51. Other contemporary Aristotelian perfectionists include Philippa Foot and Richard Kraut. Richard Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Foot, *Natural Goodness*. Neither make an effort to show that pleasure is part of the good.

<sup>83</sup> Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 149.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 59.

passive, says Hurka, and therefore it does not play a role in human perfection—regardless of whether human perfection is considered in light of morality or prudential value.

At the same time, Hurka's Aristotelian perfectionism is still able to accommodate a broad range of possible activities. For example, he argues that using one's rationality to further the good of other people is itself intrinsically good—this allows him to say that, for example, love is a good thing; or at least that “the active pursuit of others' perfection” is intrinsically good.<sup>87</sup> So relationships of love—which are often characterized by desire and pleasure—can still be important within Hurka's framework. It is simply that what is valuable about such relationships is that they require the use and development of practical rationality. After all, coordinating efforts with other people (including in situations that deal with the aspirations, intimacies, and vulnerabilities of others) would itself be an exercise in practical rationality and could thereby be counted as intrinsically valuable. Pleasure and desire might then play an instrumental role in these relationships—that we may be more inclined to make a greater effort in our relationships insofar as we desire the good of the other person, or insofar as we enjoy their company and success.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, the point remains: satisfaction and pleasure do not contribute to Hurka's account of human perfection. Hurka acknowledges that perhaps some theory could be created

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 132-33.

<sup>88</sup> See *ibid.*, 170. I take this to be a shortcoming in Hurka's theory. To unfairly characterize only slightly, Hurka's theory suggests that love is valuable only insofar as it requires brainpower, planning, and coordination.

that recognizes both perfection *and* satisfaction as goods; this kind of “hybrid” or “pluralistic” theory is of course quite possible. He says:

My claim is not that satisfaction has no value. Pure perfectionism makes this claim, but there is also the possibility of a pluralist theory that weighs perfectionist ideas against others about, for example, pleasure or desire-fulfillment. Such a theory can combine these ideas in different ways. It can treat satisfaction as simply another value alongside perfection, or it can say that satisfaction has value only, or has the most value, when it is satisfaction *in* perfection, for example, pleasure in scientific research.<sup>89</sup>

Such hybrid or pluralistic accounts will be discussed below. But it seems that any theory which accepts the importance of satisfaction or pleasure, at least according to Hurka, cannot be a pure perfectionistic theory—it must be some other kind of theory (i.e. an objective-list theory).

There is tension between this claim—that counting desire and pleasure as important is incompatible with pure perfectionism—and the claim that historically perfectionist accounts have adopted views of desire that are supposed to fit within a perfectionist framework. For example, Hurka mentions that philosophers like Aquinas say that humans have certain natural desires, quoting Aquinas’ passage that reads:

Each thing is inclined naturally to an operation that is suitable to it according to its form: thus fire is inclined to give heat. Wherefore, since the rational soul is the proper form of man, there is in every man an inclination to act according to reason.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 27-28. As we will see, I think perfectionism is capable of taking satisfaction into consideration, at least to a certain extent.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 25. quoting Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q.94, art. 3. I do not see why this needs to be an “accretion” to perfectionism. It may be more than Hurka finds necessary, but within the Thomistic analysis, such claims are part of the metaphysical framework that justifies perfectionism in the first place.

Hurka likewise acknowledges that pleasure has been invoked as an important concept within some accounts of perfectionism.<sup>91</sup> But according to Hurka, such invocations of pleasure and desire “can only be accretions to perfectionism.”<sup>92</sup> They obscure the real working of the theory and can cause confusion. Furthermore, Hurka believes it to simply be false that humans have natural inclinations towards reason and perfection, and that even if humans do typically enjoy their perfections (and perfecting activities) this is not always the case. Perfectionism would be best off if it were to reject such a view.<sup>93</sup> Such accretions to perfectionism, Hurka asserts, divert attention from what is most important in perfectionism and invite needless objections.<sup>94</sup> Hurka describes, instead, a “non-teleological” form of perfectionism—one in which natural inclinations, natural desires, and natural ends play no real role in well-being and perfection.<sup>95</sup>

Thus we see no indication from Hurka that desire-satisfaction or pleasure—in themselves—have any place in human perfection. Rather, he seems to believe that insistence upon their importance is either evidence of a non-perfectionist theory or an unnecessary and helpful accretion to perfectionism. And while it’s true that an insistence upon the importance of desire-satisfaction and pleasure is unnecessary for perfectionism, it renders perfectionism more

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Hurka gives an example of a research scientist who desires to advance knowledge, which she may never satisfy—but nevertheless she lives a good life. He also points out that “If a strong desire or pleasure doctrine were true, pursuing excellence would be easy. Once we knew where our greatest good lay, achieving it would be just a matter of following our strongest want or enjoying our greatest pleasure.”

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>95</sup> This apparently being a departure from Aristotle.

intuitively plausible. As I will argue, Aquinas' view on pleasure and desire allow the Thomistic approach to withstand the objections raised above.

### *B. Brink and the Kantian Approach*

Another of the leading theories of perfectionism is offered by David Brink, who channels Immanuel Kant and T. H. Green in his approach. Brink is wary of desire-based approaches to well-being, as he believes they lack the normative authority that prudential value ought to have. He instead prefers objectivism to subjectivism: "one might understand a person's good in objective terms as consisting, for example, in the *perfection* of one's essential (e.g. rational or deliberative) capacities or in some *list* of disparate objective goods (e.g. knowledge, beauty, achievement, friendship, or equality)." <sup>96</sup> Of these two types of objectivist approaches, Brink prefers the first. He provides a few reasons. First, he points out that the second option (i.e. the objective-list theory) "may seem the only way to capture the variety of intrinsic goods." The problem, however, is that "if it is a mere list of goods, with no unifying strands, it begins to look like a disorganized *heap* of goods." <sup>97</sup> More to it, he suggests that the objective-list account suffers from the same problem that does desire-satisfaction: it does not adequately account for well-being's supposed normative authority, because the objective list theory cannot explain "why we should maintain our concern for items on the list if we already care about them and why we should care about items on the list if we do not yet." <sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Brink, "The Significance of Desire," 18.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

He avoids this “heap of goods” problem by adopting the second objectivist approach. He adopts a kind of perfectionism which “identifies a person’s good with the perfection of her nature and, in particular, with the development of her deliberative competence and the exercise of her capacities for practical deliberation.”<sup>99</sup> Brink states the doctrine of perfectionism simply: “Perfectionists identify the good with perfecting one’s nature.”<sup>100</sup> As a general rule, “perfectionist ideals often prize creative achievements that exercise the agent’s rational capacities in some way and condemn shallow and undemanding lives.”<sup>101</sup>

A key difference between Brink’s Kantianism and Hurka’s Aristotelianism is how they identify the relevant nature that is to be perfected. Hurka argues that it is *human* nature that ought to be perfected, keeping in mind that a human is a rational—but also biological—organism. Brink, on the other hand, focuses primarily on nature as rational agents; he grounds the standards of perfection not in contingent facts about our biological and psychological makeup, but in the nature of rational agency itself.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 33. This definition appears often throughout the literature, but I have my doubts about its appropriateness. It is not at all clear to me how one can go about perfecting his or her nature. One’s nature is a given, fixed thing—not the kind of thing to be perfected. Rather, I have always been under the impression that one’s nature generates the *norms* of prudential goodness and badness itself; thus one is better off perfecting *himself* in accordance with his nature, not “perfecting [his] nature.” Perhaps this is what is meant by the phrase, but if so, the phrasing could be improved.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. Scholars within the “New Natural Law” school often try to find a middle ground between traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic perfectionism and Kantian perfectionism; they argue that rationality, and not biology, generates the norms of well-being, but some of those norms involve bodily health, etc. See John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Brink finds this approach appealing because it preserves the “resonance condition”—i.e. that the good resonate with an individual for whom it is good—“without resort to problematic commitment to desire-dependence.”<sup>103</sup> The fact that a creature has a certain biological makeup provides no claim of normative authority upon that creature, nor does the mere fact that the creature has a particular desire for something or other. Instead, the demands of practical reason generate both (1) normative authority and (2) resonance, insofar as we are rational creatures engaged in exercising our rationality. We cannot escape the demands of rationality, and rationality cannot fail to resonate with a rational creature (with any intent on exercising rationality). But the same cannot be said of biological essence; while we cannot escape our biological natures, we might not treat the imperatives of biological existence—reproduction, health, digestion, etc.—as normative—we may decide to forgo all of them completely.

Unlike philosophers within the Humean tradition, Brink does not see practical reason as simply an exercise in efficiently obtaining objects of desire. If practical reason does indeed have normative authority, practical reason must be more than the mere exercise of instrumental rationality. According to Brink, desire has no “per se authority,” and as such, desire cannot ground the normativity of practical reason.<sup>104</sup> And while Brink says little about pleasure, one can assume that it likewise has no per se authority, and does not factor into an analysis of whether someone is exhibiting excellence in practical reason. Reasons, and not mere desire or pleasure, are and ought to be the starting point for practical reason. The ultimate upshot is that, under Brink’s neo-Kantian theory, pleasure and desire-satisfaction are of little to no import for well-

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<sup>103</sup> Brink, "The Significance of Desire," 6.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

being. Because practical rationality is the sole determiner of one's well-being, and because pleasure and desire are only—at most—accidentally related to rationality, then Brink's perfectionism fails to accommodate the intuitive goodness of both pleasure and desire satisfaction.

