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INTRODUCTION

The idea that human beings can flourish is ancient. This idea was shared by many Ancient Greek philosophers, and it came to a rich, full expression in Aristotle's writings. It has generated enormous contemporary interest as well. It is one of the core ideas of the positive psychology movement, and the attractiveness of the concept of a flourishing life is central to the movement. Yet many of people are uncertain about the prospects for flourishing because unavoidable human frailties seem to bar the way to thriving. Unfortunately, positive psychologists have not integrated the promise of flourishing with the realities of human frailty.

How can people thrive, given dependency, the complexity of life, human limits, and unavoidable suffering? We have written this book to answer this question. We show not only that it is possible to flourish as imperfect beings but also that human frailty is actually central to living well.

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Frailty, Suffering, and Vice: Flourishing in the Face of Human Limitations, by B. J. Fowers, F. C. Richardson, and B. D. Slife
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Consider the following example. As she sat and pondered her life recently, Silvia felt overwhelmed by a confusing mix of sadness, frustration, and guilt, and, as she thought about it, she realized the strongest feeling was that of guilt. She recognized that she seemed to have it all: a successful career as a painter, a loving husband, three (mostly) wonderful children, good friends, and a comfortable lifestyle. At 44, Silvia had been successful at everything that had really mattered to her, yet she felt chronically burdened and conflicted. Partly because of her success, she felt guilty that she was not happier and more grateful for her good fortune.

Silvia also recognized that there were good reasons for the pain and guilt she felt. She experienced frequent periods of sadness about losing her best friend to pancreatic cancer last year. Although she loved and enjoyed her three daughters beyond measure, she often felt consumed by helping them with homework, boyfriends, social activities, shopping, and reality checking. Her parents had become unable to help with the girls because of chronic health problems, and they now needed Silvia's assistance on a weekly basis. Silvia worried that she was neglecting her husband and her friends as she responded to the needs of her children and parents. She was also behind schedule in preparing for an art show booked for the near future. The worst guilt, Silvia reflected, followed the immediate resentment she experienced when one of her family members asked for help or floundered in a way that made an even stronger appeal for assistance. She would always rise to the occasion, but she felt beset by these many and imperious needs.

Silvia's therapist suggested that she let go of some of these responsibilities and focus on giving herself credit for all that she did do rather than feeling guilty for not doing more. Her therapist also recommended a recent book on happiness, which Silvia had been reading. When she had attempted to complete a gratitude exercise recently, she had recounted many things for which she felt genuinely grateful, though each one of them was accompanied by a resounding "but." She recalled writing "I am grateful for my children's health" and then spending 15 minutes thinking about how much time it took to shop for and prepare healthy meals and to drive them to physical activities and doctor visits. The glow of gratitude did not last long for her. Silvia looked ahead in the table of contents of the happiness book to see if there was something that might be more helpful. She found herself dreading the chapters on happiness and flourishing. Because gratitude was so difficult, happiness and flourishing seemed entirely impossible.

Silvia is not alone with these tensions and conflicts. We have written this book because we experience similar difficulties ourselves, as do our family members, friends, students, and clients. The focus on happiness and living a flourishing life that positive psychology has so widely publicized has been an important source of hope and renewal. Positive psychology has been

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enormously beneficial for many people. It has helped many individuals to shift their focus from stress and coping to human potential and fulfillment.

Yet our own experiences and observations of the everyday challenges of cultivating a flourishing life have shown us that creating one is neither simple nor easy. There are real and unavoidable complications and suffering in all of our lives, and attempting to be positive about them is often not enough. We are convinced that a useful approach to flourishing has to explicitly incorporate ordinary human frailties and limitations. It is not enough to work around these normal challenges or to presume that we can just transcend them. We decided to write this book because we are convinced that human frailties and limitations are not just unavoidable, they are central to the goal of living in a flourishing way. Our goal is to show how people flourish by living excellently as the sort of creatures we really are, with all our limitations and frailties.

As a starting point, we address three questions whose answers will show how to enrich and extend the insights positive psychology has offered so far. What are the pathways to flourishing? Is good theory important? Are virtue and flourishing moral topics?

WHAT ARE THE PATHWAYS TO FLOURISHING?

