

# Liberal Perfectionism, Moral Integrity, and Self-Respect

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a dilemma for Matthew Kramer's view, as defended in his *Liberalism with Excellence*. A central aim of that book is to critique existing liberal perfectionist theories, which he labels 'edificatory', and to defend a different such theory, which he calls 'aspirational'. Edificatory perfectionism holds that governments ought to promote citizens' well-being directly by inducing them to live lives that are more wholesome, cultivated, or autonomous. Aspirational perfectionism, meanwhile, holds that governments ought to promote the conditions under which every citizen can be warranted in harbouring a strong sense of self-respect, by promoting the occurrence of outstanding achievements within society. We first argue that Kramer's two central arguments against edificatory perfectionism, which appeal to the value of freedom and to moral integrity, fail to establish the impermissibility of edificatory policies. His critique could be salvaged by holding that the ambit of legitimate government activity is limited to the provision and distribution of primary goods. However, we argue, second, that Kramer's own aspirational perfectionism also runs afoul of this restriction, because his conception of warranted self-respect is not a primary good. Kramer is thus faced with a choice between upholding his objections to edificatory perfectionism and maintaining the coherence of his aspirational perfectionism.

## I. Introduction

A central aim of Matthew Kramer's *Liberalism with Excellence* is to critique existing liberal perfectionist theories, which he labels 'edificatory', and to defend a different such theory, which he calls 'aspirational'.<sup>1</sup> Though both theories are united in their endorsement of a

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range of government policies that seek to promote valuable activities, such as subsidies for the arts, they differ fundamentally in their justifications for these policies.

Edificatory perfectionism holds that the government is at least morally permitted, and perhaps even obligated, to promote citizens' well-being by inducing them to lead lives that are more wholesome, cultivated, or autonomous. For example, the arts should be subsidised because this makes a valuable activity more widely available, thus increasing citizens' capacity for autonomous choice and enabling more citizens to enjoy a worthwhile pursuit. The key feature of the view is that it aims to improve the lives of citizens directly, by steering them toward valuable ways of life. This is the familiar form of liberal perfectionism endorsed by philosophers such as Joseph Raz and Steven Wall.<sup>2</sup>

Aspirational perfectionism is far less familiar.<sup>3</sup> Its central tenet is that governments are obligated to promote the conditions under which every citizen can be warranted in harbouring a strong sense of self-respect. One important contributor to citizens' level of warranted self-respect is the excellence of society, which is realised through the achievement of many top-notch accomplishments across myriad domains of human endeavour. The character of society partly determines how well each citizen's life goes, and thus the sterling exploits of others in society bolsters each citizen's warranted self-respect. One way that governments can strengthen citizens' warranted self-respect, therefore, is to provide support to sundry areas of human striving, thereby promoting the occurrence of outstanding achievements. This support can be provided in various ways, including through subsidies, prizes, fellowships, tax exemptions, allowing the use of public land and facilities free of charge, directly operating museums and galleries, and instruction in

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Kramer, *Liberalism with Excellence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). All unattributed page references, including those in parenthesis in the main text, are to Kramer's book.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Steven Wall, *Liberalism, Perfectionism, and Restraint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as far as we are aware, it is completely novel.

schools. All of these policies can be used to foster the excellence that strengthens the warranted self-respect of all. In other words, the arts should be subsidised not in order to directly induce citizens to enjoy edifying experiences or to promote the capacity for autonomy, but in order to increase the occurrence of self-respect-bolstering top-notch artistic achievements.

This paper presents Kramer with a dilemma. In section II, we argue that Kramer's two central arguments against edificatory perfectionism are inconclusive. In particular, neither argument succeeds if, as some edificatory perfectionists hold, governments have *duties* to provide the conditions in which citizens can live worthwhile lives. While we agree with Kramer that governments do not in fact have such duties, his arguments do not show this to be the case, and their existence would undermine the force of the objections he presents. Kramer's critique could be salvaged if he held that the ambit of legitimate government activity is limited to the provision and distribution of primary goods. However, in section III we argue that aspirational perfectionism itself runs afoul of this restriction, since its conception of warranted self-respect does not meet the conditions for being a primary good. Kramer is thus faced with a choice between upholding his objections to edificatory perfectionism and maintaining the coherence of his aspirational perfectionism.

## **II. What's Wrong with Edificatory Perfectionism?**

The aim of Kramer's critique of edificatory perfectionism is to show that all "distinctively edificatory perfectionist laws or policies are morally impermissible" (271). However, since aspirational and edificatory perfectionism will converge on a number of policy recommendations, such as public funding for the arts, it is important be clear on what counts as a *distinctively* edificatory policy. Such a policy, Kramer tell us, is one that has as its

rationale to “induce citizens to lead lives that are more wholesome or cultivated or worthily autonomous” (279).

Kramer launches two lines of attack against edificatory policies so understood. The first strand of his critique aims to demonstrate that edificatory perfectionists are working with an inadequate conception of freedom, leading them to disregard the numerous ways in which edificatory policies restrict citizens’ freedom.<sup>4</sup> The second strand aims to show that edificatory policies degrade the system of governance where they are implemented: the government officials who implement these policies tarnish their moral integrity by failing to show an adequate degree of self-restraint.<sup>5</sup>

We will call the first strand Kramer’s critique the freedom objection, and the second strand the moral integrity objection.<sup>6</sup> Though we will discuss both of these objections, slightly more attention will be given to the latter, for two reasons. First, the freedom objection is not intended to be a decisive objection to edificatory perfectionism, making the moral integrity objection the deeper of the two critiques. Second, this latter problem is the more novel and interesting of the two challenges to edificatory perfectionism. While the freedom objection is to some extent in line with prior objections to edificatory perfectionism,<sup>7</sup> the moral integrity objection does not resemble any earlier objections to the view and it develops an idea that Kramer has appealed to in earlier work as part of his distinctive explanation of the wrongness of torture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Liberalism with Excellence*, chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> For further critical discussion of these two strands of Kramer’s critique see George Sher’s “Confessions of a Quidnunc,” in this symposium.

