

Human Flourishing: A Christian Theological Perspective

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Abstract

This chapter outlines one Christian theological account of human flourishing, with its roots in the Reformed Protestant tradition, but also drawing on other Christian traditions and disciplinary perspectives. Human flourishing is understood as the fulfilment of God's good purposes for human creatures, and (following the Reformed theologian Karl Barth) includes the dimensions of relationship with God, relationships with others, living a physically embodied and integrated life, and living out a particular vocation in a particular place and time. This theological account of flourishing is brought into dialogue with current social-scientific models of well-being, particularly hedonic and eudaimonic models, and points of agreement and critique are identified. Finally, the chapter suggests a few ways in which this theological account might have practical implications for the measurement and promotion of well-being or human flourishing.

Keywords: Christianity, eudaimonic models, flourishing, hedonic models, Karl Barth, Reformed tradition, theology, well-being.

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Introduction

This chapter outlines one particular Christian theological account of human flourishing and explores some of its implications for the issues raised and discussed in this volume. That account has its roots in the Reformed theological tradition – that is, the branch of Protestant Christianity that originated in sixteenth century Geneva and the work of reformers such as John Calvin (Calvin, 1845). However, it has been developed in an ecumenical and interdisciplinary way, drawing on theological sources from other Christian traditions (such as the medieval Catholic thinker Thomas Aquinas) and engaging with a range of disciplines including philosophy and disability studies.¹

The chapter approaches the discussion of well-being and measurement from a slightly oblique angle. The original context of my account of flourishing was an attempt to understand health and disease theologically, in order to provide an analytical lens through which to examine a range of bioethical problems. The result was a theological account of health and disease in the context of human flourishing (Messer, 2013). That account had four stages: first, an understanding of humans as creatures; second, an account of health as an aspect of creaturely flourishing; third, an understanding of disease in relation to evil, sin and death; fourth, a sketch of some practical implications of this account, particularly in the context of health care. The third and fourth stages have less relevance to the present volume, but the first and second can serve as the basis for a theological understanding of flourishing that may be brought into dialogue with current social-scientific accounts of well-being. The next two sections of the chapter summarize those stages of my account of flourishing, after which the following sections explore some of its implications for the understanding and measurement of well-being.

Humans as creatures

The first stage in this account of flourishing is to recall that the Christian tradition thinks of human beings as God's *creatures* (Messer, 2013, pp. 164-174). Three important insights follow from this.

First, "creature" is a theological category. In Christian theology, to describe humans as creatures is to claim that we, in common with all created things, owe our existence to the good purposes of a loving and sovereign God. If we wish to know what it means to be a human *creature*, we are enquiring about God's purposes. But since God, in the Christian tradition, is infinite and transcendent, how can finite creatures like us gain any understanding of God's purposes? The various Christian traditions will answer that question in different ways. The Reformed tradition, in which this account is rooted, tends to emphasize the limits of our capacity to understand God and God's ways out of our own intellectual and experiential resources. This is because we are both finite creatures and sinners (of which more below). Therefore, this tradition typically attaches great importance to God's self-revelation to humanity. In this Christian perspective, that divine self-disclosure is seen centrally in the person and work of Jesus Christ, to whom the Scriptures witness (cf. Barth, 1932/1975, ch. 1). That is one reason why the Bible is foundational for Christian theology.

It is worth noting in passing that this theological account is not in competition with evolutionary or other scientific accounts of human nature, and has no need to deny or reject these accounts. Science cannot tell us that we are – or that we are not – God's *creatures*. However, those who understand themselves on theological grounds to be God's creatures will find plenty to learn from relevant scientific disciplines about the form taken by our kind of creaturely

existence (for a few examples of the voluminous literature on theology and evolution, see Messer, 2007; Northcott and Berry, 2009; Deane-Drummond, 2009).

Second, ‘creature’ is a normative or evaluative, as well as descriptive, category. To describe ourselves as creatures is to claim that our existence, and its particular form, reflect God’s *good* purposes. It is objectively *good* to be a human creature. This kind of theological account, in other words, resists the modern separation of description from evaluation, or fact from value.

