



A
HUMAN FLOURISHING
SEVEN PILLARS
ESSAY

The Full Inheritance

*What Ancient Wisdom and Modern Science
Agree On, and What That Permits*

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A Note on This essay

This essay is a companion to *No Longer a Matter of Opinion: Flourishing Is a Science, and What That Changes*. That essay asks whether the conditions for a good life can be studied and measured. This one asks a different question: what did human beings already know before anyone could measure anything, does it agree with what the instruments now show, and what does that agreement permit us to say?

Both of us came to this work through Heroic, a personal development platform built on the same two sources this essay is about, before Human Flourishing existed. We practiced first and found the case underneath it. Scott holds a financial interest in Heroic, and Angela and two of our board members are Heroic coaches. We name that here because the connection runs through everything below.

Two Thousand Years, One Instruction

In 1955, a New York psychologist named Albert Ellis stopped practicing psychoanalysis. He had concluded it was slow and not doing much for his patients. What he built instead started from a claim he took directly out of a second-century handbook: that people are disturbed not by things but by the views they take of them. He quoted the line in his first major book and taught it to his patients in their opening sessions. It came from Epictetus.

Aaron Beck arrived at nearly the same place independently, working at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1950s. Setting out to confirm the psychoanalytic account of depression, he kept finding something simpler: a stream of automatic thoughts, mostly unnoticed, interpreting ordinary events in the harshest available terms. When his team published the first treatment manual for cognitive therapy, it opened by tracing the approach's philosophical origins to the Stoics.

Between them, Ellis and Beck built the foundation of cognitive behavioral therapy, now among the most tested interventions in the history of psychology. Both said in print where the core idea came from. Epictetus was born into slavery around the year 50, studied philosophy while still enslaved, was freed, and taught in Rome until Domitian expelled

every philosopher from the city. He went to Nicopolis in northwestern Greece, opened a school, and taught there for the rest of his life. He wrote nothing himself; what survives exists because a student took notes. Twenty centuries later, two clinicians working independently recovered his central instruction and demonstrated that it worked. The encouraging part is not the coincidence. It is that the

Instruction did not have to be invented. It had to be recognized.

Once you start looking, the pattern is everywhere. The wisdom traditions that shaped civilizations on every continent, and the modern sciences of psychology and neuroscience, describe a flourishing life in terms that keep turning out to match. They arrived by entirely different routes, separated by centuries and oceans and mutual ignorance of one another, and the descriptions line up. That convergence is among the most useful facts we know about human beings.

What the Traditions Agreed On, and What They Didn't

The wisdom traditions disagreed about nearly everything that could be disagreed about — the nature of God, whether there is a God, what happens after death, whether the self is real. These were not polite differences. People died over them, in numbers, for centuries.

On the question of how a person should conduct a life, they agreed. The Stoics taught that what disturbs us is our judgment of events rather than the events themselves. Buddhist teaching identified craving and aversion as the root of suffering. Confucius organized a philosophy of family and public life around *ren* — benevolence, genuine care for others. The Hebrew prophets called their people out of fear and self-interest toward covenant obligation. Jesus reduced an entire moral law to love, extended past the tribe to enemies. Muhammad's teaching built a code of conduct around justice, mercy, and communal duty. The *Bhagavad Gita* instructs a man paralyzed on a battlefield to act according to his duty without attachment to what it will yield him.

Set the theology aside, which is where these traditions fought, and read only the instructions for living: purpose beyond the self, honesty in relationship, discipline over impulse, generosity, humility, an obligation owed even to the stranger. It has become common in some quarters to treat this body of teaching as a Western inheritance belonging to some people and not others. The claim has a straightforward test, and it fails it. If the pattern were an inheritance from Greece and Rome, it would stop at the borders of Greek and Roman influence.

It does not stop. Southern African thought carries the principle in the Nguni expression *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* — a person is a person through other persons — the maxim most closely associated with ubuntu. Its written philosophy is recent. The communal ethic it articulates is not, and was carried in proverb and practice long before anyone set it down as philosophy. Its claim is that personhood is constituted by relationship, and that a person's moral standing is measured by the quality of their obligations to others.

Nothing in it descends from Athens.

Diné teaching organizes a good life around *hózhó*, a term Diné scholars are careful to say does not translate cleanly into English — something closer to a condition of health, balance, and beauty, governing thought, speech, and action, held together with *k'é*, kinship. That lineage did not pass through the Mediterranean either. Confucian China developed its account of the well-ordered life in complete independence from the Greco-Roman world, and so did the Indian traditions from which Buddhism emerged. What they say about character, duty, and generosity is recognizably what the Stoics say and what the Hebrew prophets say. The pattern crosses every boundary a cultural inheritance would respect.

