

THE SHAPE OF A LIFE

NewPhilosopher

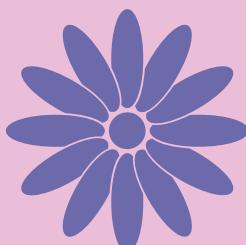


ANTONIA CASE
The meaning of your life

NIGEL WARBURTON
The risk of overthinking

ANGIE HOBBS
A fully human life

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“There is only one inborn erroneous notion... that we exist in order to be happy.”

— Arthur Schopenhauer

Flourishing

It's not uncommon for people to think that flourishing is a destination, a place we can reach where our lives are in order and we (and the ones we love) are happy and balanced and at peace with our place in the world. For most of us, it's slightly more complicated than that; rather than a destination, flourishing is more like a shadow we can't quite make out, let alone grasp.

As we strive for this utopian state, life goes on in all its messy glory: bills, chores, work, errands, failures, financial worries, disappointment in ourselves and in others. Not to mention global concerns such as war and climate change. How are we to flourish amidst all this chaos and drudgery? Is flourishing but an illusion?

Schopenhauer described the notion of the “will to live” as an “animal force to endure, reproduce and flourish” – importantly, he believed this will to be irrational, a “blind incessant impulse without knowledge” that is the driving force of instinctive behaviours, keeping us in a state of endless insatiable striving. Schopenhauer thought we could, that we should, aim higher.

As is often the case, while I understand Schopenhauer’s position, I think he overreaches with his pessimism. Our will to live might be an animal force that drives our instinctive behaviours to endure and flourish. And it’s probable that flourishing is like a shadow that we can’t quite make out; a state that, for the most part, eludes us, that skips away the more we chase it. But is this such a bad thing?

It could well be that the very elusiveness of flourishing is what keeps us going, prompting us strive for *something* better – a better life, a better society, better health, a better environment – thereby permitting us to persist, perhaps even flourish, when life feels all too burdensome.

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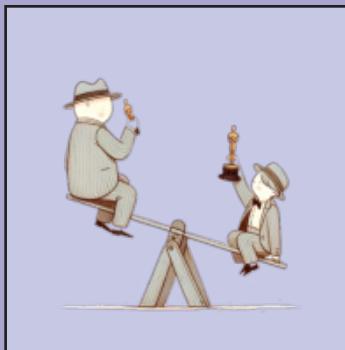
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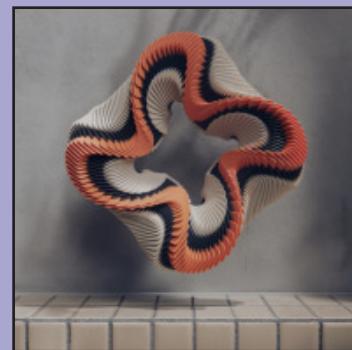
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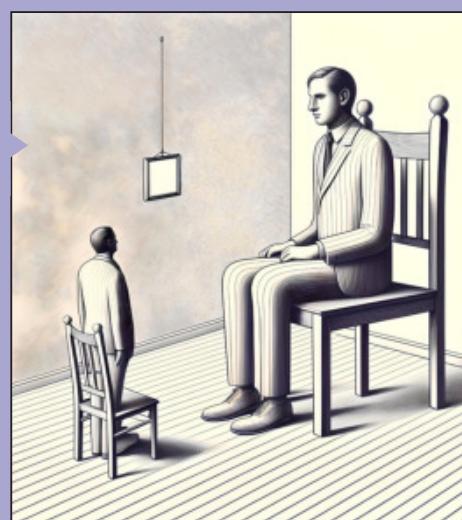


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Corey Mohler is the creator of *Existential Comics*, which has covered more than 120 philosophers, examining a wide variety of thought from pre-Socratic philosophy to contemporary philosophy. In 2018 Mohler drew attention from Elon Musk after calling him “the villain from Atlas Shrugged”. Musk angrily responded during a SpaceX launch and Mohler later published a comic about the incident.

Genís Carreras

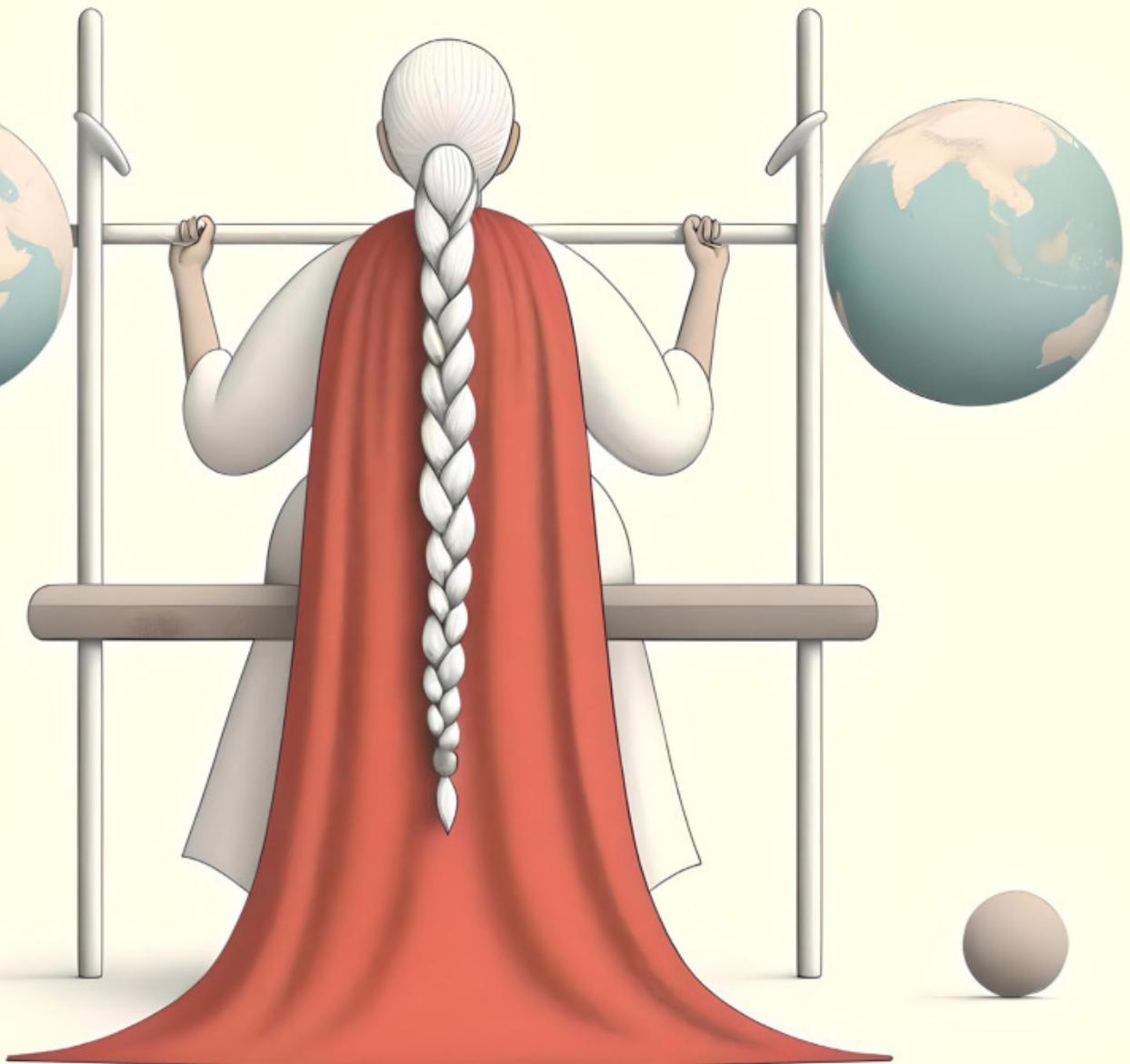
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A doctrine of
better-ism

“Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher ‘standard of living’ is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.”

– Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds,” wrote environmental philosopher Aldo Leopold in his classic book *A Sand County Almanac*. Writing back in 1949, Leopold was not discussing climate change specifically, but rather about the importance of preserving natural ecosystems and our ethical responsibility to care for the land. He taught others to view land as a community to which we belong – treating it with love and respect. If nature does not flourish, neither will we, seems to be his message.

Climate change is a wound that will inflict deep and lasting harm upon both humans and the natural world, altering ecosystems, endangering species, and threatening the very fabric of life on Earth. A survey of 380 top climate scientists by *The Guardian* found that 42 per cent of scientists think global temperatures will rise by more than 3 per cent, or double the internationally agreed target of 1.5°C. Only 6 per cent believe the target can be met.

In the face of these dark predictions, the surveyed scientists expressed feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and despair, with some suffering burnout and depression. Many felt guilty for not having succeeded in changing things for the good. “Much of the damage inflicted on land is

quite invisible to laymen,” continues Leopold. “An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”

A question many today ask is: how can we flourish in the face of climate change? Pessimism (causing people to throw their hands in the air) is paralysing, and so for that matter can be optimism (why worry when it will all be fine in the end). How then should we think about the issue?

Scientists and citizens might do better to adhere to the philosophical perspective of meliorism, which comes from the Latin word *melior*, meaning “better”. The Oxford English Dictionary defines meliorism as the “doctrine that the world, or society, may be improved and suffering alleviated through rightly directed human effort”.

In the face of climate change, rather than wallowing in “a world of wounds”, a meliorist would instead believe in the potential for gradual, incremental improvements through human effort.

In other words, they’d step up to the task of making inroads for the better.

Slumbering energies

At 2:00 pm on August 5, 2010, a gold and copper mine collapsed in the Atacama Desert, and 33 miners were instantly trapped 700 metres under the earth's surface. In 35°C heat and suffocating humidity, the miners lacked sufficient food or water, and after days of peering down adjacent tunnels and ventilation shafts for a way out, they came to the terrifying conclusion that there was no escape.

On this day, 33 miners were forced, by a rare act of fate, to become superior to their former selves. While the rest of the population, up upon the Earth's surface, continued to plod about, going about their day at a slow pace, apathetic and half-awake, the miners, in contrast, were jolted into a new way of being.

In *The Energies of Men*, philosopher William James writes about the human tendency to operate, most of the time, at half speed. Although we have vast reservoirs of energy to draw upon, most of this energy goes unspent. "Everyone knows on any given day that there are energies slumbering in him which the incitements of that day do not call forth, but which he might display if these were greater," writes James. "Most of us feel as if we lived habitually with a sort of cloud weighing on us, below our highest notch of clearness in discernment, sureness in reasoning, or firmness in deciding. Compared with what we ought to be, we are only half-awake... We are making use of only a small part of our possible mental and physical resources."

To illustrate his point, James uses an experience common to all of us at some point in our lives. We habitually stop to rest when we feel tired from working, or cleaning, or playing a sport; but then at times due to a deadline, or scheduled event, or competition, we plough on. We may stay up late, or delay rest, or run that extra ten miles, and, somehow, we manage to come into a 'second wind', tapping into some hidden reservoir of energy.

How, questions the philosopher, can we better utilise this hidden energy – a magical power – in our everyday lives?

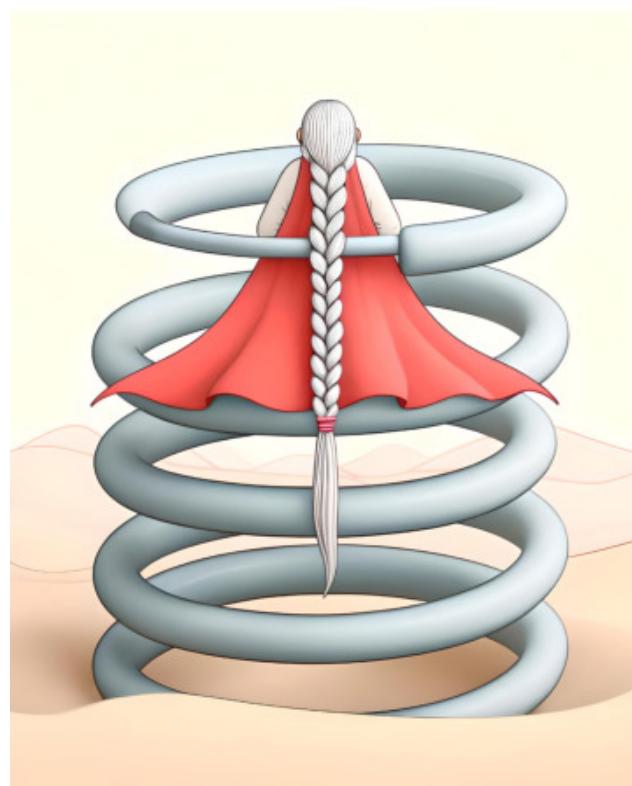
When 33 men were buried alive almost a kilometre deep, duty shift supervisor Luis Urzúa led the survivors into a 50m² underground room, which he'd designated as a refuge. He organised the men into teams and gave them the daily task of searching for food and water. He set up an underground chapel and held daily prayers.

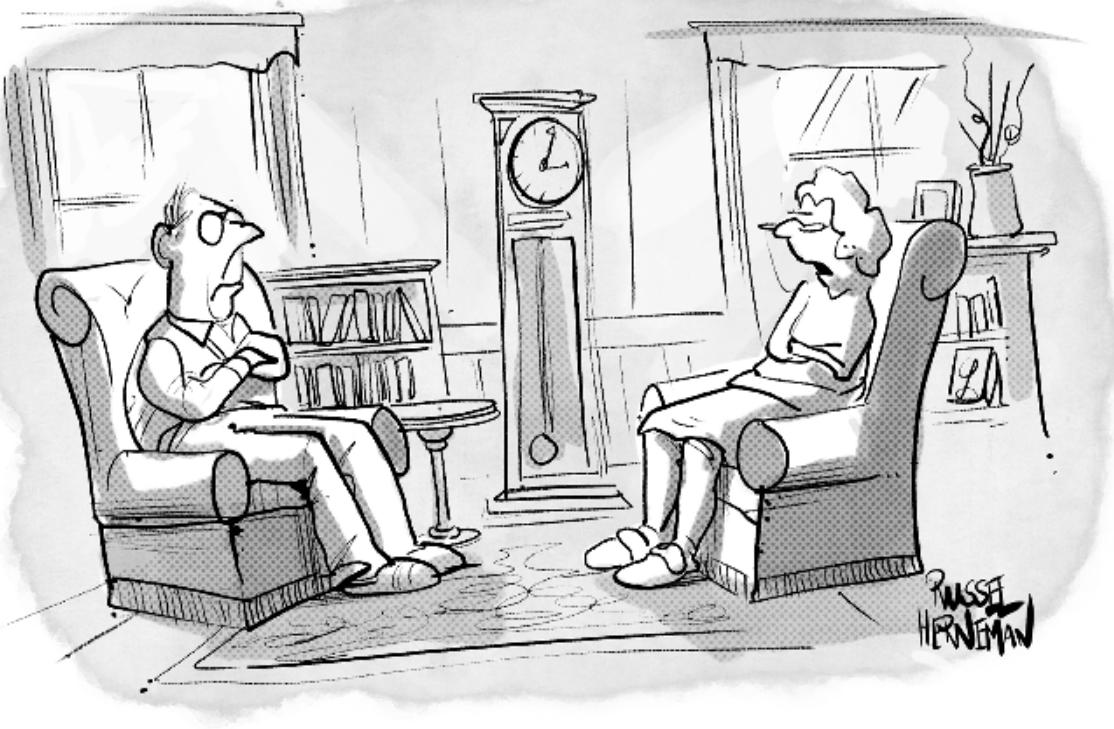
There was enough food for days not months, so the men established a careful rationing system, barely sufficient to keep them alive. They drank from an underground spring and emptied water from the radiators of mining equipment.

For over two months, the men lived in a state of paralysing uncertainty, but, forced to rise to the occasion, they miraculously learnt to survive. And, on the 69th day, a moment that was televised to a billion people worldwide, all 33 men were excavated to safety into the arms of tearful loved ones.

Humans live far within their limits, writes James. We possess powers which we habitually fail to use. We rarely exhaust our energy supplies, and hardly ever operate at our optimum. "It is an inveterate habit," he writes "the habit of inferiority to our full self."

What if, instead, the philosopher surmised, we could somehow harness this latent energy so that our lives are richer, and grander – giving us more energy to flourish?





*"If you were going to flourish,
you'd have done it by now."*

"If we were to ask the question: 'What is human life's chief concern?' one of the answers we should receive would be: 'It is happiness.' How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure."

– William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Becoming a superhero

Imagine you were given the chance to become a superhero. Let's say a genie pops out of an old urn you purchased at a flea market and offers you the chance to change the world. But first, you must make a choice. Which coloured cape do you wish to wear? The red cape will grant you powers to fight against the things in the world you do not want – poverty, violence, injustice, and so forth. The red cape, in comparison, gives you the power to foster things you do want to see happen – such as peace, happiness, and abundance, for instance. Which cape would you choose?

For some, eliminating the bad will make room for the good to flourish, and so the red cape will be preferable. For others, fostering the good will help dampen the bad. "The life of the red-cape superhero would be very different from the life of the green-cape superhero," writes James Pawelski in his paper, *William*

James and Well-Being: The philosophy, psychology, and culture of human flourishing. While the red cape superhero will look for problems in the world, and will set out to resolve them, the green cape superhero will search for opportunities.

Of course, life is not this simple. Pawelski uses the example of gardening. While the red cape superhero will diligently pull out every weed, if they never actually plant a seed, the garden will not flourish. Conversely, if the green cape superhero – throwing seeds with abandon – doesn't deal with the weeds, they will choke the growing plants. In many ways, in life we need to wear both capes at once – paying attention to both mitigative and constructive measures.

When it comes to our own psychological state, we can fall victim to wearing the red cape most days, by focusing our attention on what's wrong with us – how can we become

less anxious, depressed, or distracted. The DSM, or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), is a red cape handbook – classifying all the mental illnesses from which one might suffer.

More recently, however, positive psychologists, donning green capes, have come up with complementary reading material to the DSM, called *Manual of the Sanities*. The psychologists looked to cultures around the world and throughout history to pinpoint the character strengths and virtues that are universally valued. Rather than focus on what's wrong with some of us, they focus instead on what's right.

The manual lists the character traits (see list of traits below), or distinctive qualities, we should foster in our everyday lives – a handbook, more or less, to flourish.

Manual of Sanities

Published in 'Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification', by Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, is *Manual of the Sanities*. The manual lists the character traits that the mentally strong possess: creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, perspective, bravery, perseverance, honesty, integrity, zest, love, kindness, social intelligence, teamwork, fairness, leadership, forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humour, and spirituality.



“Psychology is half-baked, literally half-baked. We have baked the part about mental illness. We have baked the part about repair and damage. But the other side is unbaked. The side of strengths, the side of what we are good at, the side... of what makes life worth living.”

– Martin Seligman

OPTIMISING MUTUALISM



Humans are social creatures, and, for the most part, we flourish from working cooperatively and forming partnerships. A kind neighbour can be a godsend when planning a vacation, acting as pet feeder, gardener, and home surveillance all in one. Life is made easier, and more is possible, when we work together.

‘Symbiosis’ is a term used in biology, referring to close associations between two or more species. Symbiotic relationships can be beneficial for both parties (mutualism), beneficial for one party while the other is neither helped nor harmed (commensalism), or harmful in that one party benefits at the expense of another (parasitism).

In human relationships, clearly mutualism – meaning everyone flourishes – is the optimal arrangement. When I flourish, you flourish – and we both flourish more than had we not formed the partnership at all. If you diligently water the roses when your neighbour is out of town, and vice versa, then you have a mutualistic relationship. But if you refuse to do your bit when asked, then in biological terms, you are a parasite (you derive benefits at your host’s expense). In human relationships, parasitic relationships can happen within the family, at work, and in the community – exploitative, one-sided relationships, where one person flourishes while the other suffers.

A good example of mutualistic partnerships is the happy union between termites and fungi. Within termite colonies, located deep underground, fungi live in specialised chambers maintained by termites who constantly feed them. The plant material and faecal

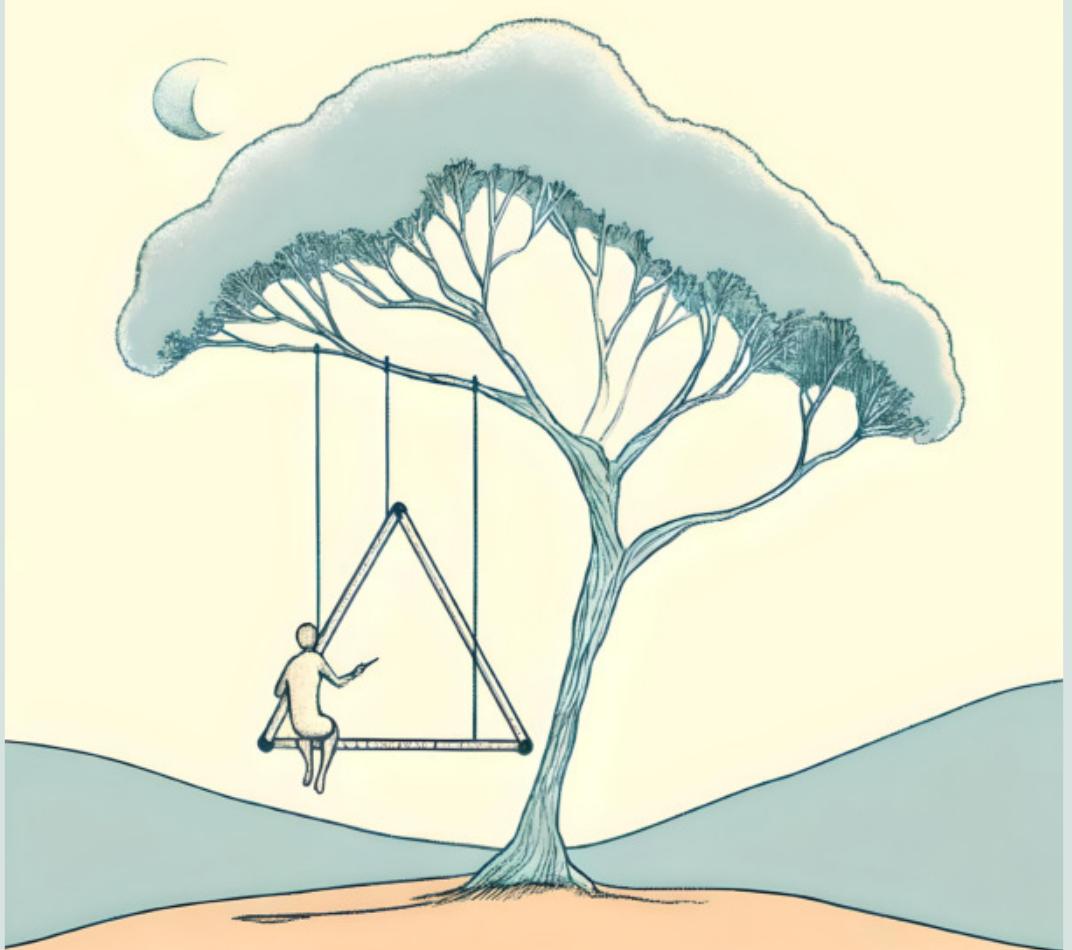


matter brought in by the termites is subsequently broken down by fungi into nutrient-rich mushrooms, which the termites eat in turn. Magnificent mushroom gardens are created by this mutualistic dance between termite and fungi.

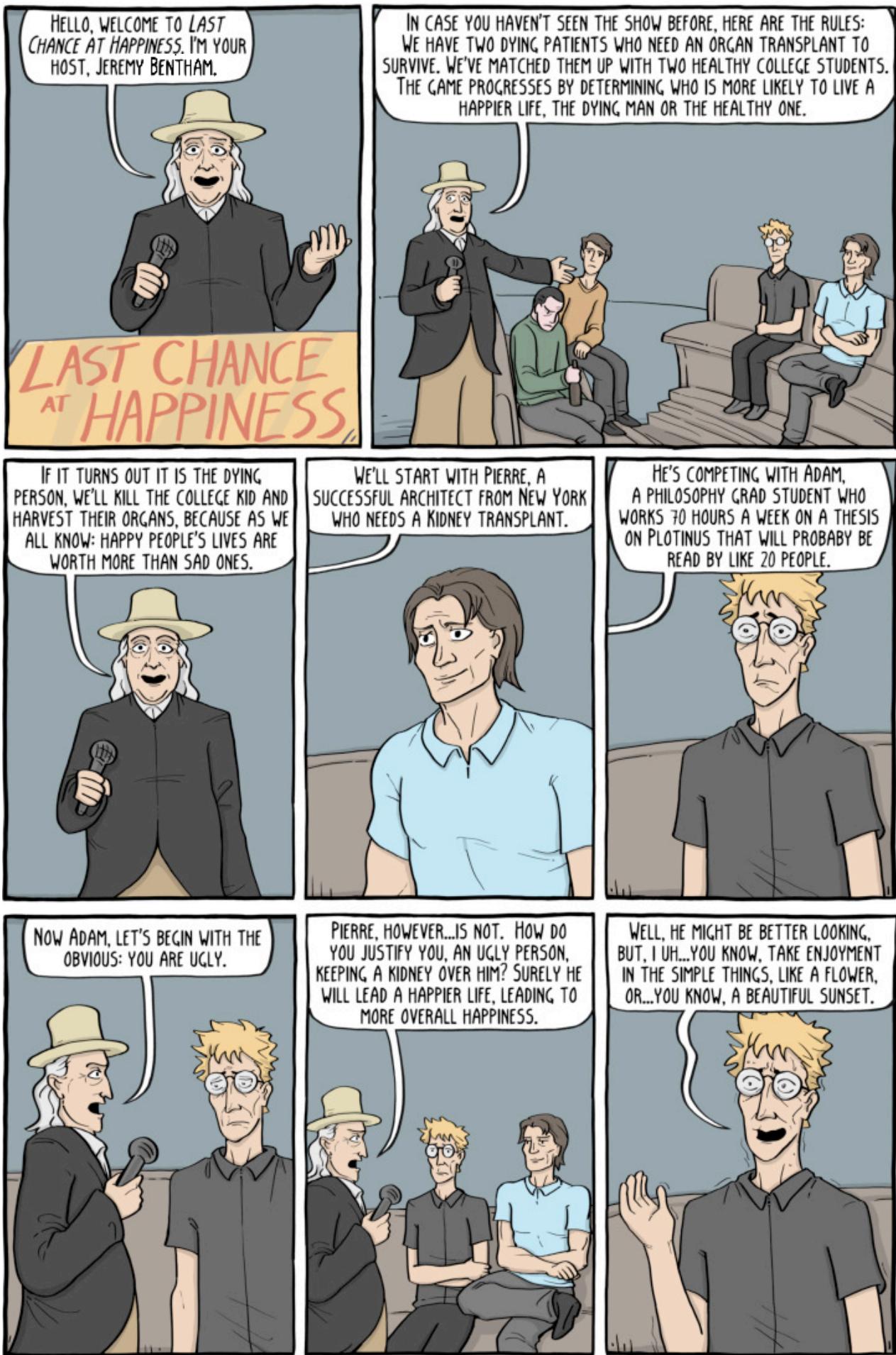
All human relationships, and even business structures, can leverage from symbiotic mutualism – a situation where a positive feedback loop can amplify the conditions for flourishing.

