

## Integrating the Humanities and the Social Sciences: Six Approaches and Case Studies

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In 1917, Max Weber famously proclaimed that “the enterprise of science as a vocation is determined by the fact that science has entered a stage of specialization that has no precedent.”<sup>1</sup> Weber did not introduce this fragmentation as a cause for lament; on the contrary, he insisted, “Only rigorous specialization can give the scholar the feeling for what may be the one and only time in his life, that here he has achieved something that will *last*.”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, he recognized that scientific specialization posed significant challenges for intellectual work of any significant ambition or scope: “With every piece of work that strays into neighboring territory...we must resign ourselves to the realization that the best we can hope for is to provide the expert with useful *questions* of the sort that he may not easily discover for himself from his own vantage point...Our own work, however, will inevitably remain highly imperfect.”<sup>3</sup>

This galloping specialization has only accelerated since Weber’s day – by some measures there are now 174 distinct scientific sub-fields, including astronomy, atmospheric sciences, and automotive engineering.<sup>4</sup> And the humanities have by no means been immune from the pressure to specialize: particularly in the Anglosphere, it is exceedingly rare today for a philosopher or theologian to publish on more than a handful of her discipline’s classic problems, both from the sheer mass of publications in even relatively narrow sub-fields, and owing to the academic

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<sup>1</sup> “Science as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures* (Rodney Livingstone, trans.; Hackett, 2004), 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Ioannidis John P. A., Salholz-Hillel Maia, Boyack Kevin W. and Baas Jeroen. 2021. The rapid, massive growth of COVID-19 authors in the scientific literature. *R. Soc. open sci.* 8210389210389. <http://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.210389>

incentives for hiring and promotion. Not that all philosophers and theologians are happy about this situation: both disciplines are full of internal hand-wringing about the fragmentation of their sub-disciplines and the intellectual impoverishment it imposes.<sup>5</sup>

In this situation of deep, Weberian specialization, it is perhaps no great surprise that even sciences closely adjacent to the humanities – “social sciences,” such as psychology, sociology, or social epidemiology – have had relatively little time or energy for opening a conversation with their seemingly strange neighbors. Some corners of the humanities – philosophy in particular – have made relatively greater progress in engaging with the findings of the social sciences, but on the whole, the lines of communication between these disparate disciplines have been few and fragmentary.

The social sciences are still young, and their interaction with older siblings such as theology and philosophy is still necessarily tentative. However, a broad paradigm for dialogue in some specific areas is now coming into focus.<sup>6</sup> Below, we outline three ways in which humanistic disciplines such as theology, philosophy, or history might inform the social sciences, and three in which the social sciences might inform them in turn, proceeding in each case by way of brief “case studies” to exemplify the relation. In the first direction, 1) the humanities provide

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<sup>5</sup> In philosophy, cf. Alasdair MacIntyre’s treatment of the destructive effects on both disciplines of the modern divorce between ethics and the philosophy of mind (“How moral agents became ghosts or why the history of ethics diverged from that of the philosophy of mind,” *Synthese* 53.2 (1982): 295 – 312). An analogous lament from within the theological disciplines can be found in the introduction to the interdisciplinary volume, *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), where Richard Hays and Ellen Davis recall, “One member of the [working] group remarked [that] at one time the church’s great interpreters of Scripture (such as Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Luther) did not think of themselves narrowly as specialists in Old or New Testament or in theology or church history; for them, the interpretation of the Bible was a seamlessly integrated theological activity that spoke directly to the needs of the church. Thus what we were doing, he joked, was assembling a group of fifteen specialists to function corporately as a ‘Complete Theologian’” (xv).

<sup>6</sup> For a sketch of how such a dialogue might proceed between the fields of economics and literature in particular, cf. Gary Saul Morson and Morton Shapiro’s *Cents and Sensibility: What Economists Can Learn from the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2017). They argue that “economists could benefit from drawing on [three] humanistic capabilities: an appreciation of people as inherently cultural, of stories as essential forms of explanation, and of ethics in all its irreducible complexity” (44).

conceptual **clarity** for constructs which the social sciences aim to study; and 2) they **enrich** & clarify the interpretation of empirical results; and 3) help the social sciences identify new content and **scope** for their inquiry. Moving in the opposite direction, the social sciences can help 4) **confirm (or challenge)** claims from the humanities, 5) **furnish** new data for philosophical, theological, or historical reflection, and 6) **establish** the efficacy of interventions for achieving some agreed-upon good and determine what these interventions might best look like.

### *1. Clarifying Constructs: Hope and Optimism*

The humanities can help clarify the constructs being employed by the social sciences. The social sciences are not immune from Kant's insight that intuitions without concepts are blind.<sup>7</sup> In particular, empirical research is strongly guided by the construct definitions of the traits, behaviors, or phenomena it aims to study.

As an example, the terms "hope" and "optimism" are often colloquially used interchangeably, which in turn frequently obscures social science inquiry on these topics as well. There has in fact been more empirical research to-date on optimism than hope.<sup>8</sup> The empirical social science research on hope has been dominated by Snyder's definition of hope as "the cognitive energy and pathways for goals," along with the survey measure he developed to assess that trait.<sup>9</sup> However, this conception includes elements which are arguably quite distinct from hope. For instance, while Snyder distinguishes his conceptualization of hope from the related

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<sup>7</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* A 51/B 75, p. 106-7.

<sup>8</sup> Scheier, M. F., Swanson, J. D., Barlow, M. A., Greenhouse, J. B., Wrosch, C., & Tindle, H. A. (2021). Optimism versus pessimism as predictors of physical health: A comprehensive reanalysis of dispositional optimism research. *American Psychologist*, 76(3), 529.

<sup>9</sup> Snyder CR. Conceptualizing, measuring, and nurturing hope. *J Couns Dev.* 1995;73:355–360.

trait of “optimism,”<sup>10</sup> many of the items in his measure of hope in fact seem principally to capture an optimistic future outlook (albeit with a high-degree of “self-efficacy”) rather than hope, either as classically conceived within the Western philosophical tradition or as used in ordinary language. Items such as, “There are lots of ways around any problem,” “I’ve been pretty successful in life,” or “I meet the goals that I set for myself,” for instance, imply a strong expectation on the part of the respondent that the future will in fact turn out well, or (in contrast to both hope and optimism) that it already has.<sup>11</sup>

The philosophical and theological literature on hope, however, emphasizes that it does not require this optimistic assessment of the future, although it is consistent with such optimism. In a recent report for the John Templeton Foundation on hope and optimism, the philosopher Michael Milona emphasizes that hope differs from optimism in not necessarily presuming or expecting that the future will be good, but focusing both belief and desire on the *possibility* that it will be good nonetheless.<sup>12</sup> Milona’s account of hope is consistent in this respect with Thomas Aquinas’s, which emphasizes that hope is a desire for some future good that is difficult, but not impossible, to obtain.<sup>13</sup> Hope fixes one’s attention, not on the likelihood that the future will be good, but on the *possibility* that it will be, and empowers one to seek that good, whether actively or passively, even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainty.

