

## Emotions as Crucial

### *Emotions and Human Flourishing*

#### Introduction

The integral relationship between individuals' emotional lives and the social-cultural-political environments in which they find themselves underscores the need for critical analysis of emotions. Having clarity about what is life-giving in relation to one's emotions—as well as what is a life-giving social system (what the early Greeks called the polis)—is more important than ever. Psychological construction models of emotions offer hope for emotions' use in both personal and systemic improvements. Individuals construct emotions in the moment, in context, and people can develop the capacity to reflect on their core affect, on the affective attributions that are given to Objects, on the goals, needs, and values their emotions indicate, and on how individuals' personal experiences interface with their world.

Historical and sociological accounts suggest that emotions function to keep people together in groups where individuals are safest and in which they can cooperate to enhance resources, thereby promoting their survival. Neuroscientific research affirms this view: staying close, moving to a shared rhythm, and being synchronized to the emotions of others is what keeps human beings alive. Keeping together, then, is fundamental to flourishing.<sup>1</sup> The challenge, however, is that not all rhythms are life-giving; some groups breed death.<sup>2</sup> Adolf Hitler set the beat for a

march designed to create a national solidarity which targeted and eliminated millions of people. The world watched as ISIS moved in formation across Syria—murdering and pillaging as it went—and accounts of the devastation wrought by groups engaged in racialized or sexualized violence dominate headlines around the globe. Such realities are haunting, and they serve as a helpful check on an overly optimistic view of emotions and their uses. When individuals surrender their own will and agency to the command of another, or when people merge into a group of fellow human beings for a sense of security, they often suspend their critical judgment and begin making choices that may meet immediate needs but impede human flourishing. Keeping together can serve purposes of life or it can serve evil and death. It is important to know which groups to join, which rhythmic movements to share, what beat to follow. Knowing the difference is critical in the effort to cultivate humans' well-being.

Thus, while emotions such as love and the desire to belong bind human beings together and support their survival, the same emotions can be manipulated, leading people to commit heinous crimes in the name of their group.<sup>3</sup> There are other ways emotions and the choices they motivate are not life-giving, too.<sup>4</sup> Some behaviors and attempts to address emotions and the feelings that attend them are life-limiting: for example, consuming material goods or overeating—both of which can change one's emotional state, or core affect, in the moment—do not ultimately alleviate anxiety. It matters what people individually and collectively “set their hearts on,” as early Greek philosopher Epicurus and early Christian theologian Augustine noted.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of early Greco-Roman philosophy, *eudaimonia*—usually translated as “happiness” but sometimes as “well-being” or “flourishing”—meant the good life, and in exploring *eudaimonia*, philosophers were interested in the passions' relationship to ethical living, the development of one's character, and one's contribution to the polis.<sup>6</sup> Early Christian theologians were interested in the passions' role in salvation, which they understood as aligning one's will with God's (happiness, most thought, could only be achieved in the afterlife). Natural scientists seem less interest in questions of *eudaimonia*; for them, it seems, it is enough to communicate with other organisms in order to survive physically so that genes will be passed on and the species can continue. Psychotherapists are implicitly interested in well-being, though they do not always articulate clearly what they mean by the term: the ability to

love and work well (or to be self-actualized) seems the primary goal. For social scientists, belonging to a group helps afford security. Finally, although they may not be explicit about it, contemporary neuropsychologists' work could be interpreted to suggest that the entire human organism is geared toward *life* in complex ways and that emotions are crucial to being fully alive: they relate in ways previously not possible the intrapsychic, interpersonal, social-contextual, and neurological components at play in emotional episodes. This chapter attempts to integrate these views into a more explicit, holistic understanding of flourishing and its cultivation—and emotions' role in that.

Because there are life-limiting responses to and uses of emotions, having some way to adjudicate what *is* life-giving and what is life-limiting—both individually and in the social order—is important. An understanding of the difference will allow for a more positive and careful approach to emotions than a quick dismissal of emotions' value—so common in Western cultures—allows. While pastoral theologians such as myself—as well as philosophers, theologians, ethicists, and psychologists—often understand well-being as the goal of our work (at least implicitly) and have thought hard about how to achieve it, the actual features of flourishing, or what it might require, have not gotten as much sustained attention as the goal warrants.<sup>7</sup> Understanding how emotions can be useful for flourishing will require overcoming some of the either/or thinking that has dominated thought about emotions—for example, that they are *either* personal *or* socially constructed, that they are *either* positive *or* negative, and that the good is *either* of this world *or* in the next. Psychological-construction models help overcome some of the classical models' divisions that have perplexed for over a century. A more refined understanding of human flourishing can help overcome some of the challenges posed by early understandings of eudaimonia.

The good news is that, despite the challenges of controlling emotions with the will, people have more control in relation to their emotions than is often thought; change for the better is possible. This suggests that human beings can harness their emotions toward well-being if they understand what some of the features of well-being are. But positive change will also require developing disciplined practices toward exploring emotions and willingness to intentionally work toward engaging what leads to more flourishing.

### Early Philosophers' and Theologians' Understandings of the Good or Saved Life

Despite centuries of study, there still seems to be little consensus on the appropriate relationship of emotions to a good or desired life. Indeed, there is little agreement about the nature of the good life or human flourishing itself. For example, while Plato understood the passions to be anathema to the right and desirable life, Aristotle found them critical to the development of virtuous character and meaningful participation in a life-sustaining polis. Where the Stoics understood the passions to be the cause of suffering, philosopher and medical doctor Galen understood them as a useful diagnostic tool. Although Augustine and Aquinas considered the passions to be signs of the Fall and human brokenness, Charles Darwin understood emotional expressions as natural and critical to survival. And indeed, since Darwin's time, emotions' importance for survival, both physical and social, has enjoyed a place in both popular culture and psychotherapeutic practice. In fact, I have argued that each of the perspectives on emotions' functions, effects, and value informs contemporary confusion about emotions' appropriate place in people's lives. But survival is a narrow and basic requirement for the telos (aim or goal) of life. While necessary to life by definition, survival does not say much about the nature of and means toward flourishing.<sup>8</sup>

In most cases, examinations of emotions have been more descriptive than prescriptive. Although the scientist Paul MacLean mused at the end of a seminal article that "we are witnessing the evolution of a spirit with a concern for the future suffering and dying of all living things," many scientists shy away from making normative statements about the good life and what it entails.<sup>9</sup> Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud dared suggest that his aim was to enable analysts to love and work, and psychotherapeutic practitioners use emotions to support life-giving relationships—to oneself and others—and self-actualization, even though they seem loath to be prescriptive about what genuine flourishing might entail.<sup>10</sup> Because recent neuroscience has helped connect the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social-political-cultural contexts with the physical, embodied aspects of emotions, a normative vision of well-being will need to address its manifestations at the personal or individual level as well as the interpersonal, group, institutional, organizational, and societal level.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, while it is a worthwhile pursuit, loving or working "better" only *implies* a value system: What does it mean to love "better"? What does it mean to work "better"? What does self-actualization

look like and how does one achieve it given the very real constraints, especially on targeted and oppressed people's lives? Answers to these questions are deeply significant for understanding what "human flourishing" might mean and what it will require. Constructive additions to the conversation about emotions and flourishing from philosophers and theologians—including pastoral theologians—then, are crucial.<sup>12</sup> Pastoral theologians—whose work ideally draws on many disciplines, including psychology, social and cultural theories, science, and theologies—are well suited for the task of proposing a vision of flourishing. Indeed, although pastoral theologians are not always explicit about what they mean by it, people's flourishing is, fundamentally, the goal of our work. Pastoral theologians' efforts are informed, explicitly and not, by the earliest thinkers on the matter, but we also seek to critically analyze and augment the thinking of those who have come before.<sup>13</sup>

Early philosophers' interest in eudaimonia was framed as the "happy" or "good" life, with emphases on ethics and moral action. For example, Socrates and Plato, the Stoics, and Aristotle all reacted strongly to what they perceived as the increasing materialism and acquisitiveness of their fellow citizens. They feared that the "race for material aggrandizement, personal honors, martial recognitions, and literary awards were dwarfing the search for truth and virtue."<sup>14</sup> Athenians, they feared, were trying to attain happiness through gymnastics, pleasure, and even the mere study of philosophy (instead of genuine contemplation) rather than through the proper channels of cultivating right thinking and virtuous living.

