

Racism, Flourishing, and Suffering: Ethics for White People Working against Racism

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Land Acknowledgement

I recognize that, in Colorado, we learn, teach, and live on or near the ancestral homelands of the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Pueblo, Shoshone, and Ute Peoples. We at Colorado College are specifically situated on the traditional territories of the Southern Ute Nation, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and the Northern Ute Peoples. We have a responsibility to acknowledge our Indigenous connections, as well as the histories of dispossession and forced removal that have allowed for the growth and survival of this institution. We also have a responsibility to recognize and highlight the continued social, intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions of Indigenous Peoples to Colorado College, Colorado Springs, and all of society.

Today's Topics

- The problem with grounding ethics in principles
- Shifting ethics from principles to people
- An ethic of flourishing: core claims
- The human in human flourishing
- Flourishing, and suffering as human beings
- How racism blocks flourishing and causes avoidable suffering for BIPOC community members
- How racism blocks flourishing and causes avoidable suffering for whites
- A white virtue ethic of solidarity: an invitation for white people
- Q&A/discussion
- Blank slides for short “breathers”

Two Stories

- Joe “the Plumber” Wurzelbacher’s 2014 open letter to parents of young people killed in Elliott Rodgers’ shooting/stabbing spree that killed six people and injured 14 others:
 - “As harsh as this sounds – your dead kids don’t trump my Constitutional [gun] rights.”
- 1920s US government laws requiring industrial alcohols to include poisons such as kerosene, chloroform, mercury salts, and nicotine, and requiring that up to 10% of the total alcohol product consist of deadly methyl alcohol
 - Intended to deter illegal alcohol consumption
 - Killed over 10,000 individuals who did not or could not stop drinking (Deborah Blum. “The Chemist’s War.” *Slate*, 2010)

Three Framing Quotes

- “There is something perverse about using moral arguments to inflict harm rather than to alleviate it.” (John Corvino, *What’s Wrong with Homosexuality?*, 2013, p. 76)
- “The greatest sin of the age is to make the concrete abstract.” (Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev; quoted in Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service*, 2017, p. 61)
- “It’s hard to be philosophical when faced with suffering.” (Dr. Beverly Crusher, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Season 1, Episode 21: Symbiosis)

Racism as Morally Wrong: Common Principles

- Injustice
- Inequality
- Loss of freedom (for members of BIPOC communities)
- Loss of efficiency (for, e.g., businesses) or other harm to systems such as capitalism

The Problem with Principles

- Principles are morally neutral and can be used for good or ill
- Freedom to vote OR to pass laws that restrict voting
- Freedom to design a course to maximize student learning OR to assign racist/sexist/homophobic materials
- Free speech can lift up the voices and concerns of devalued people OR promulgate hatred and terror
- US American freedom through history: all the freedoms at the heart of feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, LGBTQ liberation.....
- US American freedom through history: murder Indigenous people, own slaves, control your wife, profit off dangerous products, destroy the environment

Freedom Can Help or Harm

- Freedom to Vote Act, New Jersey's Freedom of Reproductive Choice Act
- Freedom to endanger others by not wearing a mask or getting vaccinated
- Florida's "Individual Freedom" bill prohibiting the teaching of Critical Race Theory
- Iowa's "Parental Freedom in Education Act" would have allowed parents to prevent children learning anything parents found objectionable

Other Values and Principles

- “Women’s rights” versus the “rights of the unborn”
- “Gun rights” (versus the “right” to be safe in school?)
- “Gay rights” versus “family rights” (1980s culture wars)
- “Equality” used to argue both for and against (for example) affirmative action

Another Problem with Principles

- Freedom is not distributed equally; members of valued groups get more of it
- Whites are freer than members of BIPOC communities
- Men are freer than women
- Wealthy people are freer than poor people
- Heterosexuals and cisgender people are freer than LGBTQ+ people
- Principles understood as abstract and neutral miss the already existing social patterns of systematic inequality and thus reinforce them

Shifting Ethics from Principles to People

- If principles can be deployed for moral good or moral evil, what's the alternative?
- An ethic that centers the well-being of actual people rather than centering principles
- Principles as a means to an end, not an end-in-themselves
- The end-in-itself is human flourishing/well-being/thriving
- Human flourishing is grounded in concrete understandings of people and personhood: human traits, capacities, needs

Human Flourishing: A First Pass

- Living lives in which we are encouraged and enabled to:
 - Be and become our whole best selves
 - Fulfill our potential
 - Contribute effectively to society and to the well-being of others
 - Enjoy the good things in life deeply
- The issue of non-human and planetary flourishing is also crucial but beyond today's scope

