

Introduction

Almost everyone concludes that nobody is perfect and perhaps even that nothing is perfect. This is a standard excuse for human lapses or for quirks within nature, as well as for more laudable expressions of humility and finitude. So, writing a book about human perfection does indeed seem stupid – pretentious and ideologically naive. Worse still, perfectionism is often seen today just as a trait of the obsessional – a feature of madness.

Stupid, that is, until it is noticed that the claim that no body or thing is perfect itself assumes some notion of perfection (actual, aspirational or just theoretical).

It might also be noticed that claims about perfection are regularly made both about mundane matters – such as a perfect weekend – about flippant matters – such as a perfect nuisance – and about profound matters – such as a perfect death (albeit with changing historical perceptions of what constitutes a perfect death) – or sinisterly – such as a perfect murder (a murder that is perfect only for the murderer because it is undetectable). And perfect marks in an examination, once thought possible only in tightly defined areas such as elementary mathematical or linguistic tests, are now given more quirkily, say, in gymnastic events and TV dancing competitions.

It might even be claimed – as this book will argue – that a quest or aspiration for perfection is a defining characteristic of human beings, distinguishing us from other mammals – *homo perfectus* in preference to other claimants such as *homo rationalis*, a philosophical favourite and, more teasingly, Huizinga's *homo ludens*.

Monotheists often claim that no body or thing is perfect except God, but then might be embarrassed about identifying God as a 'body' or a 'thing'.

Christians often claim – following Hebrews 2.10 and 5.9 – that the only earthly person who was perfect is Jesus, but then might puzzle about how perfect was Jesus' knowledge, say, of quantum physics or of the novels of J. K. Rowling.

And philosophers might conclude, without reading any further, that I have swallowed Anselm's or Paley's 'proofs' of the existence of God whole (emphatically, I have not).

Yet Christians might also recall that at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount is the extraordinary command for the followers of Jesus to 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt. 5.48) – something that I simply skimmed over in my previous book, *Moral Passion and Christian Ethics* (2017), within this ongoing Cambridge series, *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. How does that crucial verse square with a Christian conviction about ubiquitous human sinfulness?

This particular text is going to feature regularly throughout this book and is examined in depth in Chapter 5, but it is worth noting at the outset that it has deeply divided theologians in the past. In descending order of dates, John and Charles Wesley, John Calvin, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa and Tertullian offered very different interpretations of Matt. 5.48, with the Wesley brothers being enthusiastic, Calvin condescending, Aquinas subtle and nuanced, Augustine limited, Gregory surprisingly relativistic and Tertullian just polemical. Each showed clearly the influence of both their particular social contexts and their radically different theological takes on humanity.

John Wesley's response is closely related to his radical call for personal holiness. In the first volume of his collected sermons, he cited Matt. 5.48 eight times and always positively. The following conclusion to a sermon that he gave on the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5–7, is the most striking with the link that he made between a call to holiness (as in 1 Pet. 1.15) and a call to perfection (as in Matt. 5.48):

Let us not rest until every line thereof [of the Sermon on the Mount] is transcribed into our own hearts. Let us watch and pray and believe and love, and 'strive for the mastery', till every part of it shall appear in our soul, graven there by the finger of God; till we are 'holy as he which hath there by the finger of God'; till we are 'holy as he which has called us is holy', 'perfect as our Father which is in heaven is perfect'. [Wesley 1984, 530]

There are no reservations or nuances here – secular or theological [see Noble 2013] – about this call to perfection expected from the followers of Jesus, but it does require watchfulness, prayer, belief, love and striving on their part. This call is emphatically reinforced in many of his brother's hymns. Just consider the following examples from Charles Wesley [Wesley 1933]:

- **O for a heart to praise my God:** there is a longing for 'a heart from sin set free ... where only Christ is heard to speak ... a humble, lowly

Introduction

3

contrite heart, believing, true, and clean ... and full of love divine; perfect, and right, and pure, and good, a copy, Lord of thine’.

- **Christ, whose glory fills the skies:** ‘Visit then this soul of mine, pierce the gloom of sin and grief; fill me radiance divine, scatter all my unbelief; more and more thyself display, shining to the perfect day.’
- **Author of life divine:** ‘Our needy souls sustain, with fresh supplies of love, till all thy life we gain, and all thy fullness prove, and, strengthened by thy perfect grace, behold without a veil thy face.’
- **O thou who camest from above:** ‘Ready for all thy perfect will, my acts of faith and love repeat, till death thy endless mercies seal, and make my sacrifice complete.’ And, most majestically, in the final verse of
- **Love divine, all loves excelling:** ‘Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be; Let us see thy great salvation, perfectly restored in thee, changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise!’

