

TROUBLES WITH FLOURISHING: COMMENTS ON DAVID NORTON

I would like to serve as devil's advocate by raising some particular questions about David Norton's brief defense in "Is 'Flourishing' a True Alternative Ethics?" of his version of an ethics of flourishing, with the aim of getting him to say a bit more.

"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." Despite the Aristotelian precedent, I think this cannot be right. One might very well believe (as I do) that animals make choices, without being forced to conclude that the flourishing of such animals is moral. The issues are independent.

"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." This also seems wrong to me. Some plants had good roots before there were any people, and would have had good roots even if there had never been any people.

"At bottom we want to be of worth to others . . ." There are two possibilities here: (1) A person may want to be "of worth" and to be recognized by others as "of worth"; and (2) A person may want to matter to other people—a person may want to be valued by (certain) other people. (2) is weaker than (1), since you can value someone without thinking the person is "of worth," period. I myself do not believe that anyone is simply "of worth," period, but there are many people that I value.

An imperfect society is "not *unreal*"; the notion of "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” This is to misunderstand the relevant metaphysics. To say that a certain coward “is not a real man” is not to say that he is in any way “unreal.”

On the matter of resolving disagreements by having everyone do his or her own thing, that might resolve the “disagreement” that occurs when Jack thinks that for him to flourish involves living a life of sort *A*, whereas Jill thinks that for her to flourish involves living a life of sort *B*, where that is incompatible with living a life of sort *A*. Here Jack and Jill are “disagreeing” (if that is the word) about different people. But they can also (really) disagree about the same person. (It might be Jack, or Jill, or some third person, Jane.) They can disagree over what it is for that person to flourish. Similarly, they can disagree over what it is for people in general to flourish. Clearly, this sort of disagreement is not resolved by having everyone do his or her own thing. (That may be one of the positions under dispute, Jack holding that each person should do his or her own thing, Jill disputing this.)

“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.” Norton takes this to involve a lack of autonomy. But a similar result will hold if one acts on any moral principles at all that allow for duties to others. An argument of this form can be given for the conclusion that one does not act autonomously whenever one acts in accordance with *principle* rather than in accordance with one’s own unprincipled preferences. I assume that is an unwelcome result.

In any event, I suggested that an ethics of flourishing will be committed to utilitarianism. If, because of a commitment to autonomy (understood in this extreme way), it is also committed to something incompatible with utilitarianism, it may be simply inconsistent. To argue that an ethical theory is committed to something incompatible with utilitarianism is not yet to argue that it is not also committed to utilitarianism.

The argument for “the requirement of autonomy in the ethics of flourishing” is that “it is to be found in all of the advocates of such an ethics from Aristotle to Nietzsche to Emerson and Thoreau.” The name of this argument is “the argument from authority.” It is an odd argument from an advocate of autonomy.

“Each person is innately invested with potential worth, and the responsibility for actualizing our worth is the inherent demand of potential worth for actualization 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.” This implies that, whenever you have a choice between two actions, *A* and *B*, where more human values will be actualized by doing *A* than by doing *B* (for example, because doing *A* saves the lives of several

people who will go on to flourish), then you will flourish more if you do A than if you do B. In other words, the claim implies that it is impossible ever for a person to sacrifice his or her own flourishing for the sake of a greater good involved in the flourishing of others. It is evident that this consequence of the claim is false.

Finally, about imitation or emulation. Obviously, one can never do exactly what another person does. One can only do what is the same in certain respects. There is a question then of saying in what respects.

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