

The Positive Humanities : A Focus on Human Flourishing

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The Positive Humanities can be defined as the branch of learning concerned with culture in its relation to human flourishing. This new field advocates for a eudaimonic turn in the humanities, an explicit recognition of and commitment to human flourishing as a central theme of study and practical aim of the humanities. It holds that this eudaimonic turn can reconnect the humanities with their initial values and goals and provide a unifying and inspiring rationale for the humanities today, opening pathways for greater individual and collective flourishing in societies around the world. After exploring the historical roots and conceptual orientations of the Positive Humanities (which are inclusive of the arts), I present five recommendations for strengthening the focus of the humanities on human flourishing: emphasize 1) wisdom as much as knowledge, 2) collaboration as much as specialization, 3) the positive as much as the negative, 4) effective friction as much as increased efficiency, and 5) the flourishing of humans as much as the flourishing of the humanities.

Human flourishing is a basic and enduring concern of the humanities. In cultures around the world and across time, a perennial desire to understand the nature and enabling conditions of human flourishing and to find ways to increase it has led to the creation of works exploring these themes and to programs of study intended to equip individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to help them and their communities flourish. For example, ancient wisdom traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Judaism – along with the later Christianity and Islam – focused on questions of how to live life well. Although varying widely in their particulars, they shared the basic view that popular methods for advancing flourishing (like pleasure, wealth, power, and fame) can often hinder it, and that flourishing can be achieved only through the cultivation of virtue.¹ These ideas were expressed, developed, communicated, and taught through religious, philosophical, narrative, and historical texts, as well as through music, art, architecture, theater, and other cultural forms.

Historically, the humanities have their roots in ancient Greek and Roman culture. The Greek *paideia* was a program of study emphasizing intellectual, moral, and physical development. Designed to promote human flourishing, what the

Greeks called *eudaimonia*, by producing good citizens who would live their lives well and help the *polis* thrive, the curriculum included instruction in language, philosophy, mathematics, science, and the arts as well as training in gymnastics and wrestling. The Romans included much of this curriculum in what they called the “liberal arts” (*artes liberales*), a program of study intended to provide citizens with the skills free persons needed to flourish and participate actively and wisely in civic life. These subjects were eventually arranged into two groups: the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). Together, they formed the seven liberal arts and constituted the general curriculum of medieval universities.

It was during the Renaissance that the humanities were developed as a distinct program of study. Increasing numbers of scholars believed that scholasticism, the dominant medieval approach to the seven liberal arts, had become disconnected from human flourishing. In a sense, the humanities were the gift of a pandemic, as these scholars were deeply influenced by the Italian poet and scholar Petrarch and his response to a devastating and extended outbreak of the bubonic plague. Known as the Black Death, this pandemic is the deadliest in history, killing an estimated two hundred million people across Europe, Asia, and North Africa in the fourteenth century. Among the dead (estimated to have included between 30 and 60 percent of the population of Western Europe) were many of Petrarch’s friends and associates, and even his own son.² To cope with the personal and social devastation wrought by the Black Death, Petrarch turned to the careful study of a selection of Greek and Roman classics, where he found solace and strength. Scholars who followed his lead and further developed his approach came to be called “humanists,” since they focused on what Cicero had called “studies of humanity” (*studia humanitatis*).³ Humanists found the scholasticism of their day to be overly pedantic and technical, fixating on the resolution of textual contradictions through logical and linguistic analysis, and neglecting the wisdom that had inspired and informed so many of the classics. By contrast, humanists turned their students’ attention precisely to this wisdom, seeking instruction on the nature of happiness and its relation to virtue by turning away from the quadrivium and re-designing the trivium. Keeping grammar and rhetoric, they replaced logic with history, philosophy, and poetry in the search for practical guidance for their lives.⁴ Eventually, the scholasticism of European universities was largely replaced by this new program of study focused directly on human flourishing.