The acknowledged leader of positive psychology, Martin Seligman (2011), wrote that "the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing" (p. 13). We heartily share this goal. From the beginning, positive psychology has been defined in contrast to ordinary psychology. Positive psychologists tend to criticize ordinary psychology for focusing too much on the negative aspects of life. Seligman described this contrast in the beginning of his latest book:

> I have spent most of my life working on psychology's venerable goal of relieving misery and uprooting the disabling conditions of life. . . . Taking the psychology of misery to heart . . . can be a vexation to the soul. [I want] to supplement [psychology's] venerable goal with a new goal: exploring what makes life worth living and building the enabling conditions of a life worth living. (pp. 1–2)

We, the authors, believe that dividing human experience up in this way may not serve clients and therapists well. If the "old psychology" has been too one-sided in its negativity, then trading that in for a "new psychology" of positivity seems to be just as one-sided. We think that flourishing includes the entirety of life, not just the happy parts. This is important because people's ongoing struggles with our human limits and fallibility are a vital part of our lives and partly define who we are. Turning our back on the difficult aspects

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of life would amount to giving up important parts of ourselves. We show that much of the growth, self-development, and meaning people find in life emerges from working through individual shortcomings and weaknesses. That is why we are proposing an integrated view that recognizes that human flourishing must include not only finding the best responses to human dependency, weakness, and suffering, but also seeking positive experiences.

Of course, Seligman (2011) recognized that all of us face some degree of adversity and suffering in life. He stated emphatically that "we must minimize our misery" (p. 53). He also suggested "learning to function well even if you are sad or anxious or angry—in other words, *dealing* with it" (p. 53). Sometimes this kind of mature management of misery is the best one can do, but this is literally all Seligman had to say about the relationship between human pain and flourishing—deal with it. Silvia is clearly "dealing with it" by taking care of her family and pursuing her artwork, but she is still stuck in the mire of guilt and resentment. We think that there is a lot more to say about constructively addressing struggles and suffering. People need to acknowledge and understand suffering in a way that enables growth and learning. We believe that people can do a lot better than just dealing with it.

Seligman (2011) developed a new theory of well-being to help promote flourishing. In his theory, "well-being has five elements . . . positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishment" (p. 16). None of the five elements show how to constructively approach suffering, dependency, frailty, or weakness. The problem is that all people struggle with these human challenges. In his concept of flourishing, Seligman envisioned no role for these inescapable features of human life. He recommended a direct pathway to flourishing by minimizing the negative and maximizing the positive. In this book, we share with readers a more hopeful, and, we think, humane view of human limitations. In our view, human limitations contribute in important ways to the quality of life rather than being a negative that should be shunted aside.

Just to make it clear that Seligman's direct pathway is not idiosyncratic to him, we consider how Barbara Fredrickson, another leader in positive psychology, addressed human frailty. In her description of her research on emotions, she used the same kind of dichotomous thinking as Seligman. Fredrickson (2009) wrote that whereas "nearly all previous efforts within the science of emotions centered on negativity. . . . I took a different path. I've made a career out of studying the positive side" (p. 12). She commented that negative emotions are "dark and heavy," whereas positive emotions are "light and buoyant" and suggested that "you may either languish, barely holding on to life, or flourish, becoming ripe with possibility and remarkably resilient to hard times" (pp. 9, 17).

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Fredrickson is, to her credit, no Pollyanna. She recognized that emotions are transient and that negative emotions are part of every life. Her recommendation has been to increase the ratio of positive to negative emotions, and she claimed that

> a fascinating fact about people's positivity ratios is that they're subject to a tipping point. Below a certain ratio, people get pulled into a downward spiral fueled by negativity. . . . Yet above this same ratio, people seem to take off, drawn along an upward spiral energized by positivity. . . . Downward spiral or upward spiral. As I see it, that's your choice. . . . We're either on a positive trajectory or a negative one. (Fredrickson, 2009, pp. 16–17)

The magic ratio is 3 to 1: "Aim for a positivity ratio of at least 3 to 1. . . . This is the ratio that I have found to be a tipping point, predicting whether people languish or flourish" (Fredrickson, 2009, p. 32).[1]

Fredrickson's (2009) solution was to maximize positive experiences so that they wash out the difficulties in life, though she offered no constructive approach to ordinary human struggles themselves. She wrote that

> trying times almost inevitably bring negativity. Unchecked, the narrowed mindsets of negativity can pull you on a downward spiral and drain the very life out of you. . . . you can choose a different path. . . . The key is to uncover your inner wellspring of heartfelt positivity. Positivity can loosen negativity's grip on your mental outlook. . . . it sets you on an upward spiral, a positive trajectory that cuts through dark times and leads you back to higher ground, stronger than ever. (Fredrickson, 2009, p. 99)

Fredrickson's answers to negativity are to flip a switch, make a choice, uncover inner wellsprings. In this book, we explore a different pathway to flourishing that includes learning from adversity, honoring losses, and growing to become better people rather than turning away from or minimizing those struggles.

