**FRAILTY & FLOURISHING**

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“P"art of what it is to be human is to need other people, to experience limits in our lives, and to suffer at times,” says Dr. Brent Slife, professor of psychology, in his new book *Frailty, Suffering, and Vice: Flourishing in the Face of Human Limitations* (8). “We would lose too much of the richness and texture of life if we focused so much on the positive that we ignore how the inevitable struggles of ordinary living can lead to deepening and growth. The key message of this book is that it is neither necessary nor desirable to eliminate human struggles and frailties in order to pursue a flourishing life” (9).

His book, coauthored by Blaine J. Fowers and Frank C. Richardson, is indeed a deep analysis of our inherent social nature, the limits and complications that need sometimes entail, the sufferings that can develop in the face of it, and the best ways to grow through them. It is, in every sense of the word, both a treatise on the "eudaimonic" or universal goal of happiness derived from a life of activity governed by reason and a manual for the application of such a pursuit.

Indeed, the authors say, “We cannot live a good life by being entirely selfish, but neither can we live a good life by being entirely selfless. At times, it is perfectly sensible to act in a way that benefits oneself, as in acting to take good care of oneself and choosing enjoyable activities. At other times, it makes sense to act mostly for the benefit of others, such as when someone’s birthday or when someone is sick. There is no contradiction here if we recognize that the situation guides us in seeing the most appropriate beneficiaries of our actions... In seeking [the] eudaimonic life, we can only succeed if we are benefiting others consistently along the way” (35).

“Self-benefit and other-benefit are usually and naturally co-mingled because relationships and mutual activity are central to a good human life. Attempting to separate them into egoistic and altruistic activities is a pointless distraction from the primary business of acting well together” (35-36).

Acting in such a way by necessity involves the recognition that our lives are inextricably intertwined and that we all necessarily depend on others. “[Human beings] are a deeply social species,” say the authors (73). “Because our social nature is so pervasive, it is easy for us to take it for granted. Like the air we breathe, the centrality of our social nature is usually only apparent to us when something goes wrong. For this reason, it has been easy to think that virtue and the good life are all about the individual” (25). In fact, “the cultural heritage of the U.S. has left [us] with a weird conflict between focusing on self-interest and on understanding morality in terms of benefiting other people. As Americans, we are taught to prioritize our self-interests and to be suspicious of any form of sacrifice for someone else. We may even go to the point of labeling other-benefit as weakness or unhealthy dependence. Yet at the same time, we define moral behavior in terms of respecting or benefiting others... Clearly, as a society, we are quite confused about these important matters” (35). But “the only way individual rights and dignity exist is when a collective endows individuals with them... It is simply impossible for individuals to establish or possess freedoms and rights independently” (43).

“Consider the relational theorist, Jonathan Sacks, [who wrote the following]: ‘One of the great intellectual discoveries of the twentieth century is that the ‘I’ is a fiction, or at least an abstraction. In reality, we develop a sense of personal identity only through close and continuous conversation with ‘significant others.’ If Sacks is right, and even our innermost identities depend on our relationships, then our identities are dependent identities; dependency is part of who we are” (74).
It is important to note that the authors do not recommend abandoning or compromising our modern ideals of skepticism and of thinking for ourselves. The problem is that . . . many of us tend to think in terms of a sharp dichotomy between two extremes. Either we stand entirely on our own two feet or we are dominated by someone else and their self-interest. Yet much of life is lived in a third mode, one that dispenses entirely with the dichotomy between independence and subservience (178).

“Once we recognize that dependence is part of what makes us human…[we recognize] that dependence makes widespread and temporally extended collaboration possible for us” (85–86).

Not only that, but they also say, “A flourishing life can be described as loving what is good . . . and pursuing it with all your heart. . . .” This is particularly important because life throws a great variety of situations our way, and we need the full complement of virtues to act well across all of the circumstances we face” (67).

Indeed, one may accept that acting for the common good as well as the individual good is indeed necessary but still ask, “But what about all the inevitable complications and unhealthy interpretations of that philosophy, such as codependency, competition, and conflict?” To that question, they answer, “We believe there is considerable evidence that this prejudice [against the complicated] is a cultural viewpoint . . . rather than a reality” (103). “Complications seem like the bane of our existence” (99). “There are, of course, problematic dependencies,” but they “have been confused with dependency in general” (86). “But dependence, in particular, has been overly pathologized and independence has been overly commended” (97).

Additionally, those complications may be seen as arising from an inconstancy between one’s perception as being separate from others, and “commodifying” or “abstracting” those others. “The ideal of individual separateness…paints the world as a resource ‘out there,’ potentially available to meet our personal needs” (106). “Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer prize-winning author…agrees that humans have ‘become a commodity.’ . . . They are like . . . consumer products. They have no intrinsic value” (107).

“Most of us . . . get caught up in the culture of commodification without fully realizing how much we are distorting our humanity. . . . It is hard to break the grip of such attitudes and practices when there is no clear alternative in view” (107). We tend to abstract ourselves from values, “insulating ourselves from people who espouse different viewpoints” (113).

But, they say, “We believe that a eudaimonic perspective goes a long way toward articulating a badly needed alternative, one that finds considerable meaning in embracing, not shunning, life’s complexity” (107). Relations of difference may complicate matters, but . . . we must give ‘due weight to commonalities and differences” (105).