Much has changed since the introduction of this humanistic approach to the university curriculum. In contemporary American colleges and universities, the humanities tend to be thought of less as a comprehensive program of study to increase human flourishing and more as a collection of separate disciplines, each with its own interests and methodological approaches to scholarship. Located within institutions of higher learning, these disciplines are subject to the norms

and values of these institutions, and individual scholars are shaped by their systems of recruitment, retention, and reward. Although early American colleges saw the moral formation of students as central to their mission, the rise of research universities has led to a prioritization of the creation of new knowledge. This change of emphasis has resulted in important breakthroughs in research, but these advances have often come at the cost of shifting attention away from questions of how to live life well. Scholars, under enormous pressure to “publish or perish,” tend to specialize in particular areas of knowledge creation, focusing on increasingly narrow points of scholarship to establish their careers as professional academics. Meanwhile, enrollments in humanities courses and programs at four-year colleges and universities continue to drop, due at least in part to increased vocational pressures on students.⁵ In response, humanities scholars feel the need to proclaim the economic value of taking courses in their disciplines. These shifts toward professional and economic interests come at a time when students, perhaps now more than ever, are in need of the eudaimonic benefits of the humanities. Even before COVID-19, surveys of American students showed alarming increases in anxiety, depression, and suicidality, and the pandemic has made things even worse.⁶

The current situation in the humanities bears some troubling resemblance to the conditions that gave rise to the humanities in the first place. Although the present pandemic is, thankfully, not as severe as the Black Death, some of the same basic problems that troubled Petrarch and his heirs are now faced by millions of students. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated a number of societal issues, including the unique mental health challenges of this new generation. And students are entering institutions where the focus of research and teaching has largely drifted away from what they need: an emphasis on the understanding and cultivation of individual and collective human flourishing. What can be done to renew the focus of the humanities on human flourishing?

This is the fundamental question motivating the new field of the Positive Humanities. In view of the Oxford English Dictionary’s broad definition of the humanities as “the branch of learning concerned with human culture,”⁷ the Positive Humanities can be defined as “the branch of learning concerned with human culture *in its relation to human flourishing*.”⁸ The word “culture” is a horticultural term, coming from the Latin *cultura*, meaning “cultivation.” The Positive Humanities hold that just as the successful cultivation of plants results in their flourishing, so too a successful human culture should lead to human flourishing. The Positive Humanities recognize the wide variety of interests that influence the creation of human culture and that determine its roles in society. Many of these interests approach culture instrumentally, focusing on its professional, academic, vocational, and economic value. Although the Positive Humanities are interested in the implications of these instrumental uses of culture for human flourishing, they

are more centrally concerned with the intrinsic benefits of culture, including its eudaimonic effects on personal enjoyment, individual and societal growth, and meaning-making.⁹

The Positive Humanities advocate for a *eudaimonic turn* in the humanities, an explicit recognition of and commitment to human flourishing as a central theme of study and practical aim of the humanities.¹⁰ The Positive Humanities seek insights into the nature and development of human flourishing from the wisdom, narrative, aesthetic, and performance traditions of cultures across time and around the world (and are thus inclusive of the arts). None of these traditions is perfect, of course – far from it – and each has both positive and negative lessons to teach about flourishing. The Positive Humanities understand that a concept as complex as human flourishing calls for collaboration across a wide range of methodological approaches and thus also look to relevant work in the social sciences. The Positive Humanities are especially interested in the practical effects of the relationship between culture and flourishing. Under what circumstances and for whom does cultural engagement increase human flourishing? Are there ways in which culture presents obstacles to flourishing? If so, who is most affected by these obstacles? Perhaps most important, how can cultural engagement be intentionally optimized to help all individuals and communities thrive? These practical questions connect the Positive Humanities to the educational institutions, cultural organizations, and creative industries through which the humanities are typically studied and experienced. With all this in mind, the Positive Humanities can be defined in more detail as “the interdisciplinary, multi-industry, and cross-sector examination and optimization of the relationship between the experience, creation, and study of human culture and the understanding, assessment, and cultivation of human flourishing.”¹¹ In the remainder of this essay, I discuss five specific recommendations from the Positive Humanities for strengthening the focus of the humanities on human flourishing.¹²

