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Philosophical perfectionism – consequences and implications for sport.

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Introduction

Ethics tends to focus on inter-personal more than intra-personal relations. This is true also in sport ethics. There is a rich literature on fairness but little, if any, on sport as part of the good life. This is peculiar since increasingly sport and physical activity are viewed as an integral part of the good life. This is true whether the goal is alternative lifestyle, health or elite performance. Sport can be a central part of a life with a focus on excellence. The sport philosophy pioneer Paul Weiss (1969) focused on the “concern for excellence” as a deep reason for being involved in sport. He focused on sport as such, on the excellent performance. This focus soon disappeared. When Hyland in 1990 discusses the individual athlete in sport the discussion is about self-knowledge and the aesthetic experience and little is said about the athletic performance as such. The same is true of Wertz (1991) who discusses the problem of knowing in sport and the artistic value of sport. There is no discussion of performance and of sport as an important part of a whole life. Heather Reid (2002), who calls her book “The Philosophical Athlete”, discusses self-discovery, responsibility and respect in sport. These are important phenomena but not intrinsically related to sport. We need discussions that a) include the subjective view of the athlete; the view from within, b) have a focus on sport performance as such, c) view athletic excellence as a human good, d) clarify sport as an integral part of life as a whole.

It is my aim in this article to try to remedy some of these shortcomings. I will present and discuss a type of ethical theory that seems to fit sport well, especially sport involvement with a focus on excellence. The theory goes back to Aristotle, but has recently been developed by Hurka (1993). The theory focuses on the development of human talents. It advocates that humans have an obligation to develop human nature, the central human talents and capacities, to the highest possible level. The strongest version of the theory implies that this is a moral obligation for all of us. A weaker version considers perfection to be an option that one has to choose. The idea of perfection is developed in less extreme versions in theories of self-realization, flourishing and

development of human capacities or capabilities (Nussbaum 2000, Sen 1993). One could argue that self-realization and flourishing are good concepts to characterize involvement in health or lifestyle sports, whereas perfection is a concept that fits elite sport.

I will start with some remarks about the idea of perfectionism and its place in ethics. Hurka's philosophical perfectionism will then be presented, commented upon and at the end of the paper critically examined. I use much space to present Hurka's views. I think this is fitting, since, as far as I know, Hurka has given the fullest exposition of perfectionism in recent times. His views can serve as a good basis for future discussions about the role of perfectionism in sport.

Perfection and the idea of the good life

Ethics in the Western tradition has had a tendency to become a) too narrow, and b) reductionistic. It has been too narrow since most moral questions have been exclusively located in the context of human interaction. This means on one hand that questions concerning non-human agents or objects have been neglected. It is only recently that animals or landscapes have become part of ethical debates. On the other hand a person's relation to herself became ethically unclear. Do we have self-regarding duties or obligations? Or, as Greek and modern virtue philosophers would ask, is developing oneself in a certain way an important virtue? Furthermore many ethical theories tended to reduce ethical problems and dilemmas to one type. Both deontological and utilitarian theories typically reduce ethics to one dimension, in one case will or intention come into focus, in the other case pleasure or preference satisfaction. Some philosophers have tried to overcome these limitations. Bernard Williams (1985) thinks that we should start our moral reasoning with a question that Socrates puts forward in the Republic: "What is the good life?" This is not a question concerning certain bodily or mental states but about life as a whole. Socrates' question is about how one should live. According to Williams, Socrates' question is the best place for moral philosophy to start. It is better than "what is our duty?" or "how may we be good?" or even "how can we be happy?" (Williams 1985,4). These other questions take too much for granted. Socrates' question is a good starting point since it is an impersonal one, and therefore it is relevant

for everyone. And it is general; it is about a manner of life and a whole life. It invites to a reflection on one's life as a whole, from every aspect and all the way down. It invites me, according to Williams, to think about my life from no particular point in it.

This is a good starting point. But from here theories about the good life go in quite different directions. Many theories focus on pleasure, happiness or life quality in one form or other. But philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Marx, Hegel and Nietzsche thought that the highest good was connected with the development and perfection of skills and talents of various kinds¹. It is characteristic of perfectionism that it, in contrast to most other theories, has an objective view of human goods. Certain states of affairs and certain activities are good in themselves and not good because they are desired or valued by human beings. Hurka (1993) has a relatively narrow conception of what is good: "What is good, ultimately, is the development of human nature." Other writers have a broader view that includes goods in various social and cultural spheres. Rawls (1971) talks about "Maximizing the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture." Perfectionism is a philosophical theory that contains a theory of value, a moral theory and a political theory. Philosophical perfectionism should, however, not be confused with psychological perfectionism. In sport psychology perfectionism characterizes "athletes who have high personal standards of achievement and behave with intense effort and drive to reach these high personal standards" (Vealey 2005, 350). Psychologists distinguish between positive and negative forms of perfectionism². In sport the focus is often on the maladaptive forms of perfectionism that hamper progress and performance. Some of the best athletes in the world are, however, examples of adaptive and positive forms of perfectionism that combine quest for peak performances with acceptance of setbacks. It is nevertheless important to notice that philosophical perfectionism is a basic theory that may lead to various psychological manifestations in athletes. Pursuing perfection may have psychological costs.

