



Virtue and Flourishing for Ultrasocial Beings

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When discussing human flourishing, it is important to clarify what one means by flourishing and the basis for one's claims about it. It is all too easy to simply generate a set of currently desirable attributes and call that set of features flourishing. The contemporary Babel of theories in the field of well-being offers many examples of the plethora of possible indicators of flourishing, ranging from happiness to purpose in life to "flow". What is generally missing is a systematic, coherent theory that justifies this gaggle of correlated variables. In seeking such a theory, it is reasonable to begin with Aristotle's (1996, 1999) fulsome account of flourishing, which has not only cogency, but also millennia of resilience to its credit. To get his theory of flourishing off the ground, he proposed the function argument, which suggests that human flourishing is constituted by the excellent expression of natural human functions and that virtues are the character strengths that make it possible to fulfill those functions. The function argument defines flourishing as the excellent expression the nature of the organism and virtues as the best manifestation of the organism's natural capacities.

Framing flourishing in terms of human nature obviously raises an even thornier question: what is human nature? How can we have confidence in any theory of human nature, given that there are many such theories (Pojman, 2005; Stevenson, Haberman, Wright, & Witt, 2017)? How can one detect a good theory of human nature? Of course, one can just select the most appealing one, but this will tend to be arbitrary and subject to prevailing biases. Perhaps the most reasonable criteria for a theory of human nature is that it is scientific, with a strong conceptual basis and clear empirical evidence. Only theoretically justified and empirically verified features can be included in such an account, and all such features are thoroughly vetted by a community of scholars. The importance of a robustly documented account of human nature is that it makes it very difficult to populate human

nature with whatever one sees as subjectively desirable features. The only theory of human nature that is robustly conceptualized and thoroughly scientifically documented is the theory of evolution.

It is important to understand the meaning of the term “theory” in this case. In everyday parlance, a theory is similar to a hunch or speculation, but “the theory of evolution is supported by so many observations and confirming experiments that scientists are confident that the basic components of the theory will not be overturned by new evidence” (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2008, p. 11). Of course, elements of the theory continue to be revised as new evidence becomes available, but there is no doubt among scientists that evolution occurred and continues to occur.

In addition to its scientific value, I suggest that evolutionary theory provides a surprisingly useful understanding of human nature for the purposes of the function argument, with the latter’s emphasis on flourishing as excellence in natural human functions. An evolutionary understanding of human nature recognizes humans as a reasoning species that is characterized by communal living (Fowers, 2015; Tomasello, 2014). The similarity to Aristotle’s claim that humans are reasoning social beings is remarkable. The *Politics* (Aristotle, 1996) is replete with references to collective identity, including one of his most famous claims that humans are “political animals” (1253a 1)¹. I will focus today on our communal nature, emphasizing collective identity and profound interdependence. Humans evolved to live in groups, and group membership is so important that people evolved the capacity for collective identity as well as the more widely recognized capacity to have an individual identity.

¹ I use Bekker numbers to reference passages from Aristotle because there are many translations of his works that vary in wording and pagination, rendering it difficult to identify passages by page numbers. Bekker numbers are included in scholarly editions of Aristotle’s works.

The argument I will attempt to make is that (1) collective identity is ubiquitous and influential in human relations, (2) collective identity is an evolved feature of humans, (3) collective identity is related to human flourishing, and (4) a set of virtues are necessary for excellence in collective identity.

The Ubiquity and Operation of Collective Identity

In this section, I argue that collective identity is a ubiquitous feature of human nature. In order for there to be a phenomenon such as collective identity, it is necessary for humans to be able to recognize who is and who is not a member of the group, and this capacity has been termed “social categorization,” which makes it possible to quickly and reliably recognize who is a member of one’s group. Collective identity is the idea that a substantial element of identity resides in the ways each individual takes on the identities of the collectives to which he or she belongs. There is extensive evidence that both social categorization and collective identity strongly influence behavior, and I begin with social categorization.

Social Categorization

Many scholars believe that categorization may be one of the most basic cognitive processes (e.g., Bruner, 1957), and, as Hogg (2004) noted, social groups can be seen as categories of people. A basic principle of social categorization theories (Hogg, 2004; Tajfel, 1981) is that the human social world is organized through categorizing oneself and others into social groups. According to Hogg’s (2004) review of an extensive literature, social categorization is a very basic cognitive process is that social categorization heuristics are simple, fast, and automatic. This evidence of a speedy, automatic process suggests that social categorization is a very basic and important capacity. Categorization has four characteristic features. First, categorization highlights differences deemed important and

deemphasizes other differences. For example, speech patterns might be emphasized, and height might be deemphasized. Second, the person doing the categorizing is always implicated because social categorizations always focus on the relationship between the categorizer and the categorized. Third, social categorization is focused on differences between categories and similarities within categories (Tajfel; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Finally, Hogg clarified that “social categorization...produces ingroup identification, a sense of belonging, self-definition in group terms, and ingroup loyalty and favoritism” (p. 209). Brewer and Yuki (2007) explained that social categorization establishes a repetitive separation of people into ingroups and outgroups. This leads to positive inclinations toward ingroup members (e.g., trust, liking, and cooperativeness), and a wariness toward outgroup members.

Scores of studies provide evidence for social categorization through the use of the minimal group paradigm (e.g., De Cremer & van Dijk, 2002; Kramer & Brewer, 1984). These studies tend to be experimental, in which relationship status and group membership are manipulated among strangers in a very simple way. It is known as the minimal group paradigm because simple cues can rapidly elicit a group identity (e.g., group formation based on a bogus preference for the same type of painting; Tajfel, 1981). The primary conclusion of these studies is that categorization is quite easy to elicit, and it is an important part of collective identity.