With so much "either/or" thinking and the strong emphasis on the positive, many leaders of positive psychology seem to insist that one must make a choice between a one-sided focus on the negative or a one-sided focus on the positive. They advocate directly pursuing flourishing by accumulating large quantities of positive experiences. One of the things that the Silvia example illustrates is that it is just not that easy. Happiness and joy is never far from sadness and loss. Achievement and triumph is never

[1]Although the credibility of Fredrickson's ratio has been devastatingly criticized (Brown, Sokal, & Friedman, 2013), the validity of the ratio is not our primary concern.

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entirely divorced from dependency and vulnerability. Our lives are always a complex mix of positive and negative, strength and weakness. Even if it were possible to flip a switch and focus only on the positive, would that be good for us? We need a greater wisdom about living, not a quantitative increase in the balance of positive over negative experiences.

A recent exception to this one-sided view was presented by Kashdan and Biswas-Diener (2014) in a book called *The Upside of Your Dark Side: Why Being Your Whole Self—Not Just Your "Good" Self—Drives Success and Fulfillment*. They encouraged readers to recognize that "negative" emotions and experiences, such as anxiety or pessimism, can be beneficial. They urged readers to "embrace" the "less comfortable aspects" of their lives to "maximize [their] chances for true success and becoming whole" (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, p. 200). They recommended being psychologically flexible and using negative emotional states to become more effective because "the basic idea is that psychological states are instrumental" (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014, p. 201). Their advice may have its benefits, and it is a welcome shift from one-sided positivity. We share with those authors the idea that the best kind of human life is characterized by wholeness rather than by focusing on only one part of the experience. We differ from them in our recommendations for how to attain that wholeness. Kashdan and Biswas-Diener focused on transient psychological states and how to effectively use those states. In contrast, we emphasize enduring human frailties and how to become the kind of person who habitually responds properly to those frailties through the virtues. We also believe that Kashdan and Biswas-Diener's frankly instrumental perspective has some rather pernicious consequences, as we discuss in Chapter 1. (See also Fowers, 2010; Richardson & Manglos, 2012.)

Part of what it is to be human is to need other people, to experience limits in life, and to suffer at times. Like Silvia, most people cannot just shift their attention to an ever-expanding happiness or fulfillment because dependence, complexity, limits, and suffering are part of the warp and woof of life. If these difficult aspects of life are not given their due attention, then a great deal of what makes us human—attachments, mortality, vulnerability—is cut off. Each of our identities is partly constituted by the particular people on whom we depend, the complexities of everyday life, the specific weaknesses with which we cope, the actual suffering through which we have passed, and the definite limits we have encountered. If we neglect all this, we risk losing sight of who we are.

This book differs from the majority of positive psychology writings in that we focus on the intimate relationship between the flesh and blood limitations of ordinary human beings and flourishing. The frailties, dependencies, and suffering that beset every human being to some extent are invaluable

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sources of the meaning, growth, and deep relationships that constitute flourishing. Although the apparently direct path to flourishing by accentuating the positive can be helpful, people would lose too much of the richness and texture of life if they were to focus so intently on the positive that they ignore how the inevitable struggles of ordinary living can lead to deepening and growth. The key message of this book is that it is neither necessary nor desirable to eliminate human struggles and frailties to pursue a flourishing life. In fact, we aim to show that the proper responses to human limitations are actually the best pathway to a flourishing human life. Learning and growing from difficulties is a vital pathway to flourishing that may appear more indirect than the more commonly discussed direct pathway, but it is one that is far more inclusive of human experience.

Consider grief for the loss of a loved one. Grief can be seen as pain that ought to be minimized, or it can be seen as honoring the memory of someone who was irreplaceable in one's life. People often feel the loss most acutely when they think about the good experiences they had with their loved one. As authors, we are not recommending prolonged or exaggerated grieving, but we recognize that the suffering of grief can be good because it is one of the ways individuals pay homage to the important people they have lost.

