

## ON UNDERESTIMATING US

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*Human beings are social animals. A solitary life would be horrible for most of us. What makes life worthwhile is being with others and engaging in shared projects with them. To do justice to these facts, philosophers need to pay more attention to the first-person plural, we/us, and to rethink their accounts of value and virtue.*

The aim of this article is to recommend the idea that, when thinking about action and reasons for action, philosophers should pay more attention to 'we/us'. Philosophical discussion in these areas usually assumes individualism, in the sense of taking it that the fundamental questions are for an individual and have the form 'What should I do?' and 'What should I value?' But, I shall suggest, the first-person plural is as important as the first-person singular. So equally fundamental are the questions for us, 'What should we do?' and 'What should we value?'

One upshot of accepting this shift of viewpoint is (I shall suggest) the need to rethink options in metaethics and moral psychology. In the later part of the article I shall say something about 'fact' and 'value' and also about 'egoism' and 'altruism'. Both of these contrasts, as often understood, presuppose individualism. So, if individualism is false, use of the contrasts may reinforce distorted and unhelpful ways of thinking.

Let me stress at the outset that I am NOT claiming to have discovered some new 'first-person plural' way of thinking, which once adopted will lead to people agreeing more on what it is to behave well and finding it easier to do so. The kind of thinking I want to draw to your attention is

something human beings are already doing. And the central suggestion is rather that philosophers (at least philosophers in the analytic tradition) have overlooked or misrepresented it, because they have operated with assumptions about human beings which are lopsidedly individualist. So we philosophers need to enlarge our repertoire of tools and options for reflecting on action and value, just in order to grasp better what is actually going on. Perhaps by getting more accurate philosophical representation of these matters, and so directing philosophical debate in new directions, philosophers might help human beings to understand themselves better and behave better. But that is another topic, which I shall not pursue here.

A full spelling out and exploration of the idea that 'we' is as important as 'I' is a much bigger job than I can do here. But I hope to say enough to make it seem worth setting out on the project. Here to begin with are reminders of some familiar points.

No one doubts that the individualist perspective captures something important, in that there is a real question for each one of us about his or her own life and whether it goes well or ill. Depending on what I do, I could make a mess of things, or I could secure something valuable (for me at least), in virtue of which I would flourish (in some respect at least). In short, there is individual flourishing and suffering. But what is it for an individual to flourish or suffer?

Some, the objectivists in ethics, think that there is objective value, independent of me or any other person, which sets a standard for what each of us should think and feel and do. Others, the subjectivists, deny this. The objectivists and subjectivists give different accounts of individual flourishing and suffering, because of their different metaphysical views about value.

The objectivists think that I will flourish by getting into some appropriate relation to objectively valuable things, for example by bringing justice into being in my just actions, or by creating and appreciating beauty. And the justice and

beauty which are valuable for me, and make my life go well, are objectively there, and valuable for everyone. So they can contribute to other people's lives going well too.

The subjectivists are uneasy with the idea of there being objectively valuable things. For them, what it is to flourish, and so what is valuable, is relative to the potential flourisher. Any individual has a nature (including such things as what he or she enjoys, wants or is capable of appreciating), which fixes what it is for that person to flourish or otherwise, and so fixes what is valuable to that person. But different people may have different natures, may flourish under different conditions. And so what is valuable to me, in that it contributes to my flourishing, may not be valuable to you and vice versa.

Different subjectivist theories offer different accounts of individual flourishing and suffering. Older accounts invoke ideas like pleasure and pain. Recent theories tend to talk about 'desire satisfaction' or 'utility'. But they are all 'subjectivist' in two senses. They maintain:

(1) What is valuable to an individual subject is bound up with the nature of that particular person. It may contingently be the case that different individuals benefit from the same things. But, for all we know, there are arbitrary and idiosyncratic variations in what is valuable to different people.

(2) Ethical and evaluative claims, such as 'It is our duty to be just', cannot be true claims about the objectively valuable, since there is no objective value. Hence such claims cannot be 'objective' or 'factual', in the sense in which the claims of science are objective and factual. They are rather expressions of feeling or attitude.

But, very importantly for what follows, subjectivist theories are (usually) not 'subjective' in the sense of endorsing a third claim:

(3) A person's nature is whatever he or she thinks it is. So a person cannot be wrong about what is valuable to him or her. There are no objective truths, i.e. truths independent of what the person thinks, about what is valuable to him or her.