This theoretical insistence on the separability of hope from optimism about the future is arguably well-grounded in the concept’s ordinary use in non-theoretical contexts as well. For instance, it is striking how prominent the theme of “hope” is in Viktor Frankl’s memoir of his

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<sup>10</sup> “Even though an optimist may believe that ‘things will work out,’ that optimist may lack the pathways cognitions important in reaching one’s goals. Therefore, an optimist may be stuck when blocked from a goal, whereas the high-hope person should produce new routes when the original path to a goal is blocked” (ibid., 356).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>12</sup> Milona, M. (2020). Hope and Optimism. John Templeton Foundation Report. October 2020. Available at: <https://www.templeton.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/JTF-Hope-Optimism.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.40.1.

time in Auschwitz, notwithstanding his frank assessment of how bleak his future prospects were, once he was inside the concentration camp. “I said,” Frankl wrote, “that to the impartial the future must seem hopeless...Each of us could guess for himself how small were his chances of survival...But I also told them that, in spite of that, I had no intention of losing hope and giving up.”<sup>14</sup> Frankl would have been out of his mind to affirm that “there [were] lots of ways around any problem” in Auschwitz; but his determination to still fix his intellect and will on his possible future good was *more*, not less, truly hopeful for the bleakness of his situation.

Snyder was right to recognize the separability of hope from optimism in principle, but in practice he did too little to distinguish them. Or rather, we might better say that what Snyder in fact distinguished were two sub-species of *optimism*: on the one hand, there is “unwarranted optimism,” which simply expects the future to be good, full stop, and “warranted optimism,” which grounds judgments about the future in the agent’s capacities and actions. This might be useful in itself, but it is a confusion to identify hope with warranted optimism.

Incorporating philosophical and theological insights into measure development on hope would help to better distinguish hope from optimism in the psychology literature, and so enable better empirical research on these topics. More generally, the use of distinctions in the philosophical and theological literatures has tremendous potential to guide more precise construct definitions in the social sciences. The use of philosophical resources to refine construct definitions and to clarify the logical relations between those definitions and survey items designed to capture them may have considerable potential to improve measure development in the social

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<sup>14</sup> *Man’s Search for Meaning, rev. ed.* (Washington Square Press, 1989 [1959]), 103.

sciences.<sup>15</sup> The humanities have a real contribution to make in providing conceptual clarity for constructs which the social sciences aim to study.

## 2. *Enriching Interpretation: Explaining and Understanding Marriage*

The humanities can enrich the interpretation of insights from the social sciences. At least within the life and social sciences, the centrifugal forces of specialization have been balanced in recent decades by a centripetal force pressing for what E.O. Wilson called “consilience,” a cross-disciplinary search for a unified account of human nature and behavior in evolutionary and neurophysiological terms.<sup>16</sup> Let’s call this “bottom-up consilience,” since its stock-in-trade are explanations of complex human behaviors, such as marriage or religion, in terms of imperatives and processes (reproductive fitness, group selection) which operate across the animal kingdom.

Bottom-up consilience has shed a great deal of light on questions such as, “Why has monogamy prevailed over polygamy as a marriage form?” or, “Why have societies with powerful and vigilant gods tended to dominate those with weaker, less judgmental ones?” Each of these questions, and many others, are given rigorous treatment in Joseph Henrich’s recent book, *The WEIRDest People in the World*. As Henrich shows, there are deeply practical reasons for each of these developments, which can be worked out mathematically in game-theoretic terms.

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<sup>15</sup> As other examples of the use of insights from the philosophical and theological literature for the purposes of measurement development see, respectively, on the topics of meaning and purpose, and on suffering: Hanson, J.A. and VanderWeele, T.J. (2021). *The Comprehensive Measure of Meaning: psychological and philosophical foundations*. In: M. Lee, L.D. Kubzansky, and T.J. VanderWeele (Eds.). *Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities*. Oxford University Press, Chapter 12: 339-376. VanderWeele, T.J. (2019). *Suffering and response: directions in empirical research*. *Social Science and Medicine*, 224:58-66.

<sup>16</sup> E.O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Human Knowledge* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999). As Morson and Shapiro wryly observe, “Too often the economic approach to interdisciplinary work is that other fields have the questions and economics has the answers” (*Cents and Sensibility*, 28).

In the case of monogamy and polygamy (or rather, “polygyny,” with one husband and multiple wives), the gradual pressure toward monogamy can be best explained in terms of polygyny’s “math problem”: when men are allowed to take multiple wives, elite men tend to take many (think of King Solomon’s 700 wives and 300 concubines), leaving a glut of less successful men who can’t find even one spouse.<sup>17</sup> This is a dangerous situation, since unmarried men will often be less productive and more prone to reckless or criminal behavior than their married peers, while wives and children in polygynous families receive less investment of effort and concern from their husbands and spouses than those in monogamous families.<sup>18</sup> Monogamy solves the math problem more elegantly than polygyny can.

Henrich’s game-theoretic account of marriage’s slow evolution toward monogamy provides a paradigm of an impersonal account: it offers a vision of marriage from the outside, as an adaptive strategy on which societies naturally converge over time without any deliberate or reflective understanding. Most crucially, this kind of bottom-up explanation makes no reference to any perspective from *within* the institution of marriage itself.

Accounts of human nature and behavior offered by bottom-up consilience are examples of what Wilhelm Dilthey called “explanation (*Erklärung*),” and whose paradigmatic instances he took to be found in the natural sciences.<sup>19</sup> Explanation is reductive – in physics, the mechanics or chemistry of medium-sized dry goods are explained in terms of interacting elementary particles; in sociobiology, beliefs and practices are explained in terms of the appetites which give rise to

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<sup>17</sup> Henrich calculates that if the wealthiest 20% of men in a society take between 2-4 wives, then the poorest 40% of men won’t be able to marry at all, or, if married, won’t be able to have kids (cf. Henrich, *The WEIRDest People*, 263-64).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 268-84.

<sup>19</sup> *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences: Selected Works, Vol. III* (Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, eds.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 107 *et passim*.

them. This spirit of “nothing-buttery”<sup>20</sup> is that “cold philosophy,” which Poe lamented must in the end “unweave the rainbow.”<sup>21</sup>

The reductive accounts offered by consilience from below explain a great deal – but not everything. Indeed, much that lies closest to the heart of human life is screened out entirely by its method of “explanation,” which Dilthey opposed to “understanding (*Verstehen*),” an incommensurable and equally important mode of inquiry concerned with “spiritual (*geistlich*) objects” which are grounded in “lived experience (*Erlebnis*)” and which are proper to the human sciences or “*Geisteswissenschaften* (sciences of mind).”<sup>22</sup> The natural sciences aspire to a “view from nowhere,” as Thomas Nagel put it, an account of the world from which subjectivity has been expunged;<sup>23</sup> they can depict only what John McDowell called “the space of nature...the realm of law.”<sup>24</sup> The *Geisteswissenschaften*, by contrast, concern themselves with a subjectivity-saturated world, Edmund Husserl’s “life-world (*Lebenswelt*),” or Wilfrid Sellars’s “logical space of reasons,” in which one is “able to justify what one says.”<sup>25</sup> As Dilthey puts it, “the procedure of understanding is grounded in the realization that the external reality that constitutes its objects is totally different from the objects of the natural sciences. Spirit has objectified itself in the former, purposes have been embodied in them, values have been actualized in them, and understanding grasps this spiritual content that has been formed in them.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “The Human Heart and Other Organs” in *The Essential Mary Midgley* (Routledge, 2005), 203.

