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Health and Humanity

The life of an individual is wasted when it is devoted solely to the pursuit of simple pleasures and excessive, unsustainable self-indulgence. As human beings, we should strive to live our lives morally upright individuals who contribute to the well-being of our fellow humans to create a better and brighter future. Actions which help to achieve this end, whether directly or indirectly, would be valid from an ethical standpoint; this would be desirable as ethical decisions will create an ethical world and therefore create the better world which we seek. When discussing ethics, it is often thought that decisions in this realm are made in some otherworld's twilight-zone scenario, in which there are varying amounts of people tied down to railroad tracks; but this is a common misconception, people deal in ethics every day, it exists not somewhere far off but at their very doorstep.

When people conduct themselves each day and make what seem to be small decisions for their own health, they are unknowingly making decisions which contribute to the well-being of the rest of the world as well. This can be seen in several practices, including dietary decisions, exercise habits, and in some recreational practices as well. The most ethical decision which can be made is the one which both considers how the actions being taken will affect others and be made to promote the flourishing of others. A lifestyle which supports our own health is the most

ethical lifestyle as it promotes the most flourishing for humanity as well. Thus, to be ethical humans who, make ethical choices, we must also be healthy humans who make healthy choices.

Before laying out each component of the argument, I must first define what it is that I am arguing about, thus I must first define what exactly ethical behavior is. To achieve this end, I will be relying on the words of Aristotle, one of the greatest minds in human history, one of the most widely renowned philosophers of all time, and a tutor to Alexander the Great. According to Aristotle, as can be read from Chapter 3 of Professor Stiltner's book, *Toward Thriving Communities*, the meaning of human life is to achieve happiness, thus making equating true happiness to virtue as it fulfills us as humans, but this happiness is not what it is perceived to be by modern American society, true happiness is not simply basking in excessive, indulgent, and materialistic pleasures, but in achieving a life full of flourishing – that is, a life which promotes constant growth in individuals, makes them better people, and promotes better living – these ends are achieved by striving to live a virtuous life (Stiltner, 73-75). While we've now outlined the basic definition of virtuous acts – acts which achieve meaningful happiness through bringing about human flourishing – we must still outline the criteria for outcomes which actually achieve human flourishing. Professor Stiltner continues to write that: “Any flourishing, and thus truly happy, person must enjoy these four activities regularly throughout life:

- Having a good character and acting with virtue
- Engaging in study and contemplation
- Enjoying meaningful friendships
- Participating in public life---making contributions to the well-being of one's communities” (Stiltner 77).

Thus, to identify what lifestyle habits can be considered to virtuous, in that they promote true flourishing, we must compare the outcomes which these lifestyle habits bring about in the world with the criteria above to see if at least one of them are fulfilled. While this allows us to begin analyzing each lifestyle choice against some sort of baseline, a swathe of behaviors must first be looked at from afar to help in our understanding of each individual behavior as we continue to narrow our focus.

By this, I mean that we must take into consideration not only all lifestyle behaviors, but their impact on health in general. The most common causes of death in the United States today are chronic disease, which tend to have a high correlation with obesity; according to a journal posted in 2010: “Obesity is linked with higher risk for several serious health conditions, such as hypertension, type 2 diabetes, hypercholesterolemia, coronary heart disease (CHD), stroke, asthma, and arthritis (Levine).” From this we can see that obesity is clearly correlated with chronic disease and overall negative health, the article then continues: “Direct medical spending on diagnosis and treatment of these conditions, therefore, is likely to increase with rising obesity levels (Levin).” Thus, we’ve hit a point where the lifestyle choices that individuals make will affect not only their own well-being, but the well-being of others as well, in that by increasing the costs of medical care over time, the rest of the public who requires treatment along these lines suffers as they must pay more for the same tests, medical treatments, or medications along these specific lines.

