
NOËSIS XIX

MORAL PHILOSOPHY, WRITING, AND
HISTORY

IN CONVERSATION WITH THOMAS HURKA

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Dr. Thomas Hurka is a professor of moral philosophy, and the Chancellor Henry N.R. Jackman Distinguished Chair in Philosophical Studies. He began his career as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto before completing his BPhil and DPhil at Oxford University. He subsequently taught at the University of Calgary from 1978 to 2002 before returning to the University of Toronto as a professor. As an author, Hurka is famous for re-kindling philosophical interest in perfectionist accounts of ethics with his groundbreaking 1993 book, *Perfectionism*. His other publications include *Virtue, Vice, and Value* (2001), *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters* (2011), and *British Ethical Theorists from Sidgwick to Ewing* (2014). He has received several awards for his work, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2006 and, most recently, the 2017 Killam Prize in Humanities. Outside of academia, Hurka produced weekly ethical commentaries as a columnist with the *Globe and Mail* from 1989 to 1992, and for “The Monday Column” on CBC-TV from 1998-2000.

Noësis: Thanks for doing this interview. As you’re talking to us you’re in Australia. Could you tell us a bit about what you’re doing there?

Hurka: The trip was an invitation to visit the Australian National University. I’m working on a paper that I have been working on for several years, about what makes one wrong act more seriously wrong than another. Lots of people talk about “this is right, and that’s wrong”; but we also think that some wrong acts are more seriously wrong than others. For instance, murder is more seriously wrong than breaking a promise. That’s easy to explain, but in more complicated cases it gets interesting. I’m also going to present a version of the talk I gave as a Killam lecture, so I’m revising that, and then I want to get to another paper. A lot of people in ethics write about a concept of wellbeing, meaning what’s good for people. It’s supposed to be importantly different

from what's simply good. I'm a skeptic about the idea that there's a distinct concept of wellbeing, and I've been working on a paper about that for a while. That's a mess, so I've got to re-do it quite radically.

Noësis: You were awarded the Killam Prize because of your contributions to moral philosophy, including your books *Perfectionism*, *Virtue, Vice and Value*, and *The Best Things in Life*. Would you say there's a key thesis or line of thought that you've developed through your work?

Hurka: I've written articles on lots of different topics, but my major focus of interest is writing about what's good and what's bad. When I was a graduate student, the only views that people considered were hedonism (that what's good is pleasure and what's bad is pain and that's all) and preference or desire theory (that what's good in somebody's life is whatever he wants). Historically, most of philosophy didn't take either of those two views. They thought that certain things, like knowledge and virtue, are good in themselves quite apart from whether people wanted or would get pleasure from them. My undergraduate education plus my personal background gave me an interest in those historical views. The term for those views given by Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* was "perfectionism". My first book was about a more specific version of perfectionism that was very historically prominent. Simply put, perfectionism is the view that human goods are all based in some idea of human nature, and the good human life is the one that develops the properties that are fundamental to human nature. I defended that view, and then added a more detailed elaboration of it. So, the book was a defense of the idea that there are human goods that are not pleasure and that are not made good because we desire them.

In *Perfectionism* I argued that virtue, or being a morally good person, was not among the human goods. You ought to care about other people, but not because being virtuous makes your life better. I didn't see, contrary Aristotle and a long tradition, that our nature favors virtue over vice; that someone who uses rationality to hurt people is developing his fundamental human properties any less than someone who uses rationality to help them. So, I hadn't included virtue. By the time I wrote the second book, *Virtue, Vice, and Value*, I didn't believe in the part about human nature anymore. In it, I give an account of what virtue and vice are, independent of human nature. It has a very simple central idea, which was the most widely accepted account of vice and virtue around a hundred years ago. No one was paying any attention to it in the contemporary literature. It's a perfectionist account of the positive value of virtue, and the negative value of vice. For instance, being benevolent or being honest is a good thing and makes your life better, and being malicious or being selfish makes your life worse.

