



**“Like a Tree Planted by Water”:
Objections and Responses to the Flourishing Model
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Trees have the strange ability to evoke within the heart of humans a resonance for some of the most profound reflections on our nature. It was a garden that Adam and Eve discovered each other, and, later, came to know evil. In the Forest of Arden, one of Shakespeare's characters declaims that "All the world's a stage/ And all the men and women merely players" (*As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII.139-40). Greek mythology goes further: it fuses the images of plant and person in the story of Daphne, the nymph who fled through a forest to escape the arms of Apollo—and turned into a laurel tree, a moment incomparably captured by a statue of Bernini. Then there Shel Silverstein's popular children's book, in which the *Giving Tree* personifies a mother's love. Here I would like to begin by discussing the nature of the flourishing model; then to raise and reply to two objections to the model, and in doing so we will see some of the advantages of the model—advantages that persist despite some misunderstandings of it.

Allow me to begin by making some points that are so obvious they are often left undiscussed. For example, the concept of "human flourishing," encapsulates an analogy that is inescapably biological. Minerals do not flourish; no inorganic material flourishes. Living things do. Billions of plants and animals possess species-common properties and natures that organize their nutrition, growth, reproduction, and homeostasis throughout particular life-spans. The term "flourishing" applies above all and primarily to plants: etymologically, it is derived from the Latin *florere*, literally, "to bloom, blossom, to flower." Flourishing marks a specific stage in the development of a healthy plant: the seed sprouts, grows a stalk, develops leaves to enable photosynthesis, and finally flowers in preparation for pollination and the production of seeds or fruit. Through the cycle of seasons, the plant will mature and flourish in increasingly more productive ways: the flourishing of a healthy twenty-year-old apple tree is manifestly more abundant than that of a one-year-old sapling. Consequently, there are levels of flourishing appropriate to the plant given its species, its individual composition and location, and its stage of development.

Because the flourishing model draws upon the richness of biological, organic reality, it has many advantages over more abstract understandings of human behavior.

(i) For example, the notion of "human flourishing" accords with the taxonomical reality that humans are a species of animal. Flourishing indicates that humans are more than minds and willpower: we experience life as *embodied creatures*, as a complex self-environment of powers and capacities, each of which themselves are composed of various factors integrated over time (VanderWeele, 2017). To say that humans "flourish" is to recognize parallels with plant life: humans grow, mature, and manifest the interior dynamism of their life in ways characteristic to their species, stage of development, environmental context, and individual composition. Rather than encapsulating human well-being within a self-report of emotional contentment, one can speak of flourishing in terms of physical health; emotional flourishing; ethical flourishing as manifested in moral conduct; and spiritual flourishing in relation to the highest religious concerns.

(ii) The flourishing model also scales to different group sizes. Just as one can speak about the flourishing of a single tree, a forest, or the planet, different scales of flourishing exist for humans: for individuals, families, communities, states, and international bodies—with significant interactions of diverse entities on different levels. One could for instance say that a family flourishes in itself and then compare that to the community or state in which they live; or one could describe dependencies: that the flourishing of a community depends on that of the family (on the smaller scale), as well as that of the state (on a larger scale).

(iii) The flourishing model helps organize, integrate, and evaluate various goals. A model of flourishing can help integrate various sub-goals as they are related to a more overarching goal: an apple orchard flourishes when individual trees bear fruit, which is helped by adequate growth, nutrition absorption, photosynthesis, etc. Likewise, a model of human flourishing can help clarify primary and secondary goals for human life. Those goals establish relations among contributors to flourishing on different levels and scales. In this way, flourishing is a model that can evaluate, organize, and integrate mere lists, including the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Despite the vast research poured into the SDGs, they suffer from a lack of common integration and organization: they are simply listed in numerical order or are depicted as elements in a cycle. Where should we start first: with Goal 9: “Decent Work”? Goal 15: “Life on Land”? More importantly: what counts as “development” in the first place?

(iv) Flourishing involves objective measures, unlike studies of well-being which rely almost exclusively on self-reporting, which is notoriously difficult to quantify (Deiner, 2009). Agronomists can objectively measure what factors contribute to an apple tree's flourishing (e.g., amount of sunlight, water, nutrients), and what are signs of its flourishing (e.g., size of apples, density of branch growth). An apple tree is most perfect when it flourishes according to its nature as an apple tree—by growing straight and strong, flowering, bearing fruit in due season, and so on. Likewise, a robust flourishing model for humans would seek to identify and rank contributors to as well as objective signs of flourishing, such as seen in physical and emotional health indexes. These will help us accurately identify and rank obstacles to our flourishing.

