“Does Virtue Contribute to Flourishing?”

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Introduction

The question of our title raises several further questions. Whose flourishing is in view — that of the person who possesses the virtue, or that of people whose lives are affected by the person with the virtue? And the answer to that question might depend on which virtues are in question — temperance might be thought primarily to benefit its possessor (she’s slim and healthy, and her marriage is intact), while justice benefits those who receive just treatment (her friends and associates can trust her to treat them right). But more fundamental than either of these questions is this one: What is flourishing, anyway? Is it just a preponderance of pleasure over discomfort? Is it the same as happiness? Is it reliably measured by sincere self-report, or can a person be flourishing more or less than she thinks she is? And if this is possible, how can a person be ignorant about her own flourishing? Is the concept of human flourishing tied to the concept of human nature, so that what we take flourishing to be will depend on what we think human beings are? And if what flourishing is depends on what human nature is, might this be a key to the relation between virtues and flourishing, so that to live virtuously just is, in some sense, to flourish, since virtues are a fundamental way of flourishing? This essay will attempt to answer the question of the title by proposing answers to these other questions. I begin with a discussion of flourishing.
Human flourishing

Thinkers disagree about human flourishing, and that in two ways. First, they may have different conceptions of what kind of thing human flourishing is. And second, even if they agree on what general kind of thing it is, the kind of thing they agree it to be may have rather starkly variant subspecies.

One answer to the question, “what is human flourishing?” that comes to mind is, “a human being is flourishing when, and only when, he or she is happy. But ‘happiness’ has more than one meaning. Consider positive affective time-slice happiness. We say, for example, “the Baylor students were very happy when the Lady Bears won the NCAA women’s basketball championship, but were much less so when they returned, later in the evening, to preparing for tomorrow’s history exam.” Here, happiness is feeling good. Daniel Gilbert says,

Emotional happiness … is the feeling common to the feelings we have when we see our new granddaughter smile for the first time, receive word of a promotion, help a wayward tourist find the art museum, taste Belgian chocolate toward the back of our tongue, inhale the scent of our lover’s shampoo, hear that song we used to like so much in high school but haven’t heard in years, touch our cheek to kitten fur, cure cancer, or get a really good snootful of cocaine.1

In this usage, ‘happiness’ refers to some particular time-slice: you can be happy one minute and unhappy the next. Gilbert’s book offers an explanation why we human beings

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are so poor at foreseeing what will make us happy in this sense.

He also argues that positive affective time-slice is the primary sense of ‘happiness.’ He takes on a long and deep tradition in philosophy when he denies the legitimacy of a conception of happiness that ties it closely to virtue:

For two thousand years philosophers have felt compelled to identify happiness with virtue because that is the sort of happiness they think we ought to want. … But if living one’s life virtuously is a cause of happiness, it is not happiness itself, and it does us no good to obfuscate a discussion by calling both the cause and the consequence by the same name.

…Happiness is a word that we generally use to indicate an experience and not the actions that give rise to it. Does it make any sense to say, ‘After a day spent killing his parents, Frank was happy’? Indeed it does. We hope there never was such a person, but the sentence is grammatical, well formed, and easily understood. Frank is a sick puppy, but if he says he is happy and he looks happy, is there a principled reason to doubt him? …

Happiness refers to feelings, virtue refers to actions, and those actions can cause those feelings (34–35).

Gilbert is off-target when he says that virtue refers to actions. Virtues are primarily attributes of persons, and only derivatively of actions. Emily performs generous actions because she is generous. And to say that she is generous is to say that you can depend on her, day in and day out, year in and year out, to tend to have generous thoughts, generous motives, generous emotions, and, yes, to perform generous actions. Her record may not be perfect, but a strong tendency is there if she has the virtue.
On a positive affective time-slice conception of happiness, Frank is happy if he feels good, and it’s not inconceivable that he’s in a state of euphoria now that he’s killed his parents. So Frank is in a happy moment. But is he a happy person? And here, on this rather different concept of happiness — as an attribute of persons rather than moments in a person’s experience — I think we’ll find it very hard to conceive Frank as happy. So, using these two different concepts of happiness, it makes good grammatical sense to say, “Frank’s happy to have killed his parents, but he is decidedly a very unhappy person.” It would be silly to say that virtue is necessary for ever feeling good at all, but it seems quite possible that virtue is required for being a happy person. So this is the sense in which it might make sense to say that virtue is necessary to happiness.

