



# Global Faculty Initiative

**The Faculty Initiative  
seeks to promote the integration  
of Christian faith and academic disciplines  
by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars  
across the spectrum of faculties  
in research universities  
worldwide.**

[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)

Preview Response

## **FLOURISHING / SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Donald Hay

Emeritus Fellow, Jesus College, University of Oxford

---

The three-part conception of flourishing (agential, circumstantial and emotional) is very helpful in reflecting on the approaches to human flourishing that are part of an ongoing discussion in economics and related disciplines. More specifically, the issue of 'flourishing' or 'welfare' has a long history in economics, and has generated a considerable recent literature, arising from dissatisfaction with the standard approach of welfare economics with its roots in utilitarianism (a version of *life feeling as it should be*), and the reliance on GDP and household incomes as indicators of human flourishing:

1. *Life led well – agential*. The capabilities approach pioneered by Amartya Sen [(1999) *Commodities and Capabilities*], and developed philosophically by Martha Nussbaum [among many publications (2011) *Creating capabilities: the human development approach*]. Sabina Alkire has used this approach to develop an operational index of poverty and deprivation for use in development round the globe. [(2002), *Valuing freedoms: Sen's capability approach and poverty reduction*]; programme - *Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative* (OPHI), [www.ophi.org.uk](http://www.ophi.org.uk).
2. *Life going well – circumstantial*. At first glance this conception of flourishing is not much canvassed in economics, except for the tiny minority of academics who continue to work with Marxist economics. However, there is an ongoing discussion of what elements are conducive to a flourishing *social/economic order*: these discussions include neoliberalism (the vision of a free-market economy and society), environmentalism (see for a popular example, Kate Raworth (2018) *Doughnut Economics*), and (in Europe at least) democratic socialism. The discussions are more focussed on the appropriate institutions and the role of government, than on the flourishing of individuals. [Let me digress briefly here, to suggest that the Biblical concept of the 'people of God'- see Deuteronomy in the OT and Jesus' preaching about the kingdom of God – should be part of this discussion. This concept clearly deals with social/ economic structures.]
3. *Life feeling as it should be – the emotional dimension*. The 'happiness' literature in economics has focussed on the multiple 'determinants' of reported happiness. Major contributors to this literature include Richard Layard in the UK [*Happiness: lessons from a new science*, 2006, a popular exposition of the findings of a research programme at the LSE], and John Helliwell in North America [*Globalization and Wellbeing* 2002, editor of the *World Happiness Report*, program on 'Social interactions, identity and wellbeing' at the Vancouver School of Economics]. The economics

---

literature is now extensive. A similar literature but with a focus that is sociological and health oriented has been developed by Tyler VanderWeele, Director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard. This program is notable for its comprehensive data collection and the sophistication of the statistical analysis.

I do not of course want to suggest that the Theology Brief should engage with all these literatures directly, but it should show at least an awareness of them. What would be helpful for a Christian economist is an indication of what we should be looking for as positives, and from what we need to register our dissent, in respect of human flourishing, when we evaluate the literatures.

Here are some other queries relating to content of the Preview: they may just reflect my misunderstanding. First, given the natural law tradition originating with Aristotle, and fundamental to Roman Catholic social teaching, could reference be made to that literature? Second, while the preview makes a nod in the direction of social institutions, should it not detail such institutions: e.g. marriage, family, health services (both physical and psychological), good governance, work, leisure, education? Third, there is not yet direct reference to freedoms of various kinds which might be seen to be fundamental to the 'agential' dimension. Fourth, the list of exemplars puzzles me: why Marcus Aurelius rather than Aristotle or Aquinas, why Mond rather than Bentham and utilitarian economists, and why Marx rather than many political philosophers who have focused on 'life going well' since Adam Smith? Fifth, given that sin is by definition destructive of human flourishing how does it relate to the three dimensions? Sixth, the Christian vision outlined is largely focused on individuals in relation to God – shouldn't it also incorporate the flourishing of the people of God as explored, for example, in Deuteronomy?

**For more information**

**[www.globalfacultyinitiative.net](http://www.globalfacultyinitiative.net)**