(v) Flourishing also includes subjective measures. Subjectively, a person may experience flourishing in one capacity and not in another at the very same time. For example, a person with chronic illness may flourish ethically despite the lack of full physical or emotional flourishing. Comparing objective and subjective concerns helps us make sense of complex data such as quantifiable health measures and qualitative self-reporting. This helps integrate other findings and give more precision to them, e.g., results from a “happiness index” (Helliwell, et al., 2017, 2018).

Despite these many advantages to the flourishing model, there are two significant objections that its proponents need to confront: one is practical, the other theological.

The practical objection to flourishing is that, from standpoints such as education and policy-making, a model like flourishing seems unwieldy, vague, and abstract. Kristján

Kristjánsson acknowledges one version of this critique in his latest work, *Flourishing as the Aim of Education: A Neo-Aristotelian View* (2020). He notes that much flourishing discourse tends to be “narrowly ideal” and “theoretical,” not only in the sense of not spanning the gap between theory and advice on practice, but also insofar as it is less driven by some specific political agenda (Kristjánsson 2020, 49-50). In contrast, it seems that deontological ethics has a *prima facie* advantage for policy (and therefore policy-makers), namely, it focuses on laws for human actions. As summarized by Terence Irwin, there are four differences between law and virtue in Kant’s ethics (Irwin 2009, 67-8):

- (1) Law prescribes actions that we “can” be compelled to perform, but virtue prescribes actions that cannot be compelled.
- (2) Law prescribes actions only, but virtue also prescribes motives and ends.
- (3) Law prescribes duties of narrow obligation, but virtue prescribes duties of wide obligation.
- (4) Law prescribes what is simply required, but virtue prescribes what is supererogatory or meritorious.

For a policy-maker, therefore, it seems that laws have a number of advantages over programs in favor of human flourishing and virtue: rules of conduct are precise, prescribing only what is required; they avoid overwhelming a subject by narrowing the limits of one’s obligations; they focus on exterior behavior and therefore can avoid arguments about motives, ends, and human nature itself (Kant, 1785/1999, 4:389); and they can even compel agents to perform certain behaviors. Further advantages accrue, for laws are promulgated in some way—typically written down—and consequently can be more easily remembered and inculcated. Being specific and concrete, the implementation and effects of laws are more easily measured. Finally, Kant argues, laws are objective, insofar as they are derived either from reason itself or by an exterior sovereign, both of which transcend the individual (Kant, 1785/1999, 4:421).

I would like to reply to this objection in light of an example in which regulating human conduct is a matter of life and death, namely, in war. I will allow the reader to draw the obvious parallels with classroom education. Suppose that a British policy-maker wants to ensure that soldiers will conduct themselves rightly. How to do so? He hears a neo-Aristotelian ethicist propose that soldiers be encouraged to pursue “human flourishing.” Would this be helpful? The concept of flourishing is so broad, it would need to be specified that flourishing includes various virtues, especially the virtue of “courage.” How to inculcate courage? He could propose Lord Nelson as an exemplar, but this would serve at best as a halfway house to a more mature development of virtue (Kristjánsson 2020, 139-60). Any implementable policy must consist in something more than a general description or an exemplar of its aim. A “courage policy” thus requires some way to measure whether or not it is being put into action, that is whether soldiers are being courageous or cowardly. For this, a list of rules or laws regarding the virtue is created. Accordingly, the Army Act states that the following actions (among others) are punishable by death: abandoning post, shamefully casting away arms in the presence of the enemy, cowardice before the enemy, causing a mutiny, causing false alarms, and desertion (Oram, 2001). On the other hand, medals for

exemplary service may be given, as the Victoria Cross is conferred for “most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valor or self sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy” (UK Ministry of Defense, 2019). Kant vindicated.

