

PERSPECTIVE

Valuing the Flourishing Life

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Abstract

In this paper it will be argued that the naturalist assumptions of scientific attention to psychological, physical and behavioural aspects of the person, with particular attention to the explanatory normative promise of evolutionary psychology, might be necessary, but are not *sufficient* to establish any final picture of the flourishing person. How and what we are shaped to be, is amongst these factors, a consequence of our capacity to escape the causal determinants of biology and be responsive to matters of value as embodied in our social institutions. Because we are self-reflective, imaginative and critical, we construct varying cultures which sometimes embody very different pictures of what is to be valued and what is to count as identity and flourishing with respect to those values. If this is the case, then it is also necessarily the case that any visions of healthcare incorporating a broad scope directed towards flourishing and wellbeing will incorporate a picture of the healthy person governed by some ethical, socio-political or religious framework. Values so derived might sometimes be unwittingly implicit in a putatively neutral 'scientific' account of wellbeing.

Keywords

Culture, evolution, flourishing, identity, science, values

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Introduction

The question about what counts as a psychologically healthy life, 'wellbeing' or flourishing, engages with some fundamental questions about the relations between science, psychology and psychiatry, ethics and political philosophy. In the contemporary world of healthcare and those sciences associated with issues of flourishing and wellbeing, 2 kinds of implicit themes are apparent. The first of these locates wellbeing within the interiority of the psychology of the individual. In other words, wellbeing is associated with developing the appropriate emotions, behaviours, thoughts and lifestyle which bring about good physical and psychological health. Encouraging and understanding the development of 'positive emotions', for example, has been argued to be critical to this task [1-3].

The second of these themes is a general view embracing a metaphysical picture of the world, its occupants and how these are to be properly understood. Put simply, the position is this: "The accomplishments of the natural sciences seem to make it natural to assume, firstly, that all reality including human nature and its place in the world will eventually be brought under the comprehensive descriptive and explanatory powers of one or many scientific disciplines" and "the identity of our humanity will be completely theoretically explicable in terms of the causal laws of science and the physico-chemical structures by which we are constituted."

The sciences that articulate the theoretical hope embodied in this view are to be sought amongst the biological, psychological and neurosciences, most particularly evolutionary psychology [4]. The ambition is that these disciplines will yield empirically validated theories about the functioning of *Homo sapiens* which can provide the normative guidance informing the development of a flourishing life. Specifying our primary evolutionary environment and the nature of our minds which are presumed to have been genetically shaped to be cognitively maximally efficient within this world is, for example, hypothesised to be a fruitful resource for articulating what will count as 'wellbeing'. The scope of this potential achievement has even been recently argued by Sam Harris to encompass ethical questions. He argues that moral questions have objectively right answers when conceived as the question 'what conditions will lead to human flourishing?' The conditions which promote flourishing will embody answers to questions such as 'What is the good?' and 'How are we to live?' [5].

Considered in this light, both the points discussed above seem to direct our efforts towards those empirical sciences which like pieces of a jigsaw will yield a unified conception of human nature: it can seem obvious from this perspective that a conception of what wellbeing ultimately entails should derive from a combination of sciences, or perhaps a *sui generis* science whose aim is the articulation of this state. The utility and function of health policies and

treatments will be aimed towards - and their success judged by - their contribution to this empirically derived ideal of the flourishing person. Harris' extension of the embrace of scientific method and theory into the realm of ethics and morality appears to receive incontestable backing from the broadly accepted underlying metaphysical conception of the fundamental nature of reality shared not only by cultural commentators, but by many if not most scientists and philosophers: the shape and identity of a flourishing person will emerge as a consequence of our evolving scientific understanding of what we are. This picture will set the normative standards in comparison to which the presence or absence of aspects of wellbeing and flourishing can be judged.

