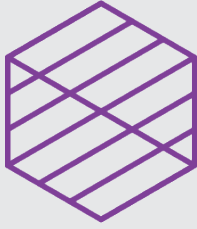

THRIVING CITIES ENDOWMENT BRIEF



The Good

WILLIAM HASSELBERGER



Thriving Cities is an initiative of the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture.



WILLIAM HASSELBERGER

University of Virginia
Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture

Made possible by the generous support of the Kern Family Foundation



THE TRUE
Human Knowledge



THE GOOD
Social Mores and Ethics



THE BEAUTIFUL
Aesthetics



THE PROSPEROUS
Economic Life



THE JUST AND
WELL - ORDERED
Political and Civil Life



THE SUSTAINABLE
The Natural Environment

COMMUNITY ENDOWMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Much like biologists think of an ecosystem as a community of living and non-living things working together in the natural world, Thriving Cities uses a framework we call “human ecology” to help us envision a city. The human ecologies of a city contain and depend upon an array of different, but fundamental endowments. Such endowments: (a) give expression to long-standing and universally-recognizable ends that are essential to human thriving (e.g., intellectual life, aesthetics, sociality, play, health and security, transcendence); (b) become actualized within specific social practices and institutional settings (e.g., universities, theaters, social media, soccer clubs, health care, and places of worship); (c) have distinctive histories that shape their present and future possibilities; and (d) interact dynamically with one another, creating both virtuous cycles when robust and healthy, and vicious cycles when depleted and weak, but also generating synergies with unintended consequences and tensions between competing goods.

The language of endowments is highly intentional. It stands in direct opposition to the language of “capital,” used by most standard and many cutting-edge approaches. Where capital denotes abstract, a-temporal, and amoral value that is at once fungible and fluid, which is to say unfixed (which is precisely the source of its conceptual strength), the language of endowments brings the dimensions of particularity and temporality back into view—endowments are the products of investments made over time and they must be maintained in the present if they are to remain available in the future. Also, attached to the language of endowments is a sense of fiduciary responsibility and obligation. Where capital functions as a medium of value and exchange irrespective of context, endowments function as a reservoir of wealth held in common—as a trust within very definite contexts. Despite its obvious strengths, the language of capital is not able to capture these essential qualities of community life, and not surprisingly, they remain empirically elusive in approaches that rely on it.

Our distinctively cultural approach, with its emphasis on the normative dimensions of common life in cities, invites us to see them in terms of six interactive (and ever-evolving) formative contexts in which we routinely see the exercise of moral agency and practical reasoning across human communities. The first three of the six endowments build on the classical ideals of “the True,” “the Good,” and “the Beautiful;” the last three are what we might call the modern ideals of “the Prosperous,” “the Well-ordered and Just,” and “the Sustainable.” Together they form some of the most recognizable horizons of the human experience.

Thriving Cities Project
Endowment Brief: *'The Good'*

1. Introduction

This endowment brief encompasses two broad and complex topics in ethical thought: human flourishing, on the one hand, and moral character and its development, on the other. More pithily: *the good life* and *the morally good life*.

The topic of human flourishing encompasses a set of questions related to the nature of a good, fulfilling, thriving, meaningful, and well-lived human life: how should we conceptualize such a life, what concepts do we need to adequately describe and understand it, what activities make up such a life, what socio-cultural conditions are necessary for its realization? The topic of moral character encompasses a set of questions related to ethical life: what is the nature of ethical virtue and moral character, how do ethical virtues relate to human flourishing and the good life, what are the social and cultural contexts in which virtues are formed, and what contexts and practices are necessary for the development and sustainment of good moral character?

It is no accident that this endowment brief's twin topics of human flourishing and moral character are also the basic and irreducible ethical concepts of Ancient Greek ethics. A central theme of what follows is this: how we understand the *relation* of these twin topics is crucial for our understanding of the human good. These topics stand at the very beginning of Western philosophical thought, and they remain essential—though they take on a highly distinctive character in the 'modern' epoch, the era following the Scientific Revolution and the rise of large-scale European states. Indeed, the concepts of flourishing and moral goodness take on such specific character in this period—both in philosophy proper and also in broader intellectual culture—that the Greek approaches can seem quite alien, almost as if they are asking different questions, or addressing a different topic.

A crucial feature of the Greek, specifically Platonic and Aristotelian, perspective that is apt to strike us as particularly unusual is this: questions of the good life (for an

individual) and the morally good life (with others) are inseparable. In a crucial sense, they are the same question, encapsulated in Socrates' timeless and sweeping question, *How should human life be lived?* This question concerns the good life for a human being, as such, and not the specifically *morally* good life, nor the specifically *personally* or *prudentially* good life. Human goodness is, on this view, a kind of *excellent activity* that irreducible to either (what we moderns mean by) 'morality' or 'prudential goodness/happiness.' This is a philosophical outlook that came to seem indefensible to many modern philosophers. Modern philosophers came to think of the good life (i.e., a life of wellbeing, happiness, flourishing) as *one* self-standing concern, and the morally good life (a life of virtue activity with one's peers) as another concern. The latter, many now think, is, at best, contingently connected to the former: perhaps virtue is a good 'means' or 'strategy' for achieving the good/flourishing individual life, but perhaps not. And either way, we are dealing with two fundamental, conceptually-distinct 'forms' or 'species' of human goodness, and thus two conceptually distinct species of practical reasoning about how to act: moral reasoning and prudential reasoning.

I argue below that the ethical perspective of Classical Greek antiquity—in particular, that of Aristotle—affords us a crucial vantage point on modern approaches to the good life and the morally good life. This perspective lays bare serious limitations (and confusions) in modern ethical thinking and offers us a richer set of concepts for thinking through the nature of human thriving and moral goodness. My assumption, which this endowment brief aims to justify, is that these fundamental practical-philosophical concepts are best approached from a broad, synoptic perspective, one contrasting now taken-for-granted modern conceptions of human goodness with a Classical alternative, most fully expressed in Aristotle's account of flourishing and virtue. This approach, I hope to show, will help to clarify *what we might mean* by such elusive notions as 'the human good,' 'flourishing,' 'moral goodness,' and thus help the *Thriving Cities Project* to re-think the pursuit of the common good within the context of contemporary urban life.

A word of warning: this endowment brief is largely conceptual and philosophical in nature, and is likely to be less empirically rich and sociologically and historically informed than the other briefs. The overall goal is to clarify a basic philosophical framework that enables us to better articulate and discuss the nature of the good human life along its various, interwoven normative and socio-cultural dimensions, and avoid common forms of contemporary reductionism and myopic and subjectivist thinking about ‘happiness’ or ‘wellbeing.’

I proceed as follows. First, I assess different conceptions of the good human life (the flourishing, fulfilling, or well-lived human life), contrasting certain entrenched ‘modern’ conceptions of the good life with a richer, Classical ‘eudaimonistic’ conception, one most fully articulated by Aristotle. Second, I describe the relationship of ethical virtue—or good moral character—to the good human life, again contrasting the modern way of characterizing this relationship with the Classical picture. Third, I describe, in broad philosophical terms, how ethical virtue is developed and expressed, and the role of particular practices and social institutions in this development and expression. Fourth, I describe how a framework based on a certain concept of social practices (tied to the cultivation of virtue and the appreciation of intrinsic goods) sheds light not only on individual flourishing, but the flourishing of larger groups of practitioners—communities of practice within modern cities. Finally, in closing, I raise some larger methodological or ‘meta-theoretical’ questions about the relationship between, on the one hand, our understanding of human goodness (flourishing and good moral character), as it is embodied in actual, concrete practices, and, on the other, the more abstract, theoretical perspective afforded by a study like the TCP.

2. The Human Good: The View from Here and Now

Before diving into the philosophical waters, let us start with some rather obvious initial questions. Why should there be a Thriving Cities Project with an endowment on ‘the Good,’ which, together with the other endowments, seeks to better understand—or

even re-think—the cluster of ideas of human ‘thriving,’ ‘wellbeing,’ ‘happiness,’ ‘flourishing,’ and ‘the good life’ in contemporary American cities?

First, the provision of studies, metrics, articles, and TED talks concerning human wellbeing and happiness is, to put it mildly, not obviously *lacking*. Why another one? And, second, consider the following conclusions of a few recent studies. According to a 2007 Gallup poll 92% of Americans self-report being “happy,” with “not too happy” only getting 6%. And consider a (somewhat infamous) survey from 1976, which asked Americans to identify how happy they are with their lives by picking out a face representative of their own condition from a “smiley face” chart of faces ranging from *really* smiley to *really* frowny: only 3% of adults placed their lives in the unhappy range, and 93% placed themselves happy to *really* happy range. And don’t even bother asking about the findings of the United Nation’s 2013 *World Happiness Report* concerning the happiness and wellbeing of adults in Canada or Denmark! Indeed, some psychologists and economists claim that the current condition of the developed world is *by far* the most prosperous—and also the most moral—moment in human civilization.¹ So, do we really have a wellbeing or thriving *problem* in twenty-first century urbanized Western countries with happiness percentages in *ninety percent range*—a problem screaming out for the Thriving Cities Project’s careful scrutiny? How happier, more thriving, and better off can we get?

A moment’s reflection, however, prompts some questions about such purported findings. How are the positive findings consistent with *other*, less self-congratulatory statistics concerning levels, in contemporary Western societies (and America, in particular), of depression, chronic stress, loneliness, alcoholism, drug addiction, divorce, suicide, unemployment, dissatisfaction with work, lack of strong community bonds, and so on? In one recent nationally representative survey of American adults, 93 percent of

¹ For the “more happy than ever” claim, see, for example: Charles Kenny, *Getting Better: Why Global Development is Succeeding—And How We Can Improve the World Even More* (New York: Basic Books 2011); Stephen Moore and Julian L. Simon, *It’s Getting Better All the Time* (Washington: Cato Institute Press, 2000). For the “more moral than ever” claim, see Stephen Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012). For some helpful skepticism about these claims, see Daniel Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Wellbeing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

those polled held that “Americans are too focused on working and making money and not enough on family and community.”² We can grant to those boosters of our current moment of Western society that we indeed have much to celebrate (greater political participation, better dentistry, less plague, less chance of dying a violent death). But are we obviously leading happier, more well-off, or more flourishing *lives* than people at earlier historical moments? What, exactly, is such a claim saying? At a fundamental level, *what is it* specifically that current, mainstream studies of ‘wellbeing,’ ‘happiness,’ ‘flourishing,’ and the like, claim to be counting, comparing, measuring, graphing? To measure anything whatsoever, in a coherent sense, we have to have some suitable conception of *what the thing is*, and *how* it is to be studied and compared. How is human wellbeing, happiness, and the good life being understood in mainstream contemporary research? And is that understanding satisfying and defensible?

2.2 The Modern Schism of ‘Human Goodness’: Wellbeing vs. Morality

Terms like ‘human goodness,’ ‘wellbeing,’ ‘flourishing,’ ‘happiness,’ and ‘thriving’ are exceedingly slippery and elusive. Let me try to give a firmer account of what these terms are taken to mean within mainstream contemporary work in philosophy (and related fields of psychology).