<sup>21</sup> *Lamia*, l. 230, 238.

<sup>22</sup> For Dilthey, these disciplines included “history, political economy, the sciences of law and of the state, the studies of religion, of literature and poetry, of art and music, of philosophical world-view, as well as the theory and conceptual cognition of the historical process” (*The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, 91, 107, cf. also 140).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>24</sup> *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), xiv-xv. “The *Lebenswelt* is irreducible,” Scruton writes. “We understand and relate to it using concepts of agency and accountability that have no place in the physical sciences...the *Lebenswelt* exists in the ‘space of reasons,’ not the ‘space of law’” (*The Soul of the World*, 36).

<sup>25</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind,” in *Science, Perception and Reality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 127-196.

<sup>26</sup> *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, 141.

Sir Roger Scruton took Dilthey's distinction between "explaining" and "understanding" as his point of departure in his 2012 Stanton Lectures, later published as *The Soul of the World*, which defend the irreducibility of "personhood" against various contemporary reductionisms. "Persons are objects," Scruton notes, "but they are also subjects... This means that, while we often endeavour to explain people in the way we explain other objects in our environment – in terms of cause and effect, laws of motion, and physical makeup – we also have another kind of access to their past and future conduct. In addition to *explaining* their behavior, we seek to *understand* it."<sup>27</sup>

As Scruton argued elsewhere, the distinction between explanation and understanding is particularly crucial in the case of an institution such as marriage: "Anthropologists can tell us why the vow of love is useful to us and why it has been selected by our social evolution. But they have no special ability to trace its roots in human experience, or to enable us to understand what happens to the moral life when the vow disappears and erotic commitment is replaced by the sexual handshake."<sup>28</sup> Even if the impersonal, evolutionary account succeeds in explaining why monogamy should eventually prevail within populations of sexually dimorphous primates with slow-developing children, that in itself provides us no access to the *reasons* for which men and women enter into marriage, and which sustain their commitment to it. In this case, neglecting the work of understanding entirely in favor of explanation will be, not merely incomplete, but fundamentally misleading.

To begin, an account which reduces human behavior to genetically-driven appetite cannot make sense of basic facts about the human experience of sexual desire. As Scruton

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<sup>27</sup> *The Soul of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2014), 32.

<sup>28</sup> "Sacrament and Sacrilege," in *The Meaning of Marriage* (Jean Bethke Elshtain and Robert George, eds; New York: Scepter, 2006), 13.

emphasizes, the experience of sexual desire is arguably not in the first instance “a desire for sensations,” notwithstanding the determination of much empirical psychology to treat it as such.<sup>29</sup> Rather, it is a desire for a *person* – not for “his or her body, conceived as an object in the physical world, but the person conceived as an incarnate subject, in whom the light of self-consciousness shines and who confronts me eye to eye, and I to I.”<sup>30</sup> It is precisely because sexual desire properly aims at a communion of subjects that it takes as its focus, not the genitals, but the face, and particularly the eyes, the soul’s windows. It is also why we instinctively class rape, not with being spat upon, but with murder – it is not the unwanted contact with another’s bodily fluids that makes it a desecration, but the forcible reduction of another’s free personhood to the status of a mere, passive object.<sup>31</sup>

Both because sexual desire is so intensely compromising, and because it tends to take root out in the world in the form of children, it has a kind of internal teleology, naturally (NB: this is not an empirical claim) issuing in mutual public vows which solemnize and sacralize the marriage bond.<sup>32</sup> As G.K Chesterton long ago observed, “The idea, or at any rate the ideal, of the thing called a vow is fairly obvious. It is to combine the fixity that goes with finality with the self-respect that only goes with freedom.”<sup>33</sup> Marriage invites vows rather than mere contracts, precisely

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. the “Sexual Desire Inventory-2,” which defines “sexual desire” as “interest in or wish for sexual activity,” in turn defined as “touching [a partner’s] genitals, giving or receiving oral stimulation, engaging in intercourse, etc.” (Spector, I. P., Carey, M. P. & Steinberg, L. (1996). *The Sexual Desire Inventory: Development, Factor, Structure, and Evidence of Reliability*. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 22, 175-190: <https://www.midss.org/content/sexual-desire-inventory-2-sdi-2>). So too, Toledano and Pfaus introduce their “Sexual Desire and Arousal Inventory” by noting, “sexual desire can be defined as ‘wanting’ or ‘craving’ sexual activity or fantasy” (Toledano, Rachel, Pfaus, James. “ORIGINAL RESEARCH—OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT: The Sexual Arousal and Desire Inventory (SADI): A Multidimensional Scale to Assess Subjective Sexual Arousal and Desire.” *Journal of sexual medicine*, 2006-09, Vol.3 (5), p.853-877: <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2006.00293.x>).

<sup>30</sup> “Sacrament and Sacrilege,” 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 17.

<sup>32</sup> A vow is not a promise, “for a promise is fulfilled in time. And when the promise is fulfilled it is also finished. But a vow...is endless and changeless, and there is no point at which the account is closed” (*Ibid.*, 10).

<sup>33</sup> “The Story of the Vow,” in *The Superstition of Divorce* (New York: John Lane, 1920), 95.

because it is then a commitment to an unalterable state of life; spouses have become “one flesh” (cf. Gen. 2:28), and even divorce offers “no return from the state of marriage, but only a transition to another state *beyond* marriage,” in which all parties remain burdened with various entanglements to their “self-made enemy.”<sup>34</sup>

The anthropologist’s perspective allows us to explain why lifelong monogamy is a selectively advantageous reproductive strategy; but the internal perspective allows us to understand the reasons which make that institution intelligible to its members. In this case, the two perspectives are not merely complementary, but mutually reinforcing. As Scruton observes, while “the inner, sacramental character of marriage is reinforced by its external function” of socializing sex and nurturing children,<sup>35</sup> it is equally true that the external function is sustained by the internal commitments, so that “societies in which the vow of marriage is giving way to the contract for sexual pleasure are also rapidly ceasing to reproduce themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

Much more of course could be said on this controversial topic. However, it is clear that by appealing to different levels of explanation and, in particular, those concerning teleology and the reasons agents give for commitments and actions, our understanding of empirical research can be enriched. While we have given a single example here concerning appeal to more philosophical forms of reasoning, likewise interpretation of data from the empirical social sciences can be enriched by theological frameworks, by historical understanding and context, and by a deeper and more philosophical exposition of relevant concepts. The humanities can enrich the interpretation of the social sciences.

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<sup>34</sup> Scruton, “Sacrament and Sacrilege,” 8.

<sup>35</sup> “Sacrament and Sacrilege,” 19.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

### 3. Guiding Inquiry: Life Satisfaction and Eudaimonia

The humanities can also help guide, direct, and motivate the research inquiries of the various social sciences. Consider the recent explosion of research on the topic of happiness and the “positive” dimension of human life more broadly. Each year, thousands and probably even millions all around the globe are surveyed about the extent to which they are happy or satisfied with their lives as a whole, or where they would place their lives (ranging from “best” to “worst”) on a ladder<sup>37</sup> of choiceworthiness.

