

# The Role of Spirituality and Religion in Optimal Human Development

*Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar  
October 30, 2018*

Joel M. Hektner  
North Dakota State University

# Development

- Changing over time toward more complex, capable, adaptive states
- Process of fulfilling the possibilities of
- Occurs nonlinearly, unevenly across different domains



# Optimal Human Development

- Developing in ways that maximize the **well-being** of the self and others
- Thriving
- Flourishing



# What is well-being?

- Let's look at potential answers from

Philosophy

Religion

Sociology

Psychology

- A whirlwind, selective tour
- Difficult to disentangle definitions of well-being from descriptions and prescriptions of how we attain it
  - Often, definition is implied by ideas of how to attain

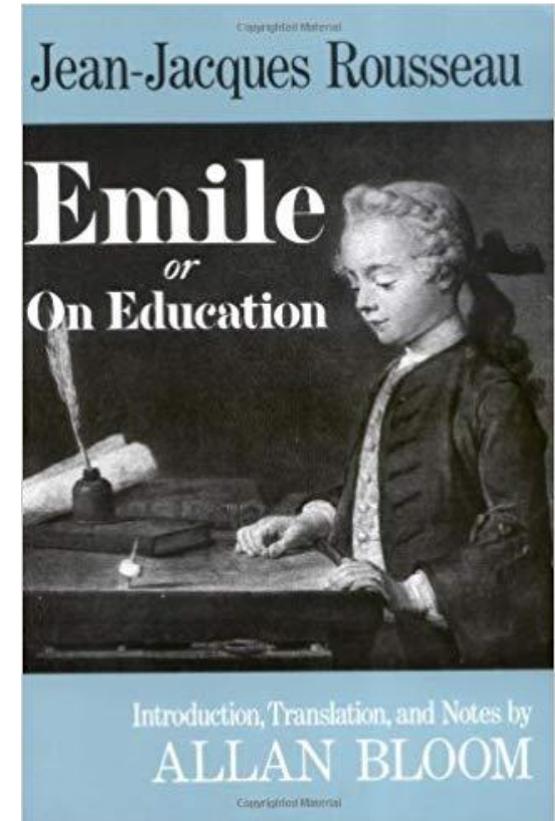
# What is Well-Being?

## Answers from Philosophy

- Not just pleasure (hedonic happiness)
  - But could include pleasurable moments
- Aristotle: eudaimonic happiness
  - Achieved through virtue
  - Correct education is to be brought up to feel pleasure and pain at the proper things
  - We need friends to help us be morally good and so we can be good to them
  - Happiness is an activity desirable in itself, in conformity with virtue