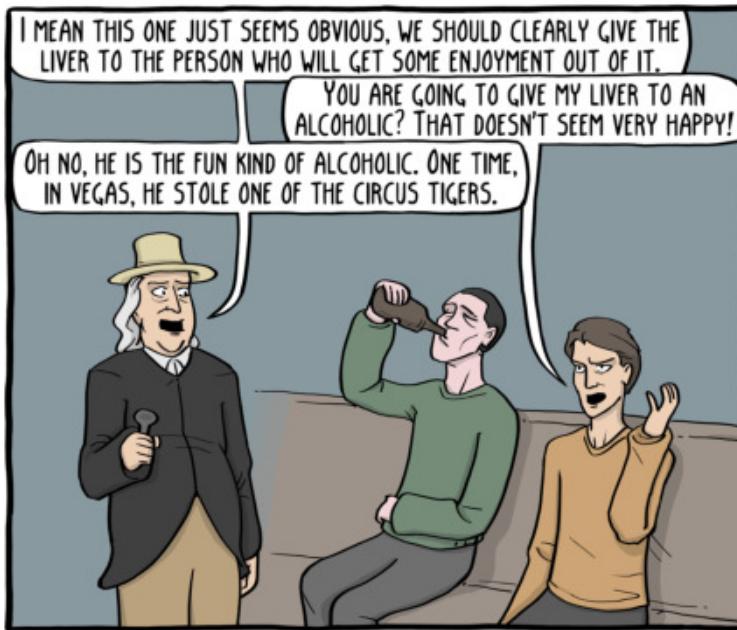
“All Nature is linked together by invisible bonds and every organic creature, however low, however feeble, however dependent, is necessary to the well-being of some other among the myriad forms of life.”

– George Perkins Marsh



Last chance at happiness

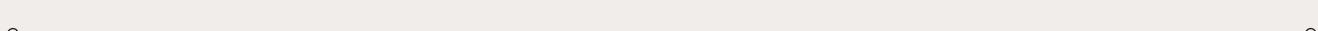




A lot of the critiques of Utilitarianism, the doctrine that we should try to create a world that maximises happiness, point out the bizarre and inhuman actions that we would seemingly have to accept if we accepted the theory. For example, we can imagine that if we wanted to maximise happiness, it would be morally justified, and perhaps even required, to murder a healthy person and harvest their organs in order to save five people. After all, five lives are more valuable than one, so even if it doesn't seem like justice, we should kill one person to save the five. However, as the comic points out, you don't even need to get five people involved. Utilitarianism usually sounds great when people first hear about it, and the theory really only suffers from one minor flaw – no one wants to live in a world where we actually believe it is true. By Corey Mohler, for more comics visit existentialcomics.com

by Tom Chatfield

Flourishing enough



I recently visited Japan for the first time. When I got back, and people asked me what I had found most interesting or surprising, I found myself talking about small things rather than big ones: public toilets rather than temples; side streets rather than castles; vending machines rather than bullet trains. The temples and the cherry blossom were wonderful, of course. But I already had some sense of what widely-photographed world heritage sites would look like. What I hadn't anticipated was the rows of vending machines selling gourmet dishes in spotless subway stations; the lifelike fake food and drink lined up in shop windows, plastic noodles suspended mid-slurp; the baseline of calm and quiet that made Tokyo, the largest city that has ever existed, feel less frantic than my mid-sized hometown on a Saturday night.

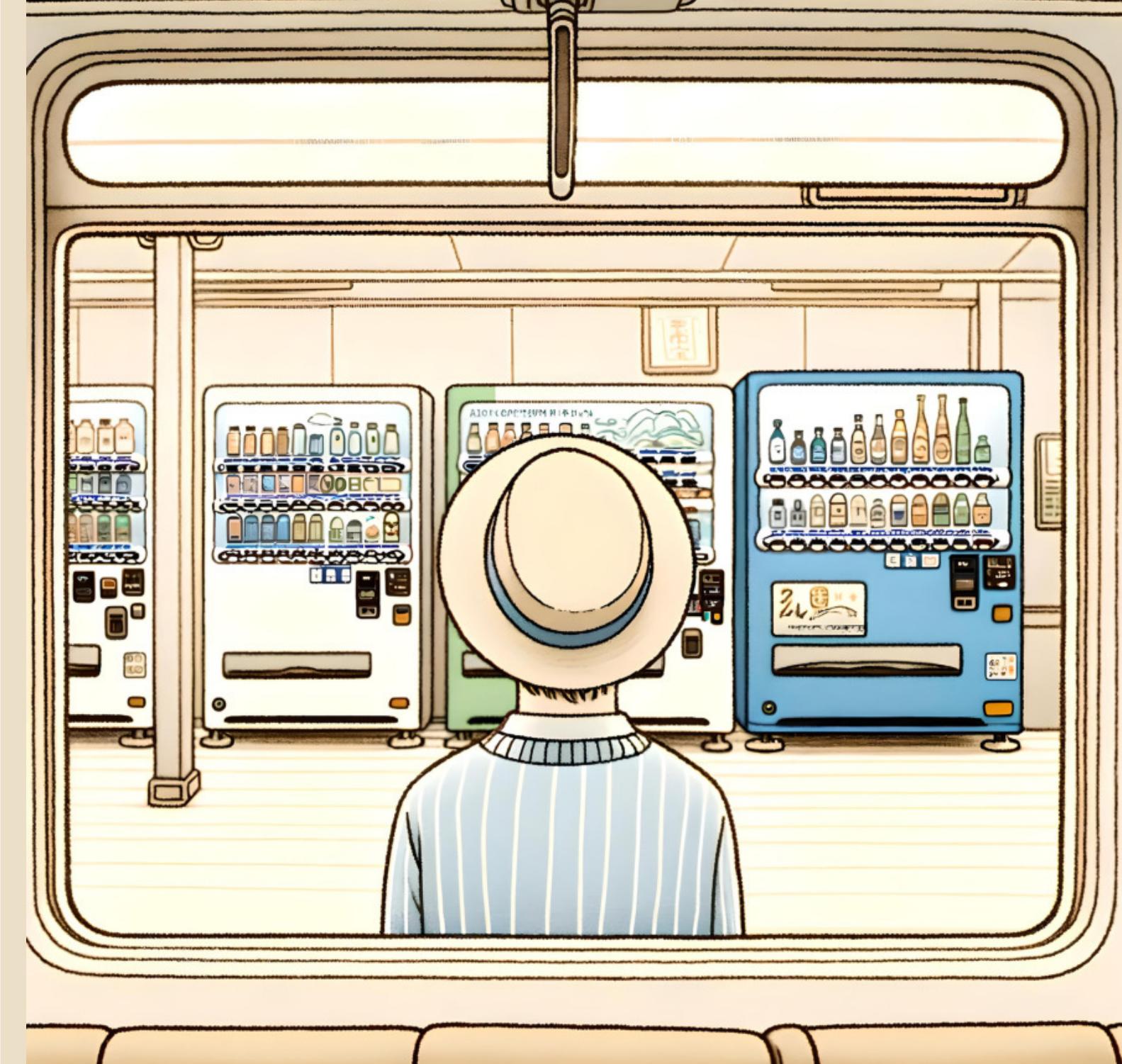
Among the smallest and most striking things I noticed was the conductors of inter-city trains pausing, turning, and bowing before leaving each carriage. Britain has a (mostly) decent (ish) train system, but that kind of thing doesn't happen here. What

was going on? After speaking to some Japanese friends, I found an interesting range of perspectives. First, employees are following a company rule: this isn't a spontaneous act or personal choice. Second, it isn't necessarily passengers who are being bowed to: respect is being shown to the job and the train as much as the people. Third, this kind of thing isn't universal or guaranteed to continue. But it is bound up with an important idea in Japanese culture: the dignity and value of performing any given activity with excellence.

In her 1966 book *Ikigai-ni-Tsuite* ("About Ikigai"), the Japanese linguist, psychiatrist, and author Mieko Kamiya defines her titular concept – *ikigai* – as that which makes life worth living. The idea of *ikigai* has been important for centuries in Japan but, she noted, it's elusive and almost impossible to translate. This is because it encompasses both the sources of meaning in someone's life and the emotions that they experience in response. It's also resolutely active and particular rather than abstract. Scale and impact have nothing to do with *ikigai*. What matters is the sense that you're doing something

worthwhile – and this sense is in turn conferred by doing it purposefully and well. To invoke a second Japanese concept, *hatarakigai* ("work worth doing"), neither pleasure nor monetary reward are the most important determinants of a task's value. Excellence and social impact matter just as much.

Fittingly, Kamiya's book itself hasn't been translated into English: I'm basing the above on others' analyses, and I'm sure that I've missed several layers of cultural nuance. As someone with an interest in western virtue ethical traditions, however, I'm struck by the common ground between *ikigai* and European concepts of human flourishing. From Aristotle onward, flourishing has offered a satisfyingly active metaphor for finding purpose in life. It's something that you do – that you grow into and actively pursue – rather than find lying around inside a book. And it's also something that you don't wholly control. To flourish is to align your circumstances with your own nature, gifts, and limitations. It requires a degree of good fortune, self-reflection, and humility. There is no one recipe for a life worth living, or an equation capable of maximising purpose



In Japan and in ikigai, I've found a reminder that neither grandeur nor singleness of purpose are necessarily admirable – or what makes life worth living.



and impact. Rather, there's the business of inhabiting your own opportunities more gratefully and deeply; of seeking out sustaining relationships and role models; and, perhaps, of becoming a role model yourself.

An irony of *ikigai* is that, for all its elusiveness, it's best known internationally thanks to a viral Venn diagram, created by the British activist and entrepreneur Marc Winn in 2014 in response to a TED talk on longevity by the author Dan Buettner. In the diagram, *ikigai* exists in the intersection between four factors: that which you love, that which you're good at, that which the world needs, and that which you can be paid for. It's a useful model for reflecting upon your own values, talents, and routes to fulfilment – something eminently worth doing. But it's not *ikigai* in the Japanese sense. Indeed, Winn's own diagram is closely based on one created by the Spanish entrepreneur and astrologer Andrés Zuzunaga, in which the central intersection was labelled *propósito*, meaning "purpose" – a singular, definitive prize, worth pursuing at maximum velocity.

What connects viral Venn diagrams, train conductors, and hard-

to-translate cultural concepts? One of the joys of being a tourist is becoming temporarily inexpert in life's little rituals, and thus having to attend to them closely: how to greet people, thank them, excuse yourself, show respect. This was compounded, on our trip to Japan, by the fact that we had our eight- and ten-year-old daughter and son with us. They loved learning to say hello and express profuse gratitude in Japanese; they loved the cleanliness and courtesy of the everyday. And I loved being there with them, experiencing the strangeness and newness of travel together, savouring the privilege of unstructured time.

Like most parents, I regularly feel that I am not good enough at the most important thing in my life: raising my children. Watching them show others small kindnesses, however – watching them endure long journeys, relish small differences, bounce back from inconveniences and upsets – I allowed myself to take pride in their flourishing. Part of the pain of parenting is the fact that family is never a singular focus. The rest of life is always there, demanding, competing, distracting, seducing. There is never enough time,

energy or patience for everything to be done or some final excellence to be achieved. Yet it's this tempestuous interplay between the source of meaning and my experiences of it that defines parenthood as a living, striving thing. And it's the small rituals of respect, compassion, forgiveness, and foolishness that help me find a way forward – or find a way back when everything feels disconnected and broken.

The ideas of purpose and flourishing are intimately entwined, and for good reason. To flourish is to grow in a certain direction: to fulfil a potential, develop and exercise a skill, achieve a goal. In Japan and in *ikigai*, however, I've found a reminder that neither grandeur nor singleness of purpose are necessarily admirable – or what makes life worth living. One of my happiest memories of our trip is my son and daughter sitting in a tea house, ordering bowls of noodles and sipping tea, looking at a beautiful view. Not much happened, except that they embraced the moment alongside us, proud we'd climbed together to that spot. The noodles were excellent, the tea fresh and hot, the city beneath us buzzing with life. It was enough. ■

Part of the pain of parenting is the fact that family is never a singular focus... There is never enough time, energy or patience for everything to be done or some final excellence to be achieved.

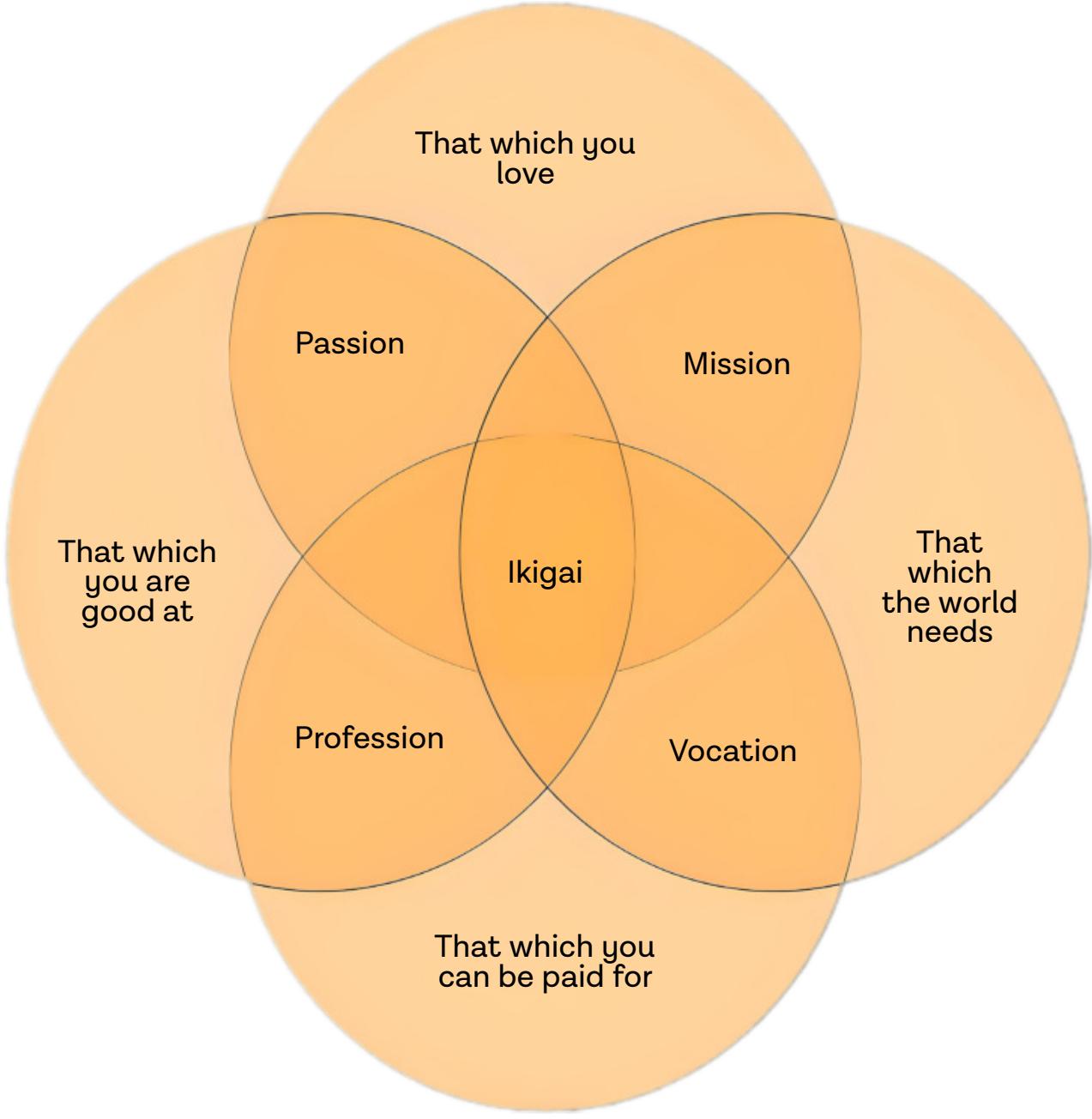


Diagram by Marc Winn

“The Okinawans call it *ikigai*, and the Nicoyans call it *plan de vida*; for both it translates to ‘why I wake up in the morning..’ Research has shown that knowing your sense of purpose is worth up to seven years of extra life expectancy.”

Dan Buettner, *The Blue Zones of Happiness: Lessons From the World's Happiest People*

by Marina Benjamin

Instant gratification

Suffer now, thrive later. This fundamentally Christian paradigm is surprisingly tenacious. It's not just that the meek will inherit the earth, or that the pious will be saved, but, in diluted form, it's the idea that if we can somehow resist life's varied thrills and temptations, on the promise of eventual, even multiplied reward, we will have played a good hand in the game of life. The future will bring joy, prosperity, even righteous justification (think of apocalypse) – providing, that is, you're willing to put up with a less than perfect present.

There's an aspect of mean-spiritedness to this philosophy that is especially evident in the way it translates into the wider secular world. Consider our savings culture. The pay now, reap later model encourages us to turn our noses up at people who spend their earnings on fun and fripperies without a thought for the debt they might accrue later in life, as if they were somehow morally incontinent. Don't they know

that a little restraint goes a long way? That grit is character building? Or that life showers dividends on those who build nest eggs for the future?

The Tiger Mum phenomenon exploits a similar logic. It demands that teenagers curtail their enjoyment and exploratory instincts in order to focus narrowly on discipline, hard work, and perseverance. If they excel at school and get into the right colleges, or so the thinking goes, their first-class education will give them a better shot at success. It's the immigrant mentality par excellence: work hard, keep your head down, and expect to thrive down the line.

The idea that delaying gratification confers life advantages found unlikely scientific support in Stanford psychology professor Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow tests. Between 1967 and 1973, Mischel, along with one of his graduate students, Ebbe Ebbesen, ran numerous experiments to find out if preschool children could exert self-

control in the face of irresistible temptation. Could the tots wait 15 minutes to eat a delicious marshmallow treat placed directly in front of them after being told they'd get two marshmallows instead of one if they managed it? It turned out the answer was mostly no.

However, a notable few did hold out for the double treat – though they climbed the walls waiting for it. Mischel's experiments spawned many imitators, which make for hilarious viewing online. Pre-schoolers are filmed sitting alone in a room with a marshmallow on a table before them. They squish the treats they're not meant to eat, sniff them, touch them then lick their fingers. They writhe in their chairs and slap their foreheads as they struggle to endure the exquisite agony of their unmet desire.

An indication that an ability to defer pleasure might be a life skill, leading to long-term success and fulfilment, arrived later, in the 1990s, when Mischel, then at Columbia, conducted follow-up



The Feast of the Bean King, 1640-1645, Jacob Jordaens

An indication that an ability to defer pleasure might be a life skill, leading to long-term success and fulfilment, arrived later, in the 1990s.

tests with the original pre-schoolers to see if an early ability to delay reward correlated with later SAT scores. Mischel found they did; moreover, the correlation was strong. On further investigation the (now adult) resistors were found to possess greater self-esteem and were also better at managing stress. Meanwhile, short marshmallow wait times were linked to obesity.

In everyday language, the findings suggest that if you cannot endure short-term suffering for long-term gain then your chances of success in life will be curtailed.

It is difficult to know if these findings objectively corroborate the way we tend to think more broadly about what kind of behaviours maximise or optimise our chances of happiness. Or if they merely confirm existing biases. Either way, I feel there's something too neat about them.

As we've come to understand more neuroscience than Mischel did in the 1990s, we've learned that immediate gratification gives us a dopamine hit – and that one dopamine hit makes us crave another, in addictive fashion. In other words, we are wired to seek gratification, which implies that self-denial goes against the grain of our natures.

Psychoanalysis complicates matters further by illuminating our tendency to place obstacles in our own path when

pursuing our desires and ambitions. On the model of Freud's split self, the pleasure principle is opposed by the death drive, leading us to sabotage our own attempts at flourishing. We routinely deny ourselves what we want, thinking we don't deserve it, or because the idea of actually getting what we want terrifies us. Who are we, after all, if we reach the end of our desires?

In social terms, delayed gratification faces a different challenge: it presumes stability and growth. Deferring reward only makes rational sense if you believe that our economies will boom for decades to come and the planet will miraculously heal itself and continue to support us – beliefs that, in this current climate, seem naïve. Young people, profoundly sceptical of any golden future, struggle with the idea of delayed gratification. Their experience of the present is awash with precarity (in the job market, the economy, the natural world) and heightened anxiety (will they ever enjoy financial security?). For many young people pay-now-reap-later has become 'pay now, then suffer some more'.

Following Tik-Tok influencers such as Nigerian blogger Sisi Yemmie, who offers tips on self-care and good nutrition, Gen Z is busy rewriting the rule book and focussing on enjoying the now: the #softlife. It's the opposite of Tiger Mum-ing; instead of investing in

discipline and hard work, soft-lifers are into rest and renewal, living by the co-operative values they cherish.

Many of them – including my own 21-year-old – are turning their backs on the rat race. They figure that however hard they might strive they may never attain the material security their parents enjoy. So why bother? Besides, striving only leads to anxiety. My 21-year-old's aims in life are about having enough, working hard enough, being good enough (in that Winnicottian way) and putting energy into painting, travelling, yoga, and friendships. He doesn't want to pursue the fast-track life: achieving, attaining, exploiting, and soaring. And he doesn't see any reason to defer his flourishing till later. When I told him I was writing about the kind of self-denying 'grit' it takes to flourish, he said: "I'm not interested in being the best."

In 2020, scientists at UCLA undertook a fresh survey of the original marshmallow test subjects and found that delay times failed to forecast a range of adult outcomes from net worth and social standing, to diet and exercise habits, debt levels, and procrastination tendencies.

The marshmallow, it turns out, does not hold the key to our destiny. It just may be that Gen Z have got it right, and the soft life has more to teach us about human flourishing. ▀

NO ROOM FOR A CURE

“Then it is that the height of unhappiness is reached, when men are not only attracted, but even pleased, by shameful things, and when there is no longer any room for a cure, now that those things which once were vices have become habits.”

SENECA ON HAPPINESS

Lucius Annaeus Seneca the Younger was an Ancient Roman Stoic philosopher, a statesman, and a dramatist. His prose works include 12 essays and 124 letters dealing with moral issues, including *On the Shortness of Life*, *On the Happy Life*, *Phaedra*, and *Agamemnon*.

GOOD AND BAD

“Death is neither a good nor a bad thing, for that alone which is something can be a good or a bad thing: but that which is nothing, and reduces all things to nothing, does not hand us over to either fortune, because good and bad require some material to work upon. Fortune cannot take ahold of that which Nature has let go, nor can a man be unhappy if he is nothing.”

NONE BUT HIMSELF

“That man, I declare, is happy whom nothing makes less strong than he is; he keeps to the heights, leaning upon none but himself; for one who sustains himself by any prop may fall.”

UPRIGHT AND EXALTED

“At any rate, if you wish to sift doubtful meanings of this kind, teach us that the happy man is not he whom the crowd deems happy, namely, he into whose coffers mighty sums have flowed, but he whose possessions are all in his soul, who is upright and exalted, who spurns inconstancy, who sees no man with whom he wishes to change places, who rates men only at their value as men, who takes Nature for his teacher, conforming to her laws and living as she commands, whom no violence can deprive of his possessions, who turns evil into good, is unerring in judgment, unshaken, unafraid, who may be moved by force but never moved to distraction, whom Fortune when she hurls at him with all her might the deadliest missile in her armoury, may graze, though rarely, but never wound.”

THE UNHAPPY MIND

“All vices sink into our whole being, if we do not crush them before they gain a footing; and in like manner these sad, pitiable, and discordant feelings end by feeding upon their own bitterness, until the unhappy mind takes a sort of morbid delight in grief.”



by Antonia Case

Somewhere to flourish

For much of my early adult life, I viewed flourishing as a state of being that necessitated certain ingredients, much like a plant requires good soil, water, and a healthy dose of sunlight to bloom. The graceful rose, for instance, needs to be planted in rich, moist, and well-drained soil, and requires at least six hours of sunlight a day. Place the delicate rose in a garden bed overshadowed by a Eucalyptus tree and the roses won't bloom. Competition for light, and water,

is one thing, but some studies have shown that some Eucalyptus species can send allelopathic chemicals into the soil, suppressing understorey vegetation.

Flourishing, I thought, required the perfect location – one that was best suited to my needs and dreams. Should the place, therefore, be hot or cold? City or country? Close to home or further afield? Should I even move overseas to find this special spot, or be nomadic and travel about with no fixed abode?

My personal views on flourishing sent me on a decades-long pilgrimage around the world in search of that elusive spot; because once found, or so my theory went, I would be happy.

It's not uncommon for humans to think about flourishing this way – a narrow focus on career success, or material success (riches), or self-perfection of some sort, like having the perfect body. Some people spend an entire life in pursuit of their own version of the



'flourishing life' – as I did with the 'ideal' location – and wonder why they do not feel any happier for it. "The typical unhappy man," writes Bertrand Russell in *The Conquest of Happiness*, is one who has come to value one "kind of satisfaction more than any other, and has therefore given to his life a one-sided direction, together with a quite undue emphasis upon the achievement as opposed to the activities connected with it."

Marked by the tragedy of losing both parents at a young age, Russell admits to being an unhappy child and adolescent. Although impeccably educated, he was plagued by self-loathing and bouts of unutterable boredom. "I had the habit of meditating on my sins, follies, and shortcomings. I seemed to myself – no doubt justly – a miserable specimen," he wrote.

But as Russell aged, a mysterious emotion enveloped him – that of, for want of a better word, contentment, or even happiness; and as every year passed, he enjoyed his life even more. What was the source of this mysterious emotion? Or, putting it another way, had Russell stumbled upon a cure for the ordinary day-to-day unhappiness that many suffer?

In a dusty field, alongside a windy lake in Isla de Ometepe in Nicaragua, I had an epiphany of sorts about the

conditions required for a flourishing life. The dust, combined with an unforgiving wind, had left me with an eye infection. It hurt to blink. My lodge, devoid of window panes, was visited by cows peering in, and the floor of the lodge was covered in dirt. But, oddly, it was here, within a hazy veil of dust, I met a group of people who, by all accounts, seemed to be flourishing. In a place of so little comfort – no paved roads, or restaurants, no shopping malls or sports stadiums – and with little entertainment other than absentminded cows grazing at the lake's edge, I met a group of recently arrived missionaries on a two-year assignment to Nicaragua.

I accompanied the group on a trip to the supermarket. We needed food for the evening meal and a car trip to the nearby town seemed more palatable than watching cows scrape at dirt for sustenance. Little did I know that the supermarket excursion would take hours, and be, well, for the missionaries at least, so exhilarating. Wandering the tight aisles with their baskets, the missionaries were deeply captivated by just about everything – food items on shelves, ingredients, even packaging; they placed coconut water and yuca into trolleys with the relish of children discovering candy canes. It was as though the world were in technicolour. And, as we drove back to the camp

in the car, the missionaries continued to comment on the film unfolding beyond their window – the exquisite beauty of the setting sun, the Spanish word for soap, unfinished second storeys on buildings, the patterned colours of parrots and how they compare to the ones in Costa Rica. Would I call it a zest for life, or even joy?

In all the places I'd travelled, it was in a barren dusty field in a roadless and forgotten camp in Nicaragua that I found people who were, by most definitions, flourishing.

After much consideration, Russell tried to pinpoint the reason for his own sense of heightened contentment as he aged. He surmised it was due, in part, to a diminishing preoccupation with himself. As the English philosopher aged, he naturally began to take a keener interest in the world around him, such as various branches of knowledge, individuals for whom he cared; he loved playing chess, gardening, hiking, and attending salons with other intellectuals; he founded schools and was actively engaged in political activism and philanthropy. "The more things a man is interested in," he noted, "the more opportunities of happiness he has, and the less he is at the mercy of fate, since if he loses one thing he can fall back upon another. Life is too short to be interested in

As Russell aged, a mysterious emotion enveloped him – that of, for want of a better word, contentment, or even happiness; and as every year passed, he enjoyed his life even more.

