

A graphic of several white puzzle pieces arranged in a grid, overlapping the text. The pieces are slightly offset, creating a sense of depth and movement.

# THE FLOURISHING SOCIETY

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## **The Flourishing Society: Introduction**

*– Fergus O’Ferrall*

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Human flourishing is the end of all political, social, economic and political activity. If any activity is known to be harmful to the overall well-being of human beings, or any of one person or group in society, then it should be opposed and ended. It is, therefore, of first importance to ensure that the vision of human flourishing is articulated and kept clearly in view at all times. It is vital that all our public activity – political, social, economic and cultural- is measured regularly to assess what progress is being made towards the fulfilment of the vision. The contributions in this publication are written to assist in the articulation of such a vision and to essay what might be involved in the Irish context in achieving a ‘flourishing society’. The focus is upon articulating a new vision and indicating strategic and practical steps towards achieving such a vision: there have been many excellent analysis of the causes and consequences of the collapse of the ‘neo-liberal’ economic model. This publication is intended to help develop a sustainable alternative.

### **The Flourishing Society – vision and components**

Irish society, embedded as it is in a globalising world, is undergoing a deep-seated and prolonged multi-dimensional crisis. This has provoked widespread debate and a search for solutions for aspects of the crisis. There is however, as yet, no widely shared inspiring vision which would provide the essential guideposts for reform and change across the many crisis-laden aspects of our society. Broadly speaking the essayists in this publication argue the end of all our activity should be to enable each person to function and flourish within a society that has the common good of all as its lodestar. Political philosophy and the social sciences enable us to identify the main components of what the pursuit of ‘public happiness’ requires in terms of practical public policies– healthy societies are those that share an inspiring narrative about the meaning of the good life; there ought to be a certain level of equality in respect of income and welfare to facilitate a more equal citizenship; the market economy should function within a climate of strong social and political institutions; provision should be made for universal education and health systems; as far as possible full employment

opportunities should be created so that all may make their contribution. The essays below explore aspects of these components in richer detail. My own essay seeks to delineate a vision of a civic republic and the elements required to build a truly republican society and state. Philip Orr's essay is a significant contribution drawing out from our past the possibility of a more inspiring narrative about how we understand our human motivations and the central relevance of this to the challenges we now face in the wake of the crisis of capitalism. Moral philosophy and, in particular that of Francis Hutcheson, assumes seminal importance in our efforts to construct a more accurate and inspiring narrative concerning human flourishing. Sinead Pentony discusses the key issue of how we develop an Irish economy which will service and support a flourishing society. Sli Eile, the *nom de plume* of an experienced public servant, details the necessary changes required in our political, institutional and legal frameworks if we are to build a new civic republic. Robin Wilson examines what we may learn from the Nordic countries in the wake of the collapse of the 'Celtic Tiger' economy. We conclude with a composite statement 'Towards a Flourishing Society' as a contribution to the vital debate about renewal in the Irish State and economy illustrating how the themes and threads in the separate essays might be drawn together to produce both a coherent vision of a flourishing society and an approach to public policy making that would help realise such a vision.

### **Values are at the heart of the matter**

At the centre of a flourishing society must be certain values which need to be embraced and expressed by citizens. It is important, in the current Irish crisis, not to rush to hand-me-down 'solutions' or 'reforms', based upon a broken economic model. To do so would be to neglect the slow but vital process of articulating values and building norms of behaviour which are essential to a flourishing society. It might indeed be argued that what has been lacking in the Irish context has been a widespread public understanding and commitment to such values and norms as are discussed in this set of essays. Many initiatives, indeed, might be taken to 'consult' the people on what needs to be done; however, if the well of the public mind has run dry or has been shaped by exhausted ideas then surely it is valuable to drill deeper into other streams perhaps to find new streams flowing underground deep in our past as so valuably done in Philip Orr's essay. We may very profitably seek fresh channels in the thinking of other people beyond our

shores as Robin Wilson essay does so informatively in relation to the Nordic countries. Take for example the national approach to wealth: we have sought, hitherto, as the main measure of our 'success' growth as measured by gross national product. However, political wisdom from classical times teaches us first to decide what kind of political, social and cultural living we desire to pursue before simply opting for wealth creation as the main or indeed the only measure of national development. As Aristotle argued concerning the framework of a flourishing society, it is necessary to discuss first 'what the most choiceworthy way of life is. As long as this is unclear, the best regime must necessarily be unclear as well.' The recovery of the wisdom embedded in moral and political philosophy concerning what is supportive of human flourishing proves to be a vital resource in seeking to develop a new paradigm for societal development in the face of the literal, as well as the moral bankruptcy, of the 'neo-liberal' paradigm. Wealth creation has been the pivot around which our society has revolved and we urgently need to be reminded by Aristotle that 'clearly wealth is not the good we are seeking, since it is [merely] useful, [choiceworthy only] for some other end.' Resources, such as wealth, are good only insofar as they promote human development. In order for resources to be so utilised society must be centred upon the unique value of the human person and what is required for each person to function as fully as possible and so to live a flourishing life. Sinead Pentony's essay convincingly argues that we need a radical new political economy to underpin the challenges ahead if all public policies are to create and support the conditions for a flourishing society.