### *C. Modifications and Hybrid Theories*

Someone therefore attracted to the idea that perfection is prudentially valuable must either accept the fact that certain intuitive goods like pleasure and desire-satisfaction are not, in fact, goods, *or* he must find a theory that counts perfection as good without neglecting the goodness of pleasure and satisfaction. For those who prefer the second option, the most obvious tactic would be to adopt instead an “objective list” theory that gives perfection a prominent place on the list of objective goods.<sup>105</sup> This, one might think, provides the best of both worlds. We can still count perfection as good, but we can also call things like pleasure and desire-satisfaction good as well.

Many contemporary philosophers have put forward various hybrid approaches, including William Lauinger and Robert Adams, both of whom add certain “desire-fulfillment” or “enjoyment” conditions onto perfectionist theories.<sup>106</sup> Fred Feldman has entertained modified forms of hedonism that take into account the “worthiness” of certain pleasures.<sup>107</sup> Antti

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<sup>105</sup> For more on why some theorists prefer objective-list theory over perfectionism, see, e.g., Arneson, “Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction.”; Gwen Bradford, “Problems for Perfectionism,” *Utilitas* 29, no. 3 (2017).

<sup>106</sup> Lauinger, *Well-Being and Theism*; Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*.

<sup>107</sup> Fred Feldman, *Pleasure and the Good Life: Concerning the Nature Varieties and Plausibility of Hedonism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2004).

Kauppinen proposes a hybrid form of perfectionism that takes into account the “shape of a life.”<sup>108</sup> The basic idea that these theories share is that straightforward perfectionism is not enough to account for the intuitive goodness of desire-fulfillment, pleasure, or other activities not obviously geared towards self-perfection.

I find much to like in these proposals, because they do point to shortcomings in some of the more popular perfectionistic theories within the literature. But at the end of the day, none of these hybrid accounts explains why the additional conditions required for intrinsic goodness—e.g. desire-fulfillment, pleasure, shape of life, etc.—should count as intrinsically good for us. In most cases, they appeal to our intuitions, but do not provide any account of how these hybrid features connect with some notion of perfection or human nature. As such, the hybrid theories lack the explanatory unity that perfectionism is supposed to provide. And one of perfectionism’s chief strengths its explanatory unity: that the perfection of something *just is* what it means to be good for it.

So whatever the merit of such theories may be, they are not perfectionist theories. But I believe that a perfectionist theory can indeed recognize the importance of both desire-satisfaction and pleasure. And indeed, I believe Thomas Aquinas has already laid out such a position; in the remaining pages, I will sketch out an interpretation of Aquinas’ theory such that desire-satisfaction and pleasure can indeed be understood to be intrinsically good.

#### **IV. A Way Forward: Thomistic Perfectionism**

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<sup>108</sup> Kauppinen, "Working Hard and Kicking Back: The Case for Diachronic Perfectionism."

We can thus see the problem for perfectionism. Insofar as pleasure and desire-satisfaction are (intuitively) intrinsically good for our well-being, perfectionism—as described above—remains an implausible theory. To be sure, this does not prevent perfectionists from continuing to defend the theory, arguing (for example) that desire-satisfaction and pleasure are not all they're cracked up to be. Nonetheless, if perfectionism is to find any wider appeal, there must be some way to account for the goodness of desire-satisfaction and pleasure—or at least some way to account for the intuition that they are good.

The perfectionist could, of course, argue that the satisfaction of *certain* desires would indeed be good for someone. For example, if one desired increased knowledge, or health, or practical wisdom, the perfectionist would happily admit that the attainment of such goods would benefit that person. But this is not sufficient to dispel the critiques of perfectionism. After all, it seems that the attainment of such goods is not good by virtue of the subject's desires, but because such things are good in themselves. Such a modest admission on the part of the perfectionist would not make his theory any more accommodating of desire-satisfaction or pleasure; after all, the satisfaction of many other desires (e.g. immoral or frivolous desires) would not contribute to that person's well-being.

What the perfectionist needs, then, is a way to incorporate the satisfaction of desire and the attainment of pleasure into the description of perfection itself. That is, unlike philosophers like Adams, Lauinger, Feldman, and others, the perfectionist must not simply add a pleasure or desire requirement to well-being. Rather, pleasure and desire satisfaction must be examples of, essential to, or—at very least—proper accidents of perfection itself. Under such a view, it cannot be objected that pleasure and satisfaction are not incorporated into the good—because they will be.

### A. Aquinas' Mechanics of Desire

Ultimately, the goal of this argument is to show that desire and pleasure can be understood in terms of human perfection. And I believe that the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas does just that. However, it should be noted from the outset that Aquinas does not think that we can reach full perfection in this life.<sup>109</sup> As such, any perfection that we talk about as attainable in this life—which is the primary focus of this paper—is only “perfection” in an analogical sense. They are relative perfections, they do not constitute perfection in the fullest sense of the term. I do not take this to be a major difficulty for Aquinas' view, as I presume that most perfectionists share the view that we cannot actually achieve full human perfection in this life, and yet some things are indeed intrinsically good for us.

We should begin by examining Aquinas' understanding of desire. Humans have various appetitive faculties—that is, certain aspects of our psychology draw us towards certain things.<sup>110</sup> The things towards which we are drawn are the objects of desire. For Aquinas, our appetitive faculties are drawn to these objects of desire because those objects appear (in some way or another) good to us.<sup>111</sup> And while certain interpretations of this doctrine are controversial, it need not be so in this context. Aquinas does not mean that everything is desired because we *believe* it

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<sup>109</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 48.

<sup>110</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I-II Q.5, art. 3.

<sup>111</sup> For a defense of the proposition that desire depends on appearances of the good, see Sergio Tenenbaum, *Appearances of the Good : An Essay on the Nature of Practical Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica : The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, Rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 2.

to be good—an object of desire may strike our sub-rational sensitive faculties as good, contrary to our better judgment.<sup>112</sup>

An appetite is an inclination towards something—to some end or object proper to the appetitive faculty.<sup>113</sup> Upon obtaining this end, the appetite is satisfied—the movement from desire to satisfaction is now complete. It is in this sense that the object of desire, as obtained by the agent, “perfects” or “completes” the appetite. The attainment of the object of desire is in thus perfective of the desiring faculty. As one Thomistic scholar put it: “goodness is understood in terms of desirability [and] desirability is understood in terms of completion.”<sup>114</sup>

Given the framework of Aquinas’ perfectionism, it is those inclinations that we have by virtue of human nature that direct us towards the objects and ends that fulfill us. Following Cicero, Aquinas argues that the “natural inclinations” or “natural appetites” of humans incline us towards the constitutive components of human happiness.<sup>115</sup> The constitutive components of human happiness are grounded in our nature as human beings; certain things (or families of things) categorically “perfect” or “complete” these natural appetites. For example, humans—by

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<sup>112</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II Q.77, art. 2; *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 3-4.

<sup>113</sup> David Oderberg explains the Thomistic approach by saying that an appetite is simply a tendency or disposition towards or away from certain ends, and the term “good” can rightly be applied to all cases in which that appetite is fulfilled. That is—something is good to the extent that it fulfills an appetite. David Oderberg, “Being and Goodness,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2014): 346-47. It is also worth noting that philosophers working within the Thomistic meta-ethical framework take as a given that goodness means “perfective of or fulfilling of the agent.” McNerny, *Ethica Thomistica : The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Robert C. Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions : A Study of Summa Theologiae : Ia2ae 22-48* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>115</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II Q.90, art. 2; Q.94, art. 2.

their animal nature—have an intrinsic desire for health and its components.<sup>116</sup> By their rational nature, humans have an intrinsic desire for knowledge.<sup>117</sup> These goods “perfect” aspects of our human nature—the body and mind, respectively. And it is precisely for this reason that we are inclined towards them.<sup>118</sup> Perfection, for Aquinas, is not a matter of achieving certain goals that could potentially be alienating for the agent; it is a matter of satisfying the deepest desires of the individual according to the kind of thing he or she is. And as each constituent component of happiness—health, virtue, friendship, knowledge, etc.—is the fulfillment of these natural desires, they are “perfections” that ought to be sought.

Such an approach differs from objective-list theories insofar as it makes a claim about why certain things, when obtained, are good. It is not merely a brute fact that certain things are good for us (as the objective-list theorist maintains); rather, things are good for us because they are the proper objects of our natural inclinations.<sup>119</sup> Such things perfect our faculties (this is why we tend to desire them), and it is therefore good for us when our desires for them are satisfied.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., I-II Q.8, art. 1; Q.2, art. 8.

<sup>119</sup> Finnis, for example, explains how our reasons for action are grounded in human perfection (whether we know it or not): “The goods to which practical reason’s first principles direct us are not abstract, ‘ideal’ or ‘quasi-Platonic forms.’ They are perfections, aspects of fulfillment, flourishing, completion, full-being, of the flesh-and-blood human beings (and the palpable human groups or communities) in whom they can be instantiated.” Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*, 91.

We would be worse off—less perfect—if we lacked such goods in our lives, and thus the satisfaction of our desires for such things is a necessary condition for perfection.<sup>120</sup>

This raises the following objection: doesn't this describe an accidental relationship between desire-satisfaction and perfection? In other words—what makes something contribute to someone's well-being? Is it the fact that the desired object or end perfects or fulfills some aspect of his or her human nature? Or is it the fact that the agent has this innate, natural inclination or desire towards it? If the former, it no longer seems that the perfectionist can continue to say that desire-satisfaction plays an important role in human well-being.

But Aquinas' theory does not allow enough room for this objection to really take hold. We are inclined by our human nature (i.e. by our natural inclinations) towards certain things because they are the kinds of things that (by virtue of human nature) perfect or fulfill us (or at least our natural inclinations).<sup>121</sup> It is a neat circle—one that I do not find terribly problematic, given Aquinas' belief that a provident Creator has created human nature such that it is naturally inclined towards that which fulfills it.<sup>122</sup> Some object or end can be good because it is desired (i.e. the object of our natural inclinations), and we are inclined towards it because it is good (i.e. it fulfills our natural inclinations). The upshot: things can be good for people, even within a traditional perfectionist theory of welfare, because they are the objects of our desires.

