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By Ignace Haaz, Editor-in-Chief

A Hypothesis on How Selfless Human Flourishing Can Still Pursue the Good Life

In ordinary language

“A flourishing society is one in which people are able to live meaningful, secure, and connected lives...”¹ “Human flourishing places emphasis on human dignity and wellbeing [...] (Source: GEF 2026 Concept Note).

An analysis of the concept is the first necessary step, beginning with a definition: they are many good candidates for an ethics of human flourishing, but an attempt could be made to define it on the logical intersection of

- 1) Self-knowledge or the meaning of life, an art of either ascetic or non-ascetic perspective motivated by pleasure, power or a way of making life easier; and
- 2) the ethics of human flourishing, which refers to the process or the result of what German Idealism calls *Bildung*. The German word stands for a general character education, not focused on a discipline but rather on the person itself, the formation of the well-balanced personality.

Self-Knowledge and Questions about the Meaning of Life

Anattā in Buddhism claims that a *no-self view* should be considered seriously. “No permanent, unchanging soul, essence, or core identity exists in humans or any other phenomena²”. If the Self would fail to exist, then life would probably be meaningless, at first glance, the no Self view provides us with a negative definition of human flourishing as it would provide a *prima facie* reason to believe that life is meaningless. On the contrary, a naturalistic account of the meaning of life may benefit from sceptical claims on the existence of the Self, as *No-One-Self view*.

¹ URI to the Globethics Repository collection on human flourishing related to Global Ethics Forum event 2026: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4321314>

² Wikipedia, *Anattā*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anatt%C4%81>

David Hume writes in a short section “Of Personal Identity” of his *Treatise*, that he personally refuses to rely on any given fixed Self³:

“If any one upon serious and unprejudic'd reflection, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me.”

Although there are various ways to question the need for a single and stable Self, as a metaphysical substratum, in contrast to a bundle of properties, which persist through time, the question of *the meaning of life* in itself could be considered as distinct from the one on knowledge of the self, or considered different from the question whether the self exists, whether it has a material constitution, or mind-independent modal properties (Le Bihan, 2019; Benovsky, 2017).

If with eliminative materialist thinkers, we suppose that there is not such thing as a Self, but instead a bundle of mind-related properties (as David Hume in contrast to René Descartes; see also Benovsky, 2009), even if we don't have answers to certain questions such as the meaning of life, the question itself continues to make sense.

It is interesting that literature in the education sector (Schinkel et al., 2023), associates human flourishing with our capacity to wonder, and to consider a given situation “as wonder-full”, claims which are close to the philosophical capacity we have been pointing at, of being in research of ourselves and of the values or properties of a meaningful life.

Human flourishing does need as type of meaning of life, to be articulated on the mode of a *given answer*, and to relate to a *positive form*, in bringing a set of reasons, in contrast all sorts of reasons with Camus⁴ to find life *absurd*. Nevertheless, one might argue that the very *questioning* of the meaning of life remains a central interrogation point, in all cases. It invites us to contemplate human flourishing, as a possible dream like scenario, even with Camus or with the Buddhist Madhyamaka tradition. Sceptical voice can choose a *deflationist view*, “that everything (including the material objects and selves) is empty, namely lacking substance”(Le Bihan, *ibid.*). It does not mean that they are concluding that life is meaningless, in the sense that life does have some

³ Hume, David. (1739-40). A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part IV, Section VI, “Of Personal Identity”.

⁴ Camus, Albert. 1942. *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, Paris : Gallimard.

positive value such as life is worth living. There are important things to do even for very pessimistic intellectuals or ascetic Buddhist ethicists, and this is true both in a liberal and pluralistic configuration, or a more restricted monist configuration on knowing more on the subject.

Ascetism

We find in the concepts of non-ascetic or life affirming values, vs. ascetic and life denying values an example of monistic filtering down in additional categories, different forms of either positive or negative values. E. g. *ascetism* as *means of controlling* different negative emotions, could be considered important for life, by the existential threatening they trigger, e. g. *controlling sensuality*:

“The religions that have held compassion and love in the highest esteem arose among highly sensual peoples, as is already demonstrated by the fact that, in relation to sensuality, they established the ascetic ideal: proof that, in this respect, they experienced themselves as excessive and unrestrained” (Nietzsche refers in this section to great global religions such as Hinduism and Judaism). (Van Tongeren et al., Askese, p. 158, 2004)

Meaning of Life, as Will-to-Power and Will to Life

A first objection to the relevance of this concept concerns its genealogical roots or psychological foundations, and the possible circularity between the origin and the aim of a flourishing life. A concept cannot coherently function both as the *explanans*—the explanatory principle or means by which X is achieved—and as the *explanandum*—the very X that is to be explained or achieved.

