

IS “FLOURISHING” A TRUE ALTERNATIVE ETHICS?

IN AN ARTICLE IN *Philosophy and Public Affairs* entitled “Human Flourishing, Ethics, and Liberty,”¹ Gilbert Harman sets about to answer the question, “What kind of ethics do we get if we begin with a conception of human flourishing and attempt to derive the rest of ethics from that conception?” His answer is that it must be either a form of utilitarianism or else an ethics centered in “imitation of excellence,” which is no ethics at all, since we cannot identify the excellence to be imitated without an antecedent idea of excellence, which has to be smuggled in from somewhere else.

I want to show that an ethics of “flourishing” logically cannot be reduced to either of the forms indicated by Harman; and to go further, it also does not reduce to a variant of Kantian deontology. Rather it stands as an independent ethical theory, genuinely alternative to the prevailing utilitarianisms and Kantianisms. Its hallmark is the primacy it gives to moral character: ideally it is our own developed character that tells us what to do, not abstractly formulated laws or rules, and not other people, or convention.

But first, what is an ethics of flourishing? I will offer a thumbnail characterization that combines Harman’s observations with a few of my own.

It is characteristic of this approach to take the basic form of evaluation to occur when something is assessed with respect to the way in which it fulfills its function. . . . A bread knife has a certain purpose: it is used to slice bread. A ‘good’ bread knife is one that is easy to use to slice bread smoothly. A ‘bad’ bread knife has ‘defects’ of one or another sort that make it not well suited for this purpose. . . . Bodily organs are also associated with functions. A heart is something that functions to pump a creature’s blood through its circulatory system. . . . A ‘good’ heart is one that functions well, pumping blood with just the right pressure through the circulatory system. . . . A similar sort of evaluation applies to whole organisms. Associated with a particular type of plant or animal is what might be called a condition of health or ‘flourishing.’ We evaluate organisms with respect to this condition. A ‘good specimen’ of an oak tree is an oak tree that is flourishing, not one that is stunted or diseased. . . . An oak tree ‘needs’ the necessary conditions of its flourishing. It ‘needs’ a good root system, adequate water and nutrients, light, air, and so forth. . . . People may or may not flourish in this sense. They may or may not be healthy and happy. Of course, happiness is connected not only with the satisfaction of bodily needs but also with the satisfaction

of a person's incidental desires and interests... Flourishing in this sense would seem to involve happiness, virtue, and accomplishment.

The "flourishing" of artifacts, organs, and animals is non-moral for they have no choice in the matter; human flourishing fulfills the moral condition of choice, for the will of the individual must be enlisted if flourishing is to occur. Functional evaluation of artifacts, organs, and animals is secondary to and derivative from human flourishing, because human flourishing is the agency by which value is realized in the world. For this reason a "good" murder weapon or implement of torture does not imply (morally) good murder or torture; implication can run only in the reverse direction.

Persons are *responsible* for flourishing, because flourishing realizes value in the world; flourishing is not a selfish enterprise because the value realized is objective, that is, potentially of worth to others, not to the flourisher alone, and is intended to be so by the motive of flourishing. At bottom we want to be of worth to others (think of persons you love), and are not sufficiently fulfilled to be said to "flourish" in the absence of this condition.

The standard of flourishing affords a criterion for criticism of persons' wants and desires. We often desire things that would, if realized, be detrimental to our flourishing, and indeed the very desires are detrimental for they displace other desires that would contribute to our flourishing. Flourishing requires of us that we desire the right things.

Because human goods are many and diverse, and the functional analysis of utilities is derived from human goods, utilities are not confined by an ethics of flourishing to a single "proper" use. There may be other "good" uses for a breadknife—the wine press, for example, suggested the printing press. To suppose that each utility has but one "proper" purpose would entail the extinction of the human ingenuity that is inseparable from human flourishing.