This is not to say that everything about human life as we experience it is good, or is what God wills. Another central claim of Christian faith is that the world as we know it is profoundly broken and distorted by the presence of evil. This takes various forms, one of which is often referred to as “natural evil”: the natural processes of the created world, as we experience them, do not fully reflect God’s good purposes. For example, many kinds of natural process may bring about suffering, death and destruction for both human and non-human creatures, much of which seems hard to reconcile with the loving purposes of a good God (for discussion of one aspect of this, see Southgate, 2008; Messer, 2018). Another form of evil is what the Christian tradition refers to as “sin,” a much-misunderstood word. “Sin” does not simply mean moral wrongdoing, though there is of course a relationship between the two. Fundamentally, sin is a theological, not simply a moral or ethical, category. It names a basic distortion in our relationship with God, from which spring all kinds of other distortion in our relationships with one another, ourselves and the created world (see, e.g., McFadyen, 2000). Though it may seem paradoxical to say this, there is good news at the heart of Christian talk of sin and evil, because the heart of Christian faith and theology is the message and the doctrine of *salvation*. This refers to the Christian claim that God has acted decisively through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to overcome sin and

evil. Along with the doctrine of salvation comes *eschatological* hope: the promise of a future age in which evil will finally be a thing of the past, and God's good purposes for human life and all creation will be completely fulfilled.

The ambivalent character of the present world – created good, but also flawed and distorted by evil – is one reason why this theological perspective emphasizes the need for revelation to inform theological and ethical understanding. If we wish to understand God's good purposes for human creatures, we cannot simply read them off our observations or scientific investigations of what human life, as we experience it, is actually like. This is because human life, as we experience it and investigate it in this world, is always already a complex mix of the good and the broken (cf. Bonhoeffer, 1949/2005, pp. 319-320). This is not to deny the value of experience or scientific investigation for informing theological understanding, but insights from these sources will have to be critically appropriated, and their significance interpreted through a theological lens, if they are to do so.

Third, "creature" is a *teleological* category: one that implies purposes, goals or ends. To be a creature of a particular kind is to be a being whose good consists in the fulfilment of the goals or ends appropriate to this kind of creature. But the goods, goals and ends of human creaturely being come in various shapes and sizes. To borrow a distinction made by the twentieth century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1949/2005, pp. 146-170), we can say that human creatures have "ultimate" and "penultimate" ends. The *ultimate* has to do with the salvation and eschatological hope mentioned earlier: our ultimate end is the complete fulfilment of all that God has created us to be. It is only God, not we, who can bring this about: this hope is available to us simply because of God's free and generous love, or what theologians call God's grace.² The *penultimate* refers to the conditions of life in this world, for which humans are called to take

responsibility. The penultimate matters, because it is in this world, in the here and now, that humans can encounter God's love and the promise of the ultimate. In theological perspective, life in this world has real, great, but not ultimate, importance.

Our ultimate end is eternal life with God. Within that horizon, we have all kinds of penultimate ends: purposes and goals that are good for human lives to be directed towards, in this world. I shall say a little more about what this means in the next section. Some of our penultimate ends are universal: goals or purposes that are appropriate to any of us, just by virtue of being creatures of this particular, human, kind. Others are particular: to do with the particular forms that different human lives take in different times and places. And even universally human ends have to be realized in particular ways in each of our lives.

One caveat about this teleological account of human life should be noted. As I have already emphasized, humans are both finite creatures and sinners, and that means we are very easily mistaken about our own and our neighbors' good. Ignorance, self-interest and prejudice, among other things, may distort our understandings of what it means for a human life to flourish or be fulfilled. So a healthy suspicion is needed about the ways in which our notions of the human good may be wrongheaded, partial or distorted, and we should welcome critical perspectives that can call attention to these distorted understandings and help to correct them. In the context of a theological discussion of health and human flourishing, for example, important critical perspectives are offered by disability studies and theological reflections on disability (Messer, 2013, pp. 51-101, 151-161).

Health and creaturely flourishing

To flourish as a human creature is to fulfil the goods, goals and ends that belong to this kind of creaturely life. But we need to put a good deal of flesh on that skeletal definition to have a useful or informative account of either health or human flourishing.

The great twentieth-century Reformed theologian Karl Barth offers one way of doing this. He gives an account of Christian ethics in terms of “the command of God the Creator”: God’s gracious call or summons, which sets us free to be the creatures God has made us to be. Barth identifies four dimensions to this divine summons (Barth, 1951/1961). The first he calls “freedom before God”: we have been made for relationship with God, and God’s command sets us free for that relationship. The second is “freedom in fellowship”: we are relational and social creatures, and God’s command sets us free to live in good relationships with one another. The third is “freedom for life”: we are called simply to *be* creatures of our kind; physically embodied creatures in whom body and psyche form one integrated whole. The final dimension is “freedom in limitation”: we are finite creatures, and our creaturely life must always therefore be lived in particular times, places and ways.