To rule out the happiness of persons in favor of the happiness of moments (person-time-slices) is to adopt a controversial (to say the least) and revisionary concept of a person. Adult human persons have a strong bent to think of themselves and their fellow human beings as having a narrative in which they are a continuous (though no doubt changing) character. A person does not just live; he or she lives a life.

That life can be good or bad (good or bad for the person himself, as well as for his friends, family, and colleagues, and even the world — consider Gandhi and Hitler). When a person has a life that is good for himself as well as those around him, we may call that person happy. He is a happy person even if, at the moment, he’s going through a hard time (let’s say he’s just been wrongly dismissed from a job that he really enjoyed, and is now unclear about what to do next). He’s feeling “down.” This is not a happy moment in his life, but that doesn’t mean his life is not a happy one.

So what does it mean to have a happy life? Someone who thinks about happiness
in the way Gilbert does might admit that lives can be happy as well as moments, but insist that a happy life is just one that has a preponderance of happy moments and is short on very unhappy (distressed, painful) moments. In that case, he would still be right about positive affect time-slice happiness being the basic kind; it is the kind of happiness that a happy life is made of.

If a happy life is happy because and only because of its happy moments, then a person who sought to have a happy life would want to make maximal use of a machine that I will now imagine. This machine stimulates pleasure centers in one’s brain in such a way as to give one pleasure reminiscent of a cocaine high, but so that it does no damage and the experience is always utterly “fresh”: you never get tired of it. You can be in ecstasy during your whole waking day, and continue (at a lower voltage) with ecstatic dreams through the night. When you’re on the machine, you can’t do anything else (work, write, play the piano, interact with other humans), and further, you don’t want to; you’re completely satisfied. You’ll have to get off the machine every now and then to eat, get some exercise, and perform necessary bodily functions, but having once experienced it, you’ll always be in a big hurry to get back on it. With such a routine, and given the bodily harmlessness of the machine’s action, a person who was wealthy enough not to have to work could spend seventy, eighty, ninety, or a hundred years on the machine, thus having the “happiest” possible life of any human being in history. If you think that positive affective time-slice happiness is all that personal happiness is made of, you will choose life on the machine in preference to a life of meaningful work, worship, play, inquiry, adventure, good friendships, marriage and children and grandchildren…. Even if

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2 The following is a modification of Robert Nozick’s thought experiment in Anarchy, State, and Utopia (New York, Basic Books, 1974), pp. 42–45.
such activities are on balance affectively positive, they all carry their moments of frustration and discomfort. And, after all, on the affective time-slice view, what makes all of them attractive is just the degree to which they issue in positive feelings.

I propose that wise people would not choose to live their lives on such a machine, despite its vast superiority in terms of positive affective time-slice happiness. They would not regard it as a good human life, not even as assessed solely from the point of view of the one living the life. What might the wise say in favor of resisting the machine’s allure? “Pleasure without meaning is empty” (they don’t deny that it can be intense, and very attractive, even overwhelmingly so). “A life on the machine would be a selfish life.” “It would not be a worthy life.” Worthy of what? —“Worthy of a human being.” These are some of the intuitions that a wise person is likely to feel, on contemplating a human life lived for the momentary pleasures of the happiness machine.

Let’s try to go deeper into these intuitions. What do these wise people mean by ‘meaning’? Why should a life be meaningful? Why isn’t it enough that it be pleasant? And what does this talk of ‘worthiness’ come to? Why should a life be worthy? Again, isn’t it enough that it be pleasant? Don’t people who want worthiness want it just for the pleasure they derive from it? They have a taste for “worthiness,” others have a taste for cocaine. Doesn’t it all come down to pleasure in the end? People who think like Gilbert will say yes.