The self can only offer so much fodder for contemplation, and a life centred on oneself will undoubtedly become stale and barren.

everything, but it is good to be interested in as many things as are necessary to fill our days.”

The person who adores cooking is happier than the person who dreads the chore of feeding their family. The person who loves to read is happier than the person who wiped their hands of literature on their final day of high school. “Suppose one man likes strawberries and another does not,” comments Russell. “The man who likes them has a pleasure which the other does not have; to that extent his life is more enjoyable and he is better adapted to the world in which both must live.”

The secret to flourishing, proposes the philosopher, is to be outward looking – towards the world and its myriad offerings – and less focused on the empty self, on one’s fears and misgivings. The self can only offer so much fodder for contemplation, and a life

centred on oneself will undoubtedly become stale and barren. “Vanity, when it passes beyond a point, kills pleasure in every activity for its own sake, and thus leads inevitably to listlessness and boredom,” he writes.

On the contrary, the more interests you have, the more opportunities you have for experiencing wonder. (The camera enthusiast is captivated by the ‘magic hour’ at sunset; the home sewer examines the pleats on their friends’ skirt; the political activist devours the morning headlines). The more actively engaged you are with life, the more attentive you are to the world, to your friends and family, to your interests and passions, the more you will see the world in technicolour.

And, like a delicate rose, if you find yourself planted under the shade of a Eucalyptus tree, at least you can enjoy the view. ■



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Wealth of philosophers

Diogenes of Sinope, the original Cynic, watched a mouse that seemed to be content with very little, just a scrap of grain, and modelled his own abstemious behaviour accordingly.



The courage to be

If Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard were alive today, and had his own social media account, he probably wouldn't get many likes. Kierkegaard never got married or had children...

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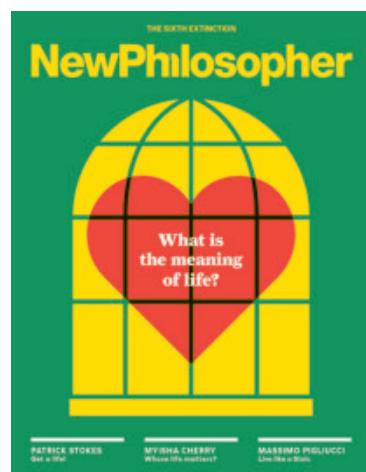
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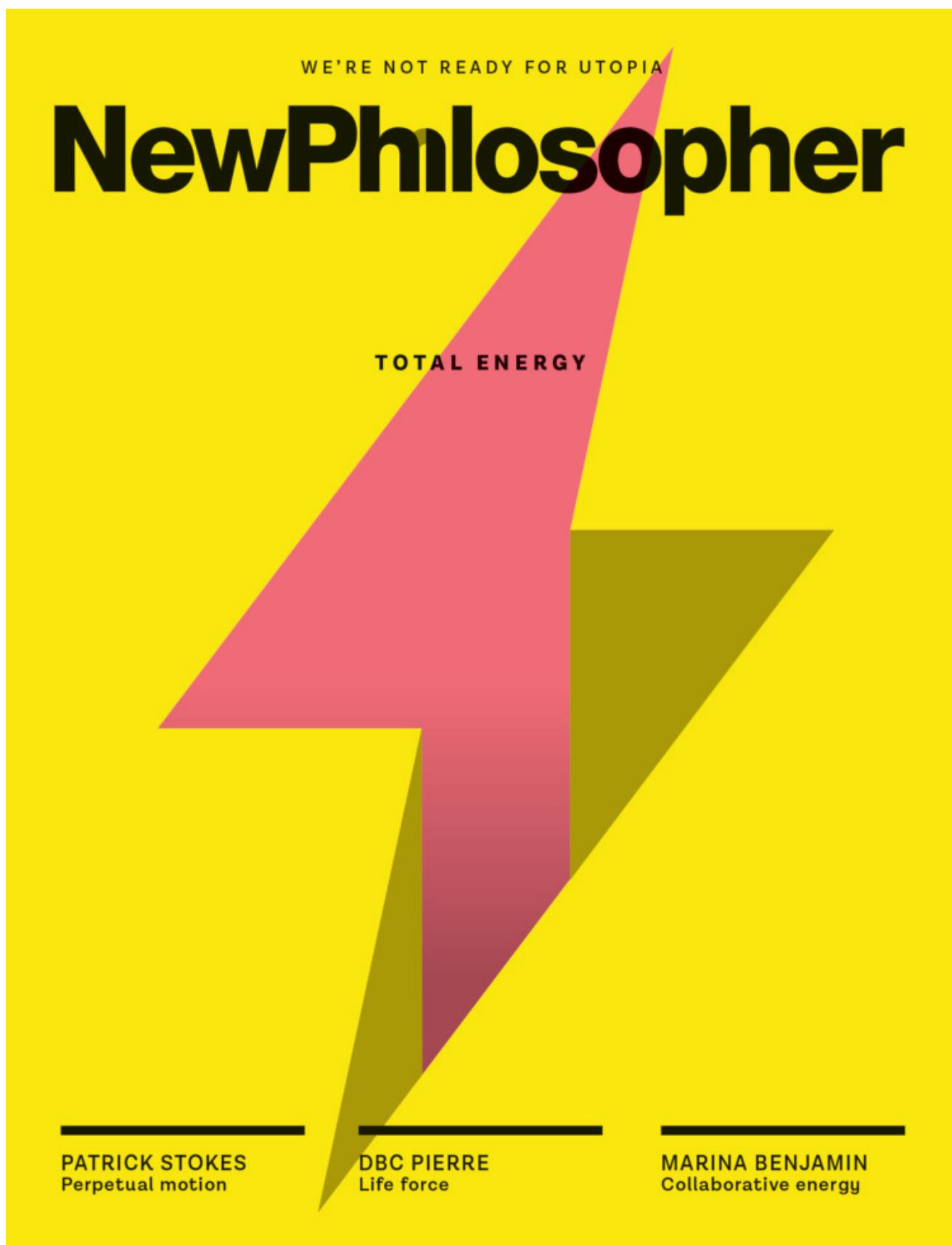
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by Patrick Stokes

The shape of a life

Ask most people what ‘the good life’ involves, and they will likely rattle off a list of goods. Maybe those goods are simple pleasures like food, laughter, sex, or money; maybe they’re more refined goods like art, music, friendship, parenthood, or a fulfilling career. Philosophers, you may be surprised to learn, are people too, and often put together similar lists as constituents of the good life. Even Aristotle, who believed that the key to *eudaimonia*, or ‘flourishing’, is the cultivation and exercise of virtue, still thought certain goods were either prerequisites for happiness (e.g. health) or were goods that came to the virtuous (fame, wealth, friendship).

If we’re comparing how happy or flourishing various people’s lives are, it seems natural to look for certain goods, and compare who has more of them. There are plenty of different ways we could do this, of course, and it’s quite likely we won’t agree on which goods are the ones that are

constitutive of happiness. It may, for one thing, depend on who you are, and what you happen to value. Ask a young actor, for instance, what they’d consider a flourishing, fulfilling life to consist of, and they might reel off a list of goods related to their profession: being cast in high-profile roles, being well-paid, achieving critical acclaim, winning awards, and so on. That seems reasonable enough. An actor’s life will be better, all things considered, if it contains these things than if it doesn’t.

But consider this thought experiment, adapted from one given by the philosopher Dale Dorsey. Let’s compare two thespian lives, each seemingly containing the same overall amount of ‘goods’, but with very different life-trajectories.

First, meet Toby. Toby wants to be an actor. He struggles to get work for many years, enduring all sorts of setbacks and heartbreaks. But as the years go by, Toby manages to land a succession of increasingly prestigious

roles. From humble beginnings, he works his way up to become a famous, wealthy, and universally respected actor. His lifetime earnings are \$20 million dollars, and he wins an Oscar for his final movie before retiring.

Now, meet Ybot. Ybot, like Toby, wants to be an actor. Unlike Toby, however, Ybot hits the big time right out of the gate: in fact, he wins an Oscar for his very first film role, making him rich and respected. After this initial easy success, he enjoys a succession of film roles, but over time the roles become less prestigious and less-well paid, and he begins to endure a number of setbacks and heartbreaks. Towards the end of his career (across which he has earned \$20 million, mostly at the start), he struggles to get work, and finally retires into humble obscurity.

As you’ll have quickly realised, these two actors’ lives, like their names, are mirror-images. Both Toby and Ybot’s lives contain the same putative



goods: an Oscar, \$20m, fame, respect, and so on. They also contain the same struggles and heartbreaks. If we view their lives as a sort of balance sheet of experiential profit and loss, Toby and Ybot both seem to lead lives of equal net worth. The only difference is that Ybot experiences these goods and bads in a reverse order to Toby. Toby's overall 'score' in life slopes upwards over time from a low starting point, while Ybot's slopes downward from an initial high, yet they both hit the same heights and endure the same lows. If flourishing is just a matter of enjoying certain goods, then it seems both actors flourish to the same extent.

Yet most of us, I suspect, would think that the ordering of these goods does, in fact, make a decisive difference to how we compare Toby and Ybot's careers. It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that Toby's life is better than Ybot's. If we had to choose between these lives, most of us would much prefer to live like Toby than Ybot. Both experience triumph and adversity, but Toby's story is one of triumph *over* adversity, while Ybot's is a story of decline *into* adversity.

But why should that make a difference, if both lives contain the same amount of pleasure vs suffering and both contain the same net benefits? Does our preference for one life over the other track some deep fact about human value, or is it simply an irrational habit of thought – and would we, then, be better off if we ditched this preference?

When comparing the overall welfare level of different lives, it seems natural enough to think of a person's life as a sort of container for various good and bad experiences. Someone whose life contains loving relationships, a stable home life, fulfilling work and experiences like travel and education seems better off than someone whose life does not contain these goods. The goods and the bads are what we evaluate; the 'container' they sit in is basically neutral. But that 'balance sheet' model seems to miss another, more elusive kind of value.

We might, for instance, value things like overcoming adversity, or not having our successes come too easily. Someone who climbs a mountain will experience more struggle than someone who gets dropped on the peak by helicopter, but the climber will also have a sense of accomplishment the other person may well envy. In that sense, we might think Toby's life is better because his highs seem more well-earned than Ybot's do. But that's not the whole story. The narrative trajectory itself seems to make a difference. A life of early success followed by stagnation and decline seems like a less overall successful life than one where success comes later in the day. Where the story ends, relative to where it began, seems to matter in itself. We value happy endings, not just happy moments.

This intuitive judgment finds expression in what's been called the

We might, for instance, value things like overcoming adversity, or not having our successes come too easily.

'shape of life' hypothesis. On this view, living a good life is not simply about having the right kind of experiences or life-events, but of having them in the right order or sequence. In other words, it's not enough to have the right ingredients – you have to arrange them in the right sort of way, and some arrangements are better than others, in ways that can't be reduced to the sum of the parts. It's like furniture: you can have two nice sofas and a coffee table, but it also matters how the room is set up.

What the shape of life hypothesis suggests is that our lives are not simply bags into which we cram good things and bad things. The type of life it is – the genre of that life-story, so to speak – matters too. Without the right shape, even a life full of wondrous things can end up as a tale we'd prefer not to live out. ▀



Living a good life is not simply about having the right kind of experiences or life-events, but of having them in the right order or sequence.





A Sunday on La Grande Jatte, 1884, Georges Seurat

ARE YOU FLOURISHING?

(THE HUMAN FLOURISHING PROGRAM)

Instructions: Please respond to the following questions on a scale from 0 to 10:

1. OVERALL, HOW SATISFIED ARE YOU WITH LIFE AS A WHOLE THESE DAYS?



2. IN GENERAL, HOW HAPPY OR UNHAPPY DO YOU USUALLY FEEL?



3. IN GENERAL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH?



4. HOW WOULD YOU RATE YOUR OVERALL MENTAL HEALTH?



5. TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL THE THINGS YOU DO IN YOUR LIFE ARE WORTHWHILE?



6

6. I UNDERSTAND MY PURPOSE IN LIFE.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

7

I ALWAYS ACT TO PROMOTE GOOD IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, EVEN IN DIFFICULT AND CHALLENGING SITUATIONS.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not True of Me

Completely True of Me

8

8. I AM ALWAYS ABLE TO GIVE UP SOME HAPPINESS NOW FOR GREATER HAPPINESS LATER.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not True of Me

Completely True of Me

9

9. I AM CONTENT WITH MY FRIENDSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

10

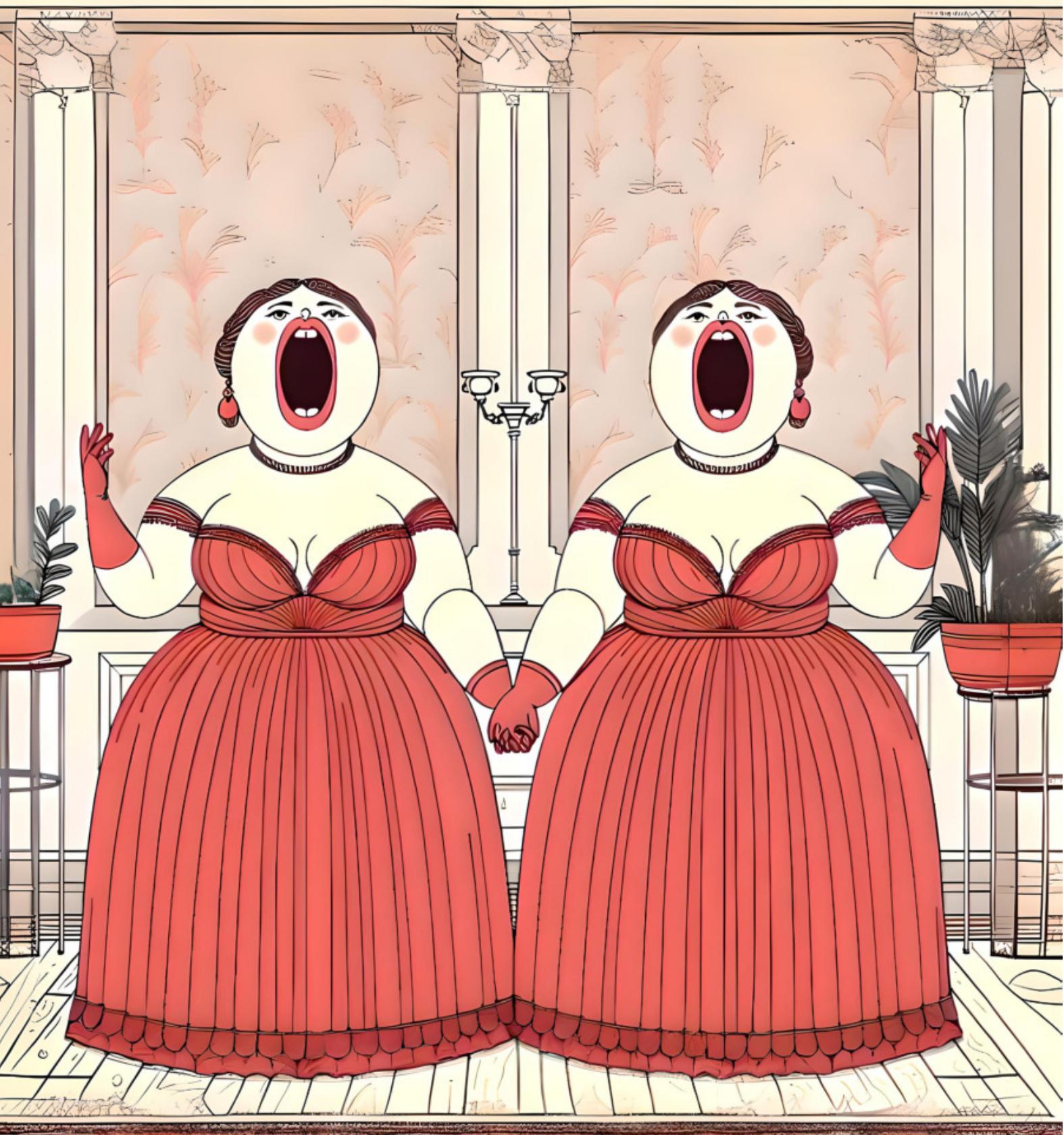
10. MY RELATIONSHIPS ARE AS SATISFYING AS I WOULD WANT THEM TO BE.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

These items have been used around the world to assess various domains of flourishing, or human well-being: Happiness and Life Satisfaction (Items 1-2), Mental and Physical Health (3-4), Meaning and Purpose (5-6), Character and Virtue (7-8), and Close Social Relationships (9-10). The background and motivation for these items and the flourishing domains can be found in: VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). On the promotion of human flourishing. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, U.S.A., 31:8148-8156.



by Mariana Alessandri

Sympathetic resonance

When two stringed instruments are in close proximity to each other, they can communicate. If you pluck the strings on one, the others will vibrate, even without physical contact. Musicians call it “sympathetic resonance”, and some instruments are intentionally built with “sympathetic strings”. These are not meant to be played directly but will vibrate when you pluck their companions, thus achieving a deeper sound.

Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno likened human hearts to strings, saying that they are meant to vibrate when someone else’s does. Sympathetic resonance explains why some of my college students start to weep when I get emotional. This reaction is often involuntary, sometimes even unwanted,

but as the greeting card says, “friends don’t let friends cry alone”.

Except when they do. I have sat with more than one crying friend, myself unmoved. Why, someone asked Unamuno, don’t our heartstrings always vibrate in response to human suffering? His answer was harsh: “If [others] don’t have heart-strings, [or] if they are so rigid that they won’t vibrate, my cry will not resonate in them.” I don’t like to think that some of us walk around without heartstrings, but I have felt my own heartstrings become rigid, from disuse, self-protection, or social pressure. It sometimes feels like my heart is freezing.

When I had babies, my breasts made milk. All it took for me to have a meal at the ready was to hear a baby

crying. Any baby. I could even do it by imagining a baby crying. Lactation was my superpower, and I was disappointed when it went away. At 46, my breasts no longer spring to action at the sound of a baby’s cry, but my heart, which lives deeper inside the proverbial breast, hasn’t completely shut off. Even as we age, we possess the capacity to resonate when we hear the sound of suffering. And if our heartstrings are rigid, we can work on stretching them out. Philosophy gives us reasons to try.

The Greek word that usually gets translated into ‘flourishing’ is *eudaimonia*. It is also regularly translated as ‘happiness’, which I try to avoid with my students. In their minds, happiness relates to similar capitalism-driven concepts including ‘self-care’

Flourishing is the manifestation of our potential, which, in the case of humans, means becoming our best selves. We know we're flourishing because we can feel it.

and '#goodvibesonly'. When I need to side-step this sticky web to explore what Aristotle meant by eudaimonia, I offer them his famous example: an acorn that flourishes into an oak tree. Even as a seed, he said, the tree was there, but it needed water and light to become what it is. Flourishing is the manifestation of our potential, which, in the case of humans, means becoming our best selves. We know we're flourishing because we can feel it. And flourishing also looks good on us. It's no wonder, then, that a lot of students end up choosing Aristotle as their favourite philosopher: flourishing feels good and is good for us.

But this pleasant-sounding philosophy is not to be confused with the billboard in my town that reads, *Put Your Positive Pants On*. Flourishing is not faking it till you make it, letting your light shine, or refusing to sweat the small stuff. Flourishing is not selecting your best photo for social media

or Choosing Happy. These are pantomimes of flourishing, brought to us by an emotionally anaemic society.

Human flourishing was never, not even for Aristotle, a matter of being cheerful or, as Taylor Swift put it, "Do[ing] it with a broken heart." Flourishing doesn't require putting our best foot forward or changing our attitude. Humans flourish when we feel our feelings, banishing none to the locked cellar of our rigid hearts. Instead of editing our emotions down to the joyful and/or socially acceptable ones, flourishing looks more like integrating them into our lives. 'Wholeness' and 'flourishing' arrive at the party together and dance side-by-side all night.

But can this image be right? Crying in my car on the side of the road is hardly what Aristotle had in mind when he wrote about eudaimonia. What connects emotional pain to flourishing isn't simply allowing ourselves the full range of emotions, but it can happen when I call my best friend, when I tell her what's going on and we cry together – me from pain and she because her heartstrings are warm and loose.

Sharing sadness with people who love us gives their heartstrings a chance to vibrate. Unamuno and his wife lost their son, Raimundo, to meningitis when he was six. He was born sick, but knowing his death was coming did not make it easier. Unamuno described the experience of losing his son as being crushed in a mortar by a "heavy pestle of sorrow", like spices being ground down into powder. He was not alone in the mortar. His wife Concha – the mother of Raimundo – was also there, getting crushed alongside her husband. If their hearts had gone rigid, as sometimes happens in response to

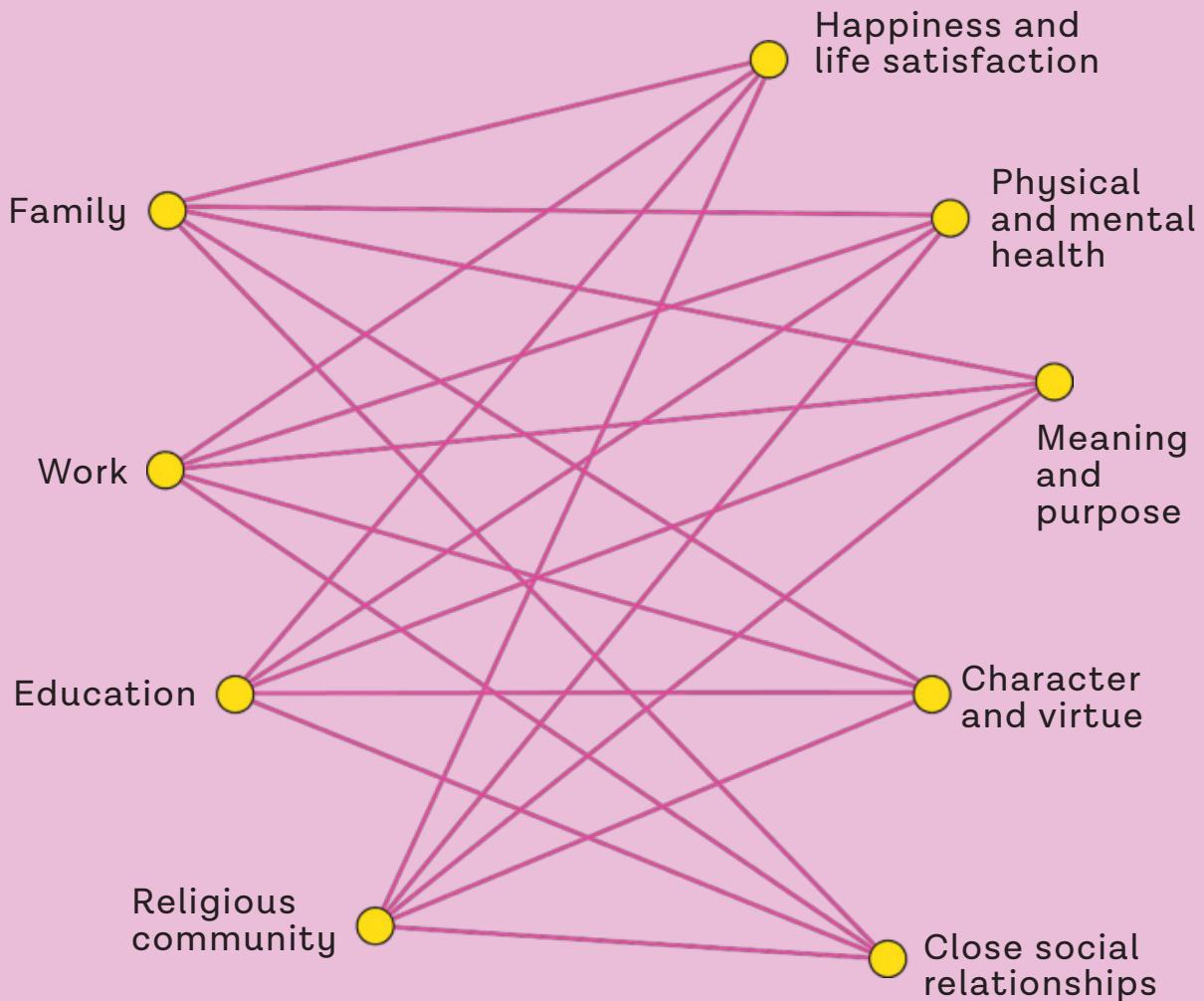
overwhelming pain, they would have grown apart. But Unamuno describes sharing with Concha an "embrace of despair" that led them to "true spiritual love". Their sympathetic resonance added depth to the sound of their cries.

Some of us were raised to believe that sharing pain with another person amounts to putting a burden on them. The admirable thing to do, if you believe this, is to shield your favourite people from your most miserable feelings. My mother was this way, but instead of liberating me, her sacrifice made me feel locked out of her heart. "It's all good", "no worries", and "I'm fine" are blocks which, while appropriate in certain contexts, effectively keep loved ones at arm's length. What good can we be to one another if we deny each other access to the innermost chambers of our bleeding hearts? This, too, seems necessary for flourishing.

My mother passed away on June 9, 2023. About a week before that, as she lay dying in my bedroom, I found my ten-year-old son crying in his room. My husband told me that my child was sad because he had two conflicting parties the next day and would have to choose between them. First world problems, indeed. My husband had already talked to him, so I knew that no words needed to be said. Instead, I went into my son's room and rubbed his heaving back. After a few minutes in the dark, I started crying. Alarmed, he flipped over, looked at me, and asked: "Why are you crying?" "Because my mum is dying," I replied. My son blinked in recognition and started to rub my back. He did not wipe my tears away or tell me it was going to be OK. We just cried together in the dark, each for our own, age-appropriate reasons. Sympathetic resonance. ■

PATHWAY

OUTCOME



“The four pathways... are common and... have powerful effects across the domains of flourishing. The argument here is not that, for any individual, all four must be present for flourishing. Nor is the argument that these four are exhaustive. Rather, it is that these four pathways are important, and common, and that if efforts were made to support, improve, and promote participation in these pathways, the consequences for human flourishing would be substantial.”

