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# THE APORIA OF PERFECTION

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In this paper, I introduce a new aporia, the aporia of perfection. This aporia in-
cludes three claims: (1) Ought implies possibility, (2) We ought to be perfect, and
(3) It is not possible that we are perfect. All these propositions appear to be plau-
sible when considered in themselves and there are interesting arguments for them.
However, together they entail a contradiction. Hence, at least one of the sentences
must be false. I consider some possible solutions to the puzzle and discuss some
pros and cons of these solutions. I conclude that we can avoid the contradiction
that follows from (1) – (3) and still hold on to our basic intuitions, if we instead
of (1) – (3) accept some slightly different propositions.

## 1. Introduction.

Consider the following set of sentences:

(1) Ought implies possibility.
(2) We ought to be perfect.
(3) It is not possible that we are perfect.

All these sentences are intuitively plausible and they seem to have been de-
fended by many different individuals throughout history. I take (1) to be a version of
the so-called ought-implies-can principle. (1) has been accepted by many philoso-
phers, at least since Kant and the proposition can be proven in several so-called
deontic systems.[1] The principle has been defended not only by deontologists but also
by many teleologists.[2] (2) would probably be accepted by some so-called perfectio-

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[1] For an introduction to deontic logic, see, for example, Gabbay, Horty, Parent, van der Meyden and
van der Torre (eds.). (2013).

[2] For more on the ought-can principle, see, for example, Dahl (1974), Fischer (2003), Howard-
Snyder (2006), Kekes (1984), Littlejohn (2009), Mason (2003), Montefiore (1958), Ofstad (1959),
Sinnott-Armstrong (1984), (1988), Stern (2004), Stocker (1971), Streumer (2003), Vranas (2007)
and Yaffe (1999).

nists.[3] The norm can be found in the Bible[4] and according to Kant *one's own perfection* is one of the two ends of morality that is also a duty (the other end is *the happiness of others*)[5]. (3) is intuitively very plausible. Human beings seem imperfect and fallible in many ways; our bodies are fragile and our cognitive capacities are limited. Both our theoretical and practical reasoning often appear to be flawed. There are many things we do not know and probably cannot know. It is often difficult for us to understand other people and our empathy is limited. If we really try to develop some of our capacities as much as possible, other potentials will be unrealised.[6] In Section 2, we will consider some arguments for the sentences in the aporia. Nevertheless, the following deduction proves that {(1), (2), (3)} is inconsistent:

(4) If ought implies possibility, then if we ought to be perfect it is possible that we are perfect. [Form (1), that is, (4) is an instance of the ought implies possibility principle]

(5) If we ought to be perfect, it is possible that we are perfect. [From (1) and (4)]

(6) It is possible that we are perfect. [From (2) and (5)]

(7) It is possible that we are perfect and it is not the case that it is possible that we are perfect. [From (3) and (6)]

But (7) is a contradiction. Hence, {(1), (2), (3)} is inconsistent, for the argument is obviously valid. Therefore at least one sentence in this set must be false. This is the aporia of perfection.

The aporia of perfection can be turned into three arguments against the propositions in the aporia. Let us now consider these arguments.

(A1). If ought implies possibility, then if we ought to be perfect it is possible that we are perfect. Ought implies possibility. We ought to be perfect. Hence, it is possible that we are perfect. Here we use (1) and (2) as premises. The conclusion in the argument is the negation of (3).

(A2). If ought implies possibility, then if we ought to be perfect it is possible that we are perfect. Ought implies possibility. It is not possible that we are perfect. Hence, it is not the case that we ought to be perfect. In this argument, we use (1) and (3) as premises. The conclusion is the negation of (2).

(A3). If ought implies possibility, then if we ought to be perfect it is possible that we are perfect. We ought to be perfect. It is not possible that we are perfect. Hence, it is not the case that ought implies possibility. This argument uses (2) and (3) as premises. The conclusion is the negation of (1).

All these arguments are clearly valid. So, if the premises in (A1) are true, the

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[3] For introductions to perfectionism, see, for example, Kraut (2013) and Wall (2017). See also Griffin (1986, Chapter IV) and Hurka (1996).

[4] Matthew 5:48.