In a more reflective mode, John Wesley, remarkably, came to ‘retract several expressions in our Hymns, that partly express, partly imply ... the impossibility of falling out from perfection’, arguing, instead, that: ‘There is such a thing as perfection’ during the lifetime of a human being; but, ‘It is not absolute. Absolute perfection belongs not to man, not to angels, but to God alone’; ‘It does not make a man infallible’; ‘It is improvable ... one perfected in love may grow in grace’; and ‘It is constantly both preceded and followed by gradual work’ [Wesley 1777]. In his wide-ranging survey of perfectionist theology, Anthony Baker, perhaps too harshly, concludes that in this way Wesley simply ‘dismantles his own account of perfection’ [Baker 2011, 283].

In contrast, Calvin clearly had reservations about any straightforward adoption of Matt. 5.48. Preceding his brief and grudging interpretation of this text, he noted caustically that monks ‘and other bawlers of the same class ... were not ashamed to claim perfection for themselves’ [Calvin 1875, 305]. He then interpreted the Matthean text as follows:

This perfection does not mean equality, but relates solely to resemblance [*Cette perfection ne signifie pas qu’il y ait une égalité et mesme mais elle se rapporte seulement a quelque ressemblance ou approche*]. However distant we are from the perfection of God, we are said to be perfect, when we aim at the same object, which he presents in himself. Should it be thought preferable we may state it thus: but the perfection of God means, first, that free

and pure kindness, which is not induced by the expectation of gain; and, secondly, that remarkable goodness, which contends with the malice and ingratitude of men. This appears more clearly from the words of Luke, 'Be merciful, as your Father is merciful': for mercy is contrasted with a mercenary regard, which is founded on private advantage. [Calvin 1875, 308]

The qualifying words here are obvious – 'solely', 'resemblance', 'should it be preferable' and 'more clearly from the words of Luke' – and suggest that Calvin was theologically uncomfortable with the notion of human perfection and more comfortable with the command to be merciful (a judgement quite opposite to that of textual critics today who tend to regard an uncomfortable variant reading as most likely to be original, on the grounds that it is difficult to see why a later scribe would want to make a comfortable reading uncomfortable). Calvin's strong notion of predestined human sinfulness and corruption weighed too heavily against any straightforward adoption of Matt. 5.48. Even today, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics* has no separate entry for 'perfection' in its two volumes, despite noting in passing that, within Matthew at least, it is 'an important keyword' [Brawley 2014 Vol. 2, 21].

More positively, Calvin did offer a dynamic understanding both in his understanding of God's perfection – involving acts of 'free and pure kindness' – and in humans who 'aim at the same object'. This is not unimportant. In classical Latin, the adjective *perfectus* does have the dynamic meanings of 'a finishing' or 'a completing' [Lewis and Short 1958], albeit with static meanings predominating in the classical Greek adjective *teleios*, such as 'full-grown', 'accomplished', 'unblemished', 'complete', 'finished' and 'fulfilled' [Diggle 2021]. In biblical Hebrew *tamim* or *salem* (which the Septuagint translates as *teleios*) has similar predominantly static meanings of 'blameless', 'unblemished', 'undivided' or 'whole' [Davies and Allison 1988, 560–1], as does the equivalent Arabic word *tamm* in the Qur'an.

In contrast again, Aquinas was comfortable with Matt. 5.48, but, characteristically, he made careful and lengthy distinctions (some static and some dynamic) beyond the text itself, on the basis of both rational thought and his observations about human nature.

Using the method of opposing questions and detailed responses adopted throughout *Summa Theologica*, he noted at the outset a clash between the standard aphorism that 'no one can be perfect in this life' and the Matthean command to perfection, from which 'it seems that one can be perfect in this life' [*videtur quod aliquis in hac vita possit esse perfectus*]. Then he responded as follows:

Introduction

5

[T]he perfection of the Christian life consists in charity [*perfectio Christianae vitae in caritate consistet*]. But perfection implies a certain universality because, as Aristotle says, ‘That is perfect to which nothing is lacking’. Therefore perfection can be considered in three ways. The first is absolute perfection, which implies a totality not only on the part of the lover but also on the part of the one loved, so that God is loved to the extent that he is lovable. Such perfection is not possible for any creature but is proper to God alone, in whom goodness is found integrally and essentially [*in quo bonum integraliter et essentialiter invenitur*] [Aquinas, *ST. II.IIae. Q184.a.2 co*].