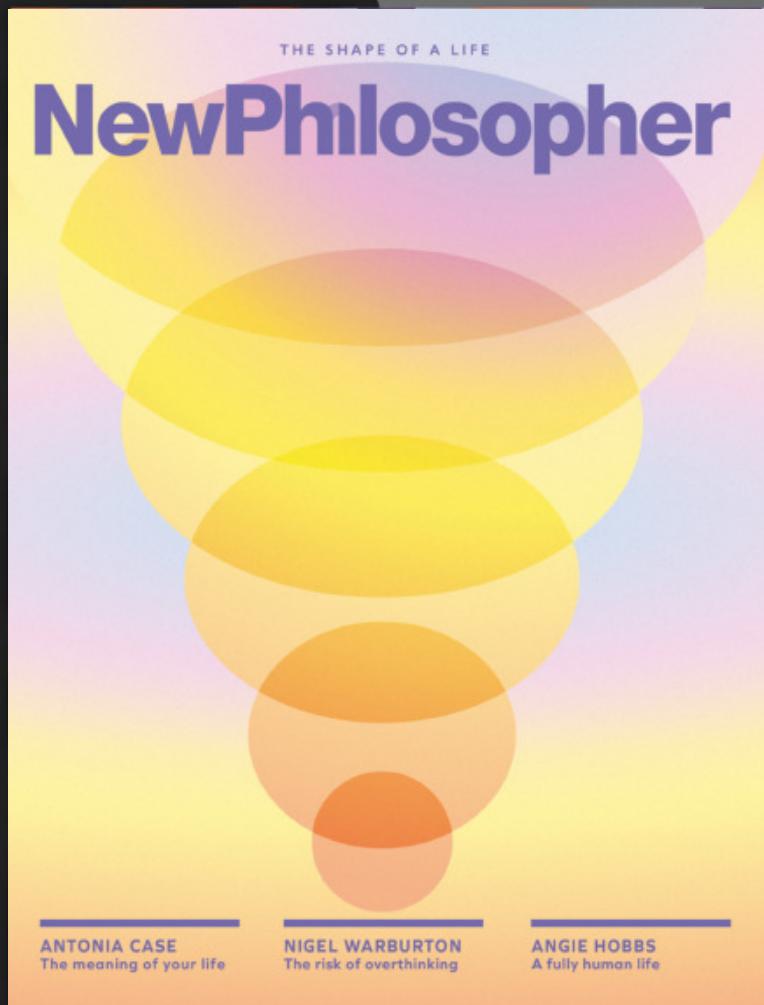
Tyler J. VanderWeele, *On the Promotion of Human Flourishing*

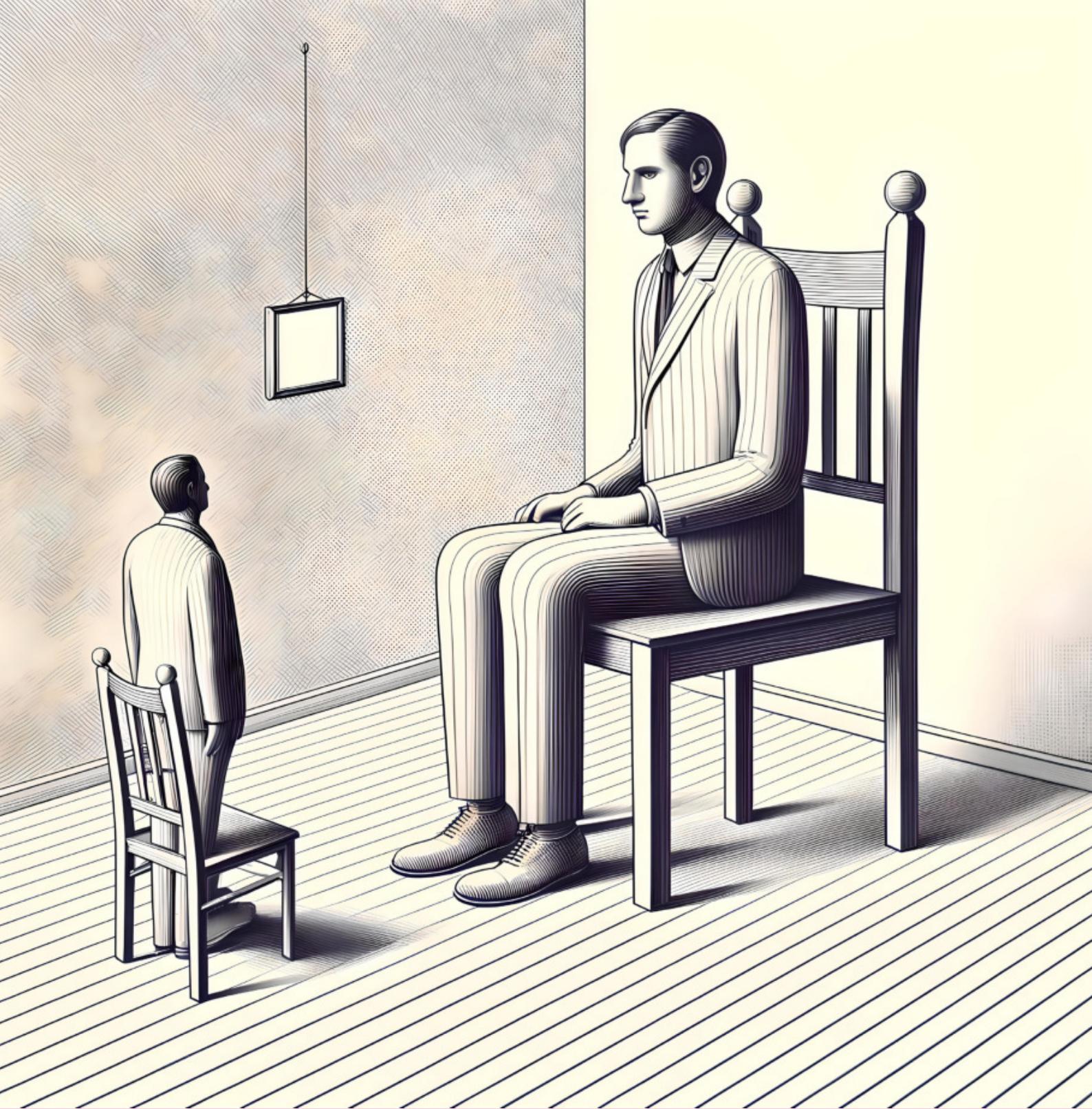
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**The self that is
not a self**

by André Dao

Existence is suffering. We don't have to look far to see the truth of this dictum: there's the news, of course, which is more often than not a litany of tragedies and atrocities. But even if we only look back on our own lives, suffering – both large and small – is ever-present. Partly, this is a function of how we remember. As Nietzsche said, "If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory."

Of course, this formulation leaves open the possibility that the

preponderance of suffering is only a trick of the memory. Perhaps suffering is only an accidental, contingent feature of existence, over-magnified by our minds?

Much philosophical thinking has been directed at some version of this question. Indeed, in the philosophical traditions of the West – that loosely connected set of diverse philosophies originating from (or claiming to originate from) the thinking of Ancient Greece – this is a central branch of enquiry: what form of being can overcome suffering, or at least

make it bearable? For some thinkers, such as Marxists or utilitarians, the sources of suffering are external, and human flourishing can be achieved by changing those external conditions, whether that be along the lines of "to each according to their need", or "the greatest good for the greatest number". For others, suffering is a matter of the mind – we could think here of the Stoics, and their exhortation for us to free ourselves of our passions.

To speak of the 'West' is obviously crude; comparing it to the 'East' is all too often an exercise in cultural



chauvinism. Yet to collapse all of humanity together is no less reductive. There really are deep fault lines running between human cultures – different conceptualisations of suffering (and therefore, of how to flourish) is one of them. In other words, one of the ways in which ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ philosophies differ is where they locate the origins of suffering; in the ‘East’, suffering is neither external, nor is it a trick or mistake of the mind. Instead, suffering is the result of the mind as such – or at least, of the mind as it is conceived of by the ‘West’.

We can see this difference in the thinking of Siddhartha Gautama – better known to us as the Buddha – who taught that suffering is caused by desire. Desire for wealth, for happiness, even for self-preservation. We might think that there is a correspondence here with the Stoics and their descendants, insofar as they too identified desire for what one does not have as the root cause of suffering. But this correspondence is only superficial. Beneath the surface, yawns a chasm.

At least, this was what an influential group of Japanese philosophers discovered when they tried to understand what Japan had to learn from western philosophy. Known as

the Kyoto School, these thinkers, active in the first half of the twentieth century, were faced with a dilemma: over the 18th and 19th centuries, the West had flourished while the East – including Japan – had stagnated. The Japanese Government had responded by aggressively modernising Japan’s economy and military. In practice, modernisation meant westernisation. The same trajectory seemed to be in store for Japanese thought. Was there some core of Japanese philosophy that could – and should – be preserved, or was the future of Japanese thinking to be western?

To answer that question, the Kyoto School returned to beginnings. Western philosophy, they said, begins with an ontological question: what is being? Plato, for instance, regarded as real that which has form and determination. Meanwhile, Judeo-Christian philosophy was concerned with understanding being through a higher or perfect form of being: God. If we return to the Stoics, we can see that their ethics have a similar focus on being: the point of controlling one’s passions is to achieve a self-contained happiness. In modern terms, we could say that these philosophies aim not so much at doing away with the ego, but with finding its true, undistorted form.

In contrast, the Kyoto School argued that eastern philosophy begins with a metaphysical question: what is nothingness? Kitaro Nishida, widely considered the founder of the school, wrote that while there was much to admire in the “impressive achievements of western culture, which thought form as being and the giving of form as good”, there lay “hidden at the base of our eastern culture, preserved and passed down by our ancestors for several thousand years, something which sees the form of the formless and hears the voice of the voiceless... Our hearts and minds endlessly seek this something; and it is my wish to provide this quest with a philosophical foundation.”

For Keiji Nishitani, one of Nishida’s disciples, this quest for the formless, or ‘absolute nothingness’, led to a critique of modern – that is to say, western – subjectivity. Nishitani said that subjectivity is defined by a false dualism between the self and the world. The consequence of this dualism is a reifying attachment to the ego and to things – reifying because it is precisely through our attachment to the two sides of the dualistic coin that we give them a reality they would not otherwise have. Importantly, Nishitani’s argument wasn’t that there is

There really are deep fault lines running between human cultures – different conceptualisations of suffering (and therefore, of how to flourish) is one of them.

There is surely some solace to be found in learning to dissolve our desiring, suffering egos into the wider world.

no self at all; in fact, he argued that a simple negation of self or being – e.g. nihilism – counter-intuitively leads back to a philosophy of being, as the self that is negated is understood as a veil masking some truer, higher self or form of being. Instead, he countered the false dualism of self and world by drawing on the Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of *śūnyatā*, the idea that all things come into being in “interdependent origination” and are therefore empty of any independent, substantial self or being. This led Nishitani to posit a “self that is not a self”.

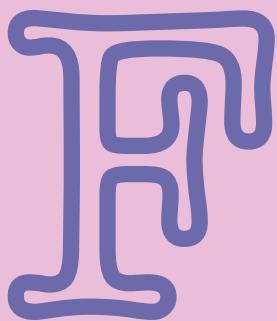
The ‘I’ writing these words is an artificial separation of an ego from the universe of which ‘I’ am inextricably a part. The realisation that this ‘I’ is an illusion is not nihilistic. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the emptiness of

that ‘I’, in the sense that the pronoun refers to nothing real, just as ‘chair’ and ‘you’ are empty of real meaning. Far from being a negation of the world, this is an awakening to its true nature – captured beautifully in the Mahāyāna Buddhist saying, “true emptiness, marvellous being”.

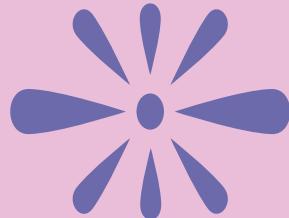
There is surely some solace to be found in learning to dissolve our desiring, suffering egos into the wider world. But there is also, I suspect, danger too. That danger is well-illustrated by the political trajectory of the Kyoto School: too many of its members became, at best, impotent bystanders to, and at worst, fellow travellers of Japanese fascism before and during World War II. For is that not the precise appeal of fascism – that one might lose oneself in the awesome power of the crowd? □



“I’m freeing myself of my ego so much better than everyone else.”

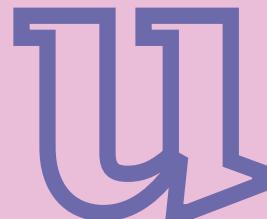
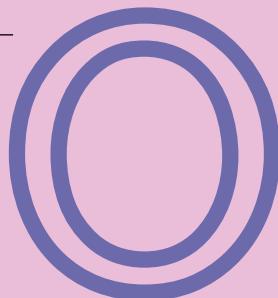
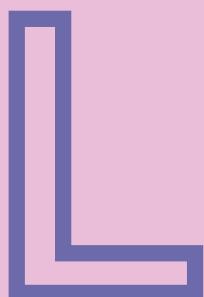


“A day without laughter
is a day wasted.”
– Nicolas Chamfort



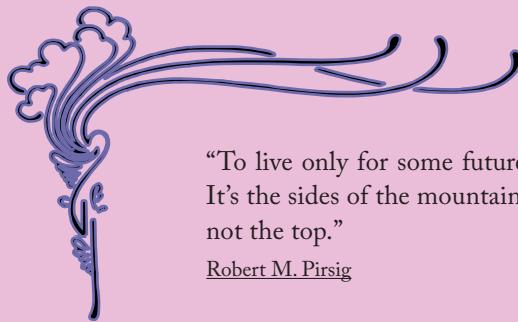
“Happiness is the only sanction of life;
where happiness fails, existence remains
a mad and lamentable experiment.”

George Santayana



“The only reality is now, today. What are you waiting for to be happy? ... Happiness is not exuberant or noisy, like pleasure or joy; it's silent, tranquil, and gentle; it's a feeling of satisfaction inside that begins with self-love.”

Isabel Allende



“To live only for some future goal is shallow.
It's the sides of the mountain that sustain life,
not the top.”

Robert M. Pirsig

“Thus we never live, but we hope to live; and always disposing ourselves to be happy, it is inevitable that we never become so.”

Blaise Pascal

“For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.”

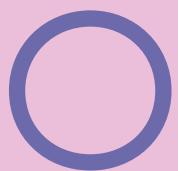
Aristotle

“Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous.”

Pericles

“Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness.”

Immanuel Kant



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“One of the best ways to face this problem of self-centeredness is to discover some cause and some purpose, some loyalty outside of yourself and give yourself to that something.”

Martin Luther King

“Action may not always bring happiness; but there is no happiness without action.”

Benjamin Disraeli



by Nigel Warburton

The risk of overthinking

Some things are best pursued directly. Others get more elusive the more you seek them. John Stuart Mill in *Autobiography* described his own dark depression following a mental breakdown in early adulthood that he labelled “a crisis in my mental history”. He had lost his desire to achieve anything, had realised that he didn’t really care whether the aims of utilitarianism were fulfilled, and that nothing gave him any pleasure anymore. He had been brought up as the next genius, the one who would carry utilitarian ideas forward, and had exceeded expectations, yet he’d lost all his motivation. He kept working, but only mechanically, without passion, just going through the motions. He wasn’t flourishing – far from it – despite his intellectual achievements and prowess. Nothing had meaning for him. He was finding life unbearable, but then his depression began to lift. As the clouds lifted, he came to realise an important truth: that the only people who are happy are those who seek something other than happiness. If you spend your life trying to be happy, you’ll almost certainly fail to achieve that end. Immerse yourself in something other than the pursuit of your own happiness, however, something that benefits other people, or all humanity if you can, and you may well find happiness ‘*en passant*’. He wrote:

“Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so. The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some

end external to it, as the purpose of life. Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation, exhaust themselves on that; and if otherwise fortunately circumstanced you will inhale happiness with the air you breathe, without dwelling on it or thinking about it, without either forestalling it in imagination, or putting it to flight by fatal questioning.”

These are wise words. They are based on the anecdotal evidence of Mill’s own experience, but ring true, nevertheless. What he describes as an attitude of “anti-self-consciousness” can be a better mindset than the kind of relentless self-scrutiny that some self-help gurus recommend. Overthinking is a real risk when you start trying to make yourself better, when you start asking yourself, “Am I happy?” or “Am I flourishing as a person?”. Socrates declared that the unexamined life wasn’t worth living for a human being, implying that we should attempt to know ourselves, to think through our actions, choices, prejudices, and attitudes. But when it comes to thinking about our own happiness and what makes our lives go well, it really does seem that this reflective attitude can jeopardise our chances of finding what we seek. We suddenly feel inadequate, lost, less happy than we were before we started worrying about whether or not we were really happy, or ever can be again.



Perhaps it's not surprising that we are better designed for engaging in other activities than reflecting on how best to achieve our own happiness and wellbeing. We flourish when our physical, social, intellectual, and aesthetic needs are met. We have evolved in such a way that doing things that enhance our flourishing in these areas tends to bring the reward of feeling good, and so stimulates us further to pursue those activities. Sitting around reflecting on what will make us happy is a lot less efficient than pursuing the things that make us happy, and if we ruminate too much there is an opportunity cost – time that we could have spent in a worthwhile activity has evaporated while we were thinking deeply about the best way to flourish.

There's also likely to be a comparison cost too – we end up thinking about how our own lives are going in comparison with how other people's lives are going, and that can be toxic (particularly in an age of social media). We all need what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called *amour de soi*, a sense of our own worth, to flourish. But Rousseau believed that many of humanity's problems ensued from *amour propre*, the kind of vanity that always has an eye on what other people are doing and how they might be seeing us. That is an inescapable element of contemporary life, predating but magnified by social media; we definitely don't need to exacerbate it by comparing our flourishing, or lack of it, with how others are doing. In fact, that is likely to be a direct route

to anxiety and depression, if you are at all prone to these. The psychologist Bruce Hood has used a famous quotation from Gore Vidal to make this point: "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little." We all know that feeling.

The philosopher David Papineau has written about the role of reflective thinking in sports. One of his observations is that while sportspeople need to think about the basic actions they are performing, it can be counterproductive to start thinking about the elements making up those actions. A footballer needs to think about kicking the ball low and hard to the left of the goalkeeper, but not to overthink the mechanics of the precise small movements of legs and feet that produce that outcome. If he or she does start this sort of thought process, it very often leads to a poorer shot. What's needed is a kind of automatic response to the situation. Papineau talks about the 'yips', the name given to that over-concentration on the component movements of, say, kicking a ball, or striking it with a bat or racket, that leads to bad mistakes. It's a well-recognised problem in high-level sport.

Perhaps something similar is going on when people become obsessed with their own flourishing. A broad interest in thriving is probably good for us. But those people who start elaborate programs of self-development in various dimensions, obsessing about their own flourishing and what is required to achieve it in terms of diet, habits, exercise, mental activity, work output, and

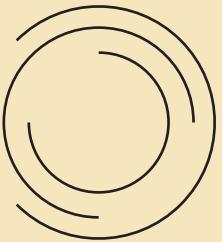
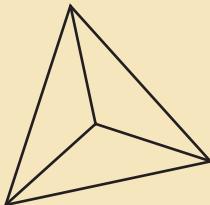


so on, are like the footballer thinking through the small muscle movements. Perhaps their well-meaning self-reflection on their own flourishing and how they want to achieve it, is the very thing that will make a high level of flourishing forever unobtainable for them. One reason for this is that it seems that human beings are particularly bad at what is sometimes labelled 'affective forecasting', anticipating precisely what will make us feel better and subsequently flourish from a psychological point of view. Perhaps like Mill trying to get out of his despair by focussing on his own happiness, it is dwelling too much on how to flourish that does the damage here. That's worth thinking about. But don't think too much about it. ▀

Sitting around reflecting on what will make us happy is a lot less efficient than pursuing the things that make us happy.

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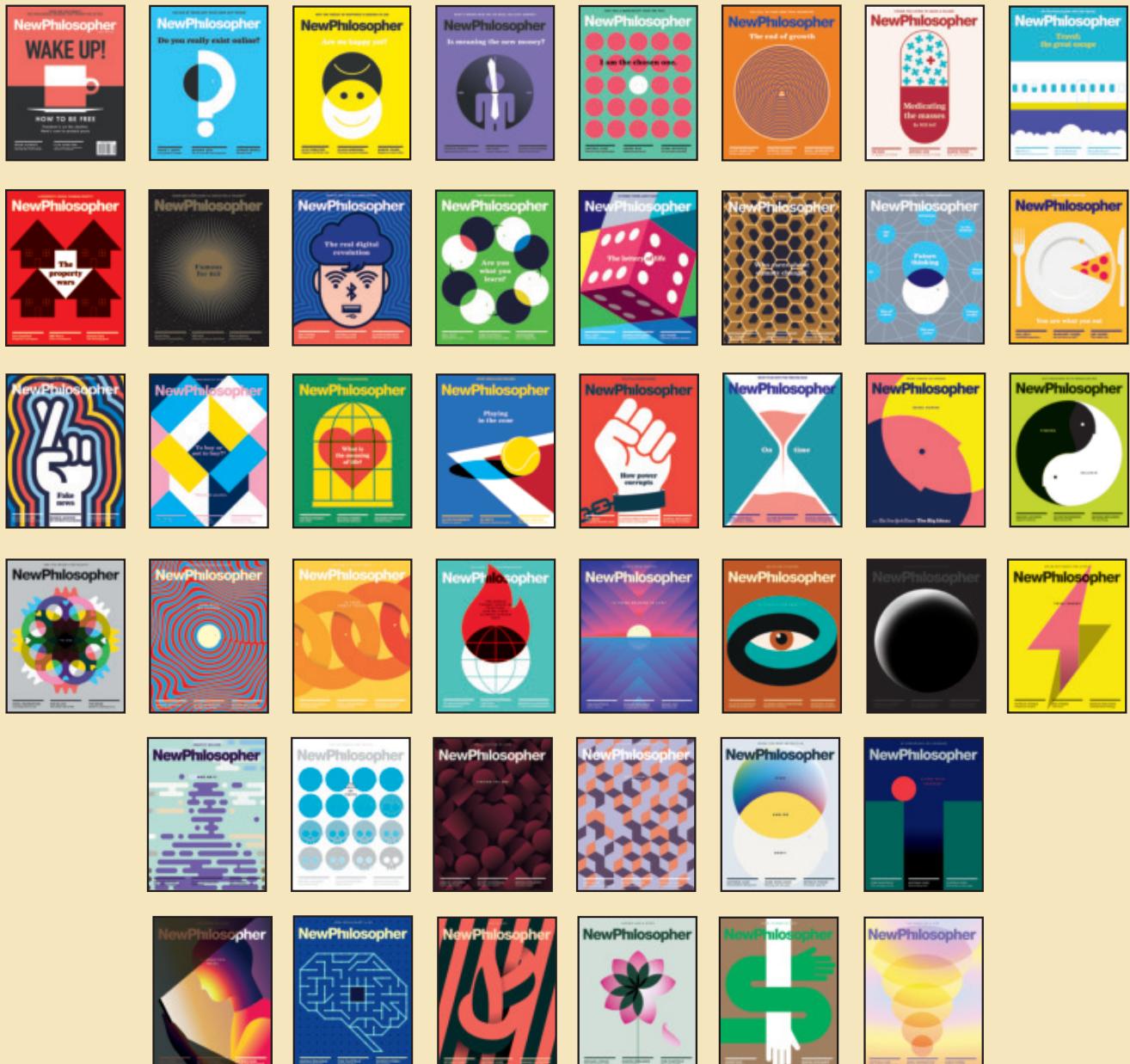
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The Wedding Dance in a Barn, 1566, Pieter Brueghel the Younger

Interview with:
Michael Foley

Interviewer:
Zan Boag

How to live, and who to be...



Michael Foley was educated at St Columb's College and Queens University, Belfast, where he took degrees in Chemistry and Computer Science. He was a teacher for 23 years at the University of Westminster, lecturing in Information Technology. His first poems were published in 1969 in *The Honest Ulsterman*, a magazine he went on to edit with Frank Ormsby, and his first prose in a satirical column in the magazine *Fortnight*, which also serialised his first novel, *The Passion of Jamesie Coyle*. After retirement from teaching he wrote his first non-fiction book, *The Age of Absurdity*, followed by *Embracing the Ordinary, Life Lessons from Bergson*, and *Isn't this Fun: Investigating the Serious Business of Enjoying Ourselves*.

Zan Boag: When determining what is important in living a flourishing life, in what way is it related to how one should live and who one should be?

Michael Foley: The first problem is that flourishing is like originality, wisdom, authority, and goodness in that it cannot be pursued directly but emerges as an accidental by-product of a combination of factors. The second problem is that the necessary combination may be different for everyone. Philosophy tends to offer one-size-fits-all recommendations that ignore context – the culture of the society and individual temperament and circumstance. And the third problem is that what encourages flourishing at one stage of life may not work at another.

Referring to the Ancient Greek concept of eudaimonia, do you think the notion of individual flourishing and living a good life has altered somewhat over the years?

The same general principles keep turning up over thousands of years and in separate cultures, in religious teaching, philosophy, literature, and, more recently, psychology. These include understanding, acceptance of difficulty, personal responsibility, autonomy, attention, transcendence, ceaseless striving, and constant awareness of ageing and mortality. But the most effective mix of these and the context in which they can be applied,

both personal and social, is constantly changing.

In your (as yet unpublished) book on process philosophy, you write that we should remind “the lazy brain that it exists in a risky, changing world, and that if it wishes to continue to flourish it should pay attention”. In what way can we direct our minds, given the ever-changing conditions we live in, to maximise our ability to flourish?

One of the most significant discoveries of neuroscience is that the human brain is a predictive system. It does not, as was commonly believed, wait for signals from the senses to arrive in an orderly linear chain, then match these to representations, make rational decisions and pass commands for action back down the line. Instead it predicts what it thinks will happen, based on experience, and acts on this. So perception can be ninety percent deception and only ten percent reception.

This has several consequences. First, an obsession with predicting, even though life is notoriously unpredictable and humans are notoriously bad at predicting. Second, the tendency to live in constant expectation, always looking forward to the next meal, next sex, next weekend, next holiday, next big thing. This can also explain the tendency to fantasise. If the brain is constantly thinking of what is likely to happen, it could easily start predicting what it would very much like to happen. Such fantasising



So the more we live by habit and routine the weaker the attention, the duller the perception, the less intense the experience.

is almost impossible to suppress. In the morning I write about the dangers of fantasy and in the evening I fantasise about winning a prize for the book. But the most serious consequence is that constant prediction makes it difficult to appreciate present circumstances because the brain tunes out the familiar. So the more we live by habit and routine the weaker the attention, the duller the perception, the less intense the experience. Habit and routine can seem to resist change, but resistance to change is itself change, in this case petrifaction, a tendency that gets steadily worse with age, especially in men. So as an ageing male I'm petrified of becoming petrified.

The importance of attention was a constant theme of the major process philosophers – William James, Henri Bergson, and Alfred North Whitehead. As James said, our experience is simply what we have paid attention to. But attention is not easy. Even the language understands this. We do not give attention, we pay attention. As a recovering cerebralist, always inclined to live in my head, I'm not good at paying attention but I try... no, I strive.

As for what can be done, the arts are particularly useful for surprising us out of the slumber of routine with unique and uniquely compelling visions of life and the world. Also comedy. Poetry and comedy are both based on surprise, one of the six basic emotions but rarely appreciated. In the morning I often read a few poems chosen at random to jolt my brain into wakefulness.

In your book you refer to Spinoza's concept of 'conatus': a ceaseless striving for self-preservation and flourishing. You write that while this drive is the fundamental process of life, it is important to strive in the most productive way. In your view, what is a productive way to strive?

My favourite quote is the passage at the end of Spinoza's *Ethics*: "If the way I have shown now seems very hard, still it can be found. And of course what is found so rarely must be hard. For if salvation were at hand and could be found without great effort, how could nearly everyone neglect it? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." That last sentence

should be on t-shirts, coffee mugs, and fridge magnets everywhere. Excellence is rare in all things, including poetry and comedy. Most poetry is terrible and most so-called comedy leaves me with a Mount Rushmore face.

Spinoza's solution was the same as Buddha's, though Spinoza could not have known of Buddhism. The problem is ignorance and the solution is understanding. Both stress the importance of understanding one's self, the flaws, weaknesses, biases, delusions, fantasies, and especially desires, which Buddha referred to as "attachments" and Spinoza as "passions". Once understood, all these become easier to control. But as usual with thinkers, both concentrated only on the individual. It is necessary also to understand the social conditions, the culture, in which the individual has to operate.

And if, as the process philosophers claim, everything is connected, then to understand anything it is necessary to understand everything. Simple.

You write that there are disincentives to learning how to flourish: 1) comfort, which makes learning seem unnecessary,

"But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." That last sentence should be on t-shirts, coffee mugs and fridge magnets everywhere.

and 2) an aversion to 'education', mostly stemming from the 'formal education' experience of many. In what way can process thinkers help people overcome these disincentives?

