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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Meaningful and Successful Ethical Enactments: A Proposal from Deliberative Wisdom Theory

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Abstract As a field, ethics is driven by the desire to help guide human life and human activities. Yet, what are the standards or guideposts indicating that a given policy or practice change actually contributes meaningfully to such desires and aspirations? In other words, how do we know if we have achieved meaningful ethical outcomes and enactment processes? Unfortunately, there are many examples of ethically oriented actions that were well intentioned but carried out in a way that undermined some of the values they intended on promoting or led to unexpected undesirable outcomes. In this paper, building on an account of ethics as a pragmatist pursuit of deliberative wisdom, I identify and discuss four procedural guideposts which can help evaluate if a process of inquiry is an ethical one oriented toward human flourishing. First, situational awareness and continuity designates the need to keep in sight the nature of the situation at stake to ensure that the enactment process does not derail from a cardinal human flourishing orientation. Second, a meaningful ethical enactment should distribute opportunities for participation such that it is not only one's autonomy (e.g., the ethicist) that is developed and exercised but that positive relationships are also fostered through the growth of others. Third, enactments must strive for more than simple avoidance of encroachment of wrongs but aim for the promotion of praiseworthy practices that pursue what is envisioned as being the better and most compelling vision. Fourth, an ethics process should be conducive of personal growth and mutual learning.

Keywords Ethics · Evaluation · Outcomes · Moral learning · Pragmatism · Deliberative wisdom

Introduction

As a field, ethics is driven by the desire to help guide human life and human activities. Yet, what are the standards or guideposts indicating that a given policy, a given practice change, or other ethically oriented change—that is, ethical enactments—actually contributes meaningfully to such desires and aspirations? In other words, how do we know if we have achieved meaningful ethical outcomes and enactment processes?[1] Unfortunately, there are many examples

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[1] Ethical enactments is a term used to represent action specifically guided by ethical deliberation (Racine 2025). As explained in deliberative wisdom theory, the aim of ethical deliberation is to identify response-scenarios, i.e., courses of action that are most contributive to the flourishing of human beings or, otherwise said, the least damaging to human flourishing. Although action is often conceived of as an endpoint, it is more accurately a process. The terminology of enactment is thus used to make this complexity explicit.

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of ethically oriented actions that were well intentioned but carried out in a way that undermined some of the values they intended on promoting or lead to unexpected undesirable outcomes. Consider the paradox in the reinforcement of respecting autonomy when a person does not want to decide, does not feel equipped to do so, or are in an uneasy position to do so. These kinds of situations have been reported by parents who are asked to make very difficult decisions about life sustaining therapies for their children when they are not ready to make such unexpected decisions, such as in an acute or neonatal care context (Orfali 2004; Orfali and Gordon 2004). Although not ill-intentioned, being tasked to make such a difficult decision in a traumatic moment risks generating a tremendous amount of anxiety and distress, thus calling for a potentially revised role of autonomy and its contribution within these situations (Orfali and Gordon 2004). Consider also the effectiveness of the promulgation of codes of ethics in the curtailing of corporate ethical malpractice. If the corporate culture is such that the code appears vacuous and disconnected from the reality it is intended to serve and speak to, there is a real risk of discrediting the ethical effort, especially if the code is imposed in a disengaging way as a mere form of corporate compliance, unsupportive of positive relationships with others (Webley and Werner 2008; Martineau 2017). These efforts may in fact appear as "cosmethics" because, in the very process of their "implementation," they impinge on the values that are supposed to be promoted by imposing a form of ethics without discussion and without moral agents being able to make sense of these guidelines or tap into the deeper, intrinsic, sources of moral motivation (Craze 2020).

Another example of well-intentioned ethics intervention is the development of research ethics to protect patients from undue risks and harms and ensure their autonomy in their decisions to participate in research (Emmanuel 2000). Despite considerable resources and legitimacy attributed to research ethics review and oversight, there are limited studies evaluating whether research ethics actually achieves its intended goals (McDonald et al. 2014). For example, some studies reveal that certain common research ethics practices, such as long forms used to obtain consent for research participation, have actually done the opposite, and generate confusion and disempowerment because of the epistemic or institutional authority they convey (Montalvo and Larson 2014). The overwhelming complexity of consent forms burdens participants and can in fact induce blind faith (because they are too long to read), amounting to a disservice in discrepancy with some of the chief goals pursued. The authorities responsible for research ethics policies have been rather oblivious to these facts, and the transformation of research ethics into soft law has created a regulatory paradigm of research ethics (Emanuel and Grady 2007). It is also important to note that research is also being done to try to bring these concerns forward to reshape research ethics to take into account the reality of research participants (e.g., levels of scientific literacy) with observable improvements in information understanding (Hadden et al. 2017).

There would also be many examples of different forms of ethical enactments to cite which unfortunately and paradoxically tend to have uncertain connections to how stakeholders envision their own welfare and the flourishing of others, sometimes even inadvertently undermining people's autonomy or other key components of human flourishing. These examples show the importance of reeling in an evaluative perspective in ethics to assess whether ethics changes are meaningful to those involved in situations given the purported intents of the actions such that an understanding of the situation—and the challenges and desires it evokes—is preserved. However, this remains somewhat of a challenge. There are few elaborate evaluative frameworks and limited scholarship on this question, which perhaps speak to a certain historical estrangement of ethics from real world practice and outcomes. However, there is a growing desire to tackle this question as seen in recent literature (e.g., (McClung et al. 1996; Linkeviciute et al. 2016; Wocial et al. 2016; Gross et al. 2020; Senghor and Racine 2022). In this paper, building on an account of ethics as a pragmatist pursuit of deliberative wisdom (explained in more detail below), I identify and discuss four procedural guideposts which can help evaluate if a proposed action or change is oriented toward human flourishing. First, situational awareness and continuity designates the need to keep in sight the nature of the situation at stake and of ensuring that the enactment process does not derail from a cardinal human flourishing orientation. Second, a meaningful ethical enactment should distribute opportunities for participation such that it is not only

