**Are You *Truly* Flourishing?**

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When one contemplates the course of his/her life as it stands, it’s rather rudimentary to identify that which brings them the greatest fulfillment and meaning. For some, this may be the result of a successful career, while for others, it may be resultant of personal relationships. The options are really endless in this regard due to their highly subjective qualities. Amid these considerations however remains a very specific inquiry: are you *truly* flourishing? There is a right way and a wrong way of doing everything, so it is only sensible to apply this truth to the concept of flourishing. In this discourse, I argue that, In order for one to truly flourish, there must be a fundamentally universal moral basis from which to build lives upon so to maintain goodness and order. This concept of moral objectivism is the only means by which one should follow in order to rightly flourish.

To begin, it seems appropriate to use the analogy of the house and the foundation at this point in the discourse. Every house must be built upon a solid foundation from which to stand erect and properly supported; less the entire structure would simply collapse over the course of time. Though houses come in an endless array of shapes, sizes and colors, they must each exhibit this common underlying principle. Like houses, human beings must also build their lives upon a common foundational principle which effectively allows them to flourish. Without a common rational ground that is adequately followed by human beings, not only will they be unable to flourish, but just like the house built without a foundation, their moral lives will simply collapse with time.

It has been mentioned that the common principles which human beings must build their lives upon in order to flourish should be on a “rational ground.” This ensures that individuals use their intellectual capabilities in order to distinguish between right and wrong. This is an ancient principle that was made famous by the great philosopher, Aristotle. In his work, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle stresses the importance of the maximization of intellectual faculties in order to attain the greatest good within human lives. The value of the human rational capacity is held to such a high standard that even the father of Western philosophy, Socrates, is known to have claimed that “the unexamined life is not worth living” in Plato’s famous work *The Apology*. Those who utilizes their God-given cognitive faculties are abundantly empowered with the ability to truly flourish.

The concept of flourishing is very straightforward and definitive; it is the intrinsic means of growth and personal development by attaining one’s full potential. The means by which people claim to flourish is far more perplexing and often times, ambiguous. Aristotle addresses this issue in *The Nicomachean Ethics* when he considers the use and application of practical wisdom. In essence, as a coincidentally supplemental proclamation to Socrates’ assertion on the unexamined life, Aristotle weights exponential importance upon the use of human reason in order to reach the greatest good of happiness, and thus flourish. With this in mind, people must be able to rationally explain why what they claim makes them flourish, actually does. The basis from which to make these rational explanations is none other than the concept of moral objectivism.

A moral system that is objectively abided by among people is comparable to the rock, as described prior, upon which to rationalize and build flourishing lives. Since that which is right is certainly moral, in order to live a just and reasonable life, the notion of moral objectivism must in fact be followed. Upon reasonable contemplation, this assertion is not at all outlandish. Because of the vagueness of flourishing among different people, it’s quite easy to recognize something that is morally right from something that is certainly wrong. This distinction however must be rooted in a common moral ground that is interpreted and understood by all people. In order to formulate distinctions from this common moral basis however, one must apply their practical wisdom to rationally justify that which is right from that which is wrong. Unfortunately, there are many individuals who, whether advertently or inadvertently, irrationally justify the actions they do, falsely claiming to flourish by them.

Some individuals understand the acquisition of the highest good, characterized by Aristotle as being the ultimate purpose in the human life, far out of its intended context. Since Aristotle iterated the importance of the proper use and application of practical reason in order to truly flourish, it would be highly irrational to suggest that an entirely unjustifiable action allows one to flourish. This is the first condition for one to lose their ability to rightly flourish. The relativistic ideology suggesting that individuals should do whatever they desire, so long as it brings fulfillment to their lives can be informally termed as “objective subjectivism.” This view would suggest that *anything* is morally acceptable so long as it brings adequate fulfillment within an *individual’s* life. Philosophers like Aristotle, Socrates and Plato would undoubtedly scoff at this idea due to the obvious philosophical flaws it exhibits.