I have invented the term 'banalist' for the many who live in a comfort zone of habit and routine, think only and talk only – often incessantly – of their families, friends, health problems, and holidays. These people can seem contented, even flourishing. But I often sense an underlying anxiety and fearfulness and they are rarely capable of accepting disappointments, afflictions, and especially mortality, which comes to them as a nasty shock. Like other apparent flourishers, narcissists, the rich, the successful, and prospering charlatans, banalists depend on the world continuing to oblige, but authentic flourishing should survive the world's frequent refusal to oblige.

Banalists have no interest in anything outside their little circles and regard learning as a tedious chore necessary only for career advancement. My banalist parents were both school-teachers but understood education as the route to professional earning and were shocked when I was studying science but developed a passion for literature. "He can do equations but wants to be a poet. What kind of lunatic have we produced?"

Learning is necessary for understanding but can be a joy in itself, enhancing the sense of being alive in a mysterious, unpredictable world. For simple organisms it is learn or die. For the sophisticated human organism it is learn or grow dull. Those who refuse to take an interest soon become of no interest. Life always takes its revenge.

And the process thinkers I mentioned all stressed that what matters is the process of learning not the knowl-

edge. William James, in his book *Talks to Teachers*, never once mentions content, that it is necessary to study the classics, science, languages or whatever. It is necessary only to enjoy the process of learning. Always the process and never the product. So for teachers the vitality that transmits joy by example is more important than any expertise. And it is also important to remember that our essential condition remains always ignorance. Learn in order not to know. This would also work on a t-shirt. Maybe I should think about merchandising.

In Embracing the Ordinary, you refer to Proust's In Search of Lost Time, that a central theme could well be taken as being the perversity of desire and the inevitability of disappointment, and you quote Proust: 'Desire makes all things flourish; possession withers them.' Does this in a way feed into your views on process thinking, that of the importance of the process over the product, as you put it?

Proust was a great psychologist, possibly one of the greatest since Buddha – but also often wonderfully droll, which few seem to appreciate. His insight on desire is what professional psychologists now define as "the hedonic treadmill", the problem that as soon as a desire is satisfied it brings not fulfilment but a new desire. This is a consequence of the predictive brain's tendency to live constantly in expectation, and an example where privileging process over product is a bad idea. In this case it might be better to value the product and appreciate what we have rather than constantly wanting more.

What happens when flourishing seems all but impossible – for those in war, those who are starving, those with debilitating anxiety, those with a terminal illness in



the last days of life, or those who have just lost a loved one? How do people manage a life in which flourishing is difficult or near impossible?

Flourishing is rarely an option for the many struggling merely to survive. It is a luxury available only to those who can count on accommodation, food and heating, enjoy reasonably good health, and have time to ponder their lives. And even many blessed with these basics are afflicted by illness, depression or bereavement. What these afflicted need is compassionate therapy not philosophy lectures. It would be outrageously presumptuous to philosophise at any sufferers in pain or anguish, or any doing three low-paid jobs to get by.

I wonder what you think about the notion of equality of flourishing. It seems that the opportunity to flourish isn't available to all humans in equal measure, that some are in a better position to flourish than others. Does inequality in general negatively affect one's ability to flourish?

The economic inequality that keeps many struggling merely to survive obviously inhibits flourishing. But equality in general is a slippery concept. Like freedom, it is a sacred western value that none dare attack though many are happy to ignore.

The belief that everyone is of equal value in the eyes of God was the most radical contribution of Christianity, something that no previous thinker had ever suggested, and it profoundly influenced western society, leading eventually to belief in universal human rights and representative democracy. But does anyone want to feel equal? What everyone wants is to feel superior. The beauty of democracy is that it gives all the freedom to feel superior in their own way while preventing them from imposing this too brutally on others. Democracy may be the most satisfactory system because it satisfies no one. The problem is that democracy became smug and came to regard itself not as the contingent invention of a time and place but the inevitable terminus of civilisation, a timeless absolute good waiting only to be discovered and implemented by everyone. As Bergson pointed out, democracy is probably the most unnatural system of government, not an inevitable end state but a historical process that can easily be reversed.

In what way do you think western societies have got it wrong when it comes to what's important to living a flourishing life?

In just about every way possible. Flourishing has never seemed easier but may never have been more difficult. It seems easy because we are bombarded with images of attractive celebrities apparently having effortlessly fulfilling lives. And many of the unfamous create online personas giving the impression that they too are attractive, popular, and enjoying endless fun. But in fact flourishing is increasingly difficult because western society frustrates all the general principles recognised through the ages. Acceptance of difficulty is itself difficult because flourishing looks easy. Attention and understanding are difficult because of the multitude of constant distractions and the poor appreciation of learning. Personal responsibility is difficult because this is the age of entitlement and rights and someone or something else is always to blame. Autonomy is difficult because of a willingness to sacrifice it for money, status or recognition. Authentic transcendence is difficult because an easy version is sought through drugs. Acceptance of ageing is difficult because of the craving for eternal youth; and acceptance of death is even more difficult.

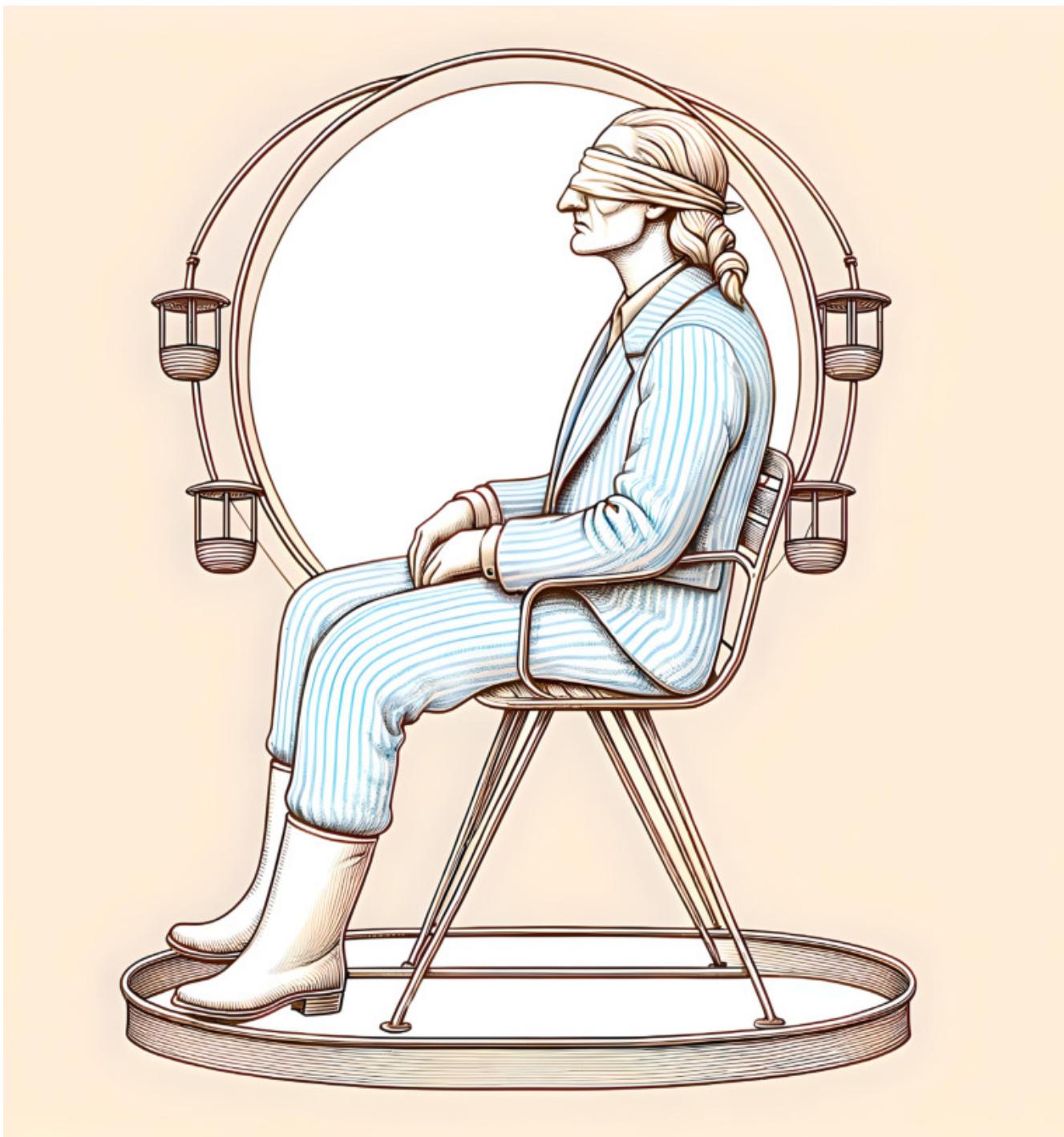
Flourishing tends to be a work in progress, something we are continually working on under ever-changing conditions. Are there certain conditions under which it is more likely for us to flourish?

Greater economic equality would obviously help by lifting more to the base level where flourishing is possible. Some thinkers now propose a universal basic income, which would indeed be a great idea, but seems to me madly impractical. Imagine the uproar if any western government attempted to introduce this.

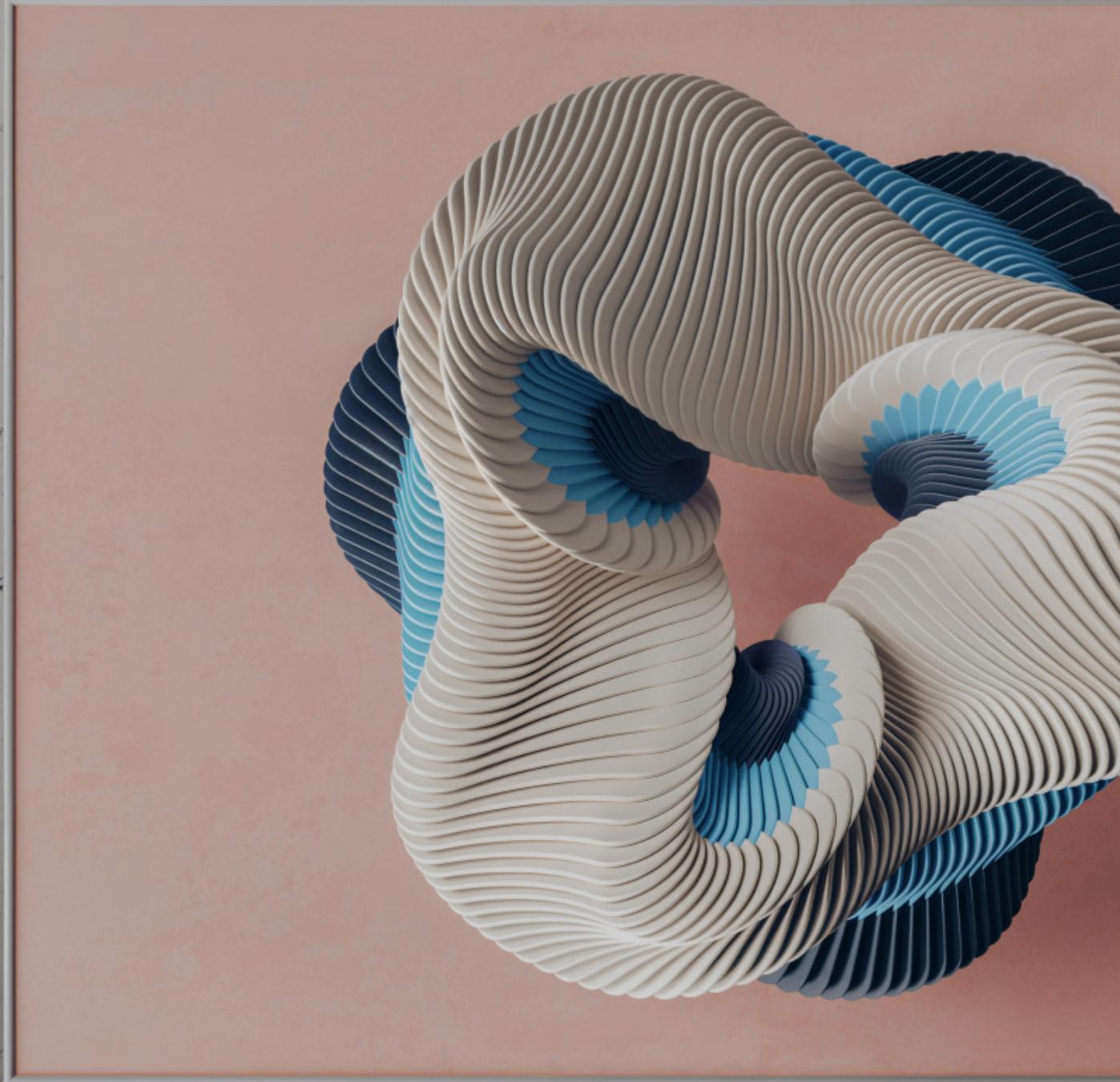
As the Stoics never tired of repeating, it is difficult to change conditions but easier – though not that easy – to change attitudes. The world is incurably venal and grossly unfair, but has probably always been so. What works for me is not anger, which I regard as a form of self-harm, but the ability to relish the insanities and absurdities of the world. So my favourite t-shirt maxim would be, “Life is absurd... but divinely absurd.”

And the attitude I try to cultivate is zest, another emergent phenomenon combining vitality, curiosity, scepticism, irony, humour, subversion, delight, and glee. It loves the world but understands its insanity and refuses to take anything at its own valuation.

I was enormously encouraged to discover that zest was also prized by process philosophers. William James was probably the zestiest thinker after Nietzsche – also a sort of process philosopher – and Whitehead claimed that the purpose of his philosophy was to inspire “a zest for existence”. Of course zest is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to sustain, but, as the t-shirts ought to be reminding us, “all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare”. ■



Like other apparent flourishers, narcissists, the rich, the successful, and prospering charlatans, banalists depend on the world continuing to oblige, but authentic flourishing should survive the world's frequent refusal to oblige.



Evolving growth

You studied graphic design and photography in London – what is it about 3D and motion design that initially got you interested?

What really pulled me into 3D was the idea of being able to recreate worlds that my camera couldn't capture. I would typically approach a visual task in 3D with a photographer's eye but the fact that I could make anything I could imagine and light and texture it in any way I wanted seemed magical to me. Of course the learning curve for 3D was long, but once the principles started to settle in there really wasn't any way of going back.

Artwork: James Owen









The animations from your 'Flourishing' series are based around a mathematical formula. How did you come up with the idea for this interesting process – using a base of maths to create motion design into art that represents a concept that is important to us all?

I've always been fascinated by technically complex things. Breaking apart old TVs, cameras, or toys and building them back together when I was a kid was so interesting to me. I found it fascinating that something could present itself in such a simple way like the 'on' button of a TV or

a walking toy, but behind the scenes all this complexity really brought it to life. With 'Flourishing', and most of my other projects, I tend to take the same approach: taking something technically complex and presenting it in its most simplest and beautiful form in order to obscure its complexities.

What role does this relation between mathematics, art, and ideas play in our lives?

Mathematics is the foundation of everything, that's

the beauty of maths. It allows us to navigate from numbers to imagery and vice versa.

You've named the series 'Flourishing' – could you explain how you have represented the concept through your art?

It stems around the concept of rejuvenation, an ever-evolving state of growth and progress with no start or end.

It's interesting that you have used a combination of looping animation and stills for the artwork – do you think that

flourishing is something that is in motion, a continuous process – rather than a singular moment in which we flourish?

Flourishing is a continuous process, but like photography, beauty can be found in a single moment.

Why is the concept of flourishing important to you and what contributes to your own personal sense of flourishing?

The fact it's never ending, there's no start, middle or end, there's only progress. The idea that one can continuously improve is really empowering. ▀



FLOURISHING DEVICES

72%

72% of U.S. teens say they often or sometimes feel peaceful when they don't have their smartphone; 44% say it makes them feel anxious. Roughly three-quarters of teens say it often or sometimes makes them feel happy (74%) when they don't have their smartphone.

47%

About half (47%) of teens who report being online almost constantly say they at least sometimes argue with their parent about the amount of time they spend on their phone, compared with those who are online less often (30%). Roughly three-quarters of parents (76%) say managing how much time their teen spends on the phone is an important or a top priority. Half of parents say they have looked through their teen's phone.

38%

38% of teens say they spend too much time on their smartphone. About a quarter say the same regarding their social media use. But the largest proportion of teens say the amount of time they spend on their phone (51%) or on social media (64%) is about right. Relatively few teens say they don't spend enough time with these technologies.

7 in 10

Seven-in-ten teens say smartphones provide more benefits than harms for people their age, while a smaller share (30%) take the opposing view, saying there are more harms than benefits. A larger percentage of teens say smartphones make learning good social skills harder (42%) rather than easier (30%). About three-in-ten say it neither helps nor hurts.

95%

In the US, 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and about six-in-ten say they use TikTok, Snapchat or Instagram. Roughly four-in-ten teens (39%) say they have cut back on their time on social media. A similar share says the same about their phone (36%).





by David S. Oderberg

Money from nothing

In his famous work *The Politics*, Aristotle has an equally infamous text in which he criticises what is usually translated as ‘commerce’, ‘retail trade’, or ‘business’. His attack has puzzled philosophers ever since: was Aristotle a crypto-communist, anti-business, or antediluvian in his grasp of economics?

His worries seem to boil down to this: money, in its essence, is a medium of exchange – a ticket enabling the purchase of whatever a person wants and can get with it. The problem is that a person’s wants can be unlimited. When the money ticket is used to

simplify the exchange of basic necessities – being portable, countable, easily divided, a common unit of accounting and value (unlike camels and bananas) – then it is, for Aristotle, in the service of the ‘good life’. It enables us more easily to do that which, by nature, we are supposed to do – keep ourselves, our families, our communities, and our society happy, healthy, and fulfilled. His term for this is *eudaimonia* – literally, well-being.

Money can, however, by degrees become divorced from *eudaimonia* inasmuch as, instead of being used

as a means thereto, it becomes something of an end in itself. Aristotle’s example is a humble pair of shoes: its primary function is to be worn. But it can also be exchanged: if I don’t need it I can exchange it for something I do need – say, an umbrella – by trade with someone who needs shoes and has a spare umbrella. But since shoes, ships, and sealing wax don’t make for attractive mediums of exchange, we humans have instead created money, originally in the form of material objects people can and like to carry or wear, be it gold, silver, shiny metal,

pretty seashells. Now, for reasons of cost, convenience, and others more nefarious, we have in the UK the three percent of the money supply consisting of bits of base metal and pieces of paper or plastic with ink and fancy anti-counterfeiting designs, along with the ninety-seven percent of the money that is represented by no more than pixels on a screen.

The money ticket – representing the value of shoes, camels, bananas, smartphones, haircuts, domain names, electricity, and so on – Aristotle observes, becomes an end in itself precisely due to its increasing abstractness and distance from eudaimonia. People realise they can make money from shoes and bananas but also from money itself, by lending at interest and engaging in all sorts of financial speculation – of the kind that nearly destroyed many countries' economies in 2008. The more removed it is, the more it feeds off itself and is used to acquire more of itself, the more Aristotle considers it unnatural and therefore bad – perverting human nature and human fulfilment.

Aristotle is right when he points out that one can have all the money in the world and still starve to death (whence the legend of King Midas: everything he touched turned to

gold, even his food) or have all the basic necessities for life and health yet have nary a penny in the bank. Yet he stretches the point somewhat by supposing that it is common among those engaged in trade, commerce, and profit-making, to want unlimited money for its own sake. The caricature Hollywood gangster hugging piles of banknotes springs readily to mind, but it is a caricature inasmuch as what your typical gangster – or banker – wants is unlimited money for the sake of unlimited power. Money is power, as the saying goes, for all of us. For the vast majority, it is the purchasing power that gets you what you and your dependants need daily to keep a roof over your heads, pay your bills, stay healthy, and have a nice holiday occasionally. For a privileged few, it is the power also to buy other people, not least sycophants and lackeys, one's own team of money-makers, friends, and most importantly politicians, whole industries, markets, and even great chunks of national economies.

What a source of wonder, metaphysically speaking, is the power of a few pixels on a screen to purchase whatever is for sale! Money seems to ape divine creation itself – it is created *ex nihilo*, from nothing. A prom-

ise can be conjured out of thin air, by my saying to you, "I promise to meet you for lunch," thereby – as John Searle once pointed out – creating a moral obligation where before there was none. Where did this new thing come from? Literally from no more than my freely chosen words. And yet the consequences of kept and broken promises are real. So too with money: in fact, money is a promise, for apart from the tiny amount of physical tokens issued by the government, the rest is created in the form of loans by commercial and private banks to corporations and individuals, and loans by central banks to governments, and loans by individuals, corporations and countries to governments, and loans by governments to each other and to corporations; and more. Each of these loans is, strictly, an IOU – a promise to pay by whoever does the borrowing.

Moreover, on the fractional reserve banking system in place around the world, banks lend around ten times the amount deposited with them – the loans by customers to the banks, on which these days they receive either zero or derisory interest. Banks can get away with that because customers rarely claim all their money back at the same time, which would be a 'run' on the banks. Banks, relying on

The money ticket, Aristotle observes, becomes an end in itself precisely due to its increasing abstractness and distance from eudaimonia.

In this magic circle, the power of purchasing with money, and the power of creating that money, are virtually indistinguishable.

this sociological fact – just as insurance companies rely on the fact that most people don't claim on their policies all at once – lend the deposits, i.e. the screen pixels on a spreadsheet, over and over again, creating yet more and more promises.

Now, of all the things that can – and do – go wrong with such a strange, almost occult system, I want to focus on the relation between power and creation. What if the one who has the purchasing power also has the creating power? Traditionally, that one is the government: if it issues all the money, then it too can help itself to whatever it needs to purchase. Historically, this has been palaces and armies. These days it is still armies, less so palaces, more so infrastructure to keep society functioning. Such a system has long had its problems, notably inflation, but rulers generally at least have some kind of accountability (whether at the ballot

box or the scaffold). Now, however, we seem to be living in the Age of Oligarchy. Forget Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs for a minute and focus on all the rest – such as the gigantic global banks, hedge funds, pension and investment funds. These are now the ones closest to the fire hydrant of money – either operating it or with their mouths right at the jet of liquidity. In this magic circle – full also of politicians going in and out of revolving doors – the power of purchasing with money, and the power of creating that money, are virtually indistinguishable. We who are way downstream of that fire hydrant should lie awake at night worrying about this double power. As the American author T. Cushing Daniel once said to the American Congressional Sub-Committees on Banking and Currency, the view of bankers tends to be: "Let us control the money of a country and we care not who makes its laws." ■





A vertical decorative strip on the left side of the page. It features a stylized, abstract illustration of two animals. At the top, there's a deer-like animal with large, multi-colored antlers in shades of pink, purple, and blue. Below it is a fox-like animal with a reddish-brown face and a white-tipped tail. The background is dark, and the animals are composed of various geometric shapes and vibrant colors like green, yellow, and orange.

Song of myself

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid
and self-contained,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania
of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thou-
sands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

By Walt Whitman



by Antonia Case

Travelling to flourish

The images of the rental property on the internet looked sublime, a three-story villa in a medieval Spanish town, complete with lighted cave pool and rustic charm. But when our family of six idled our oversized car down the miniature street, we were stopped no less than three times; first by two police officers who waved us down, peering with flashlights into the car and demanding identification papers, and next by two locals on push bikes – “*ten cuidado*,” (be careful). “*Don’t let your children out of sight.*”

The travel writer Paul Theroux wrote, “Travel is glamorous only in retrospect.” When we travel, we are groundless; and, unlike our ordinary life back home, there are no signposts telling us where to go and what to do.

We have to somehow make it all up – every step a veritable fork in the road.

The villa was locked tight, with twelve bolts. The neighbouring villa was derelict, abandoned, and so were most of the houses on the street. A family lived a few doors down in a house without windowpanes; children dashed in and out chasing a dog.

At the tail end of summer, the evenings were pushing towards 40 degrees, and the villa had neither air conditioning nor fans. We wanted to leave the front door open for air during the stifling afternoon, but was it safe to do so? In the intense heat we inspected a row of water bottles on the floor. We presumed it meant that the town water wasn’t safe to drink.

The human brain is an economical engine, preserving energy through automation. The human brain doesn’t want to have to think about everything – brushing teeth, commuting to work, parking the car; it wants to learn how to do it once or twice, and then commit the activity to memory, these actions orchestrated by a group of nuclei called the basal ganglia. So when a great bulk of our day-to-day life is routine and familiar, we can glide through, like sleepwalking giants, on automatic pilot. Automation makes activities easy, of course, but it also risks making life mundane.

Travel is like adding TNT to the mix. It shakes things up. It sets things alight; it demands that you see things for the first time. You can’t sleepwalk

Travelling is not just about visiting pretty places; it has the power to transform us on a deeper level, altering our perspective on almost everything, particularly on our life back home.

through the streets of Buenos Aires, or a market bazaar in Marrakesh – or act on autopilot as you hunt for food and water for your family inside the walls of an abandoned medieval town. Instead, you are jolted into action – for survival.

“Travelling through the world produces a marvellous clarity... This great world is a mirror where we must see ourselves in order to know ourselves,” wrote French philosopher Michel de Montaigne. Travelling is not just about visiting pretty places;

it has the power to transform us on a deeper level, altering our perspective on almost everything, particularly on our life back home.

For centuries, artists have used travel as the spice to add flavour to their work. French painter Paul Gauguin fled Paris, the artistic centre of the world at the time (“I cannot bear the suffocating atmosphere of Paris any longer”) for greener pastures elsewhere. He tasted rural France for a time, settling in Arles in Provence. The colours of the area were so vibrant, so intense, they seemed to leap off the canvas, he wrote to Vincent van Gogh in 1888. Every sight, sound, and smell was a revelation to him. Travelling was opening up new worlds and novel possibilities for his art.

For artists like Gauguin and van Gogh, travelling, or ‘being elsewhere’ invigorated their artistic spirit; the journeys were not just physical, but spiritual quests. In seeking out new landscapes and cultures, he was also searching for a deeper understanding of himself and his place in the universe. It was a journey of self-discovery as much as it was a journey of artistic exploration.

It is said that crystals grown at microgravity at the International Space Station (ISS), are larger, more symmetric and have less defects than crystals grown on Earth. Reduced gravitational force at the ISS altitude – about 90 per cent of the Earth’s surface – makes crystal growth more uniform. When we travel to distant places, we, too, develop new traits; we may become more sympathetic to the plight of others, more aware of

possible career paths or opportunities for our future self; even if it is just a more acute understanding that not all people live in the same way and believe the same things as we do.

In the 1940s Hemingway, who was born and raised in Illinois, rented a 15-acre farm in the small town of San Francisco de Paula, outside Havana, Cuba. The spacious Spanish colonial home had a separate tower room where Hemingway penned *The Old Man and the Sea*, a story inspired by his own experience deep-sea fishing off the coast of Cuba. The novella drew on Hemingway’s knowledge of Cuban culture, local fishing techniques, and his personal experience of fishing in Cuban waters; effectively, it was a narrative about his travels (“In order to write about life first you must live it”).

Looking back at their trip through Europe, my children fondly remember the villa in Spain. They have memories of peering out the windows late at night – watching drunks and wild children, brass bands, and fireworks. Instead of air conditioning, we slept under damp towels, surrounded by a street that woke at midnight and slumbered during the day.