Given the wealth of data these questions generate, it is important to understand what they are measuring. What exactly is happiness or life satisfaction? The economist John Helliwell, who edits the World Happiness Report, recently treated this question by drawing constructively on Aristotle’s ethics in particular.<sup>38</sup> He argues that the most important tools for measuring happiness are “the evaluations that individuals make of the quality of their own lives,” and goes on to quote Julia Annas (from her classic survey of ancient ethics) as noting that “ancient ethical philosophy ‘gets its grip on the individual at this point of reflection: am I satisfied with my life as a whole, and the way it has developed and promises to develop?’”<sup>39</sup> As Annas emphasizes, virtually all schools of ancient ethics, including the theoretically “hedonistic” Epicureans, took it that human beings ought to be, and mostly are, motivated most deeply by concerns over the shape of their lives as a whole.<sup>40</sup> A heroin addict feels extremely happy so long as his high lasts, and yet his life as a whole is not choiceworthy, not one about which he could justifiably feel satisfied. Given that, the information gleaned from surveys of global life satisfaction will in general be more valuable than information about momentary happiness.

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<sup>37</sup> Cantril, H. (1965). *The pattern of human concerns*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

<sup>38</sup> Helliwell, “Measuring and Using Happiness to Support Public Policies,” in *Measuring Well-Being*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 29, quoting Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 28.

<sup>40</sup> *The Morality of Happiness*, 27-42.

A life which is going well in the relevant respects is characterized by “*eudaimonia*,” variously translated as “happiness,” “well-being,” or “flourishing.”<sup>41</sup> As Helliwell notes, the ancient Greeks – like contemporary social scientists and philosophers – divided over what precisely makes a life choiceworthy. Some (hedonists such as the Epicureans or especially the Cyrenaics) pursued the apparently commonsense view that what we all value most is pleasurable experience of one sort or another, so that a flourishing life is one that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain. Nonetheless, the intuitive requirement to privilege the global standpoint of one’s life as a whole pressed even the Epicureans toward revisionary accounts of pleasure.

For Epicurus, the pleasures which are *really* pleasant turn out to be the refined pleasures of intellectual engagement and virtuous friendship, which he summarized as a state of being undisturbed in soul (*ataraxia*).<sup>42</sup> Only the Cyrenaics, who rejected the global requirement, were able to maintain that any pleasurable activity would do, so long as there were enough of them – and they survive only in doxographies as the butt of philosophical jokes.<sup>43</sup> Others (e.g., the Stoics) pursued the apparently contrarian view that all that really matters is excellent or “virtuous” activity, and that a truly wise man could be perfectly happy on the rack.<sup>44</sup> And others still (especially Aristotle) adopted a mediating position, holding that both personal excellence and at least some external goods (not only material comforts but also relationships) matter for flourishing.<sup>45</sup>

We can only work out to which, if any, of these theories a particular assessment of life satisfaction corresponds if we have somewhat finer-grained assessments of various aspects of well-

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 43-46.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 334-50.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 227-34.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 388-411.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 364-84.

being. In particular, measures of so-called “eudaimonic well-being” or, as Carol Ryff et al. put it, “challenged thriving,” aim to assess the dimensions of flourishing which all the ancient eudaimonists gave pride of place, such as “autonomy,” “personal growth,” “positive relations with others,” or “purpose in life.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the absence from this description of eudaimonic well-being of *the* central concept of classical eudaimonism, the virtues, is truly striking. Neither Aristotle nor any ancient Stoic would have regarded autonomy or purpose in life as intrinsic goods absent others; Hitler, after all, enjoyed a high degree of both for much of his life.

Rather, eudaimonists would regard all of those qualities as valuable to the extent that they were shaped by the virtues, those “good qualities of the mind, by which we live rightly, which no one uses badly.”<sup>47</sup> As rational animals, our ultimate good (however plastic it ultimately proves to be) must consist (at least in part) in a perfected form of *rational* agency. This is quite a modest point, even if it has far-reaching implications: a tree’s flourishing consists precisely in unhindered *aboreal* being, and a cat’s, in unhindered *feline* being. A cat cannot flourish (or fail to flourish) *aboreally*, but only according to its kind. So too, the flourishing of a rational animal must consist at least in unhindered *rational* being.

This is where the virtues, so central to every form of eudaimonism, come in: if our flourishing consists in “living rationally,” that must mean living in accord with the virtues, which are the end-products of reasonable desires and decisions becoming sedimented in an agent’s dispositions. The ambition to be reasonable or intelligent in every action unifies the virtuous agent’s character, since it is the same virtue of prudence or practical wisdom which directs his conduct in each of the more specialized virtues’ domains: judgments as to what bravery requires

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<sup>46</sup> Ryff et al., “Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being,” 99-100.

<sup>47</sup> “Virtus est bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur” (Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1-2.55.3).

will be neither wholly different nor wholly isolated from judgments about what generosity, honesty, or justice requires.<sup>48</sup>

In short, the assessment of well-being has clearly been greatly facilitated by attention to the insights of ancient moral philosophy, and particularly the philosophy of Aristotle, who emphasized the diversity of goods which compose a flourishing life. Nonetheless, a measure of well-being would be more properly “eudaimonic” to the extent that it incorporated sustained attention to the virtues as such, and not merely to some of the qualities with which they are associated. Insights from the humanities – from philosophy, from theology, from history – have and almost inevitably will continue to inform, motivate, and direct research in the empirical social sciences. The humanities introduce new content, expand the scope of, and refine the pursuits within the social sciences.

#### *4. Corroborating or Disconfirming Theological Claims: Religion and Public Health*

Let’s now consider how social scientists might return the favor and help the humanists out of their comfortable armchairs. Theologians, for instance, naturally take a keen interest in the relationship between human flourishing and the life of the church. More particularly, Christian theologians would like to say something about the effects of various Christian practices (attending corporate worship, communal fellowship and support, the confession of sin, private prayer and Scripture reading, etc.) not only on the believer’s eternal destiny, but also on a range of temporal “well-being outcomes” (rates of depression, anxiety, or suicide; community involvement; sense of meaning and purpose; moral fiber or character, etc.).

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<sup>48</sup> On this point, cf. Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, 75.

Most broadly, we might say that the theologian is interested in finding answers to a range of questions, including:

- 1) Will Christian religious practice on the whole make one a (morally) better person?
- 2) Will Christian religious practice on the whole make one a happier person, in terms of life satisfaction, physical and mental health, or even financial and material security?
- 3) Is there anything distinctive about Christianity in this regard, or are the effects described above distributed equally among religious communities, or perhaps even other kinds of voluntary societies?

To-date, it must be said, there has been a pronounced tendency among theologians to treat these questions in the manner of an armchair sociologist, drawing inferences from their own experience or perhaps from an eccentric selection of exceptional episodes from the history of the church.<sup>49</sup> That's not to say, of course, that there is anything wrong in reflecting on extreme cases – St. Francis is more remarkable and praiseworthy for being virtually unparalleled among Christians in his devotion to evangelical poverty, to missions, and to God's glory reflected in creation. Indeed, as Christian Miller has recently emphasized, it's essential to moral growth for individuals and communities alike to identify and measure themselves against unattained (and perhaps *de facto* unattainable) ideals or “moral exemplars.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The charge of “armchair sociologist” is drawn from Nicholas Healy, who aimed it at the eminent theological ethicist Stanley Hauerwas in his *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014). Even when theologians get out of their armchairs and go out into the world – as in the recent burst of theological interest in ethnographic or “participant-observer” methods (e.g., Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (New York: Oxford University, 2007); Pete Ward (ed.), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012) – their work remains bedeviled by the problem of over-generalization from tiny samples. If theology is to be genuinely empirically informed, it needs a *quantitative* as well as *qualitative* turn.