To begin, there are a number of scenarios that could display the incoherency of this idea. A good example could be an individual who claims to flourish by writing poetry; there is no moral issue with this type of activity, so long as the content of the poetry is in accordance with the objective moral code. There is another individual however, who claims to flourish through the intentional burning of other people’s houses. Here, most people would object to this type of flourishing and immediately discredit it; claiming that it is wrong and immoral. The irony here is that many of these objections were actually formulated by the same individuals who hold to the idea of “objective subjectivism,” a clear contradiction and example of hypocrisy. This relativistic ideology would universally claim that there is no distinction between the two acts since flourishing is entirely subjective; any consequences resulting from such acts are the direct responsibility of the individual. But, following the counter-examples above, the core issue with this level of thinking is the deprivation of the Aristotelian notion of practical reason. There is however, certainly a far more sensible method to truly flourish.

The more pragmatic approach would be to correctly distinguish between right and wrong in the first place. The issue with the contradictory objections from the relativistic scenario is that they lacked a moral basis from which to formulate claims. The objections were based upon individual opinions as opposed to common rational foundations. While the objections were aimed in the right direction, they would not stand firm due to the absence of practical reason in devising them. This is precisely why the submission to an objective moral system is so critical in order for people to justly prosper in their lives. Therefore, the rational means of distinguishing between correct and incorrect flourishing is through the scrutiny of, what I refer to as, “subjective objectivism,” where clear distinctions between right and wrong are made on the basis of common moral law.

The fundamental concept of “subjective objectivism” is directly linked to the previously noted analogy of the house and the foundation. Like houses, human beings come in all shapes, sizes, complexions, and personalities. Also like houses however, humans should exhibit common foundational principles upon which their lives are built. It’s been asserted thus far in the discourse that the common foundation is moral objectivism. With a system of “subjective objectivism” in place, clear distinctions are able to be made about flourishing. As an example, if an individual claims that caring for those in need allows her to flourish, there is no apparent issue since it’s a morally good thing to do. Another individual, however, claims that murdering other people allows him to flourish, which is entirely wrong and outrageous because not only is it unjustifiable, but it is also morally unacceptable. These two individuals both claim to be flourishing, but through the use of practical reason and consideration of an objective moral code, there is a crystal clear distinction between right and wrong. The much anticipated question at this point is more likely than not, “what is the moral basis?”

Since any basis is certainly a fundamentally sound starting point of reference, a moral basis must be rooted in some rationally solid concept(s). This basis must stem well beyond the human faculties, due to their highly limited and ambiguous natures. One who grounds moral principles solely upon their personal preferences is not properly formulating any ideas since the human cognition is in fact incredibly limited in matters outside of its designated functions. Resultantly, there must be a basis that is wholly separate for any human undertakings. This foundational system was therefore designed to be discovered *and* abided by among human beings. Though there are an array of ideas claiming a moral basis, this discourse will direct interest to the two most common: the secular idea, and the religious idea.

To begin, the secular idea is the view that moral standards are governed by statutory laws. The conformity to such standards is often done out of mere obligation as a result of the possible consequences that could arise should they not be followed. For instance, with this being an example of a moral basis, one should not kill another due to the consequences that would undoubtedly arise if the murder is initiated. Penalties such as prison or even death itself, are used merely to deter these immoral actions from occurring in the first place. This same principle applies to all other socially immoral acts like theft, indecency, violence, and destruction, to name a few. As a result of this type of moral basis, people will often find themselves abiding by moral standards, not because they are rationally justified, but because it is simply a conventional means that “everybody else” abides by. This now raises the question of exactly how this secular idea of moral origin is rationally rooted.

To answer the previous inquiry regarding the soundness of secular morality, it is best to shift the discussion to the religious idea of a moral basis. With this view, the concept of morality is rooted within religious statutes rather than secular laws. In this instance, people who abide by religious statutes do so because they truly believe that they depict what is right and just in their lives. As an example, one should not steal something that does not belong to them because it is established as being sinful and immoral according to the will of God. There is of course a margin of error in this respect due to the number of different religious beliefs held among people. As a result, this discourse has been written in the Christian perspective; specifically, Roman Catholicism. The idea of a religious origin for morality is rich in sense and reason, as opposed to the more arbitrary nature of the secular view. The reason for this is both enlightening as well as highly ironic.