one's autonomy (e.g., the ethicist's) that is developed and exercised but that positive relationships are also fostered through the growth of others. Third, enactments must strive for more than simple avoidance of encroachment of wrongs but aim for the promotion of praiseworthy practices that pursue what is envisioned as being the better and most compelling vision. Fourth, the enactment of change should be conducive to personal growth and mutual learning. These guideposts—although potentially common to other ethical approaches—are elaborated from the perspective of ethics as a form of deliberative wisdom.

Deliberative Wisdom Theory and Ethically Meaningful Enactments

Evaluation is a difficult question in ethics partly because ethics has long remained isolated in academic trenches with limited engagement with real-world practices and contexts. There is also the argument that outcomes to measure ethical progress and success are so context-specific that spelling out more general guideposts might simply be illusory. Take for example the many interventions designed and tested to improve consent in the context of research (e.g., with the use of digital tools (Gesualdo et al. 2021)). First, spelling out clearly what meaningful ethical goals consent serves is part of the issue. Making headway in this direction, Dickert and collaborators have identified that consent can serve many ethical functions such as "allowing control and authorization," obviously, but also "promoting trust" in research (Dickert et al. 2017). Some of these, like the first example, concern individuals more directly while others, like the second example, serve more systemic interests. Second, once a function or goal (or many of them) is identified, the ability of a given intervention to improve the valued outcome (e.g., "allowing control and authorization" or "promoting trust") introduces another set of challenges. Outcomes such as trust are complex to characterize and measure because of their partly subjective character and their multifaceted nature. Given this complexity, it is hard to provide general evaluative frameworks for context-specific aspects of ethical interventions. Otherwise said, context-specific evaluative frameworks can be imagined and developed to provide a form of *vertical* evaluation (e.g., *looking forward*, does the outcome and path taken reach its goals and destination?). However, across different contexts, perhaps more procedural guideposts could help evaluate ethical progress in ways that offer a more *horizontal* approach to evaluation (e.g., *looking sideways*, is a given orientation and path following an ethically meaningful process?).

Is there an attribute or many attributes that ethical interventions would share such that there could be an agreement that a given ethics intervention is successful, partly successful, or not *because of the way* it accomplishes a given outcome? Coming back to the example of consent and its functions (as described by Dickert et al. 2017), there are perhaps more appropriate and compelling ways that certain functions such as "allowing control and authorization" or "promoting trust" can be pursued as well as likely other ways which are inappropriate or indefensible from an ethics standpoint. Luring someone on the basis of misleading information would likely be an inappropriate, and quite paradoxical way, to foster trust, although this is part of the art mastered by conmen and conwomen. However, to be able to pin down such procedural guideposts, a theory about what ethics *is* is required to spell out what an ethics outcome is about. Some ethics theories have less to say about this because they are oriented toward answering specific normative questions and do not really incorporate a theory of what ethics is as a process or as a field of inquiry where learning occurs.

Based on the contributions of various bodies of scholarship and practical initiatives, there has been steady progress in bringing greater attention to the evaluation of ethical enactments. First, a number of existing influential ethics theories provide initial evaluative guideposts. For example, the *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* point to four important prima facie duties in the form of four principles. Accordingly, if these principles are specified to a situation as recommended in this theory, they can also serve to evaluate whether obligations such as respect for autonomy and beneficence have actually been fulfilled. Likewise, virtue ethics in the form developed by MacIntyre (1984) proposes that virtues are central to ethics and the good life. Accordingly, one can imagine that the evaluation of a given action be carried out in terms of its impact on character development aligned with specified virtues. A major issue is that MacIntyre's account of virtues tends to focus on the structure of virtues and on the virtues of the person carrying out

the action (e.g., justice, courage, and honesty) not really on its broader impact on other people (e.g., fostering autonomy in other people) and situations. Nevertheless, such existing influential theories are already a useful start. Even if they may not tend to be perceived as procedural guideposts as such, they can be partially operationalized to evaluate the outcomes of enactments.

Moving us further along procedural evaluate guideposts are some more concrete frameworks such as "Accountability for Reasonableness" (A4R), which offers clearer principles (e.g., empowerment, transparency/publicity) that are actually conditions to fulfil for a priority-setting exercise to be legitimate (Daniels and Sabin 2009) and are themselves grounded in the more formal work of Rawl (1971). Although focused on healthcare priority-setting, this proposal offers a potentially generalizable framework to assess fair process. The A4R is a more concrete framework than, for example, Habermas's discourse ethics, which offers very general conditions for the elaboration of universal norms that have legitimacy based on their test in actual discussions (Habermas 1991, 1997). However, from the standpoint of pragmatist theory, the A4R framework does not clearly or explicitly connect to human flourishing although it has clear relevance. For example, the criterion of "empowerment" put forth in the A4R framework is a call for inclusion in discussions and priority-setting. However, the link between empowerment and human flourishing merits further elaboration as a specific aspect of human flourishing.