The Best Things in Life is a trade book that I was invited to write for a more popular audience. I wrote about what's good, including quite a bit on pleasure and pain, and went through objective perfectionist goods like knowledge, achievement, virtue, and personal relationships. Those three books—*Perfectionism*, *Virtue, Vice and Value*, and *The Best Things in Life*—have a

central theme, because they're about what's good and what makes your life better. What makes your life better isn't primarily happiness or satisfying your preferences but these more objective, or perfectionist, goods.

Noësis: Why is the view called perfectionism? Does it have any relationship to the colloquial sense of perfectionism?

Hurka: No, it does not. When I was first writing about the view that you ought to develop your nature, I referred to that as an ethics of self-realization. That is what it was called in the sixties if people talked about it, and that was a term that goes back to F.H. Bradley in the 19th century. Then Rawls published *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, and he referred to those views as perfectionist. That became the terminology, and I just took it on. Rawls took it from other 19th century writers, like Henry Sidgwick and T.H. Green. It comes from the idea of developing human nature, because the thought was that you're perfecting your nature—hence the term perfectionism. In Rawls' view, you could use perfectionism to refer to that sort of view, or to refer to a view that is just a list of goods with no reference to human nature. Knowledge is good, virtue is good, achievement is good, aesthetic appreciation is good, and that's called a perfectionist view. That is the way I tend to think of it nowadays. 'Perfectionism' also doesn't have the pejorative connotations of the everyday word. As in, you care too much about fussy little details. So, there's a disconnect with the everyday use of the word perfectionist, but I blame Rawls.

Noësis: On the subject of terminology, you used to work for the *Globe and Mail*. How did that influence your writing? Do you find it easy to translate ideas from philosophy into the common vernacular?

Hurka: I don't write highly technical things. I don't use tons of symbols. I tend to write short sentences, rather than hugely long, complicated sentences. So, I think writing for a newspaper improved my writing because it made it simpler. When I wrote *The Best Things in Life*, I had to write it for non-philosophers. The trick there wasn't so much the writing sentence by sentence. It's that, when you write for philosophers, you can assume that they're interested. If they've got a copy of the journal, and they're reading the article, you don't have to hook them in. But trade writing and newspaper writing is all about hooking people in. The most important paragraph in a newspaper column is the first paragraph. You have to have something catchy. In trade writing, you can't just have a long, elaborate discursive argument over ten pages, it's got to be sprinkled with interesting examples. You've got to have neat quotes. You also can't go into too much detail, and so sometimes you've got to blur difficulties. Writing it that way took work. But I liked it, because it's just a different skill.

I will say, as a *Globe and Mail* columnist, they gave me a space of 800 words. When you write essays, you can usually be a couple hundred words over the word limit. If you're writing a newspaper column, you've got a certain amount of space on the page. And they're not going to add more paper at the bottom of the page. It's got to be the right length. I had about 800 words, and I

would write a first draft and it would be 1500 words, and then I would have to cut it down. And it would be way better at 800 words than it ever was at 1500. That is something that affected my writing. Even when I'm writing academic articles, I write something, and then I go through and I cut it down. And then I go through and I cut it down again. We academics put too many words in sentences, and they just clog it up. I find that undergraduate essays, they're twelve hundred words, and there's all sorts of stuff in there that doesn't add anything. It's padding.

Noësis: Has your writing process changed over time? When you were writing your most recent book, was the way you approached it different from when you were writing your earlier books?

Hurka: That was very different because it was a history of philosophy book. It was a huge amount of preparation. I took elaborate notes, because I was writing about 9 different philosophers. I had to remember what they all talked about, I had to have notes telling me where they all talked about this topic or that topic. I can't remember what the writing itself was like. I will say this: I'm older, I don't have the energy I once did. When I was in my twenties or thirties, I would wake up in the morning, and I might sit for an hour and a half writing. I would write however many hundred words, and then I'd quit. The way I've always worked is that I'll write in the morning, and then during the day, I'll think about how I should write the next part. When I wake up the next morning, I've got a rough idea of what I'm going to do. I'll go as far as I can, then I think about the next bit during the day. The change is that when I was younger, I might spend an hour and a half writing however many hundred words. Now, I do however many hundred words in much less time, but I still quit after the same amount. I'm, in a way, lazier. I'm more efficient, but that doesn't mean that I write for the same amount of time and do more.