If flourishing is both the means and the end, a further instrument or principle would still be required to explain how that end is to be attained.

Let us take these problems one at a time, beginning with the conflation of the origin of the state that gives rise to an awareness of flourishing. If the importance of flourishing comes to consciousness, this may indicate that existing life is perceived as insufficient in some respect.

To experience a need for transcendence and, consequently, for self-orientation, there must be some form of suffering, prompting the subject, in order to endure and move beyond it, to find meaning in that suffering. Once this process is achieved, a sense of release may follow: having found an appropriate orientation, some anxieties or sadness may recede, perhaps even giving rise to a sense of wonder.

This brings us to a second perspective, according to which flourishing is an objective in its own right. It seeks to explain why flourishing is such a significant

phenomenon—one that many educators regard as intimately connected with the ethical value of human flourishing and with education itself as a mode of human development.

But if suffering is not an anomaly to be eliminated at all costs, but rather a natural part of human existence, what would this imply for objections to the importance of an ethics of flourishing? More troublingly, beyond the sadness associated with the passivity of suffering, we can imagine situations—particularly within a market economy—in which suffering is deliberately induced or skilfully manipulated in order to create demand for a supposedly miraculous solution.

An elegant way of addressing the question of origin could be to begin with the fundamental human condition expressed in the theological notion of *original sin*. Instead of taking a naturalistic solution, in reducing or eliminating the Self, we could revise the Cartesian tradition, and instead of a Substance agree to consider a supra-human foundation for some mind-related life related properties, or consider them as related to large organic unities of other mind-related entities, which are not considered only in the biological realm.

The original sin could be transcribed into a complex form of care, bordering on anxiety—*Sorge* in Martin Heidegger—a kind of existential anxiety about being and living (with Søren Kierkegaard), or a tension between love and anxiety, as explored by Ludwig Binswanger, a pioneer of existential psychology.

Here, philosophy transforms theological concepts: care is no longer understood merely as an emotion or passing mood, but as a fundamental mode of relating to oneself, to others, and to the world⁵. It thus becomes a precise philosophical account of the human condition and of the ways in which human beings are oriented towards themselves, others, and their surrounding world.

One could predicate all sorts of things related to life such as *survival*, *will-to-power*, *will to life*, a *playful element in life*, a bold way of mitigating *colonizing affects*... Life can certainly be perceived through the need of overcoming obstacles, which try to drain our multifaceted capacities to live a mature, a philosophical, a spiritual, or simply a decent life.

The work of Albert Schweitzer qualifies well a concrete and practical definition of human flourishing which is not an abstract ideal. Schweizer explicitly refuses a

⁵ The French poet and comedian Raymond Devos, depicted this sort of anxiety of living as a survival mode, expressed as “running” instead of walking normally”. Some of the French wordplay cannot really be reproduced in English, so it is worth listening to the original: Raymond Devos, *J’ai traversé une ville où tout le monde courait*, <https://youtube.com/shorts/e8xT8ExTaZY?is=xXchNsBoJTk8JPAS>

metaphysical claim on life, and does not reduce life to will-to-power, nor biological survival, and stays away from the classical Aristotelian teleological views on self-development as a progression toward self-perfection.

On the contrary, in focusing on the *Will-to-live* or *respect of life*, as a key concept, the words “Will to live” are certainly interesting, advocating simply respect for life in all its forms. Let us sketch a comparative table situating Schweitzer’s minimalist yet lucid conception of flourishing, alongside those of some of our favourite thinkers, with particular attention to the key concept of the Will to Live.

Stage	Formula	Philosophical movement
Hartmann	Unconscious → Will → suffering → cessation of willing	Metaphysical pessimism
Schopenhauer	Will → striving → suffering → compassion / denial	Pessimistic ethics
Nietzsche	Will → power → overcoming → affirmation	Radical life-affirmation
Schweitzer	Will-to-live → self-awareness → Reverence for Life → ethical action	Universal life-affirmation
Spinoza / as critique	Conatus → plurality of affects → conflict → ordering of desires → flourishing	Non-absolutist, relational life ethics

***Bildung* or Self-formation**

Bildung as human flourishing/self-formation is related to the thinking of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who was doubting that an education imposed from above could function:

“The true end of Man ... is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers into a whole.” *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* (c. 1793–94).