Many contemporary philosophers take it to be nearly a truism that there are different ‘species’ or ‘forms’ of human goodness, of how an individual human life can count as being good: in particular, there is a fundamental conceptual distinction between *individual wellbeing* or *flourishing* (i.e., living a fulfilling, rewarding, thriving life) and *moral goodness/character* (being a ‘morally good person’). According to what I will call the **Modern Schism of Human Goodness**, a human life can count as good along two irreducibly distinct domains of value:

- (a) **wellbeing**: what is good life *for* an individual, what makes them ‘happy’ or what makes their life ‘go well’ *for them*; and

² *The New American Dream Survey 2004*, by The Center for A New American Dream, cited in Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, 284, n.25.

(b) **morality**: what is involved in leading a morally good life, in treating others rightly, or respectfully, or in accordance with the rules and dictates of morality.

The good life in the wellbeing-sense is roughly a life where the agent is well off or happy or satisfied. Different theories of wellbeing/happiness put this in different ways: e.g., the life of wellbeing is a life where an agent feels good, enjoys pleasant experiences, is satisfied with her life, and/or gets what she desires or prefers. The morally good life, on the other hand, is one where the agent conducts her affairs with others according to the proper moral principles—where she *limits* her pursuit of the good life by the principles of moral rightness.

Given this assumed schism in two forms of human goodness, *practical reasoning*—i.e., reasoning about *how one should act* so as to secure the good—is accordingly split along two distinct dimensions: **prudential reasoning** aimed at securing the agent’s own wellbeing or happiness, and **moral reasoning**, aimed at determining the demands of the moral law.

This schism is registered in two ‘intuitions’ many philosophers find compelling: (1) a thoroughly evil person can truly flourish or thrive, and (2) a thoroughly morally good individual can lead a stultifying, unfulfilling, not-thriving life. The Greeks moralists were familiar with this view and—in the guise of figures like Calicles, Gorgias, and Thrasymachus—considered, and rejected, the prospect that the truly flourishing individual could be a morally corrupt individual. But a long line of philosophical thinking in the modern period, notably found in the work of Hobbes, Kant, Mill, and Nietzsche, and continuing within contemporary philosophy and psychology, has entrenched this conceptual schism between the good life and the morally good life.

I argue below that insights from the Greek *eudaimonistic* tradition reveal this schism to be deeply problematic, and show the promise of bringing flourishing and moral character back together in a conceptual unity in our thinking about how human lives thrive or fail to thrive. But first, in order to make the case that such a re-thinking is indeed needed, let us take a closer look at these two contemporary spheres of wellbeing-goodness and moral-goodness.

2.3 A Separate Sphere of ‘Moral’ Goodness?

What do modern philosophers take *moral goodness* to consist in? ‘Morality,’ from the perspective of modern schism of human goodness, concerns a putatively distinct, authoritative, and perhaps overriding, range of *duties that one owes to other people, just as such*. This is the sphere of rule-bound requirements an agent *must* (is morally obligated to) meet in order to, e.g., accord others due respect as rational beings (for the Kantian) or properly promote the aggregate happiness (for the utilitarian). These moral obligations—e.g., not to lie, cheat or steal—count as limits on the agent’s legitimate pursuit of her own wellbeing or happiness (where these latter concerns fall under the sphere of ‘prudence’ ‘self-love,’ or ‘self-interest,’ the *other* side of the schism of human good). Thus Kant describes the will of a human agent as divided between two fundamental principles: the moral law (roughly, how one must act so as respect the rationality of others) and the principle of self-love (how one should act so as to secure one’s own happiness).³ The morally good life, then, is a life where one limits the pursuit of one’s own private good out of respect for the fundamental rules of morality. Different accounts of the moral law, and moral value and motivation, provide different conceptions of this separate moral sphere of goodness: whether Kantian, utilitarian, contractarian, etc.

This picture of the nature of morality and moral goodness is not universal and timeless, however, and a number of critics of ‘modern moral philosophy,’ including Elizabeth Anscombe, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Bernard Williams, have attacked it. In Bernard Williams’ influential formulation, “morality,” as construed above, is a distinctively *modern* concept (*vis.* a sphere of overriding obligations/duties that limit the agent’s pursuit of her good, as spelled out by Kantians and utilitarians), whereas “ethics” is an older and broader notion, tied to the Greek concept of an *ethos*: a shared ideal of

³ It’s worth noting that Kant *does* recognize moral duties-to-oneself—such as the duty to suitably develop one’s talents—but most modern moral theorists (outside of the virtue ethical tradition) see this as a problematic or borderline case.

the good human life.⁴ A culture's *ethoi* are embodied in a whole array of the culture's practices, for example, the character traits and kinds of people that the culture finds admirable, the moral-allegorical stories they tell, the nature of their 'heroes' and 'villains,' the way the various aesthetic, productive, intellectual, martial practices that make up their way of life are structured. As Williams and Anscombe both point out, it is striking that Plato and Aristotle do not seem to *have* a concept of morality, in the modern sense, at all.⁵ In the moral tradition of Classical antiquity, a *moral* or *ethical virtue* is good way of being and living *as a human*: being courageous when courage is called for is a *human excellence*, even in instances where the courageous agent is not, say, saving other people, but simply standing up for herself when that is appropriate. This contrast between the modern conception of morality and the Classical idea of an *ethos* may be roughly captured in terms of two different questions: 'What (morally speaking) must I do?' *versus* 'What kind of person should I strive to be?' *or* 'What is the admirable life?' The Classical ethical virtues, as I argue below, articulate ideals of human goodness that *cut across* the modern dichotomy of good-for-self (wellbeing/prudence) *versus* good-for-others (morality).

2.4 The Other Sphere of Human Goodness: 'Wellbeing,' 'Happiness'?

The other sphere of human goodness (within the modern schism) is that of individual wellbeing, happiness, or prudential good—in other words, what is ultimately, non-instrumentally *good for a particular individual*. This, we are told, is the kind of goodness an agent has in mind when she reasons practical about 'what to do,' not from the standpoint of morality, but simply from the perspective of her own interests. Achieving

⁴ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), especially chapters 1, 2, and 10.

⁵ Here is how Elizabeth Anscombe famously, and controversially, advocated the priority of virtue concepts over more abstract moral concepts: "It would be a great improvement if, instead of 'morally wrong,' one always named a genus such as 'untruthful,' 'unchaste,' 'unjust.' We should no longer ask whether doing something was [simply] 'wrong,' passing directly from some description of the action to this notion; we should ask whether, e.g., it as unjust; and the answer would sometimes be clear at once [unlike with the highly abstract and generic concept 'wrong']." Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy*, vol. 33, no. 124 (January 1958).

the good here (according to the schism) is not necessarily achieving any objective or impersonal goodness, but rather goodness-for-oneself, prudential goodness, or one's own personal wellbeing.

Often the concept of 'wellbeing' is treated as roughly equivalent to the concept of 'happiness' (such that the well-off life *just is* a suitably happy life). But several philosophers of wellbeing now take 'happiness' to pick out a central part of, but not the entirety of, wellbeing—roughly that part connected to the agent's psychological satisfaction.⁶ Whether or not one treats wellbeing and happiness as equivalent, the dominant contemporary understanding of wellbeing is of a special, 'person-relative,' and subjective realm of non-moral goodness. Talbot Brewer describes mainstream theories of human wellbeing as philosophical refinements of "a thought that is widely affirmed in the post-Enlightenment Western world—namely, the thought that what is genuinely good for a particular person need not be the least bit good in any more objective or impersonal sense."⁷ The dominant accounts of this personal dimension of human goodness, which largely pervade the literature, are **Hedonic** theories and **Desire-based** theories.

According to **Hedonic accounts of wellbeing**, a happy, well-lived life is one with a sufficiently positive balance of pleasurable feelings (moods, 'affects') over painful feelings. As Jeremy Bentham puts it: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, *pain* and *pleasure*. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do."⁸ And Mill writes: "By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure."⁹ Pleasure is some kind of experiential state—one with a particular qualitative "feel"—largely or entirely assessable

⁶ For example, Daniel Haybron treats wellbeing as the broader concept, with happiness as a constituent element of it, made up of goodness in purely emotional/psychological terms.

⁷ Talbot Brewer, "Is Welfare an Independent Good?", *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2009), 96n.

⁸ Jeremy Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, I.1.

⁹ J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1979), 7.

in terms of its intensity and duration.¹⁰ And life of wellbeing and happiness, then, amounts to a suitably pleasurable life.

Some see a hedonic view as the most scientifically-respectable conception of the human good, one most amenable to association with (or outright reduction to) patterns of brain activity and hormone-release. Richard Layard tells us, in *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, which mixes a hedonic theory of happiness with pop-neuroscience and economics: “Happiness is feeling good, and misery is feeling bad.”¹¹ Moreover the hedonic view lends the subject a certain first-personal *sovereignty* over his own happiness (as we’ll see, a crucial feature of the modern account of personal goodness): “If you feel happy,” says Jonathan Freidman, “you are happy—that’s all we mean by the term.”¹² This kind of view is surprisingly widespread.

Despite their popularity, hedonic conceptions of happiness/personal goodness confront many *serious* problems. Is it plausible to assume there is some *one* good thing—a subjective state of pleasurable experience—that is had in common by all seemingly heterogeneous valuable or good activities (varying only in its causal sources, intensity, and duration)? Is there a common quality of ‘pleasure’ to be had from, for instance, eating a good hamburger, having a good philosophical discussion, experiencing and contemplating the art in a great museum, and seeing one’s child go off to college? It stretches credulity to think that, at some fundamental level, these four, radically different activities are all ‘good’ in that they causally yield a single good thing, pleasurable experience (though in different quantities and durations). Indeed, such a claim seems to *level or trivialize* worthwhile activities and provide an impoverished view of what a good human life could offer us. As the philosopher Julia Annas puts it, the hedonic view

¹⁰ Mill famously tries to introduce a *qualitative* distinction, rather than mere Benthamite quantitative one, among different pleasures—higher and lower pleasures. The means by which Mill attempts to make this distinction between higher and lower pleasures involves determining *which* pleasurable experiences, among a range of options, most people (who possess suitable information) would in fact choose. Most find this method unsuccessful even on its own terms.

¹¹ Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 6.

¹² Quoted in David Myers, “The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People,” *American Psychologist* 55.1 (2000): 57.

construes the good life as a series of “smiley-face feelings.”¹³ It does not seem that *this* is what we wish for in wishing well-off and happy lives for loved ones.

This problem yields another. If we follow hedonists in construe ‘pleasure’ as a mere experiential state, it seems that entirely *passive* lives of ‘consumption’ of pleasurable experiences would count as eminently well-off and happy, by the hedonists lights. Consider a life of taking a continuous cocktail of pleasure-inducing drugs; or, to adapt a famous example from the philosopher Robert Nozick, consider a life spent entirely in basement closet plugged up to an ‘experience machine,’ which feeds you with a continuous stream of pleasurable experiences, but which involves no *actual* human activity, contact with others, relationships, or real achievement. Most people find such possibilities, not just unusual candidates for supremely well-off, thriving, and happy lives, but outright *repellent*. It seems our conception of human well-being or flourishing involves more than mere passive experience: at a fundamental level, it involves real, concrete activity, *being and doing things well*, in a shared human world. This theme is crucial on the Aristotelian approach I sketch below.