We now touch upon one of the criterion discussed earlier on from Professor Stiltner’s book regarding which type of behavior and conduct constitutes a virtuous way of living (or promotes the most human flourishing), which is that the examined behavior makes contributions to the well-being of one’s community; in this instance, we would be referring to the United

States as a whole, but the examined behaviors would be those contributing to the individual(s) in question being obese. As being obese causes is actually detrimental to the well-being of others, specifically others whom also require access to the treatment of obesity-related illnesses, we can say that the continuing of habits which contribute to obesity can be considered to be un-virtuous, in-so-far as they do not contribute to the flourishing of others as others then have to pay more in order to receive the same amount of treatment, which can put an individual who is financially vulnerable situation into a state of great anxiety and further financial instability. Additionally, these behaviors also fall short of this qualification of being a virtuous behavior as they fail to bring about flourishing in the lives of any obese individual(s) as obesity can increase susceptibility to any of the disease mentioned above, which can decrease an individual's health span (the amount of time in which an individual possesses relatively good health), can deprive an individual of both financial resources and a vast amount of time in order to pay for and receive medical diagnoses and treatments, and reduce an individual's mobility and therefore negatively impact their autonomy; thus, we can conclude that any behaviors which contribute to the state of being obese fail to be able to be considered virtuous behaviors. If we have determined what along this spectrum can be define as non-virtuous, then we can also determine that regarding obesity, it is virtuous to perform actions or practice habits that contribute to achieving a healthy body weight, to achieve a better state of living for ourselves and for others.

Now that we've established that actions which maintains a healthy weight for individuals, we can analyze each of the behaviors which contribute to this state. First, we'll consider physical activity regarding its contributions to the achieving of a state of flourishing in an individual's life. Of course, it is generally known that regular participation in physical activity brings about improvements in the health of individuals, some of the aspects affected including blood pressure,

body composition, and stability, (which is more significant in older populations) but there is additionally the benefit of the social component of interacting with others, the benefit of an increased mood, and the benefit of aiding your concentration by refocusing your attention for the time one exercises each day, which can help those who struggle to do so to feel present. Of course, the habit of exercising regularly is beneficial in the bringing about of flourishing and fills out one of the criterion of a virtuous act as it prevents obesity in the individual which is a contribution to the well-being of the self and society, but it also meets two more of the criteria of a virtuous act in that it 1) Can help to forge meaningful friendship through participating in exercise with “workout buddies,” whom you might know outside of the gym or not and might get food with after the gym, allowing for a consistent relationship and 2) Could be classified as serious contemplation or even meditation as exerting oneself physically typically pulls the attention of an individual away from whatever they are doing and forces them to focus on the present moment, just as meditation attempts to do. Thus, by promoting human flourishing by means of a multi-faceted approach, exercise can be defined as a virtuous action which can be participated in to achieve personal growth.

Not all health behaviors are important specifically in their relation to the effect of obesity on the prevalence of the disease, as certain behaviors can increase the likelihood of developing a chronic disease even in the absence of obesity. The consumption of red meat has been linked to increases in the prevalence of heart disease, certain cancers, and type 2 diabetes across several studies, this again provides a behavioral risk factor for developing a chronic that might make an individual a burden on society by impacting health care costs as well as one in which the individual damages their own health, loses time in their health span, and possibly loses some autonomy due to time lost due to treatment or due to a loss in mobility from illness (Gonzales)

(Larson). Thus, we can safely assert that the practice of eating red meat fails to meet the criterion of a virtuous act on the form of making contributions to the well-being of one's community as this habit negatively impacts their own well-being as well as the general public's. According to a study published in 2020, diets including regular red meat consumption produces a significantly larger carbon footprint, contributes to significantly higher greenhouse gas emissions, and requires significantly more resources to produce than plant-based proteins (For example, 1kg of protein from beef requires 18 times more land, 10 times more water, 9 times more fuel, 12 times more fertilizer, and 9 times more the amount of pesticides than 1kg of protein from kidney beans) (Gonzales). Thus, we are both clearing out more natural land spaces in order to build cattle farms, using more water, and ultimately producing less food in order to produce a product which has a negative effect on our health and drastically increases the risk of developing chronic diseases, particularly cancer, in consumers. Thus, the lifestyle habit of regularly consuming red meat further fails to meet the criterion for a virtuous act of bringing about good in the community of the individual.