Socrates and Plato understood happiness (or well-being) to be the result of a calm character that flows from a right relationship to the passions; they assumed that if one controlled the passions with reason, one could achieve an enduring sense of "happiness." Plato's view of well-being had a "decidedly mystical and otherworldly" quality—a telos predicated on a vision of the good that transcends life on earth.<sup>15</sup> Because embodying pure reason was the ultimate goal for Plato, happiness is an intellectual virtue, and happiness achieved through reason is an objective condition of the soul. To refer to happiness as an objective condition as early Greco-Roman philosophers did suggests that it is not just a matter of a person's experience or belief that one is happy; rather, well-being must be a state confirmed by others based on some generally agreed-upon criteria established by wise members of one's community, both contemporary and historic.<sup>16</sup>

Because of his tripartite view of the soul, Plato defined happiness as the harmony of the soul such that reason, the highest level of the soul, moderates and controls aggressive appetites and desires.<sup>17</sup> In Plato's view, one's passions are not inherently bad, but they must be assiduously controlled. Likewise, health, wealth, physical beauty, friends, love, honor, and so on are not viewed as *inherently* good in Plato's schema, though they may be *instrumental* goods if used wisely in the pursuit of wisdom and dispassionate living. However, Plato took pains to emphasize that no instrumental good is sufficient or even *necessary* for happiness. Consistent with his perspectives on the passions, then, Plato privileged the soul over the body and argued that human beings must rise above the material realities and vicissitudes of the earthly realm if they wish to find happiness. And individuals *should* wish so, for happiness thus defined is the ultimate goal of human life, early philosophers agreed.<sup>18</sup>

Philosophers who followed Plato's thinking, such as the highly influential Stoics, took Plato's work further than Plato had perhaps intended when they dismissed the importance of the passions for happiness or well-being. The Stoics declared that the passions create suffering and people should resist and even extinguish all desires. By minimizing their passions, the Stoics believed, people can be happy as they nurture the virtues of "negative freedoms" including *freedom from* need, want, desire, personal or social success, and material well-being.<sup>19</sup> The radical asceticism that the Stoics argued leads to happiness requires self-control, poverty, and a repudiation of societal conformity. Thus, well-being is cultivated by internal discipline and the dismissal of conventional morality,<sup>20</sup> patriotism, pursuit of wealth, courtesies and refinements, fame, honor, reputation, and sexuality.<sup>21</sup> Even valuable endeavors such the arts and sciences or the pursuit of knowledge should be treated with indifference. People who seek well-being should be indifferent to both joy and grief, accepting with calm the vicissitudes of life. The Stoics argued that common things people desire, such as love, honor, good health, avoiding maltreatment from others, "congenial" family life, and personal freedom, all depend too much on external circumstances beyond individuals' control and should be held with indifference.<sup>22</sup> By living according to nature, by elevating reason over the passions, and by nurturing good habits—especially of self-control, right belief, and right behavior—people can free themselves from the desire to change the unalterable and be indifferent to both pleasure and pain. In other

words, the Stoics understood well-being as freedom from the passions and achievement of inner peace (*apatheai*).

The Epicureans took a different tack than the Stoics: the passions, including pleasure, are not evil. Instead, pleasure is the highest good. However, only *certain* pleasures are worthy, namely the simple, life-sustaining ones. Worthy pleasures do not include the “tortured trinity” of wine, sex, and song.<sup>23</sup> Rather, right pleasures prevent pain and produce a serene spirit: these “pleasures” include health, self-control, independence, moderation, simplicity, cheerfulness, friendship, prudence, intellectual and aesthetic values, peace of mind, and conscience. The calm, tranquil, and harmonious life, then, is the happy or good life for the Epicureans.<sup>24</sup> However, because humans are beset by a condition of wanting more and more, humans can become addicted to pleasure and not practice self-control, allowing themselves too much of the wrong things. Because Epicurus’ goal was to avoid pain (especially mental suffering), he did not advise being invested in politics, marriage, or family. These and other passionate pursuits produce excessive and inexhaustible desire, as well as anxiety, and thus should be avoided.<sup>25</sup> Epicurus advocated for the development of the virtues that bring peace, especially restraint and denial. Epicurean philosophy promoted an individualistic, egoistic hedonism that seemed grounded in withdrawal from public life.<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle’s position differed significantly from those of the thinkers he followed. Aristotle understood happiness as an activity of the soul in accord with *excellence in the pursuit of one’s highest capacities*. Aristotle heralded well-being (eudaimonia) as the greatest good because it is desired for its own sake, not for the sake of anything else, and because it is the end toward which all other goods aim.<sup>27</sup> For Aristotle, eudaimonia is not simply a mental state or disposition: because Aristotle was not a dualist like Plato, he did not believe the soul can be a separate entity from the body. Thus, he argued that well-being requires, among other things, fulfilling the needs of the body.

Aristotle argued, then, that happiness requires living well and faring well. *Living well* consists of understanding and acting on the intellectual and moral virtues: the pursuit of truth, understanding, prudence, courage, temperance, and generosity.<sup>28</sup> These virtues are predicated on the rules found in practical and moral wisdom—“the judgement of the enlightened.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, Aristotle believed that living virtuously out of the discerned wisdom of careful reflection is the highest value and necessary for well-being. However, living well, while necessary for

well-being, is not sufficient to achieve it: Aristotle's understanding of eudaimonia also requires *faring well*.

For Aristotle, faring well encompasses a host of practical matters: a measure of material stability, a good family life, friends, leisure time for contemplation, personal freedom, health, and a "not repulsive physical appearance."<sup>30</sup> Aristotle also thought that a well-ordered and stable state (polis) was necessary to provide the opportunities and preconditions for happiness. Thus, Aristotle's understanding of eudaimonia was more complex than others': well-being requires contemplation on what is the highest good, the development of intellectual and moral virtues to support personal and social well-being. Eudaimonia also requires a society that supports the faring well of its citizens (though Aristotle privileged contemplation and virtuous living above all else).<sup>31</sup> As Aristotle defined it, then, eudaimonia requires knowledge, wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, and the pursuit of truth. Happiness (well-being) is neither a mood nor an emotion. Rather, it is an activity that accompanies virtues in action. Eudaimonia is understood to be an objective condition—a state—that arises from leading a certain type of life, achieved only through the development of a virtuous character and the establishment of social and political systems. Though Plato had imagined true well-being as fully achievable only when one eschews earthly matters, both the Stoics and Aristotle understood happiness in earthly terms. This view did not last, however.