To test the idea of philosophical perfectionism in sport I will most of the time focus on the most demanding and theoretically interesting version. I will therefore spend much time on Hurka's well-developed theory of perfectionism with strong links to Aristotelian perfectionism. One could question whether Hurka's interpretation of Aristotle holds water. This will not be discussed in the following. I rather let Hurka's

own views, Aristotelian or not, be the basis for presentation and discussion. Perfectionism can also be weighed against other views. Perhaps perfectionist ideas will serve best in a pluralist morality, where they are weighed against claims about utility or rights. Even so, exploring perfectionism on its own is a good way to discover its merits and to see how well it can fit in with more inclusive views.

Hurka and the idea of perfection

Aristotle thought that *eudaimonia*, translated as “happiness”, was the undisputable highest good. For Aristotle happiness is linked to an active life. “And as at the Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful or the strongest who are crowned but those who compete (for it is some of these who become victors), so in life it is those who *act* rightly who become the winners of good and noble things.” (1099a) 12. Aristotle thus seems to link function and goal, ontology and ethic, into one total frame. Since human beings have a certain way of being we ought to develop and perfect this way of being³. Aristotle’s view on human self-realization and perfection opened up for two views. According to one view theoretical thinking is the highest activity. The other view values the many-sided development of a broader spectrum of human nature, including the physical side of human beings⁴. Hurka’s theory of perfectionism takes good care of this physical side of human nature.

Hurka’s theory starts from an account of the good human life. In order to decide what the desirable human life is we have to know which properties constitute human nature. “The good life, it then says, develops these properties to a high degree or realizes what is central to human nature” (Hurka 1993, 3). What is central differs among philosophers. For Aristotle and Aquinas humans are rational. For Marx humans are homo faber; they transform nature through cooperative labour. For Hegel human beings realize the Spirit. According to Nietzsche humans exercise the will to power. Broader theories include ideas of a harmonious development of corporeal, mental, intellectual and modal faculties. Hurka uses “”perfectionism” (or “narrow perfectionism”) to refer to a moral theory based on human nature, and “broad perfectionism” for the more inclusive view

that values some development of capacities or some achievement of excellence”(Hurka 1993,4). As we already see here the idea of developing human nature is problematic. The concept of human nature is defined in quite different ways both among philosophers and in modern science, if it is used at all. The Aristotelian notion of a static human nature has been surpassed in many ways by more dynamic and integrated views. It seems wiser to use broad perfectionism and a wider set of human capacities and capabilities as a basis for developing philosophical perfectionism.

The next question is then whether perfecting one’s capacities is a free choice or a form of obligation or duty. If it is a duty so-called “self-regarding duties” are categorical; one has the duty whether one has the desire or not. Some think moral duties only concern treatment of others, so duty toward oneself is a confused notion. Much contemporary moral theory therefore ignores duties to oneself. Perfectionism is a corrective to this. The duties toward oneself come in a negative and positive form. “Negative duties are duties to refrain from damaging or destroying one’s capacity to lead a good life.” (Hurka 1993,10). Positive duties develop one’s nature and realize perfectionist goods. According to Hurka’s narrow Aristotelian perfectionism, developing human nature is an obligation. It is not clear that this is a good interpretation of Aristotle and in any case, as I will come back to later, my own view sees perfection as a choice and not an obligation.

In order to develop human nature one needs to know what human nature is. Perfectionism “equates human nature with the properties essential to humans and conditioned on their being living things.”(Hurka 1993,17). What we have an obligation to develop is human essences, qualities that are common to humans. But what about individual differences? One could argue that in addition to common properties individual differences should be important. In many artistic pursuits individual style plays an important role. Heather Reid argues for a similar possibility in sport. “Many athletes find ways to express their individuality within sport. They adopt particular styles such as a distinctive batting stance, or invent particular moves such as a signature slam-dunk. In sport, we’re most comfortable – and most successful - when our actions express our unique selves” (Reid 2002,32). But Hurka thinks that what we are obliged to develop is human nature and not individual style, which is dependent on cultural impact. Hurka does

not seem to see that individual style is as much a consequence of biological factors as cultural impulses.

The goal of perfectionism is to develop human nature and exercise essential human capacities. In order to identify essences Hurka wants to use both intuition and science in combination with an Aristotelian theory of human nature. Hurka thinks that this combination yields three forms of perfection. Physical perfection develops physical nature. Theoretical and practical perfection develop theoretical and practical rationality. This means that physical perfection is related to the body and its development, whereas theoretical and practical rationality are perfections of the soul.