Barth locates health in the third of these dimensions: he describes it as “strength for human life”; the power to answer God’s call and live a life of this kind. For Barth, that power itself is God’s gift: health is not something human agency or skill can create, though we can do a good deal to promote and support it (or indeed to damage it). He also describes it as “capability, vigour and freedom ... the integration of the organs for the exercise of psycho-physical functions” (Barth, 1951/1961, p. 356). It is, in other words, the capacity to live the kind of life in which the various physical and other aspects of human creaturely being are integrated into one well-functioning whole.

We might think of health, in short, as the fulfilment of *some* penultimate human goals and ends of life: those that have to do with sustaining our integrated, physically embodied lives. It is a real and great, but penultimate, good: it is not of ultimate importance.³ Some health care practices and aspirations tend to obscure or deny this distinction between ultimate and penultimate goods; in effect they treat health as a goal of over-riding importance, to be pursued at all costs by any means necessary. Attaching ultimate importance to a real but penultimate good is a species of what the Christian tradition calls idolatry, a destructive kind of mistake for all concerned.

Also, in this perspective, health is *one* aspect of human creaturely flourishing among others – not the whole of it, as the World Health Organization (WHO) definition asserts: “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organization, 2014, p. 1). “Health” names one good of embodied creaturely human life. But as Barth’s fourfold scheme of “the command of the Creator” suggests, there are other goods that belong to this kind of creaturely life, and to try and subsume them all under the heading of health would strain the understanding of the latter.

Moreover, as noted earlier, this theological tradition understands human life and the world to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31, New Revised Standard Version) yet also “fallen”: that is, broken and distorted by human sin and other aspects of evil. In a fallen world, there is the possibility of tragic conflict between human goods, so that some goods can only be realized at the cost of others. This tragic aspect of the human condition is not seen as a permanent state of affairs. Christian theology maintains the eschatological hope of a “new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1): a promised future age in which the fallenness of the world is overcome, human existence is transformed, and God’s good purposes for creation find their ultimate

fulfilment. In this eschatological future, there will be no tragic conflict between human goods, and perfect flourishing will be a reality. But that is an eschatological hope; human flourishing in the present age will always be partial at best, subject to limitations, hindrances and tragic conflicts between genuine goods.

, the boundaries between the different aspects of creaturely flourishing are not watertight. Although health is one particular human good, it is of course related to others. For example, it affects and is affected by human relationships; and as Barth emphasizes, it also has social, political and economic aspects. “The will for health of the individual,” he remarks, “must ... also take the form of the will to improve, raise and perhaps radically transform the general living conditions of all ...” (Barth, 1951/1961, p. 363).

Health, creaturely flourishing, and well-being

The WHO definition of health, quoted above, equates health, well-being, and (at least by implication) the whole of human flourishing. It has often been criticized for having too narrow a view of well-being or flourishing, in particular for excluding spiritual well-being (e.g. Larson, 1996; Vader, 2006; Chirico 2016). In the account of health summarized in the previous two sections, I have offered a different criticism (also made by other authors): that it is too wide a definition of health. It is a mistake to equate health with well-being or flourishing, if the latter are understood in such wide-ranging ways. “Health,” I have argued, is better understood as naming a narrower domain of the good of human creatures: one aspect of our creaturely flourishing, not the totality of it.⁴

If this is correct, what of the relationship between well-being and flourishing? I did not differentiate clearly between them in my earlier account, where my main concern was to mark out the limits of health (Messer, 2013, pp. 174-175). Yet well-being, as it is often conceptualized

in current social-scientific literature, is narrower in its scope than the totality of human flourishing. For example, the focus tends to be on psycho-social well-being, and this is often differentiated from health, in part so that correlations between the two can be investigated. Yet a complete account of human flourishing will surely include physical and mental health, as VanderWeele (2017, p. 8149) observes.