Noësis: How long does it take you to write a book?

Hurka: A book can take six, or seven, or eight years, if you're doing other things at the same time. The *Perfectionism* book was based on my PhD dissertation at Oxford, from about 1980. The book was published in 1993. While I was working on that book, I wrote a lot of articles. Two-thirds of *Perfectionism* was on topics that weren't even discussed in the dissertation. You change your mind. You have an idea about how the book's going to go, and you realize it's wrong. You get a new idea, and you realize it's wrong. That just takes time. The mistake in what you've written doesn't appear the second you finish writing it, and the improvement doesn't occur to your right away. Taking a long time to write a book time is a good strategy. It gives you a lot of time to rethink things. You take some time to work on an article, and then you're looking at the book afresh. It hasn't been the main thing on your mind in the last six months, and you can see different things.

Noësis: You said earlier that you're an early riser. How early is early?

Hurka: Let me just say, I wish I could get up at six every morning. There are people who can only write at three in the morning. I'm the opposite. When I was a graduate student, I would wake up, make coffee, and start work. Then

I would go into the place all the other graduate students were, and I would have done a chunk of work for the day. They would all have been slouching around, and I would say “let’s go do this”, or “let’s go play a round of golf”. “No, no, no, I’ve got to work.”

If you work first thing in the morning, then it’s done, and you don’t spend the rest of the day worrying about how you haven’t done your work yet. I do that seven days a week. I never take a break from writing. Just a little bit every day. The tortoise not the hare. There are other people who can’t write, and then they just have a burst, and over a short space of time they produce a whole paper. I don’t do it that way, I probably couldn’t.

Noësis: Speaking of your most recent book, it’s on British ethicists. You studied at Oxford for a long time, so do you see yourself as a part of that tradition? If not, who do you see as your main philosophical influences?

Hurka: When I was in my undergraduate at the University of Toronto, I didn’t do much ethics. But I had the sense that I ought to cover all branches of philosophy, so in my fourth year, I took a seminar with Wayne Sumner on utilitarianism. He has been retired for a few years, but he was a leading moral philosopher in the department. You’ll fall over backwards when you hear this, but in those days the philosophy department had undergraduate seminars that could have a maximum of six students. This was a class with three students. One of them dropped out, and the other guy was a mail delivery guy who just happened to be taking the course. He wasn’t very philosophical, so I almost had a one-on-one seminar. The topic was utilitarianism, and Wayne Sumner had two people representing the opposition, for competing theories of what’s good. Representing the objectivist or perfectionist side, he had the last chapter of G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* from 1903, which I thought was just terrific. For deontology, he had the second chapter of W.D. Ross’ *The Right and the Good* from 1930, which I also thought was terrific. I liked their views, and I liked the way they did philosophy. It was analytic philosophy with no symbols.

Then I went to Oxford, and nobody was interested in that stuff. It wasn’t what was fashionable. But I always thought that it was a great period in the history of ethics. Some people figure out what’s hot, write on the current hot topic, and then when the next hot one comes along they write about that. That’s fine, but I would find it boring. I like things that haven’t been done before, so I had the idea of writing a book about moral philosophers of that period. The attraction was that I was going to be doing all this original analysis, it didn’t have a lot to do with my having gone to Oxford. Though, one of the philosophers’, H.H. Pritchard’s, letters are in the Bodleian library at Oxford. I must have been one of the first people who ever read them. He would write letters to his friend in the university mail, even though they were in colleges a stone’s throw apart. He would say, “just taking up the topic we were discussing driving to the golf course on the weekend”, and it was kind of fun reading their letters about that. But my initial attraction to those moral philosophers was from when I was in Toronto, and I think I would have always had it, whether I had gone to Oxford or not. I just liked the way they write about the subject.

They are kind of my philosophical heroes, at least in moral philosophy. They're much less influential than Aristotle, who is hopelessly overrated, and provides a totally misguided approach to ethics. And also than Kant, who is just as hopelessly misguided. I'm a contrarian. The people I think you should read in moral philosophy are people who are writing in the late 19th early 20th century. You just get messed up if you read Aristotle, and you get messed up if you read Kant.