In my first quotation, Gilbert proposes nine examples of positive affective time-slice happiness:

1. Seeing our new granddaughter smile for the first time
2. Receiving word of a promotion
3 Helping a wayward tourist find the art museum
4 Tasting Belgian chocolate toward the back of our tongue
5 Inhaling the scent of our lover’s shampoo
6 Hearing that song we used to like so much in high school but haven’t heard in years
7 Touching our cheek to kitten fur
8 Curing cancer
9 Getting a really good snootful of cocaine

These are all pleasurable experiences for at least some people (interestingly, probably not for all people). Gilbert’s point is that we speak of them all as “happy” experiences. But notice the diversity among these pleasures that comes out when we apply the words ‘worthy’ and ‘meaningful’ to them. The pleasure of seeing our new granddaughter smile for the first time is redolent of family life: an early sign of personality in this little one whose birth was so momentous and so difficult for our daughter, the loveliness of seeing a new generation emerge from our aging loins, or as my mother once said upon hearing of one of her children’s pregnancies, “Oh, another child to love!” Compare this for meaning and worthiness with getting a really good snootful of cocaine. The snootful will be more intensely pleasurable, no doubt; but it’s at the bottom of the chart for meaningfulness and human worth. Tasting Belgian chocolate toward the back of our tongue and touching our cheek to kitten fur belong on the more sensory and less personal end of the spectrum, in the direction of the snootful of cocaine, but both experiences may be “loaded” with the essentially historical pleasures of nostalgia, their associations with episodes of our distinctively human living. The taste of Belgian chocolate might carry us back to the junior year abroad that we spent in Brussels, where we had some hard experiences and
did so much maturing and decided on our career in linguistics. Helping a wayward tourist and curing cancer are both heavy with the associations of our social life, our common threats and concerns, and our solidarity in a context of friends and neighbors and fellow human beings. And the person who takes special pleasure in helping another, or in ridding someone of a life-threatening disease, is a person to whom we attribute virtues like generosity and compassion. Without some such moral disposition, we won’t get much of a time-slice buzz out of helping others. But on a positive affect time-slice conception of happiness, pleasure is pleasure, whether it comes from virtuous roots in family life, from the pursuit of deep and interesting questions, from actions of generosity and justice, or a snootful of cocaine.

Gilbert puts down the long classic tradition that associates happiness with virtue by saying that “philosophers have felt compelled to identify happiness with virtue because that is the sort of happiness they think we ought to want.” It just wouldn’t be right for a moral creep to have genuine human happiness; therefore, when a scumbag seems happy, it can’t really be so (says Gilbert say the philosophers). Gilbert is right that the philosophers think we ought to want a kind of happiness that involves and presupposes our integrity as persons, rather than merely the joys of our time-slices. But on the deeper conceptions (Plato, Aristotle, Augustine), such person-happiness is not just what we ought to want, but also what we do want, even when we don’t know we want it. The reason is that these philosophers think we are by nature persons, and thus cannot help but desire happiness as full personal wellbeing.

Charles Taylor\(^3\) distinguishes two ways that we make evaluations. In weak

\(^3\) Cite Taylor.
evaluation we express our preferences: for example, in painting our kitchen we might prefer one shade of yellow to another. We might justify our choice “objectively” by reference to how the preferred color looks against the woodwork, but ultimately the choice is just a matter of our tastes or preferences. We don’t insist that such an evaluation be objectively “true.” It is enough that we like this and we dislike that. In strong evaluation, by contrast, we suppose that there is a truth of the matter. When we talk about people having inherent rights, or about human dignity, or about giving an accused person a fair trial, we are much less inclined to admit that our evaluation is just a matter of taste. (We don’t say, “OK, I have a taste for justice, but you prefer injustice. Now can’t we just get along?”) Here we tend to think that justice being good and injustice bad is not a matter of anybody’s preference. It is “written into the very nature of things.”

But science might dissuade us from this. It might seem to tell us that even our conceptions of human dignity and fairness and rights are merely products of evolution, and therefore merely “preferences” of our species, with no deeper truth backing them up. In this way, strong evaluation could be eliminated; all evaluation would be weak: just the evolutionarily determined preferences of one species or another. Because of our history, we might have a “hangover” of feeling the force of strong evaluation in some matters (such as justice and rights and our belief in the “nobility” of virtues), but the more deeply we assimilate the scientific thinking, the more comfortable we become with reducing all evaluation to weak evaluation.

