

Episode 7. A biological basis to ethics. Flourishing.

Welcome to philosophy for the real world. I'm Professor Thomas White.

Everyday discussions of ethical issues on talk shows, in opinion pieces, and on the street bedevil professional philosophers because we encounter every conceivable position. One end of the spectrum is rigid. Right and wrong are determined by secular laws, religious rules, or cultural traditions that are set in stone. At the other end, right and wrong are completely subjective, situational, or a matter of personal emotions—which means virtually anything can be justified.

Unfortunately, most people overlook the fact that there actually is an interesting philosophical approach to ethics that gives us a standard of right and wrong based on *biology*.

And that's what we're looking at today.

Flourishing

My favorite ethical perspective is surprisingly simple. It argues that a basic standard we can use in determining right and wrong is nothing more sophisticated or mysterious than the *flourishing* or *real-life well-being* of the people involved. That is, the moral character of an action depends on whether it makes it easier or harder for the people impacted to *flourish*, that is, to have a reasonable opportunity for a successful and

satisfying life.

From this perspective, what makes an action *morally positive* is the extent to which it promotes human *flourishing*. Similarly, to the extent that an action prevents or interferes with the well-being or *flourishing* of those involved, it is *morally negative*.

Of course, the next question is obviously, “How do we know what promotes or gets in the way of *flourishing*?” Fortunately, the contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum gives us an excellent answer.

Martha Nussbaum

Flourishing is an important feature of Nussbaum’s thought. The concept is central to her “capabilities approach” to ethics, which she developed to address questions related to social justice in the contemporary world.¹ One of *flourishing*’s most important characteristics is that it has a biological basis. In fact, Nussbaum’s understanding of *flourishing* ultimately goes back to Aristotle, who, you may not know, was a competent biologist as well as a philosopher.

Nussbaum’s starting point is that every being has *a characteristic set of capabilities* that are distinctive of its *species*. When we link this idea with the processes involved in *evolution* and *adaptation*, we can say that these *characteristic abilities or capabilities* evolved in order to allow members of that species to have

successful and satisfying lives—that is, to allow them to *flourish*. Flourishing, then, is *the full, healthy, physical and emotional growth and development of the traits, skills and dispositions that allow a being a reasonable opportunity to have a rudimentarily satisfying and successful life as a member of that species*. Let me repeat that. Flourishing is *the full, healthy, physical and emotional growth and development of the traits, skills and dispositions that allow a being a reasonable opportunity to have a rudimentarily satisfying and successful life as a member of that species*. The more fully a being’s capabilities are developed, the more it can flourish.

From my perspective, as someone who does research related to dolphins, a particular benefit of using flourishing as an ethical yardstick is that it can serve as an objective, neutral standard for discussions about the treatment of nonhuman animals by humans. It gives us a way to be free of anthropocentric species bias. I’ll get into this more when I discuss some of my work on dolphins. For now, we’re just going to talk about *human* flourishing.

Necessary conditions for flourishing. Evolution and adaptation. Nussbaum’s ten “Central Capabilities.”

Not surprisingly, flourishing requires *certain conditions*. And note that these aren’t a matter of personal opinion or preference. The conditions necessary for a

human being to *flourish* are the result of millions of years of evolution and adaptation. During this time, we developed distinctive traits, abilities, and behaviors that made it possible for our species to survive and prosper. Because *Homo sapiens* is a sophisticated species, each of us now requires a complex set of conditions to be met if we are to grow and develop as fully as possible into individuals who are not only physically and emotionally *healthy* but *equipped with the various skills needed* to operate successfully in our societies and to have a satisfying life.

What are those conditions? Nussbaum identifies ten “Central Capabilities.” She believes that we need to experience at least a minimal level of each in order, as she puts it, “to pursue a dignified and minimally flourishing life.”² These include: life, physical and emotional health, safety, liberty, education, significant relationships, freedom of thought and conscience, equality, respect for one’s dignity, participation in one’s government, ownership of property, and rest.³ And while I may not agree with her on all the details, her understanding of flourishing is extremely important.

United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Interestingly, Nussbaum’s list is very similar to the United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” which is effectively another list of the conditions humans need to flourish. This document refers to *rights*, but it may just as well say the

conditions that must be met if humans are to grow, develop, and flourish in a healthy fashion in order to have a reasonable opportunity for a successful and rudimentarily satisfying life. The document consists of thirty articles, but the main rights include: life itself, freedom, equality, personal security, protection by a just legal system, political rights, a private life, the ability to choose marriage and family, freedom of thought and action, access to the benefits of a society (government, culture, education, protection against illness), work, and rest.⁴

Note that, like Nussbaum's list, these items can be grouped into two categories. First, there are *material* or *physical* conditions. The Declaration lists: life, liberty, security of person, freedom of movement, freedom of assembly, a certain standard of living, work, education, and rest. It identifies *material conditions* that humans need protection against: slavery, torture, interference with their private lives, and the like.