We do not, arguably cannot, flourish alone or in spite of the difficulties we face. In attempting to the value of complications and dependencies, they assert that “It is not in [anyone’s] best interest to seek refuge from . . . the complications that constitute our everyday lives. If we do, we risk great damage to our identities and our relationships to others and to our world” (125). When we hold on to prejudices, for instance, that绝缘us from others, we are damaging ourselves as well as others.

To overcome those prejudices, they suggest cultivating genuine motivation to learn about and engage other worldviews. By learning about other ways of life, we come to see that there are many different ways to live well as human beings. This relativity makes it clear that all worldviews have flaws and can be questioned” (123). Seen in this light, openness to complications is a virtue.

The eternal skeptic may then suggest that even if one accepts interconnectedness and openness to complications as a part of life and even a virtue, suffering often still arises, events and circumstances that surpass understanding and perhaps even our capacity to endure them. To that, the authors respond: “We humans are strongly inclined to seek meaning in the important events of our lives, and when the meaning of suffering is elusive, that suffering is redoubled. One of the aspects of necessary suffering that makes it easier to bear is that it is often imbued with meaning” (163).

“It is hard to face ordinary limitations and frailties when our only approach to suffering is to reduce or eliminate it at all costs” (161). And “at first glance, the idea of correctly diagnosing a problem that creates suffering seems perfectly sensible” (164). But it seems that suffering gets depersonalized in the name of control and efficiency” (165). And, “pleasure is insufficient as the highest value,” indicating the absence of gods, whether secular or religious” (173).

In other words, they advise working one’s way through suffering, as opposed to circumventing or avoiding it, as a path to a truly flourishing life. But once again, the skeptic might ask if such a response is best even in the face of truly horrific suffering, especially the kind that involves that of innocent ones or that takes place on the scale of the Holocaust. The kind of pain this caused, they state, citing Eugene Long, “might seem to . . . have no purpose that can be meaningfully appropriated in human terms” and can appear to hollow out any sense of meaning or value, indicating “the absence of gods, whether secular or religious” (173).

And in response to that suggestion, they again cite Long, who “suggests that in honestly confronting ‘useless suffering,’” especially the suffering of innocent others, some people do not experience a dead end. . . . Many individuals experience a call . . . not only to condemn the suffering . . . but also . . . to a kind of giving of oneself in the face of it. . . . ‘Useless suffering can also evoke moral outrage as a call to action. This action can include a refusal to rationalize the suffering, a struggle to end it, or a deep desire to console the sufferers. We can be summoned to a higher standard of being, to a responsiveness to the [suffering]...that [transcends] any calculated obligation, . . . This kind of experience deeply links us to other beings in a shared sense of the precariousness of existence” (173).
This leads to the virtue of compassion, which can involve “learning to avoid excessive blaming and distancing.” “When compassion is understood as a virtue rather than simply an emotional response, . . . it is apparent that compassion involves reasoning about whether and how to help relieve a sufferer’s pain” (178).

“All of us encounter . . . evil,” they continue, “and we must have a way to understand these destructive possibilities so that we can resist them” (180). Human beings are also rational creatures, so we fare better when our lives make sense to us. “As uncomfortable as it is, we have to recognize that almost everyone is capable of severely harming others. This will help us to recognize vice and evil may sometimes exceed our comprehension (199-208).”

“There are varied paths to evil, including those taken through revenge, abstractionism of victims, the perception of one’s self as victim, and the maintenance of ambiguity. What do the authors recommend good people do in response to it?”

• understand and love genuine good
• recognize rationalizations, ideology, scapegoating, and justifications people offer for evil
• take responsibility through the virtues of courage and integrity. “Courage is particularly important in combating evil. . . . [But] courage does not include taking excessive risks. Very often, we have to act collectively or through our social institutions to wisely confront vicious people. Yet failing to act in ways that are available to us amounts to the deficiency of cowardice. Collectively, we have great power through calling out evil in moral terms, through the legal system, and through our economic choices”
• understand vice and evil
• recognize that evil may sometimes exceed our comprehension (199-208).

“We, as humans,” they conclude, “have the capacity to choose to seek what is good... or just accept evil. In saying this, we do not mean to make a fetish of individual choice. . . . Coming to an ever better understanding of evil and finding better ways to resist it are things we have to do together in ongoing, challenging dialogue with one another that takes both enormous courage and... humility. Seeking such an understanding and cultivating such resistance would no doubt lead to reordering a number of our priorities. As citizens of modern democratic societies, we enjoy unprecedented freedoms, rights, opportunities, and affluence. . . . We must resist the evils at home and around the world that threaten the foundations of democratic citizenship. Among the most important sources of strength for this resistance are a clear-eyed recognition of the goods to which we aspire, the evils that threaten those shared goods, and our shared responsibility. . . . There is too much at stake for ourselves and future generations to allow evil to go unchallenged” (208).

Frailty and Flourishing is far more than just a “self-help” book. It is a deep, full-bodied description of what it means to flourish with our frailties, as individuals and societies. It is an incorporation of the commonalities of the philosophical, pedagogical, and even spiritual views of charity, individual worth, and social good, with both theoretical and practical applications.