The first recommendation is to emphasize wisdom as much as knowledge. In an academic environment that prioritizes and rewards the creation of new knowledge, it is easy to succumb to a kind of intellectualization, focusing more, for example, on the analysis of texts than on the practice of the wisdom contained in those texts. Literary scholar Helen Small gives a definition of the humanities as the study of “the meaning-making practices of human cultures, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity.”¹³ It is easy for the study of meaning-making practices in the humanities to become an intellectual exercise, quite removed from the practical ability to make meaning effectively oneself, and the humanities today tend to focus more on the analysis of meaning-making than on the creation of meaning. To be

sure, knowledge about meaning-making is important, as are skills of interpretation and critical evaluation, but they are insufficient to meet the practical goals of human flourishing that initially inspired the humanities as a program of study. The humanities were intended not just to be a theoretical enterprise but a deeply practical one. I remember one of my philosophy professors in graduate school sneering about the undergraduates coming to him for wisdom, thinking that what he studied and taught could provide guidance for their lives. In the academy, the humanities curriculum has all too often become a way of knowing, with ways of living relegated to student services divisions and campus counseling centers. Important as the work of these divisions and centers is, however, it is vital to understand human flourishing as a central part of the research and teaching mission of higher education. The acquisition of knowledge must not be disconnected from the practice of wisdom. Aristotle argued that the aim of the study of ethics is not just to learn what virtue is, but to become virtuous; so, too, the aim of the study of the humanities should not be merely to know what human flourishing is, but to flourish.¹⁴

There are, of course, many scholars in the humanities who resist the pressures of intellectualization and remain committed to the practical goals of the humanities. And there are many students who resist the pressures of approaching the humanities merely as a set of academic requirements, a body of knowledge to master on the way to obtaining a degree. They value not just learning *about* the humanities but also learning *from* them. My concern is that doing so requires these scholars and students to overcome a misalignment between the basic purposes and goals of the humanities and the conditions under which they are typically taught and studied. My further concern is that so many scholars and students do not overcome this misalignment, depriving them of the most important benefits of the humanities for human flourishing and making it less likely that students will value the humanities enough to continue to engage with them.¹⁵

The second recommendation for strengthening the focus of the humanities on human flourishing is to emphasize collaboration as much as specialization. Many humanities scholars are used to working alone, or even in isolation. This approach may be effective for producing articles and monographs on specialized topics, but it is inadequate for exploring the full range of meanings and practices of human flourishing. And it is especially inadequate for applying them in ways that are fitting and effective for fostering individual and collective flourishing. The common goal of conceptualizing and cultivating human flourishing can bring together scholars within and across different disciplines in the humanities, as well as bridge divides between scholars and makers of culture. A renewal of the focus of the humanities on human flourishing also requires collaboration between the academic humanities, chiefly located within institutions of

higher education, and the public humanities, which emphasize the work of the humanities in communities, cultural organizations, and creative industries beyond colleges and universities.¹⁶

Just as important for human flourishing is collaboration between the humanities and the sciences. These two domains have always been included in the liberal arts, but there have been quarrels between them since ancient times.¹⁷ The divide between them was widened by Renaissance humanists, who excluded the quadrivium from their program of study, as they considered the sciences unhelpful for human flourishing.¹⁸ Whether or not this was true of ancient and medieval approaches, it is certainly not true of the sciences today. Although questions of human flourishing have traditionally belonged to the domain of the humanities, the sciences – and especially the social sciences – have devoted much attention to them over the last few decades. Much work has been done in psychology, economics, political science, sociology, and neuroscience, which has influenced domains as diverse as psychiatry, medicine, public health, organizational studies, education, law, and government. Psychology, for example, has undergone a eudaimonic turn, catalyzed in large part by the founding of a new branch of the discipline: positive psychology. It is worth pausing to explore this development in psychology in more detail, as it has important implications for the Positive Humanities.