<sup>50</sup> *The Character Gap*, 195-203.

Nonetheless, if a theologian's ambition is to describe what some Christian practice achieves in general (or even in some given time and place), then a scattering of anecdotes or even a detailed ethnographic description of a particular case simply amounts to digging in the wrong place. This is a broadly statistical question concerning averages, which needs to be answered by broadly inductive methods, ideally bolstered by statistical techniques which allow us to estimate associations, evaluate evidence for causation, and assess the extent to which some given sample is a fair proxy for the underlying population it is taken to represent.

Happily, a great deal of evidence now suggests that religious practice generally makes one more generous in their dealings with others,<sup>51</sup> as well as fairer, more cooperative, and more trustworthy.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, those who attend religious services at least weekly are about 34% less likely to binge-drink than those who never attend,<sup>53</sup> while adolescents who attend services regularly have a 33% lower risk of illegal drug use and a 40% lower risk of contracting an STD compared to never-attenders.<sup>54</sup> Regular attenders are also about 50% less likely to divorce,<sup>55</sup> 27% less likely to become depressed, and five times less likely to commit suicide than non-attenders.<sup>56</sup> And, in perhaps the most striking finding of all, over a sixteen-year period, regular

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<sup>51</sup> On religious generosity, cf. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 461 *et passim*; Arthur Brooks, *Who Really Cares? The Surprising Truth about Compassionate Conservatism* (New York: Basic Books, 2007); and the discussion in Miller, *The Character Gap*, and Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 308-311.

<sup>52</sup> Cf., e.g., Jonathan H.W. Tan, Claudia Vogel, "Religion and trust: An experimental study," *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Volume 29, Issue 6, 2008, pp. 832-848, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2008.03.002>; Ruffle, B. J., & Sosis, R. (2006). "Cooperation and the in-group-out-group bias: A field test on Israeli kibbutz members and city residents," *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 60(2), 147-163, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2004.07.007>. Both studies are cited in Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 308-309. Joseph Henrich describes a particularly interesting experiment designed to assess bias against out-group members across a range of religious and cultural settings: "Overall, moving from little or no belief in supernatural punishment to the strongest beliefs in punishment *reduced the bias against strangers* by a factor of four to five times" (*The WEIRDest People in the World*, 137).

<sup>53</sup> Chen, Y., Kim, E.S., and VanderWeele, T.J. (2020). [Religious service attendance and subsequent health and well-being throughout adulthood: evidence from three prospective cohorts](#). *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 49:2030-2040.

<sup>54</sup> Chen, Y. and VanderWeele, T.J. (2018). [Associations of religious upbringing with subsequent health and well-being from adolescence to young adulthood: an outcome-wide analysis](#). *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 187:2355-2364.

<sup>55</sup> <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0207778>.

<sup>56</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2765488>.

service attendees were *33% less likely to die* than non-attenders.<sup>57</sup> While questions of causality and directionality are almost always open to dispute, the research on this topic has become increasingly rigorous, employing data over time and principles of causal inference to evaluate evidence.<sup>58</sup> Again, the theologians need the social scientists.

Many of these findings may generalize across religions, which, as Émile Durkheim trenchantly argued long ago, are in part brilliant cultural adaptations for forging solidarity and accountability among unrelated individuals.<sup>59</sup> Even practices which rightly horrify us today might be a source of religiously-inspired social unity: for instance, when King Mesha of Moab sacrificed his eldest son on the walls of his besieged city his troops apparently flew into a frenzy which turned the tide of the Israelite advance (cf. 2 Kings 3:26-27). Indeed, it seems reasonable to think that much of what social scientists study under rubric of “religion” is a natural phenomenon, which unites us to one another by uniting each of us to the divine.<sup>60</sup>

From a Christian theological perspective, this reality is “sublated,” in Hegel’s sense of a development that at once preserves and transforms its predecessor.<sup>61</sup> One consequence of this

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<sup>57</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/49/6/2030/5892419>.

<sup>58</sup> For further discussion of evidence see: VanderWeele, T.J. (2017). Religion and health: a synthesis. In: Balboni, M.J. and Peteet, J.R. (eds.). *Spirituality and Religion within the Culture of Medicine: From Evidence to Practice*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p 357-401. Koenig et al., 2022, *Handbook on Religion and Health*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition; Oxford University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Joseph Ward Swain; Mineola, NY: Dover, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan Haidt suggests that we think of religions on analogy to a maypole dance, in which the dancers are bound to one another by their joint attention to the maypole (*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 302-303).

<sup>61</sup> On the “sublation (*Aufhebung*)” of religion in the Gospel, cf. Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* I.2, §17: “God’s Revelation as the Sublimation of Religion (*Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion*).” Barth has often been misread as having maintained that religion was “abolished (*aufgehoben*)” by the Gospel (this section was given the title “Divine Revelation as the Abolition of Religion” in the standard English translation edited by Bromiley and Torrance). However, as Garrett Green has brilliantly shown in his introduction to a fresh translation of this material, this misses the fact that Barth’s use of the term tracks the particularly dialectical sense given it by Hegel, for whom it precisely indicated both transformation and preservation: “to sublimate (*aufheben*) has in ordinary language a double sense, so that it means both ‘protect,’ ‘hold fast,’ and also ‘to allow to pass away,’ ‘to make an end’...the sublated is at once something preserved (*Aufbewahrtes*), which has nonetheless lost its immediacy, but which is however not annihilated (*vernichtet*)” (*Wissenschaft der Logik*, v. 1, Anmerkng 4.3, Kindle loc. 1337-ff.). (*Aufhebung* is the “synthesis” in the cartoon version of Hegel’s dialectic as a process of “thesis,” “antithesis,” and “synthesis”). So, Barth is adamant that the human “face” of religion is not only superseded but also *preserved* in the Gospel: “We would have to deny revelation

“sublation” of religion in the Christian Gospel from the perspective of Christian theology is that there is an inherent tension between its natural, social functions and its supernatural aim of union with God. There have been many times and places (the Roman Empire under the Decius, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, contemporary Saudi Arabia, etc.) in which a faithful Christian life very likely increased one’s risk of ill-health and death, and Christianity has at times been a profoundly disruptive and socially destabilizing force.<sup>62</sup> But in general, we rightly expect that a life shaped by the truth will be shaped by truth and beauty as well, and so the empirical results from the sociology and epidemiology of religion offer broad confirmation of Christians’ self-understanding of their religious practice’s role in shaping human well-being.

The empirical social sciences can help contribute evidence towards establishing claims that theologians or philosophers may take as self-evident. In some cases, the data may play out as expected, but in other cases this may not be so.<sup>63</sup> Often, however, the empirical social science research is needed to confirm, or challenge, what are intuitively attractive, but ultimately unsubstantiated, beliefs. The empirical social sciences can contribute to philosophical and theological reading and reflection by confirming, challenging, and refuting certain claims that pertain to empirical reality.

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as such if we were to dispute the fact that it...also has this human face and in this regard stands in a series along with other human faces” (Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (translated and introduced by Garrett Green; London: Bloomsbury, 2007), Kindle loc. 887.