The critique of “a neo humanistic ideal” of education or formation, associated with a formation praxis is also found in Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas, which have been gathered by Van Tongeren et al., in their *Nietzsche-Wörterbuch* (cf. *Bildung*, p. 359, 2006).

Even in broader horizons and across different historical periods, some trends or common concern emerge. The domains of concern are:

- a) the spread of education across all strata of the population (generalization),
- b) scientific specialization, which leads to ignorance in other fields
- c) historicism as a dogmatic investigation of history, which renders history no longer useful to life;

- d) The public governance from above, i.e. by the State of education or civil society institutions (e.g. as the Hegelian Prussian State, which in the 19th Century was supposed to reveal an apotheose, the highest peak of German Genius, but it was based on the “torch” or a lamp that dazzles rather than illuminates (p.370, *ibid.*), subordinating other models of cultures and formations).

Expressions such as “the highest” or the “truest” forms of formation/Bildung, should be considered as something totally useless. Other forms have limited value such as “liberation from superstition”, as “finest degree of knowing one’s proper needs”, “the aspiration of living together with persons of true formation”.

It is not a panacea: the working-class for large parts may find it useless as empirically high level of formation is not achievable for all (here we have a critique of a universalist views on Bildung), true formation needs to be balanced with the health of a people in an organic mode.

We pass on the aspects which exaggerate the agonistic modes in a Darwinian type of Bildung opposed to flourishing as community-based equalitarian right for all⁶. German idealism and Nietzsche in particular see life not as the domination by force of the fittest but rather the whole living world composed of a pluralistic set of centres of will-to-powers, which all are centres of hermeneutic filtering of the reality, of interpreting⁷.

Collisions and Bridges between Industrial Life and *Vita Contemplativa*

As is often the case in life, socioeconomic conditions shape the ways in which we respond concretely to the obstacles we encounter: “money cannot buy happiness, but it can buy the kind of misery you prefer”.

Etymologically speaking, fulfilment is much more than simply finding the least unpleasant form of misery or the creative melancholy that suits us best!

What if flourishing captures some essential dimensions of what is entailed not only in philosophy or education but in work?

A short comparative reading between work as *Beruf*, as calling/vocation/occupation with Max Weber, and the traditional distinction between ascetism as contemplative life, brings to human flourishing, very different contexts of interpretation.

In his latest work, *Reforming Business for Ecological and Human Flourishing* (2026), Laszlo Zsolnai bridges the gap between the “human-positive” and the

⁶ Nietzsche defines Life as “cooperative education through struggle”: ((61) NL 11[132], 9.490).

⁷ “The formation of an organ is an interpretation, it establishes differences, determines degrees and differences of power” NL 2[148] 12.139 also: NL 14[152], 13.333f.

“planet-positive”, representing the world not only through our limited human lenses without doing justice to other forms of life. Flourishing, therefore, should not be understood merely as an individual way of life, - or life in larger organic unities, but also as a response to the functioning—or dysfunctioning—of business, through the creation of “human ecological wellbeing” as a means of safeguarding the Earth.

If we take a step back and focus on *wealth* rather than on the *organisation of work* and its possible *rapprochement* with nature, a lack of proper understanding of the hidden costs or presumed value of *wealth* may reveal—whether in education or elsewhere—one of the central obstacles to the reform of business.

Oscar Brenifier identifies a major source of concern: wealth is conceived not only as a foundational condition for a good life, alongside health, a loving family environment, and inspiring peer communities and social networks. Yet, by focusing primarily on these foundations as external conditions, we risk overlooking a crucial internal dimension: our relationship to wealth itself.

“The attachment to wealth is rarely presented as a problem. It is sometimes criticised on moral or religious grounds, associated with greed, injustice or the abuse of power. But such criticisms, whilst not without merit, tend to remain detached from individual experience. [...] Wealth is often justified in the name of security, responsibility or freedom. Yet this attachment gives rise to a series of existential and psychological distortions that are rarely examined, precisely because they are socially accepted. [...]

