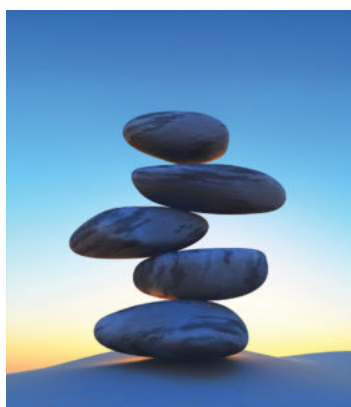




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Healthy Humanism and Ethical Wellness

BY JOHN R. SHOOK • 28 APRIL 2020



IN THE MIDST of a global health crisis, one might ask: What could health and wellness have to do with living moral lives? That idea might sound counterintuitive; stern morality suggests the opposite of flexible fitness. Still, strengthening healthy habits is connected with maintaining moral conduct and ethical character. A sound philosophy of life, such as humanism, can start with what is good for the individual body and personal relationships and grow into an ethical way of life that can be good for everyone. (Think physical and social ^[1]_{SEP} distancing, personal protective equipment,^[1]_{SEP} and so on.) Healthy humanism stays focused on human beings and their overall well-being. What's good for bodily wellness is surely beneficial for psychological and ethical wellness, and vice versa.

Humanism is a philosophical outlook, a life stance that prioritizes this mortal life and the intelligent ethics needed for improving it. There are strong similarities between living an ethical life and enjoying a healthy lifestyle, and these commonalities cannot be coincidental. Although humanism recommends ethical guidance for people, humanism is not just about humans. Only humans need ethics, but ethics concerns all life. Our healthy lives are sustained and enriched by our environments in dense webs of mutual dependency. Degrading species and ecosystems too far, while prioritizing humans too much, threatens the planet's ability to support flourishing life.

The nonhuman world is the all-encompassing and pervasive environs in which we humans are always embedded. People are hardly innocent bystanders to whatever course nature happens to take. We are witnessing plain proof of that today. Indeed, it takes humans to create pandemics. A genetic mutation is sufficient to start a viral epidemic, but in order to suffer a global pandemic, poor social habits and slow government responses (or nonresponses) are necessary. Which raises another question: To what degree are we capable of really caring for each other? The health of our *immune* system protects us from disease—the health of our *humane* system protects us from disaster.

We think we're so highly civilized, yet how humane are we? We are indeed getting used to new habits of "social distancing" necessitated by the coronavirus that emerged in China late last year and has since spread all over the world. While this kind of distancing may seem unprecedented, most of us live in countries long used to "moral distancing." My moral duties are about what I'm trying to do over here, and your moral problems are over there with you. Ethics is stretched thin while we get accustomed to a general moral weakness. No one has to be concerned about our collective moral accountability. Taking personal responsibility is not the same as taking responsibility for persons, or for society as whole. All the while, we are careless about our ever-present dependency on depleted environmental resources and impoverished social programs.

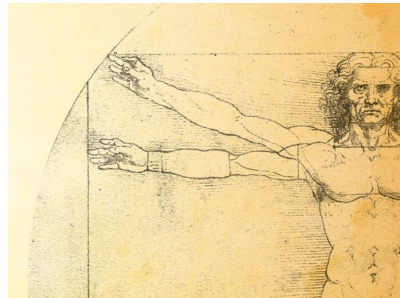
A wise humanism must be truly social and ecological to be ethical. Degrading the environment is pathologically unhealthy and unnatural. Healthy humanism is all-natural. But it is not a call to “build a utopia” or a summons “back to nature.” Being all-natural doesn’t imply surrendering the modern life, although we may question how well modern society is working for everyone. Our current technological culture is just as natural, from a neutral perspective, as any other sort of culture. Humans use large social groups and complex cultures to flourish as a species. Humanism is not a rebellion against modernity, but an all-natural humanism can help diagnose how well society, especially in times of public crises, is working for all people.

Humanism offers natural standards of human flourishing that are in turn useful for evaluating societies. A healthy humanism tries to understand how people can develop and maintain the fitness of their character and ethical virtues. It only makes sense that a healthier population will produce a healthier society more capable of moral character, which is never only about people as individuals. Humanism should avoid the appearance of allying with “natural” philosophies of life that encourage individuals to “go it alone” in aloof detachment when society seems irredeemable and social action looks pointless. There is nothing natural about encouraging people to mentally transcend their troublesome surroundings.

