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ISBN 978-0-9853088-6-5

Well-Being and Higher Education

**A Strategy for Change
and the Realization of
Education's Greater Purposes**

Edited by Donald W. Harward
Bringing Theory to Practice
Washington D.C.

Eudaimonic Well-Being and Education: Probing the Connections

Carol D. Ryff

INTRODUCTION

For the past 30 years, I have been studying psychological well-being and linking it to a host of other factors, including people's socioeconomic status, their life experiences, and their health. The first section below describes the conceptual origins of the model of well-being I developed, including its links to Aristotle's view of eudaimonia, which he saw as the highest of all human goods. This formulation is contrasted with the hedonic approach to well-being that also has roots in writings from the ancient Greeks. Extensive empirical findings have grown up around both conceptions in recent decades. The second section provides a brief look at what has been learned about the links between eudaimonia and educational attainment. The story therein is straightforward in one sense—better educated people tend to have higher eudaimonic well-being—but complicated in another—there is considerable variability *within* educational strata, and further, issues of causal directionality are not clear. Going forward, two key questions are critical for scientific inquiry. First, does the *kind of education one obtains* matter for eudaimonic well-being? This query is equivalent to asking whether some forms of knowledge and learning are better for nurturing self-realization than others. Secondly, and more incisively, what exactly does higher education do for us as we seek to achieve the best that is within us? The final section will argue that a liberal education, rich in exposure to art, philosophy, and cultural knowledge is key for achieving life-long eudaimonic well-being, with its accompanying virtues of responsible citizenship and civic engagement. Although many have previously advocated for a liberal education, few have emphasized the importance of linking such advocacy to scientific (empirical) research on well-being. Future directions for investigating links between educational experience and eudaimonia will be noted.

DEFINING EUDAIMONIC WELL-BEING: DISTILLING CORE DIMENSIONS

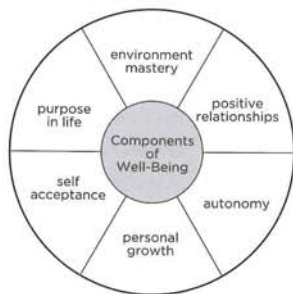
Over 25 years ago, I called for a new approach to the study of psychological well-being.¹ Although subjective well-being had been studied for decades as a window on the inner lives of U.S. adults, reigning measures assessed primarily happiness and life satisfaction. Such indicators were largely without theoretical foundation, despite extensive literatures in developmental,² clinical³, existential and humanistic psychology,⁴ all of which grappled with what it means to be a fully functioning, fully individuated, mature, self-actualized person. My 1989 contribution was to integrate these perspectives by distilling prominent points of convergence among them.⁵ Six key components of well-being, shown in

the top of Figure 1, identified these recurrent themes. Below them, the figure shows the conceptual formulations from which they were derived.

Definitions of the six theory-guided dimensions of well-being are presented in Table 1.⁶ These descriptions of high and low-scoring respondents on each dimension were the basis for developing self-descriptive items to operationalize each component of well-being. The intent

Figure 1.

CORE DIMENSIONS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND THEIR THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS



Theoretical Underpinnings

- Maturity (Allport)
- individuation (Jung)
- mental health (Jahoda)
- will to meaning (Frankl)
- self-actualization (Maslow)
- executive processes of personality (Neugarten)
- basic life tendencies (Böhler)
- personal development (Erikson)
- fully functioning person (Rogers)

Aristotle's Eudaimonia

in creating such self-assessment scales was to render well-being an empirically tractable subject. The resulting scales have been translated to more than 30 languages and use of them in scientific studies has proliferated over time.⁷ More than 500 publications have been generated to date. Numerous investigations examined the psychometric properties of the six-factor model, most of which, particularly when adequate depth of measurement (i.e., sufficient number of items) was employed, supported the original factorial structure.⁸ Other studies detailed in the review article examined how various aspects of well-being changed as individuals aged, or as they dealt with particular life transitions (e.g., parenthood, relocation) and other challenges in work and family life (e.g., job stress, parenting a child with developmental disabilities, losing a loved one). Many publications probed links between well-being and health, assessed in multiple ways—how long people live (mortality), their risk for developing disease or disability (morbidity), and their biological risk factors (e.g., stress hormones, inflammatory markers, cardiovascular risk factors). Finally, an important line of inquiry focused on whether these growth-oriented, self-realization, meaning-making aspects of

well-being could be modified and improved. Such intervention work has been conducted in clinical, educational, and community contexts.⁹ Before examining what is known about empirical links between eudaimonia and education, the above model of well-being will be briefly contrasted with the alternative hedonic conception.