[5] See Kant (1797/2017, pp. 160 – 161, 165 – 166, 209 – 212).

[6] Earl Conee (1994) introduces an argument for the view that it is impossible to be morally perfect.

conclusion in (A1) must be true; if the premises in (A2) are true, the conclusion in (A2) must be true, and similarly for (A3). The problem is that all of the premises in the arguments seem plausible. But if (A1) is sound, then (A2) and (A3) cannot be sound; if (A2) is sound, then (A1) and (A3) cannot be sound; and if (A3) is sound, then (A1) and (A2) cannot be sound. For, if the conclusion in (A1) is true, then at least one premise in (A2) is false and at least one premise in (A3) is false, etc. This is another way of expressing the aporia of perfection.

**2. Arguments for the sentences in the aporia**. I have claimed that the sentences in the aporia of perfection are intuitively plausible and that they have been accepted by many thinkers throughout history. However, a sceptic might argue that we should not take the aporia seriously if there are no good reasons for the sentences in the aproria. Our intuitions are not enough. Therefore, I will consider some arguments for (1) – (3) in this section.

**Arguments for (1): Ought implies possibility.** Is it true that ought implies possibility? The answer to this question depends on what we mean by 'ought', 'implies' and 'possibility'. There are many kinds of obligations: moral, legal, prudential, etc. I am primarily interested in moral obligations in this paper, but the aporia might also be problematic for prudential obligations. It does not seem reasonable to assume that it must be possible to fulfil all legal obligations. I am inclined to believe that the ought implies possibility principle is plausible for both all-things considered and prima facie obligations, even though I will focus of all-things considered obligations in this paper.

There are also many kinds of possibilities: logical, analytical, metaphysical, natural, historical, etc. I believe that the ought implies possibility principle is plausible given most of these interpretations. I will, however, focus on 'historical' possibility. Intuitively, A is historically possible in a possible world w at a certain moment in time iff (if and only if) A is still possible at this moment in time given the history of w and the laws of nature that hold in w. Something may be historically possible in some possible world at a moment in time, even though it is not historically possible in the same world at another time. Historical possibility implies metaphysical possibility, which implies logical possibility. So, if ought implies historical possibility, it also implies metaphysical possibility, etc.

I will now show that the ought implies possibility principle can be proved in many interesting alethic-deontic systems. According to all normal deontic systems it is true that it ought to be the case that A in a possible world w iff A is true in all possible worlds that are deontically accessible from w. And according to all standard modal systems, it is true that it is possible that A in a possible world w iff A is true in some possible world that is alethically accessible from w.[7] Let us assume

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[7] For more on modal logic, see, for example, Blackburn, de Rijke and Venema (2001), Chellas

that every possible world can see at least one possible world deontically, that if w′ is deontically accessible from w then w′ is deontically accessible from itself and that if a possible world w′ is deontically accessible from a possible world w, then w′ is also alethically accessible from w. Given these assumptions, which seem to be reasonable, we can prove that the ought implies possibility principle is valid in the following way.[8]

Suppose that the ought implies possibility principle is not valid. Then there is a possible world $w_1$ in which it is not true that ought implies possibility. Hence, it ought to be the case A in $w_1$ and it is impossible that A in $w_1$ (for some A). There is a possible world $w_2$ that is deontically accessible from $w_1$ [by assumption]. Hence, A is true in $w_2$. Since $w_2$ is deontically accessible from $w_1$, $w_2$ is alethically accessible from $w_1$ [by assumption]. Accordingly, A is false in $w_2$. But this is absurd. Conse- quently, the ought implies possibility principle is valid.[9]

**Arguments for (2): We ought to be perfect.** Is it true that we ought to be perfect? Again, the answer to this question depends on what we mean by 'ought' and 'perfect'. We have already mentioned some possible interpretations of 'ought'. So, let us consider what we might mean by 'perfect'.[10]

There seem to be several kinds of perfection: athletic perfection, artistic perfection, cognitive perfection, moral perfection, etc. We can also speak about absolute perfection and human perfection. Let us say that an individual x is absolutely perfect iff x has all perfections, where the perfections include such properties as omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, perfect benevolence, perfect wisdom, infallibility, etc. Human perfection need not entail any properties of this kind. We can say that an individual x is humanly perfect iff x is a perfect example of a human being or iff x has developed x's humanity to the highest possible degree. I will consider several different interpretations of 'perfection' below. Nevertheless, in this section, I will focus on moral perfection.