Gilbert is typical of mainline contemporary psychology, which fundamentally fails to see a moral order in the universe. Instead, whatever “moral order” there is, according to such science, is secondary to gene replication (that is, it originates purely in
the service of gene replication and remains just a product of that process) and part of an ultimately non-moral view of human development and functioning. The difficulty with such reduction, from a human point of view, is that it constitutes a debunking of morality that undermines it in anyone who fully appreciates the doctrine (or it creates a kind of schizophrenic doublethink).

By way of concluding this section, I offer two general comments on the positive affect time-slice conception of happiness. First, a time-slice conception of happiness is in tension with the fact that people are historical beings; they live (endure) in time, and identify themselves in terms of the narrative of their lives. If you have a life, you are more than a time-slice, and more than a bunch of time-slices all in a row, one after another. And you may want happiness, not just as a positive affect in the present and in the future, but as the wellbeing of a life. If happiness is a property of persons insofar as they have lives, then a time-slice conception of happiness is not what mature people are looking for in the way of happiness.

Here’s the second comment. Heretofore I’ve said nothing about the place of negative affect in human happiness. We do tend to associate happiness with pleasant, as opposed to unpleasant, affect. The “positive psychology” movement of Martin Seligman and his colleagues stresses positive affect virtually to the exclusion of negative affect. But if we think (as the positive psychologists do) that being well-formed as persons is a necessary condition for deep happiness, then we must admit that distressing emotions come with the territory. Consider some virtues. To be a just person is to care that justice be done, and to care about doing it oneself. But to care about it is to be vulnerable to

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distress when injustice is rampant or entrenched; it is to be subject to frustrations when one’s best efforts are less than successful. *Compassion* involves caring about people who are suffering — wishing that they not suffer. It can lead to rejoicing when one’s efforts to relieve suffering are successful, but equally it is characterized by distress at the suffering, and frustration when one’s best efforts are blocked. *Self-control* is by nature directed at one’s own inclinations and urges that need to be held in check for the sake of some good, and this checking of inclination is often unpleasant. *Love* for another involves rejoicing in the other’s blessings and successes, but it will also involve disappointment when the other’s projects fail and grief if the loved one is taken away. So if the happy life requires being a fully formed person, and being a fully formed person requires the virtues, then the happy life, almost of necessity, involves negative, as well as positive, affect.

The question of our title is not whether virtue is necessary to happiness, but about the easier question whether virtue is necessary to flourishing. In this first section I’ve examined the concept of happiness as a possible explanation of the concept of flourishing. Some people may say that flourishing, for a human being, is just the same thing as being happy. But the notion of flourishing is a more biologically toned concept than happiness. The name of a biological species is usually in the background when we speak of flourishing. Thus flourishing is flourishing as …, where what follows the ‘as’ is the name of a species. To flourish as a tree is quite different from flourishing as a rabbit, and both are quite different from flourishing as a human being. We’ve looked at two concepts of happiness as possible explanations of what flourishing is for a human being. One is a subjective time-slice positive affect conception, and it seems pretty obvious that a person could have quite a lot of happiness in this sense and not be flourishing as a human being.
One can imagine such a person being vicious and/or mentally ill like Frank who killed his parents, high on drugs or hooked up to our imagined pleasure machine for long periods; and none of these is compatible with human flourishing.

The deeper conception of human happiness, in which happiness depends on virtuous functioning and is compatible with considerable negative affect, is much more promising as a candidate for explaining human flourishing. Indeed, since virtues are classically defined as qualities that make a species-member properly functioning according to its kind, we might think that living virtuously is identical with flourishing. This is not quite right, since the world needs to cooperate for a human being to function properly: you have to have enough food and other physical resources, and some fairly virtuous fellow human beings to interact with. But we can say that virtue is necessary for human flourishing, and so we will have answered an even stronger question than our title asks. This answer raises another of our initial questions: Which virtues promote, or are necessary for, human flourishing?

**Human Virtues**

Let us suppose that human virtues are qualities of wellbeing for human beings. They are, as Plato and Aristotle thought, aspects of moral and psychic health. This supposition will not contain much information, however, unless we know which of the possible traits of human beings are the virtues. Any answer to this question is controversial. Moral traditions, and the philosophers and theologians that represent them, have proposed many different lists of virtues. These lists often overlap to some extent, but often, too, they advocate different traits as indicative of psychic health, and give
conflicting verdicts on particular traits.