We have a much more ambitious goal than just putting readers in touch with the pain and vulnerability that are inescapable for human beings. After all, the idea that life is difficult and uncertain is hardly news, even if we often avert our eyes from pain and uncertainty rather than facing them squarely. Rather, we hope to show that the inevitable dependency, limits, and suffering are essential contributors to a good life. That is, human beings do not flourish despite the difficulties they face. Rather, we flourish as human beings through approaching these difficulties in the best ways. It is the way that we see and respond to our vulnerabilities and limitations that determines how well we live. If we see the dependency, frailty, complexity, and loss in our lives as impediments, then it is perfectly sensible to resent them or see them as obstacles to living well. When we recognize that these aspects of life are part of what it means to be a human being, however, we come to see that it is impossible to really flourish without a way to integrate our whole lives, the positive, the negative, and the everything in between. In the example of Silvia, her commitments to her family, her artwork, her friends, and her community are indeed sources of conflict and burdens, and she often resents them, but they also can be the wellsprings of her flourishing. Sometimes the pathway to the positive is simple and direct, as positive psychologists suggest, but often it is more complex and entails finding meaning and growth in difficult human struggles. We believe that both pathways are vital.

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IS GOOD THEORY IMPORTANT?

A second way that this book is different from most discussions of human flourishing is that we present a powerful, systematic framework to illuminate what it means to flourish and how to cultivate a flourishing life. This emphasis on sophisticated theory may seem contradictory to our commitment to a practical book. It is not contradictory because we believe, along with Kurt Lewin (1951), that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory" (p. 169). Indeed, one of the best tests of theory is how well it can explain practical matters. Weak theory leads to many errors and directs one down the wrong paths. To promote human flourishing, one needs to think about it in the best ways. Good theory enriches understanding and practice. Good theory aids in the understanding of proper distinctions, such as those between virtue and vice, and the recognition of essential connections, such as the central link between flourishing and virtue and the intimate connection between human limitations and the best kind of human life. We have written this book because these indispensable theoretical and practical linkages, to our knowledge, simply are not available and accessible anywhere else.

For example, positive psychologists tend to neglect the concept of vice, but virtue can only be fully understood in contrast to vice. Take, for example, the virtue of courage. It is only possible to understand how to get courage right if we know how we can go wrong in risky situations by acting either cowardly or rash. Aristotle (trans. 1999) was one of the earliest and most influential thinkers about virtue theory, and he shared the insight that each virtue (e.g., courage) is best understood in contrast to a vice of deficiency (e.g., cowardice) and a vice of excess (e.g., rashness). Without such contrasts, we are left with partial understandings and poor guidance regarding the virtues.

We explore the possibilities for human flourishing in this book in practical and useful ways. We have written about the theory of human nature and flourishing elsewhere (Fowers, 2012, 2015b; Richardson, Fowers, & Guignon, 1999; Slife, 2004), but we focus here on what that theory tells about everyday goals and activities. In this book, we provide what we feel has been missing in positive psychology: a theoretical framework that can show how one might integrate strengths and weaknesses, strivings and limitations, triumphs and defeats. We approach this integration with a theory of the human good that grows out of an extended conversation between ancient wisdom and contemporary experience and knowledge. In Chapters 1 and 2, we present the theory and illustrate how it works in practical examples. This theory provides the ideas needed to discuss, throughout the book, human frailties, virtues, and flourishing at greater length and with the proper depth and resonance.

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We recognize, of course, the need to update any insights appropriated from ancient thinkers so that they respond to contemporary times and concerns. There are some aspects of ancient views that are entirely unacceptable to most people today and others that need to be updated because modern people know things that the ancients did not know. So the book is a conversation between ancients and moderns, philosophers and psychologists, scholars and laypeople. Such conversation is needed because no one perspective can lay claim to the whole truth. Only by comparing and contrasting these reservoirs of understanding and wisdom can one formulate a useful perspective on the good life for humans.

ARE VIRTUE AND FLOURISHING MORAL TOPICS?

A third way this book differs from most discussions of positive psychology is that we present virtue and flourishing in the frankly moral terms that are most appropriate to them. We do not adhere to the false dichotomy of facts and values as is the common practice in the social sciences. Virtues have always been recognized as moral character, and we see no wisdom in abandoning that understanding. The point of any discussion of flourishing is to explore the best way to live. It is impossible to explore the concept of flourishing without committing to some idea of better and worse ways to live. This is a seriously moral topic, and it is not possible to be neutral about it and still explore it meaningfully. Attempting to discuss and study virtue and flourishing as though they are not moral topics is like playing a child's game of pretend.

