Many things contribute to the good human life. Contemporary perfectionist approaches try to explain these things on the intra-personal level. Theories of the good life provide us with a list of things that are of inherent value—like inter alia knowledge, excellence, social interaction, aesthetic appreciation and autonomy\(^1\)—and as such are elements of the good life. However, not much has been said about the distributive implications that would follow from such accounts of the good life. On the inter-personal level, contemporary perfectionist accounts do not tell us what the state should do when support for one inherently valuable thing conflicts with support for other inherently valuable things. In other words, we do not know much about distributive tradeoffs at the inter-personal level.

Distributive justice theories, on the other hand, are very much concerned with tradeoffs, yet this concern is generally limited to neutral goods, e.g. primary goods or resources. These goods are expected to benefit all universally, but account for only a limited part of what makes human lives good. To the extent that perfectionist theories and distributive justice theories engage in mutual discourse, this discourse is restricted to arguing about the merits and demerits of state neutrality towards conceptions of the good life. This, in turn, means that the distributive implications of non-neutral goods are left unexamined and further, that upon examination it might turn out to be the case that current distributive practices of non-neutral goods (e.g. vibrant cities, minority languages, the humanities, basic science) actually create and reinforce injustice.

The first part of this paper elaborates on the motivation to articulate distributive principles of justice. The rest of the paper is more exploratory in nature. It will develop one possible way of interpreting the institutional, environmental, and cultural conditions that

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4 Sypnowich, ‘A New Approach to Equality’.
are necessary for perfectionism. According to this interpretation, these conditions will be fulfilled in an environment which enables opportunities for and achievements of general, hierarchical, complex and cooperative undertakings or goals. The former, in turn, can be achieved in environments which enable free time and access to a variety of opportunities. Having defined these conditions, we may examine further the relationship between egalitarianism and perfectionism. This exploration will hopefully open up a terrain for considering the requirements of egalitarian perfectionism, and as importantly, its theoretical and practical limitations.

**Why we need perfectionist distributive principles**

Goods that affect human flourishing require state support for their cultivation and development. Yet in a world that is characterized by scarcity of resources, state support for the cultivation and development of these inherently valuable things cannot be indiscriminate. Without an account of how the state should distribute resources and access to things that promote the good life beyond basic essentials, perfectionism remains an interesting philosophical inquiry but one that does not transcend to a political theory. for perfectionism to be relevant to morality, it needs to provide a convincing distributive-justice framework.

Moreover, not providing such an account allows the neutralist approaches to dominate the normative and theoretical distributive discourse. Neutralist distributive justice theories, however, may actually promote injustice, as follows:
They distribute the wrong “currency”

Distributing (neutral) resources disregards important inequalities that may persist in well-being or in human flourishing. Conditions for human flourishing are not the same as conditions of material equality. Beyond basic essentials—food, shelter, health—people also need education, friendship and love, participation in public life, play and sport, experiences of nature, culture, and opportunities for intellectual reflection. Above a certain threshold—in which material needs are met—improvements in wellbeing that are derived from cultural, aesthetic, social pursuits and intellectual reflection are more important than improvements in material wellbeing.

Equality of capabilities vs. actual achievements

In contrast to capability theories, which focus on ensuring equality in the potential for achievements, perfectionist theories are interested also in the actual achievement and realization of our capacities or fundamental goals. Thus equality in perfectionist terms cannot be limited to merely providing the conditions for human flourishing. This would be insufficient, because flourishing is dependent on the actual achievement of wellbeing (and not merely the potential for flourishing). Thus, we need the capacities for and access to a fulfilling life, but we also need to actually live it. Distributive theories which focus on

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8 Ibid.
capabilities alone, i.e. on the potential for flourishing, while neglecting to pay attention to the actual achievement of flourishing, fall short of the egalitarian ideal.

**Unequal public goods distribution**

Many of the things that make human lives good depend on a supportive public culture, on public institutions and on public resources. Importantly, these things do not appeal to every person in the same way. Some people are more interested than others in Opera, the humanities, nature reserves or in a minority language. These, and many other goods, can thus be classified as non-neutral public goods. For neutralist theories these non-universal public goods are “expensive tastes”, tastes which are costlier than basic goods and are controversial, in the sense that others may not see any reason to subsidize them for others. Neutralist theories, therefore, leave the provision of these goods in the hands of the private market or voting procedures. Since many of the things that contribute to human flourishing are dependent on collective and public support, withholding such support may result in inequality between the wealthy and the poor or between more powerful, better organized groups and less powerful ones. Wealthier or more powerful persons or groups may be able to provide their own public goods whereas poorer persons or groups will face a structural disadvantage, which will reduce their potential and actual achievement of human flourishing.

There is a case, therefore, for examining the distributive implications of perfectionist accounts of human flourishing. Many of the goods that contribute to flourishing require state support for their cultivation and development, yet in a world that is characterized by scarcity of resources, state support for the cultivation and development of these inherently
valuable things cannot be indiscriminate. Without an account of how the state should distribute resources and access to things that promote the good life beyond basic essentials, perfectionism remains an interesting philosophical inquiry but one that does not transcend to a political theory.

There are two ways to approach this issue. One is to borrow existing distributive principles from the neutral theories and apply them in the perfectionist context. For example, to apply equality of material resources, with the hope that equal resources will enable persons to individually pursue their own personal conceptions of the good. As discussed above, this approach (and other neutralist approaches) are at risk of distributing the wrong thing and/or creating and perpetuating injustice. This observation will be demonstrated in a later section, where I show that although resources being a necessary condition for justice, on their own they are insufficient. Many other conditions need to be met in order to achieve justice, and these conditions are not addressed in the neutralist distributive theories.