The main alternative to hedonic views of wellbeing and happiness emphasizes, not some particular experiential state, but the individual’s success in accomplishing or obtaining those things she *desires, wants, or prefers*. According to **Desire-Based theories**, the good life, in the wellbeing sense, is a life made up of satisfying (some sufficient number of) your desires, wants, or preferences, whatever those are. In his influential book, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, Wayne Sumner writes: “Versions of the desire theory now define the orthodox view of the nature of welfare, at least in the Anglo-American philosophical world. In the theory of rational choice the equation of well-being with utility (preference satisfaction) has achieved the status of an unquestioned axiom.”¹⁴

¹³ Annas, “Happiness as Achievement,” *Daedalus*, vol. 33, no. 2 (2004).

¹⁴ Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122.

Sumner, John Rawls, Henry Sidgwick, and many others defend variants of the desire/preference-based view of wellbeing.¹⁵

Desire-based theories are highly subjective, content-neutral views of wellbeing/happiness and of the kind of practical reasoning involved in furthering one's wellbeing/happiness. Proponents think of this as a benefit of the account, capturing the thought that different people can take satisfaction and happiness in different, and even idiosyncratic, things. The good life consists in the formal property of getting what you want or prefer, whatever that is, and being satisfied—i.e., in abstraction from the substantive content of one's desires. Prudential practical reasoning is then construed in a familiar way as *instrumental*, as largely or solely reasoning about the steps or means for achieving desired (or preferred) ends, where the latter desired ends are given or fixed from outside of reason itself.

And now-popular variant of this view is the so-called **Life-Satisfaction** account of wellbeing/happiness: wellbeing or happiness consists in a global positive judgment about the course of one's life relative to one's desires ends, preferences, or chosen priorities. Indeed, as Daniel Haybron notes, there is a not-too-subtle ring of consumerism about such views: the happiest, most fulfilling life is seen as all about wanting things and getting them—and being 'satisfied,' *a satisfied customer with life*, so to speak.¹⁶

Attempts to actually *measure* wellbeing and happiness in as subjective desire/preference-satisfaction raise a whole host of methodological problems.¹⁷ But the

¹⁵ See Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics*, 138-183; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 358-372; Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), 109-112.

¹⁶ Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, ch. 5.

¹⁷ Consider: *Are you satisfied with your life? Are your central desires satisfied? Are you happy?* Given the background culture's ambiguities about the very concept of 'happiness,' it's rather unclear how one is to go about reflecting on and answering these questions. And it's far from clear that one person's answer 'means' the same thing as another, similar answer from another person. There are further methodological problems: life-satisfaction surveys are notoriously subject to distortion from seemingly trivial background factors—like social norms against publically admitting dissatisfaction or unhappiness, or whether participants have had a good lunch prior to the survey, or whether participants 'found' a coin in a telephone booth prior to the survey (a coin placed there by the researchers themselves).

real problem with desire-based views resides in the basic structure: namely, their purely formal, subjective, content-neutral nature. While this may capture some of our intuitions about the variability of the sources of wellbeing/happiness across different people, the problem is that people can desire/prefer utterly *trivial* things, or even grotesque or sadistic things—and it seems deeply implausible that getting those things makes their lives count as well-off or flourishing. Plato gives the example of sorry soul who desires simply to *scratch an itch* his whole life long, and goes about doing this “to his heart’s content.”¹⁸ This fulfills the purely formal criteria of desire/preference-satisfaction, and yet it obviously falls far short of anything worth calling a well-off or flourishing life—it seems a stretch to call it a recognizably human *life* at all. As the philosopher Richard Kraut writes: “Some one wants to V [an unspecified type of act]. We ask, is it good for him to have that desire and to satisfy it? How strange it is to think that we can answer that question without being told what V is!”¹⁹

Moreover, an individual’s desires and preferences themselves can be the product of *manipulative* or *distorting* pressures. Imagine an agent who, because of the influence of domineering parents, advertising, and social pressure, desperately wants to become a manager of bank with an imposing Mercedes. It seems perfectly imaginable that such a person could strive tirelessly to achieve this and then, once the desire has been ‘satisfied,’ could feel *empty*, *confused*, and *unfulfilled* (asking herself *Why did I want this?*). In short, agent can want or prefer things, and then get them, without that making their lives *any* better, happier, or more well-off and fulfilling.

There is a *grain* of truth in subjectivist views, however. The activities that make up a good life are, ideally, engaged in with the agent’s full (‘subjective’) appreciation, attention, and absorption. As Aristotle tells us, pleasure “completes” the best activities: it’s a way of performing activities in an “unimpeded” and appreciative manner. But here the value of the pleasure or subjective appreciation *supervene on* the independent value of the activities themselves—if the activities are worthless or cruel, taking pleasure in them

¹⁸ Plato, *Gorgias*

¹⁹ Richard Kraut, *What is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2007), 100.

is no benefit (indeed, it seems make the agent worse off, insofar as it signals an irrational obsession or perversion).

2.5 Subjective Wellbeing and Individual Autonomy

We've looked at two of the dominant mainstream approaches to human wellbeing, views that fundamentally subjectivist in nature—hedonic and desire/preference-based views, and found such views deeply lacking. I will now raise a different question: *how did we get here?* How has modern philosophical thinking—as well as broader aspects of contemporary culture—come to find subjectivist accounts of the good life appealing, or even *obviously* correct? I will briefly (and rather speculatively) suggest a motivation in the history of philosophy for the prevalence of subjectivist accounts of the human good: the progressively more radical celebration of individual *autonomy*—individual self-direction, or personal self-rule—during the Enlightenment.

Major Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and Mill (and even radical critics of the Enlightenment like Nietzsche) moved from a conception of autonomy or individual self-government as check against political tyranny, to a certain *ideal of the person*: guiding one's life by one's own *individual and independent use of reason*, judging all evaluative matters oneself, and determining the course of one's life without the corrupting influence of tradition or custom.²⁰ Mill gives a particular strong account of this ideal:

The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice...He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.²¹

Thus, Mill tell us, well-being should not be conceptualized on the Classical model of a shared *ethos* of what constitutes human excellence or flourishing (which he derides as treating human beings as molded on a simple “pattern” like “steam-engines”), but “the

²⁰ The very concept of “enlightenment,” Kant tells us, amounts to “the liberation of man from his self-imposed immaturity...[This immaturity consists] not in a lack of understanding, but in a lack of determination and courage to use [one's individual understanding] without the guidance of another.” Kant, “An Answer to the Question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’, in *Political Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 54.

²¹ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Book 3, p. 61-62

free development of *individuality* is one of the leading essentials of well-being.”²² We can parse the complex and challenging relationship between the Enlightenment celebration of individual autonomy and the contemporary orthodoxy that wellbeing and happiness are private and subjective goods in terms of several distinct claims:

- 1) **An epistemological claim:** each individual is better placed epistemically to judge and know what is good for themselves. As Mill puts it: “with respect to his own feelings and circumstances [including his own happiness], the most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge immeasurably surpassing those that can be possessed by anyone else.”²³
- 2) **A character-ideal:** the self-created life of ‘individuality,’ where one somehow defines one’s own wellbeing for oneself, is intrinsically valuable. As Mill puts it: “If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode.”²⁴
- 3) **A political claim about autonomy and paternalism:** Justice demands that we treat all individual agents as autonomous, free and equal, such that imposing a conception of the human good on an individual agent who does not herself affirm it counts as unjustly paternalistic.

And finally, and most radically,

- 4) **A Metaphysical claim about the nature of value or goodness:** with Kant and later existentialists and analytic philosophers, philosophers began to view the autonomous agent’s *individual will* (or individual choice) as somehow *determining* or *constructing* what is good for the individual herself, as Kant puts it, “independently of any alien influences,” such as an objective order of values or goods.

The philosopher of history Jerome Schneewind characterizes the latter point in the following way: “The defining feature of an autonomous agent, in Kant’s view, is its ability to guide its own action by choices of a will that is such that whatever it wills is

²² Mill, *On Liberty*, 59.

²³ Mill, *On Liberty*, 81.

²⁴ Mill, *On Liberty*, 71. See also, 63.

good *simply because it is willed by it.*"²⁵ Here the Enlightenment ideal of an independent and self-responsible autonomous individual bleeds into an anti-realist subjectivism about goodness: things are good (for me) simply *because* I will, choose, or desire them—*their value entirely depends on my subjectivity* (my acts of will or states of desiring/preferring). This view of centrality of individual autonomy and the subjective nature of 'personal' value has a strong pull on Western culture—a fair number of intelligent students in any philosophy class are likely to affirm it quite strongly. It also chimes with scientific and reductionist views that *all value is simply a 'construction' of the mind*, and that any more 'objective' notion of human goodness is intolerably obscure or anti-scientific.

Whether or not I'm right about the historical sources of subjectivist views of human goodness, they have come at a cost. The mere psychological fact that an individual desires, chooses, finds pleasurable, or prefers, some activity does nothing, by itself, to show the *merits* of the activity—whether that activity is, in any respect, valuable or good or worthwhile. Indeed, as Aristotle puts it in the *Metaphysics*: "desire is consequent on opinion rather than opinion on desire."²⁶ That is, we characteristically *want* the things that we do because we conceive of them (perhaps mistakenly) as in some way *good* or *desirable* or *worthwhile*, not the other way around. Characteristically, we choose to take up, and desire to persevere within, activities and projects in our lives because we think they are independently valuable (*pace* the radical account of individual autonomy described above). The idea that our life projects are valuable *simply in virtue of the fact that we desire or choose them* seems a problematic and unstable conception of one's deepest commitments.²⁷

²⁵ J. Schneewind, *The Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory*, p. 66 (emphasis added). Consider also Christine Korsgaard's account of the relation of the autonomous will and value: "As rational beings we make the [moral] law, we legislate it. Suppose for instance I undertake a program of scientific research...My choice is an act of legislation: I lay it down, for myself and others, that this research is good. We may say that I *confer a value* on scientific research, when I choose to pursue it." *Introduction to Kant's Groundwork*, p. xxiii

²⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a

²⁷ Cf. Brewer: "The activities we choose as life projects seem from the participant perspective to meet our affirmation halfway. They seem to call for, or merit, our endorsement. To accept that this appearance is a mere illusion, and that one's life goes no better if one throws oneself into loving friendships or philosophy than if one throws oneself with equal enthusiasm into

2.6 Breaking with the Modern Schism: Strong Evaluation

Let us take stock. According to what I've called the modern schism of human goodness, there are two totally distinct dimensions along which a human life can be said to be good: moral goodness, which is largely a matter of not violating rules against wrongdoing, and wellbeing/happiness, which is largely a subjective matter of pleasurable experience or desire/preference satisfaction. Combining the two fragmented poles of goodness we have this idea: morality is a set of rules that limit one's pursuit of one's own wellbeing/happiness, subjectively construed. But does this exhaust the nature of the good human life, the well-lived or flourishing life (especially given the problems we've seen above)?