In this light, the theory of capabilities as developed by Nussbaum (2011) and Sen (1989, 1999) offers an interesting and valuable perspective on how actions can be evaluated precisely based on their contribution to growth of capabilities, as suggested in some recent empirically oriented work (Clark et al. 2019). Moreover, some proposals stemming from this approach, such as the United Nations Human Development Index (Human Development Report 2024), are grounded extensively in economics and measure human development in terms of wealth and education. Perhaps even more relevant are some aspects of capabilities theory (e.g., Nussbaum's list of ten "central human functional capabilities" (Nussbaum 2011)) which are nearer to ethics than economics. However, this list is challenging to operationalize because not all aspects seem to be well supported by contemporary research on human flourishing or connected to an open understanding of what matters for human flourishing (McReynolds 2002). For example, Carol Ryff's account of human flourishing includes more eudemonistic dimensions (e.g., autonomy, positive relationships, self-acceptance) which have clearer connections to humanistic psychology and greater empirical development and validation. Nussbaum's list is also—from a pragmatist perspective—harder to connect to how we can learn from each other about what matters and why through experiences, inquiry and empirical research, since the list of functional capabilities gives the impression of being generated theoretically or externally rather than on the experience of what matters to human beings in specific contexts, as pointed out by McReynolds (2002). Some of Sen's work hints to agents as being the source of evaluations (Sen 1999), but again this is unclear in the operationalization of the list of ten functional capabilities, which give the impression of describing a universal essence of human achievement beyond considerations of ability/disability, cultural diversity, and even more important an open perspective of what matters in human life.

Despite their interest, these proposals tend to have opposed strengths from a pragmatist perspective, desiring to bridge theory and practice through forms of open inquiry. The theories which specify more concretely the normative dimensions of interest (e.g., four cardinal principles, virtues, lists of aspects of human flourishing) are theories which do not readily accommodate for ethics to be an open and inquiry-based process. It is unclear from these proposals how what matters to stakeholders involved in a situation could be discovered through open discussion and empirical research. On the flip side, theories which envision ethics as a more experience-oriented and empirical process (e.g., discourse ethics, A4R) tend to be vaguer about what matters in ways that often do not seem to fully bring in the resources of more normative theories and important areas of social consensus (e.g., on the value of autonomy, justice) or on what emerges from contemporary scholarship on human flourishing. Deliberative wisdom theory tries to bring in the importance of human flourishing as a substantive orientation (like eudemonistic theories such as capabilities theory and normative theories which spell out importance virtues and principles) as well as attention to concrete processes (like more procedural forms of ethics such as discourse ethics

and A4R). In other words, this theory (Racine 2025) can be characterized as a pragmatist and open-ended account of eudaimonism which allows for ongoing learning about what matters in terms of human flourishing through empirical and deliberative processes of inquiry.

Two points need to be further clarified about this theoretical orientation: first how it borrows from a pragmatist account of ethics inquiry and then how it embraces a eudemonistic but non-rigid orientation toward human flourishing in keeping with pragmatist open inquiry. Deliberative wisdom theory generally espouses the inquiry-based mentality of pragmatism that calls for a view of ethical concepts as instruments which are defined by functions or tasks, in keeping with the proposal made, for example, by Dickert and colleagues (2017) regarding consent (see also on this general point Martela 2017; Racine et al. 2019). This means that ethics follows a cyclical and iterative experiential learning model—as proposed by Dewey (1922) and further explicated by Kolb (1984)—where inquiry designates an active and participatory movement from the experience of problem situations to the creative genesis of solutions, i.e., imagined or contemplated scenarios of action, through deliberation and dialogue, and ultimately the testing and learning from the enactment of changes. This theory makes a strong case for the view that ethics is a field of inquiry about moral experiences,[2] specially to assess and test whether social practices lead to human flourishing. It is here that the open-ended eudemonism comes in insofar as this theory—again in keeping with insights from pragmatism (Pekarsky 1990) as well as contemporary research in psychology (especially positive psychology)—proposes that human flourishing constitutes a viable and even compelling focus for ethics. Ancient ethics theory attempted to identify the good and better way of life (Hadot 2002) and is often taught as a set of doctrines (e.g., epicureanism, stoicism, cynicism, Aristotelianism) about the good life. This more restricted eudemonism is replaced by a deliberative and participatory account of knowledge about human flourishing where flourishing is experienced and learned rather than solely taught as being outside of people's lives and motivations. In this sense, the theory of deliberative wisdom adopts a living ethics stance (Racine et al. 2024) which attempts to connect ethics inquiry to lived considerations. It also supports a growing account of ethical knowledge.

Although I cannot review the conceptual apparatus of deliberative wisdom theory in detail here, it leads to the view that inquiry is the process by which ethics is truly ethics, i.e., as a form of open questioning and experimenting about different ways of thinking and living the moral aspects of human life. Within this theory, when actions are guided by such inquiry, they are qualified as enactments following a pragmatist scenario-based account of ethical deliberation and imagination (Caspary 1991; Fesmire 2003). Enactments are embodied and contextualized courses of action which are elaborated and rehearsed in thought and imagination and then acted out (Caspary 1991). Ethical enactments are not responses to morally problematic situations that are carried out without an understanding of their ethical meaning and contribution. The effectiveness to reach a goal—in a narrow sense—is not the sole or the chief criteria of ethical action, because the process of acting itself must be congruent with the reflexivity promoted by a pragmatist fallible epistemology based on experience and outcomes in the search for fulfilling human experiences. Otherwise, ethics is conflated with morality as distinguished above. Moreover, within deliberative wisdom theory and like-minded pragmatist ethics, the role of the ethicist is not solely or primarily that of being a teacher, but more that of a facilitator who learns, notably, from evaluating the outcomes of enactments (Widdershoven, Abma, and Molewijk 2009; Inguaggiato et al. 2019; Inguaggiato et al. 2021). Accordingly, regardless of the focus or the content or domain-specificity of a given ethical inquiry, process matters because it helps ensure that an open inquiry is undertaken and that the cardinal goal of human flourishing is not lost of sight through

