

Perfectionism and Vulgarianism About a Meaningful Life

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Abstract

As a troubling evaluative error, perfectionism involves demanding of the merely good what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding. Iddo Landau has recently charged many philosophers of life with such perfectionism about a meaningful life. Here I argue that although Landau's charge is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, there is nevertheless an important lesson for them to learn from that charge: to avoid perfectionism about what they will regard as good but not meaningful lives, they must constantly be vigilant to appreciate the value of such lives. I go on to consider whether the required vigilance is a reason to abandon the superlative concept in favor of a nonsuperlative one. I argue that it is not, because a similar sort of vigilance, to avoid a contrasting but equally troubling error that I call "vulgarianism," would be required even upon such abandonment.

1.

In a familiar negative sense of the term, to be a perfectionist is to expect of plain value what should only be expected of superlative value—to demand of the merely good, in other words, what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding. Thus the perfectionist instructor awards satisfactory grades only to the most gifted and industrious students in the course, the perfectionist parent is constantly dismayed about the ways in which their relationship with their child falls short of especially admirable parent-child bonds, and the perfectionist consumer insists that the midrange varieties of a product possess all the characteristic qualities of its premier varieties.

Perfectionism in this sense is a troubling evaluative error because it seems always to amount to a wrong or to carry very unfortunate effects.¹ The

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** I am grateful to audience members at the Fifth International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life for their helpful feedback on this paper. Iddo Landau was among those audience members, and he was particularly generous and constructive in his comments. I also owe special thanks to Lorraine Yeung and Lucas Scriptor for their insightful thoughts about an early version of this paper, and to reviewers from this journal for their very welcome corrections and suggestions.

¹ It is thus more closely related to the maladaptive trait that psychologists have linked to Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder (Ferguson 2022) than to a political philosophy. Understood as the

perfectionist instructor wrongs the satisfactory but less gifted and industrious students in the course by failing to acknowledge the good they have done. The perfectionist parent's dismay obscures the happy aspects of their parent-child bond, typically to their child's and often to their own detriment. The perfectionist consumer wrongs producers and fellow consumers alike by dismissing those midrange varieties as mere junk.

2.

In recent work, Iddo Landau has charged many philosophers of life with a perfectionism of the sort just described—with a troubling evaluative error that involves demanding of the merely good what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding. Anyone who holds that a meaningful life must include “some perfection or excellence or some rare and difficult achievements” commits the perfectionist error, he tells us, and the number of contributors to the meaning of life literature who do so is surprisingly large.² By casting meaning in terms of the demanding ideals of his overhuman, Landau says, Nietzsche clearly committed the perfectionist error. Camus likewise seems to have committed the error when he tied absurdity to the absence of a complete, unifying knowledge that is beyond the reach of us mere mortals. Nozick's perfectionism, Landau continues, is manifest in his insistence that a meaningful life must make some sort of permanent difference to, or leave “traces” in, the world. The kind of creativity that Richard Taylor views as making for a meaningful life amounts to something very unique and uncommon; this too, Landau says, is a manifestation of perfectionism. Laurence James's argument that meaning entails achievements that are difficult both for the individual and for the average person quite obviously commits him to perfectionism. Indeed, Landau notes, some of the most prominent figures in previous eras of philosophy seem to have fallen victim to the perfectionist error. This includes both Plato and Spinoza, with their emphasis on the rare and difficult nature of what characterizes the truly meaningful.³

maladaptive trait, perfectionism amounts to a tendency to strive for flawlessness in unrealistic ways. Understood as a political philosophy, perfectionism amounts to the view that politics should be aimed at the perfection or development of the properties that “constitute human nature or are definitive of humanity” (Hurka 1993, p. 3).

² Landau (2017), pp. 31–34.