Christianity overtook Stoicism as the dominant philosophy of life in the West, and the Stoic and Aristotelian this-worldly understanding of well-being gave way to an otherworldly view. Early Christian theologians co-opted Plato's transcendent vision and "remedied his penchant for abstractness," offering the masses ultimate hope and a transformed world.<sup>32</sup> For example, Neoplatonist philosopher-theologian Plotinus, who wedded Platonism and Christianity, argued that human beings are defined by their immortal souls. Perfect happiness is achievable only in the otherworldly realm and consists of the everlasting merging of the soul with God, the One.<sup>33</sup> Only through a mystical experience given by the special grace of God can people temporarily glimpse perfect happiness. Plotinus argued that the goods and experiences of this world are unimportant and may distract from the primary telos of human beings: moving people's souls toward the One. Thus, Plotinus disagreed with Aristotle, arguing that salvation does not require good fortune, material success, positive personal relationships, or a state that supports well-being



for its citizens. Rather, happiness as salvation, and the preparation for it, requires only the proper training of the soul for its highest destiny: people must live virtuously and practice fortitude, prudence, wisdom, and temperance. In short, happiness requires nurturing reason and practices that move the soul toward God.<sup>34</sup>

Augustine agreed with Plotinus that salvation is the *telos* (or end goal) of human life and added that people's desire for salvation is an instinct "implanted" by God to draw them toward God. For this reason, Augustine argued, salvation really *is* the greatest good.<sup>35</sup> Augustine defined happiness/salvation as the satisfaction of desire, though because only union with God could finally satisfy ultimate desire, it matters which desires one is talking about. Happiness cannot involve a "treadmill" of satisfying desire after desire; rather, happiness comes with the satisfaction of *all* desires and liberation from the cycle of desiring.<sup>36</sup> The logic of happiness/salvation for Augustine, then, suggests that only *freedom from* need and want can produce genuine happiness; humans are created to desire God alone, and thus are naturally drawn to the extinction of all otherworldly desires. Because happiness is the fulfillment of all desire and can be found only in God, real happiness cannot be attained in this world, nor can well-being/salvation be destroyed by the contingencies of life. Augustine's revisioning of desire and happiness suggests that the Stoics' prescription for inner peace cannot succeed in this life; nor is Aristotle's appeal to a measure of material success or meaningful relationships on earth correct. For Augustine, right desire is God-given and leads the saved out of this world and into union with God. While this understanding of happiness/well-being/salvation was the dominant one among early philosophers and theologians, it was not the only one.

Other early Christian theologians were more interested in the human experience of life as lived. For example, Boethius (480–524 CE) and Aquinas directly confronted the tragic quality of life on earth, acknowledging that suffering is difficult and deprives people of finite goods but that it can offer an opportunity to reaffirm what is the ultimate good: that is, God. Boethius believed that if one allows it, the tragedies of one's life can highlight what should matter most and help people realign their perspectives from earthly suffering to heavenly grace. Aquinas agreed and argued that a modicum of suffering is part of a saved life because individuals define themselves not *only* by the amount of pleasure they experience but also by the amount of suffering they bear and the ways they engage it.<sup>37</sup> Pain is not evil as such, then, Aquinas argued. In fact, he thought, Christ's experience on the cross shows the ways suffering

can be a necessary part of the saved life. Thus, creative and virtuous human beings can turn suffering into benefit if they respond in ways that bring them closer to God. These theologians understood the connection between pain and a good life, pointing out that a pain-free life is not a human life: humans are not rocks, or islands. Part of being human is the experience of loss and pain, and people naturally grieve.<sup>38</sup> And ideally, Boethius and Aquinas argued, individuals grow through their experiences of pain.

### Theories on Human Flourishing

#### *On Not Being Well: "Happiness Is Overrated"*<sup>39</sup>

Contemporary philosophers have again taken up the question of eudaimonia and its pursuit as proposed by Plato, the Stoics, and the Epicureans—especially the use of reason to avoid pain—and early understandings have come under fire.<sup>40</sup> If either the minimization of suffering or maximization of pleasure genuinely determines well-being, contemporary philosophers point out, then such a life would be universally enviable. One might ask whether one would be willing to trade one's life for that of an oyster that is in a continuous state of pleasure (imagine it at the bottom of the sea in the perfect conditions).<sup>41</sup> If something holds one back from eagerly agreeing to be an oyster, then something else must be at stake in the good life.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps, then, happiness understood as an enduring pleasant and contented state is not the highest good. It may be that freedom from pain and distress—the dominant view in Greek thought for centuries—is not enough. It is conceivable that freedom from pain and distress, as some early philosophers understood it—or even a subjective feeling of happiness, as contemporary popular culture might have it—is not the ultimate goal of human life.<sup>43</sup>

Many theories of "happiness" as bases for understanding well-being, then, are inadequate in at least five ways. First, the dominant connotation of happiness is being in a cheerful mood.<sup>44</sup> Second, life satisfaction—the measure of *how good one feels* in the particular moment rather than *how well one judges one's life to be going* more generally—holds too privileged a place in popular understandings of happiness.<sup>45</sup> Both are tied too closely to the subjective experience of feeling happy.<sup>46</sup> Third, the idea of happiness as a subjective feeling does not take into account the importance of meaningful engagement in something larger than oneself and the importance of meaning making, especially in the face of suffering. More specifically,

the focus on pleasure in early philosophers' and contemporary understandings of happiness do not account sufficiently for the fact that people often eschew pleasure and comfort for the purpose of achieving a higher, more meaningful goal. Fourth, happiness cannot sustain people in the midst of the losses, grief, suffering, pain, and disappointments that come in the quotidian experiences of human life. Finally, theories of happiness do not attend sufficiently to oppressive social, political, and economic systems that impede well-being for most of the world. Something more than a feeling of completely satisfied desire or freedom from desire or pain altogether is needed for a more adequate understanding of flourishing.

### *On the Meaningful Life*

Desire and the pursuit of its satisfaction are a part of being human. Without desires, without strivings, without incomplete projects to address and a future to work toward, human beings would be "saturated sponge(s) of desire"<sup>47</sup>—oysters at the bottom of a sea—which is not, evidently, a life most people would choose.<sup>48</sup> Most people need desires to pursue lest they be taken over by boredom and anomie.<sup>49</sup> Contentment—at least if it is understood as inactivity, a final termination, or merely savoring the past without moving actively toward the future—ends in boredom or retreat from the world.<sup>50</sup> However, contentment and satisfaction understood more robustly are compatible with ongoing creative activity and thus flourishing. In a revised view, happiness and contentment are not resting points but part of a positive self-appraisal that acknowledges one is on the right path. In this view, happiness/well-being includes savoring the past while working toward a hopeful future, and a sense of satisfaction in the life one is engaged in creating.<sup>51</sup> In this view, happiness includes high levels of robust meaning-making, the attainment of goals that matter, and the conquest of challenging obstacles.<sup>52</sup> These are elements of a meaningful life that have been found critical to flourishing.