While there may be good reasons to broaden the ways in which well-being is conceptualized and measured, from the theological perspective outlined in this chapter there is something to be said for maintaining a distinction between well-being and flourishing. In this perspective, “flourishing” must first and foremost be understood theologically. It refers to every aspect of what it means to realize God’s good purposes for the kind of creature we are: the fulfilment of our creaturely goals or ends in relationship with God, in human relationship and community, in the integrity of our own physical and mental life, and in our particular contexts and vocations (Barth, 1951/1961). In the nature of the case, the fulfilment of God’s purposes for God’s creatures is not something that human investigators could ever fully operationalize and measure empirically. Empirical measures of well-being will, at best, only be proxies for certain aspects of this complete theological understanding. (This would be true even if empirical measures of spiritual well-being or religious engagement were added into the mix: these could only ever be partial proxies for a person’s relationship with God, which Christian traditions would say can be fully known only to God.) To borrow a phrase from Karl Barth, in this theological perspective, empirical investigations will disclose only “phenomena of the human” (Barth, 1948/1960, p. 122), not the full reality of what it is to be a human creature before God.

Of course, this is not to deny the value of such empirical measures and investigations. Particularly when policy and practice are being considered, there is real value in having proxy

measures that can give some degree of insight into what is (or is not) conducive to the flourishing of human creatures. The distinction I have made between flourishing and well-being should simply serve as a reminder of the limits of what can be known empirically about the flourishing of human creatures. Among other things, this should encourage a certain epistemic humility in our assessments of what makes for human flourishing.

Given this theological *caveat*, what might be said theologically about the various concepts and accounts of well-being found in current social-scientific literature? The following sections outline some brief reflections.

The structure of well-being and the diversity of human goods

Some psychological accounts of well-being, notably Ryff's six-factor model, emphasize that there are diverse aspects of well-being, which are distinct and not fully translatable into one another (e.g. Ryff, 1989; Ryff et al., 2020, in this volume). The theological account outlined here will support the idea that human goods are diverse and not fully commensurable. It might, however, press more sharply the question of conflicts between these goods. As I argued earlier, a theological understanding of this world as good yet "fallen" will regard complete flourishing as an eschatological hope. In this age, genuine goods may be in tragic conflict with one another.

Therefore, this theological account of flourishing might well agree up to a point that a model such as Ryff's names some genuine human creaturely goods (I emphasize "up to a point": some of the qualifications I have in mind here will be explained in the next two sections). But it will predict that tragic conflicts between these aspects of well-being will be a common and inescapable human experience. It might also predict that there could be situations in which well-being itself (as conceptualized by an account like Ryff's) may be in tension or conflict with other aspects of human flourishing before God. For instance, the fulfilment of some individuals'

particular vocations to serve God and their neighbors might come at some cost to aspects of their own psychological well-being.

Indeed, this is not just a theoretical possibility. In their study of human benevolence and the experience of divine love, Lee and his colleagues give diverse examples of individuals whose vocations led them to accept what one described as the “cup of suffering” (including psychological pain and distress):

The people we interviewed did not escape suffering in responding to a divine call to serve others; their biographical narratives are often filled with pain that accompanied their faith-filled responses and their reliance on supernatural power to persevere (Lee, Poloma & Post, 2013, p. 131).

Yet the sense that they were following their vocations enabled them to “[understand] the pain in a different way” (Lee, Poloma & Post, 2013, p. 132), so that the “cup of suffering” was also, paradoxically, a “cup of joy” (Lee, Poloma & Post, 2013, p. 130, citing Baker, 2007). This study offers empirical evidence of Christian believers who understand their own experience in something like the theological way I have outlined: that following a vocation, even at the cost of psychological or other suffering, can be recognized as a form of flourishing.

The specific content of well-being

An important part of the discussion in the recent literature on well-being has been concerned with hedonic and eudaimonic views, and with debates and disagreements between them (e.g. Ryan & Deci, 2001). There have also been attempts at rapprochement between the two, integrating them into holistic accounts combining elements of both, such as the Comprehensive and Basic Inventories of Thriving (Su, Tay, & Diener, 2014). The theological account of flourishing outlined in this chapter may find some resonance with aspects of various

accounts, including hedonic and eudaimonic ones. However, its encounter with these accounts will also be critical, raising various questions.

Hedonic accounts focus on subjective well-being, understood as life satisfaction, positive mood and absence of negative mood (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 144). This view is strongly influenced by the utilitarian philosophy of Jeremy Bentham and his successors (Bentham, 1780/2007), and well-being in this perspective is closely associated with pleasure and the satisfaction of desire.