[2] In this paper, I draw a distinction between ethics and morality, following others (Inguaggiato, Widdershoven and Metselaar 2021; Racine 2022). In short, *morality* designates the domain of quotidian and habitual ways of dealing with moral problems, and ethics refers to the discipline that attempts to solve moral problems when our commonsensical intuitions about morality fail to provide meaningful responses. Throughout this paper, I try as much as I can to preserve the terminology of morality for the experiential and habitual ways of dealing with moral problems and use the terminology of ethics for the deliberate and reflective attempt to deal with a moral problem. This distinction parallels that drawn between system 1 and system 2 processes by Tversky and Kahneman (1974). It also originates form Dewey's visionary thinking about the relationship between implicit and explicit cognition in the context of human habits.

deliberation and enactment. The very spirit of learning from others about human flourishing is central to deliberative wisdom as an account of how ethics represents a process of growth where human beings rely on listening and learning from and with others. This account of ethics also builds from key dimensions of human flourishing identified by Ryff (i.e., autonomy, positive relationships, self-acceptance, personal growth, mastery of the environment, and purpose in life) (Ryff and Singer 2008) and supported by an emerging body of studies, as well as insights grown in the capabilities approach (Sen 1989, 1999; Nussbaum 1997) and more recent participatory approaches to capabilities development (Zimmermann 2006; Lanteigne et al. 2021). In sum, following deliberative wisdom theory, ethical enactments are actions which are pursued within a logic of inquiry, and which have human flourishing as their cardinal orientation. Ideally, ethical enactments—whether at a scale of clinical interactions or at the public policy level—are successful in promoting human flourishing in the process of their deployment such that the process itself is liberatory of human potential and helps promote important aspects of human flourishing such as autonomy, positive relationships with others, and self-acceptance. Beyond these more substantive guideposts to describe aspects of human flourishing, there is a need to describe indicators of a process of enactment toward these goals. This is the object of the next four sections, which attempt to describe qualifiers of meaningful ethical enactments as unfolding courses of actions.

Situational Awareness and Situational Continuity

The launching pad of ethics are problem situations (and the awareness of them), following insights of pragmatist theory and social psychology (Dewey 1922; Mischel 1977; Kihlstrom 2013). The understanding of a situation and eventually its reconstruction though the initial phases of deliberation progressively defines the contours of the problem at hand. Ethical action must be in service of resolving the problematic situation in the sense of transforming it, ideally, into an opportunity for growth and learning about human flourishing. Accordingly, throughout every moment of deliberating, acting, and responding, there must be an awareness of the nature of the very problem situation (and its complexity) such that the problem is not reduced conveniently to a boiled-down account of the problem that is easier to fix or to a single person's account of it. This kind of reductionism about the nature of moral problems stands as a real threat to ethics because it moves away from the spirit of ethics as a process of open inquiry and toward ethics as a form of advocacy (Callahan 2005) about one's preferred moral stance without due and open consideration of the impact of this stance on human flourishing (Callahan 1973; Fesmire 2003; Racine 2013).

Situational continuity designates the preservation of the rich and complex understanding of the situation throughout the ethics-oriented process and the enactment of the change. This situational awareness throughout the deliberation and enactment process implies that a fallible understanding of the resolution will always be upheld such that the agent(s) will remain cognizant of the limitations of the action undertaken (and their understanding of the context) and the likelihood that the problem will only remain partially resolved. During enactment, peripheral vision (in addition to central vision focused on the goals as initially conceived) is important to catch some emerging cues that things are not going correctly or that some feel that the enactment is skidding out of control or at least straying from initial goals with undesirable effects. This allows the separation of enactment from a mere unidirectional and insensitive quasi-mechanical top-down "implementation" process (see above). Within the process of enactment, there must be an acute awareness of what the initial situation was and ongoing self-monitoring and self-reflection as to whether the enactment is deviating from a meaningful resolution. Sustaining this kind of awareness will also mean that a form of humility will be cultivated and that, therefore, the conditions for the search for an appropriate resolution will be maximized given the recognition of the limitations of our knowledge. This does not mean that no unintended effects will occur. Human actions being what they are, they cannot be controlled for all procedural or final outcomes, but preserving some sense of situational continuity allows agents to be mindful of departures from the meaningful outcomes.

Situational continuity and ongoing engagement with meaningful outcomes is well illustrated by the context of neonatal neurological prognostication. To