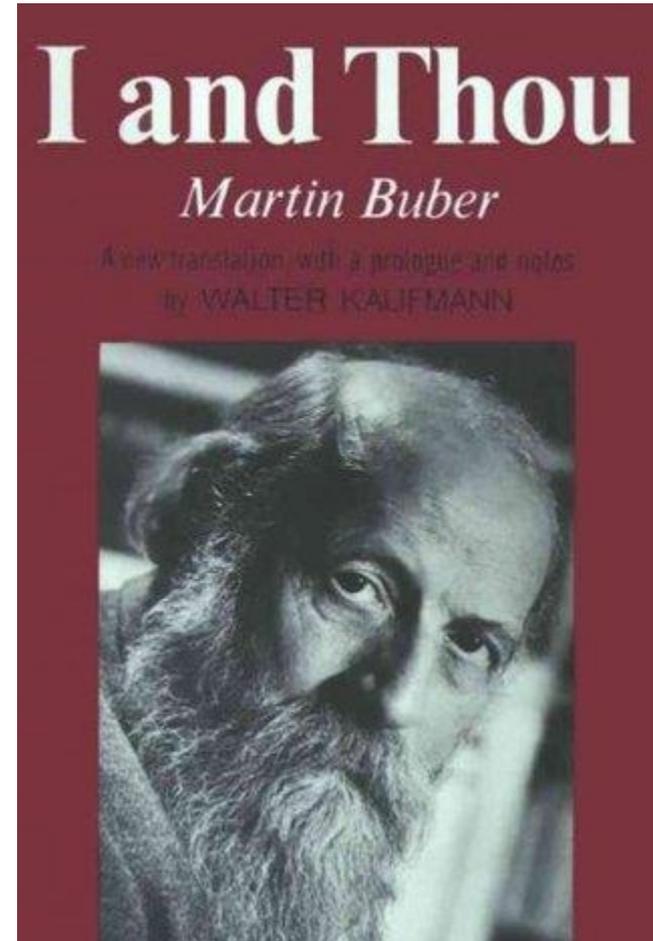
## Rousseau

- Trains Emile first to be an “active and thinking” being, then to be a “loving and feeling” being
- “To perfect reason by sentiment”
- Emile studies painful things so he can learn empathy and compassion
- He needs friendship and must give love in order to be happy
- Diminish the excess of the desires over the faculties



## Answers from Religion: Buber

- Two basic attitudes
  - I – It      I – You
- I-You always spoken with one's whole being
- Stand in relation
  - Relation is reciprocity
- I require a You to become
  - Child has drive for relation
- Every You is glimpse of the eternal You
  - Relationship with God includes all others



## The Christian Bible

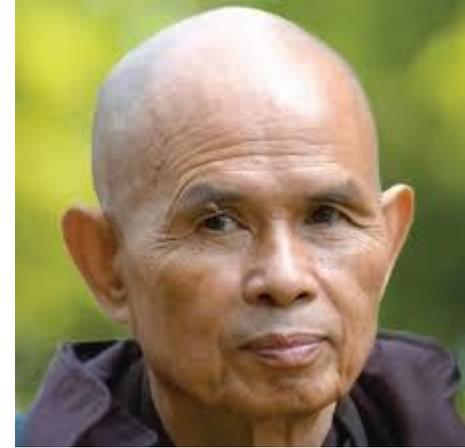
*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.... If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.* 1 John 4: 7, 12

## Buddhism

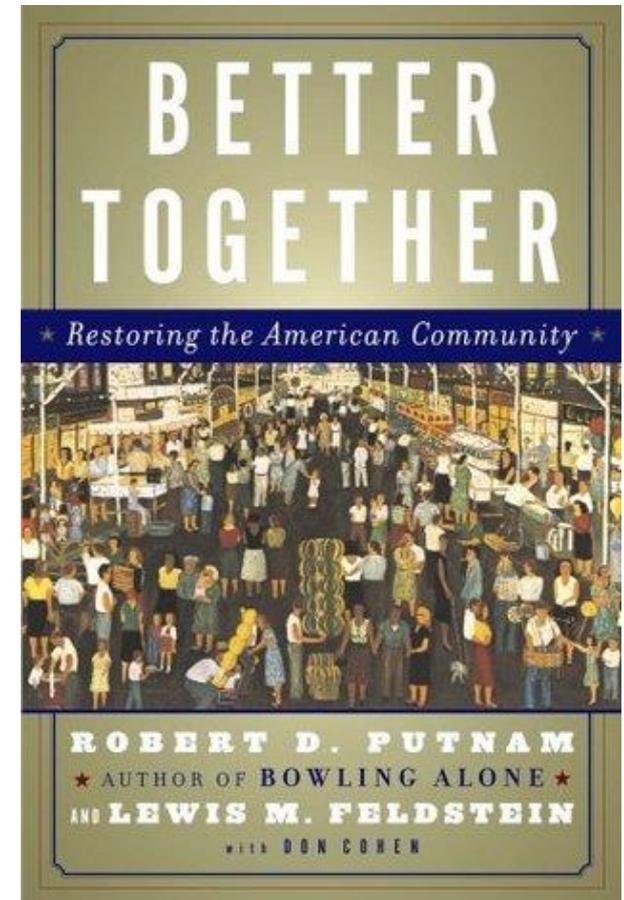
- Well-being is cessation of suffering and nourishing of joy
- Right mindfulness: stopping, calming, resting, healing
  - Dwell fully in the present moment
- Joy, peace, contentment: brought through true love
- Love: intention and capacity to offer joy and happiness
  - Capacity comes from understanding