However, a meaningful life without the subjective experience of happiness can be a difficult one. In other words, the feeling of being happy is not everything, but it is *something*.<sup>53</sup> The annals of history are full of the names of people whose lives were deeply significant, even valuable, in terms of their contributions to culture—literature, music, art, politics, intellectual resources—but who cannot be said to have been happy. As meaningful as their lives were, those of musician Ludwig van Beethoven, president Abraham Lincoln, prolific author Emily Dickinson, and theorist of moral development Lawrence Kohlberg (to name

a few well-known figures) were difficult, beset with crises and pain. In each of their lives, there are indications of dark depressions and suffering. Lincoln almost killed himself in the depths of his depression, and biographers believe Kohlberg *did* take his own life.<sup>54</sup> Despite the fact that their lives were enormously valuable and eminently worth living, surely it would have been better if these people could have been happy *as well as* being some of the world's greatest creators.<sup>55</sup>

Flourishing's opposite comes in many forms, and it is often recognized when it is seen or experienced. Boredom, anomie, and a sense of listlessness are the opposite of zest.<sup>56</sup> Loneliness and depression can kill. Descriptors of "unflourishing" include chronic and debilitating anxiety or depression, stagnation, rigidity, despair, cynicism, hopelessness, disintegration, a sense of fragmentation, and contempt.<sup>57</sup> This sense of "deadness" can come as a result of many things, and it can affirm and complicate some earlier thinkers' views: I would argue that life is diminished in the midst of deprivation but also in over-indulgence. One's humanity is deadened through a sense of entitlement but also through extreme self-sacrifice and self-abnegation.<sup>58</sup> The deadening of enthusiasm can be wrought both by overcommitment and overextension and also by alienation from oneself, others, and God (or "Goodness Beyond Being"). In an effort to "thicken" the understanding of well-being beyond feeling happy or creating value, then, it is important to distinguish between happiness, well-being, and flourishing.

In common usage, the word *happiness* refers to a personal, subjective experience, but this differs from the understanding of eudaimonia or flourishing. Well-being and flourishing are composed of multiple components—including participation in creating what is good for the whole, not just for oneself (although that is important, too). Happiness as touted in contemporary popular culture, then, is too shallow, this-worldly, and individualistic to be the ultimate aim of life. There must be something more. It is possible that happiness as a subjective experience *and* a sense of well-being *and* participation in what is good for oneself and others are required for flourishing. Furthermore, while happiness is difficult to measure (one can only *say* whether one feels happy or not), well-being and flourishing have several measurable elements, though none fully defines well-being or is sufficient for flourishing.<sup>59</sup>

*Experiencing Well-Being*

Well-being and flourishing are found in the balance of various qualities of human life: too much or too little of any one thing, including pleasure and pain, diminishes a person's capacities to flourish.<sup>60</sup> In addition, most people would not want to extirpate unpleasant emotions just because they are unpleasant; sometimes depression, anxiety, or anger can be important indicators of unjust systems.<sup>61</sup> Both "unpleasant" and "pleasant" (or "positive" and "negative") emotions, then, can be important for well-being. It seems that well-being is found somewhere in the mix and balance of multiple elements and in emotions' indication of them. A fulsome understanding of flourishing must be the bar against which emotions, feelings, and people's responses to them are judged.

Aristotle argued that at the individual level, components that comprise well-being include some level of physical and psychological safety and security and some measure of material stability, which implies equal access to required resources. *Well-being* also includes some freedom of choice, satisfying and life-giving intimate relationships with friends and family, and time to reflect on what matters most.<sup>62</sup> Well-being includes opportunities to pursue forms of engagement that express one's most compelling values at a particular moment and across one's life span.<sup>63</sup> It implies being treated with dignity and respect by oneself and others, being valued by oneself and others, maximizing one's capacities, and having a sense of satisfaction, even pride, in one's accomplishments. Well-being also requires a polis, or society, whose organizations and institutions encourage and support the good for all its members.<sup>64</sup> It also suggests participation in the development and nurture of such a society, including commitment to justice and inclusion.<sup>65</sup> Flourishing has many components that support faring well, living well, and being well. In addition, flourishing adds the element of joy or zest to the features of well-being.<sup>66</sup> Flourishing can be recognized when it is seen in others and when it is experienced subjectively: the descriptors that come to mind include creative fullness, liveliness, responsiveness, passion, compassion, zest, awe in the wonder and mystery of life itself (all life), some measure of freedom, and participation in systems that support the good of the whole. In other words, when people are flourishing they are more able to live with dynamic faith; hope; a sense of deep connection to themselves, others, and the earth; profound love; and even joy.<sup>67</sup> (In fact, when they are flourishing, people are more resilient and are more likely to engage.)

A more-nuanced understanding of flourishing, then, suggests that a subjective response—a conscious condition of contentment, a sense of meaningfulness, satisfaction, and at least occasional joy—is also necessary, and distinguishes flourishing from well-being. However, as noted, one's feelings of joy—while a necessary part of flourishing—are not sufficient for it. An objective assessment that one is pursuing activities that *matter* for the good of oneself, others, and the whole must be included in an adequate understanding of human flourishing. In other words, people can meet (and know they had met) all the culturally accepted conditions of happiness and still be sad or highly anxious. (Think of the wealthy businessman constantly anxious about maintaining his preferred standard of living.) Thus, flourishing cannot be only about meeting external, objective, culturally prescribed conditions. It objectively matters *what* a person contributes to; thus, flourishing has moral implications. Furthermore, it should be clear that as important as feeling happy is, *pursuing* happiness or joy as a subjective feeling will inevitably fail: genuine joy comes only as a *result* of meaningful and robust engagement in objectively valuable pursuits. In fact, flourishing is best understood as a by-product—not a final goal. Flourishing accompanies ongoing activity; it is not an end state. This assumes that being engaged in something that truly matters (is worthy) is fundamental to being human.

### *Humans and the Creation and Discernment of Value*

Human beings are, by nature, valuing creatures. To value something is to make it an object of concern and to want to engage it, and the desire for engagement and participation in something larger than oneself is a fundamental part of being human.<sup>68</sup> Human beings cannot be stonily indifferent to themselves, others, and the world around them and retain their humanity.

Human beings naturally create, and sometimes discover, value in the world. And because human beings *value* people, things, or experiences, they inevitably experience loss. Because of the losses one inevitably endures in life, because of the frustration one experiences in the process of pursuing one's grandest projects and highest values, because human beings suffer illness—and any number of other challenges—pain cannot be avoided.<sup>69</sup> And grief is the appropriate responses to the exigencies of life.<sup>70</sup> Rather than being inherently evil, then, pain—people's emotions in response to it, including also frustration, anger, and fear—confirms that certain things matter and reminds people that they care.<sup>71</sup> The

challenge of creative living, however, is to use one's painful experiences for practical advantage, as a springboard for the pursuit of robust meaning and grand hopes for life—in efforts toward a life of flourishing.<sup>72</sup>

Both the subjective experience of happiness and a life of meaningful engagement are required for flourishing, then:<sup>73</sup> feelings of happiness alone are too thin a gruel to sustain it. (Indeed, “happy” people should be interrogated for their level of depth, engagement, and positive engagement in the world; their happiness may have been purchased at an “unacceptable price.”<sup>74</sup>) Human flourishing, then, requires rich and complex criteria. Flourishing, as it is being defined here, assumes a connection to what is identified as valuable, either by objective standards or by human appraisal that has accumulated over time by people whose lives history has deemed positive and meaningful.<sup>75</sup> Because human beings naturally find and help create value, flourishing requires, in part, human experience and expression of creative power. People often achieve flourishing by confronting and overcoming sometimes formidable challenges and pain.

In this process, as noted, pain is not always negative: it can provide opportunities for the only happiness worth pursuing.<sup>76</sup> If human beings naturally perceive and create value and care about certain things, life without pain and grief is not a human life. Instead, it is like the life of an oyster at the bottom of the sea under perfect conditions, it is a life most people would not want even if it were possible. Furthermore, no single accomplishment—nor series of accomplishments—will satisfy a person once and for always. Human life requires continuous activity, self-transformation, and engagement in what is objectively meaningful. Flourishing is experienced in exertion; it is not a state of perfection that ends the journey.