The French philosopher continues by showing the error of associating external and internal realities instead of analysing their specific role in a meaningful life:

Wealth offers a clear, comparable and cumulative criterion, whereas happiness remains vague, subjective and difficult to measure. We therefore substitute what can be calculated for what defies calculation, and wealth becomes an indicator, creating the illusion that by increasing it, we are moving closer to fulfilment. [...] that which defies measurement becomes suspect, or even non-existent. There is no longer any room for the immeasurable, only for the comparable, the controllable, the calculable...”⁸

⁸ Oscar Brenifier, Le coût de la richesse, 17 sept. 2026

Theologian Tyler J. VanderWeele argues that health should be understood metaphysically as wholeness, intended by God as the ultimate end of life.

According to Calvinist asceticism, which differs markedly from traditional contemplative asceticism, the term refers to a moment of Christian spiritual flourishing, understood as a visitation of the Spirit. Calvin's ethic differs from contemplative ethics in suggesting that it may be meaningful to establish, quite literally, a "symbolic Sunday": to create a space between two periods of frenetic activity in our lives, those stretches of existence lived on 'autopilot', when we leap out of bed, gulp down our coffee, and rush to work, only to be confronted with the week's accumulated list of pending tasks.

Why, then, should we wait until Sunday for the symbolic Sunday to take effect?

The spiritual symbolism of Sunday thus appears crucial. Yet precisely because it is symbolic, and can therefore be applied to every day, it seems to neutralise the very essence of the concept it proposes, thereby making it operate more effectively. Conversely, for those who remain sceptical of Calvin's injunction, the 'temporal Sunday' should continue to be distinguished from other days in a way that exceeds a mere 'matter of practical and social organisation' (De Monticelli, 1997). What is at stake here is a crucial question of social organisation, one that Max Weber places at the heart of an effective system of capitalist organisation.

Since, for Calvin, the enjoyment of possession already constitutes a temptation to rest, the imperative to work more is not driven by the desire to earn more—nor by an uninhibited pursuit of power for its own sake. Rather, there is a peculiar and somewhat sombre richness to the Calvinist refusal ever to stop on Sunday and leave the instrument of labour at rest.

The fear is that, in idleness and contemplation, the sinful creature might partake in enjoyment itself, rather than maintain the course of *solī Deo gloria*: an asceticism that lies beyond rest, since rest will come soon enough, but only in the life to come.

An unexpected consequence of the Protestant ethic, following Weber's analysis, concerns the transcendent significance attributed to wealth. Once produced—whether as the outcome of economic value or labour time, or through a judicious strategy of capital investment, whereby risk-taking itself becomes a means of generating wealth—wealth, regardless of how it has been acquired, becomes symbolically a "sign of the efficacy of faith, and therefore a sign of election".

This development “goes hand in hand with the disappearance, from the mental universe of salvation, of the metaphor of wealth as something bestowed and savoured” (quotations from Roberta De Monticelli, 1997; our translation).

We could take the contrary hypothesis that many of us work in communication and knowledge professions, where private sector business shares with education or information a substantial say, since even studies following the most serious ethical standards need to find some concrete funding.

In a recent essay on academic integrity (Szecel et al., 2026), the question has been asked, to large degree answered, of the consequences of the “transition from a reader-funded model to an author-funded model”, where “several negative impacts that have been eloquently described in the latest report from the Centre National de la recherche scientifique (CNRS)”, showing that stepping back from the capitalist work model, where readers paid for reading, new problems are created, while ancient ones are only mitigated.

Following Szecel (et al.) “publishing inequalities have replaced reading inequalities”, we now discover new “possible research discredit as it can appear that researchers pay to be published”. Other problems should also be mentioned such as

“the fostering of unnecessary publications; the nurturing of ‘predatory’ scientific publishing; and cost inflation as universities or government-funded laboratories pay both to have access to publications and to publish in the case of hybrid journals (Schuhl, 2022).” (Delphine Szecel, Tom Melvin and Wouter Oosterlinck, 2026)⁹.

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⁹ Szecel, Delphine, Melvin, Tom and Oosterlinck, Wouter “Integrity and Conflict of Interest: What about the Funding Sources of Open Access and Hybrid Journal Literature? The Case of Cardiac Surgery”, in: Bergadaà, Michelle, and Peixoto, Paulo (Eds.), *Reinventing Academic Integrity in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, Geneva: Globethics Publications, 2026, pp. 157-177 © Globethics Publications. DOI: 10.58863/20.500.12424/4321415.

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