If human beings are understood theologically as embodied creatures, then it might seem that human desires can be seen in some way as indicators of the needs that must be met for our creaturely lives to be sustained and reproduced. At a basic level this need not be denied, yet a well-known biblical text, from that collection of Jesus' teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount, begins to complicate the picture:

Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6: 25, 31-33)

The Christian tradition has often been ambivalent, if not downright suspicious, about human desire. At times that suspicion has taken quite extreme forms, but properly understood, Christian ambivalence about desire springs from the understanding of human creaturely life as both good and "fallen". As the saying of Jesus quoted above suggests, the things we need to sustain our creaturely life can be seen as genuine goods, which God "knows that we need." Yet our desires may be distorted and disordered by that complex condition of alienation from God,

one another, ourselves and the world which the Christian tradition names as sin. The social, political and structural aspects of sin may also include the co-option or manipulation of human desires to serve unjust or oppressive ends. Desire will therefore be seen as, at best, an unreliable guide to the good of human creatures. Traditions of asceticism in Christianity witness to this insight, and to the idea that human desires must be disciplined or educated if they are to be directed more toward genuine flourishing (Gorringer, 2001, ch. 4). Moreover, as noted earlier, human creaturely life in this world is seen against an eschatological horizon. This suggests that the things we need to sustain our lives in this present world should be understood as genuine, but *penultimate* rather than ultimate, goods.

All of this suggests that the theological perspective I have outlined will encourage a rather critical stance toward hedonic accounts of well-being. This theological perspective may seem to have closer kinship with eudaimonic views such as Ryff's, and in some ways this is very likely true. The teleological character of eudaimonic accounts (e.g. Ryff, 2014, p. 11) resonates with the teleological picture of health and flourishing that I have offered (see Messer, 2013, pp. 164-74). Also, the Aristotelian roots of the concept of *eudaimonia* are closely linked to an understanding of virtue that has been influential in Christian theology and ethics.⁵

Nevertheless, while there may be an affinity between this theological account of flourishing and eudaimonic accounts of well-being, the relationship will still be a critical one. Consider for example the six factors in Ryff's eudaimonic account: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Ryff, 2014, Table 1). To a greater or lesser extent, the theological account of flourishing I have set out is likely to respond "Yes, but..." to most or all of these factors. I offer a few examples, to illustrate areas of broad agreement and others where there will be more questioning and critique.

Positive relations with others: The way Ryff describes this category has much in common with the theological understanding of flourishing that I have outlined. Close, trusting relationships, empathy, affection, intimacy, concern for others' welfare and so forth should all find their place within that aspect of creaturely flourishing which Barth calls "freedom in fellowship" (Barth, 1951/1961, pp. 116-323). A theological account in which relations with others are summed up by the great commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22: 39 and parallels) may go beyond Ryff's description, on the grounds that the meaning of loving one's neighbor is not exhausted by the features she names, but there will be a good deal of agreement nonetheless.

Self-acceptance: The theological perspective I have articulated will doubtless recognize the importance of self-acceptance for a sense of well-being. Yet there is a deep ambiguity about this, because Christians know themselves to be forgiven sinners. This would seem at least to complicate the business of feeling positive about one's past life, for example (cf. Ryff, 2014, Table 1). The theological vision that informs my account will suggest that self-acceptance becomes a real possibility just because we are loved and accepted by God, without having done anything to deserve God's love. This raises a question about truthfulness in relation to self-acceptance. A truthful form of self-acceptance will be seen as one that is clear-sighted about our flaws, failures, and sins, yet able to rejoice in the love and acceptance of God, which makes possible our transformation into better and more complete human creatures.⁶ Could there, by contrast, be forms of self-acceptance that would be better understood as self-deception?⁷ Might there be aspects of our past life that we would be right *not* to feel positive about? This theological view of the self-acceptance of forgiven sinners would suggest that there could.

Autonomy: In some contexts, especially health care ethics, autonomy is a problematic concept for many theologians (e.g. Messer, 2011, ch. 8). The concept, and the widely-held ethical principle of respect for autonomy, are criticized for presupposing an excessively individualistic and agonistic understanding of what it is to be human, downplaying the importance of relationships and interdependence for a flourishing human life.⁸ More fundamentally, the core understanding of autonomy as self-rule or self-determination seems to be called into question by a New Testament text from one of St. Paul's letters: "[D]o you not know ... that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). In the theological perspective suggested by this text, we are in a sense "owned" by the God who created us, who reconciled us to Godself through the work of Christ, and who promises the transformation and complete fulfilment of our lives in God's good future (Messer, 2011, pp. 216-217). Yet despite these theological criticisms, some of the concerns articulated in Ryff's description of autonomy would find strong echoes in New Testament depictions of a good life. One early church leader, for example, exhorts his readers to grow into a Christian maturity in which they will no longer be "tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). This certainly seems to have something in common with Ryff's description of the high scorer for autonomy who is "able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways" (Ryff, 2014, Table 1).