partly address this concern— although not formulated as such initially— an interdisciplinary group of Canadian clinicians, parents of children, and bioethicists wrote about how physicians—though this could also apply to other clinicians in similar situations—need to cultivate humility and awareness in situation(s) in which they formulate predictions about the quality of life and the well-being of neonates with neurological injuries (Racine et al. 2017). The authors recognized, based on their different experiences and perspectives, how the situations faced by parents and clinicians are difficult because the parents are grappling with very likely a first experience of making such difficult decisions on what they think will be best for their child, including potentially not pursuing life if it means a life of physical pain and severe disability (Racine et al. 2017; Wade, Shavell, and Racine 2012). Understanding the parent's situation and the newborn child's potential is tremendously difficult given the important unknowns plaguing decision and action. In this project, it appeared fundamentally important that the situation be constructed on the co-understanding of what it is going to be like to raise this child, much like other kinds of scenario-based exercises in similar contexts have indicated (Lippman 1991, 1992; Hoffmaster 2018). Preserving such situational understandings—and potential changes to them, including the physician's position and role within the situation—are also crucially important since no two situations will be exactly alike, and the equilibrium of what will be a good resolution will have to take into account the kinds of scenarios possible for the parents and the child. Certain scenarios (e.g., providing life support for a neonate with good chances of survival and quality of life) could be outright commendable because the interests of the child can clearly be well served by medicine in a given country and context, while other scenarios might appear as outright wrong (e.g., keeping alive a child who is suffering from an atrociously painful syndrome or condition with very unlikely or no chances of recovery or of meaningful interaction with the world). No one is saying here that all situations are that easy and clear. In fact, neonatal neurological prognostication is perhaps one of the situations where the highest level of humility needs to be in place for clear reasons related to the stakes at hand and the amount of uncertainty involved. The child is extremely vulnerable and dependent on others to make decisions on their behalf and thus requires strong protections against different forms of biases operating against neonates (Janvier et al. 2008). But, at the same time, complete rigidity is likely to result in some very challenging outcomes which imperil the well-being of families. The burden narrative is not the only one, since some parents find the experience enriching and cope with the situation (Carnevale et al. 2006, 2008), but others struggle with high divorce rates and mental health issues (Wade, Shevell and Racine 2012).

Situational awareness and continuity represent a way to preserve a connection between ethical deliberation and the experience and meaning of a morally problematic situation from the standpoint of stakeholders. Periodically asking whether the action or approach envisioned and the process of enactment are loyal to the nature of the situation helps avoid reductionism and the arrogance of overclaiming the ability of a given action to resolve a problem. Situational continuity is thus a form of ongoing listening and sensitivity to the cues that would suggest that something is heading in the wrong direction or that the means taken are actually encroaching on the end sought.

Engagement of Stakeholders and Agency Distribution (Participation)

Given the centrality of human flourishing and the role of agency and participation in an account of ethics as deliberative wisdom, ensuring that opportunities for moral agency are distributed is crucially important to allow those concerned by a given problem to grow, learn, and develop a sense of control over their existence and the situations they live (Cascio and Racine 2019). There is a risk once someone is tasked with enacting (or seizes an opportunity to act), that it becomes a "one person show" leaving aside those concerned and making a sole hero out of the person who is understood to be the main agent of change. As Sartre wrote, to express how certain people make themselves heroes of a cause, "is not a hero whoever desires; neither courage nor gift is enough, there must be hydras and dragons" (Sartre 1964) (personal translation). As the "hero" of a situation, a person can gain power and prestige and potentially fuel a misrepresentation of the situation to the detriment of those who needed help. In sum, in ethics, the risk is that some

leaders take the cause of others to further appropriate the power of change that should belong to others.

Sharing an opportunity for action is fundamentally important because, otherwise, the ability to experience growth is concentrated in the hands of the few. Moreover, sharing an opportunity for action enriches not only the person generating the knowledge and acting upon it, but also those surrounding them in ways that allow the transformation of the broader situation and the enrichment of the transactional moment to include the perspective of others. Engaging those concerned in the resolution of a morally problematic situation (including co-constructing an awareness of the problem and its resolution) facilitates the development of positive institutional climates and a broader culture in which problems are more freely named, identified, and formulated because of the learning that occurs and the experience of sharing of knowledge (Martineau 2017; Racine 2019). Chen and colleagues have shown, for example, how the promotion of dialogue and an egalitarian and participatory work culture translates, surprisingly, to improvements in the outcomes of cardiac surgery (Curry et al. 2015, 2018). Moreover, research has also shown the value of intrinsic motivation and of having the opportunity to participate in decisions that reflect the results of one's deliberation with respect to a given situation (Ryan and Deci 2000). Mastering one's environment (as understood in the context of human flourishing) and being in control of a situation contributes positively to human flourishing (Ryff and Singer 2008). From the standpoint of action and its connection to human flourishing, the ability to act upon one's environment and to exercise control over it is crucial because one cannot easily exercise one's capabilities without having a minimum of resources and opportunities to do so, and being able to act is essential to actualize oneself (Sen 1989; Ryff and Singer 2008). The opposite generates stress, distress, alienation, and disenfranchisement in various shapes and forms, such as moral distress (Seligman 1975; Jameton 1984). Interestingly, this was recognized by Aristotle who stated that poverty—although not antithetical to human flourishing, and wealth not being essential to human flourishing—was not a condition to praise. He states that: "[t]he happy person needs to have goods of the body and external goods added [to good activities], and needs fortune also, so that he will not be impeded in these ways. Some maintain, on the contrary, that we are happy when we are broken on the wheel, or fall into terrible misfortunes, provided that we are good. Whether they mean to or not, these people are talking nonsense" (Aristotle 1999, 116–117).

Engagement also has the potential benefit of empowering agents and supporting them through a process in which they feel concerned and connected such that either they will be more willing to act or more willing to accept the action because they will have been engaged in the process of problem identification and problem resolution (Cludts 1999). In the end, participating in ethics-oriented change (just like other forms of change) can be rewarding, stimulating, and a source of growth, notably with respect to one's agency and autonomy. This is why sharing the opportunity for action is so important. Accordingly, ethical enactments should attempt to maximize the possibility for the agency of others such that a single person is not seen as the only bearer of truth and agency but that the worth of the action and of agency be recognized and thus also carried by others. This procedural guidepost implies that, when possible, ethical enactments will be fundamentally participatory and allow others to develop and exercise their ability to act on deliberated-upon, intrinsically motivated actions.