Noësis: Is there anything specific you take issue with in Aristotle and Kant that you could share with us?

Hurka: Aristotle, like ancient Greek ethics, is ultimately egoistic. Your ultimate aim is your own *eudaimonia*. If you act virtuously towards other people, the explanation for why you ought to do that is ultimately that it will make your own life better. To me, that's just the wrong explanation. If you're in pain, then the reason I ought to make your pain go away isn't that that will make my life better, though it might. The reason is it makes your life better. That's something the philosophers in my book said. What makes something virtuous is how it cares about its object, which, in many cases, is other people. People who write about Aristotle deny all this, and say it's a terrible misinterpretation, but I think it's just correct. I have an obscurely published paper called "Aristotle on Virtue: Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong", the idea being that virtually everything Aristotle says about virtue is mistaken.

Kant starts out by saying the only thing that's good without qualification is the good will. That's just false. The whole theory is supposed to come out of that, but it's just false. For instance, scientific understanding is good without qualification. Kant's arguments are terrible: "some knowledge is instrumentally bad and therefore no knowledge is intrinsically good". It's terrible. I have detailed things to say about what's wrong with Aristotle because I can actually read Aristotle, but it's unbearable to read Kant, although I have over time.

Noësis: You said you hadn't done much ethics until your fourth-year seminar. When did you decide that ethics was what you wanted to do?

Hurka: At that point. By the time I went to graduate school, which was the next fall, I was prepared to specialize in moral philosophy. You can imagine being turned on by a seminar in which you have a two-and-a-half-hour meeting once a week with just you and a professor. That was great, and Wayne Sumner was a great teacher, and I just liked the subject. To tell you the truth, this might have been a bit mercenary, but it was just obvious at the time that ethics was a coming side of the discipline. There'd been very little normative ethics, rather than metaethics, until 1970. It was now 1975, and you could see that it was a coming field. It's hard for people with PhDs to get jobs now, and it was as hard then, because there had been a big hiring boom at universities in the 1960s. They weren't hiring, because they were full-up with all these people from the 1960s. I thought it might be easier to get a job as a moral philosopher. It was a combination of a subject matter that captured my interest, and a sense of "this wouldn't be a bad thing from a career point of view", and it worked out.

Noësis: Speaking of how moral philosophy has developed over time, what do you see as the biggest changes you've observed? If you had to guess, where do you think the discipline is heading in the future?

Hurka: In the seventies, there was this turn towards normative ethics in other words, towards asking about what is right and wrong. Partly practical ethics; for instance, people were writing about abortion and reverse discrimination. People turned away from metaphysics for a while, which is asking about what we mean when we talk about right and wrong. Since then, metaethics has returned. Now there's this big world of metaethics, and it's become incredibly technical, and the number of views has proliferated, and how exactly they differ from one another has become harder to tell. It's become saturated with technical philosophy of language and technical metaphysics and technical epistemology. I've just never been very interested in that.

For normative ethics, in the 1970s the views that people considered were very simple. It often was, "should you care just about your own good, or should you care partially about everybody?" There's now a sense in the normative ethics world that an adequate account of morality has to be much more complicated. Take trolleyology, or the discussion of when it's ethically permissible to turn a trolley. In the seventies, the first trolley case was introduced. Now there are eighty-five variants, and you've got to have a view which says the right thing about all of them. In a way, extra complications being recognized is a good thing, but it makes the literature more intricate. On both sides, the metaethics side and the normative ethics side, the literature has gotten much more technical and specialized. Sometimes I think that it's necessary, and sometimes I think that it's overdone.