Another perfection consists in the absolute totality on the part of the lover, so that his love always tends actually to God in its full capacity. Such perfection is not possible to man on earth, but will be possible in heaven [*non est possibilis in via, sed erit in patria*].

But a third perfection does not require a totality as regards the loveliness of the beloved or the capacity of the lover, in the sense that one is always actually loving God, but it excludes everything that would be contrary to the movement of love for God ... such perfection is possible in this life, and in two ways. First, so far as everything incompatible with charity, that is, mortal sin, is excluded from the will of man ... Secondly. So far as the will of man rejects not only what is incompatible with charity, but even that which would prevent the affection of the soul from being directed totally to God. [Aquinas, *ST. II.IIae. Q184.a.2 co*]

It is the third group of these distinctions that characterises earthly human perfection for Aquinas. Some, at least, of the classical meanings (both static and dynamic) of *perfectus*, *teleios* and *tamim* – such as blameless, unblemished, completing or full-grown – do seem to match this group. To this he then added ways that these distinctions can relate more specifically to the Dominical Command of neighbour-love:

[W]e can also distinguish a twofold perfection in love of neighbour, as we can distinguish a twofold perfection in love of God. The first, without which charity cannot exist, is that a man harbour no affection that is contrary to love of neighbour.

The second, without which charity can be preserved, is threefold. First to the extension of charity: if one loves not only friends and acquaintances, but also strangers and even enemies. Secondly, as regards intensions, which is manifested in the things a man will sacrifice for his neighbour, but [also] bodily suffering and even death [*sed etiam afflictiones corporales, et ulterius mortem*]...

Thirdly, as regards the effects of love, so that a man bestows not only temporal benefits on his neighbour but also spiritual ones [*non solum temporalia beneficia, sed etiam spiritualia*] and even gives himself. [Aquinas, *ST. II.IIae. Q184.a.2 ad 3*]

These distinctions bring more clarity than those of the Wesley brothers or Calvin, with links both to Wesleyan holiness and to Calvinist dynamism,

and they also go beyond Augustine who, in his *On the Sermon on the Mount*, related Matt. 5.48 solely to enemy-love:

‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.’ For without this love, wherewith we are commanded to love even our enemies and persecutors, who can fully carry out those things which are mentioned above? Moreover, the perfection of that mercy, wherewith most of all the soul that is in distress is cared for, cannot be stretched beyond the love of an enemy; and therefore the closing words are: ‘Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father who is in heaven is perfect.’ Yet in such a way that God is understood to be perfect as God, and the soul to be perfect as a soul. [Augustine 1887, 1.21.69]

Yet Aquinas’ distinctions still need to be tested carefully. Much of the rest of this important section in *Summa Theologica* acts (unintentionally) as a warning to the modern reader that Aquinas’ teaching needs to be contextualised and appropriated selectively – especially the part that discusses ‘whether prelates and religious are in the same state of perfection’. Here Aquinas’ assumptions about human perfection become decidedly hierarchical, clerical and medieval.

There is already a creator/creature hierarchy of perfection in the Aquinas passages just quoted and it is probably inescapable in some form for a monotheist. Yet even within this hierarchy there were, for Aquinas, different levels of perfection, in this order: God, angels, resurrected humans [*in patria*] and then earthly humans [*in via*]. But even within that last group [*in via*], bishops and monastics are placed at a higher level – albeit differently from each other, with bishops more focused upon pastoral care (perhaps a more appropriate translation of *caritas* than ‘charity’ today) and monastics upon prayer and contemplation – from other earthly humans. As a monastic himself, Aquinas saw a ‘beatific vision’, which he is said to have experienced towards the end of his life and perhaps Paul reported in 2 Cor. 12.1–4 as the aim of contemplation.

In passing, Aquinas admitted that clerics did not always live up to their expected level of perfection – like Chaucer and, later, Luther and Calvin, Aquinas was aware of clerical abuse, just as we are today. But, by such abuse, he argued, they were negating their expected perfection (similar, perhaps, to the Synoptic Jesus’ judgement of leading Pharisees). Nonetheless, for Aquinas, when clerics acted properly, they represented a higher level of perfection than other earthly humans, just as resurrected humans did (following Augustine in Book XXII of *City of God*) when compared with earthly humans. There are disturbing elements here of another hierarchy that Aquinas assumed, namely: that men are more rational than women;

Introduction

7

women are more rational than slaves; and slaves are more rational than animals – with only God deemed to be supremely rational.

