

The Positive Humanities: Culture and Human Flourishing
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Abstract

The Positive Humanities are a new field of inquiry and practice concerned with the relationship between culture and human flourishing. They seek to understand the conceptual nuances of this relationship in a variety of contexts in different societies across time. They also investigate the practical effects of cultural engagement on human flourishing, with a particular emphasis on how such engagement can be intentionally optimized to help individuals and communities thrive. Grounded in the wisdom, narrative, aesthetic, and performance traditions of cultures across time and around the world (and thus always inclusive of the arts), they seek insights into the nature and development of human flourishing from this vast storehouse of human experience. The Positive Humanities are also informed by more recent efforts in the sciences to bring empirical methodologies to bear in the investigation of well-being, and their practical emphasis connects them to the educational institutions, creative industries, and cultural organizations through which the humanities are often studied and experienced. This chapter provides an introduction to the Positive Humanities, examining their complex relationship to historical and contemporary approaches to the humanities; exploring their connections to the science of well-being (especially positive psychology); identifying their domains of practical influence; clarifying their definition, aims, and commitments; and suggesting important future directions for the field.

Keywords: Positive Humanities, positive, humanities, arts, culture, creative industries, cultural sectors, human flourishing, well-being, thriving, positive psychology, sustainable preference

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When I was a little girl, my father would frequently take me to the Art Institute of Chicago on Saturdays. During one of these visits, I happened upon a painting that changed my life. To this day, more than sixty years later, I remember looking up at Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark*, taking in the picture of a girl with a bandana in a field looking up at a bird that was barely visible in the distance. Something happened to me in that moment. I understood something profound about human longing and how it can fuel our dreams and actions, transforming our lives. When I walked away from my encounter with the painting that day, I knew I could do anything.

-Selma Holo

As a high school student, I got a summer job and began considering how my life as an adult would unfold. As I thought about the path I was on, it did not seem satisfying to me. That is when I came across the essay "The American Scholar," in which Ralph Waldo Emerson writes about how each one of us individually can have an original relation to the universe, how we can make meaning and have valuable lives. I found this essay transformative, making me think about success not just in materialistic terms, but in terms of what it is to lead a flourishing life, to live life well.

-John Stuhr

After a pretty bad first year in college, I dropped out and joined the U.S. Army. Two years later, I was in Vietnam, where I spent a year as a combat infantry advisor in the Mekong Delta. I returned to the U.S. in the summer of 1969, at a time when the country was literally blowing up because of the war. I went back to school, to the same place I had been before. I had the great fortune to meet a prominent member of the philosophy department, J. Glenn Gray, who was himself a veteran of World War II. He had written an extraordinary book called *The Warriors*, which was very much a reflective work on his experience in combat. Reading that book changed my life because it gave me a way of situating and understanding my own experience and coming to terms with it.

-William "Bro" Adams

I entered college planning on a career as a performer, playing classical music on the cello. An injury my junior year made it impossible for me to continue my performance career, so I became a musicologist. Two years ago, I decided to take up a new hobby and began taking jazz piano lessons and playing in ensembles with students and other musicians. I have been thoroughly enjoying the freedom to create something new for the pure joy of it—not to be a professional, not to earn money, just for the joy of being with others and making music.

-Anna Celenza

Despite having visited Philadelphia many, many times, I had never been to Independence Hall. So the last time I was in town I got up early one morning and headed over. All kinds of people from all across America were there—and also from all around the world. The guide from the National Park Service was wonderful. And there I was in this magical place where America happened. I'm not an American historian, but I still felt that juice. It was like doing a workout, and it made me feel great.

-Darrin McMahon

I remember attending a student production of Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which presented the pain of police violence, anti-Black prejudice, and exploding racial tensions in a major American city. I heard amateur voices breathe life into the words of Rodney King. I recall being profoundly affected by the way theatre not only mirrors society but also offers insights into how to actively engage in it. It seemed possible that the plague of racism could be whittled away—and perhaps eliminated—through the arts.

-Harvey Young

Engagement with art, literature, philosophy, music, history, theatre, and other forms of culture can greatly enrich our lives. As indicated by these first-hand accounts, it can help us expand our inner worlds as children, choose rewarding life paths as adolescents, come to terms with difficult life experiences as adults, feel the joy of creativity in collaboration with others, connect more deeply to our civic identities as members of a society, and rekindle hope and choose effective actions in the ongoing work of social justice.¹ A careful consideration of these kinds of vital experiences can reveal how engagement with the humanities can help individuals and communities thrive.² This is the domain of the new field of the Positive Humanities.

The Positive Humanities are fundamentally concerned with the connection between culture and human flourishing. Human flourishing, of course, is a botanical metaphor. Derived from the Latin word for flower (*flos*), to flourish is “to blossom,” or more generally “to thrive.”

¹ These first-hand accounts were taken from interviews conducted by the author as part of the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project, of which he is the founding director. For the full interviews and more information about the Project, visit www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org.

² Although distinctions of various sorts are sometimes made in the meanings of words like flourishing, thriving, and well-being, these terms are used in a general way and function synonymously in this chapter.

Moving from plants to persons, *human* flourishing is a condition of prospering or doing well (OED). As with human flourishing, culture, too, is a metaphor. Derived from the Latin *cultura*, meaning “cultivation,” culture refers to a process of raising plants. When successful, culture results in the flourishing of those plants. Applied to human beings, culture has come to mean “the cultivation of the mind, faculties, manners, etc.; improvement by education and training,” and more generally, “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively” (OED). As indicated by the botanical metaphor, just as the culture of plants, when successful, results in their flourishing, so human culture, when successful, results in human flourishing.