What Modern Research Adds

The traditions made claims that could, in principle, be checked: whether gratitude changes anything, whether discipline produces a better life or only a more constrained one. For most of the twentieth century those claims went unexamined, because psychology was occupied with what goes wrong in a mind. That changed in the last quarter-century, and one of the first things the new research did was go looking for exactly the convergence this essay describes.

Researchers building a classification of human character strengths made a decision that matters more than the classification itself: rather than deciding in advance what counted as a virtue, they surveyed the founding texts of eight traditions — Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, Islam — asking what each said about the good life. Six core virtues recurred across essentially all of them: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence. The finding is not that every tradition ranks these identically. The finding is that the same short list keeps appearing in texts that had no contact and no reason to agree.

Work on human values arrives at the same shape from a different direction. A survey of populations in eighty-two countries found that the structure of what people value is strikingly stable across societies: a small set of basic values whose oppositions and compati-

bilities appear to be culturally universal. Cultures differ substantially in which values they rank highest. They differ far less in what exists to be ranked.

The priority is cultural. The inventory appears to be human.

The traditions also claimed that character is formed rather than fixed, and that claim turns out to be testable. Research on explanatory style — the habitual way a person accounts to themselves for a setback — finds that the pattern is measurable and modifiable rather than settled at birth. The programs built to teach it produce effects that are real and, honestly reported, modest. That is roughly the shape of the whole convergence: the old claim survives contact with the instruments, at a smaller size than its most enthusiastic advocates would like.

Jason Viyar, who serves on our board, is carrying that work forward deliberately rather than treating the old sources as prehistory. His capstone project at the University of Pennsylvania traces the question of how to live well from Aristotle's *eudaimonia* through Marcus Aurelius, William James, and Maslow's late revision of his own hierarchy toward self-transcendence. One line runs through all of them: a good life is built rather than found, and it is primarily a matter of character. He organizes that inheritance into three things a person can actually invest in — relationships, appreciation, and present moments — and sets contemporary research beside philosophy twenty-four centuries old. On the substance, the two do not disagree.

Why Agreement Counts as Evidence

Old ideas are not true because they are old. Traditions were wrong for millennia about the shape of the world and about disease. The argument here is not from age. It is from independence.

Inquirers separated by continents and centuries, with no contact and often no knowledge the others existed, working in different languages inside incompatible accounts of reality, examined the same question and returned the same answer about conduct and character. That is structurally what replication looks like: isolated laboratories, different instruments, convergent results. It is not proof in the modern sense — the traditions did not control variables or publish methods — but the question of how to live cannot be run as a randomized trial across a lifetime, and independent convergence across every civilization that considered it is the strongest evidence available on a question that will never have better.

The disagreements strengthen the case rather than weakening it. These traditions were not drifting toward one another under social pressure; many were in open theological conflict, with real stakes and real casualties.

Agreement reached by people who wanted to disagree is worth considerably more than agreement reached by people trying to get along.

Brian Johnson's *Philosopher's Notes* offer a modern demonstration at scale: across more than seven hundred fifty distillations of the best books on ancient wisdom and modern science, from every continent and era, the same handful of ideas keeps surfacing. Heroic compresses its own version into three words: energy, work, and love. We should be careful what that proves — one person selected the books, and a search for convergence will likely find it wherever it looks. What it demonstrates is how little the material varies once someone assembles it at that scale, which is a more modest and more defensible claim.

We have our own small piece of this record, offered as observation rather than study. For two years, first through a weekly roundtable and now through Human Flourishing Circles, we have convened rooms of devout Christians, Latter-day Saints, Muslims, Jews, and people with no faith tradition at all. The vocabulary differs from person to person, and the account of a life worth living keeps arriving at the same place anyway. What has struck us more is the other half of it: people who come together in good faith can disagree and still stay open, still stay generous, still refuse to reduce the other person to their position. The disagreements that remain do not have to break anything.

The Tribal Instinct, and Why It Doesn't Get the Last Word

None of this means the differences we feel toward each other are imaginary. We are products of a long evolutionary history in which belonging to the right group was a matter of survival, and that history left us with nervous systems quick to sort people by tribe and read an unfamiliar face as a threat. That system is real and it is not going away.

