

How to not be Bored

I know many people who are happy. My friend Jack, for instance, leads a fulfilling life studying his interests: partially observable Markov decision processes. Some, however, do not trust their interests to guide their actions. They are bored, and they want a normative theory that can convince them of what to do. Many exist, ascribing fundamental good to likes of knowledge, loving relationships, and pleasure, but these statements feel arbitrary and outdated—unconvincing. I propose *gestalt experience* as an alternative fundamental good, and build a theory that assumes little and discerns carefully, in hopes that it may guide modern agents from boredom.

The German *gestalt* means a “configuration”—a “structure or pattern that cannot be derived by the sum of its parts.” It is the understanding of an emergent property or the insight gained from top-down analysis. Seeing new *gestalts* is a great joy—it is the pursuit of knowledge, and of meaning, art, and self-expression. In fact, it may be the only joy. This is the view of *gestalt perfectionism*: to be more perfect is to see greater *gestalts*.

Why are *gestalts* good? We can take Descartes’ *cogito, ergo sum*, often translated “I think, therefore I am,” as a foundation. Many reduce this to “experience, therefore existence.” We experience life, which proves our existence, and from the philosophy of mind, we cannot know anything else.¹² The most defensible good must therefore be derived from this foundation. This is the first principle of *gestalt perfectionism*: *gestalt* is the fundamental good.

However, everyone is always experiencing some *gestalt*. We need a gradation to capture the differing prudential values of different *gestalts*. I propose that “greater” captures it. Greater *gestalts* are deeper insights; they relate more concepts, more consistently, or with

greater fidelity or generality. This is the other principle of gestalt perfectionism: greater gestalts are better. This principle is universal—some may be happy with their current gestalts, and not seek greater gestalts. For the bored, however, it is inalienable: to not be bored, seek greater gestalts. This aligns with our intuition that a human lives more than an amoeba, and corresponds with greater mental perfection, rationality, and integrated information.³⁻⁵

Gestalt perfectionism is the aspiration toward greater gestalt, where gestalt comes from the first principle and greater is the grading provided by the other. It's intended as a practical theory—measuring the prudential value of actions rather than the overall well-being of a person. Finally, it has strong authority and resonates broadly because it has minimal dependencies. It is timeless because it does not rely on God⁶, human nature^{3,7}, or your personal whims⁸, and works without biology or a unitary self, and is thus compatible with uploaded minds, artificial general intelligence, and a universal hivemind.

The remainder of this paper describes the motivations for gestalt perfectionism and defends it against common critiques. Section 1 argues for the necessity of an objective theory of well-being. Section 2 describes the burden of objective theories, and shows the authority and resonance of gestalt perfectionism, while Section 3 describes how other popular theories fail these burdens. Section 4 addresses some common concerns with perfectionist theories, such as the stance on pleasure, meaning, and achievement. Finally, Section 5 discusses some corollaries of gestalt perfectionism, which may motivate some paths less traveled.

1 | The need for Objectivity

In the next two sections, I consider the purpose of theories of well-being and motivate the structure of gestalt perfectionism.

Gestalt perfectionism was the result of a search for a “theory of action,” rather than, necessarily, a theory of well-being. A theory of well-being says that one would be “better off” in one scenario versus another, with the implication that one should try to be better off. From the individual perspective, theories of well-being are often used as theories of action—to answer the question “What should I do?” A theory formulated directly for this purpose will be better than a well-being metric to optimize for, because, as Goodhart’s law observes, optimizing a metric often bastardizes it. Gestalt perfectionism is therefore rendered as a theory of action rather than a theory of well-being: it focuses on evaluating actions rather than comparing the degrees of well-being.

A theory of action needs to be logically believable and subjectively compelling or attractive.⁹ The first condition is normative authority: the requirement for some line of reasoning that convinces an agent that what they are doing is correct. The second is resonance: agents must feel that they want to follow the theory. We will see below that purely subjective theories struggle with this. On the other hand, purely objective theories are logically grounded and thus provide normative authority, though they can fail to resonate. Resonance can be guaranteed a degree of subjectivity (creating a pluralistic or hybrid theory), or, as perfectionists tend to prefer, arguing that their particular definition of perfection is inalienable.

Hedonic and preferentialist theories of well-being are intuitive and popular, but fail the criteria of normative authority. Hedonic theories hold that pleasure is the only good.