Welfarist accounts of justice are going to be unhelpful as well. Even if we take perfectionism to be a welfarist account of justice, i.e. human flourishing is evaluated according to levels of welfare, we still need to know more about what ‘welfare’ means, in terms of flourishing. For reasons discussed at length in the literature, flourishing cannot be limited to ‘happiness’ or ‘want satisfaction’. While it obviously includes these things, flourishing (especially in the sense of achievements) often conflicts with happiness, and is often accompanied by frustration. Moreover, there are persons who do not desire perfection, and therefore, their want-satisfaction will be fulfilled by non-perfectionist

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pursuits. In other words, welfarist accounts of distributive justice provide an incomplete account of flourishing components.

I therefore propose an alternative approach. This alternative looks at the contemporary perfectionist theories themselves, to examine if they possess the necessary theoretical resources to determine two things: first, the ‘currency’ of perfectionism, i.e. what exactly is to be distributed. Second, how this currency should be distributed to ensure that perfectionism is feasible. These two inquiries will then be able to point at distributive policies. The merit of this alternative, compared to the neutralist or welfarist approaches, is that it retains what is distinctive about the perfectionist project. This is because it can evaluate the distributive benefits and burdens of inherently valuable things vis-à-vis their contribution to human flourishing. This approach will be the main focus of the exploratory work hereafter.

**What is the currency of a perfectionist distributive theory?**

Existing accounts of perfectionism may differ in what precisely makes for a good life, but they are all pluralist in their approach, in the sense that they are not committed to the idea that there is only one thing or good that makes the human life go well. Rather, various things contribute to the good human life. For example: knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, social ties, etc. are all things that contribute to flourishing. Moreover, these things are incommensurable, and so it is not possible to rank and compare them. Yet even if we grant that a plurality of incommensurable perfections is what makes flourishing possible, it is still unclear what sort of combination that should be. And even if we grant that a

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combination of these things, i.e. living a life pursuing knowledge, physical excellence and social ties, is preferable to a life of perfecting only one of these, we may want to know more about the relative weights of these things within the combination.

Some perfectionist theories are more explicit than other with regards to what things contribute to human flourishing. Christine Sympnowich, for example, adopts Martha Nussbaum’s capability list to specify the following as fundamental to human flourishing: food, shelter, health, education, friendship and love, participation in public life, play and sport, experiences of nature, culture, opportunities for intellectual reflection. I will henceforth call this the 10-item list. Other perfectionist theories provide a characterization of things that contribute to human life. Thomas Hurka articulates a perfectionist theory that is grounded in Aristotelian perfection: physical perfection, theoretical and practical perfection. George Sher articulates a theory that is grounded in the successful exercise of fundamental human goals. Sher endorses an extended ‘objective list’: moral goodness, rational activity, the development of one’s abilities, meaningful and close personal relations, knowledge and aesthetic appreciation, adding two additional elements: decency and good taste. Other perfectionist theories focus on one thing—personal autonomy—as the fundamental element of human flourishing.

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15 Hurka, Perfectionism, chap. 4.
16 Sher, Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics, 202 ff.
18 Sher, Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics, 201.
19 Raz, The Morality of Freedom; Wall, Liberalism, Perfectionism and Restraint; Chris Mills, ‘Can Liberal Perfectionism Generate Distinctive Distributive Principles?’, Philosophy and Public Issues 2, no. 1 (2012): 123–52. Raz’s theory can be considered monist, in the sense that autonomy is the ultimate value in his political theory Raz, The Morality of Freedom, 205. Yet this theory is unhelpful in determining egalitarian principles of distribution. For one, Raz explicitly rejects equality as a principle of promoting autonomy Ibid., 240. Second, achieving autonomy, for Raz, is predicated on the idea of incommensurability. Incommensurability therefore
Therefore, according to these perfectionist theories, there is no single currency for perfectionism, because perfectionism is a pluralist idea. As discussed above, it can be achieved in many different domains, by persons who have different talents, skills, preferences and tendencies. Contemporary perfectionism is not committed to one single excellence (e.g. as intellectual achievements), that should be promoted. On the contrary, perfectionism can and should be achieved in different, varied ways, and not be limited to the most talented only.\textsuperscript{20} Furthermore, perfectionism is pluralist in the sense that it attributes inherent value to a number of different aspects of human life.\textsuperscript{21} This pluralism is morally advantageous because it includes many things that may thereby correspond to the preferences and talents of different persons.

At the same time, this pluralism may be conceptually problematic, because in order to determine what is the best distribution of resources, values and norms that promote perfectionism, and whether equality in human flourishing has been achieved, we need a criterion for determining trade-offs between the things that contribute to human flourishing, both at the intra-personal and the inter-personal levels. For example, suppose a person is contemplating a life centered around intellectual excellence against a life of physical excellence. Suppose further than she is equally talented for both pursuits.

At the intra-personal level, a trade-off criterion would tell us which pursuit is more valuable and hence worthier for that person. But since perfectionism is pluralistic and contains incommensurable goods, it is mistaken to proclaim one kind of achievement (say, intellectual reflection) as worthier. Further, even if we acknowledge that both pursuits are

\textsuperscript{20} Hurka, \textit{Perfectionism}, 168.
\textsuperscript{21} Sher, \textit{Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics}, 244.
worthy, and a combination is preferable to concentrating on only one of them, there is still a trade-off to be made between the weights of these two pursuits within the combination. However, since these pursuits are incommensurable, we may not be able to say much about the correct relative weights. Should the person split her time between intellectual reflection and physical perfection equally? At a 60/40 ratio? In order to answer this question we need a criterion that will explain why it would be best for the person to spend 60% of her time as an academic and 40% of her time as a soccer player. Why not equally or some other ration?