So, what do we mean by 'moral perfection'? This expression can also be interpreted in many different ways. In this section, I will use the following definition: An individual x is morally perfect iff x has all the properties x ought to have (x is everything x ought to be and x does everything x ought to do). I will now

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(1980) and Hughes and Cresswell (1968).

[8] For our purposes in this paper, we do not have to introduce any moments in time in our models. When we say that w′ is deontically (or alethically) accessible from w, we mean that w′ is deontically (or alethically) accessible from w at a particular moment in time.

[9] If there are genuine normative conflicts or moral dilemmas, then the ought implies possibility principle is probably false. But it is not obvious that there are any genuine normative conflicts or moral dilemmas. For more on this, see, for example, Rönnedal (2012, pp. 73 – 96), Gowans (1987) and Mason (1996).

[10] For more on the concept of perfection, see, for example, Clark (1993), Fitch (1963), Harrison (1985), McGinn (1992) and Tsanoff (1940).

show that we can prove that we ought to be morally perfect in this sense in many interesting deontic systems.

Suppose that it is not the case that everyone ought to be morally perfect in some possible world $w_1$. Then, it is not the case that c ought to be morally perfect (for some individual c) in $w_1$. Consequently, there is a possible world $w_2$ that is deontically accessible from $w_1$ in which it is false that c is morally perfect. Since c is not morally perfect in $w_2$, there is some property H such that c ought to have H even though c does not have H in $w_2$. (H might be the property of doing something.) Accordingly, c ought to have H in $w_2$ and c does not have H in $w_2$. Since $w_2$ is deontically accessible from $w_1$, $w_2$ is deontically accessible from itself [by assumption]. Hence, c has H in $w_2$. But this is absurd. It follows that everyone ought to be morally perfect.

**Arguments for (3): It is not possible that we are perfect.** Is it true that it is not possible that we are perfect? Again, the answer to this question depends on what we mean by 'possible' and 'perfect'. We have already considered some interpretations of these concepts. Is (3) true given any of these interpretations?

It appears to be the case that no single person can be a perfect athlete, artist, scientist, philanthropist, child, parent, sibling, friend, lover, etc. at one and the same time. So, if being perfect means being perfect in all these respects, (3) appears to be true. Athletic perfection, artistic perfection, cognitive perfection, moral perfection, etc. seem to be *logically* compatible, but it appears to be very plausible to assume that it is *not historically* possible for a single human being to have all these perfections at one and the same time. Omniscience, infallibility, perfect goodness, perfect benevolence, perfect wisdom and omnipotence are among the properties that are sometimes considered to be 'perfections'. Obviously, it seems to be impossible for humans to have any of these characteristics. Hence, (3) appears to be true if 'perfect' means 'absolutely perfect'. Perhaps it is possible to be humanly or morally perfect, but even if it is, it is not obvious that it is. Earl Conee (1994) argues that it is impossible to be morally perfect. (For more on this, see Section 3.)

The arguments in this section clearly show that we should take the aporia of perfection seriously. Is there any way to solve this puzzle? Let us now consider some possible solutions.

**3. Some possible solutions.** Since {(1), (2), (3)} entails a contradiction, at least one of the sentences in this set must be false, or else there are true contradictions. Since there are no true contradictions[11], at least one of (1) – (3) must be false. All of the solutions below reject at least one sentence in {(1), (2), (3)}. There are seven

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[11] A so-called dialetheist, which believes that some sentences are both true and false, might want to question this claim. However, even a dialetheist could argue that not *every* contradiction is true. So, even if dialetheism were true, {(1), (2), (3)} might be problematic. For more on dialetheism, see, for example, Priest, Berto and Weber (2018).

possible solutions to the aporia of perfection. We can reject all sentences in {(1), (2), (3)} (one possibility), we can reject two of the sentences in {(1), (2), (3)} and accept one sentence (three possibilities), or we can reject one sentence in {(1), (2), (3)} and accept the rest (three possibilities). I will consider some of the possible solutions that seem most interesting to me.