RETURNING TO THE ANCIENT GREEKS: EUDAIMONIA VS. HEDONIA

Aristotle's writings about eudaimonia were conveyed in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which was not a treatise on human well-being, but rather an effort to formulate ethical doctrines offering guidance for how to live.¹⁰ He opened with the following question: What is the highest of all good achievable by human action? Aristotle believed happiness was the answer, but underscored notable differences among people in what is meant by happiness. In his view, happiness was not about pleasure, or wealth, or honor, or satisfying appetites. Rather it was about "activity of the soul in accord with virtue." This assertion led to the next critical question: What is the nature of virtue? In answering this question Aristotle went to the heart of eudaimonia, arguing that the highest virtue in life is to achieve the

Table 1.

DEFINITIONS OF THEORY-GUIDED DIMENSIONS OF WELL-BEING

Self-acceptance
<i>High scorer:</i> Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self, including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.
<i>Low scorer:</i> Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred in past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.
Positive relations with others
<i>High scorer:</i> Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of other others; capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships.
<i>Low scorer:</i> Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, and concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromises to sustain important ties with others.
Personal growth
<i>High scorer:</i> Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behavior over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness.
<i>Low scorer:</i> Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors.
Purpose in life
<i>High scorer:</i> Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.
<i>Low scorer:</i> Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims; lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose of past life; has no outlook or beliefs that give life meaning.
Environmental mastery
<i>High scorer:</i> Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.
<i>Low scorer:</i> Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world.
Autonomy
<i>High scorer:</i> Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards.
<i>Low scorer:</i> Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways.

best that is within us. He invoked the daimon, which is a kind of unique spirit that resides within us all. The central task of life is coming to know one's unique capacities, and then to strive to realize them. Eudaimonia is thus a kind of personal excellence. These endeavors were distilled by the two great Greek imperatives, inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi—namely, to "know thyself" and "become who you are."¹¹

Hellenic culture included other philosophers who puzzled over fundamental questions about what defines ultimate goals in life. Epicurus, for example, argued that the aim is to achieve a happy and tranquil life that is free of pain and includes pleasure.¹² Relatedly,

Aristippus posed that the goal of life was to seek pleasure by maintaining control over adversity and prosperity.¹³ Two millennia later, these hedonic ideas appeared in social scientific research on the topic of subjective well-being—that is, how U.S. adults felt about their lives.¹⁴ National surveys were conducted to assess the degree to which Americans felt happy and satisfied with their lives. Such surveys were followed by further psychological studies of subjective well-being¹⁵ and ultimately, by the emergence of “hedonic psychology.”¹⁶ Reflecting on the larger field of research, Ryan and Deci¹⁷ posed that hedonia and eudaimonia constituted the two most prominent approaches to the study of psychological well-being. A related empirical study¹⁸ employed a national sample of U.S. adults to document that these two formulations constituted related, but empirically distinct, approaches to the assessment of well-being.

It is worth noting that utilitarian philosophy is implicated in the conceptual history of contemporary research on well-being. Utilitarians sought to promote the “greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.” That said, John Stuart Mill (1893/1989), a leading utilitarian, observed that happiness would not be achieved if made an end in itself. Instead, he saw happiness is a byproduct of other more noble deeds, such as caring about the improvement of mankind.¹⁹ Bertrand Russell (1930/1958) further emphasized that happiness is not something that happens without effort; rather it is an experience for which we must strive.²⁰ Hence, he saw it as a “conquest” that demands zest, active interest, and engagement. These thoughtful points from two famous scholars are interesting that they seem to blend hedonic happiness with striving to lead a worthwhile life (eudaimonia).

The above summary clarifies that well-being is multifaceted—i.e., there is no single right way of conceptualizing it, or studying it empirically. Indeed, in recent decades a great deal of scholarly research has grown up around both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Entire scientific journals are now devoted to such inquiry, while mainstream journals in other disciplines (economics, epidemiology, sociology, diverse biomedical fields) now routinely publish findings about well-being. Educational status is regularly part of the reported findings; sometimes as an independent variable (e.g., does educational attainment predict different levels of well-being?), or more frequently, as a covariate (e.g., do the reported findings

linking well-being to health, for example, hold up when differences in educational status are taken into account?). Deeper questions involving links between education and the pursuit of individual excellence that define eudaimonia are considered below.