It is important to articulate clearly what is—and is not—meant by the Positive Humanities, since this term may initially conjure up a range of unrelated associations from positivism to positive thinking. The humanities can be broadly defined as the “branch of learning concerned with human culture” (OED). The Positive Humanities are the branch of learning concerned with human culture *in its relation to human flourishing*. They seek to understand the conceptual nuances of this relationship in a variety of contexts in different societies across time. They also investigate the practical effects of cultural engagement on human flourishing, with a particular emphasis on how such engagement can be intentionally optimized to help individuals and communities thrive. Grounded in the wisdom, narrative, aesthetic, and performance traditions of cultures across time and around the world (and thus always inclusive of the arts), they seek insights into the nature and development of human flourishing from this vast storehouse of human experience. The Positive Humanities are also informed by more recent efforts in the sciences to bring empirical methodologies to bear in the investigation of well-being, and their practical emphasis connects them to the educational institutions, creative

industries, and cultural organizations through which the humanities are often studied and experienced. This chapter provides an introduction to the Positive Humanities, examining their complex relationship to historical and contemporary approaches to the humanities; exploring their connections to the science of well-being (especially positive psychology); identifying their domains of practical influence; clarifying their definition, aims, and commitments; and suggesting important future directions for the field.

The Humanities and Human Flourishing: Past, Present, and Future

Human flourishing is a central and perennial concern of the humanities. The historical roots of the humanities stretch back to ancient Greece and Rome and the development of programs of study designed to teach citizens the knowledge and skills needed to flourish. The Greek *paideia* (*παιδεία*) and the Roman liberal arts (*artes liberales*) emphasized the study of language, philosophy, mathematics, science, and the arts as requisites for free individuals to live life well and participate successfully and wisely in civic life. These became codified as the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) and served as the core of the curriculum in medieval European universities.

Growing out of these historical roots, the humanities were first defined as a distinct domain and program of study during the Renaissance. Humanists, as the proponents of this program of study came to be called, were dissatisfied with the contemporary scholastic approaches to learning that had been adopted in the universities. They argued that these approaches had come to overemphasize logic and linguistic analysis, focusing on techniques of abstract thinking and resolution of textual contradictions instead of the improvement of students' lives (Proctor, 1998). They advocated a return to the Greek and Roman classics in a way that

would renew the ancient project of education for the purpose of living life well, promoting a particular approach to classical learning. They turned away from the mathematical and scientific subjects of the liberal arts contained in the quadrivium and focused on redesigning the trivium. Removing logic from the trivium, they supplemented the remaining subjects of grammar and rhetoric with history, philosophy, and poetry (Kristeller, 1965). They saw the humanities as a course of study that would lead them toward wisdom and virtue, clarify the nature of happiness and its relation to virtue, and provide sound guidance for their lives (Proctor, 1998). Thus, human flourishing is not only a central concern of the humanities but was a key catalyst for their initial development.

In our contemporary world, the humanities tend to be thought of less as a comprehensive program of study and more as a collection of disciplines pursued in our academic institutions, particularly in our colleges and universities. Even a brief look at these various disciplines reveals that a concern with human flourishing is at their roots, as well. In philosophy, for example, Socrates argued that “the unexamined life is not worth living” and urged his fellow Athenians to cultivate virtue as that which leads to all public and private goods (Plato, 1920a). Plato wrote dialogues about the nature of virtue, justice, courage, piety, truth, pleasure, creativity, beauty, and love. In his most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, Plato (1920b) explored the just state and suggested ways politics can best support human flourishing. Plato’s student Aristotle (1926) wrote extensively about ethics and politics. He argued that human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is the goal of all human activity and that its achievement requires the cultivation of virtue, which he understood as the relative mean between vices of excess and deficiency. From this perspective, he analyzed a range of particular virtues, including courage, temperance, and modesty, noting that the study of ethics has a practical goal: not simply to know what virtue is but actually to

become good. An emphasis on human flourishing is at the root of non-Western philosophies as well. In the case of Chinese philosophy, for instance, Confucius (2014) explored questions of human flourishing, emphasizing the importance of personal virtue, correct social relationships, and shared culture for individual and societal well-being. Although Zhuangzi (2020) focused more on a connection to Nature to promote flourishing, his Daoist teachings had much in common with Confucianism. Both philosophical traditions critiqued the individualistic and materialistic methods many people followed in the quest for happiness and advocated instead a connection to something higher and larger than any individual life or momentary pleasure (Ivanhoe, 2013).

What is true of ancient philosophy is true across the religious traditions developed during this time. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism, along with the later Christianity and Islam, for example, centered on questions of human flourishing. Like ancient philosophy, these religious traditions held that the typical pathways for seeking happiness (pleasure, wealth, power, fame, and the like) are not effective and actually lead to more suffering. Instead, they advocated a cultivation of virtue to attain a higher sort of happiness, a transcending of narrow, individual concerns in favor of an identification with the broader universe or a connection to the divine. Literature, music, art, architecture, theatre, history, and similar pursuits were seen as ways of supporting this cultivation of virtue and this broader connection in the quest for human flourishing. (For a more detailed account of the development of the humanities and their focus on human flourishing, see McMahan, this volume.)

The Positive Humanities are interested in understanding more deeply the nuances of the connections between culture and human flourishing as they have developed historically, as they exist presently, and especially as they can be intentionally optimized for the future. When

considering the historical development of these connections, there are a number of salient questions to be asked. What conception of human flourishing was espoused in each of these cultural traditions? What were the means these traditions adopted for cultivating flourishing? How successful were these means in achieving the flourishing they envisioned? Which individuals and groups were deemed candidates for flourishing, and which were excluded? How did the relationship between culture and human flourishing develop and change in these various traditions? With regard to this last question, for example, we have already noted that the inception of the humanities as a program of study arose from a concern that the study of culture had drifted too far into abstraction, distancing itself from questions of human life. The return to the study of certain Greek and Roman classics, as advocated by the early humanists, spread throughout European universities, replacing the scholasticism it had initially critiqued. Eventually, however, this return to Greek and Roman classics began to feel too narrow to many scholars, and they advocated the study of modern languages and contemporary works written in those languages. More recently, as we will soon see, the humanities have moved away from a prioritizing of human flourishing (see also McMahan, this volume).

Turning from the past to the present, a look at current conceptions of the humanities can shed light on the connections between culture and human flourishing that hold today (Shim et al. 2019). As mentioned earlier, the humanities presently tend to be thought of as a collection of academic disciplines pursued chiefly in our colleges and universities. The Positive Humanities raise a number of questions specifically relevant to educational institutions. How do the various humanities disciplines conceptualize, understand, and define human flourishing? What do these disciplines say about how human flourishing can be increased? In what ways do these disciplines actually support and encourage the cultivation of human flourishing? Are some approaches

within these disciplines more effective than others? Do particular disciplines make unique contributions to human flourishing that other endeavors do not? Are there ways in which humanities disciplines can obstruct human flourishing?