<sup>7</sup> In chapter 2 of his *Liberalism without Perfection* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), Jonathan Quong also takes edificatory perfectionism to task for its conception of the value of autonomy. Though Kramer rejects a key part of Quong’s critique (45-63), he concurs with the portion of Quong’s argument that aims to establish that the edificatory perfectionist conception of autonomy will ultimately permit unacceptable infringements of liberty (247-9).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the relationship between Kramer’s moral-integrity-based critique of edificatory perfectionism and his earlier work on torture and capital punishment, see his “On Political Morality and the Conditions for Warranted Self-Respect,” *Journal of Ethics* 21(4), 335-349.

*A. The Freedom Objection*

One form that edificatory policies take is the banning of certain activities on the grounds that they cannot be part of a good or flourishing life.<sup>9</sup> Take a ban on the sale, possession and consumption of an addictive drug on the basis of its detrimental effects on the lives of those who consume it recreationally. Such a ban evidently restricts the freedom of those who are subject to it, but is its freedom restricting character necessarily disvaluable? If, as Joseph Raz held, “autonomy is only valuable if it is directed at the good”, then it will not be.<sup>10</sup> On this view, provided the activity that is being restricted is genuinely a bad option, there is no disvalue in preventing citizens from taking part in it. This conception of autonomy’s value is particularly friendly to edificatory policies. If restricting citizens’ freedoms to pursue bad choices gives rise to *no* disvalue then there are reasons to enact such policies—that they help to realise more value in the world—and an absence of reasons speaking against them: the freedoms they limit were not of any value in the first place.

Kramer’s elaboration of the freedom objection aims to show that this understanding of freedom and its value is flawed.<sup>11</sup> He argues that there are various ways in which freedoms are valuable that is not contingent on the value of what they are freedoms to do. Or, put another way, freedom has various kinds of content-independent value. Kramer offers a detailed and subtle account of the value of freedom, but in brief this content-independent value consists in the following three components:

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<sup>9</sup> Other forms include subsidies and punitive taxes that aim to steer citizens toward more edifying ways of life. The freedom objective also applies to these, given that they limit freedom via taxation (215-6). We focus on bans here since the objection applies to them most straightforwardly.

<sup>10</sup> *The Morality of Freedom*, 411.

<sup>11</sup> His argument also targets a different route to the conclusion that restricting the freedom to choose certain bad options does not give rise to any disvalue, presented by Peter de Marneffe (207-27). We set aside de Marneffe’s view here for ease of exposition. Considering Kramer’s reply to Raz is sufficient to elaborate the gist of the freedom objection, since de Marneffe’s view is ultimately taken to fail for the same reason.

*Intrinsic:* Freedoms enhance the declinatory force of our choices: we impress more of our will upon the world when we decline more options, even if they are options we would never choose (204-5).

*Instrumental:* Freedoms are valuable for the execution of a life plan, especially given that we are fallible and thus may change our minds about which ends to pursue (205-6).

*Constitutive:* Freedoms are a constitutive component of autonomy, which is intrinsically valuable (207).

Though this is a broad-brush recapitulation of Kramer's conception of the content-independent value of freedom, it is sufficient to demonstrate the freedom objection. That objection is that the edificatory perfectionist friendly conception of freedom is mistaken in holding that restrictions on the freedom to pursue bad options do not instantiate any disvalue. Such a view ignores these various ways in which freedoms have value that is entirely independent of the value of what it is they are a freedom to pursue.

What does this establish? Kramer writes that it highlights the *illiberality* of edificatory perfection. Those perfectionists “scant the importance or value of freedoms that are unserviceable for the fruition of [...] edificatory objectives” (41) and this is an element of the “sinisterly illiberal undertone” of the view (249). However, though this may be true, it is important to be clear that it does not establish that edificatory policies are wrong or impermissible. As Kramer himself accepts, the value of freedom does not always surpass the value of competing desiderata. And so the fact, supposing that it is one, that restrictions on freedom always give rise to disvalue does not establish that restricting freedom for edificatory reasons is wrong or illegitimate. At best, then, the freedom objection shows that in order to justify the freedom restrictions they propose the

edificatory perfectionist will need to appeal to a goal that is sufficiently important to outweigh these costs.

The limited force of this conclusion can be seen by noting that some edificatory perfectionists take citizens to have duties to promote the good and to ensure that others are able to live flourishing or autonomous lives.<sup>12</sup> Nothing in the preceding account of the value of freedom offers a basis for denying that we can legitimately take away the freedom not to comply with a duty. In fact, the goal of securing compliance with duties of justice looks like precisely the kind of goal that could outweigh the content-independent value of freedoms. It seems then that the permissibility of enacting edificatory policies hangs here on the prior question of whether we are ever under the kind of the duties that edificatory perfectionists take us to be under. If we are, then those policies can be legitimately enacted in spite of the disvalue to which they inevitably give rise.<sup>13</sup>

While Kramer accepts that his ruminations on the value of freedom “are not in themselves sufficient to support a robustly liberal position on the matter of the limits of law”, he claims that “they militate much more strongly in favour of such a position than the edificatory perfectionists characteristically allow” and “go some distance toward capturing the wrong-making properties of the drive for edification that suffuses contemporary perfectionism” (252-3). However, we think that even these somewhat modest claims overstate his case. Whether or not any edificatory perfectionist policy is in fact wrongful remains an open question, even if we fully embrace Kramer’s analysis of freedom and its value. That analysis identifies some considerations that speak against edificatory policies, but does not entail any conclusions about their wrongfulness.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, 407-8.