In short, these examples suggest that the theological account of human flourishing I have outlined may resonate with various psychological accounts of well-being, particularly eudaimonic views such as Ryff's. But the encounter between these views and this theological perspective is also likely to be a mutually critical one. I would think that the critical questions these views put to one another have the potential to be helpful and illuminating for both.

Basic visions of the human good

This kind of positive but critical response to some of the specific content in different accounts of well-being reflects a more fundamental question about the basic vision of the human good that informs those accounts. Perhaps I can put the point this way. The previous section was concerned with the contrasts between hedonic and eudaimonic understandings of well-being, and with positive and critical theological responses to both. Yet in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) – historically one of the most influential biblical texts in shaping Christian visions of the good life – one finds a rather different understanding from either.

To be sure, there is common ground. According to Pennington (2017, pp. 41-68), the Sermon sets out a vision of human flourishing with roots in the Aristotelian virtue tradition as well as the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. In the Sermon, the key word used to denote flourishing is *makarios* (usually, though misleadingly, translated “blessed”), which is close in meaning to *eudaimonia*. However, the Sermon’s vision of flourishing is strikingly different from an Aristotelian understanding. It opens with a famous statement of what it means to be *makarios*:

Blessed [*makarioi*] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5: 3-10)

As Pennington (2017, pp. 137-168) observes, this is a dark and paradoxical vision of a good human life. Flourishing is associated with “poverty of spirit,” mourning, “meekness” or humility (which Aristotle would have considered a vice), hungering and thirsting, and persecution. As a vision of human flourishing, it makes sense only because of the eschatological promise expressed in the second half of each saying: that God will bring about “the kingdom of heaven,” a state of affairs in which God’s good purposes for creation are fulfilled, and the broken and disordered world we presently inhabit is healed, transformed and fulfilled. The people who truly flourish are those who live in the light of that eschatological promise, even though doing so will invite suffering in the present age.

The point of this comparison is that while there may be common ground between the theological vision of human flourishing articulated in this chapter and current accounts of well-being, if we dig down far enough we are likely to find some deep differences in their basic assumptions about the human good. Moreover, this will not be true only of theological accounts. Any account of well-being will depend on some basic assumptions about the human good, whether or not those assumptions are articulated. Different accounts will be shaped by different basic assumptions, which may in some respects be incompatible with those that shape other accounts.

Consider for instance the contrasting visions that inform hedonic and eudaimonic views (Ryan & Deci, 2001, pp. 143-148). As noted earlier, hedonic accounts generally have deep roots in Bentham’s utilitarianism, which makes definite and particular claims about the human good, with pleasure and the absence of pain at the heart of its conception. Now, this view does not come out of nowhere, but has a particular genealogy, including a complex relationship with Protestant Christianity: in some ways it has roots in a Protestant Christian past, while also being

a radical reaction against it (cf. McKenny, 1997, pp. 17-20). Hedonic theories of well-being rest in some way or other on this philosophical substructure. Eudaimonic theories, as we have already seen, rest on a different kind of philosophical substructure, shaped in part by the thought of Aristotle. These are not the kind of differences that can be fully resolved empirically.

This suggests we should perhaps be cautious about trying to harmonize or synthesize contrasting accounts. There is a risk that a “holistic” synthesis of rival accounts may be built on a combination of basic assumptions or visions that are in fact incompatible with one another, in which case the resulting account of well-being may turn out to be incoherent to a greater or lesser extent. It might be better to acknowledge that some of the differences between models of well-being simply reflect rival conceptions of the human good.

Practical implications

This is all very well, but when there is a need to produce usable measures in order to assess the impact of public policy, health care interventions or other potential determinants of well-being, the theological critiques outlined in the preceding sections may seem like unhelpful theoretical quibbles. So what are the practical implications of my account, and is it likely to help or hinder the assessment of well-being in the various contexts in which current models are used?