Flourishing, then, is in part the result of choices, actions, and direct confrontation with the ordinary realities of human existence. The sense of having defined what matters to oneself and to others and of having worked toward what matters raises one's spirits (engenders joy) and is an important component of flourishing.<sup>77</sup> Flourishing is not something anyone fully accomplishes; rather, flourishing is something one seeks with intentional daily practice.

### Conditions That Support Flourishing

It is important to identify the elements of flourishing, but it is also true that genuine flourishing can be achieved only if it is cultivated by and nurtured in both individuals and the collective (the polis). Furthermore,



what flourishing looks like has qualities that are contextualized and particular to each case. At the individual level, flourishing presumes positive, meaningful relationships, engagement in valuable activities, the accomplishment of significant goals, and a subjective experience of joy. Flourishing is something of a developmental task that is experienced—at least to some degree—by having significant needs met, living into one's deepest values, setting meaningful goals, and developing capacities to meet them.<sup>78</sup> One's goals ideally include both self-interest and other-interest and can be used to build life-giving communities and social orders.<sup>79</sup> "Choose life," readers of Jewish and Christian sacred texts are admonished in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, not death.<sup>80</sup> But how? No one lives an unconstrained life. No one makes choices as freely as he or she might wish. Opportunities to build meaningful relationships, to choose life-giving work, to achieve relative safety, to realize some measure of freedom and creativity, and to pursue other means to and signs of "self-actualization" are always constrained by the "givenness" of the worlds in which we all live. Some of these constraints are given in the finitude of humanness. Some are the results of decisions people make—singly and together—moment to moment, in their own lives: indeed, some limits on flourishing are the result of personal and collective election.

For example, all people participate in hierarchies that divide, rank, and exclude certain people and groups. These oppressive hierarchies are built into the structures of legal systems, encoded in global economic strategies, and built into environmental policies.<sup>81</sup> These destructive hierarchies are the results of members of advantaged groups—often in step with one another and with deep fellow feeling<sup>82</sup>—working together to define, target, oppress, and exclude others on the basis of race, age, gender expression, class, physical ability, sexuality, or religious belief. These destructive systems are often unconscious and usually well hidden, yet they significantly shape a person's life chances and sense of possibility. Limits on flourishing are embedded in societies and enacted in interpersonal and intergroup relations. The decision to pursue a life that allows flourishing cannot be only an individual one. Nor can it be achieved without some attention to an Ultimate Reality, the *Force for Life* that helps define what is "good." As the earliest philosophers and theologians believed, it is helpful to put emotions and feelings in the context of one's understanding of ultimate reality, though the view of ultimate reality presented here will differ from that of Plato, Augustine, and others presented in chapters 1 and 2.



Christian theologians understand well the challenges of the human condition and living as constrained creatures, and yet they suggest this is not all there is. For example, philosophical theologian John Caputo imagines all life as lived between the *Unconditional* and the *conditional* in which the conditional is what is done in the service of or for the purpose of something else, and the Unconditional is without reason or purpose; it simply is because it is.<sup>83</sup>

Jewish and Christian theologians, for example, understand that the Unconditional (that is, the Sacred) gift of life is always juxtaposed with the experience of the conditional material realities of life, and human beings live between the two: they are “dust and breath, matter and spirit, divine and clay, finite and infinite, insignificant and of estimable significance, body and self, brain and mind.”<sup>84</sup> Life is lived between the conditional and the Unconditional reality. Flourishing, then, must lie somewhere between what is current, conditional reality and what is Goodness Beyond Being, integrating the otherworldly with the here and now.

Caputo argues that the Unconditional Sacred depends on the conditional for its realization on earth. That is, what is conditioned (meaning everything that exists in the material world, as on earth) is invited to be the fullest expression of itself by what is Unconditional.<sup>85</sup> In other words, the Unconditional invites the conditional/material/human to self-realization. Everything is encouraged to maximize itself to its highest form. And because only human beings can be human beings, Caputo suggests, they are invited—or rather urged—by what is Sacred to be the fullest expression of humanness that they can be within the constraints of finitude.<sup>86</sup> In fact, this may be all that is asked of creation: to embody Sacredness and express the best of itself within the condition to the fullest extent possible. This is the orientation of one’s life that is foundational and necessary for flourishing. Humans’ response to the Sacred Invitation is to live as fully as possible toward flourishing, and to rejoice in their time in the world. This, however, depends on whether each individual can cultivate the virtues, values, and motivations that express the values and hopes of “God.” Because the values of Goodness Beyond Being depend on the conditional to exist on earth, human beings are urged in the direction of love and justice, to value oneself and also what is beyond oneself, and to engage meaningfully for the good of the whole. Because what is Good needs people and societies to be given

its conditional existence in the world, flourishing requires humans' creative and intentional effort to bring it into being.

### The Telos (Aim) of Life

There is no objective, predetermined *purpose* to life that can be proven, and even believing that life has meaning takes a certain leap of faith. Similarly, there is no objective, set *meaning* for human life that can be discerned. There are, however, *ways to create* the meaning of life through the pursuit of what is worthy. Human beings need not begin the quest for what is genuinely valuable from an ideal, transcendent, otherworldly vantage point, however. They can begin with the values already present in themselves and in their contexts: highest-order values that are visible over the course of history, in the best of religious traditions, and built into traditions and conventions that have currency because they are "right."<sup>87</sup> Virtues of love, justice, patience, kindness, and wisdom are time-tested, and they fund flourishing as it is being defined here because they contribute to individual flourishing as well as collective well-being. In this view, the Holy Other is not wholly other.

The understanding of flourishing being proposed here, then, is based on an understanding of life and the universe that describes a highly interconnected, deeply interdependent system of everything that is.<sup>88</sup> Thus, while the arc of justice is long, often sputters, and even loses ground at times, the full inclusion of all<sup>89</sup> toward flourishing is crucial.<sup>90</sup> Working to achieve flourishing for all people is a creative and meaningful endeavor worth pursuing, for by the definition being proposed here, as long as some are excluded from pursuing flourishing, none can fully achieve it.

While the virtues extolled by Aristotle can be discerned in the best (that is, the most just) moments of human history and its leaders, it helps to have a clearly articulated sense of the value system that is embodied in these virtues and which guides their application.<sup>91</sup> Most beliefs and practices related to Jewish and Christian traditions, for example, are committed to the idea that human flourishing requires awareness of the ways all of life is a response to the invitation of the Unconditional (or the Sacred, "Goodness Beyond Being," or "God") toward love and justice. And the Jewish and Christian traditions recognize that individuals' and communities' ability to respond to the Insistence of the Sacred has something to do with capacities that must be cultivated: Aristotle and the philosophers and theologians he informed were right that no person is *born* wise.