Because humanities disciplines are largely housed within institutions of higher education, they are influenced by changes within these institutions and shaped by their values, norms, and systems of recruitment, retention, and reward. In the United States, for example, early institutions of higher learning considered the moral formation of their students to be one of their chief missions. With the rise of research universities, priorities in higher education shifted to the creation of new knowledge. These new priorities have led to significant breakthroughs in research, but they have also shifted the focus of faculty away from questions of living life well and toward narrow points of scholarship. In this context, humanities scholars have become professional academics whose success depends on the selection of a particular area of specialization within their discipline, with most of their time and energy focused on writing books and articles whose primary audience is other scholars with the same or a similar specialization. Secondly, these professionals have responsibilities for teaching their discipline and specialization to their students and for supporting their institution and their discipline by taking on various roles and duties of service. For the most part, however, they are not required to link their scholarship, teaching, or service to human flourishing.

The practical aims that initially inspired humanistic study are thus often eclipsed by the theoretical and methodological demands of the kind of disciplinary scholarship currently required for professional success in academia. Particularly troubling is the case of graduate students as they study to become professionals in their field. As Graham Burnett (in press) argues, this process of “professionalization” can often actually undermine the well-being of

individuals who are initially attracted to the humanities because of their eudaimonic value but find they need to leave these interests aside to learn the demanding skills of “hyperspecialized ‘technical’ scholarship” (p. 15). Indeed, contemporary research aims more at the analysis of texts than the practice of wisdom. Helen Small (2013) has presented a general definition of the humanities as the study of “the meaning-making practices of human cultures, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity” (p. 23). Studying the meaning-making practices of human cultures does not, of course, entail an ability to make meaning effectively oneself, and the current focus of the humanities is more on the analysis of meaning-making than on the creation of meaning. To be sure, the close study of texts, a mastery of methods of interpretation and evaluation, and an understanding of meaning-making practices are a source of flourishing for many humanities scholars. This scholarship, which requires virtues such as self-discipline, steadfastness, and an openness to different ways of understanding the world, can be thought of as a “way of life” that nurtures certain forms of well-being (Hadot, 1995; Eskilden, 2016). Nonetheless, this approach to flourishing is quite specialized, available to those individuals who have the personality, dedication, training, and opportunity to engage in this sort of scholarship. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the many other, less restricted ways the humanities can support human flourishing for a broader range of individuals and communities.

Another common feature of current approaches to the humanities that can also limit the work of human flourishing is the form the analysis of meaning-making often takes. Such analysis frequently follows the methodology of critical theory, using what Paul Ricoeur (1970) called a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” reading texts against the grain to discover hidden meanings, latent

psychopathologies, and corrosive ideologies (Moore, 2013). This theoretical dismantling of texts can suggest not only that the humanities today are not about meaning-making (and are only about the academic *study* of meaning-making), but also that any meaning-making endeavor is not worth undertaking, as it is bound to fail. Although it is valuable to have an awareness of the difficulties of meaning-making and of the undesirable consequences that can arise from even good-faith efforts, it is important to balance this awareness with what Ricoeur called in a less remarked phrase a “hermeneutics of affirmation.” Understanding various pitfalls in meaning-making is not the same as knowing how to make meaning effectively, and a growing number of scholars are pointing out the need for a more balanced approach (Moore, 2013). Just to take two examples, Eve Sedgwick (1997) was an early and influential voice calling for complementing suspicious readings with what she called “reparative” interpretations, and more recently Rita Felski (2008, 2015) has argued extensively that a hegemonic focus on suspicion has resulted in an overbearing emphasis on the negative that needs to be balanced by a “positive aesthetics.”

From the standpoint of students in higher education, there are a number of priorities and pressures that make it difficult to cultivate flourishing through the humanities. Given the priorities that typify the implementation of the academic mission of contemporary colleges and universities, humanities courses offered by these institutions are likely to emphasize theory over practice, suspicion over affirmation, and academic credit over eudaimonic outcome. This approach can make it difficult for students to discern how the humanities are connected to their lives in any vital way, even though so many of them are struggling with issues of anxiety and depression related to questions of meaning and identity—just the kinds of matters the humanities were initially developed to address. When the increased emphasis on STEM fields and the pressures students are under to use their studies as vocational preparation are added to the

picture, it is no wonder that fewer students are choosing to study the humanities. When students do end up in humanities classes, it is all too often for merely academic reasons: to satisfy course requirements to obtain their degrees, considering these courses as necessary evils or as a means of developing various academic skills (e.g., reading comprehension and writing ability). Thus, the professional interests of scholars and the academic interests of students are often quite different from the eudaimonic interests at the root of the humanities.

The Positive Humanities are also interested in examining the relationship between culture and human flourishing outside of academia. They consider the creative industries and the for-profit companies that drive so much of the development and distribution of the music, movies, and books that are made each year. To what extent is the content in these multi-billion-dollar industries created to maximize profits, and to what extent is it intended to support the flourishing of their customers? What examples might be identified and studied of works that are both financially successful and supportive of human flourishing? The Positive Humanities are also interested in the nonprofit public sector of the arts and humanities. In what ways are organizations in this domain oriented toward human flourishing? How do conservatories of music, orchestras, ensembles, choirs, dance troupes, theatre companies, art schools, and artist cooperatives, as well as museums, galleries, libraries, theaters, and performing art centers support or obstruct the well-being of professionals and their audiences? How do programs in the public humanities and the priorities of government organizations (like the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts in the United States) influence the flourishing of individuals, communities, and societies in general? Finally, the Positive Humanities concern themselves with the experience of the general public. To what degree and in

what manner do individuals and groups within society engage with the humanities, and what are the short- and long-term well-being effects of such engagement?