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<sup>120</sup> One might then ask what we are to make of the case in which someone fails to desire these objective goods. If these good things are nevertheless in his life, can they be good for him? Lauinger argues that such things cannot be good for someone absent desire. However, I would likely deny the premise: these are the things we cannot fail to desire in the relevant sense. I defend this view in a separate paper.

<sup>121</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II Q.2; Q.8; Q.91, art. 2.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II Q.91, art.1; Q.93.

Given Aquinas' theory of human nature and perfectionism, we might easily see how things like vitality, family harmony, strong relationships, and philosophical knowledge might fulfill our natural inclinations. But this does not seem to account for the intuitive goodness of many other (perhaps "lesser") things—a glass of beer, thirty minutes of peace and quiet, a trip to the amusement park, and the like. Even if Aquinas' perfectionism recognizes the importance of desire-satisfaction in some contexts, the scope of this recognition seems rather limited.

There are two options. Someone defending Thomistic perfectionism might simply deny the intrinsic goodness of these lesser purported goods. If such things—a glass of beer, some peace and quiet, and amusement-park trips (pick your example)—are in fact valuable, they are only instrumentally so. Perhaps they give us an opportunity to recharge, to relax, and to energize ourselves so that we can then pursue intrinsic goods. But the Thomist cannot always rely on this option if he is to avoid the charge that perfectionism cannot acknowledge the goodness of "cheap thrills" and other lesser pleasures and (purported) goods. The other option, is therefore to provide an explanation of how, precisely, such lesser goods and cheap thrills can contribute to our well-being within a perfectionist theory. That is, one must show that the purported goods somehow fit into a perfectionist framework—and here I gesture at how this might be accomplished given the framework outlined above.

We should recall that perfectionist philosophers often disagree about what kinds of objects or activities perfect the kinds of beings that we are. There's a whole host of possible things that could be plausibly argued perfect or fulfill us or our natural inclinations: life, vitality, food, drink, knowledge, play, beauty, friendship, practical reason, religion, leisure, marriage, and

so on.<sup>123</sup> After all, such things are generally not sought for the sake of anything else. Moreover, most humans appear to share an inclination for such goods. This gives us at least *prima facie* grounds for believing that such things are, in fact, fulfilling and perfective of us.<sup>124</sup> So the goal would be to show how any purported lesser good or cheap thrill—the glass of beer, the peace and quiet, the amusement-park visit—somehow instantiate some object of our natural inclinations.

This, it seems to me, provides great flexibility to the perfectionist in accommodating a broad range of possible (though minor) intrinsic goods. If something can be counted as leisurely activity intelligibly done for its own sake, we can plausibly count it as an instance of intrinsic value. Likewise all the actions that we undertake for the sake of friends or sociability—even if it’s just a matter of getting a few drinks, going to the amusement park, or playing parchisi. A whole host of objects and activities could therefore be counted as intrinsically good under a particular theory of perfectionism.

This at least makes some headway in showing that perfectionism needn’t deny the intrinsic goodness of many (or most) purported “lesser goods.” If a plausible perfectionist theory claims that “leisure” or “play” are proper objects of our natural inclinations, and a lesser good can fit under that rubric, then clearly perfectionism need not deny its intrinsic goodness.

Nonetheless, one might continue to press the issue. What if there’s some purported lesser good that can’t be interpreted as instantiating some proper object of a natural inclination?

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<sup>123</sup> See, e.g., Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*; Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*; Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009); James V. Schall, *On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2012).

<sup>124</sup> Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*.

Arneson, recall, describes cheap thrills as those activities that provide no value beyond their pleasantness.<sup>125</sup> So even if we have partially addressed his concern—after all, the theory outlined above does not require effort, sacrifice, or significant talent for something to count as good—Arneson might insist that there still might be intuitive goods that slip through the cracks of even this form of perfectionism.

The perfectionist thus has two options. First, he could bite the bullet and simply deny that there are any such intrinsic goods that don't fit under the "natural inclination" rubric. Second, he might provide a theory of human nature and/or of pleasure such that pleasure *counts* as a perfective good—at least to a certain degree.<sup>126</sup> In what follows, I will sketch out how the Thomistic framework allows for the second option.

### *B. Pleasure as Perfection*

Aquinas does not deny the goodness of pleasure. In fact, he considers pleasure to be good for its own sake. As a perfectionist, then, Aquinas must explain how pleasure is perfective. The starting point is Aristotle's account of pleasure, whereby pleasure is the "natural consequence of any operation perfect in its kind."<sup>127</sup> Pleasure, under this account, is a property (in the Aristotelian sense, i.e. "proper accident") of perfection.<sup>128</sup> A property—even a proper accident—

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<sup>125</sup> Arneson, "Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction," 120.

<sup>126</sup> It is not only theoretically possible for pleasure to be considered a good within perfectionism—such views have been defended throughout the history of philosophy. The ancient Epicureans believed pleasure to be good precisely because of the kinds of beings we are. Modern philosophers have arguably made the same argument. Dale Dorsey, "Objectivity and Perfection in Hume's Hedonism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 53, no. 2 (2015).

<sup>127</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange, *Beatitude: A Commentary on St. Thomas' Theological Summa, Ia Iiae, Qq. 1-54*, 68.

<sup>128</sup> Henri Renard, *The Philosophy of Morality* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1953), 42.

need not always be present. After all, a three-legged dog is still a dog, even if four-leggedness is a property of dog-ness. It is in this sense that “pleasure does not constitute man’s happiness, but is something added to it.”<sup>129</sup>

The non-essential nature of pleasure does not negate its intrinsic goodness. Pleasure is “good simply, is good in itself.”<sup>130</sup> Of course, Aquinas acknowledges that certain circumstances may make it so that experiencing pleasure might be all-things-considered bad, morally dangerous, or simply “unsuitable.”<sup>131</sup> Nonetheless, he takes the position that, on top of the realization of some perceived good—i.e. some perceived perfection or fulfillment—“there is added another good, which is pleasure.”<sup>132</sup> This is because pleasure itself is an additional kind of perfection or fulfillment. Pleasure is how we subjectively experience the completion of an operation, movement, or inclination when recognized or perceived as such.<sup>133</sup> It is “the emotional response to a present [perceived] good,” which itself “perfects” the activity, operation, or inclination.<sup>134</sup> In other words, “pleasure perfects activity by way of final cause.”<sup>135</sup> It is the subjective, experienced end towards which an inclination, operation, or activity is directed.

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<sup>129</sup> Charles Reutemann, *The Thomistic Concept of Pleasure* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 21. From Aquinas himself: “That men desire pleasure for its own sake, and not for the sake of something else, [is] not enough to indicate the pleasure is the ultimate end . . . for although pleasure is not the ultimate end, it is, of course, a concomitant of this end, since pleasure arises out of the attainment of the end.” Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 26.19.

<sup>130</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I-II Q.34, art. 2.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II Q.32, art. 1.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II Q.31, art. 1; Renard, *The Philosophy of Morality*, 40.

<sup>135</sup> Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions*, 181.

The result is an account of pleasure that treats pleasure non-instrumentally good. And while its goodness is derivative of (perceived) objective goodness, it does not follow that pleasure does not intrinsically improve human well-being.<sup>136</sup> Aquinas, therefore, can maintain his perfectionist theory while claiming that “pain attacks the general well-being of the organism, whereas pleasure merely increases that well-being.”<sup>137</sup> Experiencing pleasure may not always be morally good, nor will it always yield a net improvement in one’s well-being (since one might take pleasure in harmful things, and since one’s moral rectitude is arguably part of one’s well-being). As one scholar notes:

Inasmuch as pleasure is an actuality or perfection, it is obviously good in the being of nature; but it is not immediately apparent as to whether all pleasure is morally good, that is, in conformity with reason . . . It will derive its [moral] goodness or badness from the activity [which] it completes.<sup>138</sup>

Pleasure may be intrinsically good—but it is not *the* good.<sup>139</sup> Thus the Thomist can indeed affirm, with Arneson, that if pleasure did not count as intrinsically good, “the world would be immensely worse and most human lives significantly blighted.”<sup>140</sup> Thus the Thomistic approach

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<sup>136</sup> To use an analogy: A piano string is tuned to a certain key. If nothing obstructs the reverberation of the string after the hammer strikes it, a sound is produced. The sound attends—as a proper accident—the string’s reverberation. All has gone well—we might say that the sound was successfully played. And to that extent, things are good. The string’s object—to create a sound—has been realized and fulfilled. But it does not follow from this that, within the context of the piece of music being played, the note played was a good one. The string could have been tuned incorrectly—or perhaps the musician struck the wrong key. All the same, a note was successfully played, and the end—or good—of the string (as it was tuned at the time) was realized. Likewise, pleasure—considered in itself—is good, but experiencing pleasure might not always yield a net improvement in someone’s well-being.

<sup>137</sup> Reutemann, *The Thomistic Concept of Pleasure*, 11.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>139</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 27.

<sup>140</sup> Arneson, "Human Flourishing Versus Desire Satisfaction," 120.

to perfectionism can accommodate the claim that, all things being equal, a pleasant life is better than an unpleasant one.

So how might Thomistic perfectionism take on Arenson's "cheap thrills"? Even if that cheap thrill does not instantiate some proper object of a natural inclination, nevertheless the pleasure that the cheap thrill produces is nonetheless intrinsically good. Moreover, the pleasure is good precisely because it is a kind of perfection: it is the subjective experience of the objective completion or fulfillment of some activity, operation, or inclination. And again, none of this suggests that an instance of pleasure experienced in a "cheap thrill" ought to be pursued in any given situation—after all, doing so might be (at least in some cases) morally suspect or all-things-considered prudentially bad. Some substantive theory of practical reasonability or morality would govern whether someone ought (all things considered) to pursue a particular cheap thrill, but the cheap thrill (or at least the pleasure gained from it) would nonetheless still be good for the agent.