According to the first solution there are two kinds of obligations (or two kinds of ought-sentences): actual obligations (Ought$_A$-sentences) and ideal obligations (Ought$_I$-sentences). The first is an action-guiding type of obligation and the second is a non-action-guiding type of obligation. Ought$_A$ implies possibility, but Ought$_I$ does not. 'Actual obligation' and 'ideal obligation' can be defined in many different ways. Here, is one way of making these concepts more precise. We can say that it is *ideally* obligatory that A in a possible world w (at a moment of time t) iff A is true in every ideal world (at t) regardless of whether or not A is historically possible in w (at t). It might no longer be possible for us to create an ideal world of this kind. It is *actually* obligatory that A in a possible world w (at a moment of time t) iff A is true in all the best possible worlds that are still historically accessible from w (at t). This definition entails that it is actually obligatory that A only if it is historically possible that A, only if it is still possible to create a possible world in which A is true. Now, according to the first solution, our obligation to be perfect is not an obligation that implies possibility, it is an unfulfillable, ideal obligation. Even though the ideal of perfection is an impossible ideal, it is still an ideal. The ought in (1) is not the same kind of ought as in (2). This solution 'rejects' (1) and (2). {(1), (2), (3)} is not consistent, but all of the following sentences are true:

(1b) Ought$_A$ implies possibility. (But it is not the case that Ought$_I$ implies possibility.)

(2b) We ought$_I$ to be perfect.

(3) It is not possible that we are perfect.

According to the second solution, the obligation to be perfect is not really an obligation to *be* perfect; it is an obligation to *strive* for perfection.[12] Since we cannot be perfect we do not have an obligation to *be* perfect, but we have an obligation to *want* to be perfect, to *strive for* perfection; we ought to *aim to be* perfect.[13] This obligation can be fulfilled even if we cannot *be* perfect. This answer 'rejects' (2). {(1), (2), (3)} is not consistent, but all of the following sentences are true:

(1) Ought implies possibility.

(2c) We ought to *want* to be perfect. (But it is not the case that we ought to *be* perfect.)

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[12] Kant sometimes seems to defend a view of this kind; see, for example, Kant (1797/2017, 211).

[13] Clark (1993) argues that an obligation of this kind is problematic.

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(3) It is not possible that we *are* perfect.

Is it reasonable and even obligatory to *want* to be perfect even if it is impossible to *be* perfect? The following argument suggests that this might be the case. It is better that you want to be perfect than that you do not want to be perfect. For if you want to be perfect, you will try to be perfect, and if you will try to be perfect you will become a better person, even though you will inevitably fail to *be* perfect. If it is better that you want to be perfect than that you do not want to be perfect, then you ought to want to be perfect. Hence, you ought to want to be perfect. If you shoot for the stars you might hit the moon.

According to the third solution, the obligation to be perfect is not really an obligation to be *perfect*, it is an obligation to be *as close to perfect as possible*. Humans cannot be perfect, but they can be more or less 'nearly perfect', and they can be more or less close to the ideal of perfection. The obligation to be perfect is an obligation to be *as close to perfect as possible* or to *perfect ourselves as much as possible*. This answer 'rejects' (2). {(1), (2), (3)} is not consistent, but all of the following sentences are true:

(1) Ought implies possibility.
(2d) We ought to be *as close to perfect as possible*. (But it is not the case that we ought to be *perfect*.)
(3) It is not possible that we are *perfect*.

There are similarities between the second and the third solution; for example, both reject (2). But there are also important differences. Wanting to be perfect and being as close to perfect as possible are clearly very different things. Someone can want to be perfect without being as close to perfect as possible, and it also seems to be possible that someone is as perfect as possible without wanting to be perfect (even though the latter is perhaps more debatable). Therefore, an obligation to want to be perfect and an obligation to be as close to perfect as possible are clearly two very different obligations. Note also that it is still impossible to *be* perfect according to the second solution. But the fact that this is impossible does not entail that it is impossible to *want* to be perfect. According to the second solution we ought to want something that is impossible. However, according to the third solution, it is possible to *be* as close to perfect as possible. Therefore, it is reasonable to clearly distinguish between these different solutions.

