

HUMAN FLOURISHING THROUGH PROGRESS?

The inaugural event of our new conference series reflects [the wide-ranging interests of the Council for Transformative Enterprise](#) and the Rhodes Trust community. The topic – and conference series – also echoes the late Edmund Phelps’s humanistic dedication to *Mass Flourishing* but with a greater emphasis on science and technology and less on economics.

Eight sessions and three lunch and dinner talks are planned.

The first two sessions will debate general conceptions and theories of “flourishing” and “progress.” No agreement is expected. Instead, we hope thoughtful exchanges will stimulate reconsideration of existing views. The other six sessions will cover more concrete enablers, obstacles, and notable cases of transformative progress. Led by expert contributors, these six sessions will inform participants from other domains and hopefully inspire boundary crossing ideas. Additionally, distinguished practitioners and public intellectuals will offer personal reflections at lunch and dinner talks or in conversations with moderators.

The rest of this document outlines the starting premises for the sessions and the questions (or “prompts” in AI lingo) the sessions might address.

Sessions 1-2 General Conceptions and Theories.

Phelps’s *Mass Flourishing* provides a provocative starting point. Very briefly, Phelps’s flourishing spans intrinsic satisfactions:

“The thrill of voyaging into the unknown, the excitement of the challenges, the gratification of overcoming obstacles and the fascination with the uncertainties.” (Italics added)¹

Phelps sees flourishing as a defining reward of the modern economy that provides the “space to exercise initiative, insight, imagination, and creativity.” He distinguishes flourishing from “prospering”² and says both aren’t “about income and wealth.” And both are *individual*, or *personal* – results of the person’s own *initiative*.³ And, laments Phelps, both are suffering from declining dynamism which he dates to the 1970s.

This is hardly a consensus view.

A recent article takes a religious view. It sees flourishing as requiring a “relationship between man and the divine that rises above doctrines of autonomy, utility, and efficiency.”⁴ For Phelps, an avowed atheist, ‘autonomy’ (or ‘human agency’) is essential.⁵

Amar Bhidé prepared this document as the basis for planning an agenda for the Inaugural Conference of the Council for Transformative Enterprise planned for 19-20 August 2027 at the Rhodes House in Oxford. The Rhodes Trust and the Council will co-host this conference, which Chrystia Freeland and Don Gogel will co-chair.

Other conceptions are materialistic, not religious. One values *abundance* -- of goods and services, or the hedonistic pleasure their consumption provides, more than stimulation of the work that produces these goods. Another emphasizes the maximization of *leisure* and implicitly the disutility of work.⁶

Yet another prioritizes collective satisfactions -- of group solidarity and belonging -- over Phelps's personal satisfactions.⁷

Sessions 1 and 2 will discuss these different views of flourishing and their relationship to "progress." We don't expect or aim for a precise definition of progress (or flourishing). We can instead raise the following kinds of questions.

Is progress a byproduct of flourishing or vice versa? Or are they unrelated? Does promoting collectivistic flourishing restrain materialistic progress or channel it in collectivist directions? For example, do commitments to broad-based public health entail downplaying rare diseases or discouraging advances in cosmetic or life-style treatments for the affluent? Can religious flourishing--or its rejection--permit pursuing materialistic or technological progress? Is flourishing and/or progress inherently exploitative and unjust? Is it practically elitist: providing stimulation (or lop-sided financial rewards) for a few exceptional individuals. And if it is, should the others be content with a "rising tide raising all boats" that increases everyone's living standards to different degrees? How do flourishing/progress intersect with nationalism and beliefs that flourishing/progress is geographically "zero sum?" Does "catching up" (or "falling behind") increase or reduce class or international conflict?

Sessions 3-8: Enablers, Obstacles, and Examples of Progress.

These sessions will focus mainly on extrinsic progress, with intrinsic flourishing as an important accompaniment.

The Politics of Progress.

Nationalism, tribalism, nativism, envy, patronage, and so on have proven electoral winners. Can progress compete? Can its prospects or accomplishments be directly sold to voters -- or must it be slipped in under populist guises, such as appeals to nationalistic pride or playing on anxieties about national security, taxes, and property rights? And if progress does produce unequal outcomes (from exceptional entrepreneurial fortunes to the exceptional Phelpsian flourishing of star researchers) can it be protected against the politics of envy? Does it even need protection or is delivering material progress a natural vote winner? Similarly, how important--politically rather than ethically--is compensating the casualties of creative destruction? Do Rawls-style rules for taxing winners and compensating the losers and bystanders of innovative contests have electoral appeal?