In trying to reason as soundly as possible about the choices that confront us, even setting aside straight forwardly moral considerations about others, we often face the question what *should* I want, what *should* I aim at, what *should* I prefer. Call this, following Charles Taylor, the question of "strong evaluation."²⁸ In taking up this question, we ask what can count as *appropriate* or *fitting* or *worthy* objects of one's desires, aims, choices, preferences. The "strong evaluator" asks how she can steer and educate her desires, aims, preferences so as to track what is genuinely desirable, valuable, or good. Taylor claims that the capacity to take up this kind of evaluative perspective—to address the question on what is worthy of desire (not simply how to satisfy what one in fact desires)—is partly constitutive of being *a fully human agent*.

The central critical point I wish to make is this: contemporary accounts of the human good (split as they are between the poles of subjective satisfaction, on the one hand, and rules against moral wrongdoing, on the other) offer us *little or no help with this larger 'strong evaluative' question*. The question of strong evaluation is not a question that can be settled by appealing to one's *actual* desires, aims, preferences, etc., whatever they may be, and it is not satisfyingly settled by appeal to rules against wrongdoing. Appealing

collecting saucers of mud, is tantamount to accepting that there is no particular point in doing anything. This is nihilism masquerading as a positive account of the sort of value humans might hope to find in their lives." "Is Welfare an Independent Good?", 102.

²⁸ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4, 14, 20, 42.

to moral rules may help an agent rule out certain life projects, but the question of strong evaluation is deeper than this: we want to know if the ways we desire or choose to live are indeed, *sound*, *wise* and *well-chosen*—we want to know whether a given way of life is conducive to human flourishing, not simply whether it's morally permissible.

In sum, the contemporary schism of human goodness leaves us are left with a fractured picture, split between two domains of the good, both of which are construed in impoverished, 'thin' manner (and which are reconcilable only contingently, if at all). On the one hand, mainstream theories of wellbeing/happiness present us with a range of views that all presuppose an implausibly subjective account of the nature of the good life; on the other hand, with accounts of moral rules and moral rightness divorced from individual flourishing, though they may be quite demanding (as with certain forms of utilitarianism), do little more than tell us to do our moral duty and avoid moral wrongdoing—they seem to provide us with little more than a handful of prohibitions and constraints.

This 'thinness' in accounts of human goodness is reflected in many of the current metrics on offer in this terrain of wellbeing and morality (such as *The World Happiness Report*, Ed Diener's "Quality of Life" index, and so on). We find a plethora of subjectivist measures of the good life (hedonic measures, desire-satisfaction, life-satisfaction), and very limited set of measures of the moral health of communities focused largely on wrongdoing—e.g., crime rates, discrimination, domestic violence, etc.²⁹ There are exceptions, but they prove the rule.³⁰

²⁹ See Ed Diener, "A Value-Based Index for Measuring National Quality of Life," *Social Indicators Research* 36 (1995): 107-127.

³⁰ In some ways, the so-called "capabilities approach" to human wellbeing offered by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen is a richer picture, and it shares a number of features with the view I sketch below—including attention to human activity (rather than passive states) and the ethical virtues needed for healthy human relationships. See the articles in Nussbaum and Sen, eds., *The Quality of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). And there are other non-subjectivist accounts of wellbeing/flourishing in the minority in philosophy and psychology. But these often seem to run into a different problem. Because they attempt to locate such *highly general* properties of happy or well-off lives—properties found in lives made up of completely different kinds of activities in completely different cultural contexts—they end up picking out properties that don't seem, from the first-person perspective to properly capture what agents actually find valuable, rewarding, worthwhile in their concrete practices.

I will now attempt to spell out an alternative approach to human goodness that seeks to overcome the conceptual schism of wellbeing and moral good and that is rooted in Classical ideas of ethical virtue as human excellence, of flourishing as excellent activity, and of an *ethos* embodied in practice.

3. An Aristotelian Approach to Flourishing and Virtue

Let me turn back the clock of Western intellectual history a mere 2,500 years. The Ancients Greeks—including, centrally, Aristotle, Plato, the Epicureans, and Stoics—share the broad orientation that ethics has to be grounded in a proper view of the human soul or person—a proper philosophical and moral *anthropology*, we may say. But Aristotle, against Plato and others, thinks the human person should be understood, not as a disembodied intellect, but as an *embodied form of life*: a particular living being with a certain emotional nature, certain *distinctive capacities*—in particular, those of rational thought, mind-directed action, and discourse—and certain *characteristic activities*—in particular, those of social life, friendship, and civic/political practice.

More broadly, for Aristotle, ethics is an extension of thinking about *life*, generally, and about human life, more particularly: how our living nature can be shaped, brought into its proper form, fulfilled, expressed, or frustrated, stifled, and left ‘withering on the vine,’ so to speak. In general, we understand particular kinds of living beings by looking to their patterns of activity or, in a broad sense, their ‘functioning’: the way a living being grows, interacts, reproduces, and is drawn by nature towards certain ends. That is living beings, for Aristotle, are only fully understood in terms of how their lives display a certain evaluative or normative structure: how certain states and activities are, for those beings, states of *health, growth, proper functioning, fully and properly exercising their capacities and*

For example, the psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci provide a list of “universal human needs” that are among the chief “sources” of the good life: *autonomy, competence, and relatedness*. It seems unlikely that these highly general/abstract properties will properly answer to what, for example, a musician finds so rewarding and valuable about playing music. See Richard Ryan, Randall Curren, and Edward Deci, “What Humans Need: Flourishing in Aristotelian Philosophy and Self-Determination Theory” in Waterman, ed., *The Best Within Us: Positive Psychology Perspectives on Eudaimonia* (American Psychological Association, 2013). Thanks to Talbot Brewer for helping me to see this point.

powers, and, conversely, *illness, deprivation, dysfunction, disorder*. Life, then, is inextricably tied to ‘value,’ in the sense that a proper grasp of a particular form of life requires a grasp of the ways that form of life can *flourish*. The same goes for human life. Certain states and activities in human life count as conditions of flourishing—conditions of health, proper functioning (including proper social functioning), full development and exercise of mature human capacities—and other states and conditions impede human flourishing. Indeed, from an Aristotelian ‘life-centered’ to human goodness the modern idea that, say, water and oxygen are good for me primarily because of their connection to subjective satisfactions (e.g., pleasure or desire-satisfaction) seems bizarre: water and oxygen are good for me because of their connection to my *human form of life*.

Aristotle’s ethics grows out of a conception of human goodness that must be approached *via* questions such as the following:

- What are the ends/aims for which human beings naturally strive?
- What are the states and activities of proper functioning for human beings?
- What makes up a worthwhile, fulfilling, genuinely flourishing human life—human life *lived at its best*?
- What is the place of different forms of character—stable psychological dispositions and ways of seeing and responding to situations—in the living of a worthwhile, fulfilling human life?

Human beings, Aristotle assumes, have some underlying nature, one that is variable and educable but still significant and comprehensible: humans characteristically develop in certain ways, we need and do certain things, we can acquire certain traits and dispositions, and we are drawn towards certain ends. Aristotle’s ethics is rooted in an account of those traits, aims, and activities of human beings that most centrally contribute to our living worthwhile, fulfilling, genuinely flourishing lives. The human good, in the broadest possible description, is to live a fully and characteristically human life, one that

is an inherently rewarding and fulfilling expression of our distinctive capacities of *rationally-guided, self-directed activity and social engagement*.³¹

So what *do* human beings, by nature, aim at, or strive for? Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* by noting that anything that we intentionally do we do *for the sake of something*, for some purpose or aim. For example, imagine I walk over to my coffee maker and place a new filter in the brewing basket. Imagine someone asking: *Why did you do that—what's the point?* I did it for the sake of brewing a fresh pot of coffee. That is the good, or the reason, in virtue of which my action is intelligible. *Ok, but why do that—what's the point?* I brew a pot of coffee so I can wake up and continue to work on a paper. Again, that is the good or reason my action seeks and in terms of which it is intelligible. *Ok, but why do that...* Such reasons-seeking or purpose-seeking questions *Why?* can be re-iterated. But ultimately, Aristotle thinks, we must come to an intelligible stopping point: an overall, fundamental goal for why we act and live in one way, rather than another. What is the *overall* goal or point of our life activities and strivings? Aristotle gives us a clear answer: all human beings ultimately strive for *eudaimonia*, roughly, a comprehensive way one's life can go well or flourish as a whole.

But this doesn't get us very far. *Eudaimonia* is typically translated as 'happiness,' and indeed, we are all familiar with the 'psychological hedonist' claim that all human action ultimately aims at happiness-for-self (pleasure-for-self). However, 'happiness,' understood in the modern sense, has features very different from the concept of *eudaimonia*: happiness is often thought of (i) as a feeling or state ('I *feel* happy'), (ii) as a state that is episodic and potentially fleeting ('I was blue yesterday, but I feel happy *today*'), and (iii) as a state that is independently-identifiable and ethically-neutral (e.g., a

³¹ It is controversial among contemporary Aristotelians what role characteristic features of the *human species* should play. Modern Aristotelian 'naturalists'—such as Anscombe, Geach, and Foot—claim that it plays a central role: ethical virtues, they claim, are ultimately grounded in essential features of our species or *life-form*. Geach famously writes: "Men need the virtues as bees need their stings." Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 17. Foot writes: "It is necessary for plants to have water, for birds to build nests, for wolves to hunt in packs, and for lionesses to teach their cubs to kill...human defects and excellences [including the ethical virtues] are similarly related to what human beings are and what they do." Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 15.

psychological state of pleasurable experience, or a formal property of getting something that one desires/prefers). *Eudaimonia* differs from ‘happiness,’ so construed, on all three counts. Against (i), *eudaimonia* is most fundamentally a form of *human activity*, not a state or feeling. Against (ii), *eudaimonia* is something that characterizes *the kind of life* a person lives overall—what a person makes of her life, as a rounded whole—not an episode or even a series of episodes that can be ‘had’ in fleeting moments. Against (iii), the true nature of *eudaimonia*, what it truly consists in, is only properly understood from within a certain socially-shaped and cultivated *proper ethical perspective*, and thus is not something that anyone can understand irrespective of their ethical character. (I elaborate these contrasts further below).

With those qualifications in mind, we have the start of a *eudaimonist* account of human goodness. Human beings act intentionally for the sake of reasons or purposes—things that strike them as valuable or good, either instrumentally or intrinsically. The reasons and goods fit together into larger hierarchies of our purposes in life (e.g., publishing a paper is more dominant and comprehensive goal for me than brewing a pot of coffee, though the latter may, in a distant sense, be part of means to the former). And human beings, Aristotle claims, *by nature* seek the highest-order good of living happy, flourishing (*eudaimon*) lives.

But, Aristotle recognizes, we disagree strongly about what a flourishing life *consists in*. In a strikingly timeless analysis, Aristotle argues that many people either explicitly or implicitly construe the flourishing life in terms of one of three ends: *money*, *pleasure*, or *popularity* (‘public esteem’). And while each of these things have *a place* in a fulfilling human life, their proper role and relevance is often (grossly) misunderstood and exaggerated, and far more central elements of the fulfilling life are often neglected or ignored completely.³²

³² Money, argues Aristotle, is a merely instrumental end—something valuable only for the sake of something else, and so is not even suited to play the role that *eudaimonia* plays in human life: what is ultimately, comprehensively good for a human being. And, to another side of Aristotle’s view, pleasure will indeed be an element those activities that make up a fulfilling life—like strong friendships, family relations, and the valuable social practices—but pleasure

Aristotle schematic account of *eudaimonia* is this: human flourishing consists in *activity according to excellence (or virtue) over a complete life*. Put differently, the flourishing life is a life of *engagement in intrinsically valuable human activities done well, and appreciated, for their own sakes*. So understood, *eudaimonia* fits into a broader philosophical structure within which we can understand three interrelated concepts: human flourishing, the ethical virtues, and human sociability and social practice. This structure provides us with a far richer starting point than the modern schism of goodness into subjective happiness and moral rules. So while Aristotle's particular views (of virtue, friendship, etc.) are significant, it is the overall *eudaimonist* structure that is most helpful for the Thriving Cities Project. The basic structure can be very roughly summarized as follows.