What is the directional nature of the relationship between education and well-being?

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EUDAIMONIA AND EDUCATION

Findings from a national sample of U.S. adults, known as MIDUS (Midlife in the U.S., www.midus.wisc.edu) are examined to offer an empirical look at how educational attainment and eudaimonic well-being are connected.²¹ The results offer useful information, but also underscore what is not known; thus suggesting possible directions for future inquiry.

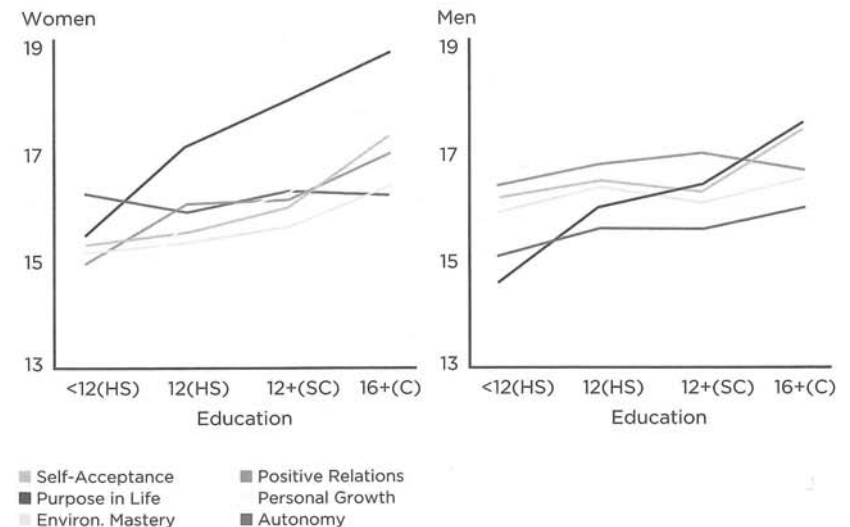
What Do We Know?

Scientists across diverse disciplines routinely collect information on the educational levels of those included in their research samples. Educational status is thus part of standard demographic information in behavioral and biomedical science, along with gender, age, racial/ethnic, marital status, and so on. Using data from the MIDUS study, initiated in

1995 with over 7,000 U.S. adults aged 25 to 74, we examined how respondents’ reports of eudaimonic well-being, across the six dimensions described above, varied depending on their educational attainment.²² Figure 2 displays what we found—it shows average levels for each dimension of well-being, arrayed separately for men and women, as a function of four levels of educational attainment. The overall story is clear: those with higher levels of education report higher levels of well-being across all six dimensions. The positive associations between education and well-being are somewhat stronger for women than men, as reflected by steeper increments in levels of well-being among the better educated. These patterns may reflect changing educational opportunities among younger compared to older cohorts of women. Such descriptive findings do not adjust for other factors known to account for variation in well-being, such as respondents’ age. Before considering that issue, however, it is useful to reflect on the question of causality in these data—that is, what is the directional nature of the relationship between education and well-being?

The positive association between education and well-being may mean that in becoming educated, people experience gains and enhancements in their well-being. Alternatively, it may be the case that those with higher levels of purposeful engagement, personal growth, self-acceptance, and so on, are more likely to persist in getting higher education. Both scenarios are plausible—thus suggesting that educational standing and well-being may be reciprocally related. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to expect that the preponderant direction of influence is the former: namely that becoming educated contributes in multiple important ways to the pursuit of individual excellence. The knowledge acquired on one’s

Figure 2.
EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING.



Source: MIDUS National Survey

educational journey not only provides access to resources (income) and opportunities (career positions), it also likely cultivates the skills, strategies, and insights needed to negotiate life challenges and deal with adversity. These questions could be investigated empirically although they rarely are.