Physical perfection has several levels. The basic level consists of good bodily health and a well-functioning body that is fit for reproduction and survival. Higher physical perfection comes with more intense and vigorous activity. Aristotle was skeptical toward specialized sport. Hurka, however finds “the highest physical good in great athletic feats. These feats often embody perfections other than physical perfection. They require skill and dexterity and can follow months of careful planning” (Hurka 1993,39). As we shall see later this means that sport, some more than others, and especially at high levels of performance, makes use of practical rationality as much as physical fitness. Physical perfection is especially well demonstrated in pure and simple athletic feats of outstanding quality: “When a human runs 100 meters in 9.86 seconds or long-jumps 29 feet, something physically splendid occurs. His bodily powers are realized to the full in a way that is intrinsically admirable and of intrinsic perfectionist worth”(Hurka 1993,39). Sport is thus an arena for developing physical nature to high levels. But sport also requires practical and sometimes theoretical rationality, at least at high levels of performance where strategic planning and science play an important role. This is true even for sprinters. World-class sprinters make extensive use of practical and theoretical rationality. Many people, including Hurka, underestimate the role of theoretical rationality in sport at high performance levels. The knowledge base is both scientific and experiential. Athletes have to draw information from different sources.⁵

Specialization and different ways of aggregating perfection

Based on Aristotle there are two possible views concerning perfection. One view is that *there is one and only one highest perfection*. Since Aristotle ranks theoretical perfection highest we should always seek theoretical perfection ahead of the other forms of perfection. Practical perfection is ranked lower than theoretical, even if the theoretical perfection needs the practical in order to be realized. Following Aquinas we can give physical perfection some value but it must always yield to spiritual goods. Hurka also gives physical perfection the lowest rank, even if he has no special argument for this, except that his intuition tells him so.

One way of developing perfection is through specialization. It could be in sport, business or science. Even if theoretical thinking was the highest form of action for Aristotle one could generalize and democratize his views to include also physical and practical activities as valuable candidates for perfection. Suppose sport was chosen. K.A. Ericsson (2006) thinks that in order to reach world-class level in sport one needs 10 000 hours of concentrated deliberate practice. One form of developing human nature would be to concentrate all one's effort to reach the highest possible level in one specific sport discipline. It would mean a concentration of focus and effort at the costs of other talents or capacities. If one reached world class level there would still be choices to make about how to concentrate one's effort in the best way. What would be the most interesting and valuable way of showing one's extreme capacities. Based on Hurka's theory let me point to four possible strategies: summing, averaging, maximax and single-peak.

a. Summing

The strategy here is to take part in as many competitions as possible, taking into consideration the chance of burnouts or injuries. The idea is to compete as often as possible. One would then hopefully over a season show many good results. The sheer number of medals or money or goods one had acquired would be signs of how well one had performed in sum over a season. This strategy would mean that one not only took part in the big events but also in smaller events; not only international competitions but also national; not only national but also regional ones. Some marathon runners take part in only a couple of races every year. Others run every month. In the "good old days" speed skaters took part also in local races. Today some do not even take part in the

national championship because they want to save energy for the next international competition. Summing means that being an elite athlete is a lifestyle and hard work. One is more interested in displaying one's skills and talents in many events than saving them for the big occasions. For people who use a summing strategy there is no big problem if one has a bad day. It does not detract significantly from the general impression of many good performances over a season, a year, or a career. In many ways the world cup system in slalom or cross country skiing favours a summing strategy. Even on a bad day there may be some points to win. It is always better to get at least some points rather than not to take part. It is the summing over a season that counts. If one wants to be the World Cup winner it is important not to miss competitions.

b. Averaging

The averaging strategy means that one should have the highest possible average performance over a season, a year or a career. It means that one should only compete when one is in good shape and not too far from one's best. Many think that Muhammad Ali's last fights against Larry Holmes and Trevor Bebrick should not have taken place. They lowered the average of Ali's performance over a career. The results detracted from the impression of Ali as a world-class boxer. He did not follow Nietzsche's harsh words: "Many die too late and few die too early. Die at the right time!" For athletes following the averaging strategy it becomes very important to drop competitions when one is out of shape. And it is even more important to stop when at the top and not wait too long, like Ali, and get a certain shadow falling over parts of the career. Averaging is typical for some athletes in athletic events. They concentrate on the big events, the championships, and drop many of the Golden League events. The strategy here is to build up maximum performance in fewer events and that means that training and resting before these events are more important than maybe winning a lower-ranked competition.

c. Maximax

Maximax is a more extreme strategy than averaging. It means that one should search for the greatest season or career value of single events. Concentrate on a few of the best opportunities and put all your efforts into winning the few most prestigious

events. Lance Armstrong is a good example of this strategy. He had just one big ambition every year – to win the Tour de France. All his training, all his efforts, and all his work, were dedicated to this single goal. The races he entered before the Tour de France were just a part of the training for the tour. He tested the most difficult parts of the Tour de France course. He went up the steepest hills just to find the right rhythm so he knew how to tackle the hill during the race. He was a perfectionist in relation to equipment. All the minute details that could improve the bike, the sitting position, the clothing, were looked into. Food, nutrition and rest were optimized.⁶ We do not know whether the perfection also included forbidden means. But if so, he was not alone. His competitors were in the same class.

Lance Armstrong used a maximax strategy in relation to a season. But he used in many ways a highest average over his career. He concentrated on Tour de France, which is the most prestigious race, and he won seven in a row. Then he quit. If, however, he returns to Tour de France in 2008 he runs the risk of experiencing the same drop in performance as Muhammad Ali.

Single-Peak

Single-Peak Perfection is a term coined by Thomas Nagel. Some performances represent single peaks since they open up new possibilities and help us enter new ground. The first climb of Everest, the special theory of relativity, and the first landing on the moon are examples of such achievements. Single-peak perfection means discovering new truths, making technological breakthroughs, setting new world records, and inventing new sport forms.