<sup>13</sup> For the view that we are sometimes obligated to promote the good of others, even when doing so involves a disvaluable restriction of their autonomy, see David Birks, “How Wrong is Paternalism?” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* (online first, doi: 10.1163/17455243-20170006). Birks accepts, with Kramer, that there are reasons not to interfere with autonomous choices and that such interference is a *pro tanto* wrong, but denies that these reasons are never outweighed by reasons to promote the good of the person who is interfered with.

*B. The Moral Integrity Objection*

In order to understand the moral integrity objection, we must set aside the perspective of the citizens who live under an edificatory perfectionist system of government and instead examine edificatory policies from the perspective of those charged with administering them. When we take up this perspective, we discover that edificatory policies “degrade the whole system of governance wherein they occur” (41). In order to maintain their moral integrity, governments and government officials must adhere to an ethic of self-restraint. But the implementation of edificatory policies violates this ethic and thus tarnishes the moral integrity of those officials. More precisely, edificatory perfectionist policies are indicative of a *quidnunc mentality* that degrades the moral integrity of the entire system of governance that implements them (265).

In elaborating this ethic of self-restraint, the first point Kramer emphasises is that when a person or a system of government is unaccommodating or intolerant without good justification this shows both a lack of virtue and a degrading trait, as well as constituting a failure to satisfy some moral obligations (270-2). Both individuals and systems of government are of course required to be intolerant in a range of cases: those in which dangers or injustices are at stake. However, outside of this range of cases, for a system of government to be intolerant or unaccommodating is for it to go beyond the bounds what it is morally entitled to do. For Kramer tells us that government officials are

Morally obligated to operate institutions that serve to uphold principles of justice and promote public order through the coordination of people’s activities and the preservation of basic security. [And] they are morally entitled to employ the least invasive feasible means that are necessary for the fulfilment of these responsibilities incumbent on their system of governance, provided that in so doing they are not contravening any deontological prohibitions. (272)



When intolerance is not required in order to fulfil these moral obligations, it is both self-aggrandizing and a manifestation of shameful weakness (274-6).

Because systems of government are not morally obliged to edify their citizens, edificatory policies do go beyond the bounds of what such systems are morally entitled to do. In doing so they exhibit the outlook of a village busybody: a quidnunc mentality (276-280). A village busybody aims to steer her fellow villagers toward her preferred behaviours and way of life. She then takes how well her own life goes to depend, in part, on whether her fellow villagers actually modify their behaviour accordingly. Similarly, the government officials tasked with administering edificatory policies take how well their system of governance goes to be dependent on how citizens behave; that is, on whether citizens actually live more edifying lives as a result of the policies. This outlook is overweening, since it is based on the false proposition that edifying citizens is within the legitimate ambit of systems of government. It is also a manifestation of weakness: it takes the success or failure of the system of governance to be dependent on how citizens respond to edificatory policies, but these responses are not in fact relevant to how successful any system of governance is. Therefore, not only do the officials charged with administering edificatory policies operate in a domain that they should not be operating in, they also deal in a domain that is beneath them: a domain that a stronger and more secure government would not concern itself with. This is the sense in which the outlook attributable to an edificatory perfectionist system of government is one of both unaccommodatingness and weakness.<sup>14</sup>

With this account of the ethic of self-restraint before us, we can now state the moral integrity objection to edificatory perfectionism more fully. Systems of governance

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<sup>14</sup> An important point of clarification should be noted. It might be thought that this critique of edificatory policies depends on the claim that the government officials who enact and enforce those policies have particular intentions or mental states when doing so. However, Kramer insists that the objection stands even if the intentions of those officials are entirely benevolent and their mental states bear no relation to the weak and self-aggrandizing outlook described. The quidnunc mentality and the corresponding lack of moral integrity are ascribable to edificatory perfectionist systems of government regardless of the actual attitudes or intentions or mental states of the individual. It is the outlook that would “at a high level of generality [...] most credibly account for their decisions and behaviour” (270).

that enact edificatory policies show an unjustified lack of tolerance and manifest a shameful kind of weakness. In so doing they tarnish their moral integrity, as they violate the ethic of self-restraint that all systems of governance are obligated to comply with. Edificatory policies are objectionable in this way regardless of their impact on the lives of the citizens who live under them, as this account of their wrongness has proceeded entirely from the perspective of the systems of government that enact and enforce them.

A striking feature of the moral integrity objection is that it presupposes that systems of government are not under duties of justice to edify their citizenry. We say this feature is striking because earlier in *Liberalism with Excellence* Kramer rejects an argument against edificatory perfectionism made by Jonathan Quong on the basis that it presupposed the absence of edificatory duties (59-62). Given that the moral integrity objection also presupposes this, if governments do have edificatory duties then the objection loses its force. In such a case, edificatory policies would not go beyond the bounds of what systems of governance are morally entitled to do, and the officials tasked with administering them would not be taking the success of their governance to depend on something that it does not. Given this, they would not exhibit the quidnunc mentality or violate the ethic of self-restraint. The moral integrity of edificatory perfectionist systems of governance would be intact, and the objection would miss its mark. We will call this the edificatory duties reply to the moral integrity objection.

