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Theology Brief Preview

FLOURISHING

Miroslav Volf

Henry B. Wright Professor of Systematic Theology, Yale University
Founding Director, Yale Center for Faith & Culture, Yale Divinity School

Matthew Croasmun

Director, Life Worth Living Program, Yale Divinity School
Lecturer, Humanities & Divinity, Yale University
Associate Research Scholar, Yale Center for Faith & Culture, Yale Divinity School

Ryan McAnnally-Linz

Associate Director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture
Lecturer in Humanities at Yale College

The importance of reflection on and of clarity about flourishing life — life that is worthy of our humanity, the true and good life — follows from the following observation about contemporary societies: “We have become experts in means but amateurs in ends.” [1] We have become “resource-oriented” and perhaps even “resource-fixated.” [2] We are like painters so interminably obsessed with all the tools and supplies they need to paint well that they never come actually to paint. We rarely reflect on the purpose of our life, on what kind of life is worth aspiring to. Our education is concerned primarily with instrumental reason. When it comes to achieving our human purpose, the consequence is that, though we propel the wheel of our existence faster and faster, we end up making no progress at all.

The assumption of this brief is that “a flourishing life” is a *normative* ideal. Consequently, *setting the definition of flourishing cannot be a task for the empirical sciences*. What follows is our proposal, as Christian theologians, of how best to frame the theological and philosophical reflection required to ground our research into—and pursuit of—flourishing life.

A Three-Part Conception of Flourishing

Our proposal is an expansion of Nicholas Wolterstorff’s argument in *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*: we flourish when, in addition to *leading life well* (agency) and *life going well* (circumstances), life also *feels right* to us

(emotions).

Life led well refers to the "agential" dimension of the flourishing life, to the good conduct of life — from right thoughts and right acts to right habits and right virtues.

Life going well refers to the "circumstantial" dimension of the flourishing life, to the desirable circumstances of life — be they natural (like fertile, uncontaminated land), social (like friendships or the absence of war), or personal (like certain kinds of genes or a well-functioning body).

Life feeling as it should is about the "emotional" dimension of the flourishing life, about "happiness" (or contentment or joy), empathy, and the like.

The flourishing life thereby has three dimensions: *agential* (or active), *circumstantial* (or passive), and *emotional* (combining both passivity and agency). Alternative accounts of flourishing life differ in two major ways: (1) how they understand each dimension of flourishing life and (2) how much weight they place on each.

Three Thinkers on Flourishing

We illustrate each of the three aspects by considering thinkers who have placed just one of them at the center of their visions of flourishing.

For the ancient Stoics, people like the emperor Marcus Aurelius, flourishing, or the good and true life, is preponderantly one of virtuous *agency*, not of positive feeling (which, in a strictly limited form, flows out of virtuous agency) or adequate external goods (which, strictly speaking, are irrelevant).

For Karl Marx flourishing is understood primarily as *life going well*. The revolution will bring about the transformation of technological, economic, and political circumstances, by historical processes, and is sufficient for the flourishing of all; "moral" behavior and appropriate affective states will follow.

For Mustapha Mond, a fictional character from Aldous Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World*, flourishing can be understood as *life feeling right*. In Mond one can recognize a realization of the vision of the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham, who begins *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) with the statement: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. They alone point out what we *ought to* do and determine what we *shall* do."

Marcus, Marx, and Mond are each exemplars of flourishing: agency in Stoicism, circumstances in Marxism, and emotions in Utilitarianism.

A Christian Vision

A plausible Christian way of construing the vision of flourishing life is to see it summed up in the statement of the Apostle Paul that the kingdom of God consists in "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). Righteousness here means a certain kind of *agency*, the right living which is

summed up in love of God and neighbor; peace means a certain kind of *circumstances*, a comprehensive order of material and relational well-being; joy is the signature *emotion* of the flourishing life where one responds with positive feeling to both right agency and right circumstances. As is suggested by the order in which Paul lists the three, righteousness as the agential aspect of flourishing life, has primacy without in any way devaluing the other two.

The three dimensions of flourishing life are not just each important in its own right, but each at the same time in part contains the others so that each dimension, though distinct, can serve as a window onto the whole of the flourishing life. Love, for instance, is a certain kind of agency (beneficence), but it is at the same time circumstance (world of love) and a feeling (attachment). A different way to make the same point would be to say that each needs the others to be fully itself. Finally, all three of these are not possessions of independently self-actualized human beings, but rather markers of a life flourishing in relationship to the Divine; each and all three together are, as Rom. 14:17 insists, only fully ours "*in the Holy Spirit*."

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[1] Miroslav Volf, "Life Worth Living: Christian Faith and the Crisis of Universities," https://www.abc.net.au/religion/life-worth-living-christian-faith-and-the-crisis-of-the-universi/10099272.

[2] For the phrases and the image of the painter, see Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 3.

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