The Sacred Insistence urges creation into being—indeed, it invites the world into existence in every moment. The name scientists usually give to the force of “cosmic allurement” is evolution, contained by the forces of gravity,<sup>92</sup> but from a theological standpoint this understanding is limited: gravity describes only the attractional force and does not accommodate the whole-making nature of evolution. The concept of love may be a better word, and it is one employed to describe both cosmologists and theologians.<sup>93</sup> Yearning for wholeness through love, then, is at the heart of all creation from some cosmologies and from a Jewish and Christian perspective. The experience of wholeness is the awareness—at some level—of belonging to another, the awareness of being part of a whole. Love is the means to and the result of this awareness. The degree to which people and societies are (and are aware of being) part of this whole is fundamental to flourishing.<sup>94</sup>

The expectations of flourishing, then, include an evaluation that one's life is meeting one's internal standards (succeeding at what genuinely matters, both to oneself and objectively), realizing significant goals, developing one's capacities for complex tasks such as love and justice, establishing self-esteem, developing self-respect, and attending to what matters for the flourishing of others. Because everything on earth is interconnected, none can fully be well until all are.<sup>95</sup> One's motivating values must be affirmed by objective criteria grounded in history and by the best of what societies have achieved thus far: the Sacred can be materialized only when love, justice, and care are.<sup>96</sup> These virtues can provide guidance for handling moral situations in which self-interests are at odds with others' interests.<sup>97</sup> In fact, right action must be evaluated while also holding flourishing of the individual and the whole in tension. Those who seek flourishing must seek to know what is right, moment to moment, in their context and circumstance. Sometimes that will mean being motivated primarily by love for another, sometimes by love for oneself, sometimes by respect or principle, and sometimes by likely consequence or outcome. These discernments require wisdom, defined as knowing what is best when joined with motivation to act on it. In other words, wisdom and virtuous action require at least an intuitive understanding of what lies under each circumstance, insight into how things hang together and what makes individuals and societal systems tick, as well as the practical know-how to apply to concrete situations and determine how best to proceed.

Thus, while the promise of flourishing is a deeply personal experience that invites each individual to examine his or her life moment by moment, it is also a collective endeavor. Flourishing requires a democratic and inclusive effort. It is participatory, affirming the ontological value of all people, empowering the agency of each, and enhancing capacities for working collaboratively, and for holding in tension compassion and accountability. Flourishing values diversity and complexity and requires the inclusion that gives life—not the exclusion that creates suffering and often kills. And so, while flourishing surely has something to do with people being alive—an individual saying “yes” to her own aliveness—it also means saying “yes” to “God’s” intention of flourishing for every other life and all creation.

Achieving this “yes”—both for oneself and for all else—also depends, then, on resisting what is destructive of the Good; flourishing also requires saying “no” to oppressive systems and actively dismantling them. In other words, humans’ flourishing is part and parcel of becoming more maturely, complexly human, and it includes a profound solidarity with all of creation and the ability to care for selves, others, the environment, and institutions.<sup>98</sup> At its most basic material level, flourishing requires equal distribution of resources, the embrace of interdependence, and capacities for creating just social systems. Engaging in efforts toward just systems—in other words, actualizing the Sacred on earth—is the way human beings create meaning in their lives and in the world, effect Goodness, and enhance their own flourishing and that of others.

## Practices That Cultivate Flourishing

### *Cultivating Strengths and Virtues*

What can be said about the *ways* toward well-being, then? As noted, a life of well-being—or better, flourishing—is a collective endeavor that has unique, local, contextual, and deeply personal aspects. Flourishing necessitates the development of one’s strengths and the possibilities for living out one’s deepest values, as affirmed by wise others. Flourishing requires being clear and realistic about one’s gifts *and* limitations and having opportunities for ongoing growth and development.<sup>99</sup> Flourishing depends on both opportunities and capacities for self-definition and self-expression through imagination, reflection, and creativity. To flourish, one must be able both to experience and to develop one’s exquisite uniqueness even as one develops moral capacities for generous participation for

the good of others.<sup>100</sup> Flourishing is enlivened by and enlivens one's sense of being a being animated by Goodness Beyond Being's Insistence in a world invited into existence by that life force—and loved by it. Experiences of flourishing increase as individual and group capacities for helping create and nurture such a world increase. "Whatever we think 'God' means it must mean life—more life," Caputo writes.<sup>101</sup>

Flourishing, then, is active and it is perspectival: both immediate and personal, and also whole thinking and future directed. A sense of flourishing holds together the now and the future. It attends to both the individual and the deeply personal while always keeping an eye on the world.<sup>102</sup> More than just self-actualization or loving and working better, the highest value in flourishing is the cultivation of what is required for the flourishing of all—and the meaning of life is found in this pursuit. Those who would cultivate flourishing must be able to account for the many paradoxes of human existence, including care and accountability, giving and receiving non-possessive love, and committing deeply while holding loosely. Flourishing includes awareness and ownership of finitude, faults, and brokenness—one's own and others'. It requires taking responsibility for and being accountable to the wounds each, in finite humanness, inevitably inflicts on others. Because of this, flourishing must incorporate coming to some terms with the losses and the inevitable griefs of life rather than their escape. The fullness of one's humanity—which necessarily includes finitude, pain, and grief—must be included in an understanding of flourishing. For this reason, flourishing will require that people are resilient, courageous, resolute, responsive, relational, dynamic, and responsible to one another, to themselves, and to the earth, both in periods of intense activity and also in quiet solitude.

The complex task of flourishing, then, requires the exercise, or practice, or the *discipline of wisdom*,<sup>103</sup> which the Greeks considered the most important virtue.<sup>104</sup> Wisdom, defined as the "ability to make theoretical as well as practical distinctions that allow one to see beyond appearances, below the surface" must be applied so that one develops an intuitive knowing in a way appropriate to the situation.<sup>105</sup> Wisdom both flows from and allows the capacities to see the connections in one's life experiences, between all people, and, indeed, in all of life. It also comes from intentionally reflecting on one's experiences, values, behaviors, and goals as life is being lived. Taking care to apply what one has learned in one's moment-to-moment responses and behaviors is the "alpha and omega" of wisdom.<sup>106</sup>

In order to realize flourishing, then, people will have to strive to be virtuous and wise, but this is a goal not without obstacles. Because human beings live between the Unconditional and the conditional, each must *intentionally develop* the ability to respond to the Sacred Insistence and cultivate capacities for love, justice, “interpathy,” and nonviolence.<sup>107</sup> The wise person will be skilled at analyzing what is going on, diagnosing what is not working, and seeing clearly and correctly what the response should be.<sup>108</sup> But these capacities are significant achievements for those who accomplish them, and they are not guaranteed; growing into wise maturity is not an inevitable outcome of life or the passage of time. To be developed most fully, these capacities require conscious effort, focused awareness, and a willingness to be vulnerable to oneself and with others.

### *Becoming Wise*

The ancient Greeks agreed that wisdom and the virtues must be learned and developed over time and that to be virtuous, people must cultivate the knowledge, perspectives, and skills (the *character*) that will guide them in perceiving, evaluating, understanding, planning, managing, and responding to the events in their lives. The best way to cultivate these understandings is through the exploration of emotions.<sup>109</sup>

Wise people (*phronimoi*) are able to understand deeply and with complex nuance the situations they are in.<sup>110</sup> They do not only experience their own emotions, moods, and feelings; they are also able to understand *why* they are feeling what they feel. They do not just react; they understand the motives and reasons for what is happening. They also understand, or at least consider, the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of their circumstances and their experiences. And they use their emotions—of hopelessness, of love, of care, and of anger—to resist what goes against flourishing.<sup>111</sup>

Each human life begins for each person in a radically connected and utterly dependent state (that is, in the womb) and ends radically connected, when the energy of an individual’s body rejoins the earth at death to become the dust, energy, nutrients, and features that nurture the next generation. Between the two, human life ideally also includes periods and processes of growth, change, differentiation, and deepening of capacities for intimacy and empathy, for non-possessive love, and for justice.<sup>112</sup> One might say that the more complex each one is as a person, the more fully one is able to contribute to creating the kin-dom of God. Indeed, only the fullest complexity allows the fullest response to the gift

of the Sacred that is life.<sup>113</sup> Awareness and intentionality allow people to respond more fully to the Sacred Insistence that we create the kin-dom of “God” than can, say, a rock.<sup>114</sup> And no one is born with these capacities.<sup>115</sup> Each person must *learn* the virtues that support flourishing by engaging his or her own growth with intention.