Not all edificatory perfectionists hold that governments and citizens have edificatory duties, however. On some versions of the view, there are reasons to try to make citizens lives go better that do not necessarily amount to duties.<sup>15</sup> Even if the edificatory duties reply holds, the moral integrity objection could still have force against such non-duty based views. This is because if we accepted Kramer's claim that systems of government are only morally entitled to uphold principles of justice and public order, and must use the

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<sup>15</sup> George Sher, *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4-5.

least invasive feasible means to do this, then the implementation of edificatory policies will be ruled out in the absence of edificatory duties of justice.

Nonetheless, since some perfectionists do take there to be edificatory duties, Kramer's account of the wrongness of edificatory policies will be incomplete without a response to the edificatory duties reply. Before examining Kramer's stated response to this reply, we will briefly consider another possibility: reformulating the moral integrity objection so that it no longer presupposes the absence of edificatory duties. This could be done by defining the quidnunc mentality solely by its descriptive features, rather than by reference to conduct that both has those features and goes beyond one's moral entitlements. The quidnunc mentality would thus be defined as the outlook ascribable to those who try to steer others toward their preferred ways of life and take how well their own life goes to depend on whether this steering is successful. The moral integrity objection would state that all conduct that exhibits this mentality is wrongful.

Reformulated in this way, the objection would successfully impugn edificatory perfectionist policies. However, this would come at a great cost: it is implausible to hold that all conduct that exhibits the quidnunc mentality, understood in this purely descriptive sense, demonstrates an impermissible failure of moral integrity. Many forms of conduct that display the descriptive characteristics of the quidnunc mentality are undoubtedly permissible. It is clear that there are benign instances of steering and dependence, such as when we tell someone a joke in the hope of cheering them up and take how well our day goes to depend on whether we succeed in lifting their spirits. Even more damningly, the fulfilment of duties of justice will almost always involve steering and dependence—such as when a system of governance steers its citizens toward fulfilling their duties, and takes its success to be dependent on their compliance. Those displaying the quidnunc mentality are thus not necessarily showing a lack of self-restraint by being intolerant in circumstances when there are no dangers or injustices at stake. Since there is no sense in which someone

who is intolerant to injustices and seeks to steer others away from perpetrating them exhibits a failure of moral integrity, the proposed reformulation cannot salvage Kramer's moral integrity objection.

Let us turn now to Kramer's actual response to the edificatory duties reply. He begins by stating that the most promising way for the edificatory perfectionist to advance this reply would be to argue that autonomy is a primary natural good, such that principles of justice should serve to favourably influence its incidence. However, in making this claim they would cause edificatory perfectionism to no longer be distinct from liberal neutralism. In taking autonomy to be a primary natural good, the edificatory perfectionist would no longer be in deep disagreement with liberal neutralists. Rather, the two views would only disagree about the index of primary goods, and this would make them virtually indistinguishable from each other (289-95).

Kramer's response here is puzzling, as it is not clear why taking autonomy to be a primary natural good is the most promising way for the edificatory perfectionist to advance the reply under consideration. An alternative route would be for the edificatory perfectionist to hold that governments have a duty to help improve the lives of their citizens where this duty is understood in terms of a conception of well-being. Whatever else would be objectionable about a view that made this claim, it could not be its indistinguishability from liberal neutralism.

The force of Kramer's response can be retained, however, if we take him to be committed to the claim that principles of justice must be concerned with the distribution of primary goods—call this *the primary goods principle*. If he were to appeal to the primary goods principle, Kramer could argue that the only way to press the edificatory duties reply consistent with that principle is to take autonomy to be a primary natural good. This would allow the objection that this would render liberal perfectionism virtually indistinguishable from liberal neutralism to get traction.

Alternatively, an appeal to the primary goods principle might provide grounds for a more direct objection to edificatory perfectionism. Autonomy, at least when it is understood as an ideal to be realised across the entirety of one's life, cannot plausibly be construed as a primary good. Primary goods, as we will discuss in more detail in section III, are those goods which are valuable for the realisations of a variety of reasonable conceptions of the good life. Since various reasonable conceptions of the good will not value the realisation of autonomy understood in this way, its claim to being a primary good strikes us as dubious. If this line of thinking is sound, then the primary goods principle will rule out edificatory duties from the start, and thus its adoption would directly forestall our proposed edificatory perfectionist reply to the moral integrity objection.<sup>16</sup>

Though he does not explicitly commit himself to the primary goods principle, it would be in line with the tenor of the book. None of his objections to liberal neutralism call into question the neutralist commitment to primary goods as the appropriate metric of distributive justice. And his aspirational perfectionism, which we will discuss imminently, concerns itself principally with the primary good of self-respect. Therefore, attributing this claim to him does not seem at all farfetched.

Since attributing the primary goods principle to Kramer seems to be the best way to rescue the moral integrity objection, the remainder of this paper will be devoted to exploring its implications for his aspirational perfectionism. Specifically, we argue that aspirational perfectionism itself violates the primary goods principle. This means that Kramer's view faces a dilemma. He must either affirm or reject the primary goods principle. If he affirms it, he can press the moral integrity objection against edificatory perfectionism, but in doing so he will also call into question aspirational perfectionism. If

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<sup>16</sup> Though we will not aim to demonstrate it here, we suspect that this objection would have more force than Kramer's own indistinguishability objection.

he rejects it, he can protect his aspirational perfectionism but only at the cost of preventing him from pressing the moral integrity objection.