Positive psychology has been defined as “the scientific study of what enables individuals and societies to thrive.”¹⁹ Launching the field during his presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1998, Martin Seligman argued that psychology had become fixated on the study and treatment of psychopathology. He claimed that work on mental illness is valuable but that on its own it is too narrow to achieve psychology’s broader mission of making the lives of all people better. This mission cannot be fulfilled merely by removing obstacles to better lives, he contended, but also requires the study and cultivation of the actual constituents of individual and collective flourishing.²⁰

Positive psychologists typically study human flourishing in terms of well-being, which can be defined as “optimal psychological functioning and experience.”²¹ As I have observed elsewhere, positive psychology is proceeding in both a complementary and a comprehensive mode in its study of well-being.²² In its complementary mode, it understands mainstream psychology as focused on what delays or destroys well-being – on the mitigation of ill-being – and thus as “indirectly positive.” Positive psychology, by contrast, is focused on what causes or constitutes well-being – on the promotion of well-being – and thus is “directly positive.”²³ Accordingly, work in the field includes topics like gratitude, awe, love, flow, grit, character strengths, healthy relationships, psychological richness, and meaning and purpose in life. In its comprehensive mode, positive psychology relies on a balance between indirect, mitigative approaches and direct, promotional approaches in support of what is contextually optimal, of what is desirable or

preferable under specific conditions and in particular settings. In most real-life situations, the best way to make life better is through a combination of removing ill-being and increasing well-being. The ideal here is *sustainable preference*, in which the short- and long-term well-being interests of each individual and of all groups in a society are respected and supported.²⁴ This ideal cannot be achieved – or even approached – without deep collaboration across all disciplines and fields with a connection to human flourishing.

The third recommendation is to emphasize the positive as much as the negative. It is not only in mainstream psychology that the focus has been on ill-being, on the obstacles to human flourishing. Across much of the work in the humanities over the past few decades, there has been a strong focus on surfacing latent psychopathologies and corrosive ideologies in texts and other forms of culture.²⁵ In some circles, the methodology of critical theory, using what philosopher Paul Ricoeur identified as a “hermeneutics of suspicion,”²⁶ has been used so extensively for these purposes that there has not been much room for other approaches.²⁷ It is important, of course, to be aware of very real problems like alienation, injustice, and malfeasance and the surreptitious ways they can obstruct flourishing for so many individuals and groups. A fixation on what can go wrong, however, often obscures what can go right, leading to missed opportunities for direct action to foster flourishing. At its founding, the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”²⁸ In a similar way, it is important to understand flourishing as more than just the absence of languishing. For this reason, it is crucial to make room for what Ricoeur called “hermeneutics as a restoration of meaning”²⁹ and has been referred to as a “hermeneutics of affirmation.”³⁰ Flourishing requires as much attention to its conceptualization and direct cultivation as it does to the understanding and overcoming of obstacles to its realization.

Similar to positive psychology, the Positive Humanities function in both a complementary and a comprehensive mode. In their complementary mode, they emphasize the study of the nature and constituents of human flourishing. Some important work along these lines has already begun to emerge in a variety of humanities disciplines. Examples include Darrin McMahon’s work on the intellectual history of happiness;³¹ Daniel Haybron’s and Valerie Tiberius’s work on the philosophy of happiness, well-being, and the good life;³² Menachem Mautner’s exploration of the central role art can play in human flourishing;³³ Ellen Charry’s positive theology and Miroslav Volf’s theology of joy;³⁴ and in literary studies, Eve Sedgwick’s call for “reparative” interpretations, James O. Pawelski and D. J. Moores’s advancement of a eudaimonic turn, and Rita Felski’s advocacy for a “positive aesthetics.”³⁵

In their comprehensive mode, the Positive Humanities advocate for a balanced integration of suspicion and affirmation in the interests of optimizing flourishing in real-life circumstances. Just as a garden requires both weeding and planting to flourish, so our lives and communities require both attention to what delays or destroys human flourishing and to what causes or constitutes it. The optimization of well-being in any context requires a balanced integration of indirect, mitigative approaches and direct, promotional approaches to human flourishing. In this comprehensive mode, for example, the Positive Humanities value critique for the insights it can yield into ways culture sometimes undermines flourishing, and they seek to integrate these insights with reparative and constructive work for advancing individual and collective human flourishing.