Suffering and Flourishing

- The opposite of flourishing is avoidable suffering
- Some suffering is not avoidable (and should not be avoided)
- Some suffering would be avoidable if our society worked differently
- Avoidable suffering limits flourishing

Ethic of Flourishing: Core Claims

- All people ought to have the opportunity to flourish
- An ethically good act is one that supports one's own flourishing and/or the flourishing of others
- An ethically bad act is one that contributes to otherwise avoidable suffering
- The same can be said of values, beliefs, ideas, cultural norms, organizations, and large-scale institutions
- The point is not to write off a particular value, action, or institution but to understand whether it is leading to flourishing or suffering, and for whom

The Moral Problem with Racism

- It limits, blocks, and damages flourishing for people from BIPOC communities
- It causes avoidable suffering for people from BIPOC communities
- To a lesser extent and in different ways, it blocks flourishing and causes avoidable suffering for white people
- AND racism is unjust, promulgates inequality, limits BIPOC freedom (and some kinds of white freedom), and is morally troubling in all the other ways we traditionally understand

Humanity and Pat Parker's Paradox

A quote from Black lesbian feminist poet Pat Parker:

“The first thing you do is to forget that I’m black.
Second, you must never forget that I’m black.”

(From the poem “For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend,” *Movement in Black*, 1978)

The Human in Human Flourishing

- People as simultaneously:
 - Individuals with unique experiences, understandings, stories
 - Human beings with universally common traits, gifts, needs
 - Members of social groups, including groups that are differently socially valued and therefore either privileged or penalized based on a group identity
 - Specifically, whites are given, and BIPOC people are denied, the benefit of the doubt with regard to competence, morality, trustworthiness, and dangerousness, and white people often consider BIPOC people to be outside the “moral community” deserving of just/fair treatment
- All three aspects of humanity are always in play, but differently salient in different situations
- This talk focuses on people as human beings

People as Human Beings: Universal Aspects

- Relational beings, inescapably interwoven with other people
- Social beings, inescapably interwoven with society
- Embodied beings who live and experience agency, joy, and vulnerability through our bodies
- Emotional beings who experience a wide range of positive and negative emotions, feelings, moods
- Meaning-making beings who literally need for our lives to make sense in order to survive
- Learning beings who gain personal, intellectual, and other kinds of knowledge and skills and who grow over time by trying things, experimenting, exploring

Universal Human Aspects, cont.

- Playful beings who need to laugh, enjoy things, rest and relax, be silly, and celebrate
- Moral/ethical (and immoral/unethical) beings who love and hate, create and destroy, act generously and selfishly, and who have the capacity for tremendous good and evil
 - Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: the line between good and evil runs down the middle of every human heart (*Gulag Archipelago*, Volume 2, 1975)
- Creative beings who make and remake ourselves and our material, intellectual, and social world by generating new ideas, things, and relationships

Universal Human Aspects, cont.

- Spiritual (not necessarily religious) beings capable of experiencing awe, reverence, wonder, gratitude, humility, openness, hope, a sense of abundance, a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves (a story, community, or life project)
- Agentic beings with self-efficacy, capacity, purpose, the need to act on and have an impact on the world around us as we pursue our goals and intentions
- These aspects of humanity are all interwoven; they inform and enrich and complicate each other
- Individual experiences of these aspects vary, as do group-based experiences of them

Flourishing and Suffering: Relational Beings

- We flourish when we are treated well by others and can establish meaningful relationships, when we love others and are loved by them, when we belong to others and to larger communities
- We suffer when we are shunned, isolated, devalued, mistreated, or otherwise kept from meaningful relationships, when our care is rejected, when we do not belong to anyone or to any community

Flourishing and Suffering: Social Beings

- We flourish when we can make our way through the social world successfully, interacting with individuals, communities, and organizations (family, religious, educational, healthcare, the government, legal systems, workplaces, culture/the arts, the media, sports...)
- We suffer when individuals, communities, and organizations treat us badly or we are unable to interact with them successfully

Flourishing and Suffering: Embodied Beings

- We flourish when:
 - We are physically safe and free from physical/sexual violence
 - We have sufficient resources for bodily health (nutritious food, safe water, clean air, shelter, clothing, money to pay for these)
 - We have access to free or affordable quality healthcare
 - We have control over our bodies and what happens to them
 - We have opportunities to use our bodies for pleasure, connection with other people, and accomplishments (work, play, creativity)