Perhaps the fourth-century Gregory of Nyssa's relativistic take on Matt. 5.48 helps somewhat:

It is ... undoubtedly impossible to attain perfection, since ... perfection is not marked off by limits. The one limit of virtue is the absence of a limit. How then would one arrive at the sought-for boundary? Although on the whole my argument has shown that what is sought for is unattainable, one should not disregard the commandment of the Lord which says, *Therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly father is perfect*. For in the case of those things which are good by nature, even if men of understanding were not able to attain everything, by attaining even a part they could yet gain a great deal. We should show great diligence not to fall away from the perfection which is attainable but to acquire as much as is possible. To that extent let us make progress in its very growth in goodness. [Gregory of Nyssa 1978, 8–10]

Nevertheless, elsewhere, qualifying this somewhat, he also held that 'perfection consists in our never stopping in our growth, never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation' [Gregory 1953 8.1, 213–14]. In contrast, each persona within the Trinity, he insisted, 'is perfect in all respects' and without any 'excess or deficiency' [Raddle-Gallwitz 2017, 276].

Tertullian, writing against Marcion in the early third century, however, is decidedly unhelpful. He takes Matt. 5.48 (which he quotes inexactly) as being an opportunity to insist that 'Marcion's God is imperfect in goodness on the ground that there is perdition ... [Marcion's followers] are saved as far as their soul, but forsaken in their body, which according to Marcion, does not rise again' [Raddle-Gallwitz 2017, 51].

An additional problem in following Aquinas too closely today relates to his pre-scientific views of human perfection within the Garden of Eden. Patrick Clark's fine, albeit committedly Thomist, analysis *Perfection in Death* has a section on 'Prelapsarian Virtue and Human Perfection', which he argues has been underappreciated recently [Clark 2015, 139–42]. He quotes, without dissent, this passage from Aquinas:

Man was happy in paradise, but not with that perfect happiness to which he was destined, which consists in the vision of the Divine Essence. He was, however, endowed with a 'life of happiness in a certain measure' as Augustine says (*Gen. ad lit. xi, 18*), so far as he was gifted with natural integrity and perfection. [ST 1.q.94.a.1.ad.1]

A literal belief in Adam delivers yet another layer of human perfection, albeit one that is lower than someone who 'will sacrifice for his neighbour, but [also] bodily suffering and even death' – that is, lower than

‘perfection in death’, which, Clark argues, is especially manifest in the Christian martyr. Yet, for those Christians who cannot accept any literal belief in the Garden of Eden, in Adam or in his (and, as a result, our) Fall, this presents a considerable problem. In addition, there was even a problem for Aquinas, since he glossed over his obvious difference here from Augustine’s somewhat embarrassed speculations about how Adam and Eve might have produced children virtuously before the Fall without having lust-driven sexual intercourse [*City of God*, XIV, 26].

My own position, having had a neo-Thomist, the clever and holy Eric Mascall, as my doctoral supervisor half a century ago, is that I continue to learn from the genius Aquinas (for me, the ‘perfect’ theologian), as, indeed, do other Anglican moral theologians today [Sedgwick 2019, 117–19], but I do not feel bound by all his medieval assumptions. I have, however, been spurred on to engage more directly with Aquinas in this study by Esther Reed’s very thoughtful review of my *Moral Passion and Christian Ethics*, in which she concludes that:

This book’s survey of instances of moral passion prepares the way for further investigation of what shapes and motivates moral passion, why and how. My hunch is that such an investigation would be well served by reappropriation of classic discussions of ‘moral passion’, the relationship of passion(s) to virtue, reason and the will, the role of passion(s) in the perfection of virtue, and its contextually-rooted education [Reed 2019].

It would be thoroughly over-indulgent to repeat points made before, going over the same territory so soon again here. Yet on re-reading my previous text with Esther Reed’s critique in mind, it has become obvious that it started and finished with an insight from the late Dominican Servais Pinckaers’ classic *Passions and the Virtue* (2015) – that moral passion can be mapped on different moments in the moral life, of which the most mature is perfection. Shamefully, I had sheltered behind Pinckaers (and he behind Augustine and Aquinas). Reed is right. More primary work is needed. Hence this present book.