## **V. Conclusion**

The conclusion, then, is that perfectionism can indeed affirm the importance of desire-satisfaction and pleasure. The perfectionist may consistently hold that desire-satisfaction is a necessary condition of perfection. To be perfect is to be without want—and our deepest wants, which would result in the most satisfaction—are for those objective goods which perfect our faculties. When we are morally, spiritually, and physically healthy, we experience the enjoyment of those goods, and this enjoyment is—like the rosy glow of youth—a property, proper but non-essential to the good it attends that makes our lives better. After all, pleasure is the subjective experience of the perfection of a faculty's operation.

Perfectionism, thus, can rebut one of its primary attacks against it: it does not deny the importance of desire-satisfaction and pleasure within the good life. In fact, it can positively affirm their goodness—within certain limits. Pleasure is not *the* good—nor is any created or temporary object that gives satisfaction *the* good. But it does not follow from this that pleasure and desire-satisfaction are unimportant. The goodness of pleasure is perfectly consistent with the claim that human perfection (in full) does not consist in pleasure or any other created good.

Aquinas recapitulates Augustine’s famous dictum about the restless human heart:

For man to rest content [an effect of perfection] with any created good is not possible, for he can be happy only with complete good which satisfies his desire altogether [i.e. which perfects him]: he would not have reached his ultimate end were there something still remaining to be desired.<sup>141</sup>

Far from neglecting the importance of desire, Aquinas ensures that desire plays a key role in his account of human perfection. The goods that partially or temporarily give rest to the inclinations of the soul are indeed perfective to the extent that they do satisfy our longing; but insofar as they fail to satisfy our highest longing (according to Aquinas, for the fullness of Truth and Goodness, the proper objects of our reason and will, respectively), our pursuit of such lesser goods cannot bring us the fullness of perfection. And, per Christian doctrine, grace perfects nature; any defect or imperfection in one’s life (for surely there will be many) can be overcome by the superabundance of God’s grace; this why it is consistent for someone like Aquinas to (1) affirm

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<sup>141</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q.2, art. 8.

the intrinsic goodness of pleasure<sup>142</sup> and thus (2) accept that pleasure is a kind of perfection<sup>143</sup> while simultaneously (3) claiming that pleasure is not fully perfective of human life.<sup>144</sup>

This is not an argument about semantics. Perhaps some people will read Aquinas and simply deny that he is a perfectionist, since he affirms the importance of desire-satisfaction and pleasure. But we should not forget that Aquinas (probably) talks about perfection more than any other philosopher, and explicitly considers perfection to be the ultimate end and good of man. It would be quite odd to exclude such a figure from discussions of perfectionism—especially on the grounds that he has a different conception of perfection than certain contemporary philosophers. Second, perhaps my definition of perfectionism is a little revisionary. But perhaps such revision is needed when certain key figures in the history of philosophy are excluded from a particular philosophical conversation because *later* philosophers define their terms in ways that don't easily map onto older schools of thought. It would be unfortunate if certain scholars prematurely dismissed perfectionism as a viable theory of well-being because they conflate perfectionism—a general family of theories articulated by various philosophers throughout history—with a very narrow set of theories presented by contemporary philosophers.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., I, Q.5, art. 6.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., I-II, Q.31-34.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., I-II, Q.2, art.6.

### Paper 3: The Singular Analysis of the “Good For” Relation

#### I. Introduction

Well-being, it is often said, is a measurement of how well one’s life is going. When we talk about well-being, we talk about what is “good for” someone, or “someone’s good.” There is a relation between the person and the good, and if we are to have a better grasp of well-being, we need a better grasp of this relation. An essential step in understanding what is good for ourselves and the people we care about (and, for that matter, people we don’t care about) is articulating the nature of this “good-for” relation—or, to use the language of Peter Railton and Connie Rosati, we need to better understand “relational goodness.”<sup>145</sup>

In recent decades, philosophers have argued about whether relational good—i.e. the “good-for” relation—is a singular kind of value.<sup>146</sup> When we talk about what is good for persons, what is good for plants, what is good for cars, and so forth, are we employing the same concept in each case? Or, alternatively, are we employing different “good-for” relations? Rosati frames the question in the following way:

Is relational good—*good for*—a singular kind of value? If so, how does its singularity affect what we might plausibly say about the relationship between the fact that X is good for S and the existence of normative reasons to do or promote or use or foster X? Does ‘good for’ instead express a number of different relations, depending upon the type of usage, and so different sorts of relational value? If so, then how many distinct sorts of relational value are there? And what distinguishes those uses of ‘good for’ that concern

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<sup>145</sup> See Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *The Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (1986): 330; Connie S. Rosati, “Objectivism and Relational Good,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 25, no. 1 (2008).

<sup>146</sup> Some philosophers (most notably G. E. Moore) reject talk of “good for” altogether. I will not investigate arguments for this position within this paper.

*welfare?* More specifically, what distinguishes the form of relational value that constitutes *personal good* or *prudential value*—*good for a person*?<sup>147</sup>

The question is whether all right predications of “X is good for S,” including within the context of well-being, all share the same basic meaning. Rosati calls this the “multiplicity problem,” and argues that how we answer the question (i.e. is there an analysis of the “good-for” predicate that can apply to all cases?) has a direct effect on our efforts to construct theories of welfare.<sup>148</sup> The reasoning is rather straightforward: if relational goodness is a singular value—that is, if all right predications of “good-for” share the same meaning—then many theories of welfare “will be deficient to the extent that the analyses they offer of the good-for relation fails to capture parts of our talk.”<sup>149</sup> After all, many analyses of well-being are incompatible with “good-for” predications made of non-human, or at least non-sensate, subjects.<sup>150</sup> On the other hand, if indeed “good for” does not express a single relation, then any attempt to build a theory on the supposition that it does may result in “severe distortion.”<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Connie S. Rosati, “Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem,” *Philosophical Issues* 19, no. 1 (2009): 206.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> Take, for example, the theory offered by L.W. Sumner. If well-being is necessarily perspectival (as a conceptual matter), then it is hard to see how “good for” in the welfare context can have the same meaning as “good for” when applying it to something without a perspective—for example, a car, or a project, etc. See Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*. Likewise, Peter Railton appears to argue that relational goodness (of the sort he’s interested in) can only apply to beings with the capacity for motivation—clearly, this good-for relation is inapplicable to plants, cars, and other things that have no motivation. See Railton, “Moral Realism.”

<sup>151</sup> Take, for example, the theory offered by Richard Kraut. If well-being is derived from a different kind of relational goodness, conceptually distinct from other good-for relations, then why should we assume that there must be some analogy between, say, what is good for humans and what is good for plants? Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, 4.

Neither side's position is immediately implausible. Clearly a singular analysis that could unify all of our predications of relational good is more theoretically elegant and therefore more appealing. Its virtue lies in its simplicity. As Guy Fletcher writes, "It would be a major selling point of a theory if it could solve this 'multiplicity problem' by giving a unified treatment of our use of "good for" across all subjects."<sup>152</sup>

Richard Kraut, in *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, argues for this kind of singular analysis:

It makes sense to say about certain conditions that they are good for plants but bad for humans, and when we say this we are talking about one and the same relationship; what we mean is that a single thing bears that good-for relationship to plants but does not bear that same good-for relationship to humans.... But the meaning of the expression "good for" does not alter. The relata are different; the relationship is the same.<sup>153</sup>

The advocate for a singular analysis would hold that when we talk about flourishing being good for plants and (say) pleasure being good for humans, we are making the same predication. That is, there is no reason to think that we are employing two different concepts—i.e. speaking equivocally—in the two cases. The singular analysis view, therefore, holds that we do not use the term "good-for" equivocally when talking about what's good for different kinds of things.

Several philosophers, including Rosati, have argued against the possibility of a singular analysis of relational good. They have argued that "good-for" is used equivocally within various linguistic contexts; they argue that there are multiple good-for relations that cannot be reduced to a singular analysis. In this paper, I will defend the singular analysis of relational good from

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<sup>152</sup> Guy Fletcher, "The Locative Analysis of Good for Formulated and Defended," *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* (2011): 10.

<sup>153</sup> Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, 94.

recent attacks. My approach will be loosely grounded on the ethical and metaphysical theory of Thomas Aquinas. I argue that Aquinas provides a framework in which we can understand all claims of relational good—regardless of whether the subject of the predication is a person, an animal, a plant, or an artifact. That is, Aquinas defends something like a singular analysis of relational good.<sup>154</sup> I will offer the Thomistic analysis, and then will demonstrate that the Thomistic analysis avoids the arguments raised by critics of the singular analysis, such as Connie Rosati, Jeff Behrends, and Guy Fletcher.

## II. The Multiplicity Problem

### *A. Rosati's Challenge: Accommodating Various "Good-For" Predications*

In *What is Good and Why*, Richard Kraut articulates a theory of welfare that is grounded on a singular understanding of the “good-for” relation. This approach to relational goodness serves as the structure for the view he called “developmentalism,” means that things are good or bad for something insofar as they promote or hinder flourishing. He offers a quick sketch of how he understands the “good-for” relation by saying that

everything that is good for S, whether S is living or not, either promotes or is part of flourishing.<sup>155</sup>

Despite this claim, Rosati argues that Kraut often equivocates between different uses of the relational good. Throughout Kraut's book, he uses the phrase “good for” in three separate ways:

- (1) X is good for S = X is in S's interest (or where S's interest lies).
- (2) X is good for S = X is suitable for S in that it serves S well.