In the example of neonatal care discussed above, engaging parents is a worthwhile (even essential) strategy to involve them in the decision, ideally following models such as shared-decision approaches (Makoul and Clayman 2006). However, such decisions can be extremely difficult to deal with on a personal basis. The growth may be painful or not apparent at all. Being in such a situation requires much reflection and the ability to take distance, etc., while the parents could be experiencing grieving emotions with limited ability to take a broader perspective on the situation. Accordingly, the paper I cited above (Racine et al. 2017) recommends that the engagement of parents be scaled or calibrated to the actual desire of the parents to be involved, so as not to impose an overwhelming amount of engagement on those who would suffer from this (e.g., anxiety, discomfort). Generally speaking, it has been found that in different clinical contexts (e.g., Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy), such scaling or calibration is consistent with the preferences of patients and stakeholders themselves, who express varying levels of engagement in decisions (Racine et al. 2013; Zizzo et al. 2016).

One caveat to these findings is that low willingness to participate can be the expression of learned hopelessness, especially in healthcare systems which have perpetuated disempowerment (Zizzo et al. 2016). A clearer example of ongoing engagement could be the development of an ethics and institutional policy using participatory approaches (Martineau 2017). Such approaches would involve members of a group or an institution to ensure that the guidelines connect to the specific problem(s) (situational awareness and continuity) that they attempt to tackle. Importantly here, this process empowers agents and offers them the possibility of participating in and exploring ethical aspects of their work (e.g., ethical issues in the workplace) or of their social environment. Such methods are now widely used in the development of codes of ethics in business ethics (and more creative variants of this) (Bell et al. 2021) and in healthcare ethics where bodies of professionals and patients can be involved as a community (Bruun et al. 2019). But clearly, simply generating a policy is not the end of the enactment process.

In sum, ethical enactment should foster participation and dialogue through engagement of stakeholders and agency distribution, i.e., participation. We are accustomed to being alienated from participating and being active agents in our own lives and collectivities such that there are not only economic, political, and social barriers, but also psychological barriers to doing so as apathy is internalized. However, we know from the literature that there are relationships between participation and flourishing both at an individual and a collective or political level (Seligman 1975; Kim et al. 2020). In their role as facilitators of human growth and flourishing, ethicists can adopt participatory approaches to counter detrimental passivity in its internalized and institutionalized forms. Acting as a moral hero to other people's causes—despite its possibility of celebration and fame—is not the most fundamental in this role.

Enactments Striving for Ethical Praiseworthiness Beyond Ethical Acceptability

To foster the flourishing of oneself and others, ethical enactments must be carried out with the intent of not only replicating (or conforming to) standards of ethical acceptability (Racine 2010) by not harming or encroaching,[3] but of striving to go beyond what exists, to create a situation where the abilities and capabilities of others will be afforded an opportunity to be exercised in a more positive and affirmative way. In a sense, ethical enactments set a new, higher, or more profound standard given that they transform the situation. Ethical enactments liberate potentialities and allow others to grow and learn from their experiences and gain insight into themselves and others. They create their own kind of aesthetics and motivational appeal by supporting growth and flourishing in line with ethical praiseworthiness (Nussbaum 2011).

Keeping an eye on ethical praiseworthiness and recognizing its importance is helpful to maintain motivation in facing obstacles and surmounting difficulties in enacting a given response-scenario. Moreover, the gratification of contributing significantly to others' welfare and wellness is now not only evidenced by anecdotes but also documented in research, showing that it is a source of deep satisfaction and contentment, more so than gaining economic or social advantage over others (Kim et al. 2020). This latter tendency, which actually increases inequalities, can be detrimental to physical and mental health (even of those who appear to be gaining) (Wilkinson 1992; Zimmerman and Bell 2006). The benefits of contributing to the well-being of others or a shared well-being is also exemplified in countries that tend to invest massively in shared public goods and adopt a culture of dialogue (e.g., Sweden, Finland, Norway); they obtain higher quality of life scores than more neoliberal countries (e.g., United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada) (Raynault et al. 2013; Paquin 2014).

[3] "Ethical acceptability refers to the quest for meeting minimal ethical obligation of not causing harm to others. This obligation can be sanctioned by law and other extrinsic motivators, because what causes harm tends to be more obvious in comparison to what engenders goods. Harms to others (lying, murder, theft, disrespect) can be commonly agreed upon as being ethically unacceptable, at least in principle. In contrast to ethical acceptability, the notion of ethical praiseworthiness captures positive obligations to actively pursue substantive forms of the good, with an orientation towards human flourishing that relies on intrinsic motivators such as moral ideals (Gracia 2003; Racine 2010). Ethical acceptability and ethical praiseworthiness can be envisioned as reflecting two fundamentally distinct yet complementary ethical foci or ethical orientations." (Racine 2024, 352) Ideally, our actions are both acceptable and praiseworthy, and these criteria counter-balance each other.

The ethical role models of figures such as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jane Adams, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela also speak to the aspiration of praiseworthiness beyond acceptability. These inspiring figures achieved a generous vision of humanity in depth and in scope to create opportunities for flourishing for all, by creating agreement, peace, and justice in situations where perpetuating disagreement, war, violence, and retaliation would have been the likely habitual route. Their understanding of various sociopolitical situations as opportunities for human betterment, and the role of these figures therein, has not only transformed the nature of the situations but has set a new standard for others to live in and live by. This growth of meaning related to greater conditions for human flourishing and increased possibilities of human development exemplify the importance of ethical enactments that aim for praiseworthiness.