### III. Warranted Self-Respect as a Primary Good?

In contrast to edificatory perfectionism, aspirational perfectionism does not aim to directly induce citizens to live lives that are more wholesome, but instead seeks to provide the conditions under which citizens can enjoy a warranted sense of self-respect.<sup>17</sup> Aspirational perfectionism centres on a range of policies that promote the incidence of top-notch accomplishments across sundry domains of human endeavour, thereby increasing the excellence of society, which makes all citizens' lives go better, and thus bolsters their warranted self-respect. Kramer argues that warranted self-respect is a primary good, such that aspirational perfectionism is “perfectionism in the service of justice”<sup>18</sup>—and, specifically, of an account of justice that fulfils the primary goods principle. Aspirational policies fulfil that principle, since “an aspirational-perfectionist system of governance seeks to promote the incidence of the primary natural good of warranted self-respect for each citizen” (341).

It is not clear that aspirational perfectionism can make use of the Rawlsian notion of primary goods in the way that Kramer claims, however. One way to see why this is the case is to ask: why focus on primary goods at all? Why should we view justice as being concerned with the distribution of primary goods, in particular?

A key part of Rawls's answer to this question was that primary goods “are generally necessary as social conditions as all-purpose means to enable persons to pursue their

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<sup>17</sup> One might wonder, drawing on Darwall's familiar distinction, whether Kramer's concern is with appraisal-self-respect or recognition-self-respect. Kramer in fact believes that these are closely related, since appraisal-self-respect is partly constituted by recognition-self-respect. His focus is thus on a conception of appraisal-self-respect that includes recognition-self-respect as an element. See 300-22 for Kramer's exploration of these points.

<sup>18</sup> This is the title of Chapter 8 of *Liberalism with Excellence*.

determinate conceptions of the good and to develop and exercise their two moral powers.”<sup>19</sup> As Kramer puts it, “their availability to a person will be serviceable for the realization of her ends regardless of what those ends might be” (328).

A central feature of primary goods, then, is that reasonable citizens<sup>20</sup> can recognise their value whatever their specific conception of the good. They are in that sense neutral among reasonable conceptions of the good. This is ensured by the primary goods being identified using a political conception of persons as reasonable citizens, rather than using the account of the human good provided by any comprehensive moral doctrine.<sup>21</sup> They are part of what Rawls called the thin theory of the good.<sup>22</sup>

On this basis, Rawls includes the social bases of self-respect among the primary goods, defining them as “those aspects of basic institutions normally essential if citizens are to have a lively sense of their worth as persons and to be able to advance their ends with self-confidence.”<sup>23</sup> It is unclear, however, that *warranted self-respect*, as Kramer understands it, is a primary good. The relevant account of warrantedness—of when citizens *rightly* have a high level of self-respect—cannot be within the thin theory of the good. A thicker account of the nature of the good is required in order to identify what societal and cultural excellences warrant high levels of self-respect. Yet this account will be rejected by many reasonable citizens. Many might consider the relevant excellences valueless or unimportant, and as not contributing to their secure sense of self-respect. Nonetheless, for Kramer, this does not prevent those citizens from enjoying a high level of warranted self-respect due to their society manifesting those excellences. But this means that a warranted sense of self-

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<sup>19</sup> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 307. The two moral powers are the capacities for a sense of justice and for a conception of the good (*Political Liberalism*, 19).

<sup>20</sup> Reasonable citizens recognise others as free and equal, are willing to propose and honour fair terms of cooperation, and recognize the burdens of judgment and their consequences. Kramer accepts this general Rawlsian definition of reasonableness (6-12).

<sup>21</sup> See John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 58.

<sup>22</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 348.

<sup>23</sup> Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 59.

respect, as he understands it, is *not* in fact “cherished as such by every reasonable conception of the good” (220).<sup>24</sup>

Kramer drives a firm wedge between self-respect and warranted self-respect. The level of self-respect that a citizen is warranted in enjoying depends on whether her society in fact exhibits estimable traits and contains exemplars of excellence, even if she does not personally recognise the value of these achievements. “Aspirational perfectionism rests on ethical claims about the warrantedness of levels of self-respect, rather than on empirical claims about the contents of people’s preferences” (385; see also 322-5, 366-7). The question of whether each person can warrantably harbour a robust sense of self-respect is “fundamentally objective rather than subjective” (312). It is the actual, objective, excellence of society that warrants self-respect, “rather than perceived excellence” (367).

This feature of the theory is manifested in Kramer’s discussion of artistic and cultural projects that cause offence or consternation among some citizens (398). If such art is in fact of a high quality then it bolsters the warranted self-respect of all citizens, even those who object to it. Despite their aversion, the art helps fulfil the aspirational perfectionist aim of “bringing about the conditions under which everyone can be warranted in feeling a solid sense of self-respect” (325).

The upshot of this is that aspirational perfectionism violates the primary goods principle. An aspirational perfectionist conception of warranted self-respect must depend on claims about the good that go beyond the thin theory and could be rejected by some reasonable citizens, such that this conception is not among the primary goods. This claim can be further substantiated in two ways. First, a thick conception of the good<sup>25</sup> is needed

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<sup>24</sup> One might think that another problem here is that the Rawlsian primary good is ‘the social bases of self-respect’, rather than self-respect itself. Kramer (325-339) discusses this distinction at length and argues that both he and Rawls are in fact concerned with both self-respect itself, as a primary natural good, *and* its social basis. We accept Kramer’s account here for the sake of argument, since our objection is independent of this issue.