The fourth recommendation is to emphasize effective friction as much as increased efficiency. One of the most common critiques of the humanities is that they are inefficient. As mentioned earlier, students are facing rising vocational pressures, with education often viewed merely in terms of job preparation. If the only goal of education is the short-term aim of landing a job – and one that pays as well as possible – then it makes sense to study subjects that will lead directly to desirable employment. Since jobs in technology, business, and medicine pay more than jobs in the humanities, the thinking goes, it is best to spend one’s time in the classroom studying STEM subjects or completing professional programs. Taking courses in the humanities is seen as unnecessary at best and wasteful or distracting at worst.

It is not just in education that efficiency is extolled. Psychologist Barry Schwartz argues that the “modern world is characterized by the worship of efficiency.”³⁶ Citing examples from manufacturing, commerce, and finance, he observes that increasing efficiency by removing friction from these processes is seen as essential to progress. Economists, he notes, hold that the only way to improve a society’s standard of living is to increase efficiency. Schwartz points out, however, that while some efficiency is no doubt good, more efficiency may not be better, especially in cases where there is uncertainty. He cites insurance as an example. In a world where you know your house will not burn down, carrying fire insurance is a waste. But in the world we live in – a world characterized by uncertainty – fire insurance is a wise inefficiency, a worthwhile friction. Schwartz concludes that in our uncertain world, the most reasonable goals are not ones that maximize efficiency under normal conditions, but rather options that lead to satisfactory results under a wide range of possible conditions. In a world of uncertainty, narrow efficiency is unlikely to be the most effective path to long-term success. This is especially true when that narrow efficiency is limited to economic considerations but success is understood broadly in terms of human flourishing. Economic factors are important for human flourishing, but they are by no means the only things that are.

Emotion research supports this understanding of the limited value of efficiency under conditions of uncertainty. Negative emotions like anger, fear, disgust, and sadness are quite efficient, often co-opting our physiology to prepare us for attack, escape, avoidance, or withdrawal even before we are consciously aware of having a problem. Positive emotions like joy, serenity, and awe also have physiological components, but it is not as easy to identify what, if anything, they prepare us to do. This led to a bias against positive emotions until psychologist Barbara Fredrickson proposed the “broaden-and-build” model of positive emotions.³⁷ Her research showed that while negative emotions helpfully narrow our attention, cognition, and behavior in times of danger, positive emotions broaden attention, cognition, and behavior in times of safety. This broadening does not just feel good, but it makes us more creative and allows us to build enduring physical, psychological, and social resources. Negative emotions can be life-saving in the short term, but positive emotions can be life-saving in the long term by helping us to be better prepared for as-yet-unseen dangers when they do arise. From a short-term perspective, positive emotions are inefficient; their effectiveness becomes clear only over the long term.

Similar to economic friction and positive emotions, the humanities can seem inefficient when considered in the short term. Courses in ethics, literature, or theater may or may not teach skills that lead directly to employment, but they can broaden our experience of the world and allow us to build enduring resources that may help us remain creatively resilient in times of unforeseen adversity. We live in a world of uncertainty, where novel problems often arise, for which it is not possible to prepare directly and efficiently. In these situations, broad preparation in the humanities may help us be most effective in facing the difficulties. And although studying the humanities may or may not be the most effective means of taking maximal advantage of immediate employment opportunities, it may be of great value in preparing for the employment needs of the future.

The key here is an Aristotelian mean between excess and deficiency. Too much efficiency can lead to ruinous rigidity, but too little efficiency can lead to a wasteful squandering of time and resources. Keeping human flourishing in mind as the ultimate goal can provide a prudent corrective to both extremes. The humanities should not be forced to yield immediate returns on investment; nor, however, should they be absolved from making significant eudaimonic contributions to our lives.