Even though travel isn’t instrumental – you’re not going to get a job promotion or pay rise, award or accolade while travelling – this is perhaps what makes it so special. For a gap in time, you get to forget about work, status, career, money, health issues, and the like, and existential problems like what you’re going to do with the rest of your life. Instead, you just get to live. ■



For artists like Gauguin and van Gogh, travelling, or ‘being elsewhere’ invigorated their artistic spirit; the journeys were not just physical, but spiritual quests.



FLOURISHING

/ 'flʌrɪʃɪŋ /

noun:

1. to develop quickly and become successful or common;
2. to grow well; to be healthy and happy.

Origin:

Middle English: from Old French *floriss-*, lengthened stem of *florir*, based on Latin *florere*, from *flos*, *flor-* 'a flower'. The noun senses 'ornamental curve' and 'florid expression' come from an obsolete sense of the verb, 'adorn' (originally with flowers).

Source: Oxford English Dictionary









Women dancing, 1996, by David Brow, Lowell Historical Society





Interview with:
Angie Hobbs

Interviewer:
Zan Boag

Living a fully human life



Angie Hobbs is Professor of the Public Understanding of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield. Her chief interests are in ancient philosophy and literature, and in ethics and political theory from classical thought to the present; and she has published widely in these areas, including *Plato and the Hero*. Her most recent publication for a general audience is *Plato's Republic: a Ladybird Expert Book*. She contributes regularly to radio and TV programs and other media, including 25 appearances on *In Our Time with Melvyn Bragg*. Hobbs lectures and gives talks around the world: she has spoken at the World Economic Forum at Davos, the Houses of Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, Westminster Abbey, and the United States Air Force Training Academy in Colorado. She has been the guest on *Desert Island Discs*, *Private Passions*, and *Test Match Special*. She was a judge of the Man Booker International Prize 2019 and was on the World Economic Forum Global Future Council 2018-19 for Values, Ethics and Innovation.

Zan Boag: You're quoted as saying that you believe eudaimonia to be a hugely important and helpful concept, maybe even the most important concept that should be taught to people. Why is it so important, and how do you teach it to others?

Angie Hobbs: Okay, let's break that down into the two parts. The reason I really like *eudaimonia*, which in ancient Greek literally just means, "looked after by a beneficent guardian spirit", is because it's a more objective concept than happiness, or pleasure. It's much more to do with the fulfilment of your faculties, the actualisation of your potential, living a rich and fully human life. And it's something you can hang on to even in circumstances where feeling happy just isn't possible, let alone feeling pleasure.

You can't always feel happy. Awful things happen in life. You can't feel happy every moment or indeed every day. And sometimes it would just be insensitive: imagine if I went and turned on the TV and saw the destruction of some civilian population in Ukraine or elsewhere, and just laughed merrily.

The fulfilment of your faculties provides a solid framework. Of course, over time and place, the canvas will change, the picture will change, but you've got a solid frame. Other ethical approaches such as consequentialism

or deontology rights-based and duty-based ethics are act-centred, but I prefer an agent-centred ethics, which starts with these two really basic questions: "*How should I live?*" and "*What sort of person should I be?*". You don't initially have to be committed to virtue or morality to care about those questions.

I really like the fact that it's about the whole person living a whole life. It prompts you to ask questions about the shape of your life, the style of your life, the narrative of your life. And that brings us very quickly to relations between ethics and aesthetics – something which really appeals to me. But it also gets you asking immediately, "Well, OK, this is about my flourishing, but what kind of infrastructure needs to be in place socially, politically, in my community for me to flourish?" Very minimally, don't I need access to healthy food and clean air and water and housing and so on, and job opportunities and cultural and leisure opportunities too?

The links between ethics and aesthetics, the links between ethics and political and social theory and practice are immediately foregrounded. And so, for me, it's an ethic which is sensitive to the complexities of the lived human experience. And I find that very user-friendly. Your next question was: "*How do you teach it?*" Well, I think I would go at this in two ways. I would



Eudaimonia is something you can hang on to even in circumstances where feeling happy just isn't possible, let alone feeling pleasure.



say from quite a young age, really still in primary school, you can start to get children to think about what they think a good life is and what it involves, and also then what kinds of qualities, what kinds of excellences and skills, and what kind of support system are needed to make that good life possible, both for the individual and the community. You can get quite young children to start to reflect on these issues and ask questions.

But also, and this is something which is a real passion of mine, I think it is vital not just to get children to think about a good life, but also to enable them actually to live it. I'm really passionate that school should not just be about preparing children and young people for adulthood – very important though that is – but also be about giving children a chance to flourish as children, because these years form a significant part of any person's life. And for a few children, tragically, their school years are the whole of

their lives, so we absolutely owe it to children that these years should be years of flourishing in themselves – full, rich years in which their various intellectual and emotional and physical capabilities are given a chance to be exercised.

I think I first started to think about flourishing – rather than feeling happy or feeling pleasure – when I was about 19 and first came across Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, and the “pleasure machine” experiment: if someone offered to plug you into a machine that could make you feel pleasurable sensations for evermore, would you accept? You are assured that once you'd been plugged in, you would never regret it, but still, as you are now in your current state, would you agree? And I knew that I wouldn't.

And then I thought, well, supposing it's not a pleasure machine, but a happiness machine. If I knew I could be plugged into a machine where I would feel happy and content forever

as a subjective state, again, would I do it? And again, no, I wouldn't. I wouldn't want to turn on the news and smile happily at the sight of innocent civilians around the world being destroyed. So Nozick got me started.

And then, at university, I discovered Plato. Although my political views are very different from a lot of what the character Socrates says in *The Republic*, for instance, nevertheless Plato really resonated with me. He is a great artist as well as a great philosopher – and of course he never speaks in his own voice, so we can never be entirely sure whether he agrees with what the character of Socrates is saying. In the *Gorgias*, the character of Callicles starts off claiming confidently that the good is unqualified pleasure, but then through careful question and answer, Socrates gets him to agree that actually he doesn't think all pleasures are equally good. He hates cowardly pleasures, for example – he admires the ruthlessly strong and capable man of



action. While I certainly don't agree with Callicles' views either, Socrates' conversation with him again convinces me that unqualified pleasure is not the good.

So, from my late teens, I have felt that a good life was a rich, fully human life in which all my capacities were being exercised, including my capacity for feeling sad when that was appropriate, for feeling pain when that was appropriate, for empathising with the pain of others. I don't want to be endlessly cheerful and not respond to other people's pain.

It's interesting you talk about education and the years when children are at school. I think in the modern world we face a raft of challenges in that the formal education system isn't the only way children are being educated. There is a plethora of other means by which they're being educated, whether that's through online media, through television or online videos or whatever else it may be; through their interaction with their peers on social media, and so on. I think there was a time where the education system was perhaps the primary way children learnt how to behave and what was a good life. Now they're learning a whole range of other options for what a 'good life' might look like. And I think an issue with this is that the 'good life' that's presented to them through the media tends to be one that is not necessarily what will be a good life for them. It's a good life for the companies if you buy their products perhaps, but maybe not a good life for these children. How can this be countered?

That's such a good question. You use the phrase "the good life" at one point there and then you change to "a good life". And I would very much want to stick with "a good life" as we go on – unless we are specifically

discussing the views of philosophers who use the singular. I want to resist ancient Greek notions of the one ideal good life, which most of us will inevitably fail to reach. A good life. But you are right – they see a range of purportedly good lives on offer, and a lot of them are very materialistic and all about the consumption and display of material goods as a sign of success. Until social media platforms achieve the status of publishing platforms under editorial control, we have very little influence over that. And they're a mess at the moment, I agree.

We have to go at this another way. This is another reason I'm so passionate about philosophy in schools from really quite a young age. Unexamined extracurricular philosophy classes from as young as six, seven, eight – 'unexamined' because when Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living, he was not advocating the relentless testing of very young children... This would help give them both the critical thinking and reflective skills and also the creative and imaginative skills needed to assess the influx of material they're getting through the media, social media, their friends. It's not going to be perfect. We won't have complete control over this, but there is the chance of progress. We don't have to resign ourselves to the current wild west situation – it's not hopeless. And in my experience, young kids and teenage kids are often more savvy about cutting through the nonsense than older people.

Potentially they're presented with so many different ideas that they're actually learning, in some respects, quite deep ethical thinking at a young age. They're learning about the ways of the world at a much earlier age than I did, for example.



Yes, I think that's right. And it's interesting. I get parents, grandparents, teachers writing to me – and some young people, I am happy to say. I also get librarians writing to me. I think librarians are an underused resource in this project of helping children to become digitally literate. There are lots of people out there wanting to help, with resources to help, and we need to progress. We can't fix things completely, but we can make quite a lot of progress.

I'd like to just skip ahead beyond children and beyond the education system to adults – what it is that we can do to increase our chances of flourishing. In an interview some years back, you spoke about how the ancient Greek city state was constituted by overlapping circles of friendship, and that friendship was "a necessary constituent of a flourishing life". I think a lot

of people would agree with that idea. Aristotle went as far as to say that we need friendship to actualise our faculties, to be fully human. I'd like to know what you think of this idea, but also how friendship has changed, and whether it is a little bit more difficult for us to have these circles of friendship in the same way that was possible in the city-state back in Athens?

Let's start with Aristotle and then move on to the current day. We tend to get very nervous when Aristotle says he wants overlapping circles of friendship to be the building blocks of the state – we rightly get concerned about issues to do with nepotism and corruption. There is clearly the potential for problems here. However, there's also a lot we can learn from, I think. Let's look at why Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and indeed Plato before him, for example in the *Lysis*, think that friendship is so crucial to a flourishing life. Firstly, they just think it's a constituent of a good life – they would say *the* good life – we'll come back to that – in itself; it's just one of the pleasures of life. And they also think that friendship is vital for the state. Aristotle says friendship forms the relationships of trust, which he says are the building blocks of the state – relationships we are sadly lacking in at the moment. But also both Plato and Aristotle say you need friendship to acquire and display certain moral and intellectual virtues or excellences – the Greek *aretē* really just means “excellence”, and that term may be less off-putting to some. And they both argue that exercising our capacities for moral and intellectual excellence is intrinsic to the – singular for them! – good life.

For example, to acquire and display justice and generosity we need to be based in a community. And if we have good friendly relations with

people in that community, then both the acquisition and the practice are going to be easier. As for the intellectual excellences, though both Plato and Aristotle think at the final stages of philosophic ascent, we can practise them by ourselves, at least for a little bit, they both think that early on you need to do philosophy with other people, in dialogue and debate. Aristotle says explicitly towards the end of the *Ethics* that though the perfect human could do philosophy by themselves, we're frail mortals, and we don't really have the stamina and energy to keep going for long alone: we need a community of friends. Plato doesn't say that outright, but he certainly implies it in the fact that he writes dialogues – he always shows Socrates or another main interlocutor having discussions with groups, or at least one other person. You can of course have discussions with people who are hostile to you, and we see Socrates doing that with Calicles in the *Gorgias* and with Thrasymachus in Book 1 of the *Republic*, but you're usually going to have a much more productive philosophical discussion if you're all doing it in a collaborative and friendly spirit.

So both as a constituent of the – as they would term it – good life and also for the acquisition and display of moral and intellectual virtues, both Plato and Aristotle think that friendship is profoundly important. As we have seen, this is certainly not problem-free – during the pandemic many of us around the world saw politicians offering mates' rates to friends who were not always the best qualified to provide PPE, for instance. But though Plato's and Aristotle's thoughts on friendship raise issues, they are still really interesting and worth considering.

In respect of your second question about the problems with friendship

now, I still think it's really useful to look at Plato and Aristotle for guidance because they both think there are three different types of friendship. Plato talks in the *Lysis* about, firstly, friendship with opposites and then, secondly, friendships with people who are like you. However, he says that the very best kind of friendship is when a good person is friends with another good person for the other person's sake, because they are simply delighting and rejoicing in the other person's goodness and wishing them well. Aristotle also analyses friendship into three basic kinds, although his first two are rather different: utility friendships, and friendships based on shared interests, such sporting interests. But he then agrees with Plato that the best kind of friendship is when a good person is friends with another good person for the other person's sake, because they are delighting in their goodness. I think both of these accounts are helpful lenses through which to look at current challenges to friendship. When I read that some celebrity has invited 2,000 “close friends” to their 50th birthday party... nonsense, nobody has 2,000 close friends! Maybe 10 to 20 really good friends, but maybe only five, or fewer than five, friends who you really could ring up at 3:00 in the morning and they would drive several hundred miles to help you out.

In my view, I think friendships are usually best started face-to-face. You can then continue them online of course. I am certainly not dismissive of online communities – they were vital in the pandemic, and for people who are neurodiverse or suffer from agoraphobia, they can literally be a lifesaver. So I'm definitely not opposed to them, but I think in most cases it's best if you start the relationship face-to-face – you can just pick up so much more

Aristotle says friendship forms the relationships of trust, which he says are the building blocks of the state – relationships we are sadly lacking in at the moment.

from the body language, and simply sharing the same physical space is, I think, very important. And then continue the friendship both in person and online.

I'd like to stay on friendship – you mentioned earlier about the Greek notion of ethics, how one should live, who one should be. I just wonder where a friendship fits in here, in that friendship offers the opportunity to hold a mirror up to yourself: how you are living and how you behave. How important is this role of friendship in holding a mirror up to your own behaviour, your own ethics, and the way you live your life?

That's so interesting. Both Plato and Aristotle say that about friends. And Plato also says it about erotic lovers in the *Phaedrus*, you've got this notion of a mirror, in which you can see yourself reflected and come to understand yourself better. In fact, it can be even more effective than looking in an actual mirror, where we can focus on just what we want to see. Furthermore, they are both clear that a true friend, a real friend, should tell you when they think you are going off course. And you should also do that if you are a real friend, whether it's to an individual or your organisation or your country – you should have the courage to tell them, kindly but clearly, if you think they're making real mistakes.

Something I've been thinking about quite a bit recently is that Elon Musk said publicly that one of his children is on the spectrum and was struggling to make friends, and he wanted an AI system to be a friend for his lonely child, or the child he perceived to be lonely. There's a really interesting question about whether we can be friends with non-humans and with AI systems. It's tricky, isn't

it? Because in terms of Plato and Aristotle saying that the highest form of friendship is when a good person rejoices in the other person's goodness for their own sake and wishes them well for their own sake, I don't think that can happen at the moment with an AI system. And at the moment, as far as we know, an AI system can't feel those emotions of affection and care for you. The AI system may display, I won't say behaviours, may display activities which suggest they feel emotion and care, but as far as we know at the moment, they can't.

And even if they ever developed the capacity to feel emotion and care – which would be a really interesting ethical moment for humanity about how we treat AI systems – if they ever developed the capacity to feel, I don't know how we could know that they could feel. It's really tricky. At the moment, it looks as if an AI system could only fulfil Aristotle's utility friendship at best and function as a kind of training for higher forms of friendship, rather like a child has a toy and learns how to look after a person by looking after their toy and putting the toy to bed and feeding the toy and so on. I also worry that time spent with AI systems, and online friendships in general, might be time better spent developing real friendships with humans face-to-face.

It's interesting you mentioned both AI and also online friendships, because I wanted to ask you how much the notion of individual flourishing and living a good life has changed since Ancient Greece? Potentially a lot of this change has been quite recent because of the different influences that we now have. Our concept of what it means to flourish, I think, in contemporary society is fundamentally different to what it was in Ancient Greece. I think

a lot of the influences that we now have mean that our concept of flourishing has shifted somewhat. What do you think of that idea? Is it possible in contemporary society to flourish in the same way as was proposed to live a good life in Ancient Greece?

Okay, great. Let's divide that question into two, about issues that there are with Plato's and Aristotle's definition of what, in their view, is the – rather than 'a' – good life, and why we might have problems with that. And then we'll go on to look at the different influences now and how the content might have changed.

I think there are ways in which we really wouldn't want to replicate their notion of the good life. They both have a notion of one ideal human life, and a hierarchy beneath it. And most of us fail and can't get to the top. That's because, for Plato, his notion of flourishing is to do with the harmonisation of what he says are the three different faculties of the psyche: reason, a spirited element, and our appetites, each faculty with its own desires – reason for truth and reality; the spirited element for honour, respect and success; and the appetites for food, drink, sex and the money that may be needed to acquire them. Reason should be in control and should decide which are the best and healthiest of the other desires to fulfil. Aristotle also offers an objective account of flourishing constituted by the proper functioning of a tripartite psyche – in his case, the three psychic faculties, or 'parts' are rather different from those of Plato, but he agrees that reason should be in control and select which are the best and the healthiest desires to fulfil. It is this proper fulfilment, or actualisation, of the capabilities of the psyche which constitutes flourishing for him and is our human goal, or *telos*. So although there are differences between Plato's and Aristotle's accounts, they both propose a single hierarchy, and they both, very regrettably, think that mentally and physically

disabled people either don't possess all the requisite faculties to fulfil or can't fulfil them adequately. So they think that disabled people cannot reach very high up on this hierarchy.

Aristotle also claims that women cannot reach the pinnacle. He allows that women possess reason, but says it's not active in us because we are too emotional. If he had known about hormones, he would have said we were too hormonal. And Aristotle unfortunately also believes that there are 'natural' slaves, that there are some humans who simply don't possess sufficient reasoning ability to run their own lives well and are better off if other – ideally beneficent – people run their lives for them. I of course want to protest against this too. I want to get rid of the notion of *the* good life, a single ideal out of reach of most of us. I want to talk about *a* good life, a range of good lives which are specific to the individual, particular capabilities of that individual person.

So you don't get disabled people being denied the possibility of flourishing, for instance. Flourishing will consist in the fullest actualisation of whatever capabilities we individually possess. However, and this is an important 'however', we will still need particular local, social, maybe political, circumstances in which to fulfil this individual actualisation. All of us, whether disabled or not, we're all dependent on our social and political circumstances for our flourishing – that would remain true. We all need infrastructure; we all need a support system. But it doesn't mean that there's just one, single goal, which most of us will fail to reach.

And there's another, linked problem with Plato's and Aristotle's ethics of flourishing. If you propose a single hierarchy with the cleverest, most educated, and most rational few at the top, then this swiftly leads them to authoritarianism, paternalism – and maternalism too in Plato's case, as he argues for

The way Plato claims that this psychic harmony constitutes virtue and excellence as well as flourishing also has the potential to be really dangerous.

Philosopher-Queens as well as Philosopher-Kings – and indeed totalitarianism. They both argue – Plato more forcibly than Aristotle, but Aristotle also tends in this direction – that those of us who can't get to the top will be better off if these more intelligent, better educated, better qualified people run our lives for us. Again, I strongly want to protest against that too and say, "No!"

It's quite a dangerous idea.

It's hugely dangerous. For me, autonomy, personal agency, is absolutely crucial to living a good life. In the reworking of ancient virtue ethics and ethics of flourishing which I am trying to do, I really want to put agency and autonomy back into the picture and say that, in almost all cases, our intellectual and emotional excellences can't really be fulfilled unless we have personal agency.

I want to get rid of the single hierarchy which underlies the path to authoritarianism. Even though I find the ethics and politics of flourishing so rich and so interesting, I accept that, historically, it's an approach to ethics which has sometimes led down some pretty autocratic routes. I strongly want to resist those routes.

There are a couple more reasons I want us to update and modify Plato's and Aristotle's accounts of flourishing. As we have seen, Plato literally identifies your flourishing with your excellence, with your moral and intellectual excellence – both flourishing, *eudaimonia*, and excellence, *aretē*, are constituted by the same psychic harmony between the three faculties in your psyche. He also says in the *Republic* that this state of psychic harmony is a state of psychic health, which is a really interesting and influential idea. As far as we are aware, it's the first time, in western thought at least, that this notion of mental or psychic health is used. And these passages of the *Republic* were a direct influence on Freud – we know that, we have evidence about that.

So it really is important, this notion of an integrated self rather than a fragmented self. We know how crucial that is in modern accounts of psychic illness. That's great; however, the way Plato claims that this psychic harmony constitutes virtue and excellence as well as flourishing also has the potential to be really dangerous. Because if you are going to identify psychic health with virtue, that means you're going to identify psychic illness with vice. And that is going to open the door to serious political and psychiatric abuse. Leaders can say that a dissident who is protesting against their regime is not just vicious, but also mentally ill. And that they therefore need to be taken off to a sanatorium and have a lobotomy or drug 'therapy' or whatever.

This is the horrific scenario Solzhenitsyn denounces, or that we see in a book and film that affected me hugely when I was growing up, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I found the performances of Jack Nicholson, Will Sampson, and others in that film very powerful and disturbing. So, yes, the notion that your flourishing and excellence are this state of interior, psychic harmony

is a very rich theory, and it's something I write about a lot. But you do need to be aware of the dangers.

Another issue arises from Plato's claim that the spirited element of your psyche desires honour and respect and success. If that's the case, then what's the best way of achieving those things in your society? Would it not be to copy or emulate the behaviour of those who are already honoured and respected, the successful role models who already exist? And that can lead to quite a conservative tendency in these role model cultures, which is one of the points made about MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. I don't think MacIntyre himself necessarily wants his ideas to go down that conservative route, but there are issues and dangers, despite all the richness, and we need to be alert to them.

However, despite all these caveats, there is one enormous benefit in not just updating an ancient ethics and politics of flourishing, but also in some cases using the ancient versions. And that's in interfaith and faith–secular dialogue. I'm agnostic myself, but I do quite a lot of work with faith communities. And I have found that if you frame the discussions around flourishing in terms of Plato or Aristotle or the Stoics or Epicureans, people can feel much safer in that space because it's a time which obviously predates Christianity and Islam. These Classical and Hellenistic Greek thinkers don't predate Judaism, of course, but in these periods as far as we know they didn't really know much about Judaism and didn't interact much with Jewish thinkers. It's not until the turn of BCE and CE that you start to get significant interactions between Greek philosophy and Judaism. So if you frame discussions of flourishing within the context of the Classical and Hellenistic Greek thinkers, people feel they can discuss really quite profound ethical and religious questions without feeling that their own personal faith or personal

identity is being threatened. So in this respect, I have found the ancient versions a really useful common resource for everyone, in addition to providing the bases for our contemporary reworkings. But when I am engaging in these interfaith and faith–secular discussions, I also then say: "OK, we've started the debate in this safe space, but we do need to update these ideas."

And they are worth updating because, as we said at the beginning, one of the great advantages of focusing on flourishing rather than happiness or pleasure, it seems to me, is precisely because it is something that we can hang on to in those times when things are really challenging and uncertain. An ethics of flourishing is very helpful in good times too, of course, but it's perhaps particularly helpful in the bad times. I wrote about it quite a lot during the pandemic, for instance, and a fair number of people got in touch with me about it. They wanted something more secure, more solid when things were so uncertain – not just in terms of how the virus was going to mutate, but the fact that we were having to deal with the pandemic at the same time as climate change, and a rise in authoritarianism around the world and great political instability. Covid-19 is now an epidemic rather than a pandemic, I believe, but obviously climate change and the rise in authoritarianism and threats to democracy are still with us. And of course there are a number of terrible wars at the moment, and all the urgent issues over Black Lives Matter and various fights for social justice. I suppose every generation says that everything's very turbulent in world affairs, but it really does feel that way right now. And because of the internet, we're probably more aware than we would have been in previous centuries.

I think that's a big part of it, it is an awareness of what's happening around us. I suppose my question relates more

directly to those events that affects us personally. These larger events, of course they have a huge effect on our lives and on the lives of those around us. But I'm thinking about that very particular event, such as a war in one's own country or people who have completely run out of money so they're starving or they have some sort of anxiety that is completely debilitating, or a terminal illness and they're facing the last days of their life. In these sorts of instances, when someone is directly affected by an event of some sort, how do people find a way through? Is flourishing even relevant in these sorts of times when it's difficult or near impossible, or is it just a matter of getting by?

Again, unless you've really lost every single capacity, there's usually something you can do with your intellectual or your emotional or your imaginative or your physical faculties to make things just that tiny, tiny fraction better, both for yourself and those around you. It could be something just like holding the hand of somebody dying next to you, or making a thoughtful will or planting a tree that future generations can enjoy. There's usually something that you can do to improve the situation, if only by a very small amount.

I'm not remotely claiming that I would rise to the challenge in really terrible circumstances. But throughout history, we have seen people behave extraordinarily well in their dying moments or in moments of deep pain and affliction and fear.

To come back to what you were talking about before when it comes to the social and political issues that we are dealing with these days – due to some of these social and political issues, I feel that perhaps the ability to flourish isn't a level playing field. What do you think about the notion of equality of flourishing?

OK, that gets us back to our earlier discussion when I said I rejected the notion of a single hierarchy. But I also said that despite the fact I want a

range of good lives and not *the* good life, there still needs to be an infrastructure – and that's true for all of us, whether able-bodied or not, whatever our level of ability or whatever our gender, there needs to be a support system. Very, very few of us can flourish by ourselves. And clearly the social and political playing field is very far from level.

Plato makes the point incisively in the *Republic*. He says that occasionally an exceptional person may appear who can achieve excellence in adverse social and political conditions, but most of us need the right environment. He is probably thinking of Socrates as the exception, and obviously Socrates' political community was so far from supportive that it put him to death.

Most of us, however, need considerable social support. It's one of the reasons Plato just rips everything up in the *Republic* and says, "We've got to start again. We need a new society. We need new role models. We need new heroes. Things are too corrupt."

Even before we consider role models and heroes, however, it's obvious that we all need decent accommodation and warmth and clean air and water and healthy food and access to work opportunities and human contact and social and leisure opportunities and so on. And, no, these things are not remotely equally available – that's why I want to make this distinction really clearly between a range of good lives adapted to individual capabilities and the fact that they will all still need an infrastructure in order to be realised.

We need a supportive community to fully develop and display our faculties. And in my view, although all the ancient Greek philosophers adopt an agent-centred ethics of flourishing in various ways, I think the theories of Plato and Aristotle are perhaps more capable of being updated. With the Stoics, I struggle with their belief that everything's been providentially arranged

for the best – even if things look really awful, they actually make sense, if only we could see the bigger divine plan. I think that can lead far too quickly to passivity, and not taking action. To be fair, the Modern Stoicism movement – or perhaps more accurately movements – don't tend to focus on the providential plan. However, I still personally prefer Aristotle's view that, no, some things should make us angry. So long as we control that anger and use it as a fuel for social change and social justice. There is clearly not even an approximation of a level playing field, and we need to work hard to improve things.

And I think it's getting worse. I think the divergences in wealth, education, health outcomes are getting worse in many countries, including my own. And between countries the inequalities are even starker. That's why we're seeing such high levels of migration across the world at the moment. And why wouldn't you, if you felt you'd been dealt a really unfair hand in life? Many migrants, of course, are genuinely under threat, genuine asylum seekers. But even if you are an economic migrant, why would you not want to seek a better life for yourself and your family? Humans have always moved; unless you come from a long line living in or near the Rift Valley, all our ancestors have moved. We're an amazing species. Look at the people who made it to Australia and New Zealand.

This is one of the main reasons I am attracted to an ethics of flourishing – because you can transition so quickly to a politics of flourishing. Almost everyone cares about their own flourishing and wellbeing, even if they proclaim, "I'm very selfish. I'm not interested in the greater good." I don't mind the term 'wellbeing', but I prefer 'flourishing' because it's active, and because it links us vividly to the natural world.

Anyway, most people care about their own flourishing or wellbeing, and then you can usually quite quickly

get them to see how things like the pandemic, or climate change, show us how intimately our own flourishing is connected to that of those around us, and conditions around us. In the pandemic, unless you were going to lock yourself away in your house forever, and just have food and medicines delivered to your door, if you were ever going to go out again, then you needed to care about vaccines and treatments and the health of those around you on the tube or the train. And the quality of the air that we breathe, and of the water that we drink, are obviously being affected by climate change. Most people can very quickly come to see how their personal individual wellbeing is affected by their community and environment.