The range of applied ethics topics discussed has also changed. That's partly driven by what's happened in the world. When I was teaching applied ethics courses, one of the very first anthologies from the mid-1970s about contemporary moral problems had this really neat article about the ethics of war at the end. It was written by a Catholic in 1960, and it gave a very short, clearly written account of Just War Theory. I taught that in my courses at the University of Calgary, but nobody in philosophy was interested in the ethics of war. Then, in the 1980s, there was a resurgence in the nuclear arms race, and there was a lot of philosophy about U.S. nuclear weapons policy. That's an aspect of the morality of war, but a very specific one. The first Iraq war was in 1991, and suddenly people were discussing that article written in 1960. There started to be a literature about the morality of war, as it applies to conventional non-nuclear wars. And now, the ethics of war has gotten incredibly complicated. I wrote a paper about it in 2005, and people now write about the same aspect of just war theory, recognizing distinctions I hadn't dreamed of when I wrote about it. In political philosophy, there are more and more people writing about the ethics of immigration. In the nineties, there also started to be a literature in on nationalism, and that's become huge. The applied ethics topics have changed, and they'll probably continue to change, depending on what the world gives us to think about.

Noësis: Do you find, having studied in different areas, that moral philosophy is approached differently in different countries?

Hurka: It's hard to know the differences may be diminishing because people communicate through the internet much more with people in other countries. People also go to conferences much more than they did forty years ago. People fly from North America to Australia for a conference and then come back two days later, or vice versa. It used to be quite expensive and difficult to travel, and so people used to have local philosophy conferences. There used to be an Alberta philosophy conference, with just the Universities of Calgary, Alberta, and Lethbridge. In those days, people's circle of philosophical acquaintance was local, and small. Now, people fly all over the world, and they send each other papers over the internet. There's less differentiation by culture, nation, and location. It's in some ways a good thing, and in some ways a bad thing.

But there are still differences. What's hard to know is whether they're a matter of national culture, and how much they're a matter of the accidental influence of a certain person who happened to be in a certain place. Historically, Britain's public political life has been pretty consequentialist. When I was in Oxford as a graduate student in the seventies, utilitarianism was very current. The US, on the other hand, is a political culture based on rights. There was also this immense influence of John Rawls. In the eighties, political philosophy was all Rawls, all the time. That was less so in Britain. But how much of the huge influence of Rawls in the United States is due to the influence of his rights-based political philosophy that fits the political culture of the US, and how much is due to his influence as a particular person? As a personality, he was extremely influential on his students, and at Harvard he had all these great students.

In the past, Canada was much more British. When I was an undergraduate, there were more utilitarians in the philosophy department, like Danny Goldstick and Wayne Sumner. Now we have a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and we're somewhere in between Britain and the US. Canadians have also been very involved in the philosophical literature about nationalism and multiculturalism. That reflects the political history of this country. Philosophers in the United States tend to be skeptical of nationalism. They think it's what their government uses to justify invading and suppressing other countries. Nationalism is viewed more sympathetically by people in small countries, with big neighbours they think could threaten them. Israeli philosophers are sympathetic to nationalism, and Canadian philosophers are sympathetic to nationalism. In Canada, we've had a French speaking minority that we've cared about for a long time, and we've done a pretty good job of allowing immigrant communities to retain their distinctive character. Now we're grappling with the plight of Indigenous peoples in our culture. So, Canadian philosophers were among the first people writing about multiculturalism. Some philosophers who are against philosophical defenses of multiculturalism call it "the Canadian disease", because it's what all these "bad Canadian philosophers",

like Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, have foisted on the political philosophy world. There's something to the fact that people writing on a topic are affected by their countries' national histories, but it's becoming less the case because people interact internationally more often.

Noësis: You're a prolific author, and you've written on a bunch of different topics. By way of conclusion, is one of your papers a personal favorite, or is there something you'd like people to take a second look at?

Hurka: I hate to say it, but when I look back at them I often don't like the way they were written. Apart from that, I think most of them were pretty good. It wasn't original to me, but I wish people would read the account of virtue in *Virtue, Vice and Value*. It's an alternative to the dominant Aristotelean account of virtue, and I just think it's vastly better. That's the best thing to read. The Killam Lecture revisited some ideas about the value of knowledge and achievement from *Perfectionism*. I wouldn't say go back and read the chapters of *Perfectionism*, because they're too amateurishly and clunkily written, but those ideas are pretty good. If I had more energy I would now write a book about that again, but better and with changes.