Flourishing and Suffering: Embodied Beings

- We suffer when:
 - We experience physical/sexual violence
 - We don't have sufficient resources for bodily health
 - We don't have access to decent healthcare
 - We don't have control over our bodies and what happens to them
 - We are blocked or restricted from using our bodies in efficacious and pleasurable ways

Flourishing and Suffering: Emotional Beings

- We flourish when we can live free of fear and have unfettered access to the full range of our emotions so that positive emotions can be enjoyed and expressed while negative ones can be processed and released before they become self-destructive
- We flourish when society takes mental health as seriously as physical health and provides accessible quality mental healthcare accordingly
- We suffer when we are subjected to systematic fear or emotional abuse or trauma, have negative rather than positive life experiences that limit joy and cause stress, anxiety, and pain, or are unable to process and release negative emotions.
- We suffer when society stigmatizes mental health challenges and fails to provide resources to address them

Flourishing and Suffering: Meaning-Making Beings

- We flourish when we can make sense of our lives and the world around us in ways that are empowering and positive and that provide guidance for action
- We suffer when our lives don't make sense or only make sense in terms of negative experiences or understandings of the world

Flourishing and Suffering: Learning Beings

- We flourish when we can add to our knowledge and skills over the course of our lives, continuing to grow in the process, and when we are able to try things, fail, learn from our failures, and do better
- We flourish when we have access to formal and informal developmentally appropriate educational opportunities and resources
- We suffer when we are not permitted to learn (including from our mistakes) and when we do not have access to educational opportunities and resources for cultural or structural reasons

Flourishing and Suffering: Playful Beings

- We flourish when we have time, space, and opportunities to play, relax, and laugh, alone and with others, including downtime or protected time, and when we are free from danger or risk of harm so that we can be truly vulnerable
- We suffer when we do not have time, space, and opportunities for playfulness and relaxation or when we are so regularly at risk of harm or danger that we cannot let our guard down

Flourishing and Suffering: Moral/Ethical Beings

- We flourish when we are empowered to live according to a moral code that makes sense to us and that leads us to treat ourselves and others well, and when we are understood to be morally worthy of good treatment by others
- We flourish when we have information to help us judge what is good, right and true, and freedom to act on those judgments
- We suffer when the prevailing social morality sees us as inherently immoral, untrustworthy, and unworthy of positive treatment, when we are excluded from the “moral community,” or when our circumstances limit our ability to live morally
- We suffer when our access to information and our freedom to act are limited, making us unable to judge what is good and act on that judgment

Flourishing and Suffering: Creative Beings

- We flourish when we can do our own creating in whatever form has integrity for us (including having time, space, and resources to create), when our creativity is encouraged and supported, and when we can experience and appreciate the creativity and creative products of others
- We suffer when we are restricted from being creative or not supported in our creative efforts, and when we do not have access to the creativity and creative products of others

Flourishing and Suffering: Spiritual Beings

- We flourish when we have access to experiences, opportunities, and resources that help us cultivate awe, reverence, wonder, gratitude, humility, openness, hope, a sense of abundance, and a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves (a story, a community, a life project...)
- We suffer when we are cut off from such experiences, opportunities, and resources or when we learn that the world is inherently bleak, violent, chaotic, and harmful – worthy of fear rather than gratitude

Flourishing and Suffering: Agentic Beings

- We flourish when we have the freedom, protection, and access to resources that allow us to pursue our desires, make what we want of our lives, take action, and have an effect on the world
- We suffer when our agency is blocked, particularly when it is blocked by cultural values or systematic inequality, when our desires have no outlet (or no outlet that has integrity for us), when freedom is denied, protection is withheld, and access to resources is limited

Integrated Flourishing, Dehumanizing Suffering

- As human beings, we flourish to the extent that we can live out our relational, social, embodied, emotional, meaning-making, learning, playful, moral/ethical, creative, spiritual, agentic lives in as full, rich, safe, and integrated a way as possible (thus, “integrated flourishing”)
- We suffer to the extent that we are unable to experience, express, or live into these aspects of our human being fully, richly, and safely, or to integrate them in our lives (and are thus dehumanized)

In Summary

- If flourishing is living a life in which we are encouraged and enabled to:
 - Be and become our whole best selves
 - Fulfill our potential
 - Contribute effectively to society
 - Enjoy the good things in life deeply...
- Avoidable suffering happens when we are discouraged or prevented from doing so