The demands which we make in regard to food through purchasing certain foods over others additionally affects the ability of others to purchase certain food products as the decisions of the consumer contribute to the shaping of the economy. Thus, if the majority of the public partook in a diet which included more plants and only meat from poultry, as well as sea food and eggs, then the prices of these specific products, which are better for human health relative to red meat, then there would be more room available to produce these products, allowing more to be produced, which would decrease the price of the product. While this point contradicts the concept of "supply and demand," it makes sense due to the fact that an inordinately greater amount of plant protein can be produced relative to red meat protein due to the need for less

land, fuel, water, pesticides, and fertilizer, as mentioned previously, leading to a flooding of the market with these food products which would lead to an overall price decrease in healthier food products which would make them more accessible for everyone, as well as individuals who would typically have trouble affording said healthy products. Taking actions which would achieve this end would fall under one of the four requirements necessary to living a virtuous life, according to Professor Stiltner: “Any flourishing, and thus truly happy, person must enjoy these four activities regularly throughout life:Participating in public life---making contributions to the well-being of one’s communities.” (Stiltner, 77) Thus, in order to demonstrate care for the well-being for their fellow humans, which would be accomplished by allowing them to flourish through experiencing a state of good physical health, which would be accomplished by providing individuals of a lower socio-economic background access to affordable healthy dietary options; this ultimately results in our becoming virtuous humans through promoting the flourishing of others as well as through achieving flourishing for ourselves by helping others to flourish. Of course, shouldn’t it go without saying that virtuous actions are those which help others and promote their well-being?

The decisions which we make regarding our own health have an impact beyond ourselves that extends to the well-being of the public, the environment, and our children; the decisions which we make regarding our own health have significant ramifications for the future. In the case of obesity, the state of being obese has a negative impact on our own health and negatively affects those in dire needs of diagnoses and treatments for obesity-related illnesses, thus virtuous behaviors in this area are those that enable us to avoid becoming obese. In the case of physical activity, it helps to avoid becoming obese which in turn helps to prevent the development of chronic diseases, which eases the burden of medical costs for others who struggle to afford

medical treatment, helping it to meet the criterion of a virtuous act by aiding the community of the individual. The exclusion of red meat from the diet can be considered a virtuous act as it also prevents the development of chronic diseases, thus easing the burden of chronic disease on health care costs, it additionally reduces the damage on the environment by reducing the demand and therefore production of red meat, which takes a significant toll on the environment, thus avoiding red meat benefits both the individual's community within the scope of the economy as well as the environment, having a positive impact globally. If our goal is to be good people, we must consciously make decisions that bring about the most good and minimize the damage to our communities, our planet, and ourselves; this is what it means to be a virtuous person.

But our actions, be they virtuous or not, will have a ripple effect on their world which will have a chain affect that will have ramifications beyond our own lifetime; this is accomplished through the nature of epigenetics. Now, you may be asking yourself "Nik, what are epigenetics? That sounds like some weird pseudo-science sounding word that you're making up to make a point, are you full of shit?" Well, I assure you, the good reader, that I am not, in fact, full of shit. Epigenetics is a concept which is similar to genetics, but is not exactly the same, genetics refers to the characteristics which we receive from our parents and how that contributes to us, these we cannot change; epigenetics are the markers which affect how exactly our genetics express themselves within us, which we can change do a much greater extent. These markers are influenced by factors in our surrounding environment and the influences/stresses which are placed on the body, most of which being our routine behaviors. For instance, a child might have received genetics from their parents which make them predisposed to be relatively tall, however, the child does not eat nutritious food, only candy, additionally, that child only sleeps for 4 hours a night, they additionally do not receive much sunlight. Now, this child has only grown to be the

height of 5'5 (that's my height, so hopefully no one is offended), but this could have been changed with behaviors that better support health. This is a relatively simple concept, but there is just one more problem with this: these markers, brought about by our own behaviors, will be passed on to our children.