And subjectivists do right not to endorse this, since it is not plausible. It seems quite possible that I might get hold of the wrong idea about what my nature is. Even if we admit that I cannot be mistaken about whether things are going well for me just now (and this is contentious; perhaps I can deceive myself and see later that I was refusing to admit myself that I was really in a bad way), it seems very plausible that I can make a mistake about what it is in the current situation which makes it good for me. (For example, I think that it is the music which I am enjoying, when later experiences show that it was really the company and the ambience.) Or I might be right in identifying two good things which are valuable to me, but make the wrong judgement about their relative importance. (I take it that the salary for the job is more important than avoiding a long commute. But when I experience the commute, I discover I was wrong.) Another plausible source of error about myself is writing off something as not valuable to me from prejudice or inadequate knowledge of it. ('I wish I had tried this earlier.') And if, in some way like this, I this get a false picture of myself, I may then choose to do something which in fact disadvantages me.

The implication of this is that I would do well to try to understand my own nature. I need to grapple with questions like this: What it is which I really value in the situations which seem to me good? What should I do when I am conflicted and attracted to things which are incompatible? Can I find a way of having my cake and eating it by combining some versions of these things? Can I change my nature so as to make something more or less valuable to me and so avoid being conflicted? If so, in what sort of direction should I change it? How should I balance near-

term and long-term prospects? In short, I would do well to think about what flourishing is, or could be, for me.

It may not be easy to do this or to get clear answers to such questions. But various kinds of investigation, for example exploring options imaginatively, looking at what has happened to other people in similar situations and the like, may provide helpful insight. And to turn away from engaging with the questions is to become feebly passive with respect to how I live my one life. It is to drift on, remaining muddled and perhaps conflicted, and giving up on the chance of finding my way to a life about which I am at least reasonably confident that it is a worthwhile life for me. So it would be sensible to persist with these questions, even when the going gets tough.

This kind of thinking would be sensible for me, even if I were a solitary agent and did not have to bother with others' welfare. But we are not solitary agents. So how do others fit in? Much philosophical work on this represents other people as both useful to me but also an annoying constraint. They are useful because by co-operating we can together produce more good things, e.g. food, clothes, houses, medical treatments, etc. than we can by each working separately. But they also present a constraint because they will not co-operate with me to produce these good things unless I acknowledge their interests to some extent, for example by allowing them to have some of what we produce together rather than taking it all for myself.

This view represents other people as merely contingently required if I am to secure the good things of life. But there is something very strange about this. Consider being by yourself on a vast and wholly reliable automated spaceship which supplies delicious food in immense variety, hot water, soft clean towels, musical instruments, workshops to make things in, laboratories to experiment in, gardens and landscapes to wander through, robots for diagnosing and treating illness, and so on and on for every enjoyable or reassuring thing which a person may do or experience entirely alone.

Most of us would agree that such a life is a horrifying prospect, because of the loneliness. Any view which implicitly recommends spaceship life as the good life has blanked out the fact that we are social primates and dependent on others for our flourishing, not just contingently but in much deeper ways.

One kind of dependence is obvious with children. Babies are helpless and must be cared for in order to live long enough to acquire the skills needed to have any chance of surviving and flourishing in their adult lives. But the deeper kinds of dependence, and interdependence, come into view when we consider what those skills are. Let us contrast human beings here with bears. Bears are mainly solitary creatures. The cubs are dependent on the mother for surviving and acquiring skills, as are human babies. But the skills they acquire are those of foraging, fighting and the like. And when they have acquired them, they go off and live by themselves. By contrast the skills children acquire as they grow up are not those enabling them to live a solitary and non-communicative life. They are those of joining in our shared life, with its enterprises – familial, social, sporting, artistic, economic, religious, political and so on.

What this makes vivid is that I need others because my flourishing requires being part of events and enterprises which are essentially social, things such as sharing a joke, a puzzlement, a meal, an insight, a cuddle, a play production or a philosophical discussion. The possibility of my doing these things requires the background of a life lived with others, to whom I stand in longer-term relations, such as tolerance, mutual respect, affection, love, friendship and the like.