Collective Identity

Brewer and her colleagues (e.g., Brewer & Caporael, 2006) developed a theory of the extended or collective self to explain the plethora of evidence that individual identity is partly comprised by group memberships. These scholars noted that collective identity is often a prepotent response that elicits ingroup inclusiveness and beneficence, and

differentiation from and wariness toward outgroups. They also clarified the impersonal nature of collective identity which is largely due to being a category member (e.g., a tribe, profession, or fan of a sports team). For these authors, collective identity involves “a depersonalized sense of self” (p. 83), wherein the salient aspects of identity consist in seeing oneself more as a member of a social category and less as a unique individual. That is, when the collective identity is activated, it is prioritized over the individual identity.

Caporael (1997) explained that collective identity can be maintained in large groups through “common origin stories, customs, ritual, and most enduringly, language” (p. 286). Many tokens can serve to support collective identity, including physical similarities, forms of dress, a shared language or dialect. Therefore, the collective is defined and maintained through cultural meanings and practices. Collective identity, particularly as afforded through language, allows for highly coordinated behavior over significant time periods.

Brewer and Gardner (1996) made it clear that collective identity is a critical element of individual identity, rather than an add-on to an already fully complete individual. Collective identity is extremely important because the inclusion of others in one’s identity increases the likelihood and extent of social processes like trust, cooperation, resource sharing, accommodation, and forgiveness (Brewer, 1991; Brewer & Kramer, 1986; Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997, Maner et al., 2002).

Tajfel (1981) discussed collective identity² as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group...together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (p. 255). Collective identity is constituted both by the individual through the forms of cognition, action, and

² The most commonly used term in the literature has been social identity, but because this term is very broad I follow several authors’ recommendation to discuss this phenomenon as “collective identity” (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

behavior that identify one as a group member (Ashmore et al., 2004), and by other group members' acknowledgement that the individual is a member of the group.

Conceptually, identity is defined through difference (Fowers, 2015; Sacks, 2003). That is, having an individual identity requires me to contrast myself with others. To have a group identity means contrasting our understanding of our group with other groups. These differences and their contrasts are a conceptual necessity because without them, the concepts of individual and the group identity would be meaningless. Identifying oneself with a workplace, club, or profession means accepting multiple attributions of traits, capacities, or interests that group members tend to have in common and that differentiate one's group from features common held among outgroup individuals. This group identification also entrains motives for action on behalf of the group. The key point is that when collective identity is operative, one is motivated to act to further the group's interests. As Brewer (1991) put it, "when the definition of the self changes [from a focus on individual identity to collective identity], the meaning of self-interest and self-serving motivation also changes accordingly" (p. 476).

It is, of course, common for individuals to act straightforwardly for their own individual benefit, but individuals also frequently act to promote group interests. Brewer and Caporael (2006) suggested humans can respond to both self-oriented and group-oriented motivations, which means that behavior varies frequently between egocentric and group-centric motives. The tension between and balance of these two motivations are typically resolved through individual or collective identity activation. Collective identity explains why individuals act jointly with others for mutual benefits without any apparent quid pro quo. Moreover, sometimes individuals act primarily for their group's common good without any apparent or specific individual benefit.

Empirically, there is extensive evidence for how the collective self influences cognition, affect, and behavior in social groups of all sizes (e.g., Aron et al., 1991; De Cremer & van Dijk, 2002). In many experimental studies, individuals respond in systematically different ways to the activation of an individual or collective identity (Caporael et al., 1989; Tanis & Postmes, 2005; Yamagishi, Jin, & Kiyonari, 1999; Yamagishi & Kiyonari, 2000). The minimal group paradigm is often used, and even when an ad hoc minimal group identity is activated, people tend to benefit that group. Collective identity activation appears to be a rapid, automatic, and powerful response. For example, following the activation of a collective identity, research participants sacrifice resources to benefit the group, but when they act as individuals, they act in self-benefitting ways (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2002; De Cremer & van Vugt, 1999; Kramer & Brewer, 1984). Similarly, activating collective identity encourages loyalty to the group, even when that is contrary to individual interest. In contrast, when acting as individuals, people are inclined to leave the group if remaining is disadvantageous (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997; van Vugt & Hart, 2004; Zdaniuk & Levine, 2001). Brewer (2008a) explained that “when social identification is strong, contributing to the group welfare is an end in itself, independent of what benefits ultimately accrue to the self” (p. 223).

It is important to recognize that outgroup members are treated with wariness, rather than outright hostility (Insko et al., 2005). This wariness can be overcome through friendships or extended intergroup contact (Bernhard, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2006; Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Outgroup wariness tends to escalate to hostility and aggression when there is competition between the groups for limited resources (Cohen et al., 2006; Insko et al., 2005; Meier & Hinsz, 2004; Morgan & Tindale,

2002; Wildschut et al., 2002; Wildschut, Vevea, Pinter, Insko & Schopler 2003; Wildschut & Insko, 2006)

This understanding of individual and collective identity along with the accompanying motivations and behaviors raises questions about the very distinction between egoism and altruism. First, when discussing collective identity, Brewer and her colleagues were not referring to altruism. This is because the activation of collective identity leads to the kind of behavior that benefits the group, but that behavior also tends to benefit the actor as a member of the group. Two sets of studies explicitly assessed whether it is (a) empathy-based altruism or (b) the perception of common identity that promotes helping behavior (Cialdini et al., 1997; Maner et al., 2002). The experimenters activated both common identity and empathy and found that only common identity predicted helping behavior. Cialdini et al. (1997) concluded that “if self and other are not sharply distinct in a helper’s mind, it is not possible to separate egoism from altruism in a helper’s mind. After all, as the self and other increasingly merge, helping the other increasingly helps the self...when the distinction between self and other is undermined, the traditional dichotomy between selfishness and selflessness loses its meaning” (p. 490).