The fifth and final recommendation is to emphasize the flourishing of humans as much as the flourishing of the humanities. In particular, I would like to recommend the establishment of a new set of indicators for tracking the relationship between the humanities and human flourishing. Since 2009, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has published the Humanities Indi-

cators, collecting and disseminating key data about the infrastructure of the humanities in the United States.³⁸ The Humanities Indicators do an excellent job of gathering, analyzing, and reporting quantitative data on the humanities, but they are aimed at measuring the flourishing of the humanities and not the flourishing of the humans engaged in them. They are aimed at measuring many of the extrinsic benefits of the humanities, but not their intrinsic benefits, things like captivation, pleasure, empathy, cognitive growth, social bonds, and communal meaning.³⁹ Given the traditional connection between the humanities and the understanding and fostering of human flourishing, I believe it is time to create Humanities and Human Flourishing Indicators. Building on the tremendous work of the Humanities Indicators, this new set of measures would focus on tracking how successfully the humanities support the understanding and cultivation of human flourishing. Do the humanities increase human flourishing? If so, in what specific ways? Who is benefiting from this increase? Who is not yet benefiting? Are there unseen harms that are sometimes caused through the humanities? Are there particular ways of engaging with the humanities that are more effective at leading to greater flourishing? How can we optimize the well-being effects of engagement with the humanities?

The social sciences can make considerable methodological contributions to this work. For decades, psychologists have been assessing human flourishing through validated measures of subjective well-being (consisting of high life satisfaction, high positive affect, and low negative affect)⁴⁰ and psychological well-being (understood in terms of six dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance).⁴¹ Psychologists continue to develop new instruments (such as the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving, the PERMA-Profiler, and the Psychologically Rich Life Questionnaire)⁴² and to invent and refine methods (such as questionnaires, experience sampling methodologies, and Big Data) for the scientific study of human flourishing.⁴³ Well-being is not merely a matter for psychology, of course, and it is important to move beyond psychology's traditional emphasis on the study of individuals to include work from other social sciences that focuses on ways in which communities and societies function. Epidemiologist Tyler VanderWeele, for example, takes a more comprehensive approach to human flourishing, integrating perspectives from across the social sciences, including psychology, economics, medicine, public health, and other disciplines. He has developed a measure of human flourishing that covers six different domains: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability.⁴⁴ This measure is part of a Global Flourishing Study to assess the flourishing of nearly a quarter of a million participants in twenty-two countries over five years.⁴⁵ The Humanities and Human Flourishing Indicators could also be informed by work

that is being done in the arts and well-being in collaboration with the sciences and medicine.⁴⁶

However competently and comprehensively work on the Humanities and Human Flourishing Indicators is carried out, it will be crucial to keep in mind that empirical assessment of the role of the humanities in human flourishing can only complement and not replace the more traditional ways scholars have thought and written about culture and well-being. A broad range of approaches is necessary to examine something as complex as the relationship between the humanities and human flourishing. It is just as crucial to keep in mind that empirical assessment of the role of the humanities in human flourishing must be a collaborative enterprise that includes humanities scholars and practitioners as equal partners with scientists, since they have invaluable insights into the nature of human flourishing and the various ways the humanities can foster it. Scientific investigation must be informed and guided by the experience and reflection of those who dedicate their lives to the creation and study of culture. Finally, it is equally crucial to make clear that this empirical assessment is not about measuring the *worth* of the humanities. The intrinsic benefits of the humanities must be distinguished from their intrinsic worth, which will no doubt forever remain beyond the reach of scientific measurement. Research on the intrinsic benefits of the humanities cannot be legitimately used to try to create hierarchies of cultures or of cultural forms, and any attempts to do so must be strongly repudiated. With these important caveats in mind, however, collaborative empirical assessment can be uniquely valuable for measuring a range of definable and observable effects of engagement with the humanities on specific aspects of individual and collective human flourishing. The great promise of this work is not only the creation of new knowledge but also the development of evidence-based practices for optimizing the positive effects of humanities engagement on human flourishing across a variety of cultural contexts.