In this paper, it will be argued that the naturalist assumptions of scientific attention to the structures of the individual, psychological, physical and behavioural with particular attention to the normative promise of evolutionary psychology, might be necessary, but are not *sufficient*, to establish any final picture of the flourishing person: how and what we are shaped to be, is amongst other factors, a consequence of our capacity to escape the causal determinants of biology and be responsive to matters of value. Because we are self-reflective and imaginative creatures we erect varying cultures which sometimes embody very different pictures of what is to be valued and what is to count as flourishing with respect to those values. Implicitly or otherwise, these sketch for communities the possibility of various social and personal identities and, in so doing, set normative standards for what is to count as flourishing in the occupancy of these roles. This approach to understanding the human condition is exemplified in a recent book by the American philosopher of mind and psychology Jesse Prinz (2012), who has re-examined both the conceptual foundations and the experimental literature of the nature-nurture distinction [6]. A very crude summary of this distinguished work is Prinz' re-emphasis on the role of culture in the shaping not only individual and group identities, but their contribution to pathological disturbance, both physical and psychiatric. What is notable is the variability, flexibility and importance of social structures in the shaping of identity and response to the physical environment in which self-conscious creatures such as we are, find ourselves.

If this is the case, then it is also necessarily the case that any visions of healthcare with a broad scope directed towards promoting wellbeing and flourishing will necessarily incorporate a picture of the healthy person governed by ethical, sociopolitical and religious frameworks. This is not to say that the interior and behavioural life of individuals and the biological, physiological, emotional and cognitive commonalities of human nature are not necessary to wellbeing and flourishing. Nor does it imply that aspects of these factors should not be theoretically understood *via* the appropriate scientific disciplines. Rather, it stated that they are *not sufficient*. The danger of a failure to understand this is that aspects of flourishing may be taken to be objective facts of universal human nature when they are particular to normative and cultural considerations. The Eugenics movement, for example, of the pre- WW2 years, widely

embraced across much of Western Europe and the USA, but now quietly forgotten, promoted a picture of a 'healthy' humanity untainted by genetic defect. The achievement of this outcome entailed the eradication of certain 'types' of genetically unacceptable human beings. This occurred against the background of a widely accepted picture of the 'ideal person' that was itself heavily influenced by the intellectual and political currents of the time. To fail to separate normative components of pictures of flourishing from science as ideology means to constantly run this risk.

In a subtle twist of this threat, the very conception that human beings and their natures can be fully articulated by the sciences might pose a threat to precisely those values that underpin a conception of a morally accountable being possessed of free will.

A primary purpose of this paper is to adumbrate the view that how and what we are shaped to be in accordance with what we value, is amongst other factors, a consequence of our capacity to *escape the causal determinants of biology* and physical nature and be responsive to the prescriptive normativity of value. That is to say, our natures are partially shaped by the evaluative demands extant in our social worlds: in so doing we recognise that discussions of 'wellbeing' and 'health' cannot become the unique preserve of specialised scientific disciplines and 'experts', but are part of, depend on and are answerable to, considerations of value that inform the structures of culture and are extant in creative works of Literature, Art and the reflective disciplines.

Introduction to the argument

My first point will be that there cannot be *any* conception of what is to count as psychological 'wellbeing' or flourishing without a *preceding* picture of what a flourishing life should look like. This picture will be constituted by the self-created socio-historical cultures through which human lives are made manifest and expressed.

Secondly, any picture of such a life will be irredeemably shaped by values from wherever these derive, whether they are, for example, political or religious in origin. Human persons are developmentally inducted into some community(ies) in virtue of which they derive their personhood and identity with all of the consequences that flow from this for self-conception, behaviour, emotion and aspiration.

Thirdly, values in this broad sense are, along with our physiology, necessary social conditions for the identity of any life; that is to say, that nothing could count as a *human* life or identity were it not so socially and ethically located.

Lastly, we can evaluate any state of social affairs, whatever its origin, against some ethical picture of how we think matters might be better. We can ask, for example, of any putative deterministic evolutionary story of human nature, 'is it good that we have evolved to be thus-and-so?' This capacity results from our ability to imagine how things might be different, our moral sense in virtue of

which that difference is judged and our self-reflexive consciousness which seems to reveal to us our capacity to choose, act in accordance with those choices and accept the normative guidance to which our moral sense commits us.

Values, identity and social organisation

Ethics need not just be about specifying sets of values that serve as standards to guide and judge action, but can also involve some aspirational idea of character or personhood; the kind of virtues a person ought to embody and the sort of life they ought to live. 'Virtue', as used here, does not carry modern implications of prudery, moral authoritarianism and the like, but is used (see below) in a more Aristotelian sense, to refer generally to those habits of thought, behaviour and 'being-in-the world' that are conducive to whatever is conceived of as the flourishing life: the kind of person one ought to be in the world and what will count as a 'good life' within this context.