The research findings just discussed help to clarify how it is that humans are so pervasively cooperative, as seen in the ubiquitous division of labor, food provisioning, information sharing, and collective defense in all known societies (Campbell, 1983; Fowers, 2015; Tomasello, 2014). In contemporary hunter-gatherer groups (an imperfect model of ancient foraging groups, but the best one we have), a nearly universal division of labor has males providing food to women and children through hunting, and has women overseeing children and gathering plant foods (Kaplan et al., 2000). A focus on the collectivity is evident in human food gathering because once food is obtained, it is generally brought to a common

collection point or home base where it is distributed. In foraging groups, everyone is allotted a share of the food (Hill, 2002; Kaplan & Hill, 1985; Sterelny, 2007). Membership in the group is the only requirement, and spontaneous offers of food are typical. In most groups, meat is shared equally, whether or not the recipients typically contribute meat to the group (Hawkes, O'Connell, & Jones, 2001; Hill, 2002).

This particular pattern is not so evident in contemporary urban life, but there is a far more extensive division of labor in urban life, with some individuals producing food, capital goods, knowledge, or a nearly infinite assortment of services. The richness and ubiquity of specialization and exchange clarify that cooperation is a core feature of humanity, even in highly complex societies. In fact, there is no evidence that self-sufficiency regarding the necessary resources has ever been a fruitful pathway for humans.

It is well-known that bee and ant colonies exhibit strong cooperative features and the sort of collective identity that supports acting on behalf of the group. The difference is that bee and ant cooperation is based on the close biological relationship among all members of the colony (Campbell, 1983; Tomasello, 2014), whereas humans cooperate widely with biologically unrelated individuals (Hill et al., 2011). Therefore, human cooperation cannot be fully explained by kin relations. Rather, the cognitive and motivational adaptations that are part of collective identity explain this astonishing degree of cooperation.

Human cooperation is easy to underestimate due to frequent counterexamples of inconsiderate action, exploitation, and enmity. It is important to recognize, however, that these counterexamples are salient because we are so vigilant about cooperation, and we have an inherited capacity to both detect cheaters (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992) and recognize trustworthiness (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014). The reason that non-cooperation is so salient is because humans expect cooperation.

The disconfirmation of that expectation elicits attention to the non-cooperation and negative affect. In fact, human cooperation is pervasive, ranging from ordinary pedestrian and traffic patterns to economic transactions to culture. In fact, the one-shot prisoner's dilemma game was designed to elicit and reinforce defection responses, but nearly half of respondents make a cooperation move with someone they will never meet, and with whom they will only have this one interaction (Sally, 1995). This indicates that cooperation is a prepotent response, even with strangers. This ubiquity and scope of collective identity suggests that it is an adaptation that supports reproductive fitness, which I discuss next.

Evolution of Collective Identity

There are two important types of evidence for collective identity in the research discussed so far. The first is that collective identity is ubiquitous among contemporary humans. The second is that it is easily, rapidly, and automatically elicited by situations in which group membership is salient. The ubiquity of collective identity is expected because, generally speaking, a human adaptation must manifest itself throughout the species, even though genetic, developmental, or accidental occurrences can mitigate or impede it. Other examples include bipedal locomotion, and language use.

An obvious, but frequently overlooked fact is that all humans lived in small, interdependent hunter-gatherer bands for 90% of our history, and for 99% of the genus *Homo's* history. Even today, humans overwhelmingly live in group settings of various sizes. Instances of entirely solitary, non-interdependent living are rare enough to be considered the exceptions that prove the rule. In addition, from a phylogenetic point of view, the great apes who are most closely related to us (chimpanzees, bonobos, and gorillas) also live almost exclusively in well-established communities. (The exceptions are solitary males who rarely participate in

reproduction while solitary.) This suggests that group living has been integral to the human lineage for at least eight million years and possibly 19 million years (Lagergraber et al., 2012). This longstanding pattern means that our species is adapted to group living. There are many capacities necessary for successful group living (e.g., affiliation preference, hierarchy arrangements, cooperation), but I will focus only on collective identity here. Identifying a compelling selection pressure for an apparent species feature is a third criterion for classifying it as an adaptation. The selection pressure for group living is obvious and as powerful as selection pressures come. Human, chimpanzee, bonobo, and gorilla reproduction occurs entirely within group settings because it is nearly impossible for great apes to protect their young outside of the group setting. (Orangutans are the only great apes that differ in being semi-social (Galdikas, 2005), and they diverged from our lineage prior to the divergence of gorillas). This means that humans and our nearest relatives must be adapted to group living.

A fourth type of evidence for an adaptation is that, despite similarities with closely related species, there are specific aspects of the adaptation that are particular to the design of the target species. Among humans, the collective identity adaptations are especially finely honed because a primary threat to successful reproduction is ostracism or banishment from the group. This is one of the most stringent sanctions that hunter-gatherers have used (Boehm, 2000). Ostracism or even the threat of ostracism is a very powerful psychological punishment (Fowers, 2017; Williams, 2007) as well as being devastating to reproductive success (Fowers, 2015; Heatherton, 2010). Being excluded from a hunter-gatherer group has been tantamount to ending someone's chances at reproductive success, because reproduction depends so completely on the ability to share food resources and childcare responsibilities with other group members. Given the extreme demands of children's

dependency, rearing children successfully requires a division of labor (another set of vital social adaptations) within a group (Kaplan, Hill, Lancaster, & Hurtado, 2000).