Similarly, preferentialists hold that the only good is satisfying preferences or desires. These theories have become popular because they are intuitive—pleasure and desire satisfaction feel good, so they must be good. However, pleasure and desires can be misleading. A heroin addict, for example, derives immensely more pleasure from their next hit than anything else and wants it more than anything. These theories would say that the heroin user should indeed pursue the next shot, though we believe that rehab may lead to better well-being. This is the pleasure pitfall for subjective theories. The trouble is that the subject was distorted, so purely subjective hedonic or desire-satisfaction theories fail and some external input is required. This external input can be inserted with improved conditions, natural or crowd wisdom, or pluralism with objective goods, but each is untenable.

First, one may consider “improved conditions,” such as perfect rationality. In this rebuttal, the addict would see past the addiction and agree that there’s some greater life to be lived. However, this perfect rationality can be defined only as either one that results in a certain conclusion, reducing to the semi-objective pluralism case; or one corresponding to a “natural” human or the natural wisdom of a crowd, reducing to the *natural* or *crowd wisdom* case.

Natural and crowd wisdom theories insert objectivity by appealing to the judgment of a “natural” person (one not tainted or deluded by life events) or the judgment of a crowd or culture. These theories create a stationary base against which actions can be evaluated for their hedonic value. However, they still fail to provide normative authority, because we cannot know if the stationary base is correct. Who’s to say that the current culture has the correct moral views, or that one’s natural judgment, a product of their upbringing, is correct?

Finally, semi-objective pluralistic theories directly impose objective constraints on subjective judgments. For example, one might hold that “pleasure is good, but only if it is meaningful, which drug-induced ecstasy is not.” These “semi-objective” theories indeed provide objectivity, but they have the same burdens as fully-objective theories like perfectionism. Given the necessity of an objective good, we will first argue that gestalt experience is the only such good in Section 2, and consider gestalt-subjective hybrid theories in Section 4.

2 | Normative Authority and Resonance

This leaves us to consider the objective goods in a theory. A theory can have either one or more than one objective goods, which correspond to perfectionist and objective list theories, respectively. Objective list theories therefore have the same burden of proof as perfectionist theories, for each good in the list. Furthermore, if there’s the possibility of conflict between the list items, then the theory must provide a way to resolve those conflicts, such as relative weighting of the items. In “Defending the Objective List Theory of Wellbeing,” Rice argues that objective lists, with their greater degrees of freedom, can be best empirically adjusted to best accommodate the moral intuitions of people.¹⁰ However, the reliance on the wisdom of the crowd disrupts the normative authority upon which the merit of objectivity is based. I argue that the only defensible good is gestalt experience, and that this singular good is sufficient for a reasonable yet discerning theory of action.

To show gestalt experience is defensible, I propose that normative authority and resonance are not just necessary but sufficient: if a theory says to do something (normativity), is logically sound (authority), and agents believe it (resonance), then agents

should follow the theory. The burden of proof is thus limited to normative authority and resonance, and we will argue these points below.

Let's now explicate the normative authority and resonance of gestalt perfectionism. As described in the introduction, the normative authority comes, essentially, from Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum*. *Cogito*, or "knowing" is the only thing we have access to within our subjective experiences, so it is the only thing a perfectionist good can be defined as.¹⁶ Thus the *first principle* of gestalt perfectionism is to pursue "gestalts."

We also need a grading to differentiate between gestalts. I propose the *other principle*, that one should pursue "greater" gestalts. The normative authority for this principle comes from considering the opposite limit: if one were to pursue lesser gestalt, then the end goal would be to experience nothing, which leads to a degenerate theory of action.

Resonance is more complex. An experiencing agent may either want to continue experiencing, or not. If they want to continue experiencing, then the first principle resonates. Tragically, however, conditions like depression do cause people to desire the end of their experience. Someone experiencing suicidal thoughts does not resonate with the continuation of experience—the most basic assumption—so neither gestalt perfectionism nor a philosophy with more assumptions will resonate. Philosophy cannot help the depressed because one cannot think their way out of depression. The only path forward, therefore, is to talk to someone.

For the other principle, someone may either be overwhelmed, underwhelmed, or "whelmed" (happy). The non-suicidally overwhelmed may limit their gestalts until they are living a happy life, and the happy are doing a great job and should continue. The underwhelmed are the bored, and the other principle, seeking *greater* gestalts, can guide

their actions. Thus, gestalt perfectionism resonates with the bored—it is a theory of how to not be bored.

Thus, gestalt perfectionism depends only on the wish to continue consciousness. It thus resonates across cultures, species, and substrates of consciousness, and applies to agents which may not have intrinsic desires or a sense of self. This includes uploaded minds, artificial intelligence, and hiveminds—previously theoretical edge cases that are becoming increasingly realistic and relevant.