According to the fourth solution, we hold on to (1) (Ought implies possibility) and reinterpret (2) (We ought to be perfect) and (3) (It is not possible that we are perfect). According to this solution, it *is* possible that we are perfect. We just have to understand the concept of perfection in the right way. What it means to be perfect may vary from one species to another and from one individual to another. When we say that a human being is perfect, we mean that this being is perfect in some 're-

stricted' sense, for example, that she is a perfect human being or a perfect moral agent, or something similar (see Section 2). In this sense of 'perfect', it is possible for every human being to be perfect. This does not mean that it is possible for humans to be perfect in every interesting sense of 'perfect' or in every respect. This solution can also be expressed in the following way. There are different kinds of perfection; 'perfect' is ambiguous. In (2), 'perfect' is used in one sense, and in (3) it is used in another sense. Let us call perfection in the first sense 'R-perfection' and perfection in the second sense 'U-perfection'. Then it is possible that we are R-perfect, even though it is not possible that we are U-perfect. {(1), (2), (3)} is not consistent, but all of the following sentences are true:

(1) Ought implies possibility.
(2e) We ought to be R-perfect.
(3b) It is not possible that we are U-perfect. (But it is possible that we are R-perfect.)

'R-perfection' may, for example, mean 'moral perfection'. (2) is then an 'abbreviation' of the proposition that we ought to be morally perfect. For this solution to work, it must be possible for us to be morally perfect (even though it is perhaps not possible for us to be perfect in every respect). Is this possible? Well, that depends on what it means to be 'morally perfect'. It has been argued that we *must* be morally perfect (McGinn 1992; see also Harrison 1985). Given (1), it follows that it is possible that we are morally perfect. According to McGinn, 'An agent is morally perfect iff he always does what is right and never does what is wrong'.[14] In this sense, it seems obvious that we can be morally perfect (even though it might be very difficult). In Section 2, I showed how we can prove that we ought to be (morally) perfect in certain deontic systems. In fact, given the definition of moral perfection in Section 2, which is almost equivalent with McGinn's definition, and some other plausible assumptions, we can *prove* that it is possible that we are morally perfect. However, McGinn's definition has been questioned. Earl Conee (1994) argues against it.[15] According to Conee, McGinn's definition is not adequate: perfect moral agency is a matter of one's acts being as morally as good as possible in every morally relevant respect. Someone that always does what is right and never does what is wrong is therefore not necessarily morally perfect according to Conee. Still, it is not obvious that Conee's arguments are sound. If we can be morally perfect, and if McGinn's definition (or the definition in Section 2) of moral perfection is plausible we can be morally perfect, then this solution can be used to solve the aporia of perfection.

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[14] Others have suggested similar definitions; see, for example, Kant (1797/2017, 211).
[15] See also Clark (1993).

**4. Conclusion.** We have now considered four possible solutions to the aporia of perfection. It is not obvious which solution is the most plausible. Personally, I am inclined to accept (1) and (2) and reject (3) if 'perfect' means 'morally perfect' and moral perfection is defined as in Section 2. This is a version of the fourth solution. Ought implies possibility, we ought to be morally perfect and it is possible that we are morally perfect. This is compatible with the proposition that it is not possible that we are perfect if 'perfect' is interpreted in some other sense, and it might be very difficult to be morally perfect. Whether or not (3) is true depends on what we mean by 'perfect'. There seem to be several kinds of perfection: athletic perfection, artistic perfection, cognitive perfection, moral perfection, etc. and it does not appear to be impossible to find several plausible interpretations of this concept according to which (3) is false. If McGinn's definition of moral perfection or the definition that was introduced in Section 2 is plausible, it is reasonable to reject (3). On the other hand, if someone can be perfect only if she has perfect reasoning skills and believes everything that follows from what she believes, or only if she is omniscient, or has some other property of this kind, or only if she is perfect in every respect, (3) certainly seems to be true. If this is the case, we must go for some solution that rejects (1) or (2). In any case, it seems possible to avoid the contradiction that follows from {(1), (2), (3)} and still hold on to our basic intuitions, if we instead of (1) – (3) accept some slightly different propositions (for example, (1b), (2b) and (3); (1), (2c) and (3); (1), (2d) and (3); or (1), (2e) and (3b)).

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