<sup>62</sup> On the role of the Church’s teachings about marriage and family in destroying Europe’s age-old tribal societies, cf. Joseph Henrich’s *The WEIRDest People in the World*, 155-231. For a brilliant theological account of the centrifugal and centripetal forces internal to the proclamation of the Gospel which at once destroyed pagan antiquity, built Christendom in its place, and then destroyed that in turn as well, cf. David B. Hart’s “No Enduring City,” *First Things* (August 2013): <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/08/no-enduring-city>.

<sup>63</sup> As one such example related to the present discussion, while there is evidence that religious service attendance is associated with lower depression incidence and suicide, there is comparatively little evidence that there are similar reductions in anxiety, at least on average (Koenig et al., 2022, *Handbook on Religion and Health*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition; Oxford University Press). This may seem counterintuitive as many may think that if religion is to do anything positive it perhaps brings a sense of peace. The empirical research suggests that while this may be so for some, it may in fact increase anxiety for others, perhaps out of a sense of need to conform to moral norms, fear of failure, or an additional set of obligations. However, the evidence suggests that the *average* effect of religious service attendance on anxiety is slight.

### 5. *Furnishing New Data: Situationism and the Virtues*

In addition to confirming or challenging claims, the empirical social science can also furnish data and evidence that may itself prompt new directions of reflection and inquiry within the humanities. As we saw above, Western (though not only Western) ethics has frequently depicted moral excellence in terms of the “virtues,” which we defined, with Thomas Aquinas, as “good qualities of the mind, by which we live rightly, which no one uses badly.”<sup>64</sup> The virtues involve beliefs as well as habits – they are a *deliberate* orientation toward the good, not merely a matter of operant conditioning. And they are an orientation *toward the good*, not merely, e.g., a calculated strategy to burnish one’s reputation.<sup>65</sup> Crucially important is the idea that the virtues impart a high degree of cross-situational consistency to one’s actions: if I’m honest only when threatened with penalties for dishonesty, then I don’t possess the virtue of honesty.

The normative role of virtue-talk has no implications on its own for another important philosophical question, namely, “How widely distributed are the virtues?” After all, the set of perfect triangles, *in rerum natura* (in nature) is empty, but the concept is nonetheless quite useful. Over the past several decades, psychologists and other social scientists have devoted a great deal of energy to answering this question by way of empirical, and often experimental, assessments of human character and moral psychology. These findings have in turn become fodder for a lively philosophical debate.

First, the empirical evidence. A diverse body of social scientific findings, many of them well-established, suggests that virtues (and vices), in full and proper sense given them above, are

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<sup>64</sup> “Virtus est bona qualitas mentis, qua recte vivitur, qua nullus male utitur” (*Summa Theologiae* 1-2.55.3).

<sup>65</sup> For this and other complications, cf. the helpful introductory discussion in R. Hursthouse, “Virtue Ethics” (esp. Sect. 1.1) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2003; <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>).

rather rare. Instead, the experimental and observational evidence suggests that most people's propensities for fairness, gentleness, generosity, are surprisingly sensitive to variations in the situations or environments in which they find themselves. In consequence, this broad approach has come to be known as "situationism" in psychology. This literature is vast and varied; we'll present it here primarily as it appears in the work of the philosopher Christian Miller.<sup>66</sup> While psychological situationism has generated an enormous philosophical literature, both *pro* and *contra*,<sup>67</sup> theologians in particular, as Miller noted in 2016, have been much slower to take stock of its import for their own appeals to the virtues.<sup>68</sup>

Some situationist findings are apt to produce a chuckle, and others, a horrified gasp. On the more amusing end, one randomized trial found that people were almost twice likely (80% vs. 45% percent) to help a stranger if they had just emerged from a bathroom than if they were walking down a hallway,<sup>69</sup> while another found that people were much more likely (88% vs. 4%) to help a stranger if they had just found a dime in a phone booth than if they hadn't.<sup>70</sup> Both of these experiments, or close approximations to them, have been replicated, and while there is still some dispute, the underlying mechanisms seem plausible: we overcompensate for the

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<sup>66</sup> Christian Miller, *Character and Moral Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Idem, *The Character Gap* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018). Miller distances himself from the "situationist" movement as a whole, because some of its most prominent members interpret situationist findings in a behaviorist, Skinnerian sense, as implying that personality traits play no role in human behavior (cf. *Character and Moral Psychology*, 100).

<sup>67</sup> On the *pro* side, cf. Gilbert Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 99 (1999): 315–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4545312>; John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University, 2014). On the *contra* side, cf. Gopal Sreenivasan, "Errors about Errors: Virtue Theory and Trait Attribution," *Mind* 111, no. 441 (2002): 47–68; Idem, "Character and Consistency: Still More Errors"; Joel Kupperman, "Virtue in Virtue Ethics," *The Journal of Ethics* 13 (2009): 243–55; John Sabini and Maury Silver, "Lack of Character? Situationism Critiqued," *Ethics* 115 (2005): 535–62. For a recent overview of the *status quaestionis* on the situationism debate, cf. Matthew Wilson, "High-Fidelity Experiments, Situationism, and the Measurement of Virtue," *Journal of Value Inquiry* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-020-09775-w>.

<sup>68</sup> Christian Miller, "Should Christians Be Worried about Situationist Claims in Psychology?" *Faith and Philosophy* 33 (1):48-73 (2016).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>70</sup> Idem, *Character and Moral Psychology*, 98.

embarrassment we associate with the bathroom by being extra accommodating, while a bit of good luck seems to make us eager to “pay it forward.”<sup>71</sup>

Others findings are less amusing. As Miller notes, substantial majorities of college students (60-80% depending on the survey) admit to cheating at least a little on assignments when they have the chance, and these figures are corroborated by experimental findings.<sup>72</sup> Nonetheless, a range of situational factors, from forcing the test-taker to sign a copy of the honor code just beforehand, or even just seating him in front of a mirror, have been shown to reduce cheating by as much as 90%.<sup>73</sup> (Again, if I fail to cheat principally because I happened to be sitting in front of a mirror during my test, my behavior is probably not due to the exercise of the virtue of honesty in anything like the standard sense.) Some of the darkest of the “situationist” experiments were conducted in the 1960’s by Stanley Milgram, who found that virtually all of his test subjects could be pressured by a white-coated “supervisor” into administering what they (wrongly) believed to be painful electric shocks to a total stranger (in fact an actor bellowing convincing howls of agony and pleas for mercy), and that 65% were even willing to administer a deadly, 450-volt shock.<sup>74</sup>

The news isn’t all bad, however. As Miller emphasizes, these experimental findings also suggest that very few people are thoroughly dishonest or cruel, for instance. Students cheat with alarming frequency, it’s true, but they typically cheat substantially less than they could’ve gotten away with.<sup>75</sup> (Perhaps this spoonful of restraint helps the immorality go down easier.) Likewise, though participants in Milgram’s experiments could be pressured into cruel behavior, hardly any

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<sup>71</sup> Writing about the phone booth study, Miller notes, “There were replication problems with this study, but there are many other studies on the effect of mood on helping which found a similar pattern” (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-character-empirical/>).