Edmund Hilary had just one big feat in his career, but that was a single-peak breakthrough. He was the first man on the highest mountain of the world. Bob Beamon jumped 8,90 meter in Mexico city in 1978, beating the world record with half a meter and setting a new standard for what was possible in long-jump. Single-peak perfection is difficult to have as a strategy since there are so many factors that must come together in a successful way if the performance is to take place. There are elements of luck, intuition, skill and timing that are beyond rational planning.

All the four strategies are in a way impressive. One must admire the hard continuous efforts of the summing athlete. One is impressed by the prudence and strategy of the averaging performer. Maximax is a daring and risky project. The single-peak strategy is admirable in its creativity combined with luck. I would argue that each of the strategies has merits that make it in a sense unfair to rank them without taking into consideration concrete historical contexts and ramifications. A further discussion, weighing and ranking the strategies would require more space than what is available here. It is an interesting task for the future.

Perfection and the idea of a well-rounded life

Specialization and a strong focus on one single goal is one way of perfecting human nature. The other alternative is to try to live a well-rounded life. In order to aggregate perfection and make evaluations across activities and dimensions we must be able to measure perfection. We have no cardinal measures and numerical weights attached to each perfection. Instead Hurka suggests that we use *supervaluation*. This device does not operate with precise numbers, but accepts the possibility of comparing the alternatives more roughly. The simplest version would be to give each perfection serious thought and use a constant *trade-off* between perfections. “It assigns a fixed, finite weight to each excellence, and this weight is the same for all people in all circumstances”(Hurka 1993,85). It means that in a certain situation one could trade a certain amount of physical perfection for a certain amount of theoretical perfection. I can read 30 pages of philosophy or run 10 km.

A constant trade-off could lead to too much weight on one perfection. That would happen if one traded all activities into one currency. Another view is *balancing*. One could argue that the best lives contain at least a certain balance between perfections. Our lives could mirror Renaissance lives. Hurka thinks Leonardo is an ideal – but set too high. But we can all aim at “ a well-rounded achievement rather than narrow specialization.”(Hurka 1993,88) The balancing view excludes constant trade-offs. What one has neglected one should give more weight. Balancing means that goods should be acquired in some acceptable proportion. This is violated if we concentrate too much on one. This is according to Hurka, the basis for the polemics of Marx and Nietzsche against

specialization and the division of labour. Nietzsche insisted that a human's greatness lies in his "range and multiplicity, in his wholeness in manifoldness." (Hurka 1993,89)

Balancing can also make one perfection higher. If practical rationality is more valuable than physical one should spend more time on the practical without neglecting the physical. Balancing means avoiding one-sidedness. Humboldt suggests that one way to achieve "harmonious development" is to choose projects that promote several excellences at once. Scientific research can promote separate goods of theory and practice. Similarly in many kinds of sport. Hurka sees that practical rationality is important in many sports. "Team sports require players to solve strategic problems at the same time as they exercise their bodies. Here the mix of rational with physical goods is what balancing finds attractive and what suits these sports to a well-rounded life." (Hurka 1993,90). This means that a life could be well-rounded even if it was concentrated on just one activity. It could be in research, in practical pursuits or in sport. Hurka thinks that "a hockey-playing life could be rounded if the sport's intellectual demands match those of the body." (1993,90). This is of course far from Leonardo who excelled in quite different activities. But what Hurka suggests is that we should not only look at different activities but at the different aspects of the activity. This stands somewhat in contrast to Aristotelian notions of well-roundedness which balance theoretical and practical activities, private as well as public life.

The consequences of the idea of a well-rounded life for sport involvement are not quite clear. There are some tensions between the vertical and horizontal ordering. The vertical distinguishes theoretical, practical and physical perfection. The horizontal divides between different activities inside one perfection area, for instance the physical. Well-roundedness means that one must avoid one-sidedness and too much specialization. One must be balanced between theoretical, practical and physical perfection, but spend more time on the higher perfections than the lower. This makes it virtually impossible to develop sport to a very high level. One could think that Hurka would advocate a certain many-sidedness inside, say, physical perfection. That would mean taking part in a certain variety of sports. These could be ordered from sports with pure individual physical skills like 100 meter sprint, to two person sports like fencing, to strategic team sports like soccer and to teamwork in risk sports like climbing expeditions. Such an argument would

favour developing one's skill level up to a point where one masters the activity and is emotionally involved. Hurka takes another line of argument. He says that one instead should be involved in sport in a way that develops not only physical but practical and theoretical skills. In addition to developing physical perfection, an ice hockey player encounters interesting strategic problems and can take part in theoretical studies of playing styles. Such a view makes it much easier to reach world class level since it allows much more specialization yet keeping an eye on well-roundedness. However one then has to give up the Aristotelian ranking with physical perfection at the bottom. Otherwise one could only excel in strategic and theory-dependent sports and not in sports requiring pure and simple physical skills. It would place the sprinters at the bottom and the football players and expedition climbers at the top. This could, however, be remedied if one opens up for theoretical studies not related to sport as a way of overcoming one-sidedness and increase well-roundedness. Sprinters should read philosophy and take part in discussions!