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<sup>154</sup> I say “something like,” because Aquinas' approach relies on analogous predication, which permits a certain amount of variation of meaning in the same linguistic expression, but not so much that two analogous predications are equivocal.

<sup>155</sup> Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, 132.

(3) X is good for S = the occurrence of X is productive of or part of S's flourishing.<sup>156</sup>

Rosati points out that none of these formulations seem to be equivalent to one another; they seem to each express a different idea.<sup>157</sup> As such, it is difficult to see how relational good can be a singular value. The phrase "good for" in the sentence "boots are good for walking" seems to have the second meaning, not the first and third. Arguably, the phrase "sunlight is good for plants" employs the third meaning of good-for, not the first. So it seems that, despite Kraut's insistence upon a singular meaning of the good-for relation, he too necessarily uses the term equivocally. Rosati forces Kraut into a dilemma: Kraut may either accept one of the three analyses as fundamental, in which case much of our "good for" talk will go unaccounted for, or Kraut may accept all three analyses as distinct and irreducible, in which case he accepts a multiplicity of good-for relations—in other words, he must give up his singular analysis (and quite probably, his theory of well-being founded upon it).

A singular analysis of relational good must be able to unify the apparent multiplicity of its use. In particular, it must accommodate what Rosati claims are five different "good-for" relations:

1. Instrumentally good for: X is good for S in that X is effective as a means to S

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<sup>156</sup> Rosati, "Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem," 212. Rosati points to the following passages in *What is Good and Why*. First, Kraut says on page 1: "When followed by the preposition 'for' or 'of,' [the word 'good'] purports to tell us where our interests lie." On page 87, Kraut claims that the "'for' in 'G is good for S' is best taken to indicate that G has a certain kind of suitability to S . . . 'suitable for' is the sense of 'good for' in which boots are good for walking, spoons are good for stirring, watches are good for telling time." Finally, on page 141, Kraut argues that "when it is good for S that P, that is because the occurrence of P is productive or part of flourishing." Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*.

<sup>157</sup> Rosati, "Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem," 212.

2. Good for a use value: X is good for S in that X is something it is rational to want or secure in relation to S, considering just what an S is for
3. Good for an intrinsic value: X is good for S in that X helps to preserve or enhance S as the valuable item that it is
4. Good for a living thing: X is good for S in that X promotes the life, growth, health, or reproductive success of S
5. Good for a welfare subject: X is good for S in that X intrinsically or noninstrumentally benefits S.<sup>158</sup>

On Rosati's interpretation of *What is Good and Why*, Kraut's project of grounding welfare theory on a singular analysis fails. Whether or not her interpretation is accurate may be set aside for the purposes of this paper. The point stands: a singular analysis of relational good must be able to accommodate a wide variety of predications of the "good-for" relation. Insofar as there are correct predications of relational goodness that a singular analysis cannot account for, the singular analysis is deficient. I argue, however, that the Thomistic analysis can indeed accommodate each of the various uses of "good for" proposed by Rosati; it is not deficient in this respect.

### *B. Behrends' Challenge: The Limitations of Flourishing*

Setting aside Rosati's arguments about Kraut's equivocation, Kraut maintains that all right predications of relational good can be analyzed in terms of flourishing.<sup>159</sup> The view that flourishing stands as the ultimate good of all living things has a long pedigree; it is common to translate and interpret Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in this manner. Kraut provides insight into the importance of this concept:

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 206. Rosati provides here analysis of each purportedly distinct good-for relation. As I will later argue, a singular analysis can accommodate all of these.

<sup>159</sup> Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, 132-33.

It is striking that we have a single term—“flourishing”—that we use to evaluate how well any living thing is doing. For most living things, to flourish is simply to be healthy: to be an organism that is unimpeded in its growth and normal functioning.... Could it be that the notion of flourishing is involved in the very idea of what is good for a living organism? That the things that are good for us human beings are the ones that play a role in our living flourishing lives—lives that go well for us in a way that is comparable to the way the lives of other sorts of creatures go well for them? That, at any rate, is the hypothesis that will be explored in this study.<sup>160</sup>

Kraut’s singular analysis thus supposes that the good of all living things is ultimately reducible to the single concept of flourishing, whether those living things are peonies, puppies, or people.

Kraut is not alone in this line of thinking. Philippa Foot, for example, in *Natural Goodness*, makes a similar claim:

The concept of a good human life plays the same part in determining goodness of human characteristics and operations that the concept of flourishing plays in the determination of goodness in plants and animals.<sup>161</sup>

The idea of flourishing as the ultimate good for living things has intuitive appeal. But we must first be clear on what we mean by flourishing. As Rosati notes, the term “flourishing” within moral philosophy and the study of well-being is often used in two distinct ways.<sup>162</sup> The first occurs when “flourishing” is used as a synonym of “good for” or “welfare” or “well-being.” In this case, claims such as “flourishing is intrinsically good for an organism” would be circular and unhelpful. The second use of “flourishing,” on the other hand, denotes what Rosati calls “a naturalistic and substantive state or condition of S, a condition that includes such things as the

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<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>161</sup> Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 44.

<sup>162</sup> Rosati, “Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem,” 217.

development of characteristic capacities, healthiness, and normal functioning.”<sup>163</sup> It seems to be this sense of the word that is at the heart of Kraut’s analysis.

The problem with this view, however, is that Kraut’s hypothesis about the importance of flourishing has little explanatory power when it comes to explaining how things can be good or bad for inanimate objects. When we say “oil is good for cars,” are we merely using the “good for” phrase metaphorically (or equivocally), in which case oil is *not* really good for cars? To put it within the framework of Kraut’s developmentalism: is it true that oil helps the car *develop* in some important way?

Jeff Behrends notes that this is a major difficulty for Kraut’s theory. Kraut states that “everything that is good for S, whether S is living or not, either promotes or is part of flourishing.”<sup>164</sup> This suggests that “what is good for an artifact like a car is what promotes flourishing—not the flourishing of the car of course (since there is no such thing), but the flourishing of human beings.”<sup>165</sup> There are a few problems with this approach. One of them is pointed out by Rosati, who says that

if the good for an artifact or kind looks to something beyond itself, whereas the good for us or for other living things does not, that would again strongly hint that a different relation is being expressed in talk about what is good for, say, an artifact, and what is good for us.<sup>166</sup>

Kraut does not provide an explanation of why this would not a problem for his view (though, as I will suggest below, I think it could be done). But let briefly consider Kraut’s claim that the good-

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Kraut, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being*, 132.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Rosati, "Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem," 219-20.

for relation is always, ultimately, directed towards flourishing—that X is good for an artifact only if X helps the artifact promote flourishing. Behrends points out that this theory falls to an obvious counter-example. What about those artifacts whose purpose it is to promote unflourishing? He gives an example of a machine, programmed for destruction—its purpose and function is to maximize unflourishing.<sup>167</sup> This machine runs on batteries; it seems intuitive to say that batteries would be good for such a machine. But if this is so, Kraut’s claim about what is good for artifacts is mistaken—how can batteries be good for this “terror machine” if these batteries will only hinder, and perhaps destroy, all forms of flourishing? Behrends argues instead for a rather standard, straightforward understanding of the good-for relation with respect to artifacts: “something is good for an artifact if and only if, and because, it contributes to one of the functions of the artifact.”<sup>168</sup> This seems quite intuitive; few would disagree. But if it is true that batteries are good for the terror machine, then it seems difficult to say that the all good-for relations have a positive relation to flourishing. In Behrends’ words, “the fact that things can be good for the terror machine shows that no version of the developmentalist analysis can vindicate Kraut’s unified analysis thesis.”<sup>169</sup>

The singular analysis view, therefore, is faced with a second challenge, in addition to the challenge put forth by Rosati mentioned above: it must not entail that all good-for relations bear a positive relation to flourishing, as this results in absurdities—that batteries are not good for Behrends’ “terror machine,” that proper programming is not good for nuclear weapons, etc.

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<sup>167</sup> Jeff Behrends, "A New Argument for the Multiplicity of the Good-for Relation," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 45, no. 2 (2011): 125.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

*C. Fletcher's Challenge: Avoiding Substantive Perfectionism*

A further challenge raised by critics of singular-analysis views concerns the relationship between analyses of relational goodness and certain substantive theories of the good. For example, Guy Fletcher argues that singular analyses of relational good often entail a certain controversial relationship between relational and attributive goodness.

Fletcher identifies at least one singular analysis of relational good that he finds problematic. In particular, he examines an analysis of relational good often associated with forms of Aristotelian perfectionism:

What is good for a K is that which is a (productive or constituent) means to its becoming, or remaining, an attributively good K.<sup>170</sup>

This seems to imply that the ultimate good for anything of kind K is *being* an attributively good K; variations of this thesis can be found in the works of many philosophers. In the opening pages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that all activity is undertaken for the sake of some good—that is, that every agent seeks what is good for it. He follows this with the claim that what is good for that agent is the excellent performance of its characteristic activity. Thus we have a very quick move from a singular analysis of the good to a substantive theory of the good—one bound up in notions of virtue and the like.<sup>171</sup>

Fletcher, in reference to the above thesis (that what is intrinsically good for something is its being an attributively good member of its kind), states that

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<sup>170</sup> Fletcher, "The Locative Analysis of Good for Formulated and Defended," 11.

<sup>171</sup> I will later show why Fletcher's characterization needn't lead us to these Aristotelian consequences.