The study of the relationship between culture and human flourishing as it developed historically in various societies and as it exists currently in different contexts across the world is important in its own right, with significant contributions to make to the understanding of the nature and outcomes of so much of human experience. This study is also important as a way of informing cultural development and engagement so they can be intentionally optimized to help individuals and communities thrive. Built on a knowledge of the past and the present, the Positive Humanities, in their future orientation, focus on ways of bringing about greater human flourishing across societies and around the world. They are part of a *eudaimonic turn* that is influencing a growing number of domains as varied as psychology, economics, neuroscience, psychiatry, medicine, sociology, law, political science, education, organizational studies, and government. The eudaimonic turn is characterized by a commitment to human flourishing as a core interest and goal of endeavors in these domains. In the humanities, the eudaimonic turn emphasizes the centrality of human flourishing as a theme of study and as a practical goal of culture. Given the fact that human flourishing is at the root of the humanities, there is a real sense in which this is a eudaimonic *return*—not to some imagined golden age, but to the questions and concerns that gave rise to the humanities in the first place and that have been at their core for most of their history. In the contemporary context, this return must be informed by new knowledge, new perspectives, and new cultural realities that can help generate new approaches, fitting for our times, to these perennial concerns (Pawelski, 2013a).

The Science of Human Flourishing

Although human flourishing has traditionally been in the domain of the humanities, the sciences have increasingly become interested in this area. In fact, the eudaimonic turn is perhaps nowhere more advanced than in psychology, where it has led to the founding of a new branch of the discipline. Here, too, the eudaimonic turn is a kind of *return*, since human flourishing is at the root of psychology, as well. William James (1885), the Father of American Psychology, observed at the beginning of the twentieth century that happiness is one of human life's chief concerns and noted, "How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is...for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure" (p. 71). James (1982) went so far as to call for the founding of a new branch of empirical psychology to study optimal human functioning (Pawelski, 2018). This call went largely unheeded, however, as psychologists turned to Freud's psychoanalytic theories and to the behaviorism of John Watson, B.F. Skinner, and others. Abraham Maslow (1968) and Carl Rogers (1961) worked to refocus psychology on human flourishing, publishing ground-breaking work on what they respectively called "self-actualization" and the "fully-functioning person." In spite of these efforts, however, mainstream psychology at the end of the twentieth century was firmly focused on obstacles to human flourishing, on understanding and treating psychopathology and other human weaknesses.

The present eudaimonic turn in psychology was catalyzed in 1998 by Martin Seligman when he was president of the American Psychological Association. In his presidential address (Seligman, 1999), he noted that, since World War II, psychology had focused largely on healing. The results were remarkable, with some fourteen mental disorders rendered curable or at least effectively treatable. Seligman argued, however, that healing disease is only part of the mission of psychology, which should also concern itself more broadly with making the lives of all people

better. Exclusive focus on pathology, he noted, leaves out the study of flourishing individuals and thriving communities. He contended that an understanding of optimal human functioning can both help increase well-being and decrease pathology, since one of the most effective ways of buffering against mental illness is cultivating human strengths. To support psychology's broader mission, he proposed the founding of the new field of positive psychology.

Two years later Seligman, along with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, co-edited a special issue of the American Psychological Association's flagship journal *American Psychologist* on the topic of positive psychology. In their introduction to the issue, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued that an overemphasis on the study of pathology had left psychologists largely ignorant of things like hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance, all of which make life worth living. They defined positive psychology as a "science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions" and stated that the aim of this science "is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (p. 5). They claimed that such a science would "improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless" (p. 5). Positive psychology brought together the efforts of a relatively small but growing number of psychological researchers working in areas such as self-efficacy, self-determination theory, psychological and subjective well-being, optimism, flow, passion, hope theory, and positive emotions. Building on these perspectives, Seligman (2011) later developed a multi-component model of human flourishing, known by its acronym PERMA, which includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

Positive psychology has particular metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) has argued that positive psychology is chiefly a “metaphysical orientation.” This metaphysical orientation holds that the positive things in life are just as real—and thus just as worthy of study—as the negative things. It holds that positive emotions are just as real as negative emotions (and not just the relief from or transformation of negative emotions), that mental health is just as real as mental illness (and not just the absence of psychopathology), that strengths are just as real as weaknesses, and that optimal psychological states like flow are just as real as states of anxiety and depression. This metaphysical orientation does not imply, however, that the negative things in life do not exist. Although positive psychology orients itself toward the positive, it is not dismissive of the negative (Pawelski, 2013a). Epistemologically, positive psychology is committed to the best modes of inquiry in empirical psychology. Understanding that science is an ongoing, fallibilistic, self-corrective process, positive psychology seeks to advance investigative techniques and to employ multiple methods in the creation of new knowledge. Finally, positive psychology is committed to an ethical vision of well-being for all and to the realization of this vision, in part, through the investigation, development, and dissemination of evidence-based practices to help individuals and communities thrive.

It is important to note that positive psychology is proceeding in both a complementary and a comprehensive mode (Pawelski, 2016a). In its complementary mode, it defines itself as different in orientation from a mainstream psychology that is largely focused on the identification and treatment of psychopathology, as well as on the biases, irrationalities, and aggressions that stand in the way of individual mental health and optimal social functioning. That is, mainstream psychology seeks to advance well-being indirectly, through the mitigation of

what impedes or destroys it. Positive psychology, on the other hand, seeks to advance well-being directly, through the promotion of what causes or constitutes it. Instead of focusing on cures for depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia, for example, positive psychology investigates ways of cultivating optimism, gratitude, and positive relationships. It contends that a direct approach to well-being can be effective both for promoting human flourishing and for mitigating psychopathology. In its comprehensive mode, on the other hand, positive psychology seeks to establish an empirically-based approach to living life well. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) wrote, “the social and behavioral sciences...can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities” (p. 5). In this comprehensive mode, positive psychology must rely on a balance between indirect, mitigative approaches and direct, promotional approaches. The ideal of the comprehensive mode is *sustainable preference*, where the short- and long-term well-being interests of each individual and of all groups in a society are respected and supported (Pawelski, 2016b).