In addition to the need for inclusion in a social group, outgroups can also be a threat to successful reproduction (Alexander, 1987). One vital ingroup function is mutual defense, and those who are identified as ingroup members are generally defended by all, even if that involves potential harm or death to the defenders. As van Vugt and Park (2010) argued, a tribal psychology is an adaptation to dealing with rivalries and resource competition between human groups. This contributes to strong ingroup attachment and mutual defense, a wariness toward outgroups, and a willingness to exploit them. This tribal psychology requires social categorization to quickly discriminate ingroup and outgroup members, as well as identifying with one's own group to support its defense and benefit as a group. Dozens of studies have documented the simple, automatically activated heuristics for ingroup favoritism and outgroup wariness that we expect for adaptations (e.g., Fiske, 2005; Hammond & Axelrod, 2006).

Brewer (2004) further clarified the necessity of band-level collective identity for humans. As a group-living species, successful reproduction is not just dependent one's own skill and effort, but also on others' skill and effort. Anatomically modern humans evolved in small, relatively stable bands, so collective identity centered on a group of 25-30 individuals that was nested in a network of affiliated bands, which included several hundred individuals. In a group-living species, group success was paramount to individual fitness. Therefore, "all of the building blocks of human psychology—cognition, emotion, motivation—have been shaped by the demands of social interdependence" (p. 107).

A fifth form of evidence for an adaptation is phylogenetic in recognizing a similar attribute in closely related species. Mahajan et al. (2011) conducted a series of studies of free-ranging

rhesus macaques to assess whether social categorization was evident in this species. The results indicated that these monkeys can quickly and spontaneously distinguish ingroup members from outgroup members, controlling for familiarity. There are three important implications of these results. First, social categorization is evolutionarily ancient because macaque and ape lineages diverged between 25 and 30 million years ago. Second, the results also suggest that ingroup discrimination is an automatic process because the macaques successfully accomplished it with relatively simple cognition and no language. Finally, the discrimination task in the studies was whether the macaque would provide a beneficial or threatening “resource” to the target individual. Ingroup discrimination meant benefitting the ingroup member.

Similarly, chimpanzees are adept at recognizing ingroup members and protecting them. Chimpanzees live in communities of up to 150 members in relatively well-defined territories (Wilson & Wrangham, 2003). Although intercommunity interactions are infrequent, they are typically aggressive encounters (Crofoot & Wrangham, 2010). Most encounters involve only auditory threats, but they can escalate to violence (Wilson & Wrangham, 2003). Although bonobos also have and defend group territories, they tend to have more friendly relations with some neighboring groups, and they may even intermingle with another group for hours (Wilson & Wrangham, 2003). Nevertheless, bonobos differentiate ingroup and outgroup members. The contrasts between chimpanzees and bonobos are strong, with chimpanzees having no peaceful intergroup interaction and an absence of recorded intergroup lethal violence among bonobos. Within great apes, then, social categorization and collective identity are evident, but they need not be accompanied by hostile actions.

Human hunter-gatherer and subsistence communities have also been territorial, and our species is typically wary toward outgroup members and generally excludes outgroup

members from access to resources (Manson & Wrangham, 1991). Violent intergroup interactions are the most extreme form of intergroup dynamics, but the tendency to identify with specific groups is often apparent without any violence at all in contemporary urban life in clothing, speech patterns, adherence to sports teams, and nationalism. The retention of social categorization and collective identity through the millennia of human existence is another powerful indicator that it is part of our species inheritance. The persistence of these strong, action guiding tendencies is especially striking in the enormously interdependent contemporary world, where migration, trusting interactions, and cooperation are truly global in nature. These adaptations contribute to human flourishing in vital ways, but they also seem to be the basis for deeply problematic patterns of action involved in xenophobia, prejudice, and exploitation (e.g., colonialism and slavery)³. The key to differentiating admirable collective identity from destructive collective identity is found in the aims of the collective and in the virtues associated with collective identity, which I discuss in the next two sections of this paper.

Collective Identity and Flourishing

It is instructive that Aristotle (1996) can be seen as one of the original collective identity thinkers. For example, he asserted that “the community [*polis*] is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part” (1253a 19-22). He also emphasized the priority of the collective by suggesting that “the proof that the community is a creation of nature and prior to the individual is that the individual, when isolated, is not self-sufficing” (1253a 25-26).

³ It is noteworthy in this context to recognize that Aristotle (1996) actually endorsed slavery. He was at one with virtually everyone in the ancient world, where slavery was ubiquitous and considered normal. Since that time, a strong consensus has emerged (at least in many societies) that slavery is destructive and morally wrong. Expunging his endorsement of slavery (and women’s second-class status) from a neo-Aristotelian account requires virtually no other theoretical modifications. These essential amendments to Aristotle thought are necessary for its appropriation in modern times.

Flourishing

Although it seems obvious to both scholarly and lay observers, a good deal of empirical evidence also confirms the powerful contributions of close relationships and belonging to well-being. Aristotle (1999) made this explicit: “no one would choose to live without friends, even if he [sic] had all other goods” (1155a 5–6). Social scientists report that the sheer number of one’s social relationships contributes not just to happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2008) but also to health and longevity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013). When Holt-Lunstad et al. studied both the number of social connections and their quality, the quantity of relationships was important, but the quality of those social connections was enormously powerful, with people in stronger relationships having a 91% better survival rate than people in low quality relationships. In research on friendship quality, satisfaction with the friendship (the only frequently used measure) is strongly correlated with happiness and life satisfaction (Demir & Özdemir, 2010; Goswami, 2012; Wrzus, Wagner, & Neyer, 2012).