It is rather peculiar to observe the level of similarity between the secular ideas of origin and the religious ideas of origin. When solid religious statutes such as the Ten Commandments are reviewed, much of what they command is reflected in secular statutory laws. In the twentieth chapter of the book of Exodus in the Old Testament of scripture, God delivers a systematic set of ordinances from which people are expected to live by. Much of those standards are still prominently in effect to this day, regardless of one’s religious beliefs. Such standards as *you shall not steal*, *you shall not kill*, *you shall not lie*, and *you shall not commit adultery* are all regarded within the moral code of secular society. It can therefore be reasonably assumed that a great deal of secular moral principles are based upon religious statutes. The moral guidelines for all of Christianity are based upon the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. Because Christianity is based upon rational principles as formulated by theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Anselm, and St. Augustine, it is therefore a rationally rooted moral basis from which to objectively build human lives upon. These key principles of moral objectivism have been considered centuries later by some modern thinkers.

Philosophers, Douglas Den Uyl and Douglas Rasmussen sought after the concept of flourishing as well as how it could consequentially be obtained by people. They contrast the idea of flourishing to that of individual perfectionism in their book, *The Perfectionist Turn*. There, they explore whether or not the intrinsic sense of perfectionism, which they argue is held among all humans to some capacity, is beneficial to flourishing itself. While they assert that the means by which one flourishes is entirely subjective, they consistently support the idea that there must be a realm of reason by which one actually flourishes within. This realm is none other than moral objectivism. When people apply their practical reasoning through a perfectionist mindset, not only are they empowering themselves to truly flourish, but by being entirely aware of the magnitude of their flourishing, they are able to live moral and genuine lives.

Den Uyl and Rasmussen use the works of other philosophers in support of their assertions. This helps to establish a more analytic system of thinking with respect to perfectionism and flourishing. Chapter six of *The Perfectionist Turn* concerns basic moral principles which assist in understanding the applied concept of moral objectivism. Once morality is conceptualized from its most minute properties, people are more able to apply practical reason in making moral choices. Because the argument of this discourse is that true morality is indeed objective, practical reason is of paramount importance in order to fully understand and conform to morality and effectively, truly flourish. Two philosophers of interest to this claim are J.L Mackie and David Hume.

J.L. Mackie specifically speaks of wrongness with respect to morality. The element of wrongdoing within the scope of moral order is far more involved than that which often meets the eye. It should be thought of as a chronological step in a multi-faceted process. For instance, Mackie acknowledges this distinction in his book, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, when he writes: “It is not merely that two features [(action and morality)] occur together. The wrongness must somehow be ‘consequential’ or ‘supervenient.’” Here, it can be seen that the human action is actually what establishes a wrongdoing; an action that must be in opposition to a pre-existing moral code, thereby making it immoral. Whether the action was executed intentionally or unintentionally is dependent upon the practical wisdom, if any, that was applied before, during, and after the immoral act. Through this metaethical style of analysis, Mackie demonstrates that the existence and prominence of moral objectivism can be adequately seen through the act of wrongdoing itself. Den Uyl and Rasmussen follow Mackie’s ethical approach to begin their development of moral objectivism. The analytical conceptualization of moral objectivism is further enriched through a particular notion from, ironically enough, David Hume.

A fundamental component of human life is decision making. This concept is popularly exemplified in television and film when there is a person depicted as contemplating a particularly difficult course of action; an angel on one shoulder enticing him to do something good and a demon on the other enticing him to do something bad. It becomes dependent upon the individual to make the best decision through his practical reasoning. While Hume is by no means a moral objectivist in his philosophical style, he nonetheless provides some rational insights regarding the distinctions made prior between secular morality and religious morality. Like Mackie, Hume recognizes the separate distinctions of action and morality, and identifies wrongdoing as being consequential to action. Whether or not he agrees with moral objectivism, Hume certainly indirectly supports it (likely unintentionally) in his ontological reasoning. Den Uyl and Rasmussen cleverly use some of Hume’s arguments to support their claims.

Den Uyl and Rasmussen acknowledge Hume’s analysis of action and morality, and further summarize the analytic nature and use of its implication. In chapter six of *The Perfectionist Turn*, the authors respond to Hume’s distinctions: “Since there is a logical gap between statements of what is and what ought to be, there is an ontological gap between what is and what is valuable or choiceworthy.” This mode of analysis is likely what runs through the mind of the individual with the angel and demon on either shoulder as he considers what course of action he should take next. Furthermore, this is precisely the role of practical reason with regard to morality, since one must in fact reason in order to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action by first considering its possible consequential outcome(s). Den Uyl and Rasmussen also point out there is an “ontological gap”. This gap is the means by which people justify their actions, and likely falls under either of the two previously mentioned categories of origin for morality: religious beliefs or secular standards. Through the fundamental conceptualization of morality as described by Mackie, and the analytic contemplations of Den Uyl and Rasmussen, which were ironically enhanced by Hume, there is a high degree of favor toward the idea of moral objectivism which is greatly reasonable to the human intellectual capacity, as well as *essential* to flourishing.