Whatever kind of life is conceived of as desirable, some form of social organisation will not only be necessary to enable such a life, but will embody it in its institutions, values and behaviour, those necessary conditions which articulate the space of possible identities of personhood. This is the other side of becoming a flourishing person; the establishment of the kind of sociopolitical world that is best situated to the identity of a 'good life' however this may be conceived. It is important to understand that 'necessary condition' does not refer to biology plus social plus value, but that value and the social are requirements for anything that might be *called* a human life; they are intrinsic to the manifestation both socially and individually of what it is to be a human person.

This view evolves from a tradition in Ethics most commonly identified as having its origins in Aristotle and sometimes called 'Virtue Ethics' which embraces the view that a flourishing life is one in which the person has attained or aims at embodying a way of living that is admirable and follows from the kind of person they have become; the display of their character in their behaviour, the expression of their emotions and the kind of virtues that their life exemplifies. Roughly, Aristotle held that what is good for a member of some class of beings is typified by the purposes that the nature of any one of these beings directs them towards; a cat's proper flourishing might manifest in hunting mice, prowling its territory and so on. In so doing, it is living the kind of life that is the proper expression of its 'catness'.

For the cat, of course, there is a fairly direct relationship between the environment and behaviour, but human life is mediated by the artefacts of culture including social institutions, religious and political values and works of art, science and technology. These are the products of self-reflective and self-conscious beings standing in creative relation to the world about them and each other. As a consequence, for human beings the development of personhood and what is to count as flourishing occurs

within the context and instantiation of various forms of social organisation and structures of belief and value. None of these are stable: self-conscious humans reflect on their own forms of life and work consciously (and unconsciously) to protect, change, or develop them. For Aristotle and many Greeks of the classical period, the harmonious development of virtuous character and the flourishing life was to be identical with being a member of the Athenian elite, male, a free man and blessed with good fortune in status, wealth and natural talent; the social conditions necessary for the expression of fully virtuous character. In this respect, Aristotle accepted many of the values of his time.

What we can take from the Aristotelian idea, nevertheless, are 2 useful observations. Firstly, that a social environment, in the broadest sense of this word, incorporating religious, political and ethical structures and values, is a necessary condition for the expression of any individual life whatever form this might take. Secondly, and following from this point, the range of potential identities that an individual might instantiate are partially determined by the social, political and economic roles allowed for by the social structure. The structure of emotional and ethical-emotional responses to self, others and the world will be influenced accordingly. Some examples here include the concept of 'turning-the other cheek' or compassion which grew in its Christian form out of monotheistic Hebraic thought. These were not concepts initially grasped or understood within the broader Roman polity in which they were advanced. In a more contemporary vein, the Marxist psycho-political concept of alienation from others and self in an advanced industrial-capitalist society could have had no resonance in a feudal structure located in a world soaked in spiritual meaning.

Answers as to what constitutes desirable ends for the proper flourishing of the potential for life will hence differ across a range of views, ethical, religious and political embracing sometimes very different forms of social organisation. What a religious tradition might suppose constitutes a healthy and fulfilled life will differ from the ideal of what a person should be in the post-capitalist world of a socialist derived utopia in which religious values may be conceived of as symptoms of a virulent social pathology. Similarly, the rational and intellectual attainments valued by the academic, will differ from those of the warrior communities in which attainments of character such as strength, loyalty and endurance, might exemplify the pinnacle of human achievement, whilst a 'feminised' society might have little place for these virtues or, more subtly, understand the virtue of 'strength', for example, as located in a different context, with different manifestations and directed to different ends.