For example, humility is a central virtue in the Christian outlook, but is entirely missing from Aristotle’s account of virtues, and Aristotle might even regard humility as a vice. Indeed, it is almost absent in Plato as well. At the one point where Plato seems clearly to endorse it, his justification is one that Aristotle is likely to reject: that we all have need of someone to control and lead us, and that humility is necessary for us to be susceptible to such control and leading. In apparent opposition, Aristotle stresses the self-sufficiency of the most fully mature human beings. The stress on self-sufficiency is most evident in Aristotle’s account of the virtue of magnanimity or greatness of soul, where he tells us that the great-souled man tries to forget ways in which he is dependent on others, and likes to remember the ways others are dependent on him. Thus he is strongly disinclined to be grateful — another virtue that is prominent in the New Testament.

On the supposition that virtues are traits that make for a properly functioning, flourishing human life, it seems plausible that such differences of opinion about which traits are virtues can be traced to different conceptions of what sort of being a human being is. As Socrates asks, in defense of leaving other less important or vexing questions to the side, “Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?” On the answer to that question will turn the all-important issue about how to live, and how to be an exemplary

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7 Nicomachean Ethics 4.3, 1124b10–19; also see 10.7, 1177a27–35.
8 See, for example, I Thessalonians 5.18, Colossians 3.17.
9 Phaedrus 230a.
specimen of our human kind. Now I want to argue for the thesis that what flourishing is depends on which virtues you think are the human ones, and that this in turn will depend on what you think a human being is. I will focus on two examples: the virtues of *compassion* and *obedience*. If I am right that difference of opinion about which traits are virtues goes back to differences about what human beings are, and also that virtues are traits of flourishing human beings, it will follow that we can agree on what it is to flourish only if we agree on what human beings are.

*Compassion*

Martha Nussbaum comments:

Compassion is controversial. For about twenty-five hundred years it has found both ardent defenders, who consider it to be the bedrock of the ethical life, and equally determined opponents, who denounce it as ‘irrational’ and a bad guide to action.\(^{10}\)

What is compassion? Concepts of compassion as a purported virtue will no doubt differ, depending on the particular way that a moral tradition conceives of human beings and of the world in which we humans live. Some will think it virtuous to feel compassion for a sufferer only if that sufferer is not responsible for his or her suffering,\(^{11}\) but others will think that compassion can be legitimate even where the sufferer is to blame.\(^{12}\) Some will think that compassion always involves construing oneself as vulnerable to the kind of

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\(^{10}\) *Upheavals of Thought*, 354. I am indebted, in this subsection, to Nussbaum’s discussion, pp. 354–400, though not everything I say here agrees with her.

\(^{11}\) *Upheavals*, pp. 311–15, Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.8, 1385b14.

\(^{12}\) Luke 15.11–32, especially 21–22. The heavy stress on forgiveness here and throughout the New Testament seems to account for the lack of the innocence condition that is found in Aristotle and the tragedians.
suffering that one laments in the sufferer,\textsuperscript{13} and others that such self-reference is neither necessary nor ideal.\textsuperscript{14} But some marks of compassion will straddle the boundaries between the traditions. For example, the virtue of compassion is a disposition to feel discomfort about the suffering or deficiency of a fellow creature and some motivation to come to his or her aid, to relieve the suffering or alleviate the deficiency.

Aristotle does not include compassion among the virtues he treats in \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, though he gives no indication of thinking it vicious, either. He makes it a necessary condition of genuine compassion that the one who feels it construe himself as vulnerable to the suffering or weakness that he compassionates in the other, but for Aristotle this self-reference of the attitude does not seem to make it self-serving in the way that Friedrich Nietzsche does in the following:

\begin{quote}
A mishap to another offends us: it would bring our impotence, or perhaps our cowardice, into strong relief if we could do nothing to help him; or in itself it would give rise to a diminution of our honor in the eyes of others and of ourselves. Or again, accidents that happen to others act as finger-posts to point out our own danger, and even as indications of human peril and frailty they can produce a painful effect upon us. We shake off this kind of pain and offense, and balance it by an act of compassion behind which may be hidden a subtle form of self-defense or even revenge. That at bottom we strongly think of ourselves may easily be divined from the decision that we arrive at in all cases where we can avoid the sight of those who are suffering or starving or wailing. We make up our minds not
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\textsuperscript{13} See \textit{Upheavals} 315–21, Aristotle, \textit{Rhetoric} 1385b15.
\textsuperscript{14} See Wolterstorff, \textit{Justice: Rights and Wrongs}, p. 218 note.
to avoid such people when we can approach them as powerful and helpful ones, when we can safely reckon upon their applause, or wish to feel the contrast of our own happiness, or, again, when we hope to get rid of our own boredom.\(^{15}\)