It is important to resist the temptation to discount happiness results because happiness is not just a pleasant emotional state. For example, Danner, Snowdon, and Friesen (2001) found that positive affect expressed by nuns predicted mortality 60 years later. Similarly, Koivumaa-Honkanen et al. (2000) reported that Finns’ life satisfaction predicted mortality 20 years later. Steptoe, Wardle, and Marmot (2005) found that several physiological pathways explained the links between happiness, health, and mortality, including cortisol (a stress hormone), ambulatory heart rate, plasma fibrinogen (an inflammatory marker), even after controlling for age, employment level, smoking status, and body mass index. In a meta-analysis, Chida and Steptoe (2008) reported that psychological well-being reduced mortality by 29% among healthy individuals.

Another tempting way to misunderstand social network findings is to understand them as occurring merely at the individual level. In discussing their social network results, Fowler and Christakis (2008) made an important observation that shows us how social networks transcend individuals. They pointed out that “happiness...is not merely a function of individual experience or individual choice but is also a property of groups of people. Indeed, changes in individual happiness can ripple through social networks and generate *large scale structure in the network*, giving rise to clusters of happy and unhappy individuals” (p. 7, emphasis added). Fowler and Christakis clarified that social connections are observable as tangible elements of the social world, thereby avoiding the common error of psychologizing social belonging.

Languishing

The fact that social belonging is related to well-being only half of the story. The other half of the story is the relationship between lack of belonging and languishing. The empirical results are just as clear for languishing. Isolation and loneliness contribute powerfully to depression, hopelessness, and stress (Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2007; Steptoe, Owen, Kunz-Ebrecht, & Brydon, 2004). Indeed, loneliness is one of the strongest predictors of mortality, having at least as strong an effect as standard physical predictors such as hypertension, lack of exercise, obesity, or smoking (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Holt-Lundstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988).

There is also intriguing evidence that a measurable decline in belonging in the United States has been associated with negative psychological and physical effects (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Brashears, 2006; Putnam, 2000) over a 30-year period. Between 1985 and 2004, Americans became more isolated, with social networks in the U.S. decreasing by nearly one-third and the number of people reporting that they do not have a confidant tripling to

become the modal response in the population (MacPherson et al., 2006). In contrast, the average individual had three confidants in 1985. Therefore, there is good reason to believe that loneliness and isolation lead to languishing for humans, and that Americans are suffering the ill effects of neglecting social connections.

These results have also been further elaborated with experimental studies documenting that social exclusion is very aversive (Williams, 2007). Many experimental researchers have reported very quick and powerful affective responses to ostracism including sadness, lack of belonging, and even a feeling of meaninglessness. Williams (2007) concluded that “even for very brief episodes that have minimal mundane realism, ostracism plunges individuals into a temporary state of abject misery, sending signals of pain, increasing stress, threatening fundamental needs, and causing sadness and anger” (p. 444). Twenge and her colleagues also found many negative sequelae of ostracism, including reductions in prosocial behavior (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007), increases in self-defeating behavior (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002), and reductions in gratification delay, meaning, and self-awareness (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2003). Humans are extremely reactive to ostracism and will go to great lengths to protect their collective identity (Fowers, 2017).

It should come as no surprise, then, that human well-being is so thoroughly dependent on collective identity. Flack and de Waal (2000) acknowledged the stake every individual has in the group’s viability:

inasmuch as every [group] member benefits from a unified, cooperative group, one expects them to care about the society they live in, and make an effort to improve and strengthen it...Each and every individual has a stake in the quality of the social environment on which its

survival depends. In trying to improve this quality for their own purposes, they help many of their group mates at the same time. (p. 14).

Shared Identity as a Good

Is there a human good associated with collective identity? Aristotle's function argument claims that a human good is realized in the excellent enactment of natural human functions. I have argued that collective identity is a natural, evolved human function. Moreover, it is also reasonable to think of collective identity as having better and worse forms. To be able to maintain the range of better and worse forms of collective identity, I will refer to the best form as *shared identity*. Some of the elements I describe in what follows are present in the larger category of collective identity, but other elements are only present in the smaller category of shared identity, so I will use both terms, but ask the reader to keep in mind that shared identity is a good and collective identity is a broader category that includes both excellent and problematic instances of common identity.

I suggest that shared identity includes the following features: (1) the individual is a fully acknowledged group member with (2) an understanding of how to participate well in the group, (3) who participates actively, (4) has strong fellowship with other group members, (5) has shared intentions with other group members regarding the pursuit of the group's goals, (6) wholeheartedly endorses those goals, and (7) the group's goals are morally good. It is no surprise that this description matches a socially integrated, coherent life that has many recognizable elements of human flourishing. It also clarifies that shared identity is as much a matter of being a good group member as it involves individual flourishing. Clearly, one or more of these features of this good form of collective identity can be missing or misshapen, leading to a less good or even bad form of collective identity, which I address shortly.