Gregory, Aquinas, Calvin and the Wesley brothers might have agreed that human perfection is rare and requires considerable effort – with Calvin concluding that it is finally beyond fallen humanity’s capacity to attain and with Gregory suggesting that it is only partially so. The Wesleys, Aquinas and Gregory linked human perfection to holiness, whether in the form of a ‘beatific vision’ or of us being ‘changed from glory into glory’ – the latter being akin to the highly aspirational doctrine of *theōsis* derived, at length first by Cyril in the fifth century from 2 Pet. 1.4 of humans

This Book's Contents

9

becoming 'participants in the divine nature', then defined famously by Dionysius in the sixth century as 'the attaining of likeness to God and union with him as far as possible', and amplified further by Maximus and others in the seventh century, with *theōsis* seen variously either as a 'transformation of humanity in principle as a consequence of the Incarnation' or as 'the ascent of the soul through the practice of virtue' [Russell 2004, 14 and Torrance 2020 and 2021]. This doctrine in either broad form was, and remains, popular in Eastern Christianity, but it can also be detected implicitly in Ambrose [Raddle-Gallwitz 2017, 265]. Within recent Western theology, *theōsis* is explicitly identified as 'a key theme' in Keith Ward's *Sharing in the Divine Nature* and is understood by him as 'the inclusion of all things in Christ' [Ward 2020, 19], and it is also foundational to Anthony Baker's more oppositional (his term is 'diagonal') study [Baker 2011].

With or without a formal doctrine of *theōsis*, Gregory, Aquinas, Calvin and the Wesley brothers all saw human perfection in dynamic terms, as a 'becoming' – with Aquinas making a crucial distinction between God's (comparatively static) perfection as being integral, essential (ontological) and 'in full capacity' and human perfection, resulting rather from an absence in an exceptional person 'of everything incompatible with *caritas*' (i.e., unblemished or blameless) and, more positively, of a person demonstrating active *caritas* and/or spiritual neighbour-love.

This Book's Contents

The chapters that follow explore these features in greater depth, in order to give shape to a critical concept of perfection. But how is 'perfection' to be defined in so many different contexts? As seen already, Aquinas used Aristotle's universal definition, namely: 'That is perfect to which nothing is lacking.' This might fit perfect scores in competitive gymnastics or exams in elementary mathematics or language translation, resulting from no observable faults, but little else. In less absolutist terms, this definition might be modified to: 'That is perfect to which nothing is thought to be lacking', or, in more evaluative, dynamic and contextual terms: 'A perfect action or artefact is one where it is difficult to see how, in its context, it could have been done better.' The latter is the initial, working definition of 'perfection' used to test the various examples explored in Part II, with a more specifically Christian understanding of human perfection emerging in Parts II and III related to the perfection of Jesus Christ, perceived especially at the Transfiguration.

Part I Human Perfection

The first four chapters examine various aspects of human perfection – sporting perfection, artistic perfection, musical perfection, culinary perfection, literary perfection and, most importantly, moral perfection:

Chapter 1 looks at depictions of human perfection in sources not usually consulted within Christian ethics. The first source is church memorials, first in Westminster Abbey – particularly the twentieth-century Memorial to the Unknown Warrior and the seventeenth-century memorial to Isaac Newton – and then seventeenth- and eighteenth-century family memorials in three parish churches near Canterbury Cathedral. The second source is recent depictions of perfection within the arts and sport mostly gleaned from the columns of *The Times*. And the last source is John Bayley's autobiographical account of the 'perfect' meal cooked by his future wife, the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch. Together they indicate that a dynamic form of 'perfection' was, and still is, readily attributed to human endeavours.

Chapter 2 is more personal in character, suggesting a number of artistic works where I could not imagine, at the time, how they could have been done better – the first a musical performance at the Edinburgh Festival, the second an astonishing painting featured in London's National Gallery and the third an ancient bronze sculpture in Italy's Museo Nazionale Romano. It also looks at a celebrated novel by Iris Murdoch that features a fictional sermon on Matt. 5.48 and raises significant issues about artistic and moral human perfection.

Chapter 3 takes a more biographical approach [cf Plant 2023], seeing an example of moral human perfection in the little known, but dedicated, life and work of a medical missionary in North India, compared favourably with the well-known, but flawed, medical missionary work of Albert Schweitzer. Together these three chapters suggest that human perfection – understood in the contextual sense of it being difficult to see how something similar could at the time have been done better – is dynamic rather than absolute, just as John Wesley, Calvin, Aquinas and Gregory claimed, is highly focused and requires very considerable effort and hard work – striving to get something as near to perfect as humanly possible.

Chapter 4 looks at the more recent (and largely negative) concept of 'perfectionism' and, specifically (and with some reservations), at the distinction between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism within socio-psychology. This chapter looks critically at recent ethical discussions of cosmetic procedures designed to give people a 'perfect body', but also