Have you ever been displeased with some physical characteristic that you possess? It could be your height, it could be a poor constitution in regard to combatting disease, or it could be one of your physiological dispositions, such as your metabolism. All of these characteristics have a genetic component, meaning that there is an extent to which we cannot affect the expression of these characteristics in our bodies no matter what we do; but there is an extent to which we can affect the **DEGREE** to which these genes are expressed both in ourselves as well as in our offspring.

Of course, we should also ask ourselves why we don't carry out certain behaviors to begin with and why we carry out others, as Socrates once said, "The unexamined life is not worth living." (As a Greek, I hold Socrates in high regard, and thus take these words seriously and always keep them in the back of my head) But seriously, why don't we feel any desire to do the things or practice the behaviors which are conducive to a state of good health? I mean, have you ever asked yourself "Why don't I want to go to the gym today?" or "Why don't I want to eat chicken instead of beef?" or, "Why don't I meditate before going to bed instead of going on my phone?" Most people reading this will know exactly how each of these behaviors can benefit their overall well being---going to the gym can improve body composition, improve blood pressure, mood, and mental health, removing red meat from the diet can decrease the likelihood of developing certain cancers later in life (as well as contribute to the well-being of the environment), meditation also helps to decrease blood pressure, improve mood, improve mental

health, and provide a better quality of sleep, which leads to a better start for the next day. Thus, it can be safely said that most people have a general grasp of what behaviors are “good” or “bad” for their health, or which decisions which will bring about a better state of health.

But this is the point at which a major disconnect can be observed: although people understand, completely, which behaviors are better for them in the long run, they will still avoid practicing those behaviors. Some people make attempts to implement these behaviors into their lives, but do so in short stints rather than indefinitely, which has given birth to several practices, phrases, and fads. For example, a common expressions and practice is to “go on a diet,” in which an individual deprives themselves of certain foods in order to typically try to lose weight. The problem with this is that if you “go on a diet,” you eventually “go off of that diet”. This tends to be because people will eat less than what they really need and will practice crash-dieting, which leaves them feeling empty and irritable. Thus, it would make more sense to simply eat in a way that is healthy, but also sustainable, allowing one to eat healthy consistently.

The same pattern of behavior can be seen in exercise: many stop exercising in the winter as their schedule becomes busier and they lose energy due to the lack of sunlight, then start going to a gym in January as a part of their New Year’s resolution in order to get a nice-looking body for the Summer. But then after the Summer, most stop exercising again and then they’re right back where they started. Why not simply incorporate a little bit of exercise into your schedule every day, say....10 minutes? 15 minutes? Why not practice a form of exercise that you’ll actually enjoy and therefore stick with? Maybe you enjoy playing soccer, or swimming.

Finally, we come to meditation, which I’d say is the most interesting of the three behaviors discussed in the past few paragraphs; meditation is an interesting practice as it is essentially the practice of doing nothing. To meditate, simply sit somewhere comfortably, close

your eyes, breathe, and focus on the present. This is the most simple behavior to keep up with consistently, yet I'd say it's the behavior which people practice the least of the three currently being discussed (meditation, exercise, and diet). So why do people struggle even when it comes to sitting down and doing nothing?

The issue is the way which we frame each of these things for ourselves. We all want to be healthy and strong, both mentally and physically, which is something we consciously think to ourselves internally. People can agree with the big picture, yet they struggle with the nitty-gritty of the goal. Well, we have that though in our minds, "I want to be healthy," but what is the thought we have when we're thinking about exercising, eating healthy, or meditating? We think "I *should* exercise more," or "I *should* eat healthier," or, "I *should* meditate". We frame the practice of these activities as a duty, or as a burden, something which is simply a chore to be completed in order to tick off a box on a checklist. The expression "mind over matter" exists for a reason, humans can accomplish anything if they truly set their minds to it, if they are fully committed, but that's just the issue, everyone is capable of practicing these behaviors, we simply aren't all motivated to practice these goals.