Although many social scientists and helping professionals have become interested in virtue and human flourishing, it is odd how few authors explicitly recognize the connection between these concepts and morality. This error is surprisingly common in positive psychology. The reason this mistake is so common is the belief that one must strictly separate facts and values to maintain scientific objectivity. It is widely recognized that values and morality cannot be simply banished from professional practice, but "personal values" remain suspect and practitioners worry about value imposition.

The trick that psychologists generally use is to define moral questions as subjective experiences or perceptions rather than as objective (nonmoral) facts. This even includes seeing virtue and well-being as nothing more than subjective judgments. The trick only works if one believes that facts have no relationship to values and that virtue and well-being exist only as subjective perceptions. Both of these beliefs are quite dubious. Virtues and flourishing can be meaningfully assessed in self-report, behavior, and brain scans, meaning that these constructs have the same degree of objective tangibility as

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anxiety, intelligence, or personality (Greene & Paxton, 2009; Huta & Ryan, 2010; Meindl, Jayawickreme, Furr, & Fleeson, 2013). This attempt at value neutrality also leads to a deeply ironic position that implies that the values of objectivity and moral open-mindedness dictate that psychologists keep all other moral values out of the science and at arm's length from professional practices.

Aristotle (trans. 1999) helps one to understand that attempting to separate facts and morality makes no sense because all human activities are designed to achieve choiceworthy ends. One way to put this is to say that human actions aim at things that are seen as good. A *good* is a desirable state of affairs, such as pleasure, knowledge, or justice. If people are always pursuing what they think is good, then everything they do has a moral dimension built into it from the start. Of course, one can be misguided by what one believes to be choiceworthy, but the understanding of what is worthwhile always guides human actions.

This formulation even applies to social scientists. From this perspective, it is clear that the goal of social science is to pursue the good of knowledge about human beings. Social scientists are not at all neutral about the good of knowledge. Tens of thousands of social scientists avidly seek this knowledge, and society promotes these efforts by funding universities, foundations, and grants, and showing great interest in the latest scientific results. Similarly, therapists and coaches work hard to benefit their clients through helping them to attain greater happiness, contentment, and meaning. Teachers and consultants share the good of knowledge with their students and clients. All professionals hope deeply that the work they do contributes both to a better life for those they serve and to a better world. The fact that professional efforts are always directed toward choiceworthy goals leads us, as authors, to advocate an explicit acknowledgment of the goods that we seek as social scientists and helping professionals. This recognition is especially important for those who see virtue and flourishing as worthwhile.

It is still important to acknowledge the worry that incorporating the moral dimension of scientific and professional work will contaminate that work and perhaps lead to wholesale value imposition. Lengthier and much more detailed arguments make it clear that it is not really possible to separate facts and values at all because moral commitments are already built into all professional activities (Danziger, 1990; Fowers, 2005; Richardson et al., 1999; Slife & Williams, 1995; Taylor, 1985). We will not repeat those arguments here. The way to address the worries about the role of moral values in professional work is to openly acknowledge the goods that we pursue in our work so that we can discuss and debate them. This kind of open conversation is the single most powerful way to guard against the

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imposition of any particular point of view. In addition, it will provide a better understanding of what is deemed worthwhile. We discuss the enormous importance and value of the diversity of moral viewpoints at greater length in Chapter 1.

ARISTOTLE'S NATURAL ETHICS

Our thinking about human flourishing has been profoundly influenced by Aristotle, one of the original theorists of the good life. His work has endured as a touchstone for the good life for over 2,000 years.[2] We have not written a philosophy book, so we reference Aristotle sparingly, but well-informed readers will recognize our enormous debt to his work. We are not alone in our admiration of Aristotle, as his work has been a key source for many positive psychologists and moral philosophers in recent decades. There is also great wisdom to be found in other ancient Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, and the Stoics. Yet, two aspects of Aristotle's philosophy set him apart from these other thinkers. First, he was extremely practical in his thinking. Second, he grounded his ethical theory firmly in his understanding of human nature. We follow Aristotle's lead in understanding the ways that the good life always concerns practical life and is intimately related to human nature.