In the next few paragraphs, I will clarify how shared identity is a constitutive, shared good. Constitutive goods are the kind of goods in which the means of attaining the good are inseparable from the good itself. The aim of going for a walk is an example in which the goal is constituted by the means of taking a walk. Constitutive goods are contrasted with instrumental goods, in which the means and the end are separable, and the means are only valuable to the extent that they produce the end as an outcome. Shared goods are goods that can only be held in common with others. Shared goods are contrasted with individual goods, which can be pursued and achieved as an individual. For example, relational harmony is a shared good because no one can have relational harmony by themselves. Shared identity has a very clear constitutive form in that the actions associated with it cannot be separated from and the outcome of shared identity. One shares an identity with a group to the degree to which one acts consonantly with the group's norms and ideals and coordinates one's actions with other group members. Of course, it is possible to obtain tokens of collective identity such as uniforms or membership insignia through instrumental actions (e.g., purchasing or stealing them), but these artifacts have no meaning outside the mutually acknowledged engagement that constitutes group membership. Therefore, observance of the group's norms, ideals, and ethos are crucial constituents of shared identity. A person does not act as a group member to obtain a detachable product of collective identity. Acting in the way group members act is what it means to have a shared identity.

Shared identity is transparently a shared good because it can, by definition, only be held in common with other people. Somewhat less obviously, collective identity also requires mutual recognition. No individual can independently attain a collective identity because it also depends on being recognized by others as a group member. Even complete adherence

to the group's ethos is insufficient to establish collective identity without being acknowledged as a member by others.

Although it is obvious that shared identity is a shared good, it is necessary to explicitly state this point because psychologists have such an overwhelming tendency to conceptualize desirable states of affairs in terms of the individual. If we fail to recognize that shared identity is a shared good, our understanding of this good will be extremely limited and distorted. We will severely underestimate our dependency on the social context and see ourselves as far more separate and independent than we really are (Fowers, Richardson, & Slife, 2017). In the long run, understanding identity solely in individual terms will undermine and problematize the collective identity that is central to our nature, as Aristotle (1996) and others have highlighted (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, MacIntyre, 1999; Richardson et al., 1999).

In the *Politics*, Aristotle (1996) clarified that participating in the overall good of one's community is an extremely important good. He described these activities with the term *koinonia*, which can be translated as good fellowship or communion (1295b 23). The key meanings of this term include participation, partnership, contributory help, and sharing in an endeavor (Strong, 1979). Aristotle's understanding is clearly pre-Christian and refers to communion between friends, and partners in relationships, business, and the civic realm. The good of shared identity is constituted by our partnerships in the shared pursuit of what is worthwhile. Moreover, shared identity expands one's capabilities because, as Cooper (1980) put it, "only by merging one's activity and interests with those of others can the inherent fragility of any human being's interests be overcome" (p. 329). Shared identity expands the scope, meaning, and stability of our activities. Shared identity imbues human

activity with value far more thoroughly and powerfully than any possible activity of a putatively autonomous individual can.

Problematic Collective Identity

Clearly, people can and do fare poorly with respect to collective identity. The simplest difficulty is when collective identity is unavailable or weak, leading to isolation. Yet there are also other ways that collective identity can be problematic. In the modern world, we are members of many groups, and the norms and expectations of the groups may be incompatible and thereby problematize those memberships. A group may have vague, confusing, or self-contradictory membership and participation expectations, rendering coordinating with others difficult. It is also possible to be poorly equipped to participate in a particular group. Endorsing the group's goals may be problematic due to vagueness of confusion in the group's aims. Collective aims can also be undermined by factionalization, competition, or marginalization within the group. Although humans have a natural capacity for collective identity, its instantiation remains somewhat fluid, changing over time, and defined locally. The more any of these difficulties arise, the poorer one's collective identity will be. Finally, the first six characteristics of a good collective identity can be present, but if the group's goals are not morally good, collective identity can be quite problematic.

By far the biggest difficulty with collective identity is that it shows up in human conflict, prejudice, and exploitation as much as it does in salutary group memberships. One can establish collective identity in racist groups, street gangs, or terrorist groups. This reality requires some ways to adjudicate among better and worse forms of collective identity, which is a very thorny problem. I can only reference some likely possibilities given length constraints and being in the early stages of addressing this problem.

The first possibility is available through the liberal political system that upholds a system of individual rights and dignity while remaining neutral about individual and group ends and seeking to protect individual rights through neutral justice procedures. There is a lot to recommend liberal justice, especially in large, complex contemporary societies, but many criticisms of this approach have been registered (e.g., MacIntyre, 1981; Sandel, 1996). Moreover, the systematic neutrality and procedural focus of a liberal form of politics cuts against the grain of the Aristotelian approach to ethics, with its commitment to substantive goods.

A second possibility arises from the fact that a unique aspect of collective identity for humans is our capacity to be members of many groups simultaneously, and these groups invariably have many different forms and modes of membership. The groups may be quite distinct (e.g., a clan and a profession) or they might be nested (e.g., being a member of a department in a college in a university). In contemporary life, it is highly unusual for an individual to be a member of only one group. Such single-minded, absolute commitment to one group is most characteristic of cult membership, suggesting one indicator for recognizing when collective identity has gone awry. The more common situation of multiple group loyalties is suggestive of one way to avoid problematic collective identity. The challenge of doing justice to do all of one's group commitments, can assist us in preventing one group loyalty from damaging other individuals' or groups' welfare. This plurality of memberships is likely to dissuade most people from acting in destructive ways toward members of the groups to which they belong. In addition, the recognition that virtually all individuals are members of many groups facilitates a much broader perspective on the welfare of the group of groups that make up a society.