[This analysis gets] the right answers in [some] cases. To be good for a string quartet *just is* to be something that contributes towards making it, or preserving it, as a good (or better) string quartet. And to be bad for a sunset just is to be something that in some way contributes towards making it a bad (or worse) sunset. And this same analysis works for all the cases mentioned above, such as gas tanks, bicycles, watches, etc.<sup>172</sup>

The objection, however, is that this does not seem to hold with for all subjects—especially for subjects that we typically think of as subjects of well-being. According to Fletcher:

While it is true that to be good for an artwork just is to be conducive to its becoming or remaining a good artwork, the relation of being good for a person is not that of being conducive to their becoming or remaining a good person. Pleasure might be good for me without making me any more (or less) virtuous, for example, and the same goes for other welfare subjects. It is clear that some things are good or bad for gorillas, but these things do not seem to be that which conduces to making them *good gorillas*, whatever that might be. Thus this new unified proposal—that of treating all “good for” talk as connected to attributive goodness—will not work.<sup>173</sup>

Fletcher’s complaint is that singular analyses of relational good often create an implausibly strong link between relational good and attributive good. A conceptual analysis of relational good, one might argue, should not immediately entail some substantive account of the good—such as Aristotelian perfectionism.

This is not to say that an analysis of relational good that entailed substantive claims about the good is necessarily wrong—it could be that the concept of relational goodness, properly understood, *does* entail such substantive claims. But this is not how most welfare theorists understand the concept; I venture to guess that most welfare theorists want the concept to remain open, so that we can engage in debate about what the correct substantive theory of relational goodness (or welfare, etc.) actually is. If an analysis of relational good necessarily excludes

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<sup>172</sup> Fletcher, "The Locative Analysis of Good for Formulated and Defended," 11.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

pleasures, desire-satisfaction, and “cheap thrills” from being good for us as humans, we seem to have some reason to reject the analysis—for we tend to believe that the correct theory of relational good is a matter of substantive, not conceptual, debate.

This, therefore, is another challenge for any singular analysis of relational good: it should not exclude analytically from human well-being the possibility of any of the main contenders for the correct theory of the good: perfectionism, hedonism, desire-satisfactionism, judgment subjectivism, objective-list-ism, etc. Now this is a less critical test than the previous two, because it is possible that certain theories of well-being are so conceptually misguided that they *should* be excluded from discussion analytically. But such an approach would be quite revisionary, and I do not attempt to defend such a position here.

### **III. A New (Old) Analysis of Relational Good**

Thus far, we have seen how certain singular analyses might fail. Rosati, Fletcher, and Behrends together present three hurdles that a singular analysis of the “good for” relation must jump: it must (1) accommodate the many different contexts in which the phrase “good-for” is used, (2) acknowledge that artifacts are not necessarily directed towards the flourishing of living things, and (3) avoid excluding (analytically) certain substantive theories of well-being. The following analysis is intended to meet each of these requirements.

The analysis is influenced by the Thomistic tradition of value theory, which is in turn influenced by that of Aristotle. (I was taken aback when Rosati claimed that singular analyses of relational good were “quite new,” when in fact they can be traced back at least to Plato, who

maintained that all instances of goodness participate in the form of the Good.<sup>174</sup> This—to my mind at least—makes it quite old.) The central idea is that while we can still meaningfully categorize different kinds of good, there must be something that they all have in common insofar as they all belong to the same genus, namely “goodness.”<sup>175</sup>

#### *A. The Thomistic Analysis*

For Aquinas, goodness is primarily captured by the idea of perfection. To borrow from David Oderberg, Aquinas is primarily focused on goodness as “perfection, where this term is taken in its etymological sense of ‘completion’ or fulfillment,’ with correlative connotations such as ‘improve’ or ‘bring to the highest available standard.’”<sup>176</sup> This perfection, however, is not to be understood in absolute terms, but only relative to the thing or act being perfected: “an object is completed when one of its potencies is actualized, for example by manifesting a disposition.”<sup>177</sup> Things are good insofar as they achieve perfection or fulfillment in this sense.

Aquinas notes that something is good insofar as it is desirable; that is, insofar as it fulfills—perfects, completes, satisfies—some inclination or appetite.<sup>178</sup> We must be careful, however, because by saying this Aquinas is *not* (exclusively) referring to subjective, conative attitudes or mental states. Rather, everything—whether animate or inanimate, rational or

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<sup>174</sup> See Plato, "Philebus," in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1997).

<sup>175</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I Q1, art. 6.

<sup>176</sup> Oderberg, "Being and Goodness," 345.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>178</sup> Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, I.L1.11.

arational—is “inclined by a certain natural inclination towards their ends.”<sup>179</sup> This includes, but is not limited to, the ends that we are consciously inclined towards as sensate, rational beings. It is entirely possible for something to have an end without it being aware of it; in fact—under the Thomistic approach—this is quite common.<sup>180</sup>

It is in this sense that Aquinas employs the term “end” when speaking of goodness. An end is a final cause, and final causality can be rightly attributed to many things beyond mere human action. Thus we see the basis for a conclusion that Aquinas reaches early in the *Summa Theologica*, that “goodness implies the aspect of an end.”<sup>181</sup> The context demonstrates that Aquinas is not talking about ends in a conative sense; he is talking about the fulness of actuality, the perfection, or the fulfillment of some being, movement, or activity.

Things are good, with respect to the kinds of things they are—i.e. their form or “formal cause”—insofar as they are perfect, complete, actual.<sup>182</sup> The lives of all organisms and the functions of all artifacts are directed towards their respective perfections, the fullness of actuality proper to their respective formal causes. For artifacts, the formal cause is given by something extrinsic to the artifact; for natural objects, the formal cause is intrinsic to the thing itself. This perfection, completion, or fullness of actuality is the end towards which the subject, *qua* the kind

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<sup>179</sup> *Questiones Disputatae De Veritate*, ed. Joseph Kenny, trans. Robert W. Schmidt (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), Q.22 a.1.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I Q5, art. 5.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, I Q5, art. 3.

of thing that it is, is directed.<sup>183</sup> According to Anthony Lisska’s translation, “all things found to have the criterion of an end at the same time meet the criterion of a good.”<sup>184</sup> That is, all cases of goodness—and therefore all cases of relational goodness—have the aspect of a final cause.

This line of reasoning provides the basis for the Thomistic analysis of relational good. The analysis is simple and straightforward.<sup>185</sup>

*Thomistic Analysis of Relational Good:* X is good for S insofar as X is an end of S.<sup>186</sup>

For this to make sense, we must understand an end not as some consciously-desired object or state-of-affairs, but as the fulfillment of a potency, the completion of some inclination, the fulfillment of some tendency or appetite.

<sup>183</sup> *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, ed. Joseph Kenny, trans. Richard J. Blackwell, Richard J. Spath, and W. Edmund Thirlkel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), II. Lectio 12, ¶ 250. At least, not for the things whose final causes they are. Aquinas does, occasionally, argue that the existence of final causes points to the existence of a divine intelligence—but whether or not he is correct is irrelevant to the current point.

<sup>184</sup> Lisska, *Aquinas's Theory of Natural Law : An Analytic Reconstruction*, 103.

<sup>185</sup> I should note that this is not a definition of the “good-for” predicate. This would involve defining goodness, which is a task I do not wish to undertake. The analysis presented here follows the Thomistic approach: “St. Thomas, like Aristotle, did not define the good, for he saw it as a primary notion.... The good, therefore could be described only in terms of its effects.” Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 409. As Aquinas himself states: “Prime realities cannot be expressed by any preceding realities but only in terms of realities that succeed them, as causes are explained by their effects. Since the good moves the appetite, we describe it in terms of the appetite’s movement.” Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, I.L.I:C.9.

This kind of analysis, one that does not present a definition but rather a distinguishing feature, is not uncommon. In fact, this is precisely how Stephen Darwall’s “rational care” analysis of well-being operates. See, e.g., Stephen L. Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>186</sup> This includes cases in which X is a relative end (i.e. an instrumental good), pleasure (i.e. the end as reached by the appetitive faculty), and S’s final cause (i.e. its telos, final completion, perfection).

We can see how this analysis fits with a few of our intuitions about intrinsic goodness. (Aquinas’s distinction between “befitting” and “useful” goods roughly tracks the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental goodness.<sup>187</sup>) What is intrinsically good for something (or some activity or movement) is what fulfills or perfects the thing (or activity or movement) as such.<sup>188</sup> It is here that we might say that flourishing (or a particular substantive description of flourishing) is good for a tree; the tree, as the kind of thing it is, has as its final cause—its completion, its perfection—its own flourishing. We can say the same about humans; whatever it is that fulfills us, that perfects us *as humans* is intrinsically good for us.<sup>189</sup> We might, like Kraut, call this flourishing; we don’t have to. No substantive claim about what fulfills or perfects humans necessarily follows from this analysis—our intrinsic good might lie in the objects (and realization) of our basic desires, the experience of pleasure, or rational excellence. The point is that, for X to be intrinsically good for S, X must be an end—fulfilling or completing—of S to at least some degree.

How, then, should we understand conscious desires? As rational agents, we have ends that we seek. Under the Thomistic doctrine, are all of them good for us? After all, if X is good for S insofar as X is an end, wouldn’t that render all consciously-desired ends good? This seems implausible—after all, someone could pursue, as an end, self-harm or harm of others. Are we to treat such ends as good? Yes and no. Take, for example, someone who desires to self-harm. It is true that the end being sought is self-harm. Thus, the object—self-harm—is the perfection, the

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<sup>187</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I Q5, art. 6.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, I Q5, art. 5.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II Q1, art. 7.

fulfillment of that desire. The appetite—the inclination towards self-harm—is completed in the act of self-harm. Thus, the “good of the desire” is self-harm. But it does *not* follow from this that self-harm is good for the agent seeking it, or that it ought to be sought in the first place. For self-harm to be good for the agent (in the sense above), it must to some degree bring to fulfillment, perfection, or completion *the agent*, not merely one of his desires.<sup>190</sup> As fallible, rational agents, our desires (and their respective ends) can come out-of-line with our ultimate end the kind of beings we are.<sup>191</sup> So this is no objection to Aquinas’ theory; it simply means that we must distinguish between the “good” (i.e. the end, perfection, or fulfillment) of desires and the agents that have them.