1) A truly flourishing human life is a life made up of *worthwhile activities* (or, as I'll describe below, 'practices'): these are activities (i) that an agent finds valuable in themselves, valuable or rewarding *intrinsically*, rather than merely as an instrument or means to something else, and (ii) that cultivate and express deep and distinctive features of our human nature as rational and social agents.

2) Among the *most important* of these intrinsically worthwhile activities that make up a flourishing human life are certain *inter-personal relationships*: centrally, the relationships of love and friendship, in their proper forms, but also including certain types of civic and community relationships.

3) In order to wholeheartedly engage in, and fully appreciate, those worthwhile inter-personal activities that make up the flourishing life, an agent must possess certain *ethical virtues*: i.e., certain *admirable dispositions of character and ways of properly feeling, seeing, and being moved by things*.

4) An agent acquires the ethical virtues necessary for the good life through habituation, imitation, and guidance within broader communities of practice and moral formation (crucially, the *family* and the *polis*).

itself is not the *aim* or *point* of those activities (as stated above, pleasure is best seen as a *way of engaging in* those independently valuable activities with *full appreciation*).

5) Thus, in sum, the flourishing life for a human being is a life of intrinsically worthwhile social activities performed ‘according to virtue’ and appreciated for their own sake.

Notice that this *eudaimonist* view of human goodness does not distinguish a separate range of purely ‘moral’ goods, or a separate range of purely private subjective goods. Rather, Aristotle presents us with a view of the good life for human beings in which *flourishing*, *character* and *ethical virtues*, *social relations and practices*, and *moral formation* all form a tightly interconnected unity.

4. Virtue, Character, and Moral Formation

Talking about ‘moral virtues’ on an Aristotelian picture can lead to confusion. Aristotle, in contrast with the modern schism of goodness, does not distinguish a separate and distinctive sphere of *moral* obligation or *moral* value or *moral* reasons-for-action. Rather, his focus is on the states of character—the dispositions, guiding concerns, ways of properly seeing, feeling, and responding to things—that are necessary for living an excellent human life. Thus, the idea of ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ virtue—good or admirable character—for human beings is grounded in an overall view of excellent human activity, the good/flourishing life for man (rather than a separable range of purely ‘moral’ values, obligations, reasons).

‘Character’ is an extremely broad concept that encompasses (or collects) an indefinitely wide range of particular ways an individual sees and responds to various situations and to other people—including, especially, the things she *values* and finds most *worthy* of her concern. Among Aristotle’s insights are these:

- (i) human character is the product of a mixture of sources: innate human nature, experience, habituation and training, and efforts of self-cultivation;
- (ii) (certain character structures are *better* than others, more enabling of the kinds of activities and relationships that make up a flourishing human life; and, combining the former two points,

- (iii) it is human nature to shape succeeding generations into particular character structures (virtues) that reflect an *ethos*—a shared, background conception of the good life (as well as to reflect on and discuss those conceptions of the good life and the virtues).

On the broadest construal, Aristotle tells us that the concept of a *virtue* or excellence—*arête*—is the concept of a trait or characteristic of an object or organism that makes its bearer *good* (in some respect and to some degree) by enabling it to *be* and *do* something well.³³ The *arête* of a carpenter, for instance, includes her skill in carving and cutting, her adeptness in working with different grains of wood, etc., all of which enable her to perform the activity of carpentry in an excellent manner. The ‘ethical’ or ‘character’ virtues (*êthikê arête*) are qualities, acquired through practice and habituation, that make you good *as a human being* (not simply as a carpenter, or occupant of another niche role); ethical virtues, put differently, are qualities of character that enable you to engage in the kinds of distinctively activities that make up the good, rewarding, fulfilling life for a human being.

In some important respects, then, ethical virtues like courage and self-control are similar to ‘non-moral’ qualities like having good eyesight (a natural endowment important for human life) or speaking a natural language (an acculturated achievement that is also ‘natural’ and crucial for human life). Like good eyesight, an ethical virtue is a *perfection* or *excellence* of our living nature, and like speaking a natural language it is not something entirely ‘innate,’ rather we are socio-culturally formed into particular structure of virtues (just as we are linguistically formed into a being a member of a particular linguistic community). As some Aristotelians like to put it, habituation and moral formation transform a human being’s innate biological ‘first nature’ into a ‘second nature’—a normatively, culturally, and ethically-laden character structure that, as Aristotle says, “completes” our innate/biological nature.

Young children come replete with an unstable and undisciplined array of more or less selfish drives and emotions—along with various native forms of imitateness, social

³³ Aristotle tells us that a virtue (*arête*) is something that “causes its possessors to be in a good state and to perform their characteristic work (*ergon*) well.” *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106a17-18.

sensitivity, and desires for approval. What Aristotle calls “habituation” is a kind of moral formation into a more determinate character-structure that begins in early childhood. Parents and caregivers may give children various rewards for ethical behavior and punishments for unethical behavior (e.g., treating one’s peers kindly, being respectful, standing up for oneself when it’s important to do so). This helps to give shape, direction, and coherence to a child’s emotions and instincts so that she comes to experience and understand her social world in a certain way, and to act appropriately.³⁴

Aristotle’s picture of moral formation is sometimes criticized as ‘mechanical’ or ‘behaviorist’—but this charge rests on a confusion. Aristotle’s idea does not simply amount to an insistence of the necessity of rote instilling of certain habits of action in children. Rather, as M. F. Burnyeat puts it in a classic essay, for Aristotle, “practice has cognitive powers.”³⁵ It takes practice, learning-through-doing, imitation of decent people, and experience, for a child to learn to feel the shame of hurting others’ feelings, to understand the goodness of helping someone who needs it, to feel the pleasure of giving a gift to another person (not just receiving one), and so forth. When things go well, the child’s sense of the *point* of being kind or honest *transforms* during the process of habitation and moral formation: it shifts from a mere instrumental desire for rewards, praise, and the avoidance of punishment, to a sense that being considerate, honest, etc., is worthwhile for its own sake—a *good way to live and be* that feels natural and fitting, independent of any external rewards and punishments.³⁶

³⁴ As Jonathan Lear glosses Aristotle’s view: “a person’s entry into the ethical is inherently non-rational...A child is not in a position to appreciate the reasons for acting considerately; indeed, these reasons cannot really be appreciated from outside the perspective of a considerate person. Instead, we give a child encouragements and rewards for acting considerately and discourage him from acting inconsiderately...The child will typically begin acting considerately in order to gain the reward or encouragement: that is, for external pleasure. But, through repetition, the child begins to derive pleasure from the considerate acts themselves. In this way the child grows into the ethical world.” Lear, *Aristotle: The Desire to Understand* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 169.

³⁵ Aristotle tells us: “Arguments and teaching surely do not prevail on everyone, but the soul of the student needs to have been prepared by habits for enjoying and hating finely.” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b24-27.

³⁶ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a28

The idea is that, through habituation and practice, a person comes to *perceive* and *understand* the social situations she confronts from within a certain stable, ingrained *perspective*: a way of seeing and responding to the social world. In the case of good character, ethical virtue, one's habituated perspective—one's *moral vision*, to borrow a phrase from Iris Murdoch—is unclouded by all-too-human forms of selfishness, jealousy, *amour-propre*, the lust for power, and so on. The virtuous agent is someone who, through habituation and practice, possesses various intuitive sensibilities, habits, and patterns of thought and emotion, that enable her to see or grasp *what is really of ethical value* and *significance* in a particular concrete situation, and enable her to act properly in light of this ethical perception.

A generous person has a certain psychological *sensibility*, shaped through upbringing, practice, and experience, that enables her to discern what, in a particular circumstance, is the generous thing to do, and motivates her to act accordingly. Aristotle is clear that ethical virtue and practical wisdom (a kind of master virtue that involves sensitivity to what is important within particular, concrete situations) are only gained through practice and habituation—this 'moral understanding' cannot be exhaustively captured in a philosophical theory or set of general rules of conduct.

The *fundamental standard* of ethical assessment, for the Aristotelian, is not, and cannot be, a general rule or finite set of rules of 'right conduct,' but is *the judgment of a certain kind of person*, an experienced, practically wise person with good ethical character—someone who is, for instance, honest, generous, brave, and less prone to forms of moral insensitivity and weakness. The virtuous person's sound ethical understanding is not grounded on, reducible to, or otherwise explained by, any generic principle, rule, or system of rules of conduct (*contra* 'modern' moral theories). Rather, any such rules must be understood as abstractions or generalizations *drawn from* the conceptually primary, and far subtler, form of ethical understanding that is developed and expressed in a virtuous and practically wise agent's character—including her patterns of attention, emotional response, evaluative sensibility, perception and judgment. A virtuous and

practically wise human agent, then, is a kind of living “norm” in “the various departments of life,” as Elizabeth Anscombe puts it.³⁷

In sum, moral formation thus amounts to a practice that harnesses a human being’s innate social capacities—including her socio-linguistic capacities to acquire moral concepts (the concept of the honest, the admirable, etc.)—for the sake of providing an over-arching character-structure to the agent’s desires, emotions, and ways of seeing and being moved by situations. The agent progressively learns to conceptualize scenarios in terms of ethically-laden concepts and to appreciate acting in virtuous ways (through attempting to so act and progressively getting better at it): thereby, she gains a ‘feel’ for the ethical perspective and acquires the ‘taste’ for it, as we say in the context of other skills and practices.

4.2 Eudaimonia and the ‘Benefit’ of Ethical Virtues

Aristotelian *eudaimonist* approach to human goodness—as spelled out in the schema I gave above—doesn’t locate value or goodness primarily in an agent’s static ‘states’ of character: rather, it’s in certain forms of *activity* that ethical goodness consists. Like practical skills and crafts, ethical virtues are acquired through doing, social engagement, and have their point in practice, in realizing the intrinsic goods of valuable activities. Ethical virtues benefit the agent who possesses them by enabling her to engage in the inherently valuable activities that make up a flourishing (*eudaimon*) life (though Aristotle sides with common-sense in holding that possessing the virtues is *not* sufficient for *eudaimonia*, as some Stoics claim). The virtuous agent’s desires are arranged such that she

³⁷ Anscombe suggests that we “look for ‘norms’ in human virtues: just as man has so many teeth, which is certainly not the average number of teeth men have, but is the number of teeth for the species, so perhaps the species man, regarded not just biologically, but from the point of view of the activity of thought and choice in regard to the various departments of life—powers and faculties and use of things needed—‘has’ such and such virtues: and this ‘man’ with the complete set of virtues is the ‘norm’, as ‘man’ with, e.g., a complete set of teeth a norm.” Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy,” 188. This idea of species-based ‘natural norms’ (‘Aristotelian-categorials,’ as some call them) has been quite influential.

appreciates the intrinsic worth of acting virtuously and does so for its own sake, feeling the right way—finding it inherently rewarding to do the right thing.³⁸

Let me emphasize an important point about the Aristotelian picture, something that, if overlooked, can lead to confused charges of self-centeredness or egoism. A courageous person acts courageously when courage is called for, not primarily in order to be a courageous person, but because she sees (as a result of moral formation) the value of courageous action and putting greater things ahead of her own safety (*to kalon*: she sees its ‘nobility,’ ‘fineness,’ or ‘beauty’). Similarly an honest person tells the truth, perhaps even the sad or brutal truth, when that is appropriate, not in order to be an honest person, but because she sees the value of truthfulness. The honest person is, we might say with an Aristotelian turn of phrase, *a lover of the truth*. The form of practical responsiveness that makes up an ethical virtue is not properly seen either as a concern for oneself (egoism) or a dutiful adherence to a moral rule that limits one’s concern for one’s own wellbeing/happiness (Kantianism, utilitarianism). Rather, an ethical virtue amounts to a form of *care* or *love* for a value that one has come to appreciate through moral formation, practice, and experience.