Reframing these practices in a different light is just how to facilitate the practice of healthy behaviors; if we associate being healthy with being uncomfortable, unfulfilled, and unhappy, then of course we aren't going to want to try to be healthy! If being healthy meant being unhappy, then we wouldn't be able to consider it a virtuous behavior, as it wouldn't allow us to flourish within our own lives! People should still try to be healthy, but in the ways that can handle; it's on us to find ways to practice these behaviors, not in their most extreme versions, but in ways that we can actually stick to them, or in other words, make them manageable, enjoyable, and realistic enough for us to want to stick to them. This can be as simple as exercising in ways

that we actually find fun, rather than simply running on a treadmill for an hour (unless you're into that), or including a variety of healthy foods in your diet rather than the same three things so as to avoid boredom and displeasure, and to be fluid with your meditation, allowing yourself to put your own spin on it rather than forcing yourself to copy others and their methods.

Additionally, there are several small, but specific, targeted interventions which can be implemented into daily life to facilitate the adoption of these behaviors. Firstly, one must reflect on WHY they want to change at all, this is important as certain types of motivation are more potent in promoting behavior change than others; intrinsic motivation, or motivation which comes from within, based on the desires of the individual in question, are far more useful in the long run than extrinsic motivation, as individuals will eventually be disappointed or unsatisfied with performing healthy behaviors when it is not done with the goal of bettering themselves. Good health should not be seen as a chore, but something one allows oneself to have, a great privilege, once there is a reframing of the attitude toward health behaviors and a genuine desire to pursue that behavior fostered from within, behavior change will be easy.

Secondly, we can reflect on past experiences when a behavior change was attempted but couldn't be sustained permanently, in this instance, rather than looking at what brought about our failure, which will promote shame and hence an aversion to trying to change, we should look at what worked in that situation, or, where was success seen? The same principle has been consistently in both academics and athletics as well, when someone is simply told "don't fail that test," or, "don't drop the ball," they can then only focus on failure rather than on success, which leads to performance anxiety and hence failure, leading to a vicious cycle of failure, shame, and fear of trying again. Meanwhile, if you tell someone (following along the test metaphor) "try to get a 100" then that person will be more focused on success, which brings a more positive

connotation to the work being performed in order to foster change and brings a more positive outlook to the matter as a whole by bringing into focus a risk vs. reward ratio which presents us with the chance to benefit from the situation at hand.

Finally, participating in a behavior change alongside others might make the entire process easier to stick with, as there is both social support in the endeavor as well as a sense of accountability created by the fact that someone else will be aware of the individual's progress, which puts some pressure on them to change, which might be welcome if the change is a positive one. Our social circles have a great influence on our behaviors, a child learns what normal human behavior is by observing their parents we are discouraged or encouraged for what we are doing by the reactions of others in our lives to our behavior; having someone in your corner who supports you, your growth, and the path you've chosen creates a much more motivating situation than the people around you acting uninterested, opposed, or ambivalent towards your goals and ambitions, thus getting others to buy into a pursuit of a healthy behavior alongside you can make the process more positive and more doable overall.

Humans seek out comfort, it is the most easily understood sensation of all and it is the one which is most easily lived in, the tragedy being that on occasion, we mistake this comfort with flourishing, or, in other words, with *fulfillment*. Thus, we might remain within our comfort zone, doing the same things, practicing the same activities, and producing the same outcomes, frustrated with those outcomes, cursing our inability to change them. But this is people are dead wrong, they are fully capable of bringing about the change they desire, but it requires them to increase their capacity and ability to be *uncomfortable*. This great difficulty is completely necessary, however, as bringing about these positive changes in oneself has huge ramifications for the rest of the world, creating a cascade of positive change across of the world. Though it

may not feel like it at times, we are fully in control of our own actions and our own destinies, thus overcoming the difficulties of changing ourselves into healthier people is completely possible, changing for the better should be considered the greatest good, as it brings about the most good in the world and brings about *fulfillment* in the lives of individuals, which *comfort* does not necessarily provide for those who possess it. Thus, we are obligated to ourselves, our friends, our families, the world, and ourselves to strive to become healthier people, despite the hardships this path might bring.

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