³ We may add that Aristotle hardly even needs to be mentioned in this context, given how obvious it is that he was committed to the idea that a meaningful life must include some excellence. The *aretai* around which he centered his entire approach to ethics were, after all, *excellences* of character and mind that

Landau’s charge that they are committing the perfectionist error by virtue of maintaining that a meaningful life must include some excellence is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, however, for a reason I am about to explain. Note that when I talk about a concept of a meaningful life in this context, I’m talking about a basic way of understanding what it is that we are theorizing about when we give our various theories or conceptions of a meaningful life—an identification of the *explanandum* we seek to articulate and illuminate with our various *explanantia*. And when I talk about a superlative concept of a meaningful life, I’m talking about a concept of a meaningful life that entails some superlative value. Some concepts of a meaningful life are nonsuperlative because they entail no superlative value; that is, there are satisfactory definitions of these concepts that include no terms of superlative value. Among these nonsuperlative concepts I count that of a life devoted to the pursuit of one’s passions⁴ and that of a worthwhile life.⁵ There are, by contrast, no satisfactory definitions of superlative concepts of a meaningful life that fail to include terms of superlative value. A satisfactory definition of the concept of a meaningful life as a life characterized by what is worthy of great admiration,⁶ for example, will have to include terms of superlative value that correspond to “worthy of *great* admiration.” A satisfactory definition of the Aristotelian concept of a meaningful life to which I am partial, namely, that of a life devoted to the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life,⁷ will likewise have to include terms of superlative value corresponding to “*best* sort.” And so on.

The reason that Landau’s charge is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life is that the charge of perfectionism seems only to apply when superlative value is expected of what is clearly a nonsuperlative value. The charge of perfectionism against the instructor makes sense because the instructor is expecting superlative value of something that is clearly a nonsuperlative value, to wit, a *satisfactory performance* in the course. If the instructor were only expecting superlative value of a top performance in the course, the charge of perfectionism would make little sense. The charge of perfectionism against the parent is warranted because they are expecting

served to distinguish their possessors from *hoi polloi*.

⁴ E.g. Singer ([1992] 2010).

⁵ E.g. Wittgenstein ([1929] 1965).

⁶ See Kauppinen (2012) and Metz (2001).

⁷ Matheson (2022).

superlative value of a *good relationship* with their child, which is, on the face of things, a nonsuperlative value. That charge would hardly be warranted against a parent who expects superlative value of something like an outstanding relationship with their child, or the most impressive of parent-child bonds. Similarly, the consumer would be committing no perfectionist error by demanding superlative value of premier product varieties. The consumer only commits the error because they expect superlative value of something like a *midrange variety* of the product, which, again, is obviously a nonsuperlative value. For those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, Landau's perfectionist charge is likely to be seen as analogous to laying the charge of perfectionism against an instructor who awards the highest grades only to the most gifted and industrious of students in the course, or against a parent who merely acknowledges that their good relationship with their child still doesn't amount to the best, or against the consumer who complains that that product variety is not the top-of-line it is billed as being because it lacks a number of the outstanding features that characterize that premier range.

3.

Grant, then, that Landau's perfectionist charge is as it stands unlikely to persuade who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life. What I want to stress now is that there is nevertheless an important lesson that these philosophers can learn from that charge. The lesson is this: those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life must be vigilant about appreciating the value of what in their superlative view will be the many nonmeaningful varieties of a good life, for without this vigilance they *do* put themselves in danger of committing the perfectionist error—not about *a meaningful life*, but rather about *a good life* that falls outside of the scope of a meaningful life, in their view. One doesn't commit the perfectionist error simply by adhering to a superlative concept of a meaningful life. But one can commit the error if one adheres to such a concept and then is insufficiently appreciative of the goodness to be found in the many varieties of a good life that fall outside of this concept.