So ethical virtues are, on this account, part of the flourishing life: they necessary for the deepest and most rewarding forms of love and friendship, for example. But this ‘benefit’ of the ethical virtues is only apparent to someone who *already* possesses an appropriate ethical outlook through moral formation. In other words, it is only from within the socio-culturally-formed outlook of a moderately virtuous person that the *value* of acting and being virtuous can be seen. A virtuous agent chooses virtuous actions for

³⁸ Aristotle (controversially) distinguishes between fully virtuous and ‘merely continent’ action. The virtuous agent finds acting virtuous action inherently rewarding and even “pleasant” (see, e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* 1099a12). The continent agent, in contrast, knows what the virtuous action is and does the right thing, but performs it *against* her own desires—the continent agent finds virtuous activity hard and unpleasant and is, so to speak, *internally divided* about doing the right thing. How to spell this distinction out properly is quite controversial—especially given the seemingly obvious fact that, in certain unfortunate/tragic cases, finding the virtuous action ‘rewarding’ or ‘pleasant’ would be bizarre or worse (terrible hospital or battlefield cases come to mind).

their own sake, as *intrinsically valuable* (or ‘noble,’ ‘fine,’ ‘beautiful’), as part of what ‘doing well’ as a human being amounts to.

But *this* concept of ‘doing well’ cannot be understood from just *any* perspective: i.e. from the perspective of a nihilistic, monstrous, or blindly self-centered person, *nor* from an entirely detached, supposedly ‘value-neutral’ perspective. The virtuous person and the thoroughly vicious and corrupt person will have crucially different views of what counts as (truly) rewarding, what is a benefit, gain, loss, harm—different views, ultimately, of what *eudaimonia* or human flourishing amounts to.

This helps us to see the fundamental flaw in the modern hedonic view that there is some *neutrally identifiable* good had by all good things, ‘pleasure’ or ‘pleasurable experience’ (something that we all can recognize, no matter what our ethical character is like). For Aristotle, our differences in character are revealed by the different ways an ethically decent person *versus* a morally corrupt person understand what is (truly) pleasant: “It belongs to virtue to take pleasure and pain in the right things in the right way,” he tells us.³⁹ An ethically virtuous person finds pleasurable particular virtuous activities (she takes pleasure “in the right things”: for example, she enjoying lasting friendships and caring for her family); but she also finds them *intrinsically* rewarding/pleasurable *in their own distinctive ways* (she takes pleasure in particular things “in the right way” that befits them). There are distinctive, intrinsic rewards or goods internal to particular activities and practices that we undertake for their own sake: activities like friendship, family life, contemplation, the appreciation of aesthetic beauty in nature, art, and the built human environment, among many other things.

I now turn to the notion of a practice, a form of social activity which cultivates ethical virtue and offers intrinsic (non-instrumental) goods. This idea, I suggest, should be important within the Thriving Cities Project’s attempt to re-think human thriving.

5. What is a Practice?

Aristotle regards human beings as distinctive beings in nature not only because of our form of rationality, but because of the depth of our social nature. Recall Aristotle’s

³⁹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1121a4.

famous claim that human person is a *zoon politikon*, a social-political animal. Aristotle goes on to say that a man completely outside of society, “may be compared to an isolated checkers-piece.”⁴⁰ Johnathan Lear comments:

This is a remarkable comparison, for an isolated checkers-piece is not, strictly speaking, a checkers-piece at all. A checkers-piece gains its very identity, and thus in a sense its existence, by its relation to the game of which it is a part.⁴¹ Human beings acquire a particular character-structure—a set of virtues and conception of the good—only through formation within social practices (the “game” of which we are “piece,” so to speak). That is, it is through habituation into practices that we gain a sense of what is intrinsically valuable, admirable, noble, and worthwhile—the fundamental evaluative criteria they employ in our practical reasoning. How should this idea of ‘social practice’ be understood?

Here I’ll draw on Alasdair MacIntyre’s influential Aristotelian account of social practices in his *After Virtue*. In an often-quoted passage, MacIntyre writes:

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.⁴²

I’ll unpack this complex picture in terms of four broad claims:

- 1) A practice is a coherent and sufficiently complex social activity that is passed on to practitioners.
- 2) A practice is partly defined and constituted by particular standards of excellence appropriate to it and that practitioners aim to achieve.
- 3) A practice has internal goods that are distinctive of that practice and that agents appreciate though, and only through, engaging in the practice and attempting to achieve the standards of excellence that define/constitute the practice.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a2.

⁴¹ Johnathan Lear, *Aristotle: the Desire to Understand*, 200.

⁴² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 187.

- 4) An agent's capacities for ethical virtue (excellence), and her awareness and appreciation of the internal goods of the practice, are progressively deepened through her ongoing engagement in the practice.

MacIntyre gives as examples of practices certain forms of the arts, sciences, games, politics, and family life. Notice, a social practice does not simply mean a shared pattern of social behavior, not even one 'picked up on' by succeeding generations of human agents. For example, the distances that agents typically stand from each other, and the loudness and tone of voice used, in everyday, informal discussion can vary across cultures and is something 'picked up on' by new generations of agents (not typically *intentionally*, of course, but through a subtle mix of imitation and habitation). This, by itself, is not sufficient for a 'social practice' in the MacIntyrean/Aristotelian sense.⁴³ What else is involved?

5.2 Internal Standards of Excellence

Practices are partly constituted by rich arrays of practical skills, capacities, and knowledge-how. Practices are, in part, complex bodies of knowledge the practical and normative knowledge of how one properly engages in the practice and approximate its defining ideals. These skills and capacities within practices are tied to their specific *standards of excellence*, criteria of success internal to that practice itself, and to which practitioners aspire in their activity. When a new generation of practitioners becomes initiated into the practice, this body of skills and practical knowledge of the internal standards of excellence is passed on to them.

Consider an example: weaving rugs. A specific instance of the activity of weaving rugs may or may not be a practice, depending on how the activity is structured and how agents experience the point of their participation and agency within the activity.

⁴³ Note: some Heideggerians think that even seemingly 'mere habituated behavioral patterns,' like the tones of voice and the distances from one another that agents typically use in interaction, actually form part of a culture's deeper norm-laden understanding of what it is to be a human agent and, indeed, of what it is to *be* anything at all (of 'Being'). My point is that something like this would have to be shown in order for patterns like these to count as genuine practices, as opposed to mere social regularities

Imagine the agent is simply overseeing the operation of a single module of a large, mechanized carpet-making machine. Imagine further that there is little room for the development of individual skill and judgment in the activity, and that the agent sees the activity as having one dominant goal: *profit*. In this form, the rug-weaving would be *an activity of producing*, but it would fall short of an Aristotelian practice. ‘Success’ or ‘excellence,’ in this case, is merely assessed against a standard *external* to the rug-weaving process itself, the standard of profit, a standard that can be met by an indefinitely large array of other activities and that has no essential tie to the craft, its tradition, history, and body of know-how.

Now a weaver may attempt to meet a standard of profit *while at the same time* being guided by a standard more specific to, and definitive of, the activity of rug-making itself: for example, she might also be aiming to make fine and expert stitches, aesthetically beautiful patterns, and carry on a particular tradition of weaving, like Turkish *hereke* weaving. This would be to begin to approximate a genuine practice: to come, as a practitioner, to understand and hold oneself accountable to ideals of excellence embodied within a tradition of human activity.

5.3 Internal and External Goods

Practices involve more than distinctive internal standards of excellence—they involve certain distinctive *goods* or *rewards* appreciated by those practitioners who devote themselves to the practice and its specific standards of excellence. MacIntyre famously uses the example teaching a child to play chess by offering him the reward of candy to clarify the idea of goods internal to, and external to, a social practice. He writes:

There are thus two kinds of good possibly to be gained by playing chess. On the one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing and to other practices by the accidents of social circumstances—in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status and money. There are always alternative ways for achieving such goods, and their achievement is never to be had only by engaging in some particular kind of practice. On the other hand there are the goods internal to the

practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess or some other game of that specific kind.⁴⁴

MacIntyre gives as an example of the internal goods of chess, “the achievement of a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity...” These are the distinctive rewards of practicing chess for its own sake and in the right spirit: they partly make up the true *point, purpose, or telos* of the practice of chess—unlike external goals like getting candy, money, or prestige (all of which can be achieved in other activities and without any appreciation of the internal goods).

The genuine internal goods of a practice, MacIntyre says, (i) are intrinsically tied to a particular practice, and can only be articulated, explained, and specified in terms of that particular practice, and (ii) they are only fully recognized and understood by actual practitioners who have living experience with the practice: “Those who lack the relevant experience are incompetent thereby as judges of internal goods (189).”

This Aristotelian notion of a social practice with internal goods may be helpfully contrasted with the more widely-discussed and understood concept of “practice” or “convention” from economics and game-theory. The philosopher David Lewis influentially describes “conventions” as “solutions to coordination problems,” where such a “problem” is: “a situation of interdependent decision by two or more agents in which coincidence of interest predominates and in which there are two or more proper coordination equilibria.”⁴⁵ And a “coordination equilibrium” is a group of decisions and actions by agents such that no agent would be “better off” if she acted differently—in the sense that her *individually-intelligible* “interests” or “preferences” would be better promoted. A common example is that driving on the left side of the road (outside of the British commonwealth countries): this is a conventional solution to the problem of each individual having a desire/preference to travel and needing not crash into others as she travels. What is important to recognize here is that, on the Game-Theorist’s individualistic model of a “convention,” the *ends* of agents are taken to be conceptually independent of, and fixed *prior* to, the “convention” that is the social “solution” for best

⁴⁴ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 188.

⁴⁵ David Lewis, *Convention* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 24.

attaining them. Any individual's "interest" in *not crashing and dying a fiery death* is clearly independent of, and prior to, any social convention about regulating transit. We can bring the ends or interests of the agents into view without essential reference to the practice. The ends are, in this sense, 'external.' But herein lies a crucial difference with the Aristotelian idea of a social practice with internal goods and standards of excellence.