Various things follow from this. There is no good life for me, without there being a good life for others too. It is we who flourish or suffer together. Therefore thinking about my flourishing must be, in part, thinking about our flourishing. The fundamental questions which face human beings about action and value are not (only) the individualist ones

‘What should I do?’ and ‘What should I value?’ but also ‘What should we do?’ and ‘What should we value?’ The central way of addressing these questions is discussion, creation of a joint thinking space where together we address questions of concern to us.

There is plenty of such thinking going on. A couple debating whether to have another child, an appointments committee considering who should get the job, the amateur dramatic group casting its play, the citizens of the UK debating Brexit all provide examples of it. As noted at the start, the point of this article is not to suggest that humans need to engage in radically new kinds of thinking. The suggestion is rather that philosophers should give more attention to this shared thinking, and the shared flourishing (or suffering) it will lead to if it goes right (or not).

It would be quite unfair to say that philosophers have paid no attention to issues in this area. The topic of so-called ‘shared’ or ‘joint’ thinking is attracting growing interest and much excellent work has been done. But current discussion is limited in two ways. The first is that it is focused on shared judgement and decision-making and does not consider shared flourishing. The second is that it is shaped by the individualist assumption that what it is for us to do something (think, or act, or flourish) is secondary to what it is for individuals to think or act or flourish.

There are many implications of our being more radical by recognizing shared flourishing and the interdependence of my flourishing and our flourishing. We shall now briefly consider two of them. The first is for the existence of a supposed ‘fact/value distinction’. The second is for the idea that behaving ethically is a matter of being ‘altruistic’ rather than ‘egoistic’.

As to ‘fact’ and ‘value’, the suggestion here is not that recognition that we flourish or suffer together provides a way of rehabilitating the idea of objective value. Let us agree to continue to be sceptical about that. The suggestion is rather that this denial of objective value cannot be used to support the idea that reasoned, truth-directed

debate has little to work on, and so is likely to be futile, in cases where people find themselves debating contentious ethical or political issues.

The denial of objective value may be used to support this somewhat depressing view of the possibility of ethical debate, given a background of the individualist assumption about flourishing. The picture offered is the following. The disputers are labouring under the illusion that there is objective value. But in reality there are no facts about this to investigate. The only objective facts are those of science and of each individual's nature. Once the facts of science are agreed, any further disagreement about what to do stems from the different natures of the parties. But since there is no objective value to provide an external standard to adjudicate between these natures, the debate has no shared answerable question to focus on. That is why it is so irresolvable and will become merely an increasingly vociferous exchange of emotionally charged utterances.

Since the early days of emotivism, with its crude 'boo/hurrah' theory of the nature of ethical claims, subjectivists about value have worried that they are committed to this view of debate on 'what we ought to do' and have tried to avoid it. And many very ingenious moves have been made, to show how there might properly seem to be a common question we can focus on and rational, truth-invoking, ways of addressing it.

But recognizing that flourishing is something we do together reveals the whole familiar line of thought to be a muddle and these ingenious manoeuvres to be unnecessary. 'What we ought to do' (given that we are sceptics about objective value) plausibly means what will best enable us to flourish. And there will be facts about our nature as a plural subject in the same way, and of the same metaphysical status, as the facts about the natures of individuals. So to answer our question we need to think more about our nature, who we are and what it could be for us to flourish.



Thinking through the analogy with the individual may help to make this clearer. Suppose I dither and am conflicted when faced with some choice between incompatible options, safety and excitement for example. To opt for an individualist analogue of the fact/value distinction would be to say here, 'There's no adjudicating between these inclinations because there are no facts about value. So there is no point in thinking more about it. I'll just have to toss a coin.' But to do this is to overlook the possibility that I might become less conflicted by thinking seriously about the options. What is it which really attracts me in each? Can I find versions of the valuable things which can be had together? Might it be good for me to become less timid (or less rash)? Are there ways of making that happen? Even if there are no 'objective' values out there constraining me to value excitement more than safety (or vice versa), there is still the real question of how the various things which are valuable to me can be fitted by me into my one life, in some way which enables me to flourish.

Analogously, then, in the case where we differ about what would enable us to flourish, there are investigations to be done, jointly of course, into what would be good for us and how it would go for us in the various scenarios available. To turn away from doing this and to say 'You have different values from me and there are no facts about values, so let's agree to differ' is to be feebly passive with respect to how we live our shared life. It is to give up on the chance of finding our way to a life about which we, together, are at least reasonably confident that it is a worthwhile life for us.

