

How, then, shall we use...broad ideas about flourishing and suffering to help us understand what our concrete priorities should be? Individuals and groups of people have different values and priorities, after all. How can we claim to know what someone else wants or needs?

An answer—not the only answer, but my answer—is to begin with some basic, universally agreed upon and non-controversial attributes of humanity. We may not know every detail about every individual, but we do know certain things about what it means to be a person. We know, for example, that all people, as human beings, share certain characteristics and traits, capacities and needs. I've chosen some attributes of humanity with which I think no one could reasonably disagree. These attributes make us who we are as human beings. Our individual and cultural experiences with these attributes differ, but all of them describe all people to at least some degree:

We are embodied, physical beings. We are emotional, feelings-driven beings. We are relational beings who are both dependent on and interdependent with others. We are meaning-making beings who need to make sense of our experiences and our lives. Telling stories is a key way in which we make meaning. We are agentic beings, which is to say that we have self-efficacy and the need to act on and have an impact on the world around us. We are learning beings who grow and develop over the course of our lives. We are societal beings, meaning that our lives are interwoven with the larger societies of which we are a part. We are moral beings, and sometimes immoral beings. We are creative beings, given both to making new things and to appreciating the creativity of others. We are spiritual beings, meaning that we can experience awe, reverence, wonder, and a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves. Our spirituality can be tied to organized religion, but it does not need to be.

It's important to bear in mind that enumerating these attributes of humanity separately is artificial. We are always embodied and always emotional and always relational and so on. The reason to separate out each attribute is to understand how it is part of our humanity and what implications it has for our flourishing and suffering. As it turns out, we do not merely flourish and suffer as individuals or even as members of social groups; we flourish and suffer as embodied beings, emotional beings, relational beings, and in the context of the other attributes listed above.

Once we bring the lofty language of flourishing down to the specifics of human attributes, we begin to understand concrete ways in which we can contribute to our own flourishing and to the flourishing of others, both people we know and people we do not know. We also move toward identifying concrete ways to work against our own suffering and the suffering of others.