To fail to appreciate the value of good lives that are not meaningful under the superlative concept is to be in danger of treating such lives as of no value at all because they lack the superlative value that one takes to be characteristic of a meaningful life. But because such lives are clearly not to be understood in terms

of superlative value, one is ipso facto in danger of being a perfectionist about *them*, even if one is not in danger of being a perfectionist about a meaningful life according to one's superlative concept. By failing in this way to appreciate the value of what one regards as nonmeaningful varieties of a good life, in other words, one is in danger of expecting of lives of plain value what should only be expected of lives of outstanding value. Hence to avoid the danger of perfectionism, those who do adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life must be vigilant always to appreciate the value of what in their view will be nonmeaningful varieties of a good life.

To illustrate, suppose that we adhere to the Aristotelian concept of a meaningful life as a life devoted to the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt in life. It would be ridiculous to pretend that there are no varieties of a good life, a worthwhile life, and so on, other than a meaningful life, so understood. All kinds of lives devoted to good-but-not-the-best sorts of pursuit a human being can adopt in life will fall along with a meaningful life under the canopy of a good life. This will plausibly include lives devoted to socially important but deeply monotonous forms of labor.⁸ It will also plausibly include some lives devoted to nothing at all, such as the pleasant life of the morally respectable dilettante.

But if we are not careful, it would be all too easy for us to let our interest in a meaningful life, superlatively understood, cause us not to appreciate the value of all of these lives of plain value. In the same way that the perfectionist instructor fails to appreciate the value of their middling students' performances, we may fail to appreciate the value of what by our lights are nonmeaningful but good lives by failing to be sufficiently laudatory of or encouraging about those lives. Overly absorbed by the thought that those lives are not devoted to the best sort of pursuit a human being can adopt, we may fail to praise them for all the goodness they nevertheless do exemplify; or we may fail sufficiently often to say kind words to encourage individuals living such lives to keep up the good work; in either case,

⁸ It's worth noting that lives may appear to be devoted to socially important but deeply monotonous forms of labor when in fact they are devoted to something else. The government clerk, for example, whose life appears to be devoted to the performance of those repetitive tedious tasks that are required for government officials to do their more noticeable work may actually be living a life devoted to an important sort of creativity, viz., the sort that involves inventing new ways of challenging oneself, or keeping oneself interested, in the performance of such repetitive tasks. In their life, the clerk nobly uses the repetitive tasks they are assigned as a means of realizing creativity. That this sort of life can be truly outstanding despite appearing otherwise to others seems precisely to be Camus's point in his famous closing line about Sisyphus with a noble attitude: "one must imagine [such a] Sisyphus happy" ([1942] 2013, p. 123). See also Taylor's comments about the importance of "the state of mind with which such labors are undertaken" (1970, pp. 265ff.).

we fail to appreciate the value of these good lives in such a way that we commit, or come perilously close to committing, the perfectionist error. In the same way that the perfectionist parent fails to appreciate the value of their good parent-child bond, we may fail to appreciate the value of the lives that we regard as good despite lacking the superlativeness we think is required for meaning, by too frequently emphasizing the fact that they are not meaningful by our lights: our evaluative remarks about these lives may be too dominated by comments to the effect that the lives are not the lives of the Gandhis, the Mother Teresas, the Einsteins, or the Ella Fitzgeralds of this world. And as the perfectionist consumer fails to appreciate the value of those midrange varieties of a product, we may fail to appreciate the value of what we regard as good but not meaningful lives by overinflating whatever criticisms we might make of such lives. “Oh, I wish my child were pursuing something *really* worthwhile in their lives” (with the implication that whatever they are pursuing in their lives is all but worthless) and “Their interests in life rise no higher than bread and circuses” (with the implication that having no higher interests makes their lives no better lived than not) may be grounded in justifiable criticisms of the extent to which the lives in question fall short of the best we humans are capable of, but they will typically come across as overly harsh judgments to the effect that the lives criticized are so trivial as to be bad rather than good lives.