Aristotelian social practices not only make conceptually independent ends efficiently attainable (if they do this at all); more fundamentally, habituation into social practices provides an agent with a basic grasp of, and attunement towards, the relevant ends, goals, and internal goods—such practices provide an agent's sense of the *intrinsically* valuable. Return to MacIntyre's example of chess: learning the practice of chess is not best understood as the most efficient "equilibrium solution" to some problem of coordinating the pre-given (conceptually independent) interests/ends of distinct individuals (the practice can't be seen as efficiently regulating an antecedently available and intelligible form of behavior for the purpose of securing an antecedently available and intelligible end). Rather, when we learn how to play chess and enjoy its distinctive goods, we 'open our eyes' to a whole new range of ends, pleasures, and interests.

Practices and the processes of social formation (of an agent's disposition, character, ways of seeing things) that 'initiate' us into those practices, are not *plans* or *schemes* of coordination between fully-formed agents for the advancement of ends that are conceivable independently of those practices.⁴⁶ They are teleological in the stronger, not-merely-instrumental sense of providing agents with a shared conception of intrinsically valuable ends themselves.

When practices are healthy, an agent's on-going engagement in the practice involves the agent coming to better understand, with progressive appreciation and

⁴⁶ As Ashavi Margalit and Joseph Raz write: "Being social animals means not merely that means for the satisfaction of people's goals are more readily available within society. More crucially it means that *those goals themselves* are (when one reaches beyond what is strictly necessary for biological survival) the creatures of society, the products of culture." Avishai Margalit and Joseph Raz, "National Self-Determination," *Journal of Philosophy*, 87, (1990), 448 (emphasis added)

clarity, the intrinsic goods the practice offers; and this deepening engagement and further understanding, in turn, *reinforces the agent's motivation* to engage in the practice and savor the intrinsic rewards what the practice offers. This results in a mutually-reinforcing spiral of an agent's engagement in the practice, further understanding and skill, further appreciation of the practice's internal goods. But such a virtuous circle requires engaging in the practice in the *proper spirit*: holding oneself accountable to the practice's standards of excellence, and displaying the virtues or excellences befitting of the activity in one's engagement.

To return once more to MacIntyre's example, one can only enjoy the genuine internal rewards of a great game of chess if one values chess playing itself enough *not to cheat*, to play honestly in the light of the game's standards—only thereby is the game fully appreciable in an internal (and not merely external) sense. Ethical virtues are both cultivated within practices, and they are necessary for engagement with the practice in its proper form, as well as the sustaining and passing-on of the practice. But more broadly still, the cultivation of ethical virtue is itself an Aristotelian practice—a complex form of social activity and understanding with internal standards of excellence and internal goods appreciated only through formation within the practice

6. The Moral Ecology of Social Practices

How does the above Aristotelian *eudaimonistic* account of flourishing help us to think more clearly about thriving communities, in particular thriving *cities*? The central negative point of this brief is that we will *not* be able to adequately understand a flourishing community solely from within the perspective of the modern 'schism' of purely prudential good (subjective happiness) and purely moral good (avoidance of moral wrongdoing). The widespread metrics of human wellbeing that largely center on these two spheres will be of limited use. More positively, the Aristotelian perspective helps us to bring into view a broader and more holistic conception of the flourishing life: excellent activity in worthwhile social practices appreciated for their own sake. This conception of human flourishing is not identifiable either with subjective satisfaction or

the adherence to basic prohibitions against immoral action. It constitutes a more comprehensive and unified account of human goodness.

What I think this account has to offer most directly to the Thriving Cities Project is a twin focus: first, a focus on the health of the background ecology of worthwhile social practices within a community—those practices that inculcate and sustain the virtues and that enable the appreciation of internal goods; and, second, a focus on particular virtues or character-ideals that may be especially important for flourishing in contemporary cities, given the specific challenges (cultural, political, ecological, etc.) they face. I will address each of these in turn.

Picture a community as group of individuals along with the particular practices and non-practice social activities (e.g., those purely instrumental activities that fall short of Aristotelian practices) in which they engage. The social practices that the community offers its practices will stand in various relations to one another and ‘carve up’ the contours of much social life, making up a kind of normative social *ecology*: a web of forms of social activity and interaction into which agents are habituated and that present them with standards of excellence and intrinsically valuable possibilities of action.

We may partly assess the health of the community by: (i) determining the extent to which social life is composed of genuine practices with ideals of excellence and internal goods (how much of ‘social space’ is made up of practices, so to speak), and (ii) assessing the health of the communities constituent practices themselves (notice that practices like the arts, the family, religious congregations, and so on, can themselves be said to ‘flourish’ or not).

Initiation into social practices, as we’ve seen, involves the transmission of ideals of excellence—ideals of what is intrinsically worthwhile, noble, fine—into successive generations of practitioners. As Robert Bellah writes: “Committing oneself to becoming a ‘good’ carpenter, craftsman, doctor, scientist, or artist anchors the self within a community practicing carpentry, medicine, or art. It connects the self to those who

teach, exemplify, and judge these skills.”⁴⁷ Practices involve a shared or common conception of goodness: they involve agents’ *mutual awareness of* one another as practitioners who all find value in the activity for its own sake. And this mutual awareness of the intrinsic value of the practice enables shared discussion of, and reasoning concerning, the practice. Thus the members of a family, artistic community, or religious congregation can engage in a distinctive kind of shared reasoning about and discussion of the goods of the practice: how it should be done, whether tradition should be strictly adhered to or modified in the light of new challenges, how it should be carried forward, what is faltering and flourishing within the sphere or ‘world’ of the practice. In other words, the proper form of the practice and the nature of its internal goods is a *shared concern of practitioners*. In the deepest form of social practice, as in Aristotle’s conception of the highest form of friendship (itself a paradigm of a social practice) practitioners conceive of their own good in terms of the shared good of the flourishing of the practice—the practice becomes a kind extension of self (a “second self” as Aristotle describes one’s relationship to a deep, character friend).

To the extent that community life is made up social practices, then, the health of these practices amounts to a common good that directly affects the flourishing of community members (imagine the tragedy of being a dedicated fisherman or artist in a community wherein background practices have collapsed: the individual’s flourishing, tied up as it is with the flourishing and the internal goods of the practice, becomes impeded or stunted). Some of this is rather obvious and not exactly *news*: if cities are undergoing severe, long-term economic contraction (or even simply prolonged stagnation), that can have disastrous consequences, placing serious stress upon the fundamental ethically-formative institutions and seedbeds of social practices: families, schools, civic and religious communities, communities of artists and craftsmen, etc. Nonetheless, the focus on social practices can help us to better understand the sense in which an individual’s flourishing is impeded by the breakdown of focal practices within

⁴⁷ Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 69.

the community, or by the mere lack of a suitable provision of social activities that count as genuine practices with intrinsic goods.

Thriving communities, in sum, need suitably rich provision of *worthwhile social practices*, and need to be able to *identify, critically discuss, and support* such practices, and maintain them in good form. Aristotle holds that the family and the *polis*, along with the system of laws structuring daily life, are the crucial institutions of character formation and on-going character-shaping into adulthood.⁴⁸ I will expand upon Aristotle's list and focus on five moral ecological 'spheres' wherein we can assess the health of a community's social practices, including moral formation, and thus the possibilities for flourishing of the community's members: family, work, non-work community life, public space, and politics.

1) Family: families are the primary institutions of moral-formative practice, that wherein each new human individual primarily gains her 'second nature' of character-traits and moral concepts. But the family as a stable, moral-formative institution is, alas, not something that can simply be counted on in the future—indeed, the 'decline' of the institution of the long-term, stable nuclear family has garnered much attention by academics and the broader culture of late. This is perhaps where existing research and metrics will be most helpful.

2) Work: in contemporary America, adults spend vast amounts of their lives at paid employment. We also tend to identify ourselves largely with our paid employment (one of the first questions an American asks a stranger is *'What do you do?'*, where that means, *'What is your paid job?'*). But works like Studs Turkel's classic *Working*, and Matt Crawford's *Shopclass as Soulcraft* make it clear that the kinds of paid work available today vary *widely* in terms of their approximation to a genuine Aristotelian 'practice.' This raises a community-wide question about the nature of work in a city. Are many of the jobs in a given community structured so as to enable the pursuit of internal goods and intrinsic rewards—and thus the cultivation of genuine skill and virtue? Do jobs leave room for the development

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b12-14, 1103b23-25, 1179b30-80a6.

and exercise of individual practical judgment? Or are jobs excessively ‘rationalized’ so as to leave little room for skill and judgment, precluding, from the outset, worker’s appreciation of any goods internal to the activity of work? Do the majority of jobs, in effect, leave workers with nothing to appreciate beyond the external good of a paycheck at the *end* of work activity?

3) Non-Work Community: Not all, or even the most important, forms of contemporary social practice are paid work, however. Within the city, are there vibrant communities of non-work social practice? Foremost among these: communities of religious worship, groups of artists and art-lovers, craftsmen and artisans, athletic groups (community sports, climbers, hikers, martial arts, etc.). In many cases these non-work communities of practice play the crucial role of acting as bulwarks against excessive rationalization and instrumentalization of human activity, creating havens of social life in which people can cultivate skill and virtue, participate in long-standing traditions, and savor the non-economic internal goods that life has to offer.

4) Public Space: does the city provide public spaces that enable non-atomized, not-merely-instrumental forms of social encounter and interaction? This is not really an independent practice as such, but space within which certain forms of non-instrumental sociability become possible. Are there actual physical spaces that are not simply colonized by market activity (shops, advertising, etc.) and afford spontaneous sociability? Or is it strip-malls, grocery stores, billboards, and parking lots, as far as the eye can see? And if there is such spaces, do citizens *use* them (or do they opt instead for more predictable and less-spontaneous forms of encounter online)?

5) Public Discourse: Does the community have a rich enough normative vocabulary to identify and critically discuss the social practices and activities that make up community life? If the only broadly-shared evaluative vocabulary is the highly-abstract language of *rights*, this bodes ill for the community’s health. *‘I have a right to X...’, ‘this my right...’* have become one of the dominant forms of speech

act in American political life, expanding exponentially over the last hundred years or so.⁴⁹ The problem is that *I have a right to X*’ does nothing whatsoever to establish the *merits* of X, and it can crowd-out other forms of evaluative discussion, functioning largely as a conversation-stopper. A community’s thought about, and discussion of, which practices are conducive to flourishing, and how to support and strengthen those practices, clearly must expand beyond the language of rights (whether individual rights or group rights). A community must be willing and able to employ a richer, more specific and specialized evaluative vocabulary of ‘thick’ ethical concepts—including, crucially, the concepts of virtues and vices and different forms of human excellence, achievement, and admirability—in discussing the health of the community and its constituent practices.

7. Civic or Community Virtues (and Vices)

I now will briefly highlight certain ways the Aristotelian eudaimonist account of flourishing provided here (i) helps us to see how popular but mistaken conceptions of flourishing can be understood as vices with real-world impact on the health of communities and the broader ecological habitats, and (ii) helps us to identify certain character traits on the part of community members that are important for sustaining the health of community practices in contemporary contexts.