Dilettantism and Concentration

Leading a life implies that we have memory of what we did in the past. Hurka's idea of well-roundedness means that we should develop excellences we have achieved less of in the past. Does this lead to a situation where a well-rounded life will be uniformly mediocre? Or does diversity enhance perfections, enriching them from different sources? Then balance is doubly required.

Hurka thinks there are two factors that influence our decision here.

1) The *dilettante's disadvantage* favours heavy involvement in an activity, since the more time one invests the more one gains by further involvement.

2) The *costs of concentration* are due to the fact that people who become heavily involved in one single activity become easily fatigued or bored. What is more, some perfections are subject to a law of diminishing returns. It is easier to move from low to medium level achievements than from there to the top. Reaching the top means incurring big costs in time, effort and money. Would it not be better if promising young athletes sought variety instead of specialization?

Hurka thinks that we can acknowledge both factors and unite them if we look at where they are strongest. Dilettante's disadvantage is strongest at low levels of perfection and weaker higher up. In many domains big investments of time and effort are needed before one can reach any excellence. Fundamental skills must be learned in sport. Foreign languages are not learned unless one has a basic grasp of grammar. Students need to learn the basic concepts in a science. When fundamentals are acquired the progress becomes more rapid. Because of this, diversity of pursuits is damaging if it prevents a person from acquiring the basic skills. But the diversity is less harmful further along. With a certain mastery of several skills she can alternate between them.

The costs of concentration are in many ways opposite the dilettante's disadvantage. They are greatest at high levels. After many hours of practice it is hard to concentrate. One can benefit by doing something else or relax. In addition diminishing returns affect perfection at high levels. The rapid process after having acquired the fundamental skills slows down when higher levels are reached. There are also interaction effects. Diversity of pursuits is distracting at low levels but can be fruitful further on. Major intellectual breakthroughs often occur when insights from one area are applied to another. The combined effect of dilettante's disadvantage and the costs of concentration leads to the following picture; if one were to combine different types of perfection it is a bad idea to spend the same amount of time on both. One should use more time on one of the activities but not specialize too heavily. Hurka advocates moderate concentration and specialization but no monomania. Balancing still plays a role and it is good to be an all-rounder to some extent. In relation to sport such a view would favour a many-sided education among young people with involvement in different sports and then later a certain specialization without taking it too far. Some empirical studies show that a lot of activity across diverse sports is typical for athletes who later reach the highest levels (Breivik and Gilberg 2000). The groundwork must be many-sided in order to carry heavy specialization later. But in order to reach the top the last steps are only possible with intense concentration of efforts and heavy specialization. This seems to be difficult in the model Hurka advocates. Moderate specialization is not enough at the highest levels. The best model seems to be to let children start with many-sidedness and then gradually concentrate on two or three activities and finally on one or even a specialty inside one,

like being a downhill specialist more than an all-round alpine skier. Hurka has problems with the idea of specialization: “The *specializing* view may be attractive to some, but it directly opposes the balancing view and flouts the intuitions I most want to capture. In my view the most appealing ideal, especially when we consider the value of whole lives, is that of well-roundedness.”(Hurka 1993,95)⁷

The discussion so far has taken little notice of individual differences. Since many talents and capacities have genetic bases the possibilities for perfection are both limited and enhanced by factors outside our control. We are born with certain talents and lack others. One view would be to develop all our capacities, at least to a certain degree. Another view would be to concentrate only on those capacities that have the greatest potential for perfection. Most people have at least some talents. But some have limited abilities and some have short lives. In both cases the dilettante’s disadvantage works powerfully against many-sidedness. They should concentrate on fewer things and specialize. People with long lives or many talents have possibilities of being involved in a broader range of activities. They can model themselves after Leonardo, even if it is more and more difficult to reach a combination of many-sidedness and excellence.

Unity through complexity

Balance and well-roundedness can be further developed through the ideas of unity and complexity. The unified life can be monotonous. It may lack variation and complexity. But it does not need to be monolithic. If a person loves philosophy and ice hockey both can be built into her life, giving each a certain part. The valuable thing is not that they both are parts, side by side, but rather that they take part in an overriding goal. From an Aristotelian viewpoint the activities should furthermore be ends in themselves. Hurka thinks that “In its best formulation, the Aristotelian ideal is not unity but unity-in-diversity, or the bringing of many contrasting elements into one life structure.”(Hurka 1993,122). This means that one should value complex, difficult and challenging activities. These activities “stretch our capacities, demanding more rationality than ones that are simple. Chess at the grand master level is difficult, as is mountain-climbing.