The critique itself may have a contribution to make. First, it will serve as a reminder that human flourishing is broader than the aspects often considered in psychological accounts of well-being. Therefore, it will raise the question whether empirical measures of well-being need to be broadened to include other aspects of flourishing. In this respect it may support others who raise questions about broadening the scope of well-being measures and offer proposals for doing so (e.g. VanderWeele, 2017).

Next, this theological perspective will insist that well-being and flourishing must be understood against a transcendent horizon. Recall that in this theological account, a claim about human flourishing is ultimately a claim about the fulfilment of God's good purposes for human creatures. As I argued earlier, this implies among other things that there are limits to what can be measured empirically. So this theological critique will serve as a reminder of the limits of measurement in investigating well-being, a potentially useful cautionary note to sound when constructing studies and interpreting data.

Third, an obvious objection that might be raised about the practical applicability of this theological perspective is: Your theological account is shaped by a particular belief-system, so why should it have any relevance to those who do not share that belief-system? Yet as I suggested in the last section, the very particularity of my theological account is a reminder that other accounts of well-being also depend on particular philosophical (or even implicitly theological) assumptions about the human good, assumptions that cannot be tested empirically. This suggests that the kind of theological perspective I have offered can encourage a critical self-awareness, on the part of those offering and using other models of well-being, about the particularity and built-in assumptions of their own models. In turn, this emphasizes the value of interdisciplinary dialogue among social scientists, philosophers and theologians, which may help to make these built-in assumptions more explicit, subject them to critical examination and perhaps thereby aid the construction of stronger and more coherent models. As I suggested earlier, however, one effect of such dialogue might be to sharpen, rather than resolving, differences between the various models.

Aside from critiques and cautionary notes, might this theological perspective have more constructive contributions to make to the discussion about measuring well-being and flourishing?

It might seem that one way to make such a contribution would be to try and turn the theological account of flourishing into an alternative model alongside others such as hedonic and eudaimonic accounts, by operationalizing its various aspects and deriving empirically testable measures from them. I would be cautious about taking this route, for reasons that have already been suggested. First, in this theological perspective, flourishing refers first and foremost to the fulfilment of God's good purposes for human creatures. As I have already emphasized, not every aspect of this fulfilment could even in principle be tested empirically, and empirical measures will at best only reflect "phenomena of the human" (Barth, 1948/1960, p. 122), not the reality. For those aspects which could be operationalized, the empirical measures might end up not looking very different from some of those in existing models. A related concern is that some of what is most important and distinctive in the theological account could (so to say) be lost in translation.

However, as I have already suggested, this account could lend theological support to proposals for broadening measures of flourishing, for example by including health and virtue as additional domains (VanderWeele, 2017). Could it also suggest other domains or measures that could be added to models of flourishing? A seemingly obvious example would be the domain of spirituality and/or religious participation; yet on closer examination, attempting to incorporate this domain in social-scientific studies of health and well-being turns out to be conceptually and theologically fraught (Shuman & Meador, 2003).⁹ Further careful consideration would be needed to establish whether there are theologically satisfactory and scientifically workable ways of including religion or spirituality in measures of well-being or flourishing.

Whatever this theological account might or might not add to the measurement of well-being and flourishing, it is likely to have a good deal to say about the conditions that are

conducive to flourishing. In this way it could very well connect with social-scientific discussions of what VanderWeele (2017) calls “pathways to flourishing.” There is a well-established tradition of Christian reflection on this issue, focused particularly on the concept of the *common good*. The language of “the common good” in this sense has its roots in Catholic social teaching, but in recent years has attracted increasing interest from other traditions (McGrail & Sagovsky, 2015).¹⁰ I have argued elsewhere that the Reformed theological tradition on which the present account is based can find important points of contact with common-good thinking of this sort (Messer, 2009).