A strength of the Aristotelian account of virtue, I have been arguing, is that it does not draw the characteristically modern, sharp boundaries between self-interest and social-good (good-for-self and good-for-other). Virtues that are essential for healthy social bonds can, at the very same, be essential for the individual agent’s flourishing—for example, honesty and genuine other-regarding concern is essential for enjoying the goods of love and friendship, and these activates, in their proper (non-manipulative)

⁴⁹ For a history of the expansion of the discourse of rights in American politics, and a corresponding diminution of richer forms of evaluative discourse, see Mary Ann Glendon’s provocative *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

form are essential for *one's own* flourishing. Put differently, the valuable activities and practices that are essential constituents of a well-lived human life—centrally, love and friendship—require certain virtues for their proper practice and enjoyment. Having those virtues is part of seeing those activities in their proper light (e.g., seeing a friendship *as a friendship*, and not a mere instrument for private gain) and striving to bring them into, and keep them within, their proper form.

What do people need to be like—what character, motivation, and outlook must they possess—within a community for that community to resemble something like a semi-coherent discussion and seeking of the common good? People's moral character is crucial for the appreciation of the communities' focal practices and public institutions, and the support and maintenance of those practices and institutions in their proper (non-degraded, not-merely-instrumental) form. Certain 'civic' or 'relational' virtues—or, in a suitably broad sense, 'political' virtues—may have this same Aristotelian structural feature of cutting across self/other boundaries, of being essential to activities that partly constitute an individual agent's flourishing *and* the flourishing of her embedding civic community. I have in mind forms of 'civic' *temperance* or *moderation*, and a certain 'civic' variety of *love*, or, less grandiosely, of *reverence* or *appreciation* for the genuine value of one's community and the genuine significance of its flourishing.

7.2. Modern Pleonexia and Sophrosune

Subjectivist accounts of flourishing the good life, as we have seen, are related to a broader Enlightenment celebration of individual autonomy and self-making. It is up to me to determine “my own good in my own way” (to paraphrase Mill). But beyond the philosophical difficulties this subjectivism raises (which we've seen above), such a view has important civic-political consequences. Some of this may unquestionably be for the good: a tolerant, non-judgmental attitude towards individual difference, eccentricity, experimentation, and the exploration of new forms of potentially-valuable social practice—“experiments in living,” as Mill put it.

But subjectivist views of flourishing, embedded in taken-for-granted assumptions in the broader culture, when unchecked by any more objective, shared ideals of ethical virtue, may lead to serious harm for communities and individuals themselves. Armed with a subjectivist account of human flourishing, economically minded thinkers may hold that the best way to promote human goodness is to enable the widest scope possible of personal freedom for individual autonomous choice. Let people go about pursuing their own good in their own way, with suitable resources, and without interference. The philosopher Daniel Haybron puts this point nicely, describing the actual, current embodiment of subjectivist conceptions of flourishing as amounting to an ideal of “the massively resourced life.” He writes:

The daily energy requirement of a human being has historically...been under 5,000 calories. Today’s American lifestyle requires the resources of a large community at around 260,000 calories, leaving an ecological footprint at nearly twice that of our European counterparts, and several times the global average. Our consumption habits may resemble those of a French monarch more than anything our relations a couple of generations back would have recognized...Technological innovation can do a lot to reduce the number and impact of those calories, but we are not likely to get very far if we persist in the notion that our goal is to liberate ourselves from constraint as much as our morality allows, commanding as many resources as possible.⁵⁰

‘Calories’ here really function as a broader *symbol* of the vastly more resource-heavy, often wasteful, and consumption-driven nature of our contemporary ideals of a well-off life. The global ecological dangers of this widespread pursuit of such a vision of flourishing are obvious, of course. But a further, challenging and interesting way to conceive of this problem is in terms of *flourishing* itself: this picture of the good life may amount to a form of intemperance, an out-of-balance, uncontrolled, grasping acquisitiveness (*pleonexia*). If so, on the *eudaimonist* account above, it would fail a coherent picture of human flourishing, even independent of its ecological impact. A community, then, could attempt to re-imagine or re-conceptualize the good life within its bounds—and seek to articulate, in opposition to tempting cultural image of the utterly-unrestrained and “massively resourced” life, an alternative picture admirable and

⁵⁰ Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, 24.

flourishing living, one placing intrinsic value on balance, moderation, and self-control (*sophrosune*).

A further dimension of self-control and moderation is this. A modern community will have various means of introducing and advancing proposals and agendas: from ballot initiatives, to protests, to exerting pressure on elected officials, to political contributions, to creating non-profit political advocacy and ‘action’ groups. Agents can view and employ such instruments in very different ways—including, unfortunately (and, alas, all-too-familiarly), as tools for *self*-advancement. When agents treat the levers of political power within a community in the latter way, civic and political life begins to degrade into an arena for the discordant clash of private wills. The city, then, will no longer be anything like a discussion or argument about the common good, but a shouting match offering, at best, a particular, private ‘winner’—most likely, whoever is loudest, most enduring, most rhetorically manipulative.

We may conceive of ‘civic temperance’ or ‘civility’ as an ethical disposition *not* to treat the levers of power within a community as *instruments for one’s own private gain* (a purely external good, from the standpoint of the practice of the community) and to see any such *merely* private instrumental use of politics as shameful. This form of temperance, however, may require members of a community to see the community as something approaching an Aristotelian practice, to see goods *other than their own interests, subjectively construed*, as worthy of deep concern, respect, reverence, and perhaps even love. Whether this is a realistic, non-deluded attitude to have towards larger-scale urban communities in contemporary America, I leave to the reader.

8. Concluding Thoughts: Measurement, Theory, and Human Goodness

I will close with a broader question about systematic theories and measurements concerning human goods, especially, our topics in this brief: human flourishing and the ethical life. Contemporary intellectual culture largely takes the predictive and explanatory theories and models of the natural sciences to be the paradigms of knowledge of the natural world—of which, of course, we humans are a part. But how

does the knowledge and understanding afforded by scientific theories fit with the kinds of less-systematic anthropocentric understanding that we find in *the world of human experience, cares, concerns, and practices*? The perspective taken up within the physical sciences strives to be maximally systematic and maximally independent of human subjectivity, sensibilities, needs, and everyday practical perspectives. Scientific theory strives to be, at least according to many intellectuals, a picture of the world *as it really is*, independent of how it *seems* to human beings. This drive for a systematic, scientific understanding of phenomena ‘from outside’ of the perspective of human practice is widespread—even in thinking about the most manifestly human phenomena, like morality and the good life.

The Aristotelian perspective presented in this Endowment Brief, given its focus on the practical (non-theoretical) understanding embodied in ethical character and social practices, raises questions about the extent to which such a perspective concerning the human good is possible. Ethical character, as we’ve seen, arises through moral formation and practice in particular communities, instilling an ethical perspective and sense of what is intrinsically rewarding. It’s only from within such an *already* ethically-laden perspective that conceptions of the good life are intelligible and assessable. Hence, genuinely ethical reflection on our ways of living—and any ethical *critique* of those selfsame commitments—can only take place from *within* a particular, socio-culturally-shaped ethical outlook, rather than from a detached, ‘external’ point of view (like a merely-instrumentally-rational or purportedly value-denuded ‘scientific’ perspective). We cannot, for the Aristotelian, hope to suspend all ethical commitment and then *re-construct* our ethical outlook on *pre-ethical* foundations. Ethical reflection must operate *on* acquired ethical outlook *from within that ethical outlook*: critiquing it in a piecemeal fashion, but not trying to stand ‘outside’ of our evaluative commitments entirely from a theoretical stance of scientific detachment.

To the extent that this is true, the following question then arises. How far is it possible for the Thriving Cities Project, or other metrics of wellbeing and thriving, to ‘systematize’ pre-theoretical conceptions of human flourishing and the ethical life—to

isolate and identify general and quantifiable properties related to human thriving from a detached, theoretical perspective? And in what ways would this systematization of our thinking about the human good be a benefit? How should the theory relate *back* to the practices it is abstracted from?

Consider an analogy, drawn from the philosophy of art and aesthetics. Certain philosophers hope to provide a systematic theory of aesthetic judgment that shows how it can be quantified and rendered more scientific. The influential philosopher George Dickie, for example, gives us a quantitative ranking system for the assessment of works of art in his book *Evaluating Art*.⁵¹ The system identifies certain isolable properties like ‘gracefulness’ and ‘truthfulness’ and provides an account of how such properties can be tallied up to yield scores or ratings for works. Dickie, tellingly, compares aesthetic evaluation to evaluation of apples. We value apples, he says, according to a determinate set of generic and distinct criteria—red color, firmness, juiciness, sweetness, among other things. We could evaluate a batch of apples according to these criteria, assigning them a score on each variable, then comparing each apple’s set of scores. An apple that got a score of (red 5, firm 7, juiciness 5, sweetness 7) is a better apple than one that got a score of (red 2, firm 3, juiciness 4, sweetness 2). Dickie argues then argues that aesthetic evaluation shares this basic structure, except that the criteria in the case of aesthetic evaluation are those isolable *aesthetic* properties that we find valuable (gracefulness, unity, truthfulness). So certain artworks could be assessed, for example as (graceful 4, unified 3, truthful-to-life 6, emotionally-expressive 5). Whether these ‘scores’ of aesthetic properties yield a straightforward aggregation is another story, but still we are given a quasi-scientific, systematic, metrical theory of proper aesthetic judgment.

But consider the difference between the following two cases: walking through the Louvre with a great art historian and critic (a practically-wise practitioner), and walking through the Louvre with Dickie’s ranking-system in hand. Clearly the latter marks no improvement over the former. In fact, if Dickie’s account replaced the unsystematic aesthetic perspective we acquire through practice, it would mark an *impoverishment*. So

⁵¹ George Dicke, *Evaluating Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

what, exactly, is the quantifying and systematizing of the theory supposed to do? It seems as though Dickie and other philosophers of a ‘metrical’ and ‘systemizing’ stripe take non-systematic, anthropocentric, practice-based knowledge to stand in need of justification, or ‘refinement,’ by some systematic theory. But, at least in Dickie’s case (and I suspect in many other similar cases) adopting the perspective of the systematic theory, while it enables quantitative judgments of various sorts, *occludes* the richer, non-systematic understanding embodied in the practice.

So consider this question: in what ways does the Thriving Cities Project differ from Dickie’s misguided attempt to provide a systematic metric of aesthetic judgment? I don’t mean this an *objection* to the TCP, of course, only as a request for discussion and reflection on the role that quantitative metrics play in assessing the various endowments and their relations. How does the more abstract identification of variables, quantification, and measurement, at the level of the theory, relate to the kind of understanding and practical wisdom that we acquire through habituation and practice in our communities? As Martha Nussbaum notes not all wise practical judgment and evaluation can be “scientific,” and yield a formula that can be applied to cases (and thereby, possibly *replace* the less formulaic forms of everyday practical judgment).⁵² What is the proper *interplay* between the more abstract and distilled (and thus measurable) perspectives on thriving that the TCP offers, and the more rooted, non-systematic, humanistic understanding of human goodness that is embodied in people’s character and dispositions through a decent upbringing, and that may not be codifiable in formulae?

I look forward to discussing this further with the other members of the TCP.

⁵² See Martha Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Account of Private and Public Rationality,” in Sherman, ed., *Aristotle’s Ethics: Critical Essays* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).