<sup>25</sup> To be clear, throughout we use the term ‘thick’ simply to denote a conception of the good that goes beyond the thin theory.



in order to show why anything beyond the achievement of (Rawlsian) justice<sup>26</sup> is necessary in order for citizens to have a sufficiently high level of warranted self-respect. Second, such a conception is needed in order to specify what counts as a sterling accomplishment that heightens citizens' level of warranted self-respect. We will discuss these in turn.

#### *A. Justice and Self-Respect*

Even if Kramer is right that top-notch achievements in cultural, artistic, and sporting endeavours heighten citizens' warranted level of self-respect,<sup>27</sup> it is not clear why the government would be obligated to promote and facilitate these manifold modes of societal excellence. After all, citizens might be guaranteed a sufficiently high level of warranted self-respect by the realisation of justice, even in the absence of further cultural or social excellences. For Rawls, citizens of a well-ordered society would have a sufficient sense of self-respect, since in such a society basic liberties are secured for all, all citizens are guaranteed adequate means to exercise those liberties, citizens endorse and uphold just institutions, and constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice are settled in accordance with the requirements of public reason.<sup>28</sup>

While rejecting Rawls's specific conception of justice,<sup>29</sup> Kramer agrees "that the operations of the institutions which implement the requirements of justice in a liberal democracy are an outstanding collective accomplishment" (370) and "a mode of excellence in which every generally law-abiding citizen can warrantably take pride" (370-1). However, Kramer argues "that the social bases of warranted self-respect are more expansive than

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<sup>26</sup> Kramer conceives of aspirational perfectionist policies as themselves being part of the achievement of justice. So in this discussion we mean the achievement of justice absent these elements—the achievement of justice as Rawlsians understand it. Kramer himself sometimes uses the terms in this way—e.g. 367-70.

<sup>27</sup> Some may reject this, due to being unpersuaded by Kramer's account of the connection between societal excellence and warranted self-respect, which appeals to a conception of vicarious pride (352-65). We set these worries aside here. For discussion, see Stemplowska and van Wietmarschen's contributions to this symposium.

<sup>28</sup> See 333-9 for Kramer's discussion of Rawls's understanding of the social bases of self-respect.

<sup>29</sup> Including his doctrine of public reason, which Kramer criticises in earlier chapters of *Liberalism with Excellence*.

Rawls allowed” (340). Other kinds of societal excellence also contribute to heightening citizens’ level of warranted self-respect.

Be that as it may, however, we still face the question of why governments are obligated to further heighten citizens’ level of warranted self-respect by promoting and facilitating these further achievements. Why is the level achieved through realising justice not sufficient?

One possible answer is that the government is obligated to *maximise* citizens’ level of warranted self-respect. Citizens in a just society that exhibits multifarious excellences have a higher level of warranted self-respect than those in a just society lacking such achievements. An obligation to maximise warranted self-respect would make aspirational perfectionist policies necessary.

It seems implausible to think that the obligation associated with warranted self-respect is a maximising one, however. Certainly, the encouragement of outstanding achievements must take place within the constraints set by other rights and obligations (37, 367-8). But even within those constraints, it seems implausible to think that the government is obligated to maximise warranted self-respect, given the potentially inexhaustible possibilities for subsidising and facilitating cultural achievements. A maximising view would render the pursuit of excellence an all-consuming endeavour. Further, our reason for being concerned for self-respect in the first place is the necessity of a secure sense of self-respect if citizens are to have a conviction that their ends are worth pursuing and confidence in their ability to pursue them (300-1). This argument does not justify a maximising approach to self-respect. Citizens’ confident exercise of their second moral power—the capacity to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good—will be secured by their self-respect reaching a sufficiently high level. What matters for our secure sense that our lives are worthwhile is a robust, rather than maximal, sense of self-respect.

Much more plausible, therefore, is the view that the government has a duty to ensure that citizens' level of warranted self-respect reaches some sufficiency threshold. But this again leaves us with the question of why this threshold is not met by the achievement of Rawlsian justice. Why do we also need excellence in art, music, sport, and so on?

When Kramer considers this question, he responds by arguing that living in a drably mediocre society results in one having a lower level of warranted self-respect than one would have if one's society exhibited various estimable achievements (365-6).<sup>30</sup> But this is consistent with the realisation of Rawlsian justice being sufficient to ensure that one's warranted level of self-respect reaches the requisite level, no matter how mediocre one's society more generally. After all, a just well-ordered society would itself be a remarkable achievement, and one that could facilitate all citizens' confident exercise of their second moral power.

Kramer's view must be that if culture is drab then ordinary<sup>31</sup> citizens' warranted self-respect can never reach a sufficient level. To justify this claim, however, he would have to appeal to claims about the good that citizens could reasonably reject. Whereas all reasonable citizens recognise the good of justice and its self-respect bolstering properties, they would not all agree that societal excellences beyond this are necessary in order for their warranted self-respect to reach a sufficient level. Indeed, citizens would not even agree on which societal features beyond justice are valuable, and thus warranted-self-respect-bolstering. Within Rawls's view, there can be no basis for requiring further high-quality achievements in order to bring citizens' warranted self-respect to a sufficient level. Justice must be sufficient for Rawls. The fact that it is not sufficient for Kramer shows one way in which his account of warranted self-respect rests on a thick conception of the good. And this rules out warranted self-respect from being a primary good.