Positive psychology has been summed up as “the scientific study of what makes individuals and communities thrive,” and this work itself has thrived. Positive psychologists have been awarded hundreds of millions of dollars for their research; have founded academic journals to publish the results; have established national, regional, and global organizations, including the International Positive Psychology Association; and are centrally involved in the proliferation of efforts in support of well-being at the personal, academic, professional, and global levels. There is now an abundance of evidence-based books, apps, and online programs aimed at helping people increase their levels of well-being. Colleges and universities are appointing Chief Wellness Officers and offering courses on the science of happiness. Positive psychology has

influenced work in domains such as economics, neuroscience, political science, sociology, and organizational development. Sectors such as medicine, business, education, law, and law enforcement are applying research from positive psychology to help professionals experience greater well-being while also being more effective in their work. At the global level, the United Nations has, since 2012, published an annual *World Happiness Report*, detailing levels of happiness in nations around the world, and in 2018 the Global Happiness Council began publishing a complementary annual *Global Happiness and Well-Being Policy Report*, describing steps countries can take to increase their levels of happiness and well-being. Dozens of nations use well-being measures to supplement economic indicators as benchmarks of growth, and more and more countries are explicitly adopting increased well-being as a governmental goal.

The Importance of Collaboration

The humanities and the sciences both have a deep interest in human flourishing, yet their methods of investigation, social practices, goals, and values differ widely. Although it is notoriously difficult to provide adequate descriptions of the approaches of these domains and the differences between them, various scholars have proposed a number of key characteristics for each domain. They have argued that the humanities emphasize meaning-making through interpretation, critical analysis, creativity, and imagination, valuing individual response and subjectivity and exploring possibilities and ideals, often by playing on ambiguity. They have held that the sciences, on the other hand, emphasize verifiability by developing and employing empirical methods involving measurement, testing, and falsifiability; by valuing universalism, collaboration, objectivity, and skepticism; and by seeking to understand what actually is the case, often by eliminating ambiguity (Shim, et al., 2019).

Rough and contested as these distinctions are, they are sufficient to underscore some of the considerable differences that generally hold between the humanities and the sciences. Although both of these domains have always been included in the liberal arts, epistemological and methodological differences between them are long-standing and deep-seated, going back to ancient times and often becoming acrimonious (Small, 2013). In the Renaissance, as we have seen, humanists intentionally excluded mathematics and science from their program of study. More recently, C. P. Snow (1959) described the humanities and the sciences as belonging to “two cultures,” each of which tends to be ignorant of and dismissive of the other. Indeed, academic practices of selection, training, and placement encourage increasing specialization within one’s own area of study, so that scholars and researchers are often quite uninformed of work in other specializations, let alone in other domains of inquiry. In spite of the significant overlap in subject matter between the study of human flourishing in the humanities and the investigation of well-being in the sciences, these domains employ very different approaches. When humanities scholars and scientists do notice each other’s work, deep understanding and effective collaboration can be difficult.

In a domain as crucial and complex as human flourishing, however, it is vitally important to find ways to collaborate across these methodological divides. Both the humanities and the sciences stand to gain much from such a collaboration. The humanities can benefit in several ways from working with the science of well-being. First, simply focusing on questions of human flourishing more directly can be of great value. Louis Menand (2001) has argued that there is a “crisis of rationale” in the humanities, with scholars themselves not agreeing on the fundamental nature and purpose of the humanities and thus not able to make a clear case for their importance to the general public. A eudaimonic turn in the humanities could be of considerable help with

these problems. A recognition of human flourishing as a central concern of the humanities can provide them with a unifying rationale, giving scholars a common language to describe some of the ultimate motivations and aims of their work. It could help revitalize the humanities by encouraging scholars to understand more clearly the eudaimonic hopes that gave rise to each of its disciplines and to connect their own work more clearly to these hopes. It could invite scholars to join together across disciplines in a vitally important project: an examination of questions of human flourishing relevant for our times. This project would not require absolute agreement among scholars or the establishment of an orthodoxy. In fact, divergences of opinion could lead to important new insights on the nature of human flourishing and how it can be achieved, with each discipline and each scholar having something to contribute. It could, for example, open up new possibilities of human flourishing that are more equitable and widespread and that support the flourishing of the non-human world, as well. Furthermore, this project could enable scholars to make a clear case for the importance of the humanities to the general public, since well-being is a widely-shared human value. The science of well-being has been embraced by the general public because of the knowledge it has created about human flourishing and how to increase it. By learning from and collaborating with these scientific endeavors, humanities scholars can more easily carry out their own project and more effectively communicate their perspectives on human flourishing and its cultivation to a receptive public.

Second, scientific evaluative methods can help provide further information on the effects of the humanities on well-being. Currently, measurements of the effects of the humanities tend to focus on their instrumental impact on economic, vocational, or academic outcomes. In humanities classrooms, these measurements are typically limited to grades and course evaluations. Scientific collaboration can support the development and implementation of

assessment methods that focus on the intrinsic effects of eudaimonic engagement in the humanities across a variety of contexts. Although much more work needs to be done, it is heartening to see some of this collaboration beginning to take place. (For examples of these efforts, see What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2016; All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017; Tay, Pawelski, & Keith, 2018; Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2019; World Health Organization, 2019; University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine & ArtPlace America, 2019; Shim, Jebb, Tay, & Pawelski, under review; as well as the chapters in Part IV of this volume on the state of the application of scientific evaluative methods to engagement in music, art, theatre, history, literature, and religion.)

Third, collaboration with the science of well-being could allow humanities scholars to make deeper and more informed contributions to contemporary policy debates about the role of human flourishing in a variety of domains. As the eudaimonic turn takes greater hold in areas as diverse as education, healthcare, and government, thought leaders are turning to scientists for strategic advice. Collaborative efforts could allow important perspectives, insights, and practices from the humanities to inform this work, as well, with the possibility of more robust and culturally sensitive outcomes. (See Part V of this volume for chapters exploring these points in more detail.)

Similarly, the science of well-being can benefit from a collaboration with the humanities, resulting in a strengthening of scientific theory, research, and practice. On the theoretical level, the humanities are a rich repository of information and wisdom about human flourishing across time and cultures. They contain a plethora of ideas about the nature of well-being and myriad accounts of what follows from implementing them. Ideas and information from the humanities can provide powerful foundations on which to ground scientific work. This is precisely what

happened with the Values in Action Classification of Strengths and Virtues, one of the first large-scale projects undertaken in positive psychology. In the execution of this project, Christopher Peterson, Martin Seligman, and their colleagues looked to cultures across time and around the world to find strengths and virtues that seemed to be ubiquitously valued. They grounded their classification in virtue ethics. Peterson and Seligman (2004) wrote, “Long before there was positive psychology, or even psychology, philosophers grappled with issues of morality and ethics. In our endeavor to describe good character, we have learned much from these efforts....In sum, we can describe our classification as the social science equivalent of virtue ethics...” (pp. 85, 89).