Harman notes, "Finally, we can assess societies with reference to the extent of human flourishing within them... A 'good' society is one in which people flourish in the sense of leading desirable lives. That is what a society 'ought' to be like. Otherwise it is 'not much' of a society, not a 'real' society; something is 'wrong' with it."

Yes, something is wrong with it; it is imperfect, or even in a particular case "bad." But not *unreal*; the notion that what is less-than-perfect is less-than-real is not characteristic of the ethics of flourishing per se, but only of such an ethics as it figures in the metaphysics of Platonic realism or the metaphysics of Absolute Idealism. Flourishing can be separated from both of these metaphysical schools, and should be.

Turning from description to assessment, Harman first suggests that flourishing seems to be a form of moral relativism,

since what counts as 'flourishing' seems inevitably relative to one or another set of values. People with different values have different conceptions of 'flourishing,' of the 'good life.' For some, the good life in-

cludes the discriminating enjoyment of good meat and wine, others hold that no life can count as good if it involves the exploitation of animals raised for food. Some say the good life involves at its core the pursuit of an individual project of excellence; some say it involves service to others. Some people would stress the importance of elaborate social rituals of politeness; for others such rituals are trivialities of no importance at all to the good life. People put different weights on the joys of combat and competition as against the benefits of cooperation and shared undertakings. They disagree on the relative importance of knowledge and culture as compared with pleasure and simple happiness. And so on.

In response I would ask, What does it mean to be, not simply a human being, but an individual human being? And in answer I would say, first, that it means that one's flourishing should not be construed as consisting in the flourishing within oneself of all human capacities, but rather only some of them. *Omnis determinatio est negatio* (“All determination is negation”—Spinoza). Secondly, individuality means varieties of value and varieties of flourishing; that some give precedence to knowledge and culture and others to pleasure and simple happiness, or some to competition and others to cooperation, does nothing to suggest that flourishing itself is relative. Everyone is responsible for living the kind of life that will realize his or her distinctive kind of worth: this is the universal, nonrelative standard. Accordingly, there are universal conditions and personal conditions of flourishing, and we must not confuse the two.

When Henry David Thoreau moved to the woods for two years he was contending by example that everyone needs effective solitude (for which physical solitude is neither necessary nor sufficient) for the purpose of self-discovery; he was not contending that everyone should live in the woods for two years. Vegetarianism may be a personal condition of flourishing, but (even if it could be formulated coherently) cannot be a universal condition. The same is true of elaborate rituals of politeness: for some ways of life or vocations—say international diplomacy—they may be utilities, for other ways not. The test is, is it a necessary condition, or short of this, an aid, to flourishing, or an obstruction, or neither; and then, is it so universally, or just for some persons? There is no relativism in this, but simply the application of a universal principle to differing occasions.

Concerning Harman's suggestion (he does not claim demonstration) that the ethics of flourishing reduces to utilitarianism, he identifies the familiar four forms of that doctrine (act, actual rule, ideal rule, and virtue utilitarianism) but does not choose among them. And we need not be concerned with the distinctions, for it is a generic trait of utilitarianism that renders it incommensurable with the ethics of flourishing, namely utilitarianism's destruction of individual autonomy. To see this, let us estimate the number of persons, including ourselves, who are on average affected by each of our moral acts. Sometimes it will be only one other person—say our spouse or child; more often it will be a small number such as a family or group of co-workers; occasionally it will be an entire profession or class; and not

infrequently we must at least play our part in moral decisionmaking that affects an entire community or populace. It seems not unreasonable, then, to conjecture that on average perhaps 10 people are affected by our moral acts.

If we are to act for the greatest happiness (or utility, or flourishing, or whatever) of the greatest number, then on occasions of moral choice we on average have a tenth of a say in determining our own conduct while others determine our conduct by nine-tenths. And this is a description not of autonomy but of heteronomy. The fact that we choose to be utilitarians does not show that autonomy is preserved, but that it is voluntarily relinquished; we do not manifest self-responsibility by declining in perpetuity to exercise it. Jean-Paul Sartre was correct in identifying "bad faith" as chosen.