This approach to ethics, then, doesn't start from saying "be moral", which some people might immediately reject. It starts from something most people can agree with: "Do you personally want to live a good life?" And then you expand outwards. The notion of the expanding circle and the way the ethics of flourishing then expands to a politics of flourishing, I find very helpful and appealing.

I'd like to look at the idea of flourishing as a work in progress – something that we are continually working on. You mentioned the ever-changing conditions that we deal with, whether it's climate change or the pandemic, or political and social unrest. There is an ever-changing environment, and we are working on our ability to flourish within these changing circumstances. My question is, are there certain conditions under which it's more likely for us to flourish, and can we increase the likelihood of living a flourishing life?

This again is another reason I am so keen on philosophy classes in schools, unexamined philosophy classes. Of course I would also like philosophy to be an examined option later, but definitely unexamined philosophy classes

for all. But I am in addition a strong advocate of philosophy as a lifelong learning project – something like *New Philosopher* is a resource for people who want to start or continue their philosophical adventures. Because philosophy can help us to reflect on questions of what a good life might be, and what kind of qualities, skills and infrastructure might be needed to attain it. But it can also be a constituent of a good life in itself – not a necessary or sufficient constituent, but something which can help us actualise some of our intellectual and emotional faculties. I've

what makes people feel that they're living a good life, a flourishing life. And again and again, a sense of purpose or meaning crops up. There's certainly no guarantee that studying philosophy will enable you to say "Aha! This is the meaning of life." But simply asking the questions and reflecting on them and having discussions about them can help give you a sense that your life has some purpose and meaning, some narrative structure. Even feeling that you are working towards trying to find out whether there is purpose or meaning can be fruitful.

To sum up, philosophy is not necessary or sufficient for living a good life, but it can certainly be a really helpful resource, and it can be one of the constituents of a good life, precisely because it helps us actualise not just our intellectual but also our imaginative and affective faculties, which both Plato and Aristotle and other proponents of an ethics of flourishing have said are vital for us to fulfil, to get a sense of a rich, full, ongoing human life, one that's always in development. I said that it provides a solid frame, but that the picture within the frame can change. And the picture doesn't just change across communities through time and place, it can change in our own lives.

Music gave me enormous joy when I was 20, and it still gives me deep joy, but my musical tastes have changed a bit – I listen to a lot more Beethoven and Bach now, though I still love Dylan and the Stones. Living a good life is an ongoing project, and I want it to start with unexamined philosophy in primary schools, but I also want resources like *New Philosopher* to help people to continue that ongoing project. It can be part of living a good life in itself, but it can also help give you the critical and reflective skills, and the stimulus to imagination and creativity and empathy, which can all foster a good life. ■



written elsewhere about how philosophy can help provide resilience and mental agility, and also creativity and imagination and empathy. All things which I think can help us develop intellectually and emotionally and in ways which will increase our chances of finding purpose and meaning in life.

There are a number of projects around the world, such as the Harvard Flourishing Program and the Centre for Character and Virtues at Birmingham University, which are looking into



Seurat



Bathers at Asnieres, 1885, Georges Seurat



Flourishing

The Activist

Helen Keller
1880–1968

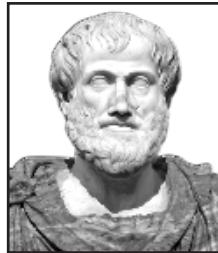
Visible goal



The Philosopher

Aristotle
384–322 BCE

Noble actions



The Absurdist

Albert Camus
1913–1960

The absurd



Most people measure their happiness in terms of physical pleasure and material possession. Could they win some visible goal which they have set on the horizon, how happy they could be! Lacking this gift or that circumstance, they would be miserable. If happiness is to be so measured, I who cannot hear or see have every reason to sit in a corner with folded hands and weep. If I am happy in spite of my deprivations, if my happiness is so deep that it is a faith, so thoughtful that it becomes a philosophy of life, – if, in short, I am an optimist, my testimony to the creed of optimism is worth hearing.

The man who does not rejoice in noble actions is not even good; since no one would call a man just who did not enjoy acting justly, nor any man liberal who did not enjoy liberal actions; and similarly in all other cases. If this is so, virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant. But they are also good and noble, and have each of these attributes in the highest degree, since the good man judges well about these attributes; his judgment is such as we have described. Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world.

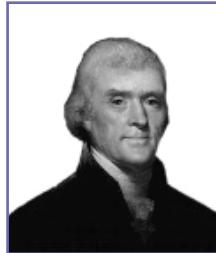
One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What! – by such narrow ways – ?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd discovery. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness.

**What is flourishing? How important is it to our wellbeing?
Here are six eminent thinkers' views on flourishing and
what it means to us.**

The Statesman

Thomas Jefferson
1743–1826

Inalienable rights



We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organising its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

The Progressive

John Rawls
1921–2002

Two aspects

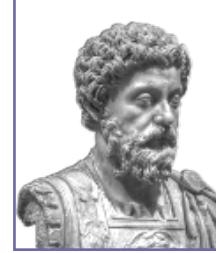


First of all, happiness has two aspects: one is the successful execution of a rational plan (the schedule of activities and aims) which a person strives to realise, the other is his state of mind, his sure confidence supported by good reasons that his success will endure. Being happy involves both a certain achievement in action and a rational assurance about the outcome. This definition of happiness is objective: plans are to be adjusted to the conditions of our life and our confidence must rest upon sound beliefs. Alternatively, happiness might be defined subjectively as follows: a person is happy when he believes that he is in the way of a successful execution (more or less) of a rational plan, and so on as before, adding the rider that if he is mistaken or deluded, then by contingency and coincidence nothing happens to disabuse him of his misconceptions.

The Stoic

Marcus Aurelius
121–180

Without fear



If you do the job in a principled way, with diligence, energy and patience, if you keep yourself free of distractions, and keep the spirit inside you undamaged, as if you might have to give it back at any moment. If you can embrace this without fear or expectation – can find fulfilment in what you're doing now, as Nature intended, and in superhuman truthfulness (every word, every utterance) – then your life will be happy.



**Even the dullest work is to most people
less painful than idleness.**

By Bertrand Russell

The pleasures of work

Whether work should be placed among the causes of happiness or among the causes of unhappiness may perhaps be regarded as a doubtful question. There is certainly much work which is exceedingly irksome, and an excess of work is always very painful. I think, however, that, provided work is not excessive in amount, even the dullest work is to most people less painful than idleness. There are in work all grades, from mere relief of tedium up to the profoundest delights, according to the nature of the work and the abilities of the worker. Most of the work that most people have to do is not in itself interesting, but even such work has certain great advantages. To begin with, it fills a good many hours of the day without the need of deciding what one shall do. Most people, when they are left free to fill their own time according to their own choice are at a loss to think of anything sufficiently pleasant to be worth doing. And whatever they decide on, they are troubled by the feeling that something else would have been pleasanter. To be able to fill

leisure intelligently is the last product of civilisation, and at present very few people have reached this level. Moreover, the exercise of choice is in itself tiresome. Except to people with unusual initiative it is positively agreeable to be told what to do at each hour of the day, provided the orders are not too unpleasant. Most of the idle rich suffer unspeakable boredom as the price of their freedom from drudgery. At times they may find relief by hunting big game in Africa, or by flying round the world, but the number of such sensations is limited, especially after youth is past. Accordingly, the more intelligent rich men work nearly as hard as if they were poor, while rich women for the most part keep themselves busy with innumerable trifles of whose earth-shaking importance they are firmly persuaded

Work, therefore, is desirable, first and foremost, as a preventive of boredom, for the boredom that a man feels when he is doing necessary though uninteresting work is as nothing in comparison with the boredom that he feels when he has nothing to

do with his days. With this advantage of work another is associated, namely that it makes holidays much more delicious when they come. Provided a man does not have to work so hard as to impair his vigour, he is likely to find far more zest in his free time than an idle man could possibly find.

The second advantage of most paid work and of some unpaid work is that it gives chances of success and opportunities for ambition. In most work success is measured by income, and while our capitalistic society continues, this is inevitable. It is only where the best work is concerned that this measure ceases to be the natural one to apply. The desire that men feel to increase their income is quite as much a desire for success as for the extra comforts that a higher income can procure. However dull work may be, it becomes bearable if it is a means of building up a reputation, whether in the world at large or only in one's own circle. Continuity of purpose is one of the most essential ingredients of happiness in the long run, and for most men this comes chiefly through

their work. In this respect those women whose lives are occupied with housework are much less fortunate than men, or than women who work outside the home. The domesticated wife does not receive wages, has no means of bettering herself, is taken for granted by her husband (who sees practically nothing of what she does), and is valued by him not for her housework but for quite other qualities. Of course, this does not apply to those women who are sufficiently well-to-do to make beautiful houses and beautiful gardens and become the envy of their neighbours; but such women are comparatively few, and for the great majority housework cannot bring as much satisfaction as work of other kinds brings to men and to professional women.

The satisfaction of killing time and of affording some outlet, however modest, for ambition, belongs to most work, and is sufficient to make even a man whose work is dull happier on the average than a man who has no work at all. But when work is interesting, it is capable of giving satisfaction of a far higher order than mere relief from tedium. The kinds of work in which there is some interest may be arranged in a hierarchy. I shall begin with those which are only mildly interesting and end with those that are worthy to absorb the whole energies of a great man.

Two chief elements make work interesting: first, the exercise of skill, and second, construction.

Every man who has acquired some unusual skill enjoys exercising it until it has become a matter of course, or until he can no longer improve himself. This motive to activity begins in early childhood: a boy who can stand on his head becomes reluctant to stand on his feet. A great deal of work gives the same pleasure that is to be derived from games of skill. The work of a lawyer or a politician must contain in a more delectable form a great deal of the same pleasure that is to be derived from playing bridge. Here, of course, there is not only the exercise of skill but the outwitting of a skilled opponent. Even where this competitive element is absent, however, the performance of difficult feats is agreeable. A man who can do stunts in an aeroplane finds the pleasure so great that for the sake of it he is willing to risk his life. I imagine that an able surgeon, in spite of the painful circumstances in which his work is done, derives satisfaction from the exquisite precision of his operations. The same kind of pleasure, though in a less intense form, is to be derived from a great deal of work of a humbler kind. I have even heard of plumbers who enjoyed their work, though I have never had the good fortune to meet one. All skilled work can be pleasurable, provided the skill required is either variable or capable of indefinite improvement. If these conditions are absent, it will cease to be interesting when a man has acquired his maximum skill. A man who runs

three-mile races will cease to find pleasure in this occupation when he passes the age at which he can beat his own previous record. Fortunately there is a very considerable amount of work in which new circumstances call for new skill and a man can go on improving, at any rate until he has reached middle age. In some kinds of skilled work, such as politics, for example, it seems that men are at their best between sixty and seventy, the reason being that in such occupations a wide experience of other men is essential. For this reason successful politicians are apt to be happier at the age of seventy than any other men of equal age. Their only competitors in this respect are the men who are the heads of big businesses.

There is, however, another element possessed by the best work, which is even more important as a source of happiness than is the exercise of skill.

This is the element of constructiveness. In some work, though by no means in most, something is built up which remains as a monument when the work is completed. We may distinguish construction from destruction by the following criterion. In construction the initial stage of affairs is comparatively haphazard, while the final state of affairs embodies a purpose; in destruction the reverse is the case: the initial state of affairs embodies a purpose, while the final state of affairs is haphazard, that is to say, all that is intended by the destroyer is to produce a state of affairs which does

But when work is interesting, it is capable of giving satisfaction of a far higher order than mere relief from tedium.

not embody a certain purpose. This criterion applies in the most literal and obvious case, namely the construction and destruction of buildings. In constructing a building a previously made plan is carried out, whereas in destroying it no one decides exactly how the materials are to lie when the demolition is complete. Destruction is of course necessary very often as a preliminary to subsequent construction; in that case it is part of a whole which is constructive. But not infrequently a man will engage in activities of which the purpose is destructive without regard to any construction that may come after. Frequently he will conceal this from himself by the belief that he is only sweeping away in order to build afresh, but it is generally possible to unmask this pretence, when it is a pretence, by asking him what the subsequent construction is to be. On this subject it will be found that he will speak vaguely and without enthusiasm, whereas on the preliminary destruction he has spoken precisely and with zest. This applies to not a few revolutionaries and militarists and other apostles of violence. They are actuated, usually without their own knowledge, by hatred; the destruction of what they hate is their real purpose, and they are comparatively indifferent to the question of what is to come after it. Now I cannot deny that in the work of destruction as in the work of construction there may be joy. It is a fiercer joy, perhaps at moments more intense, but it is less profoundly satisfying, since the result is one in which little satisfaction is to be found. You kill your enemy, and when he is dead your occupation is gone, and the satisfaction that you derive from victory quickly fades. The work of construction, on the other hand, when completed, is delightful to contemplate, and moreover is never so fully completed that there is nothing

further to do about it. The most satisfactory purposes are those that lead on indefinitely from one success to another without ever coming to a dead end; and in this respect it will be found that construction is a greater source of happiness than destruction.

Perhaps it would be more correct to say that those who find satisfaction in construction find in it greater satisfaction than the lovers of destruction can find in destruction, for if once you have become filled with hate you will not easily derive from construction the pleasure which another man would derive from it.

At the same time few things are so likely to cure the habit of hatred as the opportunity to do constructive work of an important kind.

The satisfaction to be derived from success in a great constructive enterprise is one of the most massive that life has to offer, although unfortunately in its highest forms it is only open to men of exceptional ability. Nothing can rob a man of the happiness of successful achievement in an important piece of work, unless it be the proof that after all his work was bad. There are many forms of such satisfaction. The man who by a scheme of irrigation has caused the wilderness to blossom like the rose enjoys it in one of its most tangible forms. The creation of an organisation may be a work of supreme importance. So is the work of those few statesmen who have devoted their lives to producing order out of chaos, of whom Lenin is the supreme type in our day. The most obvious examples are artists and men of science.

Shakespeare says of his verse: 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, so long lives this.' And it cannot be doubted that the thought consoled him for misfortune. In his sonnets he maintains that the thought of his friend reconciled him to life, but I cannot help suspecting that the sonnets he wrote

to his friend were even more effective for this purpose than the friend himself. Great artists and great men of science do work which is in itself delightful; while they are doing it, it secures them the respect of those whose respect is worth having, which gives them the most fundamental kind of power, namely power over men's thoughts and feelings. They have also the most solid reasons for thinking well of themselves. This combination of fortunate circumstances ought, one would think, to be enough to make any man happy. Nevertheless it is not so. Michelangelo for example, was a profoundly unhappy man and maintained (not, I am sure, with truth) that he would not have troubled to produce works of art if he had not had to pay the debts of his impecunious relations. The power to produce great art is very often, though by no means always, associated with a temperamental unhappiness, so great that but for the joy which the artist derives from his work he would be driven to suicide. We cannot therefore maintain that even the greatest work must make a man happy; we can only maintain that it must make him less unhappy. Men of science, however, are far less often temperamentally unhappy than artists are, and in the main the men who do great work in science are happy men, whose happiness is derived primarily from their work.

One of the causes of unhappiness among intellectuals in the present day is that so many of them, especially those whose skill is literary, find no opportunity for the independent exercise of their talents, but have to hire themselves out to rich corporations directed by Philistines, who insist upon their producing what they themselves regard as pernicious nonsense. If you were to inquire among journalists either in England or America whether they believed in

the policy of the newspaper for which they worked, you would find, I believe, that only a small minority do so; the rest, for the sake of a livelihood, prostitute their skill to purposes which they believe to be harmful. Such work cannot bring any real satisfaction, and in the course of reconciling himself to the doing of it a man has to make himself so cynical that he can no longer derive wholehearted satisfaction from anything whatever. I cannot condemn men who undertake work of this sort, since starvation is too serious an alternative, but I think that where it is possible to do work that is satisfactory to a man's constructive impulses without entirely starving, he will be well advised from the point of view of his own happiness if he chooses it in preference to work much more highly paid but not seeming to him worth doing on its own account. Without self-respect genuine happiness is scarcely possible.

And the man who is ashamed of his work can hardly achieve self-respect.

The satisfaction of constructive work, though it may, as things are, be the privilege of a minority, can nevertheless be the privilege of a quite large minority. Any man who is his own master in his work can feel it; so can any man whose work appears to him useful and requires considerable skill. The production of satisfactory children is a difficult constructive work capable of affording profound satisfaction. Any woman who has achieved this can feel that as a result of her labour the world contains something of value which it would not otherwise contain.

Human beings differ profoundly in regard to the tendency to regard their lives as a whole: To some men it is natural to do so, and essential to happiness to be able to do so with some satisfaction. To others life is a series of detached incidents without

directed movement and without unity. I think the former sort are more likely to achieve happiness than the latter, since they will gradually build up those circumstances from which they can derive contentment and self-respect, whereas the others will be blown about by the winds of circumstance now this way, now that, without ever arriving at any haven. The habit of viewing life as a whole is an essential part both of wisdom and of true morality, and is one of the things which ought to be encouraged in education. Consistent purpose is not enough to make life happy, but it is an almost indispensable condition of a happy life. And consistent purpose embodies itself mainly in work.

Impersonal interests

I wish to consider not those major interests about which a man's life is built, but those minor interests which fill his leisure and afford relaxation from the tenseness of his more serious preoccupations. In the life of the average man his wife and children, his work and his financial position occupy the main part of his anxious and serious thought. Even if he has extra-matrimonial love affairs, they probably do not concern him as profoundly in themselves as in their possible effects upon his home life. The interests which are bound up with his work I am not for the present regarding as impersonal interests. A man of science, for example, must keep abreast of research in his own line. Towards such research his feelings have the warmth and vividness belonging to something intimately concerned with his career, but if he reads about research in some quite other science with which he is not professionally concerned he reads in quite a different spirit, not professionally, less critically, more disinterestedly. Even if he has to use his mind in order to

follow what is said, his reading is nevertheless a relaxation, because it is not connected with his responsibilities: If the book interests him, his interest is impersonal in a sense which cannot be applied to the books upon his own subject. It is such interests lying outside the main activities of a man's life that I wish to speak about in the present chapter.

One of the sources of unhappiness, fatigue, and nervous strain is inability to be interested in anything that is not of practical importance in one's own life. The result of this is that the conscious mind gets no rest from a certain small number of matters, each of which probably involves some anxiety and some element of worry. Except in sleep the conscious mind is never allowed to lie fallow while subconscious thought matures its gradual wisdom. The result is excitability, lack of sagacity, irritability, and a loss of sense of proportion. All these are both causes and effects of fatigue. As a man gets more tired, his external interests fade, and as they fade he loses the relief which they afford him and becomes still more tired. This vicious circle is only too apt to end in a breakdown. What is restful about external interests is the fact that they do not call for any action. Making decisions and exercising volition are very fatiguing, especially if they have to be done hurriedly and without the help of the subconscious.

Men who feel that they must 'sleep on it' before coming to an important decision are profoundly right. But it is not only in sleep that the subconscious mental processes can work. They can work also while a man's conscious mind is occupied elsewhere. The man who can forget his work when it is over and not remember it until it begins again next day is likely to do his work far better than the man who worries about it throughout the intervening hours.

And it is very much easier to forget work at the times when it ought to be forgotten if a man has many interests other than his work than it is if he has not. It is, however, essential that these interests should not exercise those very faculties which have been exhausted by his day's work. They should not involve will and quick decision, they should not, like gambling, involve any financial element, and they should as a rule not be so exciting as to produce emotional fatigue and preoccupy the subconscious as well as the conscious mind.

A great many amusements fulfil all these conditions. Watching games, going to the theatre, playing golf, are all irreproachable from this point of view. For a man of a bookish turn of mind, reading unconnected with his professional activities is very satisfactory. However important a worry may be, it should not be thought about throughout the whole of the waking hours.

In this respect there is a great difference between men and women. Men on the whole find it very much easier to forget their work than women do. In the case of women whose work is in the home this is natural, since they do not have the change of place that a man has when he leaves the office to help them to acquire a new mood. But if I am not mistaken, women whose work is outside the home differ from men in this respect

almost as much as those who work at home. They find it, that is to say, very difficult to be interested in anything that has for them no practical importance. Their purposes govern their thoughts and their activities, and they seldom become absorbed in some wholly irresponsible interest. I do not of course deny that exceptions exist, but I am speaking of what seems to me to be the usual rule. In a women's college, for example, the women teachers, if no man is present, talk shop in the evening, while in a men's college the men do not. This characteristic appears to women as a higher degree of conscientiousness than that of men, but I do not think that in the long run it improves the quality of their work. And it tends to produce a certain narrowness of outlook leading not infrequently to a kind of fanaticism.

All impersonal interests, apart from their importance as relaxation, have various other uses. To begin with, they help a man to retain his sense of proportion. It is very easy to become so absorbed in our own pursuits, our own circle, our own type of work, that we forget how small a part this is of the total of human activity and how many things in the world are entirely unaffected by what we do. *'Why should one remember this?'* you may ask. There are several answers. In the first place, it is good to have as

true a picture of the world as is compatible with necessary activities. Each of us is in the world for no very long time, and within the few years of his life has to acquire whatever he is to know of this strange planet and its place in the universe. To ignore our opportunities for knowledge, imperfect as they are, is like going to the theatre and not listening to the play. The world is full of things that are tragic or comic, heroic or bizarre or surprising, and those who fail to be interested in the spectacle that it offers are forgoing one of the privileges that life has to offer.

Then again a sense of proportion is very valuable and at times very consoling. We are all inclined to get unduly excited, unduly strained, unduly impressed with the importance of the little corner of the world in which we live, and of the little moment of time comprised between our birth and death. In this excitement and overestimation of our own importance there is nothing desirable. True, it may make us work harder, but it will not make us work better. A little work directed to a good end is better than a great deal of work directed to a bad end, though the apostles of the strenuous life seem to think otherwise. Those who care much for their work are always in danger of falling into fanaticism, which consists essentially in remembering one or two

And it is very much easier to forget work at the times when it ought to be forgotten if a man has many interests other than his work than it is if he has not.

desirable things while forgetting all the rest, and in supposing that in the pursuit of these one or two any incidental harm of other sorts is of little account. Against this fanatical temper there is no better prophylactic than a large conception of the life of man and his place in the universe. This may seem a very big thing to invoke in such a connection; but apart from this particular use it is in itself a thing of great value.

It is one of the defects of modern higher education that it has become too much a training in the acquisition of certain kinds of skill, and too little an enlargement of the mind and heart by any impartial survey of the world. You become absorbed, let us say, in a political contest, and work hard for the victory of your own party. So far, so good. But it may happen in the course of the contest that some opportunity of victory presents itself which involves the use of methods calculated to increase hatred, violence and suspicion in the world. For example, you may find that the best road to victory is to insult some foreign nation. If your mental purview is limited to the present, or if you have imbibed the doctrine that what is called efficiency is the only thing that matters, you will adopt such dubious means. Through them you will be victorious in your immediate purpose, while the more distant consequences may be disastrous. If, on the other hand, you have as part of the habitual furniture of your mind the past ages of man, his slow and partial emergence out of barbarism, and the brevity of his total existence in comparison with astronomical epochs – if, I say, such thoughts have moulded your habitual feelings, you will realise that the momentary battle upon which you are engaged cannot be of such importance as to

risk a backward step towards the darkness out of which we have been slowly emerging. Nay, more, if you suffer defeat in your immediate objective, you will be sustained by the same sense of its momentariness that made you unwilling to adopt degrading weapons. You will have, beyond your immediate activities, purposes that are distant and slowly unfolding, in which you are not an isolated individual but one of the great army of those who have led mankind towards a civilised existence. If you have attained to this outlook, a certain deep happiness will never leave you, whatever your personal fate may be. Life will become a communion with the great of all ages, and personal death no more than a negligible incident.

If I had the power to organise higher education as I should wish it to be, I should seek to substitute for the old orthodox religions – which appeal to few among the young, and those as a rule the least intelligent and the most obscurantist – something which is perhaps hardly to be called religion, since it is merely a focusing of attention upon well-ascertained facts. I should seek to make young people vividly aware of the past, vividly realising that the future of man will in all likelihood be immeasurably longer than his past, profoundly conscious of the minuteness of the planet upon which we live and of the fact that life on this planet is only a temporary incident; and at the same time with these facts which tend to emphasise the insignificance of the individual I should present quite another set of facts designed to impress upon the mind of the young the greatness of which the individual is capable, and the knowledge that throughout all the depths of stellar space nothing of equal value is known to us. Spinoza

long ago wrote of human bondage and human freedom; his form and his language make his thought difficult of access to all but students of philosophy, but the essence of what I wish to convey differs little from what he has said.

A man who has once perceived, however temporarily and however briefly, what makes greatness of soul, can no longer be happy if he allows himself to be petty, self-seeking, troubled by trivial misfortunes, dreading what fate may have in store for him. The man capable of greatness of soul will open wide the windows of his mind, letting the winds blow freely upon it from every portion of the universe. He will see himself and life and the world as truly as our human limitations will permit; realising the brevity and minuteness of human life, he will realise also that in individual minds is concentrated whatever of value the known universe contains. And he will see that the man whose mind mirrors the world becomes in a sense as great as the world. In emancipation from the fears that beset the slave of circumstance he will experience a profound joy, and through all the vicissitudes of his outward life he will remain in the depths of his being a happy man.

Leaving these large speculations and returning to our more immediate subject, namely the value of impersonal interests, there is another consideration which makes them a great help towards happiness. Even in the most fortunate lives there are times when things go wrong. Few men except bachelors have never quarrelled with their wives; few parents have not endured grave anxiety owing to the illnesses of their children; few businessmen have avoided times of financial stress; few professional men have not known periods

when failure stared them in the face. At such times a capacity to become interested in something outside the cause of anxiety is an immense boon. At such times, when in spite of anxiety there is nothing to be done at the moment, one man will play chess, another will read detective stories, a third will become absorbed in popular astronomy, a fourth will console himself by reading about the excavations at Ur of the Chaldees. Any one of these four is acting wisely, whereas the man who does nothing to distract his mind and allows his trouble to acquire a complete empire over him is acting unwisely and making himself less fit to cope with his troubles when the moment for action arrives. Very similar considerations apply to irreparable sorrows such as the death of some person deeply loved. No good is done to anyone by allowing oneself to become sunk in grief on such an occasion. Grief is unavoidable and must be expected, but everything that can be done should be done to minimise it. It is mere sentimentality to aim, as some do, at extracting the very uttermost

drop of misery from misfortune. I do not of course deny that a man may be broken by sorrow, but I do say that everyman should do his utmost to escape this fate, and should seek any distraction, however trivial, provided it is not in itself harmful or degrading. Among those that I regard as harmful and degrading I include such things as drunkenness and drugs, of which the purpose is to destroy thought, at least for the time being. The proper course is not to destroy thought but to turn it into new channels, or at any rate into channels remote from the present misfortune. It is difficult to do this if life has hitherto been concentrated upon a very few interests and those few have now become suffused with sorrow. To bear misfortune well when it comes, it is wise to have cultivated in happier times a certain width of interests, so that the mind may find prepared for it some undisturbed place suggesting other associations and other emotions than those which are making the present difficult to bear.