### **The Human development and capability approach**

Each society is a work in progress: the key question is in what direction is it progressing? Societies decay and decline while others develop and grow. It has become apparent that the essential ingredients of positive development and growth are the people who compose the society. The emergence of the human development and capability approach in recent decades as an alternative to the broken 'neo-liberal' model is a decisive shift and one that Ireland needs to embrace.<sup>1</sup> This involves a wide range of measures of aspects of human development being employed to assess and develop public policy. It requires a radical change in public governance based upon developing the capabilities of all citizens to engage in public deliberation and the design of public services as well

as in the 'co-production' of the optimum outcomes of policy and services. Amartya Sen has formulated a capability approach that links closely to the Aristotelian conception of the vision of human flourishing; Sen emphasises the importance of freedom, attaching value to choice and opportunities for individuals to live the life they choose and have reason to value given their personal and social circumstances. Building upon these insights we come to appreciate that resources such as wealth, income, and say, health care, are not the key variable on which to focus when evaluating societal development. Rather the focal variable is that of individual capability to achieve valuable functionings: the capability to lead a worthwhile life. Capability to function incorporates both well-being and the freedom to pursue well-being. This approach has radical and fundamental implications: if adopted it would mean that we would assess all our public policies and services through this totally new lens: asking the radical questions as to how they are developing in those served by them better human functionings and improved capabilities. We would accept as a societal obligation the provision of the essential resources and supports required to improve our people's capability to function.<sup>2</sup>

If we make this 'paradigm shift' then a positive virtuous circle begins to develop: by utilising a capability approach as we learn together how to optimise outcomes in relation to public services; simultaneously new capabilities are evoked while improved outcomes result- over a longer period society itself develops positively with a greater human capacity to grow towards an ever more flourishing one.

### **The Flourishing Society – emerges from a new discourse**

As the reference to Amartya Sen indicates, the concept of a flourishing society and a new paradigm for development has emerged from the seminal discourse in political philosophy and economic thought which began well before the collapse of the financial and economic systems in the western world in 2007-2008. The indicators of the emerging crisis conditions were indeed evident for some decades before the crash. **The Stiglitz Report** for the UN observed that "the crisis is man-made: it was the result of mistakes by the private sector and misguided and failed policies of the public."<sup>3</sup> This Report set out how the neo-liberal economic philosophies which prevailed for the past quarter century distorted decisions in both the private and public sectors and how flawed institutions and institutional arrangements at both national and international levels contributed to the crisis. Other and sounder political and economic

philosophies were overlooked. The Stiglitz Report states that it is essential that we now work “for a robust and sustainable recovery and for reforms that ensure long-term, democratic, equitable, stable, and sustainable growth” and that we do this “with a broader respect for a wide range of ideas and perspectives”.<sup>4</sup> A particular and pernicious concept of the market- that markets are a self-correcting mechanism which will assure economic development and that regulation is accordingly either unnecessary or ought to be ‘light-touch’- pervaded the ideologies of the ruling elites in our society. This concept was based upon economic illiteracy by so many in the profession of economics who simplistically and with devastating consequences produced economic analyses ignoring the moral philosophical bases necessary to their discipline as even a nodding acquaintance with the master-work of Adam Smith would have avoided.<sup>5</sup> Philip Orr’s essay reminds of the fundamental importance of that great Irish moral philosopher, Francis Hutcheson, the father of the Scottish Enlightenment and teacher of Adam Smith. Human motivations are deeper and more plural than simply the pursuit of self-interest – we have a profound capacity for sympathy with other human beings and the ability to act altruistically: we can, and must if we are to flourish, develop and live according to a moral code that is to the long-term benefit of everyone. We need to recover our confidence in this regard in order to challenge the still influential ‘neo-liberals’ who have either refused or been unable to learn the lessons of failure- even one so massive as the Great Recession of 2008. The collapse of the moral authority associated with the Roman Catholic Church in the Irish State adds even greater urgency to our need to articulate and find a new consensus around a moral code without which no society can flourish.

### **A new politics of the common good?**

It is important that progressive thinkers do not abandon the field of moral and religious discourse to other less benign forces in society: warning must be taken from the gross misuse of Christianity by fundamentalist and right-wing reactionary elements now so dominant in the Republican Party in the USA. The solution to certain problems does require moral transformation: issues of justice and equality, for example, rely upon norms and values which flow from the Jewish and Christian heritage in the western world. Social democratic and progressive thinking in the past drew from religiously expressed social values.