Or is he? Note that “cowardice before the enemy” is punished; whereas that which merits praise is “conspicuous bravery.” In other words, the law forbids acts contrary to virtue, and rewards acts in accordance with virtue. But this view of law is not particular to Kant; indeed, it fits more with the view of Aristotle, who said, “We learn by doing [...] we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. This is confirmed by what happens in states; for legislators make the citizens good by forming habits in them, and this is the wish of every legislator” (*Ethics* II.1, 1130a32-b4). Laws should not exist *in contrast* with virtue; they do not substitute for virtue; they are not simply aimed at forming a will of a subject that is wholly and blindly obedient to the will of a superior. The choice should not be seen as *either* legislation *or* flourishing and virtue, but both law and virtue operating together. Good laws work to inculcate virtue, or at least acts in favor of virtue—and laws do so by specifying what count as the extremes of a behavior that can manifest great virtue or the most corrupted vice. The most effective laws therefore will contextualize the specific actions it commands or prohibits, rewards or punishes, in light of the larger goals and motives provided by virtue-theory, which itself exists within the ecosystem of human flourishing (Gonzalez, 2019). In this way, the ethics of flourishing are like the root of a theory of action that provides the true groundwork for morals by explaining what it means for humans to be perfected in general; virtue-theory builds on this, somewhat as the trunk and branches grow from roots, by describing perfection for particular capacities; and the best legislation builds on both, the “flourishing” as it were of an ethics of flourishing.

A second objection to the flourishing model comes from theological reasoning and religious concerns. For reasons of space and genre, I will treat it more briefly here. The sum of the concern is this: if “human flourishing” is promoted as the goal of education, policy-making, or human life more generally, then God seems to be left out in the cold. After all, an apple tree flourishes on its own without any obvious reliance upon direct divine intervention. Likewise, it seems as if human flourishing need not have recourse to religion or the divine for its motives, ends, or workings. As if humans by our own power can achieve flourishing (and happiness and well-being). Aside from mundane concerns about job security, the theological objection to this view of human flourishing is that at best it sees God as good but optional. However, Aristotle admits that complete happiness and virtue are difficult if not impossible to achieve (*Ethics* I.10, 1100a10-21); and Christian revelation explains the futility of aiming at human flourishing in our current state without God, for our nature is now in a corrupted, weakened state, where we cannot do even the good we desire but instead to the evil we do not want to do (*Romans* 7:19; see Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 85).

In response, the theologian Thomas Aquinas indicates that all flourishing comes from God. He states that we can understand the substantial love of God as the “flourishing” of God’s essence, and the love of the Holy Spirit is the “flourishing” of the Father and the Son in relation to each other (ST I, q. 37, a. 2). Human flourishing therefore is an effect of union with the overabundant flourishing of God. The flesh of the first man, Adam, flourished

through innocence of life, and in Christ our flesh “reflourished” in the resurrection (*Super Psalmo* 27, n. 7). Christ is the ultimate moral prodigy—both a model and a causal source of the goodness of others. Following this model, and with his help, Christians flourish in holiness through their habituation to goodness through good action. Just as a flower is a sign of hoped-for fruit, so the works of virtue are the hope of eternity and beatitude (*Super Gal.*, c. 5, l. 6, n. 328). Virtue is the flourishing of the individual insofar as the acts of virtue are directed towards one’s final end. We can therefore speak of two kinds of flourishing, which correspond to two kinds of virtue. One sort of flourishing and virtue is imperfect, fragmentary, centered on this world, and possible for our powers: this would be “natural” acquired virtue and its corresponding “natural” flourishing (see Aquinas, ST I-II, q. 56, a. 3; and q. 61, a. 1). Because of the effects of sin, even this sort of flourishing will never come to its full blossom. In contrast, there is a more perfect flourishing that may be called “supernatural,” which is centered on God, and possible for our powers and strengthened by grace, which corresponds to “supernatural” virtues such as faith, hope, and charity. Aquinas states, that these sorts of virtues, both infused cardinal virtues and the theological virtues, “perfectly and truly have the *ratio* of virtue, and cannot be acquired by human acts but are infused by God” (ST I-II, q. 65, a. 2).

I began this paper by noting a number of advantages that belong to the flourishing model: it accords with human nature; it scales to different population sizes; it is teleological; it can incorporate both objective and subjective measures. In light of deontological and theological objections, we find at least two other sources of advantage: to the extent that the flourishing model can successfully incorporate their insights into its flexible system, and graft their living power onto its large branches, so it can bear the weight of their fruits and thereby enjoy the benefits of law and theology as part of itself.

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