Of course, the exact root of moral objectivism is a highly controversial topic of interest. Earlier in the discourse, it was implied that moral standards derived from religious statutes, particularly Christianity, hold greater validity than those of other points of origin such as secularized statutory laws. The reason here is that the rationale behind religious statutes, such as the Ten Commandments or even the Beatitudes, is soundly rooted in the very establishment of the universe itself. In this way, morality was not created or even founded by humanity, but rather it was *discovered* by humanity. This is no different than the discovery of a chemical element; though the scientist accepts credit for making such a breaking discovery, he nonetheless held no role in creating the element itself. Therefore, morality always was, is, and will continue to be, in existence. This is a very difficult concept for those who are ignorant or hostile to Christianity or even religion itself to understand.

Since God’s existence is abundantly sound in reason, it is a fundamental starting point for one to believe in, accept, and conform to moral objectivism. Those who are Christian know that God created the universe and all who dwell within it. They also know that man was created in the image and likeness of God Himself. With these things in mind, it is not difficult to realize that humans have no role in their existence whatsoever; as it was entirely willed by God. The objective Christian idea of the purpose of life is to devote oneself to serving God while in the flesh so to experience eternal life while in the spirit. Without turning a philosophical essay into a theological sermon, the point here is to understand the validity of moral objectivism from a Christian religious standpoint since much of the societal moral principles which exist today were founded upon Judeo-Christian doctrine. In times past, the concept of moral objectivism was not a difficult one to grasp, but it would seem that, as new generations began to emerge from those times, it has become an increasingly foreign and far-fetched idea.

In a world where what was once grossly immoral, is now entirely conventional, the intellectual damage has been catastrophic. Ideologies can be so repugnant in fact, some people will even go as far as to praise the ghastly changes in moral standards; literally rebuking the way it ought to be according to the objective moral code. From a religious standpoint, within the center of every sin is “I.” Therefore, when people put their own needs and desires before that which is right, just and moral, they are merely condemning themselves within a world of lies, and are certainly *not* flourishing. Since the principle objective of philosophy is to discover truths in an exponentially abstract world, it is only reasonable to provide the most sound and rational accounts of truth using what is already known to man through the course of history and cognitive discovery.

The human capacity to reason practically is none other than a gift from the one who designed it. Those who don’t apply practical reasoning within their lives are not unlike those who buy a pizza simply for the box; the purpose is thereby defeated. Aristotle stresses the importance of using practical reason in order to reach life’s greatest good of flourishing. Today, the world has become increasingly deprived of reason through the corruption of relativistic freedom. Individuals feel that they should do whatever makes them happy, regardless of whether or not it is moral. Conversely, many of those who hold morally relativistic views exhibit prejudice against those who believe in obeying an objective moral code. Resultantly, reason has exponentially diminished in prominence while emotion has surged into its place. Furthermore, less people actually contemplate the “ontological gap,” as expressed by Den Uyl and Rasmussen when making decisions, and when the threat of realizing the wrongness of something that is done out of pleasure lurks near, it is immediately dismissed so as to simulate its non-existence. Since people who disregard an objective moral code are only lying to themselves by attempting to justify false flourishing, they can never *truly* flourish.

Everybody who lives must maintain their own lives in some way. Whether people maintain their lives by working every day in order to make a living and support themselves, or simply by eating and drinking for the purpose of survival, people must regularly actuate their lives in some capacity. Those who go further to achieve all that they are capable of achieving with respect to their potentials are theoretically said to flourish. The validity of such flourishing however is entirely dependent upon the moral authenticity of the actions claimed to be virtuous. Because of the finite capacities of the human cognitive ability, attempting to go beyond what was pre-established before the creation of humanity itself is both unreasonable as well as destined to fail. By utilizing the practical reason bestowed to all of humanity, people are able to distinguish between right and wrong within a universal scope of moral objectivism and resultantly, rise to their full potentials and flourish as human beings.

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