This means that we see the best kind of life as one that is made up of experiences and achievements that are naturally good for human beings. We know that speaking of things being "naturally good" for humans is not common in psychology these days. But see what you think as we develop this idea. A few examples will give you an initial sense of the relationship between human nature and what is good for humanity. Human beings are a deeply social species, so it is good to have strong, enduring relationships with other people. Human beings are also rational creatures, so we fare better when our lives make sense to us, and when we have good reasons for what we do. Humans find joy in aesthetic beauty of many kinds, so a life that includes beauty is better than one that does not. In Chapter 1, we discuss these desirable states of affairs as natural human goods. Thus, knowledge is a good and friendship is a good. These goods are worthwhile to human beings because of the kind of creatures that we are. If people were solitary beings, friendship would not be particularly important, but because people are profoundly social beings, friendship is a vital component of a good life.

[2]Aristotle's central text on flourishing was the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but he had much to say about it in the *Eudemian Ethics*, the *Politics*, and the *de Anima*. More detailed treatments of this work that are accessible to psychologists are available (Fowers, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015a; Richardson, 2012).

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Although human goods are natural, pursuing them is not always easy. Everyone knows that relationships do not last forever and that they tend to be complicated rather than simple. We can also get confused or misdirected in our reasoning about what we should do or how we should live. This vulnerability to going wrong in the key activities of our lives is why we need a theory of flourishing that incorporates an understanding of human limitations, such as our deep dependence on others and our vulnerability to mistakes in our thinking.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 1, we explain the ways that human nature gives rise to specific goods that are essential to living well. This framework provides the depth needed to really understand the good life in the context of human limitations. We discuss living well in terms of the successful pursuit of natural human goods. Silvia exemplifies deep commitments to some key human goods. Her commitments to her family are extremely precious to her and are essential sources of belonging and meaning for her. The importance of these relationships is not diminished by the feelings of being burdened that she often has. Her artwork represents a strong commitment to aesthetic beauty and the power of art to reveal aspects of the human and natural world. It is a key part of a good life for her. The struggles she has with painting are part of the creative process rather than something she could consider minimizing. Silvia's capacity to flourish depends on properly understanding and embracing the mutual dependency, complexity, and limitations of time and energy. This dependence includes the grief she feels about the loss of her friend to cancer. Her flourishing is not a matter of setting aside these struggles or somehow accumulating "three times as many positive experiences" to counterbalance these challenges. As therapists, educators, and leaders, we must recognize that all of our activities involve both strength and frailty. We cannot really understand the best kind of life only by emphasizing strengths and positivity. Human dependency and limitations show up at the center of our pursuit of a good life, and they cannot be pushed to the periphery. If we, as professionals, neglect human frailty, we will be unable to acknowledge Silvia's grief, help her develop the courage to face her fears and insist on a fairer distribution of burdens in her family, or assist her in gaining a greater wisdom concerning human suffering and limits.

In Chapter 2, we show how our framework of virtues and flourishing helps us understand and appropriately respond to our many limitations. Classically, virtues are the strengths that people cultivate to fashion a good life. This understanding of the virtues shows us that they are needed because

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they make it possible to respond well to the specific limitations we have. Courage is a straightforward example of the relationship between human frailty and virtue. Courage is necessary because there are times when each of us must protect something that is important to us. Loved ones must be defended against dangers, and principles or freedoms must be defended against encroachments. Protecting what is important often means taking physical, psychological, or social risks. Courage is the ability to protect something important despite the risks that it entails. Because we are vulnerable in all of these ways, we naturally fear risks and sensibly avoid unnecessary or excessive risks. Yet if people were guided only by this natural fear, risk avoidance would be the only response one would have to danger, and it would be impossible to stand up for what is important. Courage is a necessary complement to natural fears that enables people to protect what is important, even at the risk of damage or death. In this book, we discuss many virtues that are specifically designed to help human beings respond in the best ways to their inherent frailty and vulnerability.

In Chapters 3 through 7, we explore a number of human limitations. We begin, in Chapter 3, by examining the inherent dependency on other people. We explain how individuals can only become fully human through their relationships with others. This is obviously true of infants, who cannot take care of themselves. But we also clarify that human beings are deeply dependent on one another throughout life to maintain their identities, experience belonging, and to have meaning in their lives. In contrast to the common tendency to link strength and health to independence and to link weakness and pathology to dependence, we show how ordinary it is to depend on other people and how that dependency is a powerful source of the meaning and richness of life. We explain that strong, enduring relationships with others requires a mutual dependency without which it is impossible to live well as a human being. Resolving our culturally encouraged ambivalence about dependency can help us to more fully embrace the relationships that make us who we are.