On the level of research, the humanities can help guide scientific inquiry. Humanities scholars are able to provide deep analysis of the fundamental concepts on which positive psychology is based, bringing to bear a cultural richness that allows for the creation of more robust and nuanced constructs. To cite just one illustrative example, the *Journal of Positive Psychology* has recently published a special issue on “Joy and Positive Psychology.” The purpose of this issue is to provide a foundation and encouragement for more scientific research on the nature and practice of joy. In his introduction, Robert Emmons (2020), the editor of the special issue, stated, “Our initial research (Watkins et al., 2018) took seriously scholarship on joy as it emanates from the disciplines of theology and philosophy, indeed the empirical investigations we conducted and the measures we developed were highly influenced by recent thought emerging within these fields” (p. 2).

Finally, on the practical level, the humanities are replete with approaches, activities, rituals, practices, and traditions that can open up whole new domains of positive psychology interventions. One recent effort in this direction is *Rituals and Practices in World Religions:*

Cross-Cultural Scholarship to Inform Research and Clinical Contexts (2020), a volume that draws from world religions to identify specific rituals and practices that can be scientifically studied, tested, refined, and promulgated. Indeed, many of the chapters in the current volume provide further examples of ways in which the humanities can inspire positive psychology interventions.

To be effective, collaborations between the humanities and the sciences must be robust, going beyond merely cursory reading and polite quotation. These collaborations must bring humanities scholars, creative practitioners, and scientific researchers together to undertake significant, sustained projects. This will encourage the integration of complementary ways of querying human experience, a process of vital importance since no single approach to these questions is sufficient to yield a deep understanding of human flourishing and enable its effective and equitable cultivation. (For more details on how these collaborations can work, see the introductory chapter to this volume, as well as Schneider & Fredrickson, this volume.)

Defining the Positive Humanities

The good news is that these collaborations have already begun and are becoming more frequent. In fact, it is not too soon to speak of an emerging field of the Positive Humanities, which lies at the intersection of the humanities, the sciences, and human flourishing.³ As would

³ An important source of support for this emerging field is the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project, located at the University of Pennsylvania. Since receiving its first grant in 2014, the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project has developed into a growing international and multi-disciplinary network of well over one hundred humanities scholars, scientific researchers, college and university educators, arts practitioners, wellness officers, policy experts, members of government, and leaders of cultural organizations. It has published a number of conceptual papers and systematic reviews, developed a toolkit of measures, brought together researchers and groups of scholars in eight different humanities disciplines, and established a book series on The Humanities and Human Flourishing with Oxford University Press. Indeed, the present volume is one of its undertakings. For more information on the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project, including its work as a National Endowment for the Arts Research Lab, as well as other current efforts, visit www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org.

be the case with any new field, it is important to clarify what is meant by the Positive Humanities. It is also important to indicate what is *not* meant by them, so as to avoid misunderstandings of their aims and misapplications of their results. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, the Positive Humanities are the branch of learning concerned with human culture in its relation to human flourishing. As suggested in subsequent sections and as will be developed in more detail now, the Positive Humanities involve particular interests, aims, and approaches in their focus on the connection between culture and human flourishing.

The Positive Humanities consider the varied interests that guide engagement with culture. They note the numerous instrumental uses of culture, including its appropriation for professional, academic, vocational, and economic ends, and examine their implications for human flourishing. They focus more, however, on the intrinsic, eudaimonic benefits of culture, such as personal enjoyment, individual and societal growth, and meaning-making (Shim, et al., 2019; RAND Corporation, 2004), to understand what effects they have on human flourishing and how these effects can be optimized.

Thus the Positive Humanities have both theoretical and practical aims. They seek to understand the relationship between culture and human flourishing and to develop that relationship in ways that can enable culture to support human flourishing more effectively. Just as Aristotle argued that the purpose of the study of ethics is not merely to know what virtue is, but to become good, so the practical purpose of the Positive Humanities is not merely to know what human flourishing is, but to advance it on an individual and collective level.

In carrying out their theoretical and practical aims, the Positive Humanities understand the need for varied approaches, given the complexity of the relationship between culture and human flourishing. In some contexts and in some ways, culture can strongly support human

flourishing; in other contexts and in other ways, it can undermine it. For that reason, a comprehensive *eudaimonic profile* (Pawelski, 2016c), delineating domains of possible positive and negative impact, can be useful in raising awareness of the full range of effects culture can have on human flourishing. The Positive Humanities value critique as an important function of the humanities that can support human flourishing by identifying ways in which culture sometimes obstructs well-being. But this critical function of the humanities must be balanced by reparative and constructive work, as well. The indirectly positive, mitigative work of identifying and removing obstacles to human flourishing must be complemented by the directly positive, promotional work of conceptualizing and cultivating human flourishing. For this reason, the Positive Humanities *posit* things. They make claims about the nature of human flourishing, its presence or absence in certain contexts, and methods for advancing it. But they posit these claims fallibilistically, with intellectual humility, and without being *positive* that they have the final word on any of these matters.

It is important to note that the Positive Humanities are concerned with the full range of the humanities. They reject the separation of the humanities into categories of good and bad (and strongly repudiate the censorship that can sometimes follow); instead, they seek to understand as much as possible about the various well-being effects of engagement in the humanities across a variety of contexts. As with positive psychology, the Positive Humanities proceed in both a complementary mode and a comprehensive mode. In their complementary mode, they aim to understand and advance well-being directly, through the analysis and promotion of what causes or constitutes it. This includes, for example, McMahon's (2006) work on the history of happiness, Felski's (2015) "positive aesthetics" in literature, and Miroslav Volf's (2015) *Theology of Joy*. In their comprehensive mode, the Positive Humanities explore ways of living

life well, both individually and collectively. In this mode, the Positive Humanities take into account both what constitutes or causes human flourishing and what impedes or destroys it, relying on a balance between direct, promotional approaches and indirect, mitigative approaches for optimizing well-being.