Returning to the issue of age influences on eudaimonic well-being, a key point is that the educational gradients in well-being depicted in Figure 2 are not confounded with age. That is, even when age variation is taken into account (e.g., older adults tend to score lower on purpose in life and personal growth than younger adults), the educational differences are still evident *within* age groups. Thus, among older adults, who, on average, score lower on purposeful engagement than younger adults, there is still an educational gradient, wherein better educated older adults score higher on purpose in life than less educated older adults. Similar educational gradients are evident among younger age groups as well. The upshot is that education has a pervasive influence on well-being, even though other factors, such as age (which in part reflects cohort differences in opportunities for higher education as well as life course changes in work, family, and health), are known to matter as well.

A further point worth emphasizing is that averages can be misleading. Considerable variability surrounds the mean scores in all these analyses. Thus, educational status is not, in and of itself, definitive for predicting reported levels of eudaimonia. Among those with only a high school education or less, there clearly are individuals with high levels of purpose, mastery, growth, and so on. In fact, empirical scrutiny of the distribution of scores within educational groups shows that the variability spreads out as one moves down the educational hierarchy. This variability matters for health, where a large body of research on the topic “social inequalities”²³ has documented that those who are socio-economically disadvantaged—typically measured in terms of low levels of education, income, or occupational status—tend to have poorer health. Our research²⁴ adds an important new angle to that literature. Consistent with prior findings, we document that there is an educational gradient in a biological risk factor known as interleukin-6 (IL-6), which is implicated in the pathogenesis of diverse outcomes (cardiovascular disease, cancer, Alzheimer’s). Thus, those with a high school education or less have higher levels of IL-6, on average, compared to those with some college or a college degree. More importantly, we show that among educationally disadvantaged adults, those who report higher levels of well-being have significantly reduced biological risk relative compared to their same education counterparts who reported lower levels of well-being.²⁵ These findings underscore the potential of well-being to afford protection (a buffer) against biologically-based health risks.

These results offer a glimpse into scientific inquiries that have linked educational standing to well-being and health. Such research is not, however the focus of this essay. Rather, building on such evidence, the aim is to probe more deeply the question—“How and why does education matter for eudaimonic well-being?” Such issues are central to the theme of *Well-Being and Higher Education*—“How might education’s greater purposes, including well-being, be realized?”

What Do We Need to Know?

Educational status is routinely part of ongoing research on human health and well-being, which makes it puzzling how little is known about what lies behind this omnipresent variable. Put another way, almost never does scientific interest go beyond assessing levels

of educational attainment to consideration of the more penetrating question: *what is the nature of person’s education and how does that matter for the individual as well as for society?* Relatedly, among those who have been fortunate to complete a college or university degree, how does the knowledge and training obtained relate to experienced well-being? Some students focus on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; others pursue degrees in philosophy, history, languages, and the arts. Still others have educational experiences involving a mix of humanities and the sciences. In scientific studies that routinely employ educational status as a key demographic variable, little such information is known—educational status effectively is a black box. Knowing how many years of higher education one has without knowing the content of such education is a major impediment for the questions of interest herein—namely, the challenge of explicating how the pursuit of learning and knowledge translates to lives that are rich in eudaimonia and that may nurture beneficent, well-being functioning communities and societies.

Clearly, scientific research could contribute in important ways to understanding how education facilitates, or hinders, the pursuit of personal excellence articulated by Aristotle. The path he envisioned gave explicit emphasis to the task of discerning one’s unique talents and capacities. Exposure to diverse realms of knowledge seems to serve this task, particularly when combined with the opportunities to progressively attune one’s learning to personal interests and capabilities. However, in laying the foundation of one’s higher education, an argument can be made for a broad liberal arts exposure before professional specialization occurs. This stance represents well-worn territory previously advocated by many. I revisit some of these claims below, but with a novel angle—namely, consideration of whether and how a broad liberal arts education contributes to eudaimonic well-being.