Athletes such as Wayne Gretzky solve sophisticated tactical problems during their games, as do scientific researchers and politicians.”(Hurka 1993,123)

To order complexity into unity Hurka introduces the concept ‘generality’, which is defined through extent and dominance. Extent tells how general excellences are across time and objects. Dominance orders excellences in hierarchies. Development of unity-in-complexity is a challenging endeavour for at least three reasons:

a) Difficult activities imply a more complex subordination of ends under an overarching goal and therefore involve more dominance. Subordinate goals and component parts need to be structured as part of a whole. Hurka thinks “Mountain-climbing requires many steps before feet reach a peak, and because each aspect of a trek - equipment, route selection, conditioning – has component parts, again complex relations among ends are involved.”(Hurka 1993,123-124). Complex activities are difficult because they can go wrong in many different ways. There are more elements and more chances for failure. Complex activities thus make more demands on rationality. They may include sophisticated problem-solving through a series of stages.

b) Extension is a further challenge. The complexity of difficult activities is often accompanied by greater extent since one element influences others, one move affects other parts. “The great ability of athletes like Gretzky is to see all the game around them, know where other players will be next, and act on that knowledge. The ability is reflected in their tremendous recall of patterns from completed games.” (Hurka 1993,124). Good players like Gretzky can stretch the mind through more extensive mind states and compare them in the light of global properties. This stretching is an advanced exercise of rationality and very difficult and demanding.

c) Difficult activities usually involve precision. Precise steps must be taken in a precise way. Hurka states: “When I shoot the puck in hockey, my intention is usually to put it somewhere near the net. When Gretzky shoots, he intends not only what I intend but also to pick the spot the goaltender has left open, which is in the upper right corner, and a few inches across. He has all my intentions plus many more, namely, those that specify his precise goals.”(Hurka 1993,124-125).

Complexity, extension and precision, are independent of each other. Activities can have one aspect and not the other. The most advanced activities score high on all

three aspects. Such activities are typically the demanding team sports and the advanced team-based activities in natural surroundings. In these activities physical perfection is a necessary basis to reach high levels. But practical rationality is important, and in most cases, decisive if the highest level of performance is to be reached. More and more research and various forms of theoretical rationality play a central role during preparation, training and evaluation. Sport at high levels of achievement is more and more of a mind game.

The unified life and the value of activities

A unified life has value. It is unclear whether a unified life outweighs the value linked to the particular activities or vice versa. One could compare a life organized around a single end and only simple pursuits, whereas another life is anarchically distributed between different challenging projects. Sprinters that are single-mindedly focused on reaching top level and successfully pursue a career until they are 40 years old may be said to exemplify the unified life. A person with talents in several sports, chess and music, pursuing one activity after the other, without any plan or overarching goal may exemplify the second case. It is not easy to say what is best. It is easier to say what is best and what is worst. The best life “has a single organizing end that demands many different challenging activities that are also valued for themselves”, whereas the worst life “is an unconnected series of passive experiences.”(Hurka 1993,128). In the first case, there are extended, structured goals. In second case there are no such goals. I think to be realistic the international elite athlete pursuing perfection has very limited possibilities to be involved in various other activities than sport. A certain single-mindedness is needed. Specialized perfection has a prize. Too much well-roundedness detracts from the possibility of a successful career. I think Hurka underestimates the need for single-minded unification in elite sport careers. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of a limited set of meaningful activities in addition to sport. Even elite athletes have time to exercise a certain amount of practical and theoretical rationality found in art, science, social work, politics and so on.

Perfectionism – some consequences and problems

According to perfectionism the good life does not consist in well-being, but in excellence. It may be necessary to make sacrifices. This is a view that suits many writers, artists, intellectuals and athletes, since they all focus on performing something. Not only elite athletes but people who have sport as a hobby, can emphasize improving performance and performing well. They may be willing to make sacrifices, undergo hard training, and even suffer in order to reach their personal goals. In this sense perfectionism is a good antidote to the focus in present society on pleasure and well-being. Perfectionism contrasts thus with both hedonism and desire satisfaction accounts of the human good.

Hurka's version of perfectionism that we have been discussing is a demanding theory since it maintains that humans have a moral obligation to develop human nature to the highest possible level. The *human nature perfectionism* is vulnerable since it has to define what constitutes human nature and which properties or capacities are part of human nature. *Objective goods perfectionism* is more modest since it focuses on the achievement or realization of "the best things in life". The existence of the objective goods and not their relation to human nature is what makes goods worthy of pursuit. A more relaxed version of perfectionism could also include pluralism. Humans should not be obliged to develop only the higher capacities or a well-balanced set of capacities but may rather, due to differences in temperament and talents, have the opportunity to concentrate on artistic pursuits, theoretical studies and athletic achievements. Those who pursue athletic careers should have freedom to choose certain narrow specializations. Some athletes might even refrain from self-development and rather opt for the self-development of others. Perfectionist goods may then be combinable in different proportions. A plurality of different types of life may be perfect. As Wall (2007) indicates, pluralism is a possible position. It is also in many ways an attractive position.

A perfectionist ethic may thus come in an egoistic and non-egoistic form. One can perfect oneself as much as possible or to some threshold level. But this need not be

narrowly self-interested. The good of others may be derivative of my own good. There need not be a conflict. My perfection can have a positive spin-off on others. Within non-egoistic forms of perfectionism conflicts are possible since one must perfect others as well as oneself. A Kantian view means that we cannot have a duty to promote perfection in others. They are in a sense outside our control. We may not have capabilities or resources to help them and some goods require self-direction for their realization. What we can do, however, is to ensure that others live under conditions that favour their self-development. Since we can directly bring about our own perfection we should, at least in practice, put more focus on this.