But the articles *also* talk about acceptable and unacceptable *ways of treating people*. We're told we have rights to: equality before the law, fairness, a presumption of innocence, impartial tribunals, marriages based only on consent, and equal pay for equal work. And we're entitled to be protected against: discrimination, arbitrary arrest, being accused of an offense that wasn't a crime when we did it, and being deprived of our property for no reason.

Something for the skeptics

No doubt some of you may be skeptical about some of these ideas.

Are the necessary conditions for flourishing or basic human rights truly needs?

The simplest way to test whether something is *necessary* for a successful and satisfying life is to imagine what life would be like without it.

One of Nussbaum's detailed descriptions of a necessary condition for flourishing has to do with *being treated with appropriate respect*. She describes it as, "Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin."⁵

Because humans are so *adaptable*, most of us could probably adjust to living in a society where we were regularly *disrespected* and *discriminated against*. But how successful could you be at having the life you wanted? How much of your potential could you actually develop? You would constantly be the target of unfair bias. You would be denied opportunities for such critical requirements as a decent place to live and a job of your choice. You would be thwarted at every turn. At the same time, you would see the

people who were victimizing you getting benefits they didn't deserve. Human beings—no matter what the traditions or norms of their culture—don't experience frustration, discrimination, and disrespect as satisfying. Being told every day that you are inferior would eat away at your self-respect. These are hardly conditions that would let anyone grow, develop their potential as much as possible, and flourish.

Despite what despots, tyrants, or bullies of any sort will claim, no matter what part of the world people live in, no matter what the traditions of their culture, no ordinary human being is going to experience anything but frustration and dissatisfaction at being deprived of the opportunity to develop his or her abilities.

Admittedly, we can find examples of autocratic societies in which people seem relatively content, despite not having many basic human rights respected. This, however, is simply a testimony to human adaptability. To say that people *have made peace with this* as their lot in life is different from saying they're *flourishing*. Another philosopher, Phillipa Foot, is particularly eloquent on this point. She writes,

Granted that it is wrong to assume identity of aim between peoples of different cultures; nevertheless there is a great deal that all men have in common. All need affection, the cooperation of others, a place in a community, and help in trouble. It isn't true to suppose that human beings can flourish without these things—being isolated, despised or embattled, or

without courage or hope. We are not, therefore, simply expressing values that we happen to have if we think of some moral systems as good moral systems and others as bad. Communities as well as individuals can live wisely or unwisely, and this is largely the result of their values and the codes of behavior that they teach. Looking at these societies, and critically also at our own, we surely have some idea of how things work out and why they work out as they do. We do not have to suppose it is just as good to promote pride of place and the desire to get an advantage over other men as it is to have an ideal of affection and respect. These things have different harvests, and unmistakably different connections with human good.⁶

One final thing to consider. I've always thought that the best piece of evidence that humans have a fundamental need for freedom and for being treated appropriately is how willing we are to risk our lives to get it. And it's not unusual that we do this knowing we'll likely not survive. But we do it nonetheless—for our children, neighbors, and countrymen.

Try this.

So, what is the practical take away of looking at ethics this way? The next time you're thinking about whether something is right or wrong, try this. Set aside any religious, legal, cultural, personal or ideological presumptions you've been making

about right and wrong. Then, ask *whether* and *in precisely what way* that action makes flourishing *easier* or *harder* in real life. Ideally, that should simplify the picture and keep you grounded.

Of course, this is just a first step. Certain actions can make flourishing *easier* for someone but *harder* for another. But we'll discuss managing conflicts of this sort in another episode.

Thanks for listening. I'm Professor Thomas White. This has been philosophy for the real world.

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

² Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, p. 33.

³ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, pp. 33–34. For the sake of simplicity, we've referred so far only to *human* well-being and *human* needs as a basic standard in ethics. But don't mistake this as meaning that ethics doesn't apply to nonhumans. See Chapter 12, "Dolphins: Personhood, Rights, and Flourishing" where Nussbaum's concept of flourishing is applied to dolphins.

⁴ "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations," *General Assembly resolution 217 A(III) of 10 December 1948*.

⁵ *Creating Capabilities*, p. 34.

⁶ Philippa Foot, "Moral Relativism," in Kraus and Meilard, eds., *Relativism Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), p. 164.