<sup>72</sup> *The Character Gap*, 125-30.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-33.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-95. As Miller notes, somewhat more ethical variations on Milgram’s experiments, assessing the human propensity to harm others at the behest of authority figures, have been replicated many times (*ibid.*, 82-84).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-31.

embraced it with verve – in other versions of Milgram’s experiment in which no pressure was applied to administer shocks, almost none did.<sup>76</sup> Miller suggests that these findings indicate that most of us possess neither virtues nor vices, but rather possess what he calls “mixed traits,” which incline us to, e.g., honesty in some highly specified situations, and to dishonesty in others.

The findings of situationism arguably don’t so much show that we are at the mercy of our environment as that we often act out of unconscious beliefs and desires, many of them, unfortunately, less than creditable. As Miller puts it, situational factors seem to activate “surprising dispositions” in each of us, such as a disposition to “harm others in order to obey the instructions of a legitimate authority” (activated in the Milgram experiments) or to help others in order to alleviate embarrassment (activated in the bathroom experiment).<sup>77</sup> These disposition are “surprising” precisely because most of us don’t recognize that we possess them unless we catch ourselves acting them out – and even this modest self-knowledge is often a moral achievement in itself.

Miller’s conclusion, that most people possess no virtues or vices, might seem deeply counter-intuitive today, but it was a relatively mainstream position in the ancient and medieval worlds. As Miller rightly notes, Aristotle took for granted that the virtues are rare, insisting that “the many... do not abstain from bad acts because of their baseness but through fear of punishment.”<sup>78</sup> In *Aristotle and the Virtues*, Howard Curzer comments that, for Aristotle, “the category of ‘the many’ includes not only children, but also the majority of adults, for [in Aristotle’s view] these adults are morally childish.”<sup>79</sup> And, as Thomas Osborne notes, “Following Aristotle, Thomas thinks although some agents are virtuous and others are vicious, there are

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>77</sup> “Should Christians Be Worried?”, 61. Cf. also *Character and Moral Psychology*, 103.

<sup>78</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b7–13.

<sup>79</sup> *Aristotle and the Virtues* (New York: Oxford University, 2012), 333.

many agents who are neither. Continent agents act well, but they think about what they should not do because their desires are disordered. Incontinent agents act poorly, but they are generally aware of what they should do.”<sup>80</sup>

Nonetheless, some philosophers, such as Robert Adams in his *A Theory of Virtue*, have sought to defend the widespread possession of the virtues in the face of situationism. Adams maintains that we can continue to think of the virtues as a common possession, if we accept the existence of virtues which are “frail and fragmentary,” i.e., relatively weak (frail) and also relatively sensitive to situational changes (fragmentary).<sup>81</sup> This is a defensible position, but it must be said that it concedes a great deal of ground to the situationist challenge, which is focused on traits that are operative across situations, rather than “fragmentary” traits operative only in highly-specified situations. In any case, the data that has come out of experimental psychology on character and virtue has contributed our understanding of the prevalence and distribution of the virtues. It has relevance to philosophical and theological reflection as to how to better promote the development of virtue, and how difficult this task may be. The empirical social sciences can contribute to, and supplement, knowledge in ways that are useful for reflection and scholarship within the humanities.

#### 6. *Establishing Effective Interventions: How Can We Promote Forgiveness?*

For our final category of social-scientific influence on the humanities, let’s consider an area in which there is broad agreement among about a desired goal, but a need for greater clarity in how to bring it about. For instance, there is broad agreement that churches should work to

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<sup>80</sup> *Human Action in Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham* (Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 77, cf. *De malo* q. 3, art. 9, ad 7.

<sup>81</sup> Adams, *A Theory of Virtue: Excellence in Being for the Good* (New York: Oxford University, 2006), 115.

promote forgiveness, understood as the replacement by one wronged of ill-will for good-will towards the one who wronged him.<sup>82</sup> After all, the Lord's Prayer includes a petition that God would "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12), and Christ warns his disciples that, "with the measure you use it will be measured unto you" (Matt. 7:2).

Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence which suggests that being forgiving is associated with improved outcomes across a range of public health measures, including, for example, less depression and less anxiety and possibly better physical health.<sup>83</sup> Finally, many today also recognize that forgiveness – or related concepts such as "reconciliation" – is of deep social and political relevance in societies seeking to heal from past traumas, whether in post-Communist Balkan republics,<sup>84</sup> post-apartheid South Africa,<sup>85</sup> or post-genocide Rwanda and Burundi.<sup>86</sup>

Nonetheless, there is little agreement among theologians or religious leaders about how best to pursue the aim of promoting forgiveness. Recent psychological research, however, has produced a number of experimentally validated interventions to help people become more forgiving. These draw on decades of work in clinical psychology on the processes by which people come to forgive, with different models outlining somewhat different stages on the path to forgiveness. In Enright's Process Model, for instance, the promotion of forgiveness takes place

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. VanderWeele, "Is forgiveness a public health issue?" <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304210>.

<sup>83</sup> For summaries of the empirical evidence see: Wade, N. G., Hoyt, W. T., Kidwell, J. E., and Worthington Jr, E. L. (2014). Efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions to promote forgiveness: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 82(1):154-170. Toussaint, L.L., Worthington, E.L., and Williams, D.R. (2015). *Forgiveness and Health: Scientific Evidence and Theories Relating Forgiveness to Better Health*. Netherlands: Springer. Long, K., Worthington, E.L., VanderWeele, T.J. and Chen, Y. (2020b). Forgiveness of others and subsequent health and well-being in mid-life: a longitudinal study on female nurses. *BMC Psychology*, 8:104.

<sup>84</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

<sup>85</sup> Dion Forster, *The (Im)possibility of Forgiveness: An Empirical Intercultural Bible Reading of Matthew 18.15-35* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019).

<sup>86</sup> Emmanuel Katangole & Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace, and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

over twenty steps organized into four phases: uncovering negative feelings about the offense, deciding to pursue forgiveness for a specific instance, working towards understanding the offending person, and discovery of unanticipated positive outcomes and empathy for the forgiven person.<sup>87</sup>

Another prominent approach to conceptualizing forgiveness is Worthington's REACH model: Recall the hurt one has experienced and the emotions associated with it; Empathize with the offender and take the other's perspective in considering reasons for action (without condoning the action or invalidating one's feelings); offer an Altruistic gesture of recalling one's own shortcomings and realizing others have offered forgiveness; make a firm Commitment to forgive; and Hold onto or maintain the forgiveness through times of uncertainty or through the returning of anger and bitterness.<sup>88</sup> The development of these models draws upon insights from psychology, and constitutes a contribution of the social sciences to a topic which is of central theological concern.

Psychologists have also developed interventions on the basis of these insights to help people become more forgiving. Numerous randomized trials now indicate that interventions based on these models are effective not only in promoting forgiveness, but also in decreasing depression and anxiety, and increasing hope.<sup>89</sup> These interventions have been shown to be effective with groups as diverse as adult incest survivors, parents who have adopted special needs children, and inpatients struggling with alcohol and drug addiction.<sup>90</sup> These forgiveness

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<sup>87</sup> Enright, R.D. and Fitzgibbons, R.P. (2000). *Helping clients forgive: An empirical guide for resolving anger and restoring hope*. American Psychological Association.

<sup>88</sup> Worthington, E.L. (2013). *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

<sup>89</sup> Wade, N. G., Hoyt, W. T., Kidwell, J. E., and Worthington Jr, E. L. (2014). Efficacy of psychotherapeutic interventions to promote forgiveness: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 82(1):154-170.