For those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life, this lesson to be drawn from Landau’s perfectionist charge is important to learn because it seems all too easy for those strongly interested in some sort of superlative value to commit the perfectionist error about related plain values. Although I don’t think that Nietzsche committed the error about a meaningful life simply because he required certain excellences of such a life, he did seem prone to the error when it came to what on his superlative concept should be regarded as varieties of a good life that are not meaningful. Early in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for example, he has his protagonist contrast the life of the overhuman with that of the ultimate mere human (*der letzte Mensch*). The life of the ultimate mere human is clearly some sort of good life, characterized as it is by such values as longevity, health, pleasure, friendliness, wit, self-assurance, and knowledge. But because it does not display the sort of superlative value that characterizes the life of the overhuman, Nietzsche seems to view it in downright negative terms. The ultimate human, his Zarathustra

claims, is “the most contemptible” sort.⁹

One might also see perfectionism about certain nonsuperlative or plain values in Camus’s famous remarks about the most important of philosophical questions. He opens his “Myth of Sisyphus” essay with the following arresting lines:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer.¹⁰

That Camus was especially interested in the philosophical question he here describes—the question of how to understand and respond to judgments about the worthwhileness of life—is obvious from the long and exquisitely expressed train of thoughts that follow in the essay. Equally obvious is the fact that he takes this question to be of superlative value, at least philosophically speaking: this is why he describes it as *the one truly serious* philosophical problem and *the fundamental* question of philosophy. Moreover, you hardly have to strain your interpretation of this passage to see Camus’s failure to appreciate the value of the other philosophical questions at which he gestures, viz., questions of metaphysics and epistemology and the philosophy of mind that have been pursued by many throughout the history of Western philosophy. We forgive Camus for being so disparaging of these other questions because he was so brilliantly insightful in his reflection on the question of life’s worthwhileness. But this shouldn’t cause us to overlook the fact that he is being very disparaging of these other questions: in his view they amount to little more than games in which the philosopher might without too much irresponsibility engage *if* they had already addressed the question of life’s worthwhileness; the latter is in his view so much more valuable that those traditional questions that they come pretty close to having no real philosophical value at all. As Nietzsche’s interest in the life of the overhuman seems to have caused him to commit the perfectionist error about other sorts of good life, so Camus’s interest in the question of life’s worthwhileness seems to have caused him to commit the perfectionist error about other sorts of good philosophical question.

⁹ Nietzsche ([1883] 2003), Prologue, Sect. 5, p. 46.

¹⁰ Camus ([1942] 2013), p. 5.

Yet one more illustration of how those who are especially interested in superlative values are prone to the perfectionist error about related plain values can be drawn from a fascinating monologue that appears in Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin's Academy Award winning documentary, *Free Solo*. The film documents the preparations of American rock climber Alex Honnold to be the first to scale the nearly one-kilometer high "El Capitan" rock wall in Yosemite National Park without a rope. At one point, reflecting on the different fundamental attitudes that he and his girlfriend Sanni take towards life, Honnold comments:

For Sanni the point of life is like happiness. To be with people that make you feel fulfilled and to have a good time. For me, it's all about performance. The thing is anybody can be happy and cozy. Nothing good happens in the world by being happy and cozy. You know, like nobody achieves anything great because they're happy and cozy.¹¹

You cannot help but be impressed by the superlative value that drives Honnold. His interest that value, however, seems to go hand in hand with an unjustifiably dismissive attitude towards such plain values as comfort and a sense of fulfillment. So much so that he seems not even to recognize these things as really of any value at all: "Nothing good," as he puts it, "happens in the world by being happy and cozy."

4.

If those who are especially interested in superlative values are prone to perfectionism about related plain values, as I have suggested above, do those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life have good reason to abandon it in favor a nonsuperlative one? One might suppose that they do: after all, with their superlative concept they are required constantly to be vigilant about appreciating the value of what they regard as good but not meaningful lives, and if they were to abandon that concept they would not be required to do this, since they would eradicate the described danger of becoming perfectionists about such lives. To begin thinking of a meaningful life in fundamentally nonsuperlative

¹¹ Chai Vasarhelyi & Chin (2018), 1:06:20–1:06:45.

rather than superlative terms is no longer be in any special danger of becoming overly absorbed by the thought that nonsuperlative good lives fall short of a meaningful life, and thus no longer to be in any special danger of overlooking the goodness of such lives. To begin thinking of a meaningful life in fundamentally nonsuperlative rather than superlative terms is no longer to be prone to being too regularly critical or overly harsh in the assessment of such nonsuperlative lives. And so on.