It is possible however, to bracket this question of an intra-personal criterion for perfectionist pursuits, because there is more challenging issue, regarding the trade-offs between perfectionist goods at the inter-personal level, as follows.

At the inter-personal level, determining how to make trade-offs between perfectionist goods is necessary, because these goods are dependent on a public environment that supports them. Therefore, in order to know how to distribute public goods in a way that corresponds to flourishing, we will have to answer the following questions: should the state provide universities or sports facilities? Obviously this is not an either/or question, because states do provide both universities and sports facilities. But the question regarding trade-offs remains: should the state provide more universities than sports facilities? How is the ratio to be determined, bearing in mind that we are looking for a criterion that appeals to human flourishing, and not to preference satisfaction or procedural justice. In other words, we may not determine the trade-off according to what people prefer, or according to how the majority would vote. The reason we may not do that is because these distributions do not correspond to human flourishing, but rather to want-satisfaction or
power structures. And as has been argued previously, want-satisfaction provides neither an objective nor a full account of flourishing.22

Therefore, in order to determine the trade-offs between state provision of universities and sports facilities, we need to say whether one public good promotes human flourishing better than the other, and by how much. However, since perfectionism is a pluralistic notion containing incommensurable goods, the most that can be said is that it is important that the state provide both universities and sports facilities. First, because they provide the institutional infrastructure for the pursuit of intellectual excellence and physical excellence, which are both valuable for flourishing. Second, because different persons may differ in their inclinations, skills and capacities, yet they are all entitled to public goods that will advance their flourishing, but the question of the correct ratio remains unresolved, because of the incommensurability of these pursuits, and because these pursuits do not have a uniform contribution to personal flourishing. A pluralist conception of flourishing is therefore more challenging, in terms of determining trade-offs, than monistic (e.g. autonomy) or lexical conceptions (e.g. intellectual reflection superior to physical perfection).

Common features of perfectionist goods: generality, hierarchy, complexity

There might be a way to get around the conceptual problem of finding the optimal trade-off of incommensurable goods. I propose that instead of ranking and ordering the things on the list (i.e. articulating the “correct” trade-off), we look for common features of the things on the list. I look at the perfectionist goods themselves, and examine in depth what they

22 See for example Hurka, Perfectionism, 27; Sher, Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics, 185.
share in common. Then I try to answer the following question: what sort of environment(s) has a greater propensity to enable the exercise of those shared characteristics? For example, as will be discussed shortly, complexity is a characteristic of many perfectionist goods. Therefore, I will examine the public conditions that are necessary to enable complex goals, pursuits, and achievements. This strategy is more helpful for the perfectionist project at hand, because it does not ask us to rank different perfectionist goods (i.e. knowledge, friendship) one above the other. Rather, it examines which environments enable pursuing and achieving a greater variety of perfectionist goods.

The perfectionist theories articulated by Hurka and Sher both recognize that the things that are supportive of achieving perfectionism share the following characteristics: *generality, complexity, and hierarchy*. Generality is preferable to specificity.\(^\text{23}\) Things have more value the greater their extent is, the more general they are. For example, with respect to theoretical rationality, both Hurka and Sher hold that knowledge is better when it can explain more things, compared to scattered bits of knowledge that don’t hang together.\(^\text{24}\) Practical rationality is also better served by generality: the more general the ends of a person, the more it extends, to other ends in her life, and to other people.\(^\text{25}\)

Generality in perfectionism entails hierarchical dominance of goals and achievements: “humans’ essential rationality includes a capacity for mental states that are extended and arranged in complex hierarchies... if human have general beliefs and ends, it may follow that they are more perfect when their states are more general”.\(^\text{26}\) Another important relation between things on the list is their degree of variety: a life which consists of varied

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\(^{23}\) Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics*, 201.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 116.
activities is preferable to a life that consists of a single activity. The first kind of life is better if the different activities are chosen (partly) for their own sake, and not instrumentally (because they contribute to another activity).²⁷

Cooperation is also a component of generality. When a person’s goal extends to other people, that goal is more general and hence better from a perfectionist point of view. Although sometimes perfection requires isolation, at other times it is better achieved when exercised in a group. Intellectual activities are often communal, as are certain practical excellences, when people knowingly collaborate.²⁸

Finally, another important relation between things of value is their degree of complexity. In complex activities, “there is an ability, partly innate and partly trained, to stretch the mind around extended states and compare them in light of global properties. This stretching is a high exercise of rationality and immensely difficult.”²⁹ Therefore, challenging ends are preferable to unchallenging ends. This is particularly important in the domain of work, where challenging work is generally preferable (all else being equal) to repetitious assignments, but it can manifest in many other things in life such as intellectual or cultural pursuits, physical activities and so on.