Thich Nhat Hanh

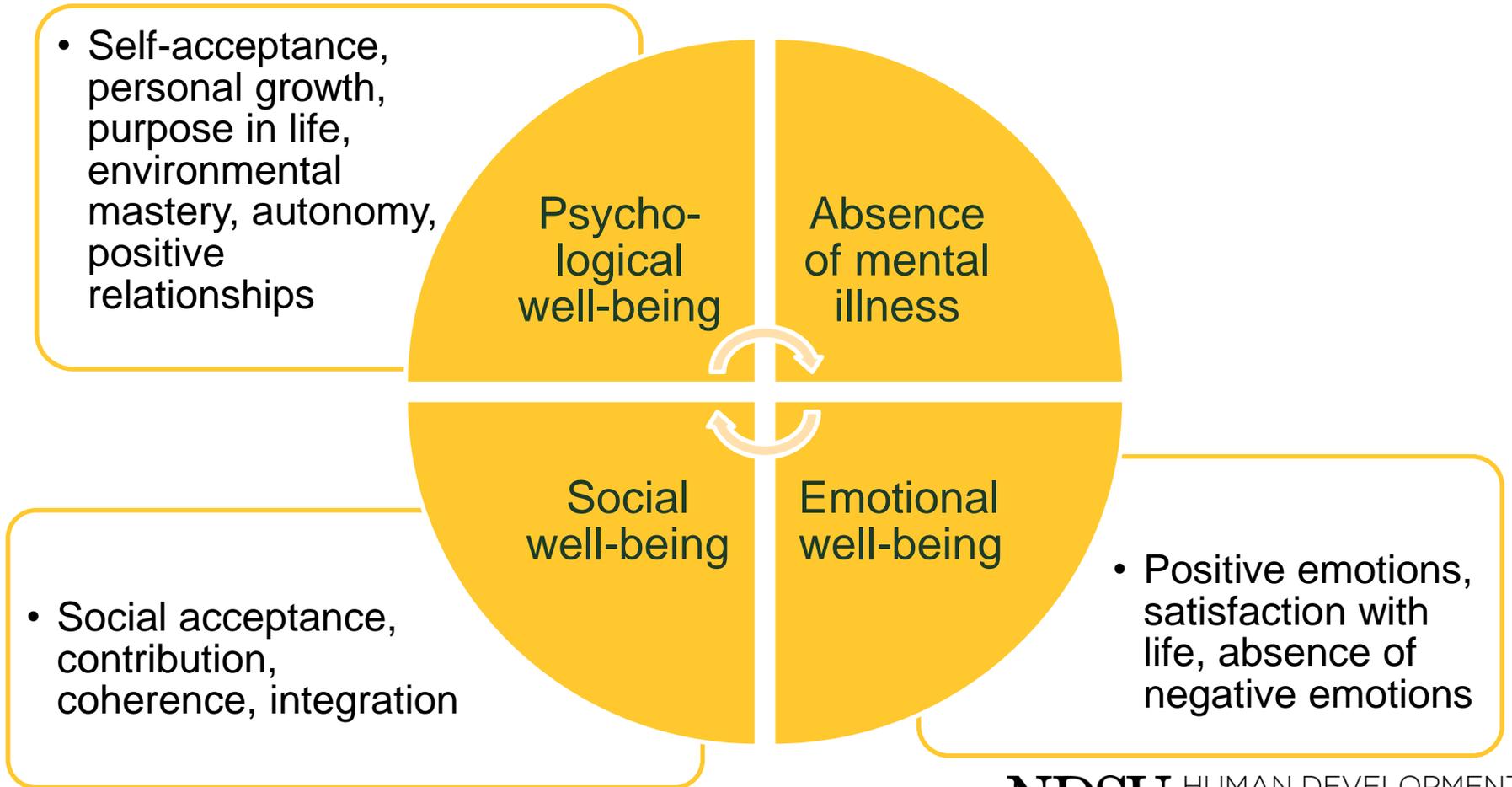
## Answers from Sociology

- Living in community versus “Bowling Alone”
- Social capital: social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness
  - Has value for people in the networks and bystanders
  - Bonding: links among similar people
  - Bridging: links among different types of people
  - Built through stories: constructing, listening (I, We, and They stories)