These considerations make possible an expanded definition of the Positive Humanities that includes more details about the domains, collaborations, and commitments of the field: The Positive Humanities are the interdisciplinary, multi-industry, and cross-sector examination and optimization of the relationship between the experience, creation, and study of human culture and the understanding, assessment, and cultivation of human flourishing. Unpacking this definition will help further clarify the contours of the Positive Humanities.

The examination of the relationship between culture and human flourishing cuts across academic disciplines, creative industries, and public sectors. Within academia, this includes the traditional humanities disciplines, such as classical languages and literature, history, and philosophy; as well as newer additions to the humanities, such as modern languages, jurisprudence, comparative religion, and criticism, theory, and practice of the arts; and even contemporary additions, such as the digital humanities (Shim, et al., 2019). This also includes scientific disciplines outside of the humanities that have a particular interest in human flourishing, including psychology, and in particular the field of positive psychology. Outside of academia, the Positive Humanities examine the work of the creative industries, such as the music, movie, and publishing industries, to understand the complex ways in which they may support or obstruct human flourishing. Also in focus are the nonprofit organizations in the public sector (music and art schools and groups, museums, libraries, performing arts centers, and the

like), the public humanities insofar as they intersect with questions of human flourishing, and the experience of the general public as it engages with the humanities.

To be most effective, work in the Positive Humanities requires deep and broad collaborations. These collaborations must be interdisciplinary, taking place across the various humanities disciplines, as well as across different methods of scientific investigation. Furthermore, they must bring together the study of culture with its creation, including both scholars and makers. The emphasis within academia on the intellectual understanding of culture can benefit from a more creative, experiential engagement with it. And the experience and creation of culture that largely takes place outside of academia can benefit from a closer connection to scholarship and research. This applies both to the well-established industries and sectors and to the amateur creation, performance, and appreciation of the arts and humanities. In sum, the Positive Humanities value the experience, creation, and study of culture in its relation to human flourishing, and they appreciate the importance of each domain being informed by the others. The experience of culture can be greatly enhanced by involvement in its creation and training in its study, the creation of culture can be deeply enriched by broad experience with it and study of it, and the study of culture can be much more insightful when integrated with experiential engagement and creative practices.

The Positive Humanities have particular metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments. Exploring the approach of the Positive Humanities to the understanding, assessment, and cultivation of human flourishing will help make clear some of the fundamental questions underlying inquiry in each of these areas of commitment. In seeking to understand human flourishing, the Positive Humanities are informed by the eudaimonic turn. They have a metaphysical orientation toward the positive, inquiring into what human flourishing really is and

exploring its constituents and the various forms it can take across different contexts. Important here is distinguishing actual human flourishing from problematic or incomplete claims of what it is. It is also crucial to note that the Positive Humanities are not dismissive of the negative or blind to obstacles to human flourishing; rather, they hold that the positive is just as real as the negative and worth studying in its own right. They recognize that human flourishing requires a balanced attention to both adversities and opportunities—and to the interplay between them, mindful that opportunities sometimes come with hidden adversities and that so many of life’s most meaningful and formative moments occur when opportunities are found within adversities.

Given that human flourishing is a botanical metaphor, there are some things that must be kept in mind when using this term in the Positive Humanities.⁴ First, flourishing might call most immediately to mind scenes of springtime when, say, a tree is putting out shoots and blooms. These sorts of seasonal changes are key to thriving, but so are the seasonal changes that occur in the fall, when a tree may be losing its leaves in preparation for winter. With persons, as with trees, it is important to consider flourishing both in the moment and from a seasonal or life-course perspective. Second, it is important to recognize that flourishing can be used to describe both individual plants and entire ecosystems. Psychology has traditionally focused largely on individuals. Human flourishing certainly involves the well-being of particular persons, but it also involves the well-being of communities and of society in general. This underscores the need for a whole range of humanistic and social scientific approaches in the service of human flourishing. Third, just as plants and ecosystems flourish in their own ways, so too do individuals and

⁴ I am grateful to the participants in the disciplinary consultations held by the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project for many discussions that helped clarify the points in this paragraph—and other ideas in this chapter. Many of the participants have written about these matters themselves in chapters they have contributed to the volumes in the Oxford University Press book series on The Humanities and Human Flourishing. For further thoughts on human flourishing as a botanical metaphor, see especially Stuhr, 2021.

communities. The Positive Humanities recognize and celebrate that although flourishing has some commonalities wherever it is found, it also involves differences across various individuals, groups, and communities. It is important to consider carefully what counts as a human flourishing outcome in a specific context and who is authorized to make this determination. Fourth, human flourishing is not privilege by another name. Although from an individual perspective, privilege makes certain types of flourishing easier, it does not guarantee the flourishing of those who have it, and it tends to work against the flourishing of those who lack it. To the extent that privilege undermines social justice, it undermines the flourishing of a community or society. If only one portion of a garden receives the sunlight and water necessary to thrive, and other portions of the garden are systemically deprived of them, that garden is not flourishing. Fifth, the relationship between flourishing and its opposite of languishing is complex. These terms are not binary opposites, but rather bivariate, and they can co-occur (Pawelski, 2013b). It is typical, in fact, for a community to flourish in some ways and languish in others. Relatedly, flourishing does not require freedom of conflict or lack of adversity; indeed, it sometimes increases as a result of them. It is therefore possible to flourish, at least to some degree, in adverse conditions, yet it is also important for such flourishing not to result in an inappropriate settling for those conditions. Some levels of flourishing, for example, may be possible in the face of social injustice, but this should not lead to an acceptance of that injustice. Finally, human flourishing is not only about humans. Both because we care about the non-human world and because we cannot flourish without it, the non-human world is implicated in human flourishing.

The assessment of the role of culture in human flourishing involves a range of epistemological questions. How do we know when flourishing occurs? To what extent does it

occur in any given context? What elements of culture are implicated? When do flourishing and languishing co-occur, and how do they interact? What are the modalities, mechanisms, and moderators of human flourishing? These questions are too complex to be answered by any single method of investigation. Thus, although the Positive Humanities are metaphysically oriented toward the *positive*, they are not epistemologically oriented toward *positivism*. Instead of relying on a single, exclusivist methodological approach, the Positive Humanities embrace epistemological pluralism in the belief that a range of methods of inquiry are necessary to understand something as complex as human flourishing. Needed here is the full panoply of methods for querying human experience that have been developed—and are being developed—both in the humanities and in the sciences.