It is important to acknowledge that there are groups whose aims are simply reprehensible, and that such groups can engender strong collective identity. That is, collective identity can help to fuel destructive, prejudicial, exploitive, and even murderous goals. It is not difficult to identify groups at the extreme, such as street gangs, slaveholding societies, genocidal groups, and organized crime. The moral badness of these groups' aims include casual murder, mass murder, enslavement, and severe economic exploitation. This clarifies that collective identity is not good in itself but is only good when coupled with admirable aims. Of course, there will be many collectives that have a mixture of better and worse aims and vetting the choiceworthiness of group memberships is a major task for agents, as is modifying problematic group aims. This deliberation about the worthiness of aims is not a new problem in human action, inasmuch as agents are frequently required to contemplate the value of their aims as they shape their lives.

One hopeful sign is that the size and scope of human social groups have expanded enormously in recent millennia, now including large nation-states and international organizations. This has been a movement toward greater inclusion that appears to be within the capacities of human beings. In addition, this expansion of the social world has enabled widespread trade, information exchange, and cultural development that would have been impossible otherwise.

One implication of this greater inclusiveness is to clarify that ingroup and outgroup boundaries and relationships are malleable. There are many ways to alter the definition of who is included in a group, through intergroup cooperation, perceived similarity, superordinate projects that include multiple groups, viewing two groups as subgroups of another superordinate group, and so forth. There is extensive evidence that ingroup-outgroup divides can be overcome, especially when cross-group friendships are formed or

collective identity is extended across groups (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011; Dovidio & Banfield, 2015). These avenues of inclusion and intergroup cooperation are continuously volitionally available, and we can apply them intentionally to increase cooperation and decrease hostility.

The positive fruits of expanding human groups increases the scale of our activities, rendering previously impossible pursuits possible. Some examples include pursuing knowledge requiring large-scale funding, the pooling of talent and effort through international associations, and the creation of the internet. All these developments are accompanied by difficulties and sometimes create previously unknown problems, but the expansion of collective identity and improvement of intergroup interactions has had clear benefits.

These considerations of the beneficial and destructive ways that collective identity plays out are a bare beginning on this important topic. The most important point is that humans have a good deal of agency about collective identity and pursuing our collective self-understandings in a positive manner is virtually always an open possibility. Some construals of our collective identities will be better than others, and it seems important to reflect on them at least occasionally to assess how worthwhile our group commitments are. I recommended a simple heuristic elsewhere regarding the management of intergroup relations “to include and cooperate where possible, live and let live when cooperation is not possible, and engage in rivalry and aggression only when it is unavoidable” (Fowers, 2015, p. 266).

Some scholars interpret the evidence regarding collective identity as a kind of tribal instinct that ineluctably controls human behavior when activated (e.g., van Vugt & Hart, 2010). There are good reasons to reject this simple deterministic interpretation, however.

First, the content and shape of collective identity are constructed, not simply given as an instinct. Brewer and Yuki (2007) affirmed this: “although the capacity for social identity is postulated to be universal, the locus and content of social identities are clearly culturally defined and regulated” (p. 307). That means that is normative to have some form of collective identity, but the content of that identity is clearly malleable. Collective identities are largely symbolically represented, with tremendous diversity in group sizes, configurations, and norms. The specific group meanings and practices are worked out within historical cultures, in response to both internal and external environments. These shared understandings are also temporally dynamic, changing as much through new interpretations of how the group construes a good life as through any other circumstances (Bellah et al., 1985; Richardson et al., 1999; Taylor, 1989).

I am claiming that the concept of collective identity clarifies that many human goods are only accessible through collective activity. This seems obvious for central human goods such as fairness, solidarity, and harmony because they are only available within relationships and with the support of larger groups. The importance of this interpretation cannot be overstated because I am arguing that individuals are unavoidably and deeply dependent on memberships in groups for many of the most important human goods, and these are goods that are necessary for a worthwhile life. If I am right, then it is vital that social scientists and philosophers pay attention to that dependency. Otherwise, our theories and research may be more of an impediment than a contribution to human flourishing. I have discussed some of the conditions for the promotion of flourishing through shared identity, but one vital condition is the virtues that make it possible to participate well in a choiceworthy shared identity.

The Virtues of Collective Identity

One way to bridge participation in a collective with individual characteristics such as virtue is to recall that each person's identity is comprised of both individual identity and collective identity. In this context, I will simply stipulate the standard neo-Aristotelian view that an individual's identity is constituted by his or her characteristic actions. Clearly, this individual identity is also dependent on cultural norms, which are, in turn, malleable interpretations of what is proper in various situations. This interpretation-focused understanding of identity suggests that humans are self-interpreting beings (Taylor, 1985). As such, human interpretations play a significant role in behavior, and this perspective implies that human action includes agency.

Loyalty

Two of the basic features of virtues are that they are a matter of choice and characteristic of the individual. This raises the question of which individual characteristics are necessary for excellence in shared identity? The good of shared identity arises through relatively lengthy participation in a group that results in identification with the group. Because this identity is formed over time, the ability to be a dependably loyal group member is required for the good of shared identity. Ordinary group membership and collective identity are common human experiences. In contrast, the full measure of shared identity, as described in the previous section, only emerges when a group member is substantially and consistently devoted to the group, fully embracing its identity and goals. The virtue of loyalty is the consistent, wholehearted, and in-depth engagement in the group's activities. Limits on an individual's loyalty to the group, perhaps seen in partial or begrudging identification with the group will limit the depth of collective identity, fellowship, and the pursuit of shared goods.