As usual, Nietzsche puts his finger on what is of dubious commendation in human conduct. But what he so astutely describes here is not real, virtuous compassion — he himself says in the context that it is what we *erroneously* call compassion — but debased forms of it, false imitations of compassion. A Christian, or someone else who believes that compassion is an aspect of the mature and good human being’s character, does not take compassion as a strategy for confirming our power over others. It is not a tactic for getting honor or avoiding dishonor in the eyes of others. It is not a defense against our own vulnerability, or revenge against those self-admiring people who would dominate us and make us feel small. It is not a device for getting applause from observers, or relieving our boredom. Such motivations are no doubt common among us, but they are not what compassion is. It is true that we’re usually not entirely absent from a sense of ourselves when feeling genuine compassion. We might, for example, be reminded of a time when we were in similar trouble. While our selves may be dimly in the background of our view of the sufferer, still, when we are really exhibiting compassion we are not at bottom thinking very strongly of ourselves; our mind is on the other and *his* suffering and how to give *him* respite. We are pained at *his* suffering and want it to be alleviated for the sake of *his* comfort. (Even people whose compassion is not very mature will feel a compassion for their own children that cannot be explained in anything like the egoistic terms that

\(^{15}\) *Daybreak*, §133. E-book. Translated by J. M. Kennedy.
Nietzsche proposes.) So in this passage, Nietzsche does not really object to *compassion*, but to a degenerate parody thereof. Defenders of compassion will agree with him in deploiring the self-deception that he deplores. Yet Nietzsche is, no doubt, an enemy of compassion. So how would the *real* Nietzsche object to *real* compassion?

Compassion is a kind of emotional solidarity or identification with those who are down, with the weak and unglorious. It is a kind of love of those who are in trouble, a caring about them and a wishing them well. But human beings — or at least the best and most admirable among them — are for Nietzsche essentially self-sufficient, self-glorifying self-creators. For him, real compassion is a corrupt state of character because it takes seriously human weakness and passivity and need of help. Compassion says, as it were, that such neediness is a normal human state, and in this way its advocates are committed to a provisional pessimism. (I say provisional because whether the outlook is ultimately pessimistic will depend on what other virtues are in the outlook; for example, the outlook might include the virtue of hope.) To the compassionate person such neediness is not demeaning, embarrassing, or shameful, even though it calls out for alleviation — alleviation by *help* from someone. Such neediness is normal for humanity. Nietzsche cannot accept this picture of humanity in its weakness. For him, true humanity is god-like in a way that excludes need, and thus excludes the kind of identification with need that compassionate feeling and action are. Neediness is decadence, and so is taking seriously the neediness of others.

The way compassion “normalizes” need as a general condition of humanity may also explain why Aristotle does not include it among the virtues that he discusses in his ethics, despite giving what looks like a sympathetic view of it in his *Rhetoric*. For, as I
have noted, Aristotle, like Nietzsche, makes self-sufficiency a feature of essential (best potential) humanity, though he does so less stridently than Nietzsche. Nussbaum points out that the ancient Stoics also see human beings as god-like in their essential nature, so that, just as self-pity for various temporal set-backs and sufferings is unworthy of human dignity, so too, to feel compassion for others in their supposed troubles is actually an insult to their humanity. Immanuel Kant takes a similar view.

The trait of compassion that some regard as a virtue, as a state of human excellence and spiritual health and maturity and proper functioning, others regard as corruption, disease, and decadence. The difference between these camps derives ultimately from a difference of opinion about what human beings essentially are: are they essentially self-sufficient, so that neediness, and seriousness about neediness, are always deficiency or concession to deficiency? Or is neediness normal for human beings, so that acknowledgment of our own and others’ needs is perfectly compatible with the highest human excellence, and indeed must be incorporated into that excellence? On the answers to this question turns the long controversy about the status of compassion as a virtue.