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THE EUDAIMONIC CASE FOR A LIBERAL EDUCATION

Many erudite scholars have reflected on what kind of education is needed to nurture full and productive lives. Focusing on childhood, John Dewey, in *The School and Society* (1899), envisioned a progressive education that was guided by active engagement rather than passive learning and that employed Socratic questioning about real-world issues.²⁶ Similarly, Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature, espoused active engagement of children and gave notable emphasis on the teaching of sympathy and empathy through poetry and the arts.²⁷ Shifting to higher education in the present context, Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) calls for a liberal arts education when universities are witnessing an ever diminishing status of the humanities, juxtaposed with the rising ascendancy of science and technology.²⁸ Fewer students choose to major in literature, art, music, philosophy, or history. Instead, the priority is to obtain educational credentials that will translate to profitable (high salaried) career paths. Relatedly, Hanson and Health, in their book *Who Killed Homer?* (1998), lament the demise of classical education and call for a recovery of Greek wisdom.²⁹

Recently, Helen Small’s *The Value of the Humanities* (2013) offers a pluralistic argument built around five key arguments. The humanities are to be valued because: (1) they

illuminate the meaning-making practices of culture (giving an indispensable role to human subjectivity); (2) they are useful to society in the preservation and curation of culture; (3) they make a vital contribution to human happiness (here Small's draws extensively on the writings of John Stuart Mill); (4) they contribute to the maintenance and health of democracy via teaching skills of critical reasoning, debate, and evaluation of ideas; and (5) they have intrinsic value—i.e., they matter for their own sake.³⁰ It is notable that Small's third value is directly tied to the experience of well-being, framed as human happiness.

HUMANITIES CONTRIBUTIONS TO EUDAIMONIA

In articulating a defense of the humanities, Mark Edmundson inadvertently (because it was not his intent) offers guidance for building bridges between education and eudaimonic well-being. His most recent, *Self and Soul: A Defense of Ideals* (2015) asserts that our increasingly materialistic, skeptical culture has lost touch with values (ideals) vitally needed by the human soul.³¹ He offers three great ideals—courage, contemplation, and compassion—which he examines via great works of literature and the accompanying argument that these ideals have relevance for contemporary lives. This call for a return to ideals is in the spirit of Aristotle's efforts to distill the highest of all human goods. In an earlier book, entitled *Why Read?* (2004), Edmundson probes deeply into what a liberal, humanistic education can mean for individual “becoming”—what we might call “self-realization.”³²

Edmundson opens with lines from William Carlos Williams: “Yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found in . . . despised poems.”³³ He links the poem to the contemporary context in which we are inundated with input from the internet, television, journalism, advertising, and other forms of what passes for the new. Faced with such overload, he asserts that there may be no medium to help young people learn how to live their lives than poetry and literature. To develop the case, a contemporary philosopher is invoked. Richard Rorty says individuals need to create a vocabulary about their lives; these are words people use to justify their personal actions and beliefs as well as to articulate their deepest self-doubts and highest hopes. Edmundson calls them “final narratives” and underscores that they are alive and dynamic—that is, needing to be challenged, tested, refined over time, and occasionally overthrown.³⁴ Ralph Waldo Emerson is also brought into the formulation via his view of education as a “process of enlargement in which we move from the center of our being, off into progressively more expansive ways of life.”³⁵ Edmundson's central point is that a liberal education offering rich exposure to great literature is invaluable in building personal narratives and expanding of personal circles.

To sharpen understanding of how the process works, Edmundson asks again and again of poems and novels he considers: Can you live it? Via this query, he pushes the reader to consider whether the literature under consideration offers a new or better way of understanding one's self and others, or points to alternative paths for living a better life. In so probing, the values or ideals, perhaps implicit behind the creative work, are put into action. To illustrate, he considers Wordsworth's famous poem, “Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” written in 1798. The context is that Wordsworth's life had become flat—“he lived in a din-filled city, among unfeeling people, and sensed that he is becoming one of them . . . there is a dull ache settling in his spirit.”³⁶ Returning to a scene from his childhood, he remembered himself as a young boy, free and reveling in nature. The return to nature, which is the heart of the poem, reminds him of its role in

nurturing his own vitality. “Wordsworth's poem enjoins us to feel that it (the answer to one's despondency) lies somewhere within our research—we are creatures who have the capacity to make ourselves sick, but also the power to heal ourselves.”³⁷

Not emphasized by Edmundson, but worth noting is that Wordsworth's poetry served the same vital function in the life of John Stuart Mill. In early adulthood, Mill realized something deeply troubling—namely that he did not have happiness, central to the utilitarian philosophy in which he was immersed. Reflecting on his life, Mill described his early educational experiences, which were unquestionably exceptional, but also profoundly deficient. His father began teaching him Greek and Latin at a very young age and then expanded the pedagogy to fields of philosophy, science, and mathematics. Nothing in such learning helped Mill to cultivate the emotional side of his being. In fact, his father was deeply opposed to anything connected to sentiment or emotion. To escape the logic machine he had become, Mill began a quest to feel, and it was the poetry of Wordsworth that ministered deeply to longings in his soul. He credited it for helping him recover from the crisis in his mental history.³⁸