The Insistent Urge toward what is loving and just presupposes growth and persistent change at the heart of the lifespan across a variety of factors. It requires that physical, cognitive, emotional, relational, and moral capacities develop and increase in complexity during processes of maturation. While the contours (or the raw materials) for the process are present at birth, it takes a lifetime to develop the capacity to hold oneself and all else in creative, interdependent tension.<sup>116</sup> Everything that exists is invited to live into its fullest capacities, but that requires individual intentionality and sociocultural support. It also takes courage.

Such a life depends on developing the strengths that have been shown to support the virtues, including the ability to take into perspective one’s own most significant needs and desires, wisdom, the capacity to love non-possessively, and to be loved, an understanding of what is just and deep commitment to it, courage, self-control, gratitude, appreciation for beauty and excellence, willingness to allow oneself joy and zest, the capacities for faith and hope, the capacity for forgiveness,<sup>117</sup> a sense of humor, and capacity for serious reflection—all of which contribute to flourishing.<sup>118</sup> Thus, flourishing requires conscious and intentional exploration of one’s emotions.

### Implications for Emotions

Emotions play a critical role in cultivating flourishing—if understood and used rightly—and they are crucial for the growth and maturation of the virtues that support it. However, some emotions—at certain times—can prevent growth and constrain one’s sense of creativity and freedom. For example, when emotions restrict increasing complexity (e.g., when fear or anxiety limits one’s growth), and when they prevent meaningful engagement with other people and in groups and social organizations, then emotions limit flourishing. Emotions in relation to human flourishing, then, must be understood as part of a complex system that indicates, motivates, and allows peoples’ growth, encourages their capacities for just and loving interpersonal relationships, deepens their awareness of being nested in an interdependent ecological system, and capacity and willingness to participate in common life that is just



and caring. Those interested in the journey toward flourishing will need to go beneath the slick messaging of popular culture and politics—and the manipulations of marketing—to explore the complexities of their emotions.<sup>119</sup> The following diagram suggests the examination of emotions in multiple, contemporaneous systems; it is an examination that will need to be constant and ongoing. Emotions and the feelings that attend them are related to one's goals, values, motives, physiology, relationships, memories, experiences in the past, hopes for the future, level of self- and other-awareness, needs, beliefs, perceptions, and emotional and cognitive capacities. Emotions and feelings can be mixed and even competing. Emotions and feelings can be pleasant and unpleasant, positive and negative, adaptive and maladaptive, and they often lead to choices and behavior—both life-giving and life-limiting. Emotions are not conscious, but feelings can be. Intentional practices of critical discernment about emotions, feelings, their sources, and potential meanings must constantly be evaluated along several axes and within several concentric circles, the outermost (and most fundamental) being human flourishing as understood herein.

If genuine flourishing requires at its most fundamental level complexity, creative participation, and responsiveness, then lack of awareness of one's interconnections must be a root problem. *Not* flourishing, then, has something to do with believing and acting as if one is disconnected from oneself, others, and from the Goodness Beyond Being, or "God." When one inflicts pain on others intentionally or out of spite, when one serves only one's own interest, when people impoverish, exploit, or deny basic rights to anyone (including recognition, dignity, and justice), when they incite hatred or denigrate others, when groups resort to tribalism and define their identity by the exclusions fueled by mistrust and contempt, then they deny creation's radical interdependence; despite the fact that flourishing has to do with a sense of fulfillment, meaning, abundance, and joy, not all that feels pleasant or good supports flourishing. The work of flourishing includes coming to terms with the proper place of one's self within the great nest of being in which everything and everyone is understood to have ontological value. Emotions, in this view, then, are useful insofar as they communicate something about the realities of life in relation to oneself (intrapsychic dynamics informed by experiences over time) and others (interpersonal relationships, also informed by experiences over time) and tell people something true about their world. And we all need to pay attention.<sup>120</sup>



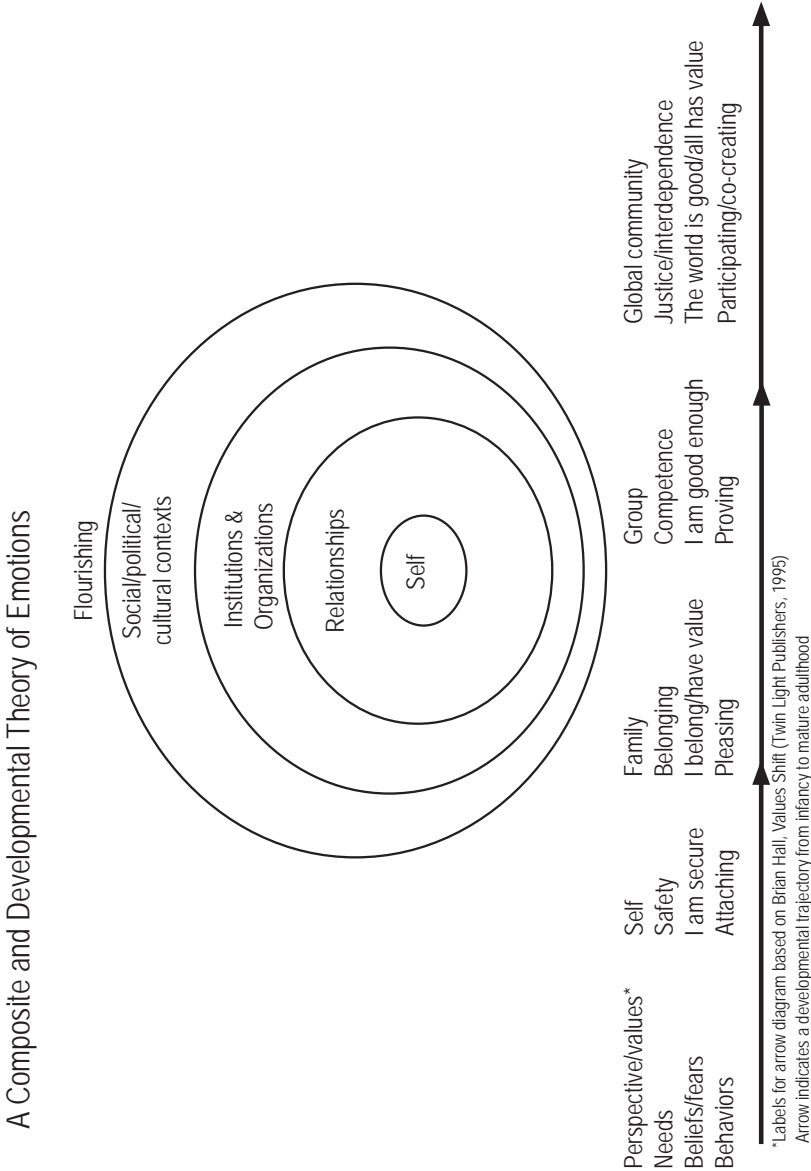


Figure 3: Emotions and Complex Systems

Individuals' emotions are phenomena that arise within people in the interplay of physiology and between people in the experience of interpersonal relationships and sociopolitical contexts. Emotions are related to one's values and goals. Emotions lead to actions and behaviors, are often below conscious awareness, and are informed by past, present, and future. Emotions often emerge when people are unable to adapt to life situations or get their most significant needs met. Emotions point to the welcome and the unwelcome parts of themselves and help people recognize the ways their choices limit their own flourishing and that of others. Indeed, when individuals and groups forget the interdependence at the heart of all that is, their engagement with their emotions reflects this: they often resort to repression (blocking conscious perceptions of feelings and instincts), avoidance of emotions and feelings, passive-aggressive behavior (sublimated aggression expressed indirectly by passivity), projection (relieving unacknowledged pain by projecting those feelings onto others), intellectualization (denying the experience of feelings by rationalizing the situation away), or acting out (engaging in tantrums, substance abuse, or violence) to avoid dealing with tension and one's own feelings.