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The function of morality is to connect and sustain cooperative relationships among people. Morality functions best when it is mostly habitual—you know your roles, you understand what you’re supposed to be doing, you know how to cooperate with others for group goals. Like all habits, moral habits need to be formed properly, they need to be maintained, and they need to be continually managed in a thoughtful way. Unlike other animals, human groups are now so complex, involving so many people and so many social roles, and offering innumerable imaginative group goals, that ordinary morality is difficult. When habits are strained and stressed, when we are confronted by novel situations that confuse us, we realize that our moral habits aren’t working so well. Like an excessive strain on the body, where we easily fall into dependence on just a few strong bodily habits to get us through the day, moral habits can get unbalanced too. However, in this pandemic, when experts tell us the very best thing we as individuals can do is isolate—that is, those who aren’t considered essential workers in fields of medicine, health, agriculture, or anything related to providing people food and safety—then that is the moral choice.

Any habit will tend to strengthen from use and even overuse. A body under physical stress will try to automatically cope by overusing some muscular abilities. It’s the short-term efficient way for the body to cope. The long-term problem from this unmindful strategy is a gradual rigidity into just a few overused bodily habits, which in the long term will result in bodily breakdown and damage. High-level stress, constant unhealthy overuse, can unmindfully distort the body’s healthy functioning. A person under high interpersonal stress will similarly suffer from this same unhealthy process of excessive unmindful overuse at first, unless and until a more thoughtful approach is tried.



Social stress causes moral imbalance and unhealthiness. The moral perspective of people narrows. For example, they throw accusations of fault and blame at plenty of others rather than themselves. They pass swift moral judgment on situations, they won’t appreciate other peoples’ standpoints, and they perpetuate false prejudices and stereotypes. No one is naturally immune from moral blindness when stressed too far. That epidemic is evident in press conferences and social media where dangerous nonsense gets spread around while a microbe having no passport gets called a “Chinese” virus.

Unhealthy morality is therefore like unhealthiness generally. Unhealthy morality results from weak moral habits, stressed moral habits, overused moral habits, and excessive dependence on too few moral habits. Unhealthy morality too easily creates rigid categories of “good” and “bad” people rather than communities of cooperating people. Unhealthy morality can also too easily make people think that “my” group is better than other groups. Unhealthy morality can cause inflexible positions of mutual condemnation and conflict between groups. Social relationships must be grounded in character virtues such as trusting and caring. We need each other more than ever during such dangerous times.

Humanism, like medicine, sees no good coming from any disconnect between mind and body. At its worst, a mind-body dichotomy lets people suppose some sort of mental independence from the physical body and the surrounding environs. This is where the notion that the mind is good while the body is evil can begin. Or people can suppose that the body is a merely physical thing that must be struggled with or defeated. Similarly, unhealthy disconnections from people are sets of poor habits that permit a person to “rise above” the rest of the group. An unhealthy moral attitude lets someone suppose that they are quite independent from the group, perhaps more special or more important than the group. Any group is made up of people with distinct talents and contributions, of course. Healthy groups work together, each playing their supporting role. Unhealthy moral habits can lead a person into selfish notions of greater importance or superior judgment, as if only he or she really knows right from wrong all the time. Likewise, unhealthy habits could make other kinds of people feel inferior and worthless to the group, as if they must be dependent on others for evaluations of right and wrong.

Ethical wisdom, unlike morality, is not at all like swift decisions according to strict rules. Ethics helps to keep our moral habits harmonious and flexible so they work better together in dynamic social situations. Any single moral rule, like any one muscle-bone connection, has limited function and range of motion. Only the harmonious cooperation of many muscles, joints, and bones foster great flexibility and nearly unlimited opportunity for activities.

Ethics has three main tasks of managing personal morality. First, trying to build healthy moral habits into a good foundation; second, trying to prevent unhealthy moral habits (such as those described above) from arising during stressful times; and third, trying to deal with unhealthy moral habits in a constructive way to regain flexible moral balance and harmony.

Following this analogy between flexible fitness and ethical well-being just a little farther, reconnecting mind and body can be like reconnecting people. This is the goal of humanistic ethics: an ethics focused on the overall well-being of all people in healthy caring relationships. Entire nations can gradually slide into unhealthy moral habits, as their members each do. An unhealthy moral group is not protecting its own members as well as it should; and an unhealthy moral group is less able to engage other groups in morally appropriate ways. Finally, an unhealthy moral society is unfit for appropriately dealing with whatever environmental opportunities and challenges eventually arrive. The all-natural and ethical alternative is healthy humanism.

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