The resources of Christian social teaching remain fundamental in the Irish context in the struggle for justice, equality, and solidarity given the religious composition of our people. The essential separation of churches from the State ought not to mean that we shut off the potential of faith-based progressive thinking in relation to the flourishing society. To do so would be fatal to the need for motivational and meaningful narratives for so many citizens. It would be, also, perhaps, a betrayal of so many Christian witnesses in the battles for justice and equality such as Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, and others that might be named in the Irish context such as, for example, Dr. Kathleen Lynn, the pioneer of children's healthcare. In the pursuit of justice and equality we cannot set aside our personal moral and religious convictions. Of course, we should not expect to impose particular moral standpoints which have not been reasoned in public deliberation and received democratic endorsement.<sup>6</sup> Michael Sandel, the influential political philosopher, has argued persuasively that justice involves cultivating virtue and reasoning about the common good:

*"A just society can't be achieved simply by maximising utility or by securing freedom of choice. To achieve a just society we have to reason together about the meaning of the good life, and to create a public culture hospitable to the disagreements that will inevitably arise... The challenge is to imagine a politics that takes moral and spiritual questions seriously, but brings them to bear on broad economic and civic concerns, not only on sex and abortion."*<sup>7</sup>

Sandel's framework of key themes for 'a new politics of the common good' deserve deep and widespread public deliberation: *citizenship, sacrifice and service; the moral limits of markets; inequality, solidarity, and civic virtue; and a politics of moral engagement.*<sup>8</sup>

### Thinking big in dark times

The concept that we hold about the nature and capacity of the human being is fundamental to the kind of society we envision. As essayists we believe in a view of the human person that is not static or one-dimensional but is rather a plural, active one – we flourish best when we have autonomy and when we exercise this autonomy in positive relationships with others. We flourish best when we have scope to use our imaginative and creative potential – knowing that our needs and interests change and develop over time. We have actual -and potential

capabilities- that naturally seek outlets for expression in the service of others. We are social beings who flourish best when we can help meet each other people's needs. By so doing so we develop good habits which become the social virtues which underpin a successful and flourishing society. This more accurate and rounded concept of the human person contrasts sharply with the merely self-interested maximiser of commodities propounded in neo-liberal ideology. It also generates a richer conception of what society as a whole can achieve. New thinking and thinking big, as the essays that follow invite us to do, is now imperative in the face of the Irish crisis. As we learn from the work of Hannah Arendt, the political philosopher whose seminal work reflects so profoundly on the human awfulness of the twentieth century, there is a fundamental relation between thinking and right-doing and, in the reverse, between thoughtlessness and wrong-doing. The capacity to think is inherent in the human person but must be developed: we need to develop opportunities for such fresh thinking by all citizens who wish to be free of received, unexamined beliefs. In "dark times, thinking brings much needed light and clarity".<sup>9</sup> Thinking becomes crucial in freeing ourselves from the scripts and standards that we too often take for granted or that may be regarded as immutable, even when they bring crisis and disaster in their train. Thinking is vital not only in moments of crisis but will remain essential in times to come when we have brighter possibilities before us. We are challenged, at this historical juncture, to think afresh in a very fundamental way and to think big for Ireland in these 'dark times'.

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<sup>1</sup> See the multidisciplinary works by Amartya Sen, the Nobel winning economist, especially **Development as Freedom** (Oxford, 1999) and **The Idea of Justice** (London, 2009); for commentary see **Amartya Sen** edited by Christopher W. Morris in *The Contemporary Philosophy in Focus Series* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010); see also Martha C. Nussbaum, **Creating Capabilities The Human Development Approach**, (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See a more detailed description in Fergus O'Ferrall, 'Public Participation: Involving Citizens in Designing Public Services', in **Working Notes Facts and Analysis of Social and Economic Issues**, Issue No:67, September, 2011, pp.3-9.

<sup>3</sup> See **The Stiglitz Report Reforming the International Monetary and Financial Systems in the Wake of the Global Crisis** by Joseph E. Stiglitz and members of a Un Commission of Financial Experts, (The New Press, New York, 2010) p.191.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.194.

<sup>5</sup> See Adam Smith **The Theory of Moral Sentiments** Introduced by Amartya Sen and edited with notes by Ryan Patrick Hanley (Penguin Books, London, 2009) and **The Cambridge Companion to Adam Smith**, edited by Knud Haakonson (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See the very valuable contribution by Gerry O'Hanlon SJ., **Theology in the Irish Public Square**, (The Columba Press, 2010). and Fergus O'Ferrall 'Deus caritas est and Active Citizenship' in **Who is My Neighbour? Deus Caritas Est: AN Encyclical for Our Times?**, edited by Eoin G. Cassidy (Veritas, 2009),

pp109-118 for brief discussion of possibility of a consensus building by the mainline Irish churches concerning the common good; see also **From Crisis To Hope Working To Achieve The Common Good** by The Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference (Veritas, Dublin, 2011)

<sup>7</sup> See Michael Sandel, **Justice What's The Right Thing To Do?**, (Penguin Books, London, 2009) p.261-262.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid pp.261-269

<sup>9</sup> See **Thinking in Dark Times Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics**, edited by Roger Berkowitz, Jeffrey Katz and Thomas Keenan (Fordham University Press, New York, 2010) especially introduction by Roger Berkowitz and 'What does it mean to think about politics' by Mark Antaki in this important collection of essays.