3 | Wayside Theories of Perfectionism

This section catalogs some philosophies that have failed to resonate with me but led to gestalt perfectionism.

Buddhism, ignorance, and freedom from suffering: Some philosophies promise freedom from suffering. Buddhism, for example, suggests that by seeing the ephemeral and diminishing attachment and the ego, one may be free from suffering and live blissfully. Others believe “ignorance is bliss.” Bliss, however, may not be well-being. I never registered this, until a chance encounter with a children’s book this year:

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real, you don’t mind being hurt.”

- Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*.¹¹

These views discount the experience of relationships and of knowledge, which did not resonate.

Aristotelian personal practices: Many thinkers, including Aristotle, list practices intended to help one achieve perfection. Modern society too has this concept of “living

your best life,” where you eat, sleep, and exercise well. These practices are certainly instrumental, in that they empirically improve health and help one pursue their philosophies. However, they don’t discern between the various projects one can undertake, and thus provide insufficient guidance for what one should do, once they’re functioning well.

Productivity and impact: To fill this void, some take on the utilitarian project of maximizing positive impact on the world. This is an admirable enterprise, but it does not lead to the wellbeing of the agent. The extent of the moral burden is up for debate, but even in this view, having a balanced theory of wellbeing allows one to increase productivity and impact, and gestalt perfectionism encourages one to stay connected with the world, to understand what people need, and gather inspiration to tackle problems more effectively.

Following your heart: Others rely on desire-satisfaction to guide their enterprises. As described below, this is an effective perfectionist theory that is defensible to many objections, but it relies on clear-cut desires and a belief in those desires. However, people can be indecisive—they may not know what they want, or their desires may be fallible. Worse, future AIs may not have desires. In these cases, a discerning, objective theory is a necessary guide.

Novelties and thrills: One such objective guiding principle is to try new things. For a time, I traveled and tried things, and did what I thought was cool. After a while, however, it began to feel performative—I was always doing things, but not experiencing or enjoying them much. At first, novelties brought new gestalts, and things felt good. But eventually, semantically new activities do not lead to greater gestalts—they stopped resonating.

Gestalt perfectionism suggests that in addition to novelties, greater gestalts can be found by looking deeper into the fractal nature of things “already seen.”

Seeking meaning: The natural correction to seeking novelties is to seek something deeper, often captured as “meaning.” However, the limiting case seemed degenerate—one might find the most meaning, or feel the most moved, in a life of iteratively postmodern art criticism or exclusively watching sad movies. It seems that deep meaning can stagnate in breadth, and eventually one loses touch with society and the greater connection it brings. Meaning-seeking approaches gestalt perfectionism more closely, but could not stand as a theory because I do not aspire to the “meaning pit.” I needed some north star that balanced breadth and depth.

Gestalt perfectionism finds the correct balance between breadth and depth by recognizing the underlying value of gestalt experience. It also discerns more finely between projects, relieving indecision when the relative strengths of one's desires are not clear. This normative authority, broad resonance, and discernment makes gestalt perfectionism a practical theory, able to assume little and say something in most every situation.

4 | Counterarguments

Gestalt perfectionism takes some unconventional stances, each of which motivates classic counterarguments. Here I defend gestalt perfectionism by clarifying its stance on pleasure and desire satisfaction, and by arguing it still supports meaning, community, and achievement.

One classic objection to perfectionist theories is that they cannot capture the intuitive good of pleasure and desire-satisfaction. All else being equal, some argue, a life with more

pleasure is better than a life with less. Gestalt perfectionism agrees instrumentally: in most cases, pleasure increases openness to exploration and desire satisfaction increases self-confidence and agency, so both contribute to the ability to experience greater gestalts. We can remove the confound of instrumental value by considering two identical 1-second lives, both experiencing the same level of gestalt, but one experiencing pleasure and the other pain. (Or, for preferentialists, one with a desire satisfied at the end, and the other with a desire unsatisfied). Hedonists and preferentialists would argue that the happy life and the satisfied life are better than the alternative. But gestalt perfectionism bites the bullet and argues that in fact, none of these lives were better than any other. Suppose you were the agent, experiencing either one second of pleasure or of pain. With no comparison, no life before or after, is the second of pleasure any different from the second of pain? This is counterintuitive because humans are biased evolutionarily to prefer pleasure, but it is a tenable perspective to value pleasure and desire-satisfaction only instrumentally, thus avoiding challenges like the pleasure pit.