Another related defense of complexity is that its absence is harmful in various ways. Decency and good taste are good in themselves. This is because of the adverse effects that the opposite of decency and good taste have on our fundamental goals. The public culture shapes our understanding of how others see both themselves and us. A coarse and vulgar public culture impoverishes our categories of thought and analysis, it has a cumulative

²⁷ Ibid., 127.
²⁸ Ibid., 68.
²⁹ Ibid., 124.
tendency to degrade our capacity to discern, and *a fortiori* to respond to, many of the subtle situations that our situations provide.\(^{30}\) Without complexity and subtlety nestedness is absent, since our understanding of what goes on within and among people will be crude, one-sided and distorted. This will be harmful to our ability to attain a whole range of fundamental goals, such as cognitive and interpersonal goals, and to attain moral goals.\(^{31}\)

To illustrate:

“A constant diet of unchallenging, lowest-common-denominator fare – the reader can fill in his own examples – cannot promote, and may actively reduce, one’s sensitivity to nuances of plot, language, character, line, color, and composition. Such fare also seems apt to foster a preference for the comfortably sentimental over astringent, unsettling and ambiguous. In these and other ways, a coarse, vulgar public culture seems bound to reduce responsiveness to important aesthetic and moral reasons.”\(^{32}\)

There are two points worth mentioning with regards to complexity: first, that since complex activities are valuable, then training one’s capacities for complex activities is necessary. Training requires external conditions (facilities, education, a supportive public environment). Second, related, is that the striving for and achieving perfection, through complex activities, is not only ethical, but is moral – it requires of others to recognize that complex activities are good and requires of them to promote and support the environment


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 213–214.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 213 n. 20.
that best provides the conditions for exercising complex activities. Thus, complexity is dependent on cooperation with others, on the existence of others who both appreciate complexity and who participate in creating, appreciating and sustaining the conditions for complex goals and achievements.

Taken together, the relationship between things that contribute to human flourishing produce the following principle:

\[ (1) \quad \textit{human flourishing is best served when a person pursues general, complex, challenging goals, often in cooperation with others.} \]

**Egalitarian perfectionism**

One of the first things to determine, when thinking about a perfectionist theory of distribution, is the status of persons vis-à-vis perfectionism. In this paper I assume an egalitarian stance towards perfectionism. To the extent that persons are morally equal, they are entitled to equal levels of human flourishing. First, each person deserves a life of human fulfilment, of exercising and elevating one’s capacities and character.\(^{33}\) Second, perfectionism does not need to be elitist. A perfectionist can be opposed to desert-based distributions or maximax (endowing the most talented with the most resources). This is because excellence can be achieved in many different ways. There are many valuable

\(^{33}\) Sypnowich, ‘A New Approach to Equality’, 182. Sypnowich identifies the justification of Hurka’s egalitarianism as an instrumental justification: egalitarianism is best placed, as a distributive approach, to promote perfection, whereas her approach starts from the opposite direction: it begins with egalitarian premises and then argues that what is to be equalized is flourishing ibid., 179. Since equality between persons is a compelling moral ideal, I adopt it as the premise for a distributive approach, and leave open the disagreement about the justification for perfectionist egalitarianism.
talents, and therefore people’s overall abilities should be more or less equal. Differences in talents between persons diminish when we consider overall abilities. “If many different pursuits can have value, each person has many chances for some worthwhile potential.” Thus, excellence and perfection can be achieved in many different domains: in science, musical composition, craft work, sports and personal relations.

Another reason to prefer equality is by comparison to Sufficientarianism. Philosophers sometimes say that in many cases we may not be able to articulate a strict principle of conduct, yet we will nevertheless be capable of identifying the extreme cases, where clearly one option is much better than another. From a distributive point of view, this would justify applying a sufficientarian approach for human flourishing. In other words, according to the sufficientarian, we may not be able to say, with confidence, what combination of human-flourishing goods persons ought to have access to, but we may nevertheless recognize when a person is below an acceptable threshold. For example, someone who is malnourished, deprived of shelter and of basic education obviously fares worse than others who do have these resources. Justice would require improving the situation of this person so that she can be on par with others.

I argue that a sufficientarian approach will not provide a convincing account of distributive justice for human flourishing. This is because much of human flourishing, as discussed above, is predicated on what happens above the threshold. Persons may be above the minimum threshold of nourishment, shelter and basic education yet have starkly

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35 Ibid., 167.
unequal levels of flourishing in terms of achievements of meaningful social ties, participation in the community, intellectual and critical reflection etc.

Recall the perfectionist principle (I) from the previous section, which stipulates that human flourishing is best served when a person pursues general, complex, challenging goals, often in cooperation with others. Taken together with the egalitarian commitment, this would produce the following distributive principle:

\[
(II) \quad \textit{Every person deserves to be able to develop and pursue, and to a certain extent succeed in general, complex, challenging goals, often in cooperation with others.}
\]

The reason why principle (I)—flourishing within a complex, hierarchical environment—does not automatically entail principle (II)—the egalitarian commitment—is that introducing the egalitarian commitment requires some adjustments in the range of perfectionist options that will be open to a person in principle (I). These adjustments are not straightforward, and may in fact jeopardize either the egalitarian commitment, or the perfectionist commitment. To see why this is so, we turn now to examine what sort of environments promote the first principle.