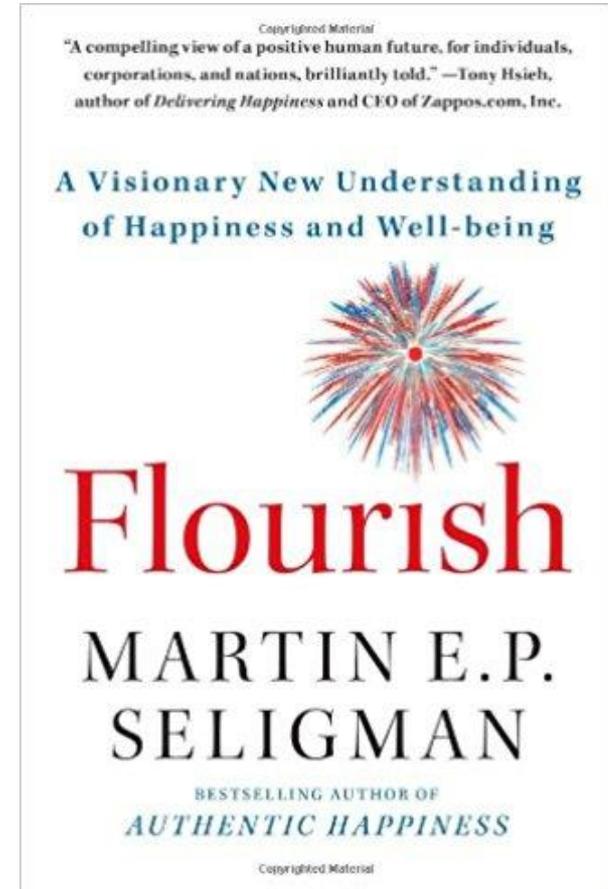
# Answers from (Positive) Psychology

Well-being = complete mental health (Keyes & Lopez, 2002)