But this assumes that those who would abandon their superlative concept of a meaningful life in favor of a nonsuperlative one would not be required to be so constantly vigilant about avoiding some other, equally troubling evaluative error. For if they would still be required to be so vigilant, only now in order to avoid some troubling error other than perfectionism, then there would be no real advantage to abandoning their superlative concept. And what I now want to suggest is that those who would abandon their superlative concept in favor of a nonsuperlative one would still be required to be constantly vigilant in this way.

For lack of a better term, I will call the contrasting evaluative error I have in mind “vulgarianism.” Whereas the perfectionist demands of the merely good what ought only to be demanded of the outstanding, the vulgarian only demands of the outstanding what ought to be demanded of the merely good. The vulgarian doesn’t just require of superlative value what is required of plain value; they further insist in practice that nothing more is required of superlative value—that the merely good, in effect, suffices for the outstanding. Thus, whereas the perfectionist instructor awards satisfactory grades only to the most gifted and industrious of their students, the vulgarian instructor awards top grades to all of their satisfactory students, even to those whose performance puts them barely beyond the passing threshold. Whereas the perfectionist parent is constantly dismayed about the ways in which their relationship with their child falls short of particularly admirable parent-child bonds, the vulgarian parent willfully ignores potential areas for improvement in their relationship with their child, even significant ones, due to the fact that they recognize no better parent-child bond than it. And whereas the perfectionist consumer insists that those midrange product varieties ought to have all the qualities of the premier ones, the vulgarian consumer never says a word about any of the ways in which those midrange varieties fail to live up to their premier counterparts, praising both in equally laudatory terms.

The reason that vulgarianism in this sense is as troubling an evaluative error as perfectionism is that it seems always to amount to an equally troubling wrong

or to carry equally troubling effects. Most certainly, the perfectionist instructor wrongs those less gifted and industrious students by failing to acknowledge the good they have done. But the vulgarian instructor equally wrongs the most gifted and industrious students by failing to acknowledge extra good they have so impressively done. No doubt it is typically to their child's and often to their own detriment that the perfectionist parent's dismay obscures the happy aspects of their parent-child bond. There is also little doubt, however, that is typically as much to their child's and often to their own detriment that the vulgarian parent is oblivious to the areas of potential improvement in their relationship, some of which may be very significant. And while the perfectionist consumer clearly wrongs producers and fellow consumers alike with their dismissals of those midrange product varieties, the vulgarian consumer just as clearly wrongs others with a failure to acknowledge the superior quality of the premier varieties: they wrong producers of the premier varieties, for example, by disrespecting the extra effort they have put into the production of those varieties, and they wrong fellow consumers by diminishing the likelihood of their being motivated enough ever to experience the extra goodness of the premier varieties.

The charge that to refuse to require some excellence of a meaningful life is ipso facto to commit the vulgarian error is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place, just as Landau's charge that to require some excellence of a meaningful life is ipso facto to commit the perfectionist error is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life in the first place. Just as the perfectionist charge only applies when superlative value is expected of a nonsuperlative value, so the vulgarian charge only applies when nothing but nonsuperlative value is expected of a superlative value. But for those who do adhere to a fundamentally nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life, such a life is not of course a superlative value. Hence in these individuals' perspective, there's little sense to be made of any suggestion about committing the vulgarian error about a meaningful life. In their view, a meaningful life is just not the sort of thing you can legitimately be charged with committing the vulgarian error about.

Nevertheless, it seems that those who adhere to a nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life will have to be especially vigilant to avoid vulgarianism about superior varieties of a meaningful life.