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<sup>30</sup> At least assuming that one is not a towering genius at the level of Shakespeare, Beethoven, or Einstein, whose warranted self-respect would not be "perceptibly impaired by belonging... to an unaccomplished society" (366).

<sup>31</sup> i.e. those who are not towering geniuses, see *supra* note 30.

*B. Which Achievements are Excellent?*

Some of these comments point to a second set of considerations that substantiate the claim that Kramer's notion of warranted self-respect cannot be among the Rawlsian primary goods. The basic thought here is that aspirational perfectionism must give an account of what counts as an excellent achievement, and this account will rely on a thick, reasonably rejectable, conception of the good. There are (at least) two aspects to this. First, what domains or areas of human achievement can realise self-respect-bolstering excellence? Second, what counts as a warranted-self-respect-raising achievement in any particular domain?

With respect to the first question, Kramer is explicitly pluralist. He mentions art, music, drama, sport, oratory, the preservation of natural beauty, chess, tailoring, and landscaping, among other things (38, 373, 379). Nonetheless, not everything is included. Kramer seems to rule out the promotion of excellence in religion, stating that the government cannot permissibly seek to increase attendance at Baptist services (395). But why not? Excellence in religion could be one thing that heightens citizens' warranted self-respect—at least according to some conceptions of the good. Indeed, there are numerous examples of citizens taking pride in religious accomplishments. People in some parts of the UK take pride in their traditions of non-conformism, some Italians are proud of their religious heritage, and many Argentinians are proud that the present post is Argentinian, just as Pope John Paul II was a source of pride for many Poles. If Kramer wants to rule out excellence in religion as a form of societal excellence that can bolster citizens' warranted self-respect then he will need to provide some account of which particular domains do and do not justify increases in self-respect. That account will inevitably appeal to reasonably rejectable claims about the good.

Kramer could seek to resist this claim in two ways. First, he might argue that all reasonable citizens can recognise the value of excellence in the domains he names. Excellence in religion is ruled out, since many will not consider it to have value, but all reasonable conceptions of the good accept the value of accomplishments in the areas supported by aspirational perfectionism. This is false, however. Reasonable citizens can consider opera and high culture to be valueless, for example, and thus reject the view of the good underlying Kramer's claim that excellence in these domains bolsters all citizens' warranted self-respect.

Second, Kramer might emphasise the pluralistic character of his view, and the multifarious domains in which his state would facilitate high-quality accomplishments. He explicitly appeals to the diversity of modes of excellence supported by an aspirational perfectionist system of governance in order to defuse neutralist concerns (382). All citizens will find that excellence is promoted in pursuits that they do value. Even if this is true, however, it does not resolve the underlying issue. The aspirational perfectionist theory itself will still need to rely on some, albeit pluralistic, conception of the good, in order to identify which domains produce achievements that heighten *warranted* self-respect. Again, this warrantedness is an objective notion, independent of any citizens' conception of the good. Citizens' level of warranted self-respect can be heightened by achievements on which they place no value, and fail to be bolstered by achievements that they do value. Some might place great store in religious accomplishments, which Kramer seems to exclude. Others might consider opera pretentious nonsense, yet this does not prevent their warranted self-respect being bolstered by having first-rate writers of opera among their compatriots.

A conception of the good needs to be built into aspirational perfectionism in order to give content to the notion of warrantedness, by explaining what domains of achievement warranted increased self-respect. Does excellence in boxing or mixed martial

arts create such warrant? Or in the design of strategic board games? The answer to these questions will depend on the conception of the good undergirding Kramer's aspirational perfectionism. And the goods identified by this conception will not be ones that all reasonable citizens recognise, rendering the account of warranted self-respect inapposite to play the role of a primary good.

The second sense in which aspirational perfectionism must rely on a thick conception of the good in order to give an account of self-respect-bolstering excellence is that such a conception is needed in order to identify sterling accomplishments within each domain. Even once we have settled on sport, say, or some specific sports, as a relevant domain, we need to know what achievements are estimable enough to heighten warranted self-respect. What count as top-notch accomplishments? Consider the performance of England's national football team. Between 2002 and 2008, England reached the quarterfinals of three major international tournaments. Many judged this inadequate, yet more recent results suggest that it was a fairly impressive accomplishment. So what is the truth of the matter? Was the authors' warranted level of self-respect heightened by England's achievements under Sven Göran-Eriksson? To answer this, we need an account of what constitutes a sterling accomplishment in international football. The same applies to all other domains of excellence.

The answer to these kinds of questions will determine which areas of human striving, and which particular projects, aspirational perfectionism deems worth of government support. Kramer notes that support should only be given to undertakings if there is a credible prospect of estimable results (383-8). Deciding what projects to support thus requires an account of what constitutes an estimable result within each domain.

Kramer might respond to this by appealing to the role of experts. He notes that decisions that concretely implement aspirational perfectionist programs should be assigned to experts within each domain, since they "are best positioned to reach knowledgeable

judgments about the merits of various projects” (398). But this simply pushes the question back. Who counts as an expert? Once again, a thick conception of the good will be needed in order to answer this question.