Racism and Systematically Differential Flourishing

- Racism as systematically differential access to the freedom, resources, opportunities and experiences that make it possible to flourish
- Racism as systematically differential exposure to the harms, threats, and traumas that cause avoidable suffering
- Racism affords white people more opportunities to flourish and members of BIPOC communities fewer opportunities to flourish
- Racism affords white people more opportunities to avoid the situations and conditions that lead to avoidable suffering, while forcing members of BIPOC communities to experience those situations and conditions
- The flourishing of white people is tied to the avoidable suffering of members of BIPOC communities
- Of course it's more complicated than that, and other forms of systematic inequality harm white people – but not AS white people

Racism, Relationality and Sociality

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as relational beings when whites (including others acting on behalf of white supremacy):
 - Withhold the benefit of the doubt from them regarding competence, morality, trustworthiness, and dangerousness
 - Exclude, shun, devalue, and isolate them
 - Treat them as less than fully human
- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as social beings as a result of community and organizational structures that set BIPOC people up for intentional and unintentional mistreatment, discrimination, and harm, both in individual interactions and in the policies, practices, and cultures of (for example) the media, the criminal justice system, schools, religion, the workplace, the voting booth, and the healthcare system

Racism and Embodiment

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as embodied beings when whites:
 - Believe (and act on the belief) that BIPOC bodies are suspicious, dangerous, or subhuman, with the result that BIPOC individuals are not physically free or safe
 - Promulgate cultural and ideological understandings of BIPOC inferiority that lead BIPOC people to experience internalized racism
 - Physically and emotionally harmful on its own
 - Can lead to self-destructive actions
 - Prejudge and mistreat BIPOC people in healthcare contexts (research on white doctors/medical students believing Black people feel less pain than white people)
 - Assault and murder BIPOC people
- In addition, the many harms, indignities, stresses, and traumas of racism exhaust, wear out and weather BIPOC bodies, leading to more illness and shorter lives

Racism and Emotionality

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as emotional beings as a result of:
 - The emotional stress, trauma, and rage of experiencing racism over time and in many places, across individual interactions, through culture, and in organizations
 - The routine need to negotiate the indignities and harms of racism, to wonder whether and how they should respond to whatever racist thing was just said or done
 - The need to control public displays of emotion lest they be seen as “too angry” (and other requirements that white comfort come before BIPOC well-being)
 - Fearing for their lives and the lives of those they love
 - Worth remembering that emotions are embodied and impact bodies as well

Racism and Meaning-Making

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as meaning-making beings as a result of needing to make sense of a white society that devalues them, withholds the benefit of the doubt from them, restricts their access to valued resources, opportunities, and experiences, dehumanizes them, and too frequently kills them
- James H. Cone (from *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 2011, p. 28):

“Dealing with nearly 400 years of ongoing suffering in African American history is enough to make any black person lose faith...trying to find meaning in an absurd world of white supremacy.”

Racism, Learning, and Playfulness

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as learning beings as a result of:
 - Having less access to high-quality educational opportunities and resources
 - Having more limited mental bandwidth (cognitive and emotional resources) as a result of navigating racism; this can interfere with learning
 - Having the benefit of the doubt withheld such that mistakes that would, for white people, be opportunities to learn and do better, become occasions for mistreatment, rejection, or violence
- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as playful beings when risks of racist harm and danger interfere with the ability to relax into the vulnerability and ease of playful time
- While the capacity of BIPOC individuals and communities to be playful anyway are an incredible testament to their resilience, the need for such resilience is itself part of the problem

Racism and Morality

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as moral/ethical beings as a result of:
 - Receiving the clear message that white society finds them untrustworthy, dangerous, and otherwise morally incompetent or inferior
 - Being excluded by white society from the “moral community” of people who merit being treated fairly, justly, and well (in the language of the Dred Scott decision, having no rights that white people are bound to respect)
 - Being put in situations where opportunities to make moral decisions may be limited (by poverty, segregation, etc.)