In some psychological theories, this phenomenon of contributing to the welfare of others and increasing our knowledge of what matters to oneself and to others is described as meaning, meaning-making, or purpose in life (Frankl 1966, 1985; Ryff 1989; Wong 1998; Baumeister et al. 2013). In ethics—notably under the influence of pragmatism, though not exclusively—it represents a process of understanding the connections between the initial apprehension of the situation and its moral dimension, the effort to undertake deliberation and scrutinize the understanding of the situation and engage in scenario generation, and the actual enactment and creation of meaning supported by the ongoing search for greater moral wisdom and the growth that accompanies this quest (Racine 2025). Another way to formulate this point is that—in matters of ethical enactment—nothing can be truly *ethical* without open-ended supporting processes like deliberation (it would be instead *moral*) and, more importantly, an explanation of why a given response-scenario is considered to be connected to human flourishing. Now, it may be that a predicted connection of an act to human betterment is proven wrong (e.g., how consent contributes to fostering trust and therefore positive human relationships, an important aspect of human flourishing), but this should be the clear rationale behind the action at the onset. If it does not turn out to be the case, some learning will have nevertheless happened.

There are numerous examples, both quotidian and extraordinary, of actions that are motivated by ethical praiseworthiness understood as the search for human flourishing. Take for example teachers committed to helping children with learning disabilities, attention deficits, and other developmental challenges. Many times, they work against the grain of many systems (e.g., educational, social, legal, medical) that create significant barriers to these children. These workers make huge contributions to the growth and development of children with those conditions when they try to promote greater inclusion and facilitate development through participatory approaches and engagement where children can voice their concerns, become more autonomous persons, be accepted for who they are, and find greater clarity about their role and purpose in life as they discover meaningful life activities. The same could be said, for example, of rehabilitation specialists when they show great commitment and go "beyond the call of duty" and of conventions to care for patients who face healthcare challenges and engage them as active agents in decisions by providing them tailored and adapted information about their treatments and engaging them in discussions as full persons. These examples may seem like I am giving greater ethical stature to the helping and healing professions. It is true that the reward offered by these professions is often related to the gratification experienced by seeing the development of others and receiving the sincere recognition of those who are helped (or their parents or their caregivers). But we can also think of those outside these professions, such as business leaders who take the time to mentor younger and less experienced businesspeople by providing selfless help to offer advice and open business networks. They are contributing to the development of the skills of that person in a way that will promote their flourishing as a developing (business) person.[4]

The criterion of ethical praiseworthiness is consistent with the importance of meaning in theories of Eudaimonia (e.g. Ryff and Singer 2008; Ryff 2014) insofar as striving for ethically praiseworthy actions is a path in the direction of meaningful actions that allow others to grow and fulfil themselves. Furthermore, a meaningful action is one that reveals a human

[4] Although I cannot explore this idea further here, it is of paramount importance that societies recognize the value of everyone's work and that everyone be allowed to participate in their own way and using their own talent towards the welfare of others and that recognition be shared through actual support of decent living conditions that allows everyone to have

being to themselves in a way that they gain self-knowledge that will then be useful to help not only themselves but others, too. Additionally, a meaningful and praiseworthy action preserves the connection to the deep concerns at the basis of the problematic situation (situational awareness and situational continuity). This connection to the problematic situation partly ensures the meaningfulness of the response. Accordingly, striving for ethically praiseworthy enactment process is another way to describe the pursuit of flourishing of oneself and others. Maintaining that focus requires firm determination and a resolute conviction that there is true value in doing things for others, i.e., that one will not lose by being generous. It also requires that ethical enactments be constantly monitored and thought of in an ongoing way to ensure clarity on the ability to actually achieve an act that is acceptable versus one that is praiseworthy in terms of its contribution to flourishing. In this way, ethics-oriented changes and interventions do not become thinned down to simple procedural considerations or compliance (e.g., following regulations or code of ethics). Ethics engages with what matters to people.

Personal Growth and Mutual Learning

Deliberative wisdom theory as well as other forms of open-ended eudemonistic philosophies posit the possibility of learning from each other about how life events and relationships affect us in different ways, based on the diversity of experiences of humanity. Accordingly, enactments undertaken under the auspices of such a theoretical and methodological orientation should be actions that allow different participants to learn from the experience of trying to surmount a given problem situation—which, as noted above, requires their engagement as persons who also learn about the world and have a unique world experience. The process of ethical enactment should therefore be such that it should not only be considered as achieving an outcome, but that the process of getting to the outcome will enact capabilities for mutual learning and growth. Regardless of the ability of the enactment to actually succeed, some growing, some learning will have occurred. As Mandela said: "I never lose. I either win or learn" (Mandela 2011). This is possible because ethical enactments are viewed as hypotheses, and the development of a hypothetical scenario through deliberation will have been a learning opportunity in and of itself (although it should not stop there) and an opportunity to understand the problem situation. In addition, precious learning occurs when there is an actual test of the envisioned response-scenario in experience. Learning will thus occur, and ideally mutual learning, if there is openness to revisiting the process of the enactment unfolding such that if it is learned that unpredicted negative outcomes surface, the act will be corrected as soon as possible.