Despite this inspiring tale, Edmundson makes clear that most educators in the humanities shy away from teaching literature to nurture inner vitality. Instead, students are instructed in skills of critical thinking, much revered in humanities departments. His view is that critical thinking is often no more than “the power to debunk various human visions. It is, purportedly, the power to see their limits and faults. But what good is this power of critical thought if you do not yourself believe something and are not open to having these beliefs modified?”³⁹ Students are thus given a cold and abstract language of smug dismissal. Derrida, he notes, clears away what has gone before, but offers nothing in return; he has no positive vision of human development. Thus, despite the rhetoric of subversion that surrounds critical thinking, Edmundson sees much education in the humanities as teaching “the dissociation of intellect from feeling.”⁴⁰ Here, he invokes Friedrich Schiller who believed a true education ought to “fuse mind and heart” as well as Weber's commentary about “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart,” and finally, Goethe's insight that “it is easy to be brilliant when you do not believe in anything.”⁴¹

For Edmundson, humanism is the belief that it is possible to use secular writing as the “preeminent means for shaping lives.”⁴² Here he makes explicit his concern with the process of human growth, which can be deeply nurtured by exposure to poetry, art, and literature. We can discover what Blake knew: “that all deities ultimately reside in the individual human heart.”⁴³ Such awareness does not guarantee happiness. Shakespeare's tragedies make clear that certain griefs are not fully negotiable. The point is not to cheer one's self up, but to pursue truths. “We can seek vital options in any number of places. They may be found for this or that individual in painting, in music, in sculpture, in the arts of furniture making and gardening. Thoreau felt he could drive a substantial wisdom by tending to his bean field.”⁴⁴ In addition, there is no single path, no one human truth about the good life, but many truths and many viable paths. A great humanities education offers “what Arnold called the best that has been known and thought.”⁴⁵ During pursuit of one's higher education, studying the humanities affords a second chance vis-a-vis how one was socialized earlier. “It's not about being born again, but about growing up a second time, this time around as your own educator and guide, Virgil to yourself.”⁴⁶

Edmundson describes his own personal experience, when as a working class adolescent, he read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Through example, the book led him to major discoveries. Malcolm X learned to read and write well in prison, relatively late in life. "In page after rhapsodic page, he describes the joys of reading, the pleasures of expression,

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the lure of knowledge. Malcom was persuaded, and persuaded me, that you could use the powers you acquired from books to live better yourself and to do something for the people around you."⁴⁷ This is what contemporary students who in the "bubbling chaos of popular culture" most need—that is, navigational skills that help them discern the difference between what is worth taking seriously and what is little more than noisy diversion.⁴⁸ Effectively, a high-quality humanities education should be there to help one see the differences between distraction and nurturing, vital sources.

Edmundson closes with this vision: "If America leads and inspires the world in the years to come, it will be . . . because here more than anywhere, people are free to pursue their own hopes of becoming better than they are in a

human sense—wiser, more vital, kinder, sadder, more thoughtful, more worth the admiration of their children. And it will be because they are free to become who they aspire to be after their own peculiar fashions."⁴⁹ These ideas are the essence of Aristotle's eudaimonia. Thus, the great gift of *Why Read?* is the argument that a humanistic education is vital for realizing the best that is within each individual life—it is about taking young minds to a place "where people have fuller self-knowledge, fuller self-determination, where self-making is a primary objective not just in the material sphere but in circles of the mind and heart."⁵⁰ It is a journey about achieving humanism's highest promise.