Hurka contrasts perfectionism with deontological and consequentialist theories. Others think that it is possible to combine perfectionism and consequentialism. One could focus on the greatest development of all human beings at all time, as Hurka does, but also on more relaxed versions without such maximization. One could develop one's own perfection up to a certain level and then focus on other people. Many goods in a life favour such a view since they do not profit from maximization. Friendship, knowledge, and aesthetic experience may taste better in threshold versions than in maximized doses. Single-minded focus on maximization can lead to situations where we may tread on others to pursue our highest goals. Do we have a moral liberty to harm others? Could we sacrifice those who have little potential for perfection? Wall (2007) thinks that a combination of perfectionism and consequentialism could endorse such an attitude. Deontological perfectionism would however find this repugnant since such an attitude would disrespect perfection or the capacity to achieve it of every human being. One should always treat others with respect.

Since there are inherent dangers in an unrestrained maximization of perfection, Wall (2007) thinks that a somewhat theoretically restrained perfectionism could be attractive. "On this mixed view, in which perfectionism is understood as merely one element of a general moral theory, it is possible to recommend perfectionism as an agent-neutral maximizing doctrine and avoid the unwanted implications that morality is excessively demanding and that it endorses the sacrifice of some for the sake of greater overall human perfection" (Wall 2007,7).

Another concern is the elitist implications of perfectionism. It would lead to different weights to the perfection of different human beings. One should seek perfection of those who are capable of achieving most. Nietzsche's and other superhuman versions of perfectionism give absolute weight to certain great men, like Socrates or Goethe, and little or zero weight to the rest of humanity. *Prioritarian* views put extra weight on the more valuable forms of perfection. It means that one should value perfection of each and every human being, but in aggregating we should count the greater perfections more, by some multiplier, than lesser perfections. Greater perfections count for more. We should pursue the greatest overall human perfection and this may have inegalitarian implications for the distribution of resources, like Thomas Nagel suggests. A prioritarian principle would give more value to the higher perfections by some finite positive multiplier. Nagel, discussing public expenditure, advocates an anti-egalitarian position in a good society. In what he calls a "mildly Nietzschean note", he suggests that a good society should be committed to developing the maximum levels of excellence possible. "A society should try to foster the creation and preservation of what is best, or as good as it possibly can be, and this is just as important as the widespread dissemination of what is merely good enough." (Nagel 1991,135). The unrestrained maximalism of Nagel may be contrasted with the more restrained maximalism of Rawls. Maximalism is not to be pursued by the state or the society as such but only inside voluntary associations. "While justice as fairness allows that in a well-ordered society the values of excellence are recognized, the human perfections are to be pursued within the limits of the principle of free association. Persons join together to further their cultural and artistic interests in the same way that they form religious communities." (Rawls 1971,328-29). Rawls' principle of fairness would furthermore exclude maximization at the costs of other people's welfare and interests. That could imply that an increase in performance should not happen at the costs of other people's possibility to excel. It should not put other people in a worse position, but rather favour their positive development.

Perfection seems in general to incline toward inequality. But could perfection be combined with equality? Wall (2007) advocates a "perfectionism cum equality". There is not necessarily a tight connection between perfectionism and inequality. It could mean that we should give all young people the same opportunity to develop and perfect their

physical talents and their practical rationality in sport. Talented young persons should not be favoured by being selected early and given much better conditions and resources than others to excel. Material conditions should be the same, positions and status be kept as equal as possible, and each person should be treated with the same respect. While I agree with this up to a certain age, say around 16-17 years, from that age on the most talented should get more resources. Or put in other terms: Up to mastery level all should have the same conditions but at the higher performance levels inequality is needed if the highest possible levels are to be reached.

Concluding comment

I have presented and discussed several aspects of a theory of perfection that goes back to Aristotle but has recently been fully developed by Thomas Hurka. While the theory is attractive and relevant for sport it has also, I think, several weaknesses. Some of these have been pointed out or hinted at during the presentation. Let me sum up some of the important points that need more discussion in the future:

1. Hurka's theory of narrow perfectionism implies developing human nature as an obligation for all. I think it is difficult to uphold the idea of human nature and human essences as defined by Aristotle and Hurka. Instead I favour a concept of sets of human faculties and capacities based on biological and cultural influences that can be further developed and perfected. Whereas Hurka sees perfecting one's nature as an obligation for all, I consider perfection a choice. Certainly perfection is one of the plausible deep life goals. The idea of a life project or a life plan focusing on perfecting one's capacities is attractive for talented young people that want to excel in sport, art, music or science.
2. The closest I come to the idea of an obligation for all is that a physically active lifestyle seems to have been an integral part of the human condition since humans evolved. From this fact there is, however, no logical implication that could oblige us to be physically active. If not an obligation it nevertheless seems to be a good choice for children and young people to become involved in many-sided and balanced physical activity. To have a diverse and well-rounded set of activities that can be mastered and enjoyed together with others is valuable and attractive in