As this last example might hint at, however, we should not conclude from these differences, that conceptions of flourishing are necessarily incommensurable, nor that there might not be concepts common to the idea of a good life or flourishing across different societies and communities. Some of these relate to aspects of our psychophysical embodiment that determine our species membership, healthy digestive systems, properly functioning sensory and cognitive organs and so on, but others particularly

those relating to our psychology and ethical-emotional lives might differ widely across different cultures and historical periods, but nevertheless share what Wittgenstein called ‘family resemblances’. Cross cultural ethnography might both revise aspects of our own conceptual structures of value or lead to mutual reconstructions. In any event, as the Cambridge philosopher of Ancient Philosophy and Science, G.E.R. Lloyd (2012) [7] has argued in his book ‘Being, Humanity and Understanding’, even very different conceptual divisions of reality and humanity between societies are not incommensurable. Neither, however, should we suppose that *within* any given society an essence of any of the normative concepts related to flourishing could be identified that allow for its incorporation amongst the ‘laws of our nature’. What these concepts mean is more closely captured by Wittgenstein’s conception of family resemblance. Reflections from the Philosopher E. B. Litwack (2011) [8] help to elucidate this point:

‘Notions such as ‘humanity’, ‘wellbeing’ and ‘flourishing’ are all applied in diverse ways to the point that there is no fixed and single set of characteristics that can be identified with them. However, we can still identify aspects of them in particular cases. Furthermore, particular cases exhibiting them are likely to vary in their particular patterns.... For example, in speaking of a person’s humanity as morally relevant, we might be attempting to express a number of things. Our goal may be to elicit compassion for the person, to encourage a sense of collective solidarity...All of these goals will share the family resemblance of being part of our moral practices which are concerned with human wellbeing in manifold ways.’

Evolutionary psychology and the flourishing life

One dominating picture of the nature of humanity emerges from the modern rationalist scientific world view that the articulation of what reality actually is, including an explanation of human nature and behaviour, will be determined by the yield of the sciences. One form that a potential explanation of this type has commonly taken is the following: if we combine evolutionary psychology with Aristotelian teleology we will properly explain what we are and why we behave the way we do. Here, we want to know what a properly flourishing human life consists in and the question can be answered in the following way; we have evolved in such a way that if we can identify both the ends and the patterns of behaviour, both social and individual, that have developed to achieve those ends (the promulgation and survival of genes or gene expression), then we can specify these as those goals which will indicate proper flourishing. Hence, we will have derived a normative set of standards which might allow us to work towards social structures that can uniquely satisfy these.

What of course we take to be *the* natural social structure, is fraught with difficulties. It is at least conceivable that there is no such thing and, as Kenin Malik has pointed out, the general attempt to explain social structures in terms of evolutionary sociology most often

involves a reading of current/historical social structures back into the evolutionary past. Earlier reflections in the paragraphs above on the nature of the concepts we use and through which we try to articulate the values and social life of human communities, only emphasise how hopeless this task is. It will not help either to suppose that one could identify cognitive, affective and other evolved processes and attempt to use these to derive a maximally satisfying ‘natural structure’, since the same problem will just re-iterate itself. This is one kind of problem with attempts, for example, to ground a concept like ‘compassion’ in evolutionary terms, since not only is the meaning of the term a complex outcome of cultural history, but it differs in meaning across many different human worlds. The Wittgensteinian warning against supposing there to be an ‘essence’ or necessary and sufficient condition that yields *the* meaning of the word and hence a definable nature, echoes again. This blocks the view that some fundamental process that constitutes ‘compassion’, or is fundamental to all forms of compassion, could be identified. Since there could be no such process, there could ‘*ipso facto*’ be no ‘specialised’ evolved module underpinning ‘compassion’ and, consequently, no stable ‘scientific’ account of the phenomena. As should be clear, this is a function of its partially normative and culturally dependent status.