A FUTURE SCIENTIFIC AGENDA

A central aim of this essay is to underscore that eudaimonic well-being is not something that people are endowed with at birth—it is not about genetic inheritance or family wealth and background. Rather, it is about a proactive journey of seeking external inputs to find out who one is and how personal capacities can best be brought to life. Much of what needs to be taken in requires educational pursuits, not only in early adulthood, but across the life course. Indeed, many have argued that one of the primary benefits of high-quality higher education is that it nurtures a commitment to continued learning, as something vitally needed throughout life. Prior scientific research documents that higher levels of educational attainment are, in fact, linked with higher levels of eudaimonic well-being, but much future scientific work needs to be done. Of great interest and importance is the task of better understanding how the pursuit of knowledge and learning plays a role, perhaps central, in people's becoming—that is, in their self-realization. To begin such inquiry, a worthy hypothesis in need of testing is that a liberal arts education, rich in exposure to the humanities deeply nurtures eudaimonic well-being, both in early adulthood and thereafter. So doing requires tracking varieties of higher education that individuals obtain, or alternatively, have been denied, and linking them to subsequent

reported levels of well-being. In the same fashion that scientists all over the world now investigate linkages between personal incomes, or gross domestic products and reported levels of happiness (typically assessed with hedonic instruments), far more scientific scrutiny is needed of how differing varieties of educational training matter for people's sense of mastery, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relationships to others, and so on. These questions are wisely studied while university training is occurring as well as thereafter, when adult lives are being played out in work, family, and community contexts. The central question, which can be put to the test scientifically and that constitutes a reconfiguring of the core utilitarian creed: that is, does a broad, liberal arts education nurture the greatest amount of eudaimonia for the greatest number of people?

NOTES

1. Carol D. Ryff, "Happiness is Everything, Or Is It? Explorations on the Meaning of Psychological Well-Being," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57, no. 6. (1989): 1069–81.
2. See Charlotte Bühler, "The Curve of Life as Studied in Biographies," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 19, no. 4 (1935): 405–9; Charlotte Bühler and Fred Massarik, eds., *The Course of Human Life: A Study of Goals in the Humanistic Perspective* (New York: Springer Publication Company, 1968); Bernice L. Neugarten, "The Awareness of Middle Age," in *Middle Age and Aging*, ed. Bernice L. Neugarten (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 93–8; Bernice L. Neugarten, "Personality Change in Late Life: A Developmental Perspective" in *The Psychology of Adult Development and Aging*, eds. Carl Eisdorfer and M. Powell Lawton (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1973), 311–35; Erik H. Erikson, "Identity and the Life Cycle," *Psychological Issues* 1 (1959): 1–171.
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3
ESSAY

Higher Education and Education in Virtue¹

Barry Schwartz

AS SOCIOLOGIST ROBERT BELLAH AND HIS COLLABORATORS pointed out in their landmark book, *Habits of the Heart*, for a long time in the history of higher education, a significant part of the aim of the university was to shape good people who were good citizens.² In some institutions, that aim was reflected in a capstone course taught to seniors by the university president with coursework and dialogue that focused on how to be an ethical, responsible, adult member of society. From a modern perspective, this practice likely seems either quaint or naïve. There is doubt among academics about what being an ethical person means. There is doubt that their own training gives them the expertise to teach it. And there is doubt about whether it is their place to cultivate values in their students. It is not that professors are indifferent to what kinds of people their students become. It is just that they think that *their* roles lie elsewhere. Perhaps they believe, as Plato might, that bad action and misplaced values stem more from error than from evil, so that by cultivating the intellect, they will cultivate ethical commitments as by-products.

Bellah and his co-authors observed all these trends and mourned their loss as a sign of the loss of America's "second language"—the language of civic virtue.³ But in truth, as the United States has become more and more ethnically, socially, and morally diverse, it has become less and less clear that there actually is a particular or common second language. And if this diversity is true of society at large, it is even more true in the university, where deliberate efforts are made to broaden the range of values and life experiences embodied by students—essentially privileging no particular common second language of civic virtue.

For many, this absence of privilege was the same as *demoralizing* the university. As such demoralization occurred, universities suffered little as a result in the eyes of the public. It continued to be taken as self-evident that higher education was good for students and society at large, and that American colleges and universities did an excellent job of providing it. But in the last few years, the university has lost its halo. Commentators, politicians, and parents are expressing serious doubts about whether colleges are teaching what they should be teaching and about whether they are teaching it well. Demands for accountability are everywhere, spurred in part by the absurdly high cost of a college education and the trillion dollars in student debt. What are students getting for all that money? What *should* they be getting? Yet the concern being expressed is not with the failure of universities to create good people. It is with the failure of universities to create people who can get good jobs.

In a move that typifies this current concern, the Obama White House launched an admirable initiative in 2014 to make college more affordable and accessible. A part of