I believe that these five recommendations from the Positive Humanities can help support a eudaimonic turn in the humanities. As I noted at the outset of this essay, human flourishing is a basic and enduring concern of the humanities. There is a real sense, then, in which a eudaimonic turn in the humanities is, in fact, a eudaimonic *return*, not to some idyllic past (no society has fully realized the promise of human flourishing), but to the questions and concerns that gave rise to the humanities in the first place and that have been at their core for most of their history. It is a return that is required of each generation of scholars as they explore and develop ways of flourishing fitting for their times. In the contemporary context, this return must address the basic questions and concerns of the humanities in fresh ways, informed by the considerable depth and range of new knowledge at our disposal and guided by the complex opportunities and challenges presented by our current cultural realities.⁴⁷

This eudaimonic turn in the humanities can bring a number of important benefits. It can help address what literary scholar and essayist Louis Menand has called a “crisis of rationale” in the humanities, with scholars themselves in disagreement about the fundamental nature and purpose of the humanities and thus unable to communicate their value clearly to students, parents, philanthropists, policy-makers, and the general public.⁴⁸ A eudaimonic turn can provide a unifying and communicable rationale for the humanities. It can enable scholars to work together to understand more deeply how human flourishing has been defined and fostered in the past in cultures across the globe and how it can be more effectively conceptualized and cultivated in our world today. The goal here is not the establishment of an orthodoxy. On the contrary, a diversity of perspectives can provide a much-needed richness of inquiry, helping to inform and guide well-being research in the sciences, and opening up new possibilities for human flourishing that are more equitable and widespread than ever before and that support the flourishing of the nonhuman world as well. Moreover, these types of approaches are likely to attract and retain students in humanities courses and programs.

More importantly, these new approaches, with their benefits for the humanities, can also benefit humanity. An explicit focus on understanding and fostering individual and collective human flourishing can be of considerable benefit to the millions of students who study the humanities each year. Because of the central role the humanities play for so many students across so many educational levels and programs, such a focus promises significant and enduring positive effects. Outside the classroom, a eudaimonic turn in the humanities can inform, inspire, and support the work of museums, libraries, performing arts centers, and even entire creative industries (such as in music, movies, and publishing) to advance human flourishing more broadly and justly in our society. Although such work is not easy, it is deeply meaningful, with the aim of exploring and enriching the relationship between culture and human flourishing, and, in so doing, carrying forward a central and perennial purpose of the humanities and opening new possibilities of flourishing for humanity.

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁹ Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2004), 44–52; and Yerin Shim, Louis Tay, Michaela Ward, and James O. Pawelski, “The Arts and Humanities: An Integrative Conceptual Framework for Psychological Research,” *Review of General Psychology* 23 (2) (2019): 166–167, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1089268019832847>.
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- ¹¹ Pawelski, “The Positive Humanities,” 33.
- ¹² For more information on the Positive Humanities, see Tay and Pawelski, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*. Also, an important source of support for the Positive Humanities is the Humanities and Human Flourishing (HHF) Project at the University of Pennsylvania. Since its founding in 2014, the HHF has developed into a growing international and multidisciplinary network of more than 150 humanities scholars, scientific researchers, creative practitioners, college and university educators, wellness officers, policy experts, members of government, and leaders of cultural organizations. For more information on the HHF, visit www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org.
- ¹³ Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23.
- ¹⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II. ii. 1.
- ¹⁵ For a further discussion of this misalignment, including steps that can be taken to overcome it in the teaching of philosophy, see James O. Pawelski, “Teaching Philosophy: The Love of Wisdom and the Cultivation of Human Flourishing,” in *Philosophy and Human Flourishing*, ed. John J. Stuhr (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).
- ¹⁶ For more information on the public humanities and attempts to bridge the gap between them and the academic humanities, see essays by Susan Smulyan, Carin Berkowitz and Matthew Gibson, Denise Meringolo, and Fath Davis Ruffins in this issue of *Dædalus*. For a review of the empirical literature in one of these collaborative domains, see Katherine N. Cotter and James O. Pawelski, “Art Museums as Institutions for Human Flourishing,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 17 (2) (2022).
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- ¹⁸ Proctor, *Defining the Humanities*, 21–23.
- ¹⁹ Constitution of the International Positive Psychology Association, Article 1, Section 2.
- ²⁰ Martin E. P. Seligman, “The President’s Address,” *American Psychologist* 54 (8) (1999): 559–562.
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- ²⁷ Moores, “The Eudaimonic Turn in Literary Studies,” 27; and Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008), 3.
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