Racism, Creativity, and Spirituality

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as creative beings when racism limits their access to the time, space, and resources necessary to be creative or limits their access to certain venues for the creativity of others (racist treatment at museums, for example) AND when white people appropriate BIPOC creative ideas and work without credit, context, or fair payment
- Ralph Ellison wrote in 1948 that “...this is a world in which the major energy of the [Black] imagination goes not into creating works of art but into overcoming the frustrations of social discrimination” (*Harpers Magazine*, published in 1964)
- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as spiritual beings when the ravages of racism make it harder for them to cultivate awe, reverence, wonder, gratitude, and other aspects of a spiritual life
- The deep and profound creativity and spirituality of BIPOC communities in a racist society is a wonder, but does not change the moral harm or wrongness of the racism they face

Racism and Human Agency

- Members of BIPOC communities suffer as agentic beings when individual, cultural, and organizational racism limits their capacity to act as agents in the world by denying their freedom, withholding protection from them, and limiting their access to resources
- Voting restrictions prevent BIPOC individuals from exercising their agency in the public/political sphere
- Job discrimination prevents BIPOC individuals from exercising their agency in the workplace
- White suspicion about BIPOC people in “white spaces” prevents BIPOC individuals from doing everything from golfing to shopping, to teaching, to working out, to eating at a restaurant, to birding in Central Park, to waiting for a friend at Starbucks...
- White suspicion about BIPOC people in “BIPOC spaces” leads to over-policing, hyper-surveillance, and harms including death

“Integrated Suffering”

- Describes situations in which racism works in complex, interrelated ways that cause harm and suffering across multiple aspects of humanness at the same time
- These different forms of suffering can exacerbate each other

Racial Segregation and Integrated Suffering

- Racially segregated neighborhoods were developed by white people and supported by realtors, government agencies, and others, and still have a wide range of effects today
- Limits on opportunities to connect with other communities, and the inhumane messages sent by segregation (relational suffering)
- Lack of public services/inadequate institutional support and the use of spatial separation to limit, for example, voting (social suffering)
- Lack of access to health resources, environmental racism, other dangers (embodied suffering)
- The stress, trauma, rage and fear of the experience and consequences of being restricted to devalued, under-resourced areas (emotional suffering)

Segregation and “Integrated Suffering,” cont.

- Acknowledging the extent to which white people devalue and exclude BIPOC people (meaning-making suffering)
- Under-resourced schools with inadequate or missing supplies, failing physical plants, less experienced teachers, and less access to opportunities such as music or extra-curriculars (learning suffering)
- Police presume the worst of residents and treat them badly, while poverty, crime, etc. make it difficult or impossible to make ideal moral choices (ethical suffering)
- Inability to live where one wants (and in a neighborhood that fosters flourishing), along with the many other limitations that go with living in a segregated area (agentic suffering)

Racism Causes White Suffering as Well

- White people lose the opportunity to connect with, befriend, and love BIPOC individuals (relational suffering)
- Racist fear, guilt, defensiveness, fragility (emotional and embodied suffering)
- White people think we have nothing to learn about (or from) BIPOC people (learning suffering)
- White people cannot see ourselves as morally good in an uncomplicated way once we understand and accept how racism works and grasp our role in it (moral/ethical suffering)
- Damage to BIPOC creativity inherently limits white creativity since exposure to creativity expands creativity in others (even if racism expands white opportunities in the creative marketplace; creative suffering)

Racism Causes White Suffering, cont.

- White capacity for cultivating a spiritual life is limited by the fear, guilt, defensiveness, and other constricting emotions that racism breeds in white people (spiritual suffering)
- Everyone loses out on the benefits, gifts, and blessings that BIPOC people would bring into a non-racist society
- Racism keeps people from working together more effectively on other substantive human problems such as global climate change
- White people tolerate economic and other injustices that cause suffering as long as those injustices are justified by and support white supremacy

White People Are Responsible...

“We are not personally responsible for what people who look like us did centuries ago. But we are responsible for what good or ill we do to people alive with us today. We are, each of us, responsible for every decision we make that hurts or harms another human being.”

Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, 2020, pp. 387-388

Toward a Virtue Ethic of Solidarity

- What does an ethic of flourishing demand of white people? How can white people respond morally to racism?
- Solidarity with BIPOC communities as the most ethical response: offering time, money, energy, and other resources to racial justice organizations and BIPOC communities
- Such solidarity requires white people to cultivate virtues such as love, compassion, humility, patience, resilience, self-sacrifice, and courage

White Solidarity

- To work against racism, white people must become willing and able to be, and must freely choose to be:
 - Uncomfortable
 - Listeners rather than speakers
 - Learners rather than experts
 - Followers rather than leaders
 - Generous with time, energy, money, and other resources

For Those of Us Who Are White

- How will we respond to this invitation? To this opportunity? To this moral demand?
- What does an ethic of flourishing ask of us?
 - As individuals?
 - As members of the Colorado College community?
 - As members of families, friendship groups, and other communities?
- What gifts, talents, passions, and resources do we have to offer?
- What comes next?

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Q&A/Discussion