

Grit and Grace: The Ethics of Creativity

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Creativity can be used in the service of goodness, healing, love, compassion, human well-being, planetary well-being, justice, pleasure, and joy. Creativity can be a profoundly ethical capacity.

Creativity can, of course, also be used to control, manipulate, harm, belittle, devalue, disempower, oppress, destroy, and kill. Creativity can, therefore, also be a profoundly immoral capacity.

Creativity is not inherently a moral good since it can be used for good or ill (and is regularly used for both). However, creativity can be an explicitly ethical practice. In this essay, I introduce a way of thinking about ethics that I have been developing for several years and then indicate what that approach to ethics suggests about the ethics of creativity.

Ethics traditionally begins with principles: maximizing good for the most people, duty, virtue, justice, care, rights. In contrast, my approach to ethics begins with people and their well-being. Most principles that can be used to improve human (and/or planetary) well-being can also be used to cause suffering by benefiting some people more than others or by actually punishing certain (groups of) people. The concept of rights can pit different groups of people against each other; the concept of morality itself can be used to socially control dissenters and outsiders. The most productive way to bring principles into morality is to approach principles as means to an end rather than as ends-in-themselves. The point is not (for example) justice or rights or freedom. The point is the well-being of actual, living people – all of them. My approach, then, is not a rights-driven ethic or an ethic of justice or autonomy. It is an ethic of flourishing.

All people ought to have the opportunity to live good lives, to flourish, to thrive. In this sense, all people begin from a morally equivalent point. An ethically good act is one that supports one's own flourishing or the flourishing of others. An ethically problematic act is one that contributes to otherwise avoidable suffering and/or that limits flourishing, for oneself or others.

This approach to ethics begins to take concrete shape when we understand flourishing and suffering in the context of what it means to be a person. People are (among other things):

- Social beings
- Relational beings
- Embodied beings
- Emotional beings
- Meaning-making beings (this presupposes that people are also conscious, thinking beings)
- Learning beings
- Moral/ethical (and sometimes immoral/unethical) beings
- Creative beings
- Spiritual beings (able to experience awe, reverence, wonder, a sense of being part of something larger than oneself, and other such experiences)
- Agentic beings (beings with self-efficacy, capacity, the need to act on and have an impact on the world around us)

These aspects of humanity begin to suggest what people need to flourish. To take a single example, the fact that we are embodied means that in order to flourish, we need physical safety in our lives, access to basic bodily resources (such as healthy food, clean water and air, clothing, and shelter), access to good healthcare, and opportunities to use our bodies in ways that bring us pleasure, joy, and a sense of agency and efficacy. To the extent that we are physically safe, have access to basic bodily resources, have access to good healthcare, and are able to use our bodies in ways that bring us delight and gratitude, we are able to flourish as embodied beings.

To the extent that our life circumstances are unsafe and we are at risk of physical harm or violent death; to the extent that we do not have access to basic bodily resources and good healthcare, and to the extent that we are not free to use our bodies in ways that please and empower us (while not harming others), our flourishing is limited and we may experience suffering that would be avoidable if circumstances were different.

While my work on this approach to ethics focuses mostly on its social justice implications, it is interesting to consider how creativity supports each of these human aspects and how these aspects of humanity support creativity. Despite the fact that creativity is an important enough aspect of humanity to merit its own mention, all of the other aspects of humanity listed above are also enriched by creativity and its projects and products:

- As social/relational beings, we bond with other people and need interactions with them to be full human beings. Creativity may include work that we do alone, but it is an important way for people to be in relationship with one another, whether on a Facebook page for songwriters, in an at class, at an academic meeting, or in the many other venues where people create together and share their creative work. People who attend a creative performance or view a creative project together (friends, family) can also bond over that shared experience.
- As embodied beings, we need ways to use our bodies for efficacy; making a difference with our bodies can be profoundly joyful and empowering. Many types of creative work involve the use of our bodies in rewarding ways, especially creativity related to the arts or to the making of material things.
- As emotional beings, we need the opportunity to have, process, and release a wide range of positive and negative emotions. Both the process of creativity and the encounter with creative products of various sorts can help us gain access to those emotions. As a personal example, when I am feeling extra vigilant and self-protective, certain songs draw out my vulnerability and sadness, allowing me to experience and discharge emotions. If I need a good cry, certain songs are guaranteed to unlock that good cry and let me have it safely.
- As meaning-making beings, we need to be able to make sense of our lives in ways that assure us that we matter and have a place in the world. Creative products can play an important cultural and material role in helping us understand what the world is like, why it is that way, and how we fit into it – and how we need to change it to increase human flourishing.
- As learning beings, we are enriched by continuing to grow intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually throughout our lives. Both the creative process and encounters with creative products help us learn and support our willingness to be changed by what we learn.
- As moral/ethical beings, we need to be able to live in the world in ways that have integrity for us, to understand that we have moral obligations to others and they to us, and then to have the world work in ways that allows us to flourish while making the most moral choices

available to us. Many creative products have moral and ethical insights attached to them that suggest what we should and should not do, who we should and should not be, thus helping us live increasingly moral lives. The creative process itself can be carried out with more or less integrity, giving us opportunities to practice being ethical even as we practice being creative.

- As creative beings, we are driven to make new things, solve new problems, see the world in new ways, and otherwise be part of the creative process at the heart of life. We live out our creative humanity by engaging in creative projects and by experiencing and celebrating the creativity of others.
- As spiritual beings, we need to be part of something bigger than ourselves and we are enriched by experiencing the feelings that go with this need, such as awe, wonder, and gratitude. Engaging in creative work is a way of being part of the creativity that burns at the center of creation, allowing us to be part of a larger creative story; moreover, many of us who live creative lives have been filled with awe, wonder, and gratitude at the opportunity to create, the experience of creating, and the knowledge that our creative products add something to the world in the service of goodness. Encountering the creativity of others can have similar effects, especially in eliciting our joy or awe or gratitude.
- As agentic beings, we need to act on and have an impact on the world around us, to know that we matter and make a difference and leave a legacy. Creating in all its forms – ideas, products, relationships – is a powerful way to act on the world, to make that difference and leave that legacy. Knowing that my creative work is out there and being used, that it is helping individuals and congregations, is powerfully reassuring to me. As a cancer survivor, I have already confronted my mortality directly. At this point, while I would love to live for many more years, I am comfortable with the fact that I may or may not get to do so and I am secure in the fact that I will live on in my creative work. I've already done what I need to do. That knowledge makes all the difference in how at peace I am with myself and my life and frees me to offer more of my energy to caring for others and seeking to serve the world.

I've just considered some ways that creativity supports flourishing across various aspects of humanity, but it is also true that our humanity across these aspects supports our creativity. Our embodiment, our emotions, our need to make a difference in the world, our passion to understand and to learn: all of these and the other human aspects drive and support our creative yearnings and work and appreciation. We could not create without bodies, without emotions, without the need to make sense of the world, without the need to be part of a larger story and to leave an impact. And we would certainly not appreciate the creativity of others as much as we do without the traits and aches and hopes and capacities that we have as human beings.

Finally, though this way of thinking about ethics and creativity does not lead inherently to a "virtue ethics" approach, it is interesting to consider the virtues we need to have rich and moral creative lives. In keeping with the creativity paradoxes discussed in a separate essay, we need a mix of courage and humility, resilience and patience, to create. As we choose to cultivate virtue, and virtues, in our own lives, we enrich our creative capacity and perhaps also the capacity to appreciate the creativity of others. In all these ways, ethics, morality, and creativity can work together to bring us more joy, make us more useful, and deepen our lives.