Rather than biting the bullet, some have constructed perfectionist theories that bake the good of pleasure or desire-satisfaction in. Bruckner's "Perfectionist Preferentialism" and Hayes' "Finding Pleasure and Satisfaction in Perfectionism" sketch definitions of perfection that can accommodate these intuitions.^{7,8} Bruckner defines desire-satisfaction as perfectionism, essentially formalizing the "follow your heart" view discussed in section 4, which is insufficiently discerning when the agent's desires are unclear. Hayes defines perfectionism as satisfying a human's natural inclinations, which undermines the resonance of the argument because people can fail to resonate with their evolution or culture.

An alternative to biting the bullet for gestalt theories is to construct a hybrid theory between gestalt perfectionism and some subjective good, such as pleasure or desire-satisfaction. Though these theories are less succinct, I follow Rice in arguing that a hybrid theory may be adjusted to be more empirically resonant. My counterargument to Rice's point above does not apply here because I have explicitly defined and defended the only objective good: greater gestalts. An example of such a gestalt-pluralist theory is gestalt hedonism, which states that something is as good as it is a greater gestalt and brings pleasure. Similarly, gestalt preferentialism would state that something is as good as it is a greater gestalt and is something you want. These theories accommodate the intuitive subjective values while holding the subject infallible with the greater gestalts condition, and may be preferable for some.

Similarly, some may worry that gestalt perfectionism discounts the intuitive good of meaningful experiences. However, meaningful experiences are themselves gestalts. Gestalt perfectionism supports meaning-seeking and ascribes a prudential value to each meaningful experience depending on the depth of the gestalt. This prevents meaning-seekers from falling too deep into the meaning pit.

Gestalt perfectionism is also not a selfish or isolating theory. Assuming others are conscious, they can guide you to the gestalts they've experienced more quickly than you may find it on your own, and the experience of communicating and working with others is in itself a deeper gestalt than the contents alone. Thus, gestalt perfectionism encourages breadth and keeps its practitioners in touch with society and culture.

Gestalt perfectionism also encapsulates achievement via the associated gestalts. Consider the achievement of summiting Mount Everest, and consider two climbers, one

who succeeds and one who almost succeeds but does not step onto the final rock to reach the highest point. Both have endured essentially the same hardships and had essentially the same experiences, except the second climber who missed out on the marginal experience of standing at the top versus just below the top of the world. The first climber achieved the summit, while the second did not. However, I argue that the two achieved roughly the same thing, and in fact that the difference in achievement was the gestalt experience of standing on the last rock. Similarly, the achievement of a climber who stopped halfway up is substantially less than the successful climber, precisely because this third climber missed the gestalt experiences of half the climb. This is not an affront to the adage “Almost isn’t enough,” rather, the adage is true precisely because the gestalt of achievement is nonlinearly and discontinuously greater than the process leading to that point. The other disproportionate benefits of achievement, such as prize money, fame, etc, are worthless except instrumentally.

The analysis of these edge cases shows that gestalt perfectionism discerns subtle differences in a principled manner. Practitioners will not fall into the pleasure or meaning pits, nor will they chase surface trends or go so deep as to lose touch with the world. Gestalt perfectionism has a balanced view of achievement, acknowledging its experiential and instrumental value without letting fame get to one’s head.

5 | Life in pursuit of Gestalts

Of course, the purpose of a normative theory is to guide action. There is much, often competing, advice on how to live. The following are the insights that stand up to the scrutiny of gestalt perfectionism.

First, practicing health and stability will help any enterprise. As will interacting with the community, both helping and accepting help, and exchanging gestalts. And one must know one's self, and be able to use themselves effectively, such as through self-talk or pride-based motivation. Find work you love, not because it will be pleasurable, but because the passion will push you farther. Though not fundamental goods, these are strong instruments for seeing greater gestalts.

Then, one must strike a balance between breadth and depth to find greater gestalts. It is important to try new things often, as new experiences often connect in unexpected ways to create new insights. It's also important to take time to think deeply, because only with development can those greater gestalts be seen. For a student like me, this means pursuing subjects that have a reputation for teaching you to think differently, and intentionally engaging in areas of thought that are normally missing from campus.

Finally, in day-to-day decisions, the hard path may lead to greater gestalts than the easy way out. However, difficulty and pain are not fundamentally good. Because one's energy is limited, one must carefully choose what difficult projects to pursue based on the expected gestalt gain.

These principles are not new, but they are often confounded by competing ideas. The wisdom of the crowd is contradictory, and the purpose of a normative theory is to sift through the sands to arrive at a tower of gold. Hopefully gestalt perfectionism, with its narrow assumptions, broad resonance, and finely graded discerning power, may serve as a guiding spark in the murky frontiers.

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