A further response Kramer might offer is to argue that a conception of excellence—both in terms of which domains are relevant to bolstering warranted self-respect and what constitutes a sterling accomplishment within each domain—need not be built into aspirational perfectionist theory at the foundational level. Instead, judgments about excellence can be made at the legislative stage, within the practice of aspirational perfectionist politics.<sup>32</sup> All reasonable citizens, whatever their conception of the good, can recognise the value of warranted self-respect, understood at a high level of abstraction—i.e. in a purely formal sense, with its substantive content left undefined. This is because all recognise the importance of having a robust and warranted sense of self-respect if they are to confidently exercise their second moral power. A formal account of warranted self-respect can thus be included among the primary goods. But the specific conception, and thus what is considered excellent, can be determined at the legislative stage. Societies can pursue their own aspirational perfectionist policies, based on the understandings of excellence held by citizens and officials. The questions we have pressed can thus be answered within political practice, rather than being incorporated into the foundations of the theory. This suggestion fits with some of Kramer’s comments concerning the role of fair procedures in selecting aspirational perfectionist policies (34, 382-3).

This response is insufficient to evade the problem, however. The formal account of warranted self-respect cannot be considered a primary good once we take into account the way in which the notion of warrant will be worked out in practice, via objectivist claims about excellence. At the legislative stage, aspirational perfectionism requires claims about

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<sup>32</sup> Kramer himself made this suggestion at the conference at which the papers in this symposium were discussed.

excellence that are not unanimously endorseable by reasonable citizens to be used as the basis of legislative action aimed at promoting warranted self-respect. This is enough to prevent warranted self-respect from counting as a primary good. Consider an analogy with well-being. One might plausibly argue that all reasonable citizens can recognise the value of well-being, understood formally, or at a high level of abstraction. All citizens wish to enjoy a high level of well-being, since all rational plans of life include well-being within their understanding of the good. This is not enough for well-being to count as a primary good, however. Indeed, well-being is ruled out from being a primary good precisely because policies that implement the pursuit of well-being at the legislative stage will rest upon conceptions of well-being, such as hedonism or objective list accounts, that some reasonable citizens reject. The general lesson here is that primary goods cannot be such that they contain formal concepts that will be specified at the legislative stage using claims about the good that some reasonable citizens reject. But that is exactly what the proposal concerning warranted self-respect in the previous paragraph involves.

The proposal also seems problematic on its own terms. Aspirational perfectionists want government policies to bolster citizens' warranted self-respect, not merely what a majority of citizens perceive to be warranted self-respect. But what policies successively achieve this aim depends on the *correct* account of warrant, and thus the correct account of excellence, rather than on citizens' beliefs, which might be mistaken. If aspirational perfectionism is to ensure that citizens enjoy a high level of warranted self-respect then the theory itself must answer the questions concerning what domains of human endeavour can contribute to this goal and what counts as excellence within each domain.

As is hopefully clear, these are not merely practical questions. They certainly have a practical aspect; a theory as novel and ambitious as aspirational perfectionism inevitably raises many questions concerning the practicalities of its enactment. Kramer's final chapter offers various helpful remarks about these matters. But the underlying questions are



theoretical. They concern the fundamental structure of aspirational perfectionist theory, and the way in which it must depend on a thick conception of the good, which many reasonable citizens will reject, in order to give content to its central notion of warranted self-respect—thus rendering that notion unable to constitute a primary good.

Kramer returns to the relationship between aspirational perfectionism and liberal neutralism in the final pages of *Liberalism with Excellence*. He makes two claims. On the one hand, “the implementation of aspirational-perfectionist policies will entail contraventions of the constraints of public reason,” since it will depend on judgments about various modes of excellence that cannot “straightforwardly comply with any injunction to maintain neutrality among all reasonable conceptions of the good” (401). But on the other hand, an aspirational perfectionist system of governance is neutral between all reasonable conceptions of the good in a deeper sense, since its aim is “to bring about the conditions under which every member of its society can be warranted in harboring a firm sense of self-respect” (401). Neutralists recognise the importance of warranted self-respect for each individual, so “the objective at the heart of aspirational perfectionism is in accordance with the values of liberal neutralism” (401; see also 342-3).

Our argument in this section has sought to challenge this claimed “fundamental alignment of aspirational perfectionism and liberal neutralism” (402). While neutralists do recognise the importance of self-respect, the conception of *warranted* self-respect that lies at the heart of aspirational perfectionism diverges significantly from the Rawlsian view, because the account of warrant must draw upon a conception of the good that goes beyond anything in Rawls’s thin theory of the good.<sup>33</sup> Such a conception is needed both to explain why anything beyond Rawlsian justice is needed for citizens to experience a sufficiently high level of warranted self-respect and to identify the relevant domains of

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<sup>33</sup> Van Wietmarschen’s “The Self-Respect of Democratic People” (in this symposium) also notes significant divergences between Rawls’s and Kramer’s accounts of self-respect. His and our arguments are somewhat different, but complementary.

human endeavour and what constitutes a sterling accomplishment within each domain. This fundamental *misalignment* cannot be evaded by assigning the specification of excellence to the legislative stage, because the fact that warrant will be concretised on the basis of reasonably rejectable claims about excellence is enough to prevent warranted self-respect from being a primary good.

This conclusion has significance for the overall argument of this paper. In section II we argued that edificatory perfectionists could respond to Kramer's moral integrity objection by appeal to edificatory duties, such that edificatory policies are within the legitimate scope of government activity and thus do not undermine its moral integrity. We suggested that Kramer could salvage the objection by adopting the primary goods principle. However, as we have now demonstrated, aspirational perfectionism itself violates that principle. This presents Kramer with a dilemma. Either he can affirm the primary goods principle and retain the force of the moral integrity objection, at the cost of impugning his own positive view. Or he can maintain his commitment to aspirational perfectionism by rejecting that principle, at the cost of jettisoning the moral integrity objection.