Educating for Progress

Education may promote or obstruct progress through what it does or fails to do. In the humanities, educators and courses may emphasize the dysfunctions of material progress and the injustices it produces, neglecting its positive correlates—flourishing and prospering (as above) and material comforts. Business schools have also increasingly focused on inequities and work-life balances—or in the opposite direction, the purely mercenary advantages of entrepreneurship. Scientific and technical education that focuses on problem sets and exam results can neglect the attitudes, knowledges (plural) and skills needed to envision and implement new ideas. And rote learning has long been criticized for killing creativity in every field and at every level.

What are antidotes? Can historians inspire aspiring innovators? Can professional schools improve capacities and interests for practical problems solving as Olin’s engineering program has tried? Can attitudes and techniques (presumably!) being cultivated in creative writing and visual arts courses and music conservatories be adapted to other fields? How effective are design thinking courses or do they also bureaucratize creativity? Are makerspaces or hacker spaces good alternatives to formal learning?

Philanthropy

Private philanthropy has two pathways of influence. One is indirect, typically through individual donors contributing to educational institutions and think-tanks. In this indirect pathway, donors have limited influence. Universities are particularly sensitive about the independence of their teaching and research. The more direct pathway is through foundation grants and prizes. Arguably both pathways haven’t effectively prioritized progress. Often philanthropy has focused on amelioration and injustice for example. There are certainly counter-examples. The Mayo Clinic and Foundation endowed *and* led by the Mayo brothers made pathbreaking contributions to medical progress. Privately endowed prizes and contests spurred the development of aviation in the early 20th century. What can the experience of more recent privately funded institutions (such as the Howard Hughes Institute) and prizes (such as the Lemelson prize and the X-prize) tell us? Can or should philanthropists take a more active role in promoting practical progress?

Case Histories

Notwithstanding pessimistic interpretations and prognoses (including but not limited to Phelps’s) modern technology has made transformative, multisided progress. This includes green energy that has become competitive with fossil fuels, electric vehicles and battery storage, e-tailing and logistics, and medical diagnostics and treatments (including a “paradigm shift” from small molecule medicines, to biologics, to cell-therapies.) What general lessons do these specific advances provide? Can continued progress sustain more flourishing and prospering? And of what kind – individual or collective? More leisure or more opportunities for productive work? What enablers need reinforcement and why?

NOTES

¹ This and the following quotes are from Phelps, Edmund. 2018. "The Dynamism of Nations: Toward a Theory of Indigenous Innovation." *Journal of Applied Corporate Finance* 30(3): 8–26. doi:10.1111/jacf.12306.

² For Phelps, categorization prospering is more extrinsic and is exemplified by:

An office worker earning a *raise* in recognition of her unusual achievement in her job, a craftsman seeing his hard-earned mastery result in a *better product*, a merchant's satisfaction at seeing "his *ships come in*," or a scholar's sense of validation from being awarded an *honorary degree*." (Italics added)

³ Concurrently, according to Phelps, a flourishing modern economy also provides *societal* gains: higher wages and household wealth and broader employment opportunities.

⁴ Collins, Gregory M. 2026. "Aristotle and Aquinas on Economics." *National Affairs*. <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/aristotle-and-aquinas-economics> (August 20, 2026).

⁵ Other ethical systems which also emphasize individual agency might not embrace Phelps's "flourishing" or "prospering" either. Think of a stoic, a Kantian, a Hindu who venerates *nishkama karma* ("duty without expectation of reward"), or an *If* devotee (who tries to "meet with Triumph and Disaster. And treat those two impostors just the same"). They too would reject "flourishing" through experiential thrill or in "prospering" by scoring a salary raise. At least in principle.

⁶ This was apparently the position of the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission created by the French government in 2008. The Commission examined how a nation's wealth and social progress of a nation should be measured. This was also the position of Keynes's *Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*, published in 1930 just as the great depression was setting in.

⁷ Phelps acknowledges that rewarding personal satisfaction and initiative also provides social gains. But that is not, in Phelps's implicit endorsement of the existentialist view of the individual struggling against the universe, its principal virtue. The collectivist view reverses the order – solidarity and belonging may help individuals prosper materially, but as a by-product not its aim.