In addition, people often use emotions to evade personal accountability: one excuses one's inappropriate behavior by appealing to the emotions as "demons beyond control" that cloud one's judgment and result in aberrant behaviors. Persons often imagine themselves as victims not responsible for their deeds; however, a psychological constructionist understanding of emotion supports this view only so far: it does not allow for such a wholly passive assessment of one's relationship to his emotions.<sup>121</sup> Because people's emotions are constructed in the moment, individuals and sociocultural contexts can also influence emotions' generation, expression, and action tendencies. While there are some difficult emotions human beings must accept and live with, at least for a time (grief is to be expected, given the human condition), all emotions invite exploration at all levels—from personal to systemic—for their life-giving or -limiting aspects.<sup>122</sup> Emotions such as guilt among those in power can indicate an unjust hierarchy, and depression, rage, or helplessness among subordinates, the oppressed, or underrepresented groups can indicate the same.<sup>123</sup> Other emotions are significant to examine in light of unjust systems, too. Take fear, for example. Darwin was correct: the expression of fear is useful for physical survival. However, when fear is born of wrong belief or of inaccurate assumptions about others, it is not useful, for that

is when it divides and oppresses and excludes, as in xenophobia.<sup>124</sup> One could make a similar argument about anger: while anger can provide useful information about what matters to someone (“I did not get the promotion I worked so hard for”), it is also a site of control and management (“You will not express your anger at sexual harassment in the workplace unless you want to lose your job”). The construction of what is socioculturally permissible in emotions’ experience and expression can limit the life-giving potential of anger.<sup>125</sup> For example, individuals with brown and black skin tones are often dismissed as “always angry” as a way to minimize their concerns, when actually their rage is justified given the systems of white privilege and oppression that prevent their flourishing. It is useful to recognize that anger has often been deemed “maladaptive” and that societies have tried to control it.<sup>126</sup> However, the anger of Black Lives Matter activists and allies and other resistance groups can be understood as maladaptive only in relation to an expectation of maintaining a status quo. In the context of a deeply and tragically unjust system, however, it is adaptive.<sup>127</sup> In other words, anger in the face of systemic and oppressive racism and the resistance it would ideally engender is utterly appropriate and understandable, even life-giving.<sup>128</sup> If attended to carefully and with critical discernment, then, and used to guide behaviors, including resistance, emotions can be guides to human flourishing and its impediments and also part of its cultivation.

Because emotions are constructed moment to moment using multiple components, they are the embodiment of physiological, developmental, and material, social, or structural realities—all of which are related to one’s past, present, and the imagined future. Because of the complexities of emotions, the sources and meanings of people’s feelings are not always clear.<sup>129</sup> For this reason, careful and disciplined attention to emotions is critical to flourishing. This is especially true because people’s avoidance or particular uses of emotions can be life-limiting. For example, emotions such as jealousy and hate—and the blame they can construct—are usually life-limiting (though they *feel* valuable) because they support one’s personal desire to avoid humiliation, best a rival, or disassociate from someone or something one does not like. However, in the long run, these patterns do not lead to life-giving relationships, management of conflict (even if that means ending that particular relationship), or forgiveness. Although these emotions can be instructive about what matters to individuals and thus are valuable for that purpose, allowing certain emotions to perdure or acting on them is often life-limiting.<sup>130</sup>

A social constructionist model of emotions provides flexibility and nuance when exploring emotions because there are so many possible components and so many options to investigate. For example, one might ask why one's core affect is being activated. Why now? What beliefs have been or are being attached to similar changes in core affect? What values do those beliefs suggest? What needs are at stake? Where did one learn such a response? In what ways is one's emotional episode related to one's past experience, and in what ways is it related to one's current context? What does one's emotional episode say about one's relational context, organizational context, or both? What has one learned about these feelings from parents, teachers, friends, television? Are there other ways one might think about or interpret one's experience?<sup>131</sup> Are there more worthy things one might value? Are there behaviors that might need to change in order to change one's own emotions or the emotions of a group/system? This view also offers multiple ways of working with emotions, from changing one's core affect with lifestyle changes to altering one's beliefs, or from shifting one's values to accepting one's needs and seeking to meet them.<sup>132</sup> A more complex view of emotions, then, offers more avenues for exploration and engagement. Because emotions and feelings are not "inside us" waiting to be triggered, but rather are re-created moment to moment, people have more freedom in the face of them than perhaps previously thought.<sup>133</sup> Emotions, feelings, and behaviors are not automatic or given, even if they seem that way. Exploring their different components, the components' history, and the ways they relate to one another in the current moment can allow for more life-giving engagement with oneself, others, and the world.<sup>134</sup>

In order to understand and use emotions in the cultivation of flourishing, then, individuals and human collectives would be helped if they kept in mind the constructed nature of emotions, analyzing critically the context in which they arise and recognizing that people often have varied and competing emotions simultaneously. At the personal level, individuals ideally will become more aware of their own emotions and learn to explore, use, and sometimes manage them. Do emotions indicate the need for something to change (a person, a relationship, or institutional or social policies, for example)? Does one's own or one's group's emotions need to be changed or regulated? At the interpersonal level, flourishing requires these personal capacities as well as capacities for exploring, understanding, using, and sometimes managing others' emotions (that is, exercising their EQ<sup>135</sup>)—always toward the goals of justice,

compassion, care, love, and respect. Add to these the ideals of diversity and inclusion, transparency, and a commitment for flourishing of the entire polis. Using emotions in the pursuit of the flourishing of all will require that all people concern themselves with what really matters (that is, what we all ought to “set our hearts on”) and develop the capacities and discipline to actualize it. Emotions are the tools that will enable such a vision. It takes courage to feel, but if we attend carefully to our own and others’ emotions and let them guide us toward flourishing, they will, in the end, be the world’s salvation.

### Conclusion

Gaining some clarity about emotions, their origins, and their functions—both for good and for ill—will help us understand ourselves better. If we interpret them in light of the ideal of human flourishing and find practical ways of discerning their lessons for us, they will be the keys to our well-being.

The earliest thinkers about emotions were right: emotions do indicate something about what is good and how to achieve it. However, the early philosophers’ and theologians’ understanding of eudaimonia were fairly narrow. The view of flourishing presented in this book is, I hope, more developed and more nuanced. Examining the features of flourishing as both a deeply personal and a wholly communal endeavor depends on our careful attention to emotions to illumine what is life-limiting and what is and will be life-giving. Emotions, then, are crucial for human flourishing.

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