The above analysis may also apply to instrumental goodness as well. When we reflect upon human action, we recognize that we have many ends that do not fully satisfy, complete, or perfect us (or our activities/projects). And yet we rightly desire them insofar as they are instrumental for the attainment of some further end. Aquinas recognizes such instrumental goods as “relative” ends.<sup>192</sup> That is, they are ends sought for the sake of further ends, from which they derive their goodness. Again, these instrumental goods need not be consciously sought by the subject; rather, they must simply be instrumentally necessary or expedient for the realization of other ends. And so while instrumental goods are not ends in an absolute sense, they are ends nonetheless; they perfect or fulfill an inclination to the extent that they bring the inclination

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<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, I-II Q18, art. 2, art. 4.

<sup>191</sup> *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, ch. 3-4.

<sup>192</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I Q5, art. 6.

closer to its fulfillment and realization. Thus acquiring money might be instrumentally good for us, insofar as it is desired for the sake of something intrinsically good for us.<sup>193</sup>

Aquinas, of course, recognizes that the import of the “good for” predication will differ, depending on what it is predicated of. While all relational goodness is grounded in final causality, the kinds of things that will count as good will differ, depending on what the subject of the predication is. There are important metaphysical distinctions between, say, being good for a living thing and being good for an artifact, project, or activity. Nevertheless, in each of these cases, goodness implies the existence of an end (consciously desired or otherwise); goodness is necessarily teleological. As he argues in the *Summa Theologica*:

“good” is predicated of many things not with meanings entirely different, as happens with things completely equivocal, but according to... the same proportion, in as much as all goods depend on the first principle of goodness, that is, as they are ordered to an end.<sup>194</sup>

Thus, all goods bear a relation to an end, as do all predicables of the predicate “X is good for S.”

#### *B. Responding to Rosati by accommodating good-for predications*

Let us return to Rosati’s challenge for singular analyses of relational good. For a singular analysis to satisfy Rosati, it must accommodate all right predications of “good for.” Rosati claims that there are at least five distinct good-for relations; she claims that these distinct relations cannot be reduced to a singular analysis. I disagree.

Rosati lists the following five (purportedly distinct) good-for relations; she also provides an example of each relation for clarity:

1. Instrumental Good-For: Arsenic is good for poisoning.

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<sup>193</sup> *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, I.L5.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, I.L.VII.C.96. For a contemporary analytic treatment of this “ontology of value,” see Oderberg, “Being and Goodness.”

2. Good for a Use Value: Oil is good for a car.
3. Good for an Intrinsic Value: Controlled climates are good for valuable paintings.
4. Good for a Living Thing: Nutrient-rich soil is good for a philodendron.
5. Good for a Welfare Subject: Authentic happiness is good for a person.

Rosati argues that, because these five good-for relations are irreducible to a single analysis, the phrase “good for” means something different in each case. For a singular analysis of relational good to succeed (at least, under Rosati’s argument), it must be able to accommodate each of these supposedly different good-for relations. Let us use our above analysis to work through each of these cases.

1. Instrumental Good-For: “Arsenic is good for poisoning.”

As Rosati notes, much of our good-for language concerns instrumental goods—goods that act as means to achieving certain ends and purposes. Arsenic, we might say, is good for achieving the end of poisoning. But as we have seen, all instrumental goods are still ends—they are intermediate, relative ends. And the end being sought in this example is poisoning. Given this end, arsenic would be expedient for the completion, the fulfillment of the end. Note that this does not mean that poisoning is good in itself. Perhaps the poisoning ought not to be done (morally or otherwise). But this is irrelevant to our purposes. Furthermore, we need to admit nothing about whether that which is instrumentally good in this case is the most effective means—there are other better and worse ways to bring the act of poisoning to its completion (one could use cyanide, perhaps). Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that arsenic is a means to—and therefore an end relative to—the completion and fullness of the poisoning. We might further say that arsenic is good for an act of poisoning because arsenic is a means of its (i.e. the poisoning) becoming an attributively good act of poisoning (as far as poisonings go). Thus, the instrumental

goodness of arsenic (relative to an act of poisoning) can easily be accommodated by the Thomistic analysis.

2. Good for a Use Value: “Oil is good for a car.”

In the arsenic example, the end towards which the instrumental good is directed was explicit—it was immediately clear that the ultimate end (to which the arsenic was a relative end) was poisoning. In this case (“oil is good for a car”), the end relative to which the oil is instrumental is left implicit. A car, in itself, is not an end. But this poses no problem. The Thomist will simply ask: “what is the end—i.e. the final cause—of a car?” Because a car (as an artifact) has no intrinsic, natural formal cause, it has no intrinsic, natural final cause. Nonetheless, a car does have a specific form (imposed by its designer), and this form is ultimately aimed at a particular purpose. That is, the formal cause of the car is aimed at its final cause, which is (roughly) to provide a certain kind of ground transportation.<sup>195</sup>

With this in mind, we can see how oil is indeed good for a car. Given the car’s form (e.g. with the kind of engine it has, etc.), oil is instrumental in achieving the car’s final cause (i.e. providing transportation). Oil is a means to the achievement of this end. Oil is necessary and expedient in the realization of reliable transportation; a car with a broken engine (caused by lack of oil) will not maintain its ability to realize its end, or fulfill its final cause. Thus, oil is good for a car insofar as it is instrumental in realizing the car’s ultimate end.

3. Good for an Intrinsic Value: “A controlled climate is good for a painting.”

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<sup>195</sup> See, e.g. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, II.L4.173.

Rosati posits a third kind of good-for relation due to the fact that certain objects are intrinsically valuable.<sup>196</sup> The end of the car in the previous example was (roughly) the performance of a particular function given to it by its designer; however, it is not immediately apparent that an intrinsically valuable object has a function. Take, for example, an intrinsically valuable painting—its value seems independent of any particular function or end imposed from without. How might the Thomist address this situation?

Without being much of an aesthetician, I think there are a few possible candidates for ends or final cause here. One possible final cause (i.e. “end”) of a painting—like practically everything else in existence—is the continuance of its own existence as the kind of thing it is.<sup>197</sup> With this understanding, we might see how a controlled climate is good for an oil painting; it is necessary or expedient to the realization of its end—the oil painting’s continued existence as the kind of thing it is (in a particular state, etc.). And Rosati admits this much when she writes:

But whereas in the case of those artifacts that are use values the concern is to preserve the functioning of the object, in the case of intrinsic values, like works of art, the concern is to preserve the object in its condition as the valuable item it is.<sup>198</sup>

And of course Rosati is exactly right. But my claim is that in both cases—despite the difference in what the final cause is (e.g. functioning vs. continued existence), both can be analyzed in terms of ends or final causes.

We could posit other possible ends as well—perhaps the end or final cause of an aesthetic creation (considered as such) is to display beauty; perhaps to participate in the form of the

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<sup>196</sup> Rosati mentions great works of art, but I see no reason why we should not also include living things like humans in this category as well, supposing that human life is intrinsically valuable.

<sup>197</sup> Oderberg, "Being and Goodness."

<sup>198</sup> Rosati, "Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem," 223.

Beautiful, etc. In any case, I presume that a theory of aesthetics could be offered such that we could describe the purpose—i.e. the end or final cause—of a work of art, even its value does not lie in any particular “function.” And none of this requires that paintings have ends in any conative sense; all that is required is that there be some final cause we can plausibly attribute to works of art as such. A controlled climate would be instrumentally good for the painting insofar as it is instrumental in realizing this end.

4. Good for a Living Thing: “Rich soil is good for a philodendron.”

Unlike an artifact, a living thing does not receive its ultimate end or final cause from an external source or artificer. This is not to say that an animal or plant cannot be put to some use, but that such a use is not an intrinsic end of the organism. Nor do we tend to believe that its ultimate end or final cause is mere continued existence (though that might be a necessary component of any fully-articulated final cause). The term “flourishing” is often used when describing the final cause of a living thing; generally, life, growth, health, and reproductive success seem to be constitutive of (say) a philodendron’s good. As such, any of these constitutive goods would be intrinsically good for the philodendron. And anything that is necessary or expedient for the realization of these goods would therefore be instrumentally good for it. In Rosati’s case, rich soil—insofar as it is necessary or expedient for the realization of life, growth, health, or reproductive success—would be instrumentally good for the plant. Again, this is not to say that philodendrons actively seek out nutritious soil in order to consciously accomplish some task; rather, soil is good (and therefore desirable as a relative end) insofar as it brings about a further end (which we call flourishing) that is intrinsic to the philodendron’s nature.

5. Good for a Welfare Subject: “Pleasure is good for a person.”

Rosati argues that the good-for relation in the context of well-being is also a distinct species of relational good. But again here we can apply the same analysis. The idea is that a person's constitutive good is his or her ultimate end. This is the standard Aristotelian line—that certain things have natural, inherent final causes. The ultimate final cause—the ultimate that-for-the-sake-of-which things are done—is our *telos*, our ultimate end, which Aristotle identifies as happiness. Aristotle goes on to make the famous (or infamous) function argument—we can leave that aside for now. As a purely formal matter, what is intrinsically good for us is the realization of our constitutive, ultimate final cause (or final causes, if there be more than one) for us as humans.

This does not entail any Aristotelian substantive conclusion about the good. It could be that, given our nature as sensate beings, the experience of pleasure is our ultimate good. It could be that, given our nature as rational, volitional beings, the ends we choose for ourselves, or those things we value, when realized, constitute our intrinsic good. Or it could be that certain kinds of things categorically (and as an objective matter) constitute our good given the kinds of beings we are; e.g. knowledge, friendship, and the like. Any of these options remain open at this point.