**Environments that support perfectionism**

Egalitarian perfectionism is a two-tiered concept, in the sense that it requires that conditions for excellences are equal, and second, that actual achievement of flourishing is roughly equal. Although the latter is conceptually impossible, because it is dependent on
personal dispositions, it is necessary to pay attention to the conditions, because “we can attend to levels of flourishing to determine whether shortfalls in flourishing are the result of conditions that can and ought to be improved by public policy. And we should have a demanding set of expectations as well as an imaginative preparedness to see the environmental roots of deficits in wellbeing”.36

Although success in human flourishing will not be equal, since some persons are more despondent than others, the very existence of the conditions themselves—an environment which is calibrated towards human flourishing, which projects its positive attitude towards human flourishing—will go a long(er) way in promoting flourishing. By creating an environment that supports a rich and diverse public culture, levels of success in human flourishing are expected to be higher than compared to a neutralist environment.37

It is helpful, therefore to examine the things that would help create such an environment, and then examine how it would relate to principle (I)—the principle which stipulates that flourishing is best attained by engaging in complex, hierarchical, cooperative pursuits. Having done that, we can find out how this environment operates in the promotion of principle (II)—the principle that stipulates that persons deserve to have equal flourishing, and what adjustments or challenges it poses for principle (I).

In the following I propose a framework for thinking about the things that are required for human flourishing in conjunction with the environmental, institutional and cultural conditions that enable them. I draw on the things on the 10-item list, since it is the most detailed among the perfectionisms reviewed here, and since it already implies some of the

37 Ibid., 186.
environmental, institutional and cultural conditions that are required to achieve human flourishing. This framework, detailed in table 1, will then be examined in relation to the perfectionist characteristics (generality, hierarchy, complexity, cooperation). This table is meant to provide an answer to the question: what sort of resources and environmental organization is required in order to achieve flourishing? For each ‘good’ on the list I identify the corresponding institutional, social and cultural and personal conditions.
Table 1: conditions for human flourishing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>type</th>
<th>good</th>
<th>(1) material conditions</th>
<th>(2) personal capacities</th>
<th>(3) institutional/environmental conditions</th>
<th>(4) cultural conditions</th>
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<tr>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>food</td>
<td>• food</td>
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<td>• resources</td>
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<td>• housing</td>
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<td>• resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td>health</td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>existence of and access to healthcare</td>
<td>a culture supportive of physical/emotional health</td>
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<td></td>
<td>basic education</td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>existence of and access to schools</td>
<td>a culture supportive of knowledge-acquisition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-neutral</td>
<td>friendship and love</td>
<td>capacity for social interaction and sustaining relationships</td>
<td>• free time the existence of and access to:</td>
<td>• “public culture of clubs festivals and concerts</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• “drop-in centres</td>
<td>• Community support to families”40</td>
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<td>• nature walks</td>
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<td>• libraries and swimming pools38</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• ‘active streets’39 (to help foster community and trust)</td>
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<tr>
<td>non-neutral</td>
<td>participation in public life</td>
<td>resources</td>
<td>capacity for engagement</td>
<td>civic education</td>
<td>democratic inclusion</td>
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<td>access to information</td>
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<td>free time</td>
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<td>‘active streets’</td>
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38 Ibid.
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<tr>
<th>type</th>
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<th>(2) personal capacities</th>
<th>(3) institutional/ environmental conditions</th>
<th>(4) cultural conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| play and sport      | play       | resources                | capacity for social interaction | • free time  
• access to play areas (playgrounds/'active streets') | unstructured time$^{41}$ |
|                     |            |                          |                         |                                             |                         |
| sport               | resources  | physical capacities      |                         | • existence of and access to sport facilities  
• free time  
• ‘active streets’ (for children) | a culture that discourages sedentary activities |
| experience of nature| resources  | physical capacities      |                         | • free time  
• access to different types of nature:  
• urban  
• rural  
• wild | • appreciation of nature  
• appreciation of “denaturation” effects$^{42}$ |
| non-neutral         | culture    | resources                | capacity to appreciate and enjoy diverse cultural materials | existence of and access to:  
• cultural facilities  
• education (cultural capital)  
• free time | • subsidies  
• public spaces  
• “public culture of clubs  
• festivals and concerts”$^{43}$  
• appreciation of one’s culture and of other cultures |

$^{41}$ Alvin Rosenfeld and Nicole Wise, *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001).


<table>
<thead>
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<th>type</th>
<th>good</th>
<th>(1) material conditions</th>
<th>(2) personal capacities</th>
<th>(3) institutional/environmental conditions</th>
<th>(4) cultural conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| opportunities for intellectual reflection     |      | resources                | capacity for intellectual reflection | existence of and access to:  
  - critical and diverse intellectual materials  
  - free time  
  - isolation/independence  
  - cooperation: proximity to other people engaged in intellectual reflection | higher education subsidies  
  - support for the arts  
  - a pro-intellectual cultural environment |
The first thing to note about the table is that material resources are necessary for achieving welfare among all the goods (except attaining friendship and love). Yet what this table does is elucidate why and how an equal distribution of material resources is by itself not sufficient in order to ascertain a roughly equal perfectionist distribution. Columns (3) – (4) demonstrate that there are important environmental, institutional, social and cultural conditions which have to be in place before an egalitarian perfectionist distribution of human flourishing has been achieved. By making a distinction between the things that are important for flourishing: personal capacities; material goods; institutional/environmental conditions and cultural conditions, the table serves two important purposes: the first is to articulate in detail the content of these conditions. This is useful from a policy-making perspective. The second purpose relates to the debate in the literature between liberal neutralists and perfectionists.

What the table shows is that privately-held resources are a necessary condition for human flourishing, yet they are insufficient. Public conditions have to be fulfilled in order to ensure flourishing. An equal-resource distribution, which does not pay attention to the public conditions, only ensures that persons are above an acceptable threshold. It will not account for inequalities in flourishing above the threshold.