There can be no doubt, I think, of the requirement of autonomy in the ethics of flourishing, for it is to be found in all of the advocates of such an ethics from Aristotle to Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche to Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thoreau. To qualify as "flourishing" it is not enough that a life contain "happiness, virtue, and accomplishment"; it must also be self-directed on the ground that each life contains its own inherent principle of normativity that (morally) demands enactment. The psychological correlate is that self-directed activities are intrinsically satisfying, because more self-engaging and self-fulfilling than imposed activities can be.

What Harman terms the "imitation of excellence" is likewise antithetical to an ethics of flourishing, for imitation is a dependent relation that is antithetical to individual autonomy. The life that flourishes lives originally, not in the sense of producing absolute novelty in the world, but in the sense that its character and initiative originate with the person whose life it is and express that life; and not in the sense of having no precedent or tradition, but in the sense of choosing its precedents and tradition. Such a life cannot be imitated for it is itself not an imitation. To be sure an ethics of flourishing must, to be appropriate to human beings, give a central place to learning from others, but what is fundamentally to be learned from those who are flourishing is how to live originally. Secondly, we require to learn from others the techniques for making our way on our chosen path (e.g., if I autonomously choose to become an engineer, I don't reinvent engineering but learn from that tradition). But it is we who choose what we shall learn from chosen others.

With respect to those who are flourishing, we are indeed "doing what they do," but in a sense so general that it applies to lives whose courses need bear no resemblance in detail. With respect to this process I think the word "imitation" is misleading enough to be judged misapplied, and I suggest, instead, the word "emulation." It seems clear that Harman means imitation, not emulation, when he says, "The right thing to do in any particular case would therefore be the same as what someone who flourishes would do in that case. So, what one ought to do in any particular case is exactly what someone who flourishes would do in that case."

I believe that what “someone who flourishes” would say about the matter has been said by Thoreau: “I would not have anyone adopt *my* mode of living on any account; for, besides that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself, I desire that there be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own* way, and not his father’s or his mother’s or his neighbor’s instead.”²

Substituting emulation for imitation will clear up the incidental difficulties that Harman identifies. One of them is that “if one is not already an excellent person who is flourishing, one’s situation may well be of a sort which a flourishing person could never be in. For example, one may have done someone a wrong and the question is what one should do now. It may be that a flourishing person could not have done that sort of wrong to anyone.” But as every advocate of flourishing has agreed, no one is born “flourishing”; “flourishing” is a developmental outcome, an attainment.³ And this means that a flourishing person whom we emulate has in all likelihood made mistakes in the past similar to those we (in Harman’s example) have just made. Emulation affords latitude to include the past of the flourishing person (“How is flourishing arrived at?” is clearly a key question to it), while imitation does not.

I said earlier that the ethics of flourishing holds that each human life contains within it its own principle of normativity that (morally) must be enacted. Thus the ethics of flourishing begins with this responsibility. Kant’s ethics likewise begins with responsibility; but there the resemblance ends. For no version of the ethics of flourishing that I am aware of attempts a derivation to show that our fundamental moral responsibility is synthetic a priori knowledge. Instead, the argument is that each person is innately invested with potential worth, and the responsibility for actualizing our worth is the inherent demand of potential worth for actualization (goodness *ought* to exist). The ultimate justification of an ethics of flourishing, then, is consequentialist: more human values will be actualized this way than any other. But the claim is that the consequence is such that it can only come from flourishing (the self that you have the potentiality to become through flourishing you cannot become in any other way). Hence there can be no prospect of nullifying individual responsibility by discovering other means to the end (as justice might be eliminated within utilitarianism by discovering means to greater general happiness that do not include provision of justice).

I do not for a moment deny that the ethics of flourishing contains internal problems that need to be worked upon by good minds. But I believe it to be a viable alternative moral perspective, not reducible to one or another of the more familiar perspectives, and have sought to show this against suggestions to the contrary by Gilbert Harman.

DAVID L. NORTON

University of Delaware