

## Human Flourishing and Social Inequality

A Colorado College “Staff Infection” Talk by Amanda Udis-Kessler, Shove Chapel, Colorado College, March 31, 2015 [“Staff Infection” was a short-lived venue for Colorado College staff to present on topics outside of their job description]

Today I’d like to propose a way of thinking about why social inequality is morally wrong that I have, at the least, not heard articulated this way before. And it begins with this set of questions: Why do we care so much about human rights? Equality? Justice? Freedom? Economic efficiency? Why do they matter? We usually talk about these values as being ends in themselves, but I think they can be productively understood as means to an end. And that end is human flourishing, human thriving, human well-being. What is the value of liberty, for example? We need it in order to have good lives. Why does equality matter? Because without it, only some of us get to have good lives. What I’d like to do today is set up some assumptions that need to be in place for us to treat human flourishing as a moral end in itself that would merit extremely high priority in ethical decision-making, and then suggest briefly what this has to do with social inequality.

Let’s start with a quote from Joe “The Plumber” Wurzelbacher, from after one of the many mass shootings of recent years. Joe wrote, in reference to gun control, “Your dead kids don’t trump my constitutional rights.” An ethics of human flourishing says that Joe is wrong – dead wrong. Because an ethics of flourishing says that everyone ought to get to have a good life and that this priority trumps virtually all principles, abstractions, and institutions when it’s time to make a moral decision. Consider the Defense of Marriage Act. Marriage is an institution. It doesn’t have a heart that can be broken, but same-sex couples who can’t legally marry may well have broken hearts. Then there’s the right of gun ownership without restrictions. Some people guard this right as fiercely as they would their own child. But their own child could be shot to death by a mentally ill criminal who should never have had access to a gun but did. In both of these cases, an ethics of flourishing says that it is of the highest priority that two people in love be able to marry, and that children get to grow up without fear of being shot. Protecting marriage, whatever that even means, is of lower priority, as is the right to have a gun with no restrictions.

An ethics of flourishing puts the lived experience of people ahead of theories, principles, and even certain values. We can talk all day about liberty, equal rights, and so on, but unless these concepts are grounded in actual human lives, they are meaningless, and can be used to cause harm just as easily as to cause good. So, we start with actual experiences, and with the priority of maximizing flourishing and minimizing suffering in those actual experiences. From this perspective, most immoral acts are immoral because they block or damage flourishing and cause suffering. And by the way, for those of you who are particularly interested in ethics, an ethics of flourishing draws on consequentialism in its concern for maximizing the good. But it is not merely about the greatest possible number of people flourishing; it is about everyone being treated in ways that support flourishing and is therefore deontological, even Kantian. And an ethics of flourishing is also of necessity a virtue ethics, since it invites us both to seek out our own well-being and to cultivate traits and virtues in ourselves that help us seek and work toward the flourishing of others. Finally, an ethics of thriving relies on sociology to make sense of social

inequality and how it interferes with well-being and causes suffering, though I will not have time to address this last point today.

To define human flourishing, we can start with the human in human flourishing. What does it mean to be human? I'll propose three general ways of answering this question, all of which have implications for human well-being. First, we are not merely individuals and we are not merely human beings in an overarching sense. We are certainly individuals; we have different experiences and make sense of them in different ways. And we are certainly human beings in that we all share certain needs and gifts. We must not forget either of these aspects of being human. But we are simultaneously also all members of social groups. We are grouped depending on whether we are male or female or genderqueer; we are grouped according to our skin color and other biological markers that are given social significance. We are grouped according to the gender or genders to which we are attracted. We are grouped according to how much money we make and how much wealth we have, and we are grouped in many other ways. Being different from one another in our group identities would be fine if not for the fact that we are also either valued or devalued depending on which type of group identities we have, and being valued or devalued impacts our ability to flourish. For example, women are much more likely to be raped than men, and LGBTQ people are much more likely to be beaten up than heterosexuals, and both the fear of violence and the experience of it interfere with flourishing in these cases. Today, when I talk about devalued groups I will mostly mean women, LGBTQ people, people of color, poor people, religious minorities, people with disabilities, and Latin American immigrants, whether documented or not.

It can be hard to hold together the complexity that we are simultaneously individuals, human beings in a general sense, and members of social groups, but when someone is treated in a way that ignores any of these aspects of being human, the treatment in question is probably less than ideal. Being treated as a member of a group instead of as an individual, especially a member of a devalued group, can lead to all kinds of prejudice and discrimination. Being treated as an individual when one is a member of a devalued group has some benefits, but it means one's challenges as a member of the devalued group are ignored and one's description of one's own life is probably not taken seriously. And we call failure to treat someone as a human being dehumanization and history shows how often it ends in suffering and even death. We can't understand either human well-being or human suffering without having some grasp of these different aspects of being a person.