To illustrate this, suppose now that we adhere to a nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life that identifies it simply with a worthwhile life. It would be as

ridiculous to pretend that are in fact no varieties of a worthwhile life that are better than others as it would be to pretend that there are no varieties of a good life other than the ones devoted to the best sort of pursuit human beings can adopt. My life, devoted as it is to intellectual pursuits, is a worthwhile life. So too is that justly more famous fellow academic's life, devoted as it is to similar intellectual pursuits. I am not foolish enough to suggest that my intellectual life is evaluatively equal to theirs: due to their abilities, industriousness, and resulting accomplishments, their intellectual life is plainly superior to mine. In one sense, we are intellectual peers, but some peers in this sense are obviously higher in the relevant evaluative rank, and it is no false humility for me to recognize that my fellow academic is higher than me. Similarly, I can readily deem my worthwhile intellectual life lower on the all-things-considered evaluative scale than various nonintellectual worthwhile lives. I genuinely (and, of course, in firm opposition to *that* part of Aristotle's thought) take it to be an open question whether my car mechanic's obviously worthwhile life is, all things considered, superior to my particular intellectual life. In the same way that Kant talked about his spirit bowing before the ordinary person of superior moral virtue,¹² I can't help but mentally bow to the impressive skill, magnanimity, and genuine good will of my mechanic every time I talk to him. So I might well recognize, upon finding out more about it, that my mechanic's worthwhile life of skilled labor is also superior to my worthwhile intellectual life.

Given the prevalence of such superior meaningful lives on the nonsuperlative concept of a meaningful life, if those who adhere to such a concept are not especially careful, it will be all too easy for them to let their interest in a meaningful life, nonsuperlatively understood, cause them to fail to appreciate the value of such superior meaningful lives. As the vulgarian instructor fails to acknowledge the extra good that their most gifted and industrious students have accomplished, those with the nonsuperlative, worthwhileness concept of a meaningful life may all too easily fail to appreciate the extra value of superior worthwhile lives by failing to be sufficiently laudatory of them.¹³ As the vulgarian parent fails to appreciate the excellences of superior parent-child bonds,

¹² Kant ([1788] 2015). p. 64.

¹³ Perhaps the thought would be that it will be too discouraging for those whose worthwhile lives nevertheless fall short of those superior ones. If so, it seems to me a thought that places too little faith in our fellow human beings. I, at any rate, am not discouraged by my recognition of the superiority of that fellow academic's or even my mechanic's life; on the contrary, I am inspired by their examples to make my already worthwhile life even better.

those with a nonsuperlative concept may fail to appreciate the excellences of various superior worthwhile lives by too frequently emphasizing the fact that they are worthwhile lives, as if that's the only thing that needs to be truly said about such lives once it is truly said. And as the vulgarian consumer fails to acknowledge the superior quality of the premier product varieties, those with a nonsuperlative concept like the worthwhileness one may fail to appreciate the value of superior worthwhile lives by overinflating the positive things they say about the other worthwhile lives. Thus, an attempt might be made to quell the point about the inferiority of my worthwhile life by an over-the-top emphasis of such true points as "Oh, but you've published in this or that impressive journal" or "Yes, but they've never experienced the joys of the intellectual life that you have."

5.

I would be the last to discourage discussion of superlative and nonsuperlative concepts of a meaningful life. If what I have said above is correct, however, the question of which sort of concept of a meaningful life we should adhere to isn't going to be decided on perfectionist grounds. I have argued that although Landau's perfectionist charge is unlikely to persuade those who adhere to a superlative concept of a meaningful life, there is nevertheless an important lesson for them to learn from that charge: to avoid perfectionism about what they will regard as good but not meaningful lives, they must constantly be vigilant to appreciate the value of those lives. I have also argued that the vigilance required is no reason by itself to abandon the superlative concept in favor of a nonsuperlative one, for a similar sort of vigilance, to avoid the contrasting but equally troubling error of vulgarianism, would be required of them even upon such abandonment.

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