An examination of the public conditions makes it clear that achieving all the non-neutral goods requires free time. Without free time, the existence of the non-neutral goods means little. Access is also a condition that is necessary for all the non-neutral goods. Free time and access to opportunities are interdependent. The most obvious explanation for lack of free time among working adults is commute time. Time spent in commuting is time that cannot be spent on flourishing activities, especially when commuting is done by driving. In
general, the larger the distance between worthwhile activities, or the more complicated the route (i.e. multiple changes in travel modes), the less likely one is to engage in these activities. Accessibility, in this sense, means the ease of reaching worthwhile activities. The more accessible a place is, the less time is wasted on “instrumental mobility”. Making different activities accessible to many people is often achieved by incorporating a multiplicity and diversity of worthwhile activities in one place.

In this context, an urban environment is plausibly better suited to enable free time and access, compared to, say, a rural environment. Urban life can also be described as more complex than rural life. For example, it has a different, more layered, temporality to it. Georg Simmel noted that “with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life,” urban life is “a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the (...) small town and rural existence.”

Does this temporality and spatial proximity of uses promote perfectionism? I turn to examine this question now.

**Single minded vs. open minded spaces and the perfectionist characteristics**

A useful distinction for the purpose of understanding the environmental/institutional arrangements that are required for promoting egalitarian perfectionism is between single-minded vs. open-minded spaces. This distinction is helpful because it categorizes spaces into places which enable and promote complexity, diversity and cooperation (open-minded), and those which suppress it (single-minded).

Single-mind spaces are “designed by planners or entrepreneurs who have only one thing in mind, and used by similarly single-minded citizens. Entering space of this sort we are characteristically in a hurry”. Examples of single-minded spaces include: zoned business and residential areas; the modern dormitory suburb; the housing project; the government center; medical center; cultural center; shopping center; the department store or supermarket; the highway; the greenbelt; within education institutions: correspondence and television courses (nowadays we may add online courses); fast food restaurants; the motel or motor inn; the exhibition center.

Open-minded spaces, on the other hand are “designed for a variety of uses, including unforeseen and unforeseeable uses, and used by citizens who do different things and are prepared to tolerate, even take an interest in, things they don’t do. When we enter this sort of space, we are characteristically prepared to loiter.” Open-minded spaces include: the “central city”/downtown, the urban quarter, the neighbourhood with its own stores, shops, small factories; the street; the city park or playground; the urban block; the university campus; the café, pub or cafeteria where people are encouraged to linger; the theatre, because of its intermission, lobby, bar, adjoining restaurants; the old urban fairground; specialty street stores; the square or piazza. The latter are exemplars of open-minded spaces since they are surrounded by a mixture of private and public buildings, which joined together, give the space they enclose “a vital and receptive quality”.

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46 Ibid., 470–471.
47 Ibid., 471.
Open-minded spaces and complexity

It is worth noting that loitering invites a degree of openness to the unexpected or unintended. This is relevant for perfectionism because a complex undertaking will plausibly include a measure of unexpected and unintended elements. An achievement will be more complex when it includes attending to things that are unexpected, compared to an achievement in which all the elements can be calculated in advance and foreseeable. The complexity of goals is also affected by unexpectedness. One can choose a goal that is complex not only because of the intricate relationship between its different elements, but precisely because it is open to some unexpected or unintended outcome to be overcome in the process. Basic science is an example. Choosing to wander around the world is also an example of an undertaking which invites some measure of unexpectedness. Therefore, an open-minded space, which invites loitering, is more conducive to the formation of complex goals and the execution of complex achievements.

Although complexity is more plausible in open-minded spaces, what about the possibility of complexity in a collection of single-minded spaces? This may be highly unlikely. A chain of single-minded spaces is not conducive to perfectionism for two related reasons. The first is prosaic. Accessing the same level of cultural, political and economic activities or opportunities in a chain of single-minded spaces takes much more time and effort compared to an open-minded space. Single-minded spaces require negotiating longer distances in more cumbersome trips, thereby limiting exposure to and awareness of alternatives. A string of single-minded spaces therefore encroaches on free time.

The second reason why a collection of single-minded spaces cannot perform as an open-minded space is conceptual: because single-minded spaces are only instrumentally linked,
they provide little place for generality, hierarchy or cooperation. "It’s not only that space serves certain purposes known in advance by its users, but also that its design and character stimulate (or repress) certain qualities of attention, interest, forbearance, and receptivity. We act differently in different sorts of space—in part, to be sure, because of what we are doing there, but also because of what others are doing, because of what it means to be "there," and because of the look and feel of the space itself."48

Following I.M. Young’s observation that physical separation can make persons oblivious to injustice,49 I argue that physical separation can also make persons oblivious to complexity. “Modernist architecture and planning," wrote Marshall Berman in All That Is Solid Melts into Air, "created a modernized version of pastoral: a spatially and socially segmented world—people here, traffic there; work here, homes there; rich here, poor there; barriers of grass and concrete in between.”50 Berman and Jane Jacobs argued that the physical separation of uses created clean and orderly places that left the city socially and spiritually dead.51 The conditions for meaningful encounters with valuable ideas or models are hampered by such separation, where persons end up encountering people who generally resemble only themselves.

Single-minded spaces have a direct influence on complexity in the realm of ideas and their intellectual and artistic manifestations. The shrinking of cultural space in America is, in part, the result of the dwindling of space where the urban bohemia, artists, performers

and independent intellectuals (those not affiliated to universities) could once thrive.\(^5\)

Gentrification, by pushing up land prices, creates a socio-spatial process where the urban bohemia and independent intellectuals no longer have a “home”.