Human relationships are also complex and messy. In Chapter 4, we question the common aspiration to make relationships simple, straightforward, and conflict-free. This quest for simplicity creates unrealistic expectations and disappointment with relationships, committee meetings, and politics. The disillusionment experienced when these faulty expectations are not met can lead to inappropriate disengagement from important involvements. The differences between people that are at the core of the messiness and tension in everyday involvements are an essential aspect of the relational world. These differences are not a problem to be overcome. Rather, differences are a source of the vitality and community that is possible only when people who are not all the same come together and treat the complexity of their relations as potentially enriching.

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In Chapter 5, we confront the fantasy of nearly infinite human capacity that has been built up by our ever-growing technological prowess and our capacity for abstract thought. We often feel that we can and should seek virtually unlimited knowledge, power, and freedom. The exhortation to "be all you can be," often inspires an inflated and unrealistic sense of what one's potential is. In Chapter 5, we explain that it is only through the recognition of our limitations (e.g., limits of time and talent) that we can make peace with the conflicts and disappointments of everyday life. What is most important is that it is through accepting rather than resisting unavoidable human limitations that we open ourselves to some of life's most meaningful experiences and fulfilling relationships, which are two keys to human flourishing.

In Chapter 6, we discuss the pervasive tendency in modern Western societies to make inordinate efforts to control outcomes and to avoid or ensure against misfortune. There is a similarly encompassing interest in reducing suffering through economic, medical, psychological, and educational policies. Although reducing misfortune and suffering are obviously desirable aims, these efforts can seduce people into thinking that misfortune and suffering can be largely eliminated. In this chapter, we explore the unavoidability of suffering and its potentially ennobling aspects. Some examples are the pain involved in growth and self-development, the grief at the loss of a loved one, and shared anguish in the face of tragedy or evil. Seen rightly, suffering is part and parcel of living as a finite being, essential to humanity, potentially reorienting, and possibly even redemptive. Such misfortunes may seem to make a good life next to impossible—at least at times. We try to show that an appropriate understanding of human vulnerability to misfortune promotes forgiveness and compassion both for others and for one's self. We suggest that compassion is a key virtue in the face of human frailty and that solidarity with others in the face of setbacks and tragedies is indispensable to flourishing.

A good understanding of virtue and flourishing requires an equally clear recognition of vice and evil. In Chapter 7, we give vivid examples of vicious characters and evil actions in the contemporary world to demonstrate their reality (e.g., genocide, slavery, distribution of highly addictive drugs). We also discuss more mundane forms of vice, such as greed and lust for power. We then analyze how individuals become subject to such vices through misconceptions and a variety of forms of self-deception about what is good. We show how this understanding of vice and evil can help people to avoid zealotry and extremism in the name of a good or a god. Most accounts of virtue and flourishing lack a clear recognition of vice and evil, which results in an ironically tepid portrayal of the best kind of life. Providing a clear account of vice and evil makes the understanding of flourishing much richer and deeper by clarifying how one can go wrong and by further illuminating key elements of virtue and flourishing.

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Chapter 8 summarizes and integrates the elements of the book. We focus on how proper understandings of dependence, complexity, limits, and suffering make it possible for us to successfully pursue genuinely human goods such as knowledge, friendship, and justice. We flesh out the framework of the good life developed in Chapter 1 to vividly demonstrate the connections between the inescapability of human limitations, the cultivation of virtues, and the pursuit of human goods. It turns out that our insufficiency and frailty as individuals are indispensable to the pursuit of the most important goods in life. The combination of human finitude and our intensely social nature is what makes it possible for the extraordinary achievements of the species, ranging from compassion to landing probes on Mars. Understanding and responding well to human finitude is indispensable because the collaboration necessary for the astonishing projects and the deep connection uniquely available to human beings can only happen because we are not individually self-sufficient. As humans, we limit our possibilities severely when we strive for this illusory self-sufficiency. Our conclusion in this book is that the human good does not arise in spite of our limitations, but rather through addressing ourselves properly to them.

Each chapter includes examples of how these ideas can be applied in practical ways by therapists, educators, consultants, and leaders. We have written this book to illuminate the ways in which professionals can promote flourishing in the context of human limitations. We begin with a very practical theory of the good in Chapter 1.