3. Hurka tries to combine perfection with well-roundedness. In relation to sport I think this means that he underestimates the need for specialization of the talents and capacities one wants to perfect. Prioritizing well-roundedness undermines the possibility of serving as an interesting philosophical theory for perfection in sport, at least if we think of international elite level performances.
4. The idea of well-roundedness should, however, not be given up. But instead of looking for physical, practical and theoretical rationality inside complex and demanding sports, I would favour a complexity where athletes, whatever their sport, sought practical and theoretical rationality in non-sport fields. This means that I favour complexity more than unity. In this way it is possible to excel in a specialized sport discipline yet get moderate inputs from non-sport areas. Darwin thought he should read some lines of poetry every day. Sprinters, and other athletes at elite levels, should read philosophy!
5. I favour equality in conditions when children are small or people are young. Above mastery level and up towards elite level the best should get more resources. More inequality at higher levels is needed if the highest perfection is to be reached. This is a consequence of perfection as an objective good that should be achieved.
6. When the idea of perfection of human nature is given up there is more room for individual biological differences and perfection of culturally based styles. Some individuals have rare qualities that should be perfected. More snow scooter drivers that can make backward summersaults with their machines are needed. Similarly people who can BASE jump from the Eiffel tower. The proviso here is that the activities must be meaningful, not only for individual persons, but as integral parts and cultivated expressions of a social and cultural milieu. Not all the perfections listed in Guinness Book of World Records satisfy this criterion. These perfections would not be accepted as Aristotelian perfections since they lack values other than pure perfection.

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¹ Perfectionism can be a theory of the good human life. It can also be a general moral theory and an approach to politics. It is a theory of the good human life that concerns us here. Generally – “perfectionist

writers advance an objective account of the human good and then develop an account of the ethics and/or politics that is informed by this account of the good” (Wall 2007, 1).

² Positive and adaptive forms of perfectionism may be characterized in the following way: “athletes set high personal standards of achievement, are driven to succeed, are highly motivated to do their best, and get pleasure from the efforts of pursuing goals.” (Vealey 2005:350). They also accept setbacks and when they perform below expected levels. Negative and maladaptive perfectionism have the following characteristics: “athletes set high personal standards of achievement, but they focus on avoiding failure, leave themselves little freedom to make mistakes, are overly critical in evaluating their performance, and rarely feel good about their performance even when they give their best effort”. (Vealey 2005:350) They get problems since reaching high level achievements require risk-taking and worry-free performance. In sport the maladaptive forms of perfectionism seem to dominate the picture. “The empirical evidence presented from sport and exercise contexts will confirm the assertions of Flett and Hewitt (2002) that perfectionism is essentially a debilitating personality characteristic, which can lead to maladaptive cognitions, negative affective responses and dysfunctional achievement behaviors.” (Hall 2006:179)

³ Thomson (2004) holds that perfectionism contains an ontology that is linked to ethics with a linking principle. The ontological thesis “holds that there is something importantly distinctive about the form of life we human beings embody, some set of significant skills or capacities that set us apart from (and, typically, above) all the other kinds of entities with which we are familiar. Perfectionism’s ethical thesis maintains that our greatest fulfillment or flourishing follows from the cultivation and development (hence the *perfection*) of these significantly distinctive skills or capacities.”(Thomson 2004:440-441). The linking principle links the ethic to the ontology in a certain way. Aristotle hence argues (ontological thesis) that what sets us apart from other beings is our ability to employ *nous* or active intellect. The ethical thesis maintains that the greatest fulfillment comes from perfecting our distinctive nature. The linking principle implies that ethical fulfillment follows directly from perfecting our distinctive ontological nature.

⁴ Nagel (1995) presents the two views in the following way: “The *Nicomachean Ethics* exhibits indecision between two accounts of *eudaimonia* – a comprehensive and an intellectualist account. According to the intellectualist account, stated in Book 10, chapter 7, *eudaimonia* is realized in the activity of the most divine part of man, functioning in accordance with its proper excellence. This is the activity of theoretical contemplation. According to the comprehensive account (described as “secondary” at 1178a9), *eudaimonia* essentially involves not just the activity of the theoretical intellect, but the full range of human life and action, in accordance with the broader excellences of moral virtue and practical wisdom.”(Nagel 1995, 113)

⁵ Lance Armstrong tells about how he used different kinds of relevant information: “You had to become a slave to data, to performance indicators like the pedal cadence, and power output measured in watts. You had to measure literally every heartbeat, and every morsel you ate, down to each spoonful of cereal. You had to be willing to look like a vampire, your body-fat hovering around three to four percent, if it made you

faster. If you weighed too little, you wouldn't have the physical resources to generate enough speed. If you weighed too much, your body was a burden. It was matter of power to weight. "(Armstrong 2003,157)

⁶ In the book "Every Second Counts", Armstrong tells how he discussed with Floyd Landis about what was necessary to win. "You had to be willing to examine any small part of your body or the bike to find extra time, I told Floyd; to look for fractions of seconds in something as small as the sleeves of your jersey. Once you reach a certain level, everyone is good, and everyone trains hard," I said. The difference is who is more meticulous, willing to find the smallest increments of time, and as you get older and more experienced the percentage grins grow smaller and smaller."(Armstrong 2003:157)

⁷ Rashdall criticizes the idea of a well-rounded life and thinks it leads to mediocrity. Using Charles Darwin as an example he thinks the idea of an equal, all-round, harmonious development is impossible. It is excluded by the constitution of human nature and the well-being of society. Hurka responds by pointing out that Charles Darwin had regrets since he had not read some lines of poetry every day. The view of Hurka answers the Rushdall's objection since it admits a certain specialization yet keeps all-rounded balance in place.