If we want to retain for our self-conception the idea that we have an ethical sense that transcends and thereby enables ethical judgement of the desirability or otherwise of putative evolved characteristics, then a substantial problem is that if the atheistic scientist Richard Dawkins and others are right about the totality of gene selection and survival, there is no guarantee, to say the least, that evolution is a respecter of the right to life and limb of persons. Here, leaving old people to die in the cold might turn out to be the best preserver and guarantor of gene survival and flourishing. Nevertheless, suppose an evolutionary theorist attempted some defence of the unacceptability of such treatment of the elderly by arguing that compassion, caring for each other, and so on, were fundamental to our evolved humanity and the grounds of moral behaviour. As such, they provided an evolutionary guarantee, so to speak, for the moral basis from which to speak about ethical matters. The trouble with this is that evolution is, itself, ethically free. It provides no standards for evaluation. What works is what results in gene propagation. Should it turn out that loss of ‘compassion’ in changing environments results in improved survival rates, then ‘compassion’ will go. Not only this, but the choice to try and ground ethics in virtues such as ‘compassion’ gives the game away. We identify ‘compassion’ as a morally desirable trait *before* we choose it as a grounding aspect of our moral psychology. To try to reduce ethics to compassion and compassion to evolution is circular; we recognise compassion as a value, because we believe it is good to be compassionate. So to choose compassion as that out of which ethics emerges is already to have recognised its essential value.

Fact, value and evolution

We can evaluate the goodness or otherwise of our evolved behaviour (if indeed, there can be patterns of determined evolved behaviour which emerge as having an identifiable essence across any and all cultures, times and communities), because we can distinguish between fact and value. In other words, we can see how things are, but we can also imagine or think how they could be different. Once we have done this, it is but a short step to asking the question 'How would it be best for them to be?' This ability and its associated creative partners, lies not only at the heart of value, but at the centre of human life. The practice of medicine itself rests on the awareness that things might be otherwise. Value and imagination are perhaps less trickily associated when we think about broken legs than mental health issues and flourishing; but in any event, once we have entered the realm of value and because we have the capacity to act in pursuit of goals, we try to direct our actions in such a manner that they are aimed at attaining the desired outcome and we evaluate our own actions and those of others against the normative standard our desired picture sets for us.

The capacities for evaluation, self-reflection and self-governance (to the extent to which we are capable of this), by free will and choice, are ineliminably linked to the standards and culture from which we derive the identities that give shape to the behaviours in virtue of which these abilities are manifest. The psychologist and philosopher, Kenan Malik (1998) [9] expresses it this way:

"Humans.... Do not simply have experiences, desires and needs and react to them - we are also aware that we have them, that there is an 'I' which is the subject of these experiences. Humans are aware of themselves as agents and of the world towards which their agency is directed."

As Malik rightly notes, the awareness of agency, self, world and other, has an inextricable link with language as the vehicle of social construction:

"Human sociability is different. At its heart lies a skill that is uniquely human...without language, an animal may be able to react to the world, but it cannot, in any significant sense, think about it. It can have beliefs about the world, but cannot know it has such beliefs."

To know that a belief or beliefs are held, is to recognise a distance between the way things are and the way they are represented; that is, to acknowledge the possibility that they may be otherwise. This capacity is, in its turn, a condition on the possibility of imagination; that is, that they could look some other way. Moral imagination governs this possibility by providing normative conceptions of how things would be best to be. These factors lift human life from the causal determinants of biological forces and into the possibility of culture, value and identities that are self-creating and sustaining.

Whether some action is right or wrong, or some way of life is desirable or undesirable, or some form of life or

belief to be chosen above another, or some spiritual or political belief embraced and, these matters are often bitterly disputed or clung to because they involve deep identity, can hardly be decided by reference to some fact about what we have evolved to do: it can always be asked of some putative fact about our evolved behaviour whether or not we ought to act in such a way, or, symmetrically, of some way of life and social organisation, or conception of flourishing, whether it is ethically sound, desirable, or more simply, right or wrong. Were there to be agreement that some characteristic of human life was an outcome of deterministic evolutionary processes, but was ethically unacceptable, then we would no doubt set about developing ways of controlling or eradicating the identified tendency [10].

Conclusion

In general and in conclusion, considerations such as these show that our evolutionary history cannot isolate the essence of what a flourishing and ethical human life might be independent of a sociocultural context. It is not even clear what 'essence' might describe independent of any social context. The variability of potential social organisation suggests that, if anything, we have evolved the capacity to partly shape our own natures in accordance with what we most value, or, bearing in mind the possibility of universal objective values, what we ought to value. How we are to value flourishing is a matter for open discussion, has a place for the disciplines of the Humanities and is not just an issue for specialist medical and biological sciences and institutions which may be equipped to offer empirical contributions where pertinent, but whose disciplinary expertise does not confer epistemological hegemony in matters of wellbeing.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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