A standard definition of the common good is “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (Paul VI, 1965, para. 26). In other words, the common good is the sum total of social conditions that make the *flourishing* of human beings and communities possible. This suggests quite a broad range of concerns: Catholic and other Christian reflection on the common good draws attention to political rights, family life, education, employment, economic well-being, cultural life, peace and security, among other things (e.g. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1997, paras. 1905-1912; McGrail & Sagovsky, 2015). From a different theological angle, the common good tradition once again foregrounds the social, economic and political concerns touched on earlier in connection with Karl Barth’s account of health. If we use this theologically-grounded concept to frame our thinking about pathways to human flourishing, it is likely to broaden the focus of our attention, and suggest that our talk of flourishing will be incomplete if it neglects these social, economic and political factors.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined one particular Christian theological account of human flourishing, with its roots in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament and the Christian tradition's history of reflection on those texts. I have argued that this theological account offers rich possibilities for mutually critical and illuminating dialogue with social-scientific accounts of well-being. I have explored various points of contact, dialogue and critique in the later sections of the paper, though other concerns – such as the social, economic and political aspects mentioned at the end of the previous section – have only been briefly touched on, and could usefully be developed in future discussions.

Mine is, of course, by no means the only possible Christian theological account. Different Christian traditions might offer accounts of flourishing that differ in some respects, and might approach the dialogue with the social sciences differently from this chapter. There could be a lively intra-Christian debate about human flourishing, well-being, and how they can be studied and measured, to say nothing of the possibilities for dialogue and debate between different faith traditions. I would think that debates both within and between faith traditions about how human flourishing should be understood and promoted might complicate the current discussion of well-being and measurement, but in the end can only enrich it.

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Footnotes

¹ As such, it is likely to contrast in some ways, but also to have some common ground and points of contact, with other accounts of human flourishing grounded in philosophy, psychology, or biology (e.g., Baril, 2020; Lauinger, 2020; Farrelly, 2020; Margolis et al., 2020, all in this volume).

² This raises a complex question, since the Reformed tradition is particularly associated with a doctrine of predestination in which God has foreordained only the “elect” to be saved (Calvin, 1845, chs. 21-24). On the face of it, this might seem to qualify claims about God’s love and generosity, though advocates of the doctrine would vigorously dispute this. Space does not permit a discussion of the centuries-long argument over predestination; suffice it to say that not all major theologians in the Reformed tradition have endorsed this doctrine in anything like Calvin’s v (see McCormack, 2000).

³ This understanding is lived out in one way by those who accept risks to their health for the sake of following a vocation to serve God and their neighbors, including some of those interviewed by Lee and colleagues in their major recent study of Christian benevolence (e.g. Heidi Baker: see Lee, Poloma and Post, 2013, pp. 54-56). In another sense, something like this insight may be at work in anyone (certainly any believer) who sets limits to their own pursuit of health because they recognize that by pursuing it too obsessively they lose sight of other human goods.

⁴ A similar insight from a different angle can be found in VanderWeele (2017); see also VanderWeele, McNeely, & Koh (2019).

⁵ There is some ambivalence on both sides of this connection, however. VanderWeele (2017, p. 8149) critiques eudaimonic theories for neglecting virtue, though Ryff (2014, p. 11) This is an accepted manuscript of a chapter published by Oxford University Press in *Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, available online at <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197512531.003.0011>. It is not the copy of record. Copyright © 2021, Oxford University Press.

explicitly makes the connection between them. On the theological side, an Aristotelian concept of virtue has been particularly influential on Catholic ethics thanks to the work of the medieval philosopher-theologian Thomas Aquinas (e.g. Thomas Aquinas, 1920, *Prima Secundae*, questions 55-67), but has often been regarded with suspicion by Protestants. In recent decades, virtue ethics has enjoyed a revival in Protestant as well as Catholic ethics thanks to the work of authors such as MacIntyre (1981) and Hauerwas (1981), but the language of virtue nonetheless has its stringent theological critics. My own view, in brief, is that virtue does have a place in a theological conception of human creaturely flourishing, but must be understood in a somewhat different way from the Aristotelian tradition (see Messer, 2013, pp. 172-74).

⁶ This finds frequent expression in Christian spiritual and devotional writing. One eloquent example is the seventeenth century Anglican George Herbert's well-known poem "Love bade me welcome" (Herbert, 1633).

⁷ This question may find some resonance with some of the concerns explored by Xi and Lee (2020, this volume, citing Horney, 1950).

⁸ Outside the theological arena, similar concerns to these have also been raised by others, including some feminist critics (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000).

⁹ There are well-known conceptual problems even with saying what we mean by "religion" and "spirituality," but apart from these, one theologically fraught aspect of this discussion, which is the particular target of Shuman and Meador's critique, would be the attempt to show a correlation between religious practice and good health or well-being.

¹⁰ However, for some critical comments on the language of "the common good," see Bretherton (2010, pp. 28-29).