The spatial loss—the disappearance of the bohemian enclaves—is a loss of an environment that nourishes intellectual curiosity and innovation. It is the disappearance of the local coffeehouse or the bookstore, making way for a fitness centre or a wine-bar, that transform the pleasant urban space that might nourish a bohemian intelligentsia. Due to the rising of land prices, independent intellectuals can no longer afford to be independent. They either end up in academia, where academic specialization is triumphed over the diffusion of culture to the wider public,\(^6\) or they simply disperse. “When [the bohemian] delicate environment is injured or transformed, the “surplus” intellectuals do not disappear, but disperse; they spread out across the country. The difference is critical: a hundred artists, poets, and writers with families and friends in ten city blocks mean one thing; scattered across ten states or ten university towns, they mean something else”\(^7\). In short, single-minded spaces decrease free time and access to important opportunities for flourishing, compared to open-minded spaces.


\(^{54}\) Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 28. Jacoby identifies the decline of American intellectual life as caused, mainly, by the swallowing up independent intellectuals and imprisoning them, so to speak, in the ivory tower, keeping the fruits of their labour hostage to specialized, inaccessible writing in select academic publications which are obscured from the public. While his historic analysis might be exaggerated (or mistaken, see Lynn Garafola, ‘The Last Intellectuals’, *The New Left Review*, no. 169 (1988): 122–28.), his analysis of the spatial processes is nevertheless plausible.
Cooperation and open-minded environments

Open-minded spaces therefore provide the environmental/institutional conditions that are necessary for flourishing: free time and access. Yet the discussion of open-minded spaces, and the lack of such spaces, reveals that open-minded spaces are also fundamental to the creation of a social and cultural ethos that considers human flourishing and perfection central to human life. This is because by creating a multiplicity of ideas and models that are visible, tangible, felt and lived, the greater the likelihood of the emergence of a public culture that is open to and positive towards curiosity, knowledge-acquisition, greater trust in others, and a sense of community. Recall that these social and cultural conditions are necessary in order to enable the goods on the 10-item list: participation in public life; friendship and love; opportunities for intellectual reflection; exposure to and living within ‘culture’.

In addition, to the extent that the environment has bearing on expectations-formation, it is plausible to argue that persons who are exposed to and live within an open-minded environment are going to have a different expectation-set compared to persons who live within a single-minded environment. Since goal formation is inextricably linked to expectations, more general and hierarchical goals will be formed as expectations are more general, hierarchical and complex.

It is interesting to note that a complex, opportunity-rich environment is argued for not only by perfectionists. For example, Ronald Dworkin and Will Kymlicka argue for an open-minded environment for the sake of ensuring that persons have the required skills to make authentic choices about their own lives. Having a choice between meaningful options is a
necessary condition for freedom.\textsuperscript{55} Freedom of choice is conditioned on the ability to question one’s beliefs and revise and transform them according to the information, examples, arguments and models that one’s culture provides. A complex and rich cultural background is therefore necessary in order for people to be able to acquire an awareness of different views and examine their conception in light of them.\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{The challenge to egalitarianism}

We have now three characterizations of the optimal conditions for flourishing: the first is the institutional environment that enables free time and access to opportunities for flourishing. The second is the institutional environment that enables complexity, generality, hierarchy and cooperation. The third is the existence, availability and access to open-minded spaces, in which complexity and hierarchy are more easily attained.

The challenge to egalitarianism is the following: Suppose one accepts that open-minded spaces are better than single-minded spaces for providing the conditions for generality, complexity and hierarchy. Does this therefore entail that other socio-spatial arrangements will not provide the same level and quality of conditions for perfection? In other words, if egalitarian perfectionism is our goal, does that mean that it can only be achieved when everybody lives in an open-minded environment? That would be too bold a statement, since it discounts any perfection that could be achieved in single-minded spaces.


\textsuperscript{56} Kymlicka, ‘Dworkin on Freedom and Culture’, 115.
For example, Hurka rejects elitist perfectionism—perfectionism through the most excellent achievements of the talented few, in favour of modest perfections that anybody can achieve. He insists that perfection can be achieved in a parent’s attentiveness to a child, or by an artisan with her understanding of her materials. This reflects the egalitarian commitment in the sense that each person is entitled to pursue and achieve modest perfections in their lives. Therefore, modest perfections can be achieved, at least arguably, in single-minded environments as well.

Therefore, we need to adjudicate between two competing approaches to defining the optimal conditions for perfectionism:

A. *Generality, hierarchy, complexity and cooperation* are highly dependent on the public conditions. The more complex an environment, the more likely it will foster, enable and promote a perfectionist-oriented culture, and the more it will provide opportunities for complex undertakings and cooperation. People who are not exposed to such environments (for lack of access and free time) will be disadvantaged, in egalitarian terms.

B. *Generality, hierarchy, complexity and cooperation* are not necessarily dependant on the public environment. Perfectionist goals can therefore be pursued and achieved in more single-minded environments. As long as persons have free time and access to the things on Sypnowich’s list, the degree of sophistication of these things, and the degree of interaction among these things should not impact the

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57 Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 120.
level of potential human flourishing. Equality in human flourishing is therefore not dependent on the socio-spatial environment.

If claim A is the more plausible of the two, then it would follow that egalitarian perfectionism requires that persons have access to complex and sophisticated environments. This is especially relevant for the egalitarian commitment, because people who live in different settings might form different expectation with regards to their preferable goals and pursuits. In this sense, when people live in environments that vary in terms of complexity and sophistication, the egalitarian commitment might be in jeopardy, because not only will the conditions for flourishing not be equal, the actual achievement of flourishing may be dependent on lower expectations.

