

Whose comprehensive morality?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[Caitlyn Jenner is on the cover of *Vanity Fair*](#), people far and wide are admiring her, and social conservatives—even the heterodox ones, from [Brendan O'Neill](#) to [Rod Dreher](#)—are not impressed.

One liberalish counter-response does an admirable job of taking their concerns seriously, and it comes from an unexpected source—oh I'm just kidding, [it's obviously Damon Linker](#):

If you're committed to an overarching (religious or philosophical) vision of human flourishing that precludes gender reassignment surgery, then an expression of disapproval and perhaps even disgust at the *Vanity Fair* cover would seem to be in order. But if you've left behind any such comprehensive morality of ends in favor of a morality of rights, then it's hard to see what's wrong with Jenner's actions, or with the magazine in promoting them publicly on its cover. No one is harmed as a result, and the harm Bruce Jenner felt as a woman trapped in a man's body has (one hopes) been alleviated by undergoing the surgical transformation into Caitlyn.

But of course many people who uphold a morality of rights go further than merely cheering on Caitlyn Jenner's coming out as a woman. They want to protect her from the emotional harm of being judged, disapproved of, and treated as an object of disgust by those who persist in upholding a morality of ends. That's where the gap between the two moralities becomes a chasm, since the morality of rights judges the very act of making a moral judgment in terms of a morality of ends to be harmful — and therefore an act of cruelty, injustice, and even evil.

That's a helpful frame as far as it goes. But it's not just about ends vs. rights. The (or a) problem with the traditional morality of ends here is that its vision of human flourishing tends to gloss over those humans who don't in fact flourish within it.

Many do, of course, especially people like me whose gender and sexual identity the traditionalists don't object to. But if a morality that deals with difference by dismissing or suppressing it promotes human flourishing at all, it does so with a rather massive asterisk: it *hurts* a lot of people, badly.

It is possible to take this hurt seriously without blithely dismissing tradition or the possibility of a comprehensive morality. But belittling Jenner and her transition—or choosing to talk about her but without acknowledging that she's a woman named Caitlyn—is to refuse to take it seriously at all.

As for Linker's alternative, I'll readily acknowledge that a strictly *laissez-faire* morality of rights will not serve the culture well in the long term. As this philosophy grows in influence, some conservatives foresee only a slippery slope of cultural doom. What I see is the need to reconfigure the idea of human flourishing in more just, inclusive terms, so that all humans can actually flourish within it. Ethicists and others are already doing this work, of course. What remains to be seen is if and how such ideas will take root in the wider culture.

One thing I'm convinced of: in such a conversation, my primary role is to *listen*. What's frustrating about these social conservative reactions to Jenner isn't that people care so much about traditional morality. It's that they think it's useful to dismissively rant against an experience that's so often been marginalized and attacked—and that isn't their own. Choosing to instead defer to the voices of such experience doesn't mean ceding all future moral discourse to social justice warriors on Twitter. It does mean that if we can create a positive moral vision in our culture, it will be a different one—built by a different, more expansive “we”—than we had before.