Compassion is a case of a determinate and particular trait that is considered a virtue by some and a vice by others; even where agreement can be reached on what compassion is, one group takes it to be an aspect of human flourishing and the other considers the same trait an aspect of human corruption.

*Obedience*

The way moral outlooks divide on human nature, and especially on the issue of autonomy versus dependency, is even clearer in the case of the virtue of obedience. As a
virtue, obedience is a disposition to respond to the known will of an authoritative other by willing what the other wills because the other wills it by his authority. It does not rule out willing the same thing for other reasons (say, one’s insight into the rationality of willing the projected action or state of affairs), though it does not require this, either. That is, the authoritative will of the other may be the sole reason for which the subject wills what he wills and thus performs what the other wills that he perform. It is a responsiveness of a subordinate will to the authoritative one. This responsiveness constitutes a personal relationship with the authoritative other, namely one that we might call “submission”; it is an honoring of the authoritative one, a show of respect for him. As Thomas Aquinas notes, “the virtue of obedience, whereby we contemn our own will for God’s sake, is more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues, which contemn other goods for the sake of God.”

Obedience is a virtue, of course, only if there actually is an authoritative will to respond to in this way. People who think that God does not exist or that God does not have a will for human lives will not think that obedience is a virtue. Also, they may think that human practical rationality is such that any attitude of obedience like the one I have described is a corruption of it or a failure to be mature. It would be the Kantian vice of “heteronomy.” (They may admit that obedience is a “virtue” in children, but not a virtue in adults.) On the other hand, if we are, as Christians and other theists think, creatures of a God who has a will for our lives, then obedience will be a central feature of the moral life and a crucial aspect of human flourishing.

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16 Summa Theologiae 2-2, 104 art. 3, responsio.
**Conclusion**

I have offered some answers to questions raised by our main question, whether virtue contributes to flourishing. In answer to the question whose flourishing is in view, the distinction between self-regarding and others-regarding virtues is not a helpful one for our question if virtues are all, as virtues, fulfillments of our human nature and thus dispositions to function well as human beings, to be psychically healthy and thus to flourish. Temperance, a so-called self-regarding virtue, is no more a fulfillment of our nature than justice, a so-called others-regarding virtue. This seems especially obvious if human beings are essentially social creatures, as most moral outlooks hold. People who are functioning properly as persons benefit both themselves and people whose lives intersect theirs. To the question what flourishing is, after all, I’ve proposed that it is happiness, but in doing so I have rejected the popular view that happiness comes in time-slices of positive affect. Happiness is a characteristic of a life, and a life has a narrative and is thus more than a collection of time-slices. Furthermore, negative affect can be as indicative of flourishing as positive affect. Happiness involves caring about things that are genuinely important, and given the sometimes frustrating character of the world we inhabit, negative affect will be inevitable for a person who is living well and thus flourishing.

I have argued that, while virtues contribute to flourishing because virtuous living is the most important aspect of human flourishing, this truth is not very informative about what human flourishing is, because it is controversial which traits are virtues. The identity of the virtues depends on what basic human nature is, and what kind of universe
we live in. I have argued that what kind of life is normatively characteristic (as contrasted with statistically characteristic) is deeply contested. I don’t say, “essentially contested,” because I don’t want to rule out the possibility of resolution, and I don’t say merely, “contested,” because I want to suggest that, while resolution of the differences of opinion might be resolvable, there is no historical precedent for a general resolution, so that any possible resolution is somewhere in the (distant) future. I have cited the controversial status of such traits as compassion, obedience, and humility.

So on the account of flourishing and happiness that I have proposed, people are not necessarily the best judges of their own flourishing. For example, if we human beings are creatures of a personal God who has a will for how we live, as Christians think, then a person who exemplifies the utmost in Kantian autonomy will not be flourishing as she might be if atheism is correct. And if atheism is correct, then Christians are wrong about what human happiness is. What flourishing is depends on what human nature is. So happiness is not very well measured by sincere self-report. It is also true that, even if a person has the correct view about human nature and the nature of the universe, she or he may be a poor judge of his or her own functioning: she may be functioning better or worse, and thus may be flourishing more or less, than she thinks. Virtues also govern people’s sensitivity to their flourishing; we may deceive ourselves about our true level of happiness, or be ruthlessly honest about it.