But we are not only that system. Watch a World Cup match and you will see tribal identity at close to full intensity — players and supporters caring, for ninety minutes, about almost nothing beyond the success of their side. Watch what happens after the tournament. Players who spent a month as fierce rivals return to club teams the following week, some alongside the opponents they just faced, and form a different tribe without apparent difficulty. The instinct does real work. It is also temporary, situational, and fully compatible with a wider loyalty underneath it.

What Validates This

The convergence holds up precisely because it was never engineered. A cross-tradition virtue survey that set out to test for shared values, not assume them, still found six recurring across eight independent traditions. A separate values survey spanning eighty-two countries found the same structure holding across cultures that had every incentive to differ. Neither research program built its result in advance.

What Challenges This

Real limits remain. The traditions do not secretly teach the same thing — a Buddhist account of the self and a Christian account of the soul are different claims about reality, not two vocabularies for one idea; the convergence is about conduct, not metaphysics. The cross-tradition virtue study examined eight literate traditions with surviving texts; it did not examine African, Indigenous American, or Oceanic traditions, whose transmission has been substantially oral, which is a real gap beneath our own argument that this pattern is not a Western possession. And every one of these traditions has also been used to justify conquest and cruelty by people who could quote it fluently — worth naming plainly, alongside the fact that nearly all of them also contain sustained internal criticism of exactly that failure.

Open Questions

We hold these open rather than resolved: where the line falls between individual autonomy and communal obligation, since different traditions locate the person differently and research cannot settle it; whether these practices retain their power once separated from the community and belief that originally sustained them; and how much of this convergence is real versus our own pattern-finding, a question we hold open against ourselves as much as anyone.

What This Means for Human Flourishing

The convergence is real, independently reached, and it counts as evidence. Not proof, and not sentiment. Evidence of the strongest kind available on a question that cannot be examined any other way.

Inherited practice, tested across generations, carries weight. The burden of proof sits on whoever wants to discard that inheritance, not on whoever wants to take it seriously.

No tradition holds a monopoly on this knowledge, and none is dismissible on the grounds of where it came from. The pattern belongs to no one in particular and is available to everyone.

The agreement is about character and conduct, not about ultimate ends. People who disagree fundamentally about the nature of reality can still recognize the same account of a life well lived.

Therefore, the method: draw from the full inheritance, honor every tradition with something serious to contribute, remain captured by none. This is the pillar most responsible for how Human Flourishing operates, because what the convergence models is inquiry conducted with humility and respect for wisdom wherever it is found, by people who never assumed their own tradition held the whole of it.

A Final Reflection

The most consequential thing we know about human beings is how much we have in common. The most consequential thing being done to us right now is the steady erosion of our ability to feel it. Ancient wisdom and modern science reached the same conclusion by entirely separate routes:

Agency, hope, and rational optimism are the evidence-based response to a divided world, not the naïve one.

The more people actually engage across the lines that are supposed to divide them, the harder the similarity is to miss. We have watched it happen in rooms where it should not have been possible.

Read the Human Flourishing Pledge at humanflourishing.us, and sign it if what it names is what you are trying to practice.

Share this essay with someone who sees the world differently than you do — and then, when they have read it, have the conversation about it.

The work is ongoing. The community is forming. The conversation is just beginning.

Scott McIntosh**Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | MAC6 | Conscious Capitalism Arizona**

Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to \$50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC⁶, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment.

Angela McIllece**Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | Founder, Soul Force Strategies**

Angela McIllece is a creative strategist, coach, and designer, and the founder of Soul Force Strategies. Drawing on her background in creative design, personal development philosophy, and community building, Angela works at the intersection of vision and execution — helping individuals and organizations clarify their identity and build with intention. As a military spouse for thirty years, Angela has lived and worked across cultures — including living in New Delhi, India and Bogotá, Colombia — raising young children abroad and traveling widely throughout Asia and Latin America, and across the United States. These experiences have shaped her deeply held belief that human flourishing is both universal and beautifully particular — expressed differently across cultures, but rooted in the same enduring human needs.

Sources and Selected Readings

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Work referenced in this essay

Jason Viyar, "The Psychological Millionaire: Rich in Relationships, Appreciation, and Present Moments." Master of Applied Positive Psychology capstone project, University of Pennsylvania, 2026. Forthcoming as a book. Jason Viyar serves on the Human Flourishing board of directors, and Human Flourishing is a partner in the publication of this work.

Brian Johnson, *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential* (Blackstone Publishing, 2023), and the Philosopher's Notes archive at Heroic. Disclosure as stated in the Note on This Essay.