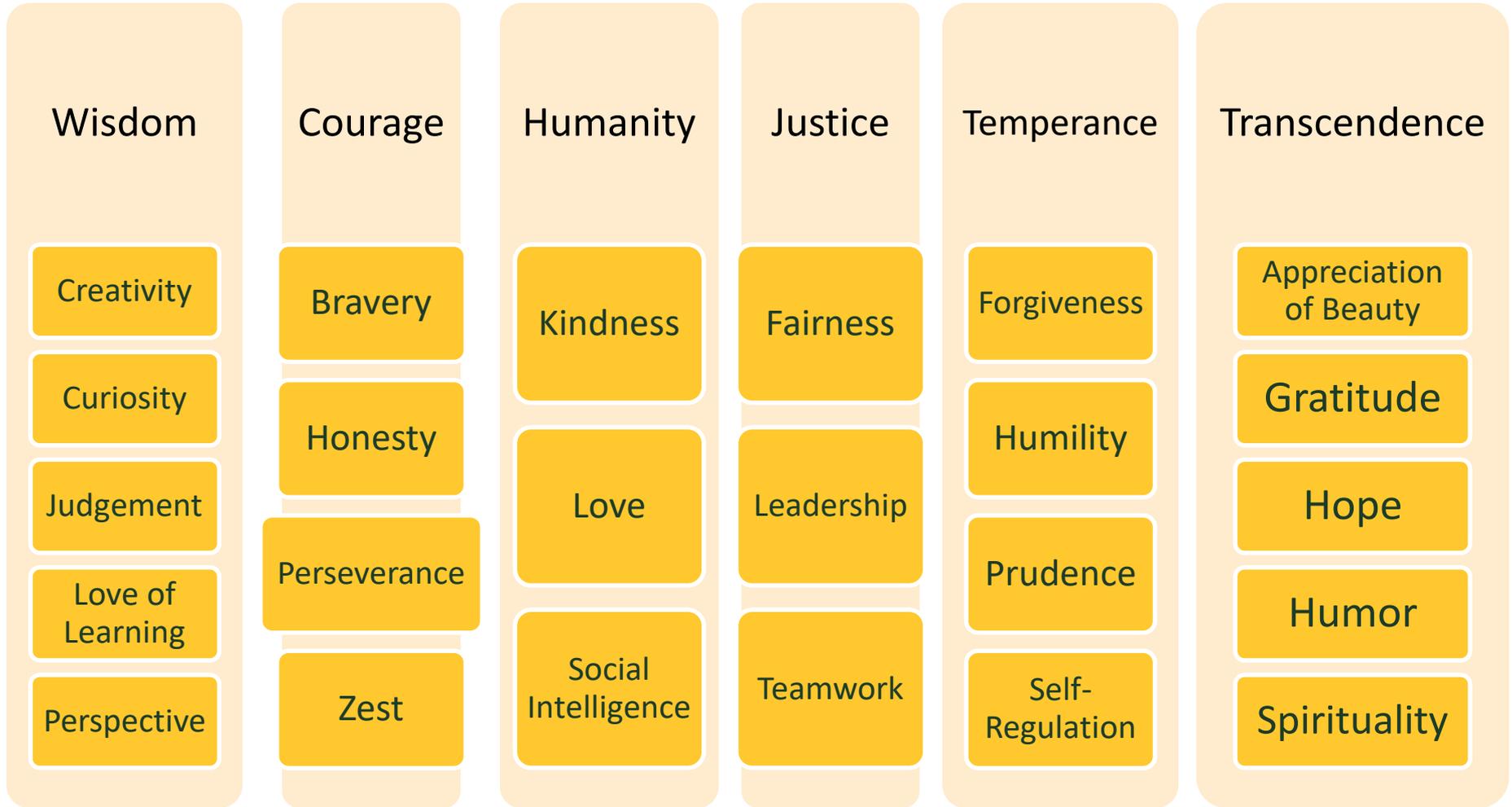


# Well-being as a Process, not Just a State

- **Positive Emotions**
  - Savoring life's pleasures
- **Engagement**
  - Experiencing "Flow" by engaging skills in a challenging activity
- **Relationships**
  - Supporting others and being supportive
- **Meaning**
  - Belonging to and serving something bigger than the self
- **Accomplishment**
  - Working to achieve mastery



# Well-Being Underpinned by Character Strengths



## So, is there a role for Spirituality or Religion?

- Both spirituality and religion involve a search for the sacred
  - Sacred: divine being or ultimate truth
  - Spiritual people can be nonreligious, but many people are both
- Religious participation predicts:
  - Greater happiness and life satisfaction (Myers, 2008)
  - Better physical health and longer life (Headey et al., 2014)
  - More social support through relationships (Diener, et al., 2011)
  - A sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging to something larger
- Type of belief matters
  - Well-being linked to religion that is internalized, intrinsically motivated, based on secure relationship with God (Pargament, 2002)
  - Negatively related to imposed, unexamined beliefs or beliefs in harsh and punitive God (Silton, et al., 2014)

## Putting it All Together

- Optimal human development, or a striving toward well-being for the self and others, should be studied and pursued
- Many disciplines and religions provide valuable insights on well-being that are largely coherent, not contradictory
- To develop optimally, spirituality or religion may well be necessary for some people, one good option for a lot of people, and a poor fit for other people
  - There are other ways non-spiritual or non-religious people can develop a sense of meaning and purpose and establish positive relationships