And again, the same analysis can be applied for instrumental goods as well. Say that pleasure is the good. Surely money could be expedient for greater experience of pleasure (whether quantitatively or qualitatively). So if we say that money is good for a welfare subject, we are again saying that money is an end—a final cause—relative to the ultimate end of human life, which—as a substantive matter, for the sake of argument—is the experience of pleasure.

Everything that is good for a subject is so because it is an end, either ultimate or relative, of the subject itself. This goes for artifacts, seeing as they have an end imposed on them by their artificer or user, as well as living things, which have an end in the sense that they have an

ultimate good towards which they, by their very nature, are directed (often called “flourishing”). Of course, any end of an artifact is artificial, whereas the ends of living things are natural. Likewise (plausibly), the ultimate end of a rational, consciously volitional animal is different from that of an animal endowed with merely sensitive and nutritive powers. And we might, like Kraut, call both the ends of both human beings and animals “flourishing,” even though the substantive content of that flourishing would differ in the two cases, given that they are different kinds of organisms. None of this suggests that the “good for” relation means different things in different cases. It seems that Rosati’s five kinds of good-for relations are not, in fact, irreducibly distinct.

### *C. Responding to Behrends about Flourishing*

We can then turn to the second objection raised against the singular analysis of relational good: that flourishing, *contra* Kraut’s thesis, does not always stand as the ultimate good in a good-for relation. Recall Behrends’ counterexample regarding the “terror machine,” the ultimate goal of which is to “promote unflourishing.” Given the above analysis of the good-for relation we can now see that this is merely a counterexample to the way Kraut phrased his analysis, and not an actual counterexample to the singular-analysis view itself. Flourishing is quite plausibly that which constitutes the ultimate good of many subjects, but it is not the ultimate good of artifacts, considered in themselves. Often, of course, the act of producing or using an artifact is ultimately undertaken for the sake of flourishing, but this is not necessary or essential. After all, as Behrends suggests, a mad scientist could very well wish to promote unflourishing and build a machine to accomplish his purposes. If the ultimate end of the terror machine is to promote unflourishing, and batteries are instrumental to the terror machine’s realization of this end, then of course batteries are good for the terror machine. In fact, the above analysis can simultaneously

affirm the importance of flourishing (for many subjects) while maintaining Behrends' intuition that "something is good for an artifact if and only if, and because, it contributes to one of the functions of the artifact."<sup>199</sup>

Contrary to Behrends' worry, this does not entail that humans necessarily have "functions."<sup>200</sup> While I myself don't share the worry (what is so odd about humans having "characteristic activities"?), we need not immediately go down this Aristotelian line of reasoning. The above analysis states that a welfare subject's intrinsic good is his ultimate end—whether or not we characterize that in terms of "function." Thus, we may easily shift the discussion from a strange-sounding (to modern ears) substantive claim about the characteristic activity of humans to the conceptual claim about the ultimate end of human life. A singular analysis of the good needn't entail any substantive Aristotelianism.

The upshot of all this is that artifacts and humans (and everything in between) can indeed be analyzed in the same way: X is good for S if X is an end of S, either instrumental or intrinsic. Kraut's analysis, while quite insightful, has certain substantive notions (such as flourishing) built into the analysis that do not seem to apply to all good-for relations. I find it quite plausible that what is ultimately non-instrumentally good for organisms is their flourishing (considered in the substantive sense mentioned by Rosati); it is just that this is, after all, a substantive matter that should be argued for within our first-order discussions of value theory and ought not unduly influence the conceptual framework within which they are situated. By keeping the analysis on the conceptual level, and leaving talk of flourishing to the substantive level, we can see that a

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<sup>199</sup> See note 166.

<sup>200</sup> Behrends, "A New Argument for the Multiplicity of the Good-for Relation," 128.

formulation of a singular analysis is possible that does not run into the objections of Rosati and Behrends.

*D. Responding to Fletcher and Rosati on Normativity*

There are two more concerns I wish to address here on the subject of normativity. First is a worry that Rosati raises—if that which is good for something is the realization of its ultimate end or final cause, and this end or final cause needn't be actively desired or found valuable by that subject, then it seems that the above analysis is not sufficiently normative.<sup>201</sup> That is, welfare is supposed to be reason-giving in a certain way. One might argue that the analysis above does not preserve the reason-giving nature of welfare, since it essentially identifies welfare with other non-reason-giving relations. For example: the fact that soil is good for trees does not somehow provide a tree with a reason to seek soil. If the “good-for” relation is the same regardless of its subject—e.g. trees and people, and the trees has no reason to seek its good, why should we? A few brief responses. First, the normative status—i.e. the extent to which welfare provides reason for action—is a matter of substantive debate. Philosophers can disagree about the reason-giving status of welfare (or of relational good in general) while still talking about the same concept. Because I here provide a conceptual analysis, it doesn't seem that worries about normativity are immediately relevant.

Rosati's concern appears to stem from the purported importance of internalism about a person's good, which is the view that for something to be good for someone's well-being, that person must be capable of caring about that good in some way. The goods of well-being,

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<sup>201</sup> Rosati, "Relational Good and the Multiplicity Problem," 218.

therefore, provide *pro tanto* reasons for action insofar as they (have the capacity to) produce an “internal resonance” with the agent.<sup>202</sup> But if there is a singular good-for relation that applies to non-reason-seeking agents (like animals) as well as non-sentient organisms (like plants) as well as nonliving things (like artifacts), then it is hard to see how well-being can be reason-giving in the way we typically take it to be. Since the singular analysis of relational good can be predicated of things that have no capacity for “internal resonances,” it seems that relational good cannot be reason-giving in the sense Rosati has in mind.

I don’t think that a worry on this front is merited. To assume that internalism is a necessary feature of well-being, we are *eo ipso* excluding certain accounts of objective-list theory and perfectionism from being candidates for the correct theory of human well-being. This would be a strange result; it places the truth or falsity of such welfare theories at the conceptual level, rather than the substantive. Presumably, we should attempt to discover the correct welfare theory through substantive debate, not through a conceptual analysis. And this is the point—if internalism is true, it is not true because the nature of the concept “well-being” or “good for” demands it. Why should the truth of internalism not rest at the substantive level? I find it quite plausible that something resembling internalism is part of how rational, volitional creatures like us discover what the good is. In fact, this is John Finnis’ interpretation of Aquinas’ epistemological approach to natural law: that we discover in what the human good consists by studying our natural inclinations—that what is good is that which *does* have in internal resonance with us.<sup>203</sup> Internalism can fit within the

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<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 27.

<sup>203</sup> Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*, 93. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that our will or rationality might be distorted and make errors in judgment or action in our postlapsarian condition.

singular analysis, but it needn't be central to it. Can we not simply say that considerations of well-being are reason-giving to those beings that can act on such reasons?

Similarly, Fletcher's worry about conflating attributive and relational goodness is misplaced. True, under the Thomistic analysis, what is intrinsically good for something (that has an intrinsic good) is the realization of its ultimate end, its final cause or "perfection." This may seem to analytically entail welfare perfectionism, which many welfare theorists find implausible. But recall that the term "perfection" (or "final cause," or "ultimate end," or whatever word we use) has no substantive content built-in. The Thomistic analysis posits perfection as the constitutive good of something; but it is the job of the value theorist (perhaps a welfare theorist) to provide an account of what counts as perfection in a given case. Thus, while I have claimed that everything's ultimate good is its final end and therefore its perfection, I have left the content of "perfection" wide open. Perhaps the ultimate good of a human being, his ultimate perfection, is the enjoyment of continuous pleasant experiences as hedonists argue; perhaps it is excellence in rational activity as Aristotelians often argue; perhaps it is contemplation of the divine mind as Thomists often argue; perhaps it is the satisfaction of certain desires as subjectivists often argue; perhaps it is enjoying numerous goods on some objective list as objective-list theorists argue; etc. The Thomistic analysis does not necessarily entail any substantive claims about what is or is not good for something; it merely provides a framework for understanding good-for claims.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In conclusion, it seems that many philosophers have discarded the possibility of a singular analysis too quickly. The above analysis has accommodated all of Rosati's numerous kinds of relational good, and it has not fallen victim to the criticisms of Fletcher and Behrends.

We need not posit different kinds of relations when we say that “oil is good for cars” and “pleasure is good for humans.” According to Philippa Foot:

The belief that the word ‘good’ must *mean* something different in the former and latter is, I think, simply a prejudice coming from the type of ethical theory that has dominated analytic philosophy in the past half-century.<sup>204</sup>

A singular analysis can accommodate use of the “good-for” locution in a multiplicity of contexts; it provides unity and coherence to our language concerning relational good.

Now of course, one might argue that the above analysis is not helpful. It is content-neutral, and adds little-to-nothing to our substantive debates concerning welfare and value theory more generally; if “to be good for S means to be an end for S” is an analytic truth, what progress have we made in our understanding of relational good? But in light of the very real possibility that many theorists writing about well-being are actually talking past each other for lack of a conceptual framework within which the meaning of “good for” is clear, I think that something like the above analysis would be rather helpful. In any case, I think that its content-neutrality is actually a strength for this approach. It places our discussions and arguments about the human good and personal welfare on solid ground and eliminates potential for conceptual confusion, so that our first-order substantive debates can be more fruitful. And with a singular analysis, perhaps such fruit will be more forthcoming. After all, we might know something about what it is to be good for a plant or an artifact—hopefully we can use that knowledge to better understand what it is for something to be good for us.

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<sup>204</sup> Foot, *Natural Goodness*, 39.

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