A man of adequate vitality and zest will surmount all misfortunes

by the emergence after each blow of an interest in life and the world which cannot be narrowed down so much as to make one loss fatal. To be defeated by one loss or even by several is not something to be admired as a proof of sensibility, but something to be deplored as a failure in vitality. All our affections are at the mercy of death, which may strike down those whom we love at any moment. It is therefore necessary that our lives should not have that narrow intensity which puts the whole meaning and purpose of our life at the mercy of accident. For all these reasons the man who pursues happiness wisely will aim at the possession of a number of subsidiary interests in addition to those central ones upon which his life is built. ■

From Bertrand Russell's
The Pursuit of Happiness.







Two trees

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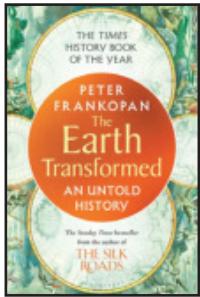
An Olive-tree taunted a Fig-tree with the loss of her leaves at a certain season of the year. "You," she said, "lose your leaves every autumn, and are bare till the spring: whereas I, as you see, remain green and flourishing all the year round." Soon afterwards there came a heavy fall of snow, which settled on the leaves of the Olive so that she bent and broke under the weight; but the flakes fell harmlessly through the bare branches of the Fig, which survived to bear many another crop.

From Aesop's Fables, by
Samuel Croxall



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The Earth Transformed

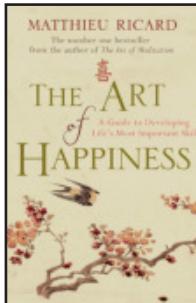


Peter Frankopan

A deeper interest

Engagement with new parts of the world spurred some to take a deeper interest in what could be learned from geography, from history and from science. Writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, the philosopher David Hume considered what the authors Horace, Juvenal and Diodorus Siculus had said about the weather and climate in Rome as well as elsewhere in the empire. It would have been preferable, he notes, "had the ancients known the use of thermometers". Nevertheless, comparing the accounts with the present day, it is reasonable to conclude that "the winters are now much more temperate at Rome than formerly".

The Art of Happiness

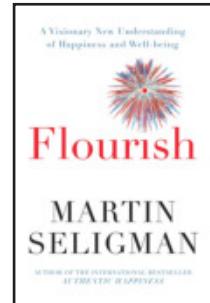


Matthieu Ricard

Thinking about happiness

Is happiness a skill that, once acquired, endures through the ups and downs of life? There are a thousand ways of thinking about happiness, and countless philosophers have offered their own. For Saint Augustine, happiness is "a rejoicing in the truth". For Immanuel Kant, happiness must be rational and devoid of any personal taint, while for Marx it is about growth through work. "What constitutes happiness is a matter of dispute," Aristotle wrote, "and the popular account of it is not the same as that given by the philosophers."

Flourish



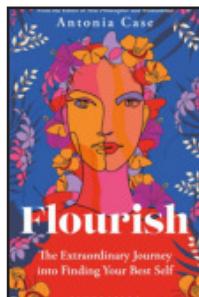
Martin Seligman

A calling

I did not choose positive psychology. It called me. It was what I wanted from the very first, but experimental psychology and then clinical psychology were the only games in town that were even close to what was calling me. I have no less mystical way to put it. Vocation – being called to act rather than choosing to act – is an old word, but it is a real thing. Positive psychology called to me just as the burning bush called to Moses. Sociologists distinguish among a job, a career, and a calling. You do a job for the money, and when the money stops, you stop working. You pursue a career for the promotions, and when the promotions stop, topped out, you quit or become a time-serving husk. A calling, in contrast, is done for its own sake. You would do it anyway, with no pay and no promotions.

Food for thought from the *New Philosopher* library. We discover books that can change the way you view the world.

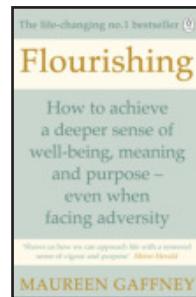
Flourish



Antonia Case
Your ideal self

The American psychologist Abraham Maslow warned that you can enter a state of incongruence, where there is a gap between your actual self and your ideal self, between who you are and who you ideally wish to become. This gap sometimes explains the mid-life crisis, the sudden life lurch where a person you once knew has taken an unexpected detour. It can explain the person who is depressed, anxious, pent-up, who can't seem to get out of bed in the morning, who has lost a certain spring in their step. When the actual self and the ideal self are incongruent, Maslow predicted maladjusted behaviours.

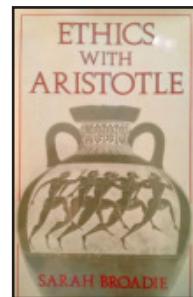
Flourishing



Maureen Gaffney
How events unfold

The ancient Greeks had two words for time: '*chronos*' and '*kairos*'. *Chronos* is ordinary time – the time of day, the stage you are at in life, the way you measure how events unfold. *Kairos* is a deeply personal sense of time, a realisation that this is the right time, the opportune moment to respond to something. It is the moment when, as philosopher Viktor Frankl describes it, you stop asking why life has thrown this particular challenge your way, and instead ask yourself: What is life now expecting of me? This a very profound change of perspective.

Ethics with Aristotle



Sarah Broadie
A systemic answer

What is the best, the happiest, the most worthwhile sort of life for human beings? Is it a life of honourable achievements: of pleasures and excitements; of service in one's community; of material productiveness: a life marked by happy personal relationships: by luxury and splendid belongings: by love of beauty: by culture of intellect and imagination... How are we to decide, and on what principle? Aristotle's *Ethics* begins and ends with this question of the best life, since the task of ethics, as he conceives it, is to seek a systematic answer.



WHAT IS THE MEANING
OF YOUR LIFE?

By Antonia Case

What should you do with your life? It might sound like an overwhelming question, but one of the most influential thinkers of modern times, Friedrich Nietzsche, saw such ruminations as of vital importance. What is important to you? What matters? What makes for a good and meaningful life? What do you prioritise, and why? These values are acted out in the choices you make – they underpin your aspirations, goals and actions.

It's during the moment when you feel restless and discontent that Nietzsche implores you to get up close to this feeling and to study it. He regards any form of questioning as a sign of good mental health. When you stop one day and say, "What am I doing with my life? Is this a good way to live? How could I be doing things better?" then you are beginning to ask the right questions.

But if flourishing is not prescriptive, if it can't be put in a box, or jotted

down in list form, then it is indeed an individual journey. Nietzsche was one to stress this point. 'At bottom every man knows that he is a unique being, the like of which can appear only once on this earth. By no extraordinary chance will such a marvellous piece of diversity in unity, as he is, ever be put together a second time. He knows this, but hides it like a guilty secret. Why?' Nietzsche thinks the reason we shy from the glory of our unique selves is out of fear of others' opinions, so we think and act with the herd and do not seek our own joy. And while some may act this out due to shyness, mostly we do it out of laziness. We are too lazy to explore our exceptional uniqueness, to discover what it is that we, each of us a 'unique being', wish to do in this one extraordinary life that has been gifted to us at this moment in human history. Nietzsche goes on to say: "The man who does not want to remain in the general mass, has only to stop taking things easily."

One needs to follow one's conscience, which cries out: "Be yourself! The way you behave and think and desire at the moment – this is not you!"

To flourish, suggests the philosopher, we need unchain ourselves from the opinion of others and the fear of standing out. We must conquer laziness and set forth on a journey to find our true genius. In the infinity of time, we exist in a brief span – "today" – and "we must reveal why we exist", demands Nietzsche. "We have to answer for our existence to ourselves and will therefore be our own true pilots, and not admit that our existence is random or pointless." But this quest to find your unique self may take you on a journey, and it may mean involve giving up the security of knowing. "Why cling to your bit of earth, or your little business, or listen to what your neighbour says?" he coaxes.

It can be unnerving to think that you, and you alone, will determine the course of your life. It's more comforting

To flourish, suggests the philosopher, we need unchain ourselves from the opinion of others and the fear of standing out.

to think that other people can make that decision for you, or that your fate is in some way predetermined by your upbringing, your education, your peers, society, the time into which you were born, your family wealth, your personal network, your health, your habits, your fears and your sorrows. But Nietzsche would shun this as nonsense and would probably call you lazy. "No one can build the bridge over which you must cross the river of life, except you alone." While we can wait for others to guide us, we risk losing ourselves. "There are paths and bridges and demi-gods without number, that will gladly carry you over, but only at the price of losing your own self: your self would have to be mortgaged, and then lost."

When restlessness mounts and you find yourself seeking, but don't know where to look, or what it is exactly that you wish to find, US mythologist Joseph Campbell likens it like being in a forest and hearing the enchanting

notes of music from afar. Do you stop to listen? Or do you, consumed by our own thoughts and worries, continue on? "Stop," he implores. "Listen." Even if just for a moment.

The enchanting music is your bliss, and bliss is your signpost pointing the way. In Sanskrit, writes Campbell, the three terms that represent the brink, the jumping-off place to the ocean of transcendence, are: *Sat-Chit-Ananda*. "The word 'Sat' means being. 'Chit' means consciousness. 'Ananda' means bliss or rapture," he writes. 'I thought, I don't know whether my consciousness is proper consciousness or not; I don't know whether what I know of my being is my proper being or not; but I do know where my rapture is. So let me hang on to rapture, and that will bring me both my consciousness and my being.' I think it worked."

In other words, while philosophers continue to struggle to define consciousness, and while debate still rages in philosophy departments as to what is a self, what we can grasp within this life is our bliss. What uplifts you? What makes you breathless when you talk about it? What did you gravitate to as a child? Such questions, of course, may be difficult to answer – and it's easy to slouch your shoulders and declare, "Nothing... See, that is the problem." But these questions are merely the jumping-off point.

"Our life has become so economic and practical in its orientation that, as you get older, the claims of the moment upon you are so great, you hardly know where the hell you are, or what it is you intended. You are always doing something that is required of you," writes Campbell. When Campbell pored over his lecture material and writings spanning a period of 24 years, he noticed something odd. Over that quarter of a century, Campbell

had grown as a person, he'd changed, progressed, and much had happened in his life. He'd worked as a professor of literature at a women's college and had married a former student, who was a dancer. But when he reviewed his writings over that time frame, he noted: "There I was babbling on about the same thing." Campbell was struck by the continuities that ran through his notes. He was 'on topic' so to speak, and this continuity, or thread, is what he calls his Personal Myth. It was his bliss station.

But what we can grapple with – and test, and chart – what we can compose songs and sing about, and tell our grandkids about, is our joy, or bliss. "Where is your bliss station? You have to try to find it," urges Campbell. "Follow your bliss," he insists. Because this is your destiny in waiting.

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer may have seen it as more akin to a personal narrative, the plot of the novel about one's life. Whatever term you might prefer, the questions are much the same: what recurrent ideas or dreams have you had in your life? When you leaf through past diary entries, what themes recur? What is on your to-do list year after year after year? What inspires you most in books and films? In other words, what are you babbling on about? Find out, and follow it, is Campbell's message. Follow your bliss.

At university, Campbell was a successful track and field athlete. He could sprint a half mile faster than almost anyone else in the world at the time. He found his bliss in sport, in both training and competing. But after university, he couldn't find a job. So instead, he rented a shack in the woods and retreated from life. He read books for five years, dividing his

day into four three-hour periods, and reading up to nine hours each day. "I followed the path from one book to another, from one thinker to another. I followed my bliss," he explains, "though I didn't know that that was what I was doing."

But it takes courage to do what you want, he stresses. "Other people have a lot of plans for you. Nobody wants you to do what you want to do. They want you to go on their trip, but you can do what you want. I did. I went into the woods and read for five years."

There were days when Campbell wished someone could give him the answer – knock on the door of his cabin and tell him what he should do with his life. He was searching in his books for a message, and it would have been easier to find if someone had given him a clue – start here and follow the path in this direction. But Campbell knew that the call to your own adventure begins and ends with you. "Freedom involves making decisions," he writes, "and each decision is a destiny decision. It's very difficult to find in the outside world something that matches what the system inside you is yearning for."

From 1929 to 1934, he read, among others, Mann, Nietzsche, Spengler, Schopenhauer, Kant, Goethe, Jung. Finally a message arrived, asking him if he'd like to take a job teaching literature. Campbell instinctively knew it was time to go back into the world and share what he had learned.

Most of our decisions in life centre on the core requirements of survival. We need food, water, shelter, clothes; we need security, a good job, adequate health and a place to live. We need love and friendship, a sense of family and connection, and also, for many, a level of respect in society, which may fall into the need for recognition, status or prestige. These 'needs' are set out

graphically in Abraham Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' pyramid, with its pinnacle being 'self-actualisation', or the desire to become the most that one can be. This is the top of the pyramid, and it is often only sought once the other needs have been met.

But Campbell was puzzled by Maslow's value system. "I looked at that list and I wondered why it should seem so strange to me," he writes. "A person who is truly gripped by a calling, by a dedication, by a belief, by a zeal, will sacrifice his security, will sacrifice even his life, will sacrifice personal relationships, will sacrifice prestige, and will think nothing of personal development; he will give myself entirely to his myth."

This happens when one experiences the call to one's own adventure. It happened for Campbell, and he entered the woods. He shunned Maslow's value system and turned his back on what was expected of him by his parents, teachers and friends. He relinquished his place in society, his security, to say nothing of his prestige. "If the call is heeded," writes Campbell, "the individual is invoked to engage in a dangerous adventure. It's always a dangerous adventure because you're moving out of the familiar sphere of your community."

Campbell sees countless parallels in folklore, myths and legends, where a central character moves out of the known sphere into the great beyond. In his book *Pathways to Bliss* he describes a Native American Navajo tale of two brothers searching for their father, the sun, called *Where the Two Came to Their Father*. Their mother warns them, "Do not travel too far from home." But more importantly, she implores them never to travel northwards due to the monsters, saying, "Go eastwards, southwards and westwards, but don't go north."

The brothers, of course, head north, forging, for the first time in their life, their own path. The boys aim to travel to their father to source weapons to help their mother fight the monsters. They travel to the edge of the known world, and step beyond the threshold into the desert, where the landscape is shapeless and devoid of features. "I call this crossing the threshold," writes Campbell. "It is the crossing from the conscious into the unconscious world."

The boys meet an old lady called Old Age, and she says, "What are you doing here, little boys?" They tell her they are going to visit their father, the sun, and she says, "That's a long, long way. You'll be old and dead before you get there. Let me give you some advice. Don't walk on my path. Walk off to the right." The boys start walking as she told them, but shortly forget about Old Age's advice, and end up walking on her path instead.

He was searching in his books for a message, and it would have been easier to find if someone had given him a clue – start here and follow the path in this direction.

To leave the known path is often depicted in mythology as akin to entering the dark woods, plunging into the ocean, or traversing the desert. Crossing the threshold into the unknown may involve relinquishing the security of a successful career, for example. “It may be depicted as an ascent or a descent or as a going beyond the horizon, but this is the adventure – it’s always the path into the unknown, through the gateway or the cave or the clashing rocks.”

Nietzsche concurs that the path to finding your unique self, to unveiling your true being, will not come easily. This “digging into one’s self”, as he puts it, “this straight, violent descent into the pit of one’s being”, will be troublesome and dangerous. He warns us that to begin this journey of self-exploration will be perilous and marked with potholes.

The boys continue to walk on Old Age’s path, forgetting what she said, and they grow old and tired, barely able to put one foot in front of the other. Sometime later they meet Old Age again, and she reprimands them for ignoring her advice. “Forge your own path and stay off mine,” she bellows. And this time they obey, and in doing so they eventually find what they were searching for: their father.

“If you follow your bliss,” continues Campbell, “you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Wherever you are – if you are following your bliss, you are enjoying that refreshment, that life within you, all the time.”

Many times, you will hear the call of enchanting music, but you will refuse it. You may think about Maslow’s value

system and feel overwhelmed by the enormity of what you are giving up – security, connection, prestige and recognition. How will I make money? Where will I live? When one experiences fear of the unknown, one may refuse the call to one’s adventure, and, as Campbell argues, “the results are then radically different from those of the one following the call.” Sometimes, “when the call isn’t answered, you experience a kind of drying up and a sense of life lost.” Sometimes when the call isn’t answered, banality sets in.

It’s not all lost, however. In life we are called to our own adventure repeatedly. It doesn’t just happen once in a lifetime. It’s a cycle, and sometimes we may be up to the task, other times not. “What I think is that a good life is one hero journey after another,” concludes Campbell. “Over and over again, you are called to the realm of adventure, you are called to new horizons. Each time, there is the same problem: do I dare? And then if you do dare, the dangers are there, and the help also, and the fulfilment or the fiasco. There’s always the possibility of fiasco. But there’s also the possibility of bliss.”

That brings me to a man I interviewed in my younger years as a junior journalist for a finance magazine. Three men, armed with different trading strategies, had been given \$5,000 each to trade on the stock market for three months. One of them was a technical trader, another was a contrarian, and the third was a buy-and-hold investor. Which trading strategy was superior? I interviewed them, recorded their results, and plotted their successes and failures. While two of the men could have been pulled straight out of a trading game box, the third man was more memorable. My

Nietzsche concurs that the path to finding your unique self, to unveiling your true being, will not come easily.

phone interviews with him sometimes lasted for hours. He talked in tangents, often about neither trading nor the stock market. He seemed to be confused about meaning in his life, what he should do, how he could make a success of it. He seemed to want to do something, and urgently, but couldn't for the life of him work out exactly what that was. To me as a twenty-something, this forty-something man seemed almost insane by yearning after something that he couldn't quite define. And why did he think I had the answers? I don't really think he did, but he was happy to ponder any scraps of ideas I had to offer before I desperately tried to get him off the phone, my editor raising his eyebrows at me over the partition as I hung up after another marathon call.

The reason he stuck in my memory is that some years later I came across his name again, quite by chance. He'd founded a financial company – whatever it did, I am at a loss to remember, but it was building wealth rapidly, and it was constantly mentioned in the financial news. I

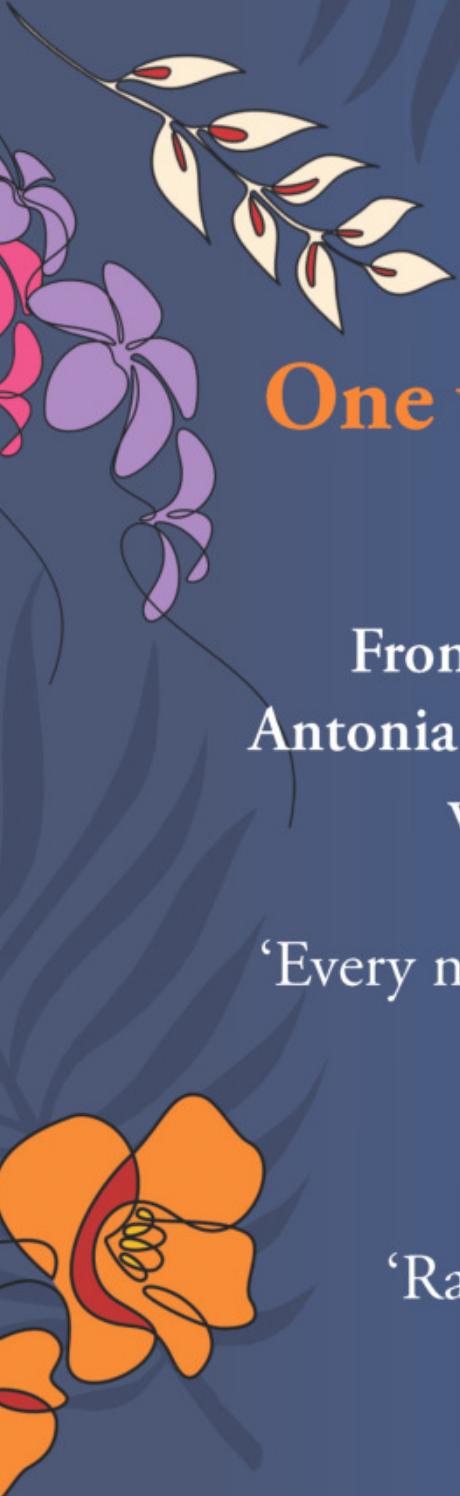
imagined at the time that he'd be very successful by now and leading a large team of people. I think back to those phone conversations, to his evident agitation, his questioning, and I can't help but think that Nietzsche would have applauded him as someone who was digging deep. And in the end, he found gold.

But there is no set point in a life – no point where we can say, "This is it, I am flourishing!" Instead, we are on a conveyor belt moving forward towards our ultimate end, passing scenes of bliss and rapture followed by frustration and deep despair. But both Nietzsche and Campbell would concur on this one: life is about seeking what matters, finding your individual footprint – for this is your way forward.

From Antonia Case's *Flourish: An Extraordinary Journey Into Your Best Self*, Bloomsbury, 2023.



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The Flourishing Path



John D. Liu, journalist, filmmaker, along with Jane Goodall, primatologist, and an international host of environmentalists and ecosystem restoration camp leaders come together in this video produced by John to present an alternative path, *The Flourishing Path*, to the current destructive path human civilisation is on.

The key message is that we don't have a theoretical or rhetorical problem. What we have is mass degradation to Earth systems on a planetary scale and therefore we must work locally but simultaneously to make ecosystem restoration happen all over the world. Restoration needs to be the central intention of human civilisation.

Human Flourishing



One of the surprising findings when you look at the science of well-being and the culture of human flourishing is that traditionally these questions of the good life – how do we flourish – were asked within the context of philosophy and literature and perhaps theatre and art. Nowadays, the strategic approach to these questions is more in

the social sciences so it's surprising and interesting that we have a set of questions that has traditionally been asked by disciplines in the arts and humanities now being asked in the social sciences, such as to measure things and that's important. Those in the arts and humanities tend to be interested in meaning, whether or not it's measurable.



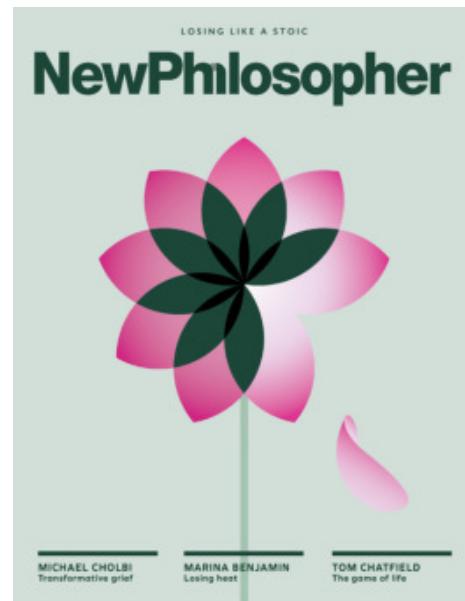
“Virtue’s true reward is happiness itself, for which the virtuous work, whereas if they worked for honour, it would no longer be virtue, but ambition.”

Thomas Aquinas

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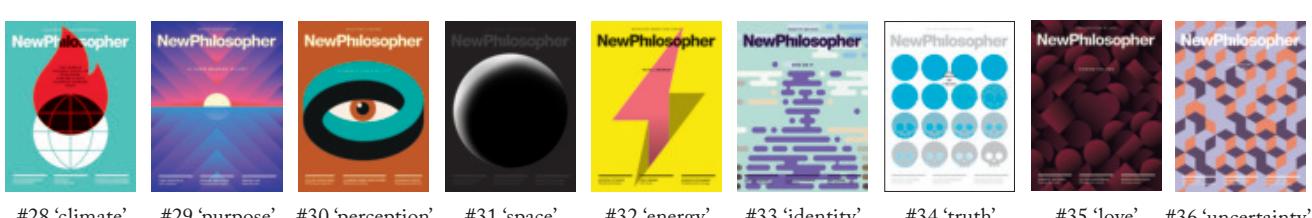
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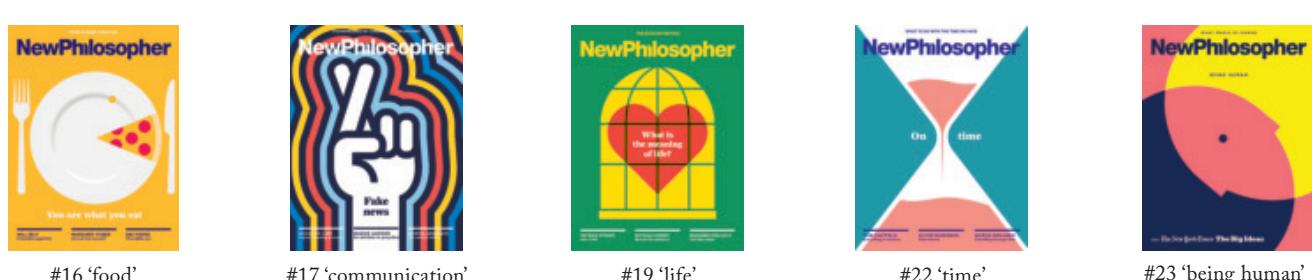
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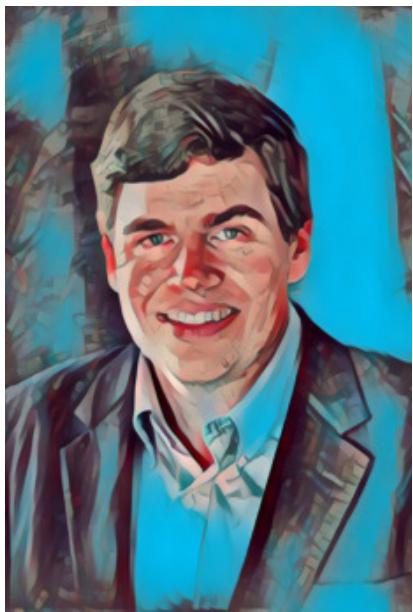


13 questions:

Christian Miller

In conversation
with Zan Boag

Christian Miller is A. C. Reid Professor of Philosophy at Wake Forest University.



What is your demon?

My doubts that my work hasn't made any difference and that the one career I will likely ever have, will end up producing little of lasting value.

Which thinker has had the greatest influence on your life?

C.S. Lewis. Reading him in high school had a profound impact on my religious thinking. It was also what got me interested in philosophy.

What do you doubt most?

Whatever position it is that a philosopher today claims to have established or proven or shown to be true with a great deal of confidence.

If you could change one thing about the world, what would that be?

It might sound cliché, but replacing the hate in the world with genuine love, a love that is deeply concerned with the well-being of other people for their own sake, and not with how we can benefit ourselves in the process.

What does it mean to be human?

It is extremely hard to come up with necessary conditions here. But at least a common tendency among humans is that we have a mixed character of some good and some bad.

What would you never do, no matter the price?

Kill myself or anyone in my family.

What illusion do you suffer from?

If it is genuinely an illusion, then I guess I can't answer this question. But I suspect one illusion I suffer

from, is that I think I am a better person than I really am. Raising three children has helped to expose some of my moral warts that I didn't know were there.

If you could choose, what would you have for your last meal?

Yellow cake with chocolate icing, refrigerated. It was my birthday cake growing up. Doesn't get much better than that!

The question you'd most like to ask others?

How do you find meaning and purpose in your life?

Your favourite word?

These days, since it's what I do so much research on – 'honesty'.

What is your motto?

"I only teach ethics." No, I'm not being serious. That's not my motto. It is something like, "I am very much a mixed bag of good and bad. How I can do better, and help others do the same?"

What is a good death?

It is easy to say dying peacefully in my sleep. But however I die, I will count it as a good death if I know that my family is happy, and that I lived a life that helped people and that I can be proud of.

What do people accuse you of?

Of being too absorbed in my own academic world of philosophy, and not doing more to learn about other areas of life, including areas where people are struggling or suffering. It's a fair accusation. ■

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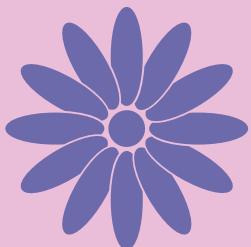
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