On the other hand, a policy which makes all environments ‘open-minded’ would be difficult to implement: it is hard to imagine a world in which all environments are complex, and all are complex in a similar degree. It would also be quite paternalistic. For example, it rules out life in homogenous environments, such as rural environments.

Let us consider, therefore, claim B—that perfectionism is not dependent on public conditions. According to this claim, perfection can be pursued and achieved in any sort of environment. This would in turn mean two things: that perfection is heavily dependent on personal capacities and on personal drives and motivations. Moreover, public policy plays a marginal role in promoting and enabling human flourishing. To the extent that public policy does play a role, it would be in ensuring that each person has equal resources, in order that she may pursue, autonomously, her preferred conception of flourishing.
In terms of distribution, this means that a perfectionist distribution is indistinguishable from the neutralist approaches mentioned in the beginning of this paper. Recall that the neutralist approaches set out principles for distribution of primary goods or material resources to individuals. If this is indeed the case for a perfectionist distribution, one has to wonder why go to all the trouble of articulating distributive principles which will promote human flourishing if the neutralist approaches already offer the same framework without the perfectionist “baggage”. In other words, if the neutralist approaches are capable of providing a convincing account of distributions that will promote flourishing, it means that a perfectionist morality (i.e. what we owe each other) is redundant. What we owe each other, in this case, is equal resources, just like the neutralist approaches prescribe. Perfectionism would not add anything interesting or relevant to the distributive discourse. It will therefore remain in the realm of ethics (how should I live my life) and will not transcend to a political morality. This is a disappointing consequence for perfectionism. If perfectionism does not contribute to morality, it becomes irrelevant for social, political or cultural issues.

Therefore, if perfectionism is to reconnect ethics with morality, it will have to provide a distributive program that is distinct from the neutralist approaches. It will need to provide an account of perfectionist environments that can fulfill the following criteria: first, environments that provides an equal background for expectations-formation. Second, environments in which persons have an equal chance at pursuing and achieving perfection in at least some of their goals. Third, environments which nevertheless enable a reasonable degree of personal autonomy.
Open-minded environments perform better on the first two criteria, i.e. an equal background for expectations-formation and the environmental, institutional and social conditions for the pursuit and achievement of perfection. This is because open-minded environments enable more free time by virtue of minimizing distances between activities. These environments also enable a greater degree of cooperation among persons, generality in goals and pursuits, complexity in the interaction of both persons and ideas.

Open-minded environments, however, may crowd out single-minded environments and pursuits, and thus decrease personal autonomy. This may be an unfortunate implication of open-minded environments, but one has to bear in mind that crowding-out is an inevitable feature of scarce resources or geographically bounded areas. It is just as plausible to stipulate that single-minded environments crowd out open-minded environments. Therefore, crowding-out of certain environment is inevitable. The question, therefore, is how to evaluate which environments contribute less to human flourishing and may justifiably be crowded out.

The advantage that the perfectionist has, in contrast to the neutralist, is that she possesses the theoretical resources to respond to the question ‘which crowding-out effect is preferable’? In perfectionist terms, a single-minded environment contributes less to human flourishing because it encroaches on free time and access. This in turn diminishes persons’ ability to envisage, pursue and succeed in complex, general, hierarchical cooperative goals. Precisely because perfectionism, as discussed in this paper, is not an elitist idea, open-minded environments enable more persons to pursue and achieve modest perfections in many different areas. Single-minded environments, in contrast, dampen the prospects of complex, general and hierarchical pursuits and thus work against the
commitment to human flourishing. These environments also work against the egalitarian
commitment, in the following ways: extremely talented persons or those who are
extremely internally-driven may be able to achieve human flourishing, even in single-
minded environments. But this will be an elitist perfectionism, awarded only to the very
few.

Summary and conclusions

In this paper I try to identify the optimal institutional, social and cultural conditions for
the achievement of equality in human flourishing. Human flourishing is composed of many
valuable pursuits and can be achieved in many ways. Determining which environment is
optimal cannot rely on one single metric or ranking criterion. I thus begin by examining a
10-items perfectionist goods list, and discuss which type of environment is capable of
providing the things on that list. In order to search for coherence with respect to the things
on the list, I identify common features of things that contribute to flourishing in
contemporary perfectionism. These are: generality, complexity, hierarchy and cooperation.
Taking the 10-item list together with these common features, I try to identify the
environment which will both enable the conditions for flourishing and its actual
achievement.

Free time and accessibility are two fundamental ‘enabling’ conditions for flourishing.
They are more feasible in ‘open-minded’ environments, because these sorts of
environments contain multiple uses and they save up on travel time. Open-minded
environments also enable a greater degree of generality, complexity, hierarchy and
cooperation. These environments not only enable the potential for flourishing, but also help foster the sort of public culture which is supportive of perfectionism.

Open-minded environments crowd out single-minded environments, and this may reduce personal autonomy to choose or engage in single-minded pursuits. However, single-minded environments can themselves crowd-out open-minded environments. This, in turn, entails a more elitist, less egalitarian distribution of human flourishing. Egalitarian perfectionism requires open-minded environments, which requires state support in the form of subsidies, taxation, regulation, and as importantly, the spatial organization of activities. An explicit analysis of the moral implications of perfectionism is an important undertaking, to which, I hope, this paper contributes.