I turn now to consider 'egoism' and 'altruism'. These labels too, as often understood, presuppose individualism in the following way. They offer us only two options for classifying some reason a person might have for an action: the reason is either egoistic, has to do with promoting that person's own individual flourishing, or it is altruistic, has to do with promoting another's flourishing. If we now take it that ethics demands that we behave altruistically, then

ethical growth is seen as acquiring the ability to put others' interests before one's own. Given the further idea that the rational thing for any individual to do is to promote his or her own interests, we are now sliding into the familiar territory of it seeming soft-headed to behave decently.

More reflection on why spaceship life is not the good life will suggest a way out of this muddle and a better way of conceiving ethical growth. Things not available on the spaceship are such occasions as a social meal, a game or a dramatic performance. These events or enterprises require participants who have (at least some) grasp of how the events or enterprises should go, what is required for them to be success. And what is required is independent of any person's particular tastes as to what role in them he or she finds immediately congenial. So, on the picture I am recommending, the possibility of conflict between what I would most like to be the case and what is needed for our current enterprise to go well is built in, at the foundation of social life. Grasping this, and coming to terms with it, is one of the major tasks a child faces in becoming an adult who is a full contributing member of whatever group(s) he or she belongs to. We can see this by reminding ourselves of what growing up is like.

At first the child, as a baby, takes part in social events, conversations, meals and the like, without having to contribute anything beyond his or her presence. The slightly older child will make sketchy, imperfect attempts to contribute, for which there are compliments and encouragement rather than reprimand. But this tolerance does not continue. The child, as he or she grows, has to learn to contribute in more substantive ways. An example: it would be nice to sit and just have the food provided, as used to be the case, when I was very small. But now if the meal is to go well, if the adults are not to be tired and annoyed, and if the younger child is not to cry and spoil it all, then I, the bigger child, need to help the adults with the preparation of the meal and, when I feed myself, to be sure to leave enough for the younger one. Another example: it would be nice to

sing the solo role and get the bouquets. But the new recruit to our choir has a better voice. So if I want to be part of a great performance, I must be content to be only one of the chorus.

Coming to understand these things is ethical development. Is the move well characterized as one from egoism to altruism? Not really. Rather the move is from appreciating only the salient self-involving parts of the enterprise to appreciating the complexities of the enterprise as a whole. It is a move to more awareness of what was previously backgrounded and implicit. It will indeed involve more concern for others, because it involves more understanding of their contribution to the enterprise and of their well-being as a necessary part of that. But my welfare and others' welfare are not, in these shared enterprises at least, in competition, in the way the egoism/altruism contrast presupposes. Rather both I and the others are enabled to flourish if our enterprise goes well. For example, I get to be part of a warm and relaxed family meal or I get to take part in a spine-tingling musical performance. And I flourish also in that I begin to enter into continuing relations with others which enrich us both, relations of affection, respect, trust and the like.

The move to this wider perspective is difficult, and may go wrong. A person may continue to throw tantrums or become sulky on being asked to undertake an unfamiliar and uncongenial role, may never learn to be a helpful contributor, may never accept having to take a back seat. Here is the territory where bullies, tyrants, narcissists and other difficult types exist. (And some particularly knotty ethical problems arise concerning how those who do grow up should relate to those who do not. But that takes us too far afield.)

'But who are we?' you may ask. And that is a very important question, which we (philosophers) and we (human beings in the various families and towns and nations and businesses and professions and ethnicities and genders, etc. etc. we find ourselves in) need to think

about. For a person who has been brought up in a functioning and reasonably stable environment, there will be some others, family and close friends, who are undoubtedly part of 'us'. But most people are also part of many other groups which think of themselves as 'us', for a shorter or longer time, in the context of many different kinds of enterprise. (And thinking of the spaceship again will show us that these other groupings are important too. Having family and close friends on the spaceship would be better than being alone. But spaceship life would still be lacking.) At any time, some groups may be dissolving, others may be under construction. There are rich complications, both conceptual and empirical, to be pursued here. But none of this undermines anything said above about the centrality for us of the first-person plural. And hence none of it suggests that it would not be a good thing for philosophers to think more about *us*.

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