There are a variety of traits that go with being human; these matter because they need to be supported for someone to be able to flourish. Here are a few examples from a much longer list:

- We can only experience reality by interpreting it; to flourish we need access to interpretations of reality in which we are valued and valuable people
- We are embodied and for that reason are vulnerable to illness and injury; at the same time our embodiment allows us to experience great joy and agency through our bodies. To flourish we need access to healthcare and freedom from violence; we also need access to the many ways we might enjoy life as embodied beings
- We are socialized to see the world in certain ways; to flourish we need to live in societies where we are valued and others are as well so that we can and want to contribute to our well-being and the well-being of others

- We are volitional in that we want and desire things; to flourish we need access to at least some of the things we want or we will receive the message that we are not worthy of having what society considers good
- We are group-centered in that we identify with particular groups of people, from our families to our communities to other types of groups; to flourish, we must have access to the groups that are meaningful to us and not be cast out of them or shunned by them
- We have creative and artistic capabilities; to flourish we need access to the creativity of others so that it might enrich our lives, and we need time and space to be creative ourselves
- Similarly, we have the capacity to be playful; to flourish we need time, space, and opportunities to play, relax, and laugh, and we need to be free enough from danger that we can set our minds to joy
- Our emotions are central to our lives; to flourish we need to be free from emotional harm and able to live our emotional lives fully so that we can be joyful when we are joyful, grieve when we experience loss, be angry at injustice and otherwise be the emotional beings we are
- Finally, we are shaped by our memories; to flourish we must have enough access to a good life and enough freedom from fear and harm that our memories do not traumatize us and, moreover, that they solidify our sense of being good people with lives of blessing

There's one more important aspect of what it means to be a human being that has implications for thriving, which is that we are simultaneously independent, dependent, and interdependent.

- We are independent in that we make our own decisions to at least some degree and our ability to thrive relies on our capacity to determine at least some aspects of our lives.
- We are dependent in that we rely on the planet for air and the work of other people for food, water, our possessions, specialized attention such as medical care, a sense of meaning, and the experience of love. Who we are has a lot to do with how we have been raised to make sense of our lives. It is always other human beings who, through our interactions with them, bring us into community and give our lives a sense of purpose. Our dependence means that we can only thrive if others treat us well and support our well-being, and only if we can trust them to do so
- We are interdependent in that we make attachments and promises to others and they to us; we build communities and society together; each of us did, or will, contribute to the world we live in unless prevented from doing so. We don't merely need others; they need us as well, for love and care and all the things that go into making society happen on a day-to-day basis. Our interdependence means that when we are socially separated from others, through inequality or for other reasons, we all suffer even if some suffer more, and all of us are limited in our ability to flourish.

Given all these aspects of being human, what does it mean to thrive? This is at best a very preliminary definition but I think it captures some important elements. To thrive is to be encouraged to be and become our whole best selves, to be able to fulfill our potential, to enjoy the good things of life, and to contribute effectively to both our own well-being and that of other people. To thrive is to experience pleasure and to be the source of other people's pleasure. To thrive fully is to thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, by which I mean in our connections to others and the larger universe around us.

What, then, do we need to flourish? What are the preconditions that allow us lives of well-being? Quite a few have already been mentioned; here's a summary:

- We need access to basic survival resources such as air, food, water, shelter, rest, healthcare, education, work and sufficient money to live, and access to the political system in order to play a role in focusing it toward our flourishing.
- We need freedom from fear as a defining factor of our lives, which means we need freedom from negative, violent, and dangerous experiences and situations including mistreatment by individuals, groups, and institutions in the forms of prejudice and discrimination. We also need to be free from the self-hatred often experienced by devalued social groups, and the kinds of self-destruction that can accompany such self-hatred. In short, we need a certain degree of safety to flourish.
- Ideally, we would also have access to socially valued goods, experiences, and opportunities, what we consider the good things in life. These might include higher education that is not merely about getting a job but that whets our imaginations and strengthens our capacities; access to work that does not merely pay minimum wage but is meaningful; access to creative activities and time to be creative; the ability to do things for pleasure and entertainment.
- We need access to self-determination of beliefs, values, and action in order to make choices about our own lives that will allow us to flourish. This requirement turns out to be complicated once we add the claim that we should be concerned about the well-being of others, not just ourselves, and the moral thing to do may turn out to be to use our freedom in the service of others' well-being sometimes, but we need the freedom to make that decision nonetheless.
- Finally, we only have access to basic survival resources, freedom from negative experiences, access to the good things in life, and a degree of freedom if we are valued and respected by others, taken seriously, and treated with dignity and worth. Put differently, we won't flourish unless others support our flourishing. Hopefully, you can already see what social inequality has to do with all this but I need to take one more step before I make the direct connection.