In this context, there are two important advantages of an Aristotelian conception of virtue. First, characteristic, intentional adherence to the group can only be considered virtuous when the ends of the activities in question are morally good. Virtuous loyalty includes an assessment of the choiceworthiness of the group's aims, which I discuss below as an aspect of practical wisdom. Second, Aristotelian virtues are accompanied by a vice of deficiency and a vice of excess. With loyalty, the deficiency can be termed fickleness (the inability to remain faithful to a group when it matters) and the excess can be labeled blind allegiance (adhering to group norms without regard for their goodness). Fickleness needs no explanation, but blind allegiance is very important. There are group configurations and group aims to which loyalty would be misplaced. One cannot, by definition, be virtuously loyal to a group with morally reprehensible aims. Nor is loyalty called for in groups that are internally exploitive or demeaning. The virtue of loyalty includes discernment about when loyalty contributes to the individual and collective good.

Friendship

A second important virtue is *philia*, but the ordinary translation of this term as friendship is misleading. Aristotle (1999) used the term *philia* because it connotes important, but not necessarily emotionally intimate relationships (Fowers & Anderson, 2018; Konstan, 1997). Fellow group members, especially in very large groups, are often not emotionally intimate, but fellow group members have a common bond. *Philia* is an important virtue for this common bond or *koinonia*. The virtue of *philia* focuses on valuing others for the quality of their characters, taking an interest in others' welfare, participating in shared goods, encouraging one another to be our best selves, and having a deeply shared interest in the common good. Virtue *philia* must be differentiated from ordinary (and well-documented) ingroup favoritism (De Cremer & van Dijk, 2002; De Cremer van Vugt, 1999;

Tanis & Postmes, 2005), which promotes greater trust, beneficence, and cooperation among virtually all ingroup members. Virtue *philia* is more intentional, wholehearted, and goal-directed than ingroup favoritism. *Philia* is the excellent expression of the pervasive human tendency to favor ingroup members.

A deficiency related to virtue *philia* is the lack of connection and involvement with other people that leaves one isolated. An excess related to this virtue is overinvolvement, wherein there is a nearly complete identification with others. This overinvolvement impedes the kind of separateness and differentiation that is required for individual identity and variations in thought, affect, or perspectives. At its extreme, the excess of overinvolvement renders the individual's commitment and involvement with others absolute, as in a cult-type membership.

Other Relevant Virtues

It seems likely that virtually all virtues are relevant to shared identity, given its centrality in eudaimonia. Given space limits, I can only mention a few others. Clearly, the good of shared identity will involve the virtues of justice, trustworthiness, compassion, generosity, and honesty. Good relationships within a group are predicated on the practice of these virtues. One virtue I have called *openness to the other* may be particularly relevant to greater inclusivity and good intergroup relationships. This virtue involves the capacity to seriously consider challenges and questions from other perspectives while remaining committed to one's own perspective. The deficiency associated with the virtue is the kind of dogmatism that asserts the absolute universal correctness of one's viewpoint, which makes it nearly impossible to be inclusive or build intergroup bridges.

Practical Wisdom

When it comes to the good of shared identity and the practice of the virtues associated with it, practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is extremely important for the expression of excellence. It is not easy to enact shared identity, and it requires good judgment to do so consistently. A reasonable definition of practical wisdom is the ability to recognize the best action for the present circumstances, through which one can participate in the good of collective identity. Practical wisdom guides the individual to recognize which virtues are called for in the given situation and to understand the actions that would express that virtue (Darnell Gulliford, Kristjánsson, & Paris, 2019). Aristotle (1999) highlighted the interdependence of virtue, practical wisdom, and eudaimonia in asserting that “it is impossible to be good in the full sense of the word without practical wisdom or to be a man [sic] of practical wisdom without moral excellence or virtue” (1144 b 31-32).

The necessity of practical wisdom is apparent in the fact that it is impossible to create a set of rules to govern all our collective activity. Collective activity is simply too varied and complex for a rule-oriented approach to work. It is, of course, possible to design heuristics that can guide collective action, but such heuristics are rough and ready guidelines that can orient us much of the time but are not sufficient for unusual or complex situations that require deliberation. In addition, humans have the capacity to reflect on, evaluate, and modify our aims and actions as we learn and encounter new people and situations. This open-endedness is extremely important in individual and collective activity because it does allow for growth, change, innovation, and inclusion. The brevity of these descriptions of virtue and practical wisdom are due to space and time constraints, but more extended discussions are available elsewhere (Broadie, 1991; Fowers, 2005; MacIntyre, 1999).

Conclusion

Collective identity is ubiquitous among humans and is the kind of basic human function that should contribute to flourishing, if the function argument is valid. I presented evidence of the ubiquity of collective identity and made a case for its evolution. Its excellence shows up in manifestations of shared identity, but there are also clear instances of worse forms of collective identity. I have cited evidence suggesting that the quality of one's collective identity is related to one's languishing and flourishing. Deficient collective identity is associated with languishing. Excellence in collective identity is related to flourishing and includes several features: having a clearly acknowledged membership in a group, an understanding of how to participate in the group well, active participation, a strong sense of fellowship with other group members, shared intentionality with other group members regarding what is important and how to pursue the group's goals, a wholehearted endorsement of those goals, and the group's goals are morally good. When one acts based on collective identity, the individual's good becomes largely inseparable from the good of the group. Collective identity is just as much about being a good member of the group as it is about flourishing as an individual, meaning that contributions to the welfare of the collective are as important as one's individual welfare. In the *Politics*, Aristotle referred to such activity as *koinonia* (communion or good fellowship) and clarified that the highest good in practical life is fostering the overall good of one's community. Shared identity includes virtues such as loyalty, friendship, trustworthiness, justice, compassion, generosity, and openness to the other. Finally, shared identity can only be attained through shared activity, which means that individuals' shared identity is what it is because it is jointly established.

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