It is important to note that assessing the role of culture in human flourishing is not the same as assessing culture. The Positive Humanities seek to measure various well-being effects of engagement in the humanities across different contexts. This does not mean measuring the humanities (whatever that might actually mean), and it does not mean measuring the value of the humanities. It may well be that the most important value of the humanities cannot be measured. Yet engagement in the humanities often produces well-being effects, at least some of which are measurable. Scientific studies have shown, for example, that arts education can increase social and emotional well-being in children (Vaughan, Harris, & Caldwell, 2011), arts interventions can provide a sense of community and belonging among adults (Shim et al., under review), and regular group singing can enhance the quality of life and reduce the loneliness, anxiety, and depression of the elderly (What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2016). It would be a misuse of these findings to try to create a hierarchy of cultural worth based on them, but studies like these can be quite helpful for understanding how engagement in the humanities can support or

undermine well-being and how the effects of these experiences on human flourishing can be optimized.

Additionally, the Positive Humanities have an ethical commitment to the cultivation of human flourishing. Under what conditions and in what ways has culture increased human flourishing in the past, how does culture increase human flourishing in the present, and how can culture increase human flourishing in the future? The Positive Humanities are committed to practical outcomes through the implementation of effective ways of increasing well-being. One important place where these practical aims can be realized is the classroom. The Positive Humanities seek to ensure that matters of human flourishing are not eclipsed by professional, academic, and vocational interests and that they are addressed not just through theoretical study but also through practical experience. Menus are rich in mouth-watering information about food but poor in actual nutritional value. Studying a menu can yield important knowledge about dining options, but it is only through the practical processes of ordering and ingesting the food that we acquire the nutrition needed to sustain life (James, 1985). An important goal of courses in the Positive Humanities is to go beyond merely providing information about flourishing and to include practical processes for its actual cultivation. Where appropriate, these courses may be informed by scientific research, including work on how ways of reading, writing, moving, focusing, thinking critically, and taking action can support well-being (Pawelski & Tay, 2018). The Positive Humanities, however, are not limited to humanities classrooms. They can, for example, also inform the education of students in science (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018), business (Greenhalgh et al., this volume), and medicine (Reiff-Pasarew, this volume). Nor are they limited to classrooms at all. In the various arts and humanities industries and sectors and in the everyday appreciation of cultural experiences, they

can foreground the importance of human flourishing in these endeavors, resulting in the creation and curation of movies, music, art, novels, poetry, and other cultural artifacts that intentionally explore different aspects of human flourishing and in the engagement with these artifacts in ways that support the actual increase of the well-being of individuals and communities.

In keeping with the ethical commitments of the Positive Humanities, it is crucial that this practical work be done in the best interests of those who are affected by it and not be used by special interests to exploit or manipulate others. This practical work must also resist pressure to become a crass and shallow instrumentalism, where humanities engagement is valued only as a quick means to achieving specific short-term effects. Instead, this work must take into consideration the importance both of promoting well-being directly in the moment and of cultivating long-term, comprehensive approaches to human flourishing that integrate both mitigation and promotion. As in the case of positive psychology, this practical work should aim toward *sustainable preference*, where the short- and long-term well-being interests of not just certain privileged individuals or communities, but of all persons and each group within society are respected and valued (Pawelski, 2016b).

Finally, the Positive Humanities focus on both the examination and the optimization of the relationship between culture and human flourishing. They seek to understand this relationship as it developed across time and cultures around the world and as it currently exists across the broadest possible range of contexts. But they do not stop there. Building on the knowledge of how this relationship has developed in the past and holds in the present, the Positive Humanities look for ways in which it can be optimized in the future. How might the understanding of human flourishing be deepened? How might its assessment be made more effective? How might culture be developed and engaged with in such a way that it most strongly

supports both the immediate and the long-term flourishing of individuals, groups, and society as a whole?

Conclusion

The Positive Humanities are an emerging new field of inquiry and practice concerned with culture in its relation to human flourishing. They offer new approaches to some very old questions about living life well. The goal of these new approaches is to address these questions in fruitful ways fitting for our times and thus to make important contributions to human flourishing. Through sustained scholarship on connections between culture and human flourishing across time and place, the Positive Humanities aim to discover important insights into creative ways culture has improved the human experience. Mindful of the enormous role the humanities play in education and leisure, the Positive Humanities seek to increase human flourishing by augmenting the well-being effects of engagement with the humanities. For example, they support an emphasis on human flourishing in humanities courses so students can both learn about and cultivate conditions for thriving; they argue for a focus on eudaimonic interests in the creative industries as a way of increasing the well-being effects of music, movies, literature, art, theatre, and other forms of culture; and they partner with the science of well-being in its growing global influence so that information, ideas, and perspectives from the humanities can strengthen the effectiveness of programs and policies for supporting human flourishing around the world.

Much more work is needed in all these areas. If these efforts are successful, the Positive Humanities may help bring much-needed change to cultural norms about what it means to live well, both individually and collectively. By providing a deeper and more extensive

understanding of human flourishing and by enabling more nuanced and accurate methods for assessing its presence, they may make it possible to cultivate human flourishing more effectively. The Positive Humanities may help us move beyond the well-being effects engagement in the humanities currently have to the effects they *can* have when informed and shaped by the eudaimonic turn. A sustained and collaborative emphasis on human flourishing in the work of humanities scholars, creative practitioners, empirical researchers, classroom teachers, and other professionals across academic disciplines, creative industries, and cultural sectors carries the fair promise of contributing significantly to well-being in our society. Given the central role the humanities can play in helping people connect deeply with each other, this work may be effective in combatting the sharp increase in loneliness, anxiety, and depression plaguing many areas of the world. Given the way the humanities can help bring individuals and groups together in a society, this work may support efforts to create greater social justice and reweave the social fabric. In addition to mitigating these individual and social ills, the Positive Humanities may promote thriving by opening up new levels of optimal human functioning. In these and other ways, the Positive Humanities may lead to the acquisition and application of new knowledge that clarifies and strengthens the relationship between culture and human flourishing. The practical aim of this work is not the discovery of the royal road to the Good Life, but rather the clearing of a promising path toward greater flourishing for individuals, communities, and societies around the world.

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