An ethics of flourishing is also, in a sense, an ethics about suffering in that it says unnecessary suffering is a moral problem and one that we ought to assuage. Part of being a human being is that we all have beloved family members die. However, white people, especially wealthy white people in the US, don't tend to have beloved family members die at the hands of the police and with their reputations smeared all over the media. As the First Noble Truth of the Buddha says clearly, life is full of dissatisfaction, probably a better term than the word "suffering" that we usually use. But again, we ought to be discerning about when suffering can be avoided or prevented, and we ought to be committed to struggling against unnecessary suffering. There are questions we can ask about different actions and ethical priorities along these lines: Does this action, priority, or value increase flourishing, and for whom? Does it increase suffering, and for whom? Are some people benefitting from other people's suffering? If so, is this outcome really morally acceptable?

Which, finally, brings us directly to the matter of social inequality. It's tempting to say that social inequality is a moral problem because it limits the freedom of devalued people, or because it interferes with equality or civil rights or justice or even, as some economists have suggested, because it interferes with the free working of the market. But again, if one claims, as I have, that these things are means to an end then social inequality is a moral problem for a quite different

reason: it damages and limits human flourishing, causes human suffering, and in the worst cases leads to dehumanization that can end in torture and death. After all, perhaps one of the most important elements of devaluing or dehumanizing someone due to their group identity is the failure to care whether they flourish or suffer, and in some cases, the desire that they suffer. Here are some examples of the relationship between inequality and flourishing or suffering, taken from the ideas presented above:

- When a person is treated, not as the complex human being they are, but as a member of a devalued group, they may be treated badly and find themselves living in fear of prejudice, discrimination, or violence.
- When a person is treated strictly as an individual despite belonging to a devalued social group, the reality of their experiences with devaluation and their need for allies with whom to struggle against the devaluation may be ignored.
- I've already suggested that dehumanization can have horrific individual and collective outcomes, many of which we've seen both historically and still see today.
- Considering the abbreviated list of traits that make us human, when someone belongs to a devalued group, the needs that come with these traits – the need for our bodies to be free from harm and to be sources of pleasure, the need for meaning systems that tell us we are valuable, the need for access to our groups, the need for creativity and play, the need to live our emotional lives freely and without harm, and the need to build positive memories, among others – may all be ignored or even purposely subverted in order to hurt devalued people.
- Members of devalued groups may lose the freedom to live in certain ways, or may find that their dependence on others comes at a cost, or may find the interdependence built into our social contracts to be tenuous and frail.
- Members of devalued groups may not have complete access to basic survival resources or to the good things in life, may live in fear of and indeed experience negative, violent, and dangerous situations and, as already noted, may be denied a variety of freedoms.
- Members of devalued groups may learn self-hatred and self-destructive behaviors; if society does not support their well-being, why should they?
- A member of a devalued group, just by virtue of being devalued, may be allowed to suffer or made to suffer by members of valued groups.
- Finally, the prejudice and mistreatment visited on members of devalued groups hurts members of valued groups as well, and in a variety of ways. Once members of a social group have been devalued and dehumanized, members of valued groups may respond to the devalued group with fear and be unable to make meaningful connections with them. This can impact family relationships and friendships. For example, when an LGBTQ+ person comes out to a homophobic or transphobic family member, their relationship may be damaged or even destroyed, which exacerbates suffering for both people. At a larger level, when groups of people fear or dislike each other each group is less able to learn about the other group and benefit from its gifts. And belonging to a valued group can cause suffering if the social expectations about what it means to be part of that group are harmful. If being a “real man” requires suppressing emotions, taking dangerous risks, or being violent, for example, expectations of masculinity cause suffering even if masculinity is more socially valued than femininity.

If you find this set of arguments, or even some of them convincing, I invite you to think about social inequality through the lenses of human flourishing and human suffering. And if, as I do,

you believe that human flourishing is a good thing to pursue as often as possible and unnecessary human suffering is a good thing to mitigate as often as possible, I invite you to figure out what role you can have in these processes. Thank you.