It is important to stress that sometimes the outcome sought is seen as so important and so valuable—and coming from a point of view that is so much better than others—that imposing or using force against others will be seen as legitimate given the *grandeur* of the cause. I have witnessed a surprising but puzzling situation firsthand which has surely happened to countless students in educational settings, as recent Canadian data suggest (Hango 2021). In my doctoral training, one of our teachers organized a mobbing session to intimidate one of the students in the class. The student was tasked to present the work of a neopositivist social scientist with whom the teacher profoundly disagreed. The student presenting the work of the author was harassed with a series of surprising and uncomfortable questions and comments by classmates in a concerted effort to embarrass him. One of the classmates later confessed and apologized to that student, who then realized how the entire class had been framed as a mobbing session against him; the teacher had organized a prior meeting of all students except the targeted student to set

Footnote 4 (continued)

a rich and meaningful life (Sen 1989, 2002). Most of the time, we are far from reaching that ideal and work conditions can be truly alienating. There are distributions of goods that are inconsistent with such a philosophy (e.g., extreme concentration of power and wealth) and others that are more consistent (e.g., ensuring a decent life to everyone). Societies organized most consistently with this line of thinking (e.g., Sweden, Denmark, Iceland) have clearly struck a preferable—although always imperfect—equilibrium between adopting a productive economic model and humanizing social lives to promote maximum human flourishing of all. The deontological claim that everyone is worthy of respect expresses this idea, but the clear foundation is not that we should simply "respect other people's autonomy," but rather that we foster models of organization and society which help promote the development of human beings as autonomous agents, as well as other important aspects of a flourishing human beings (Martela 2014).

up this wicked experience session. Looking back, I think that this teacher was so adamant about certain theories and views that she probably thought she was doing the targeted student and everyone in the class a service in discounting the views presented, along with the person presenting them.

In such situations, the initial motivation may sometimes be laudable, but the person can become radicalized such that the pursuit of that vision or theory will matter much more than the welfare of those touched along the way, or even the consistency of the actions with the actual theory and vision pursued. This is why theories of human flourishing and the end goals of ethics are important but also potentially dangerous. Think here of Mao's Cultural Revolution in China, McCarthyism in the USA, Stalin's sovietism, and colonialism and linguistic and cultural assimilation in my own country, Canada. So many genocides and other crimes are perpetrated in the name of a grand cause or goal to achieve well-being and flourishing, sometimes for a small group but sometimes also in the name of all. There are also less violent but still concerning aspects of personal development doctrines that foster the belief that all can be good, that individuals have full freedom in their lives, and that therefore success is only a matter of personal will or positive thinking. All these examples show that ethical praiseworthiness also needs to be seriously cross-checked with standards of ethical acceptability. An ethically praiseworthy action gives deeper meaning to the values embedded in standards of ethical acceptability but does not dismiss them outright. These are situations where the learning is not mutual; it is a unidirectional interaction in which one imposes knowledge and a worldview that is considered superior.

I am sure readers will understand these points if they consider their own experience of situations where the final outcome was deemed so important that humanitarian aspects or human values were sacrificed along the way, such that what promised to be a growing experience ended up becoming an experience of languishing and impoverishment. There are obvious examples of initially well-intentioned people cheating, being dishonest, stealing materials or ideas, or taking credit from others, such that in the end the action they thought laudable became unethical and poisoned by unethical behaviour. Accordingly, an ethical enactment cannot be one during which this occurs. It must be a process of enacting that is consistent with its intent, notably the growth of others and their flourishing. Otherwise, the action has the external appearance of being ethical while not being genuinely based on the inner motivations of the agents and the actual contribution to human flourishing as a process of personal growth and mutual learning.[5]

Conclusion

Changes and practices and policy informed by ethics inquiry can be well intentioned, but how can we determine if they are truly ethical in the end? This question could be dismissed somewhat easily by abstract theories that call for a neglect of consequences and outcomes. But such theoretical views contrast with so much of everyday behaviour and moral insights enshrined in legal and social systems that ethics cannot toss the question aside. Some aspects of the evaluation of ethical interventions are likely domain or context specific. Such is the case of interventions which aim to promote certain valued human experiences such as autonomy, dignity, and positive human relationships in the form of empathy and trust. There is abundant even if scattered literature to help narrow done what a meaningful improvement to autonomy, trust, and so on can be. But there are also potential procedural aspects of

[5] A crucial criterion for pragmatist theories like those of Dewey is that the enactment actually "resituates" both the agent and the context in a way that yields potentialities that help humans flourish. This is a deep and profound criterion that is not easily dealt with and calls for humility in the assuredness of actually realizing ethically praiseworthy actions, maintaining the aspiration goal of human flourishing as a constant criterion to assess and re-assess our actions. Failure to do so can result in a reductive philosophy where settling problems is considered to be the only goal. This is partly what happened in Singapore where a form of pragmatism became official philosophy and led to crude social regulation without substantive commitment to the well-being of individuals (Tan 2012). This is not what is aimed for here. Being practical does not mean to be narrow-minded, although this is certainly a possible but unfortunate skid. Being practical, and more clearly being pragmatist, about ethics means that there is a commitment to realizing the vision of human potentiality within actual situations. Unfortunately, sometimes modern scholars who claim to be inspired by pragmatism partly lose sight of this important dimension of pragmatist philosophy which contributes to its depth and avoid transforming it into something worse than crude utilitarianism.

ethical enactments—as accounted for in pragmatist eudemonistic theories such as the theory of deliberative wisdom—which can be identified and shared across different specific domains. To come to this view, however, one has to hold a certain account of ethics, likely an account where procedural and methodological aspects support reflection that means can actually undermine the meaningfulness of certain ends. Deliberative wisdom theory is one such account that offers an open eudemonistic, pragmatist account of ethics inquiry and a cardinal orientation toward human flourishing in keeping with contemporary psychology and insights from ancient wisdom and philosophy. Grounded in such an account of ethics, I have identified four guideposts which could help assess whether an open inquiry is undertaken and whether that inquiry strives to focus and facilitate human flourishing, here understood not as a fixed telos, but rather as a kind of open and self-determined orientation and process. These criteria are not final and will surely evolve as experiments of participatory research on human flourishing grow and will help bridge philosophical ethics literature with empirical literature from contemporary psychology.

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