<sup>90</sup> Freedman SR, RD Enright. (1996). Forgiveness as an intervention goal with incest survivors. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 64:983-992. Baskin TW, M Rhody, S Schoolmeesters, C Ellingson. (2011).

interventions have also been simplified into a do-it-yourself workbook format, with some preliminary evidence of effectiveness on promoting forgiveness.<sup>91</sup> Further research on the effectiveness of these workbooks on a range of outcomes is ongoing, but if they likewise also affect both forgiveness and mental health outcomes, there could be substantial societal-wide potential to employ these interventions to promote both forgiveness and health outcomes within communities.<sup>92</sup>

This is of course but one example, but similar intervention development and evaluation routinely takes place for a variety of health and economic outcomes. Moreover, further work could be done to employ these approaches for intervention development for various other psychological, social, and even spiritual goods. The social sciences thus clearly have and can play an important role in the development and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions for achieving various agreed-upon goods.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have considered various ways in which disciplines can contribute to and enrich the understanding of knowledge by drawing upon knowledge and perspectives from other disciplines. In particular we have proposed that the humanities contribute to the social sciences in that the humanities can 1) provide conceptual **clarity** for constructs which the social sciences

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Supporting Special-Needs Adoptive Couples Assessing an Intervention to Enhance Forgiveness, Increase Marital Satisfaction, and Prevent Depression. *The Counseling Psychologist* 39:933-955. Lin WF, D Mack, RD Enright, D Krahn, Baskin TW. (2004). Effects of forgiveness therapy on anger, mood, and vulnerability to substance use among inpatient substance-dependent clients. Baskin, Thomas W. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 72:1114-1121.

<sup>91</sup> Harper, Q., Worthington Jr, E. L., Griffin, B. J., Lavelock, C. R., Hook, J. N., Vrana, S. R., & Greer, C. L. (2014). Efficacy of a workbook to promote forgiveness: A randomized controlled trial with university students. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 70(12), 1158-1169.

<sup>92</sup> VanderWeele, T. J. (2018). Is forgiveness a public health issue?. *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(2), 189-190.

aim to study; and 2) **enrich** and clarify the interpretation of empirical results; and 3) help the social sciences identify new content and **scope** for their inquiry. In the reverse direction, the social sciences can help 4) **confirm, or challenge**, claims from the humanities, 5) can **furnish** new data for philosophical, theological, or historical reflection, and 6) can **establish** the efficacy of interventions for achieving some agreed-upon good and determine what these interventions might best look like.

While we believe that the first three of these modes generally arise from a contribution from the humanities directed to the social sciences, and the second three of these modes generally arise from a contribution from the social sciences directed to the humanities, in principle these modes may work in either direction. Thus, concerning the first mode, some conceptual distinctions arising from the social sciences have arguably helped provide conceptual clarity in the humanities. One such example may be a distinction in the clinical psychology literature drawn between “decisional forgiveness” and “emotional forgiveness”<sup>93</sup>, the former consisting of replacing of ill-will towards the offender with good-will and the latter being more of an affective state, the replacing of negative *feelings* and emotions towards the offender with positive emotions. Characteristically decisional forgiveness precedes emotional forgiveness. The distinction, arising from the social science research on this topic, is arguably helpful in theological contexts in making sense of the notion of a “command” to forgive.<sup>94</sup> One’s emotions are not fully within one’s control but if the command to forgive is understood as pertaining to decisional forgiveness, such commands become coherent. In this case, a conceptual distinction from the social sciences sheds light on issues of theological interpretation.

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<sup>93</sup> Worthington, E.L. (2013). *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Theory and Application*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

<sup>94</sup> Luke 17:3-4; Colossian 3:14

Concerning the second mode, while it will often be ideas and scholarship from the humanities that enrich the interpretation of the sciences, sometimes this too can operate in the reverse direction. For instance, Christian theology has traditionally been much concerned with the nature of human distinctiveness, often thematized in terms of nature of the “image of God” which Genesis 1:26-28 suggests is a unique property of human beings. But recent advances in evolutionary psychology and comparative primatology have greatly enriched our empirical understanding of how humans compare to our nearest evolutionary relatives. Some researchers, such as the primatologist Frans de Waal, emphasize continuity, highlighting apes’ remarkable capacities for social emotions and instrumental reasoning;<sup>95</sup> others, such Noam Chomsky and Robert Berwick or Michael Tomasello, emphasize discontinuity, highlighting the absence from non-human primates of hierarchically-ordered language or “joint intentionality,” each of which are key ingredients in our species’ *sui generis* capacities for social learning and cultural transmission.<sup>96</sup> Attending to the work of these scientists would greatly enrich theological reflection on the image of God, as well as other sub-topics within theological anthropology.

Concerning the third mode, it is not only the case that ideas from the humanities can motivate new topics of inquiry within the sciences, but the reverse unquestionably takes place as well. One arena in which this is clearest concerns ethics. New technologies emerging from scientific advances, such as in genetic manipulation or in the rise of social media, present a host of new ethical considerations for which the humanities are needed to provide reflection and insight. Here science itself prompts new scholarship and inquiry within the humanities.

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<sup>95</sup> Frans de Waal, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>96</sup> On language, cf. Chomsky and Berwick, *Why Only Us?: Language and Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016). On joint intentionality, cf. Michael Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). On human social learning and cultural transmission in comparison with apes, cf. Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture is Driving Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

With regard to the second set of modes by which various disciplines contribute to one another, the contribution can once again be in either direction. First, the humanities might sometimes challenge claims from scientific disciplines in part by showing that certain claims themselves are not employing the relevant concepts appropriately, as is perhaps taking place concerning certain controversies within neuroscience concerning mental phenomena such as intentionality or *qualia*.<sup>97</sup> Second, knowledge from the humanities might help supplement that which is acquired in the social sciences. For example, Muthukrishna et al. have argued that psychology needs to in part reconstitute itself as “a historical science” so as to understand “past processes, environments, and constraints that led to [present-day] psychology.”<sup>98</sup> In such cases, historical knowledge may contribute to advances within the social sciences. Third, the humanities themselves can sometimes give rise to interventions to improve human well-being. Spiritual practices arising from the richness of the world’s religious traditions might provide powerful approaches to improve human well-being.<sup>99</sup> While the empirical evaluation of these practices requires the tools from the social sciences, the form of the interventions being studied might well be taken from insights from the humanities.

While specialization has undoubtedly led to innumerable advances – advances that simply could not have been achieved without the development of specialized expertise – there is also danger in our specialization leading to knowledge that is too fragmentary. The various academic disciplines have become estranged, and the time is ripe for reconciliation. We have proposed, in this paper, some concrete ways in which this might occur. This is only a preliminary

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<sup>97</sup> Bennett, M. R., & Hacker, P. M. S. (2013). *Philosophical foundations of neuroscience*. John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>98</sup> “Psychology as an Historical Science”: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-082820-111436>.

<sup>99</sup> Yaden, D. B., Zhao, Y., Peng, K., & Newberg, A. B. (2020). *Rituals and Practices in World Religions*. Springer International Publishing.

sketch, but we hope that further work along these lines might contribute to a genuine synthesis of the humanities and social sciences. We await a new, and doubtless very different, consilience.