

HUMAN FLOURISHING #6

Libin Joseph

TELEOLOGY AND HUMAN ACTION

Dynamics of a Meaningful Life in William James

EDUSC 2026

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THE HUMAN FLOURISHING SERIES

Human Flourishing, a new series of monographs and essays, is the fruit of recent research by a group of doctorate students and professors from the Pontificia Università della Santa Croce (Rome), in collaboration with Universidad Panamericana (Mexico). The works in this Series delve into fundamental topics found in the crux between the philosophy of the person, or philosophical anthropology, and psychology today. The research behind the Series has been carried out in close collaboration with specialists in both clinical and experimental psychology; many of these works have been presented in their various stages of development at interdisciplinary congresses and encounters.

The Series tackles topics that have been the object of a widespread interest that has gradually emerged across fields and over time. The relatively recent development of experimental psychology has been marked by the intention of maintaining it separate from its speculative origin in classical philosophy. Moreover, in broad sectors of applied thought, such as business ethics and organizational ethics, the axiological discourse has remained linked to the advances in experimental psychology. Nevertheless, in these contexts, connections to philosophical thought are not at all remote, as a good number of the scholars and promoters of organizational psychology and other such developments in the first half of the 20th century come from research areas that inevitably touch on the interdisciplinary: medicine, anatomy, biology, philosophy.

In successive generations, now-renowned authors initiated the incorporation of philosophical questions, hitherto unexpressed, into the fabric of experimental investigation. Magda Arnold, Gordon Allport, Abraham Maslow, and Viktor Frankl recuperate central themes such as the meaning of life, happiness, and the significance of the emotions in the person's growth.

The combination of a philosophical vision with psychological experimentation, inaugurated by William James, encountered new development channels for these rediscoveries of humanistic sense and exis-

tential meaning, leading to more studies on personality and attitude. In recent decades, the boom of positive psychology has brought into sharp relief the importance of profound and methodological analysis of these notions, sparking the collaboration of psychologists, educators, and philosophy scholars.

The first studies of this Series have their roots in two seminars organized at the Università della Santa Croce—one in September 2012 and another in January 2013. Collaboration from these encounters has matured and continued ever since.

The first seminar was eminently practical in scope, principally venturing into the coaching instruments. The impulse of Luis Romera and the participation of Federica Bergamino set things in motion, marking out the work for the following years. The availability, reliability, and openness of Evaristo Aguado and Edith Castellarnau helped us understand the depth behind the application of some psychological tools to build up and amplify a professional's capacity for work. The added value of the systematic application of these instruments was not so much in the increase of professional efficiency as in the promotion of becoming aware and conscious of one's own responsibilities and growth in autonomy.

The second seminar (January 2013) was organized by Martin Schlag and Juan Andrés Mercado as part of the work of the *Markets, Culture, and Ethics Research Centre* (MCE). Around twenty professors from various management schools in Mexico, Spain, Chile and Argentina participated, generating a fruitful exploration which helped us confirm or discover tracks for future investigations.

The anthropological aspects of some of the issues dealt with in these encounters converged in an international conference hosted by the School of Philosophy of the same Università della Santa Croce, "Personal flourishing in organizations," in February 2014. Seven months later, a collection of texts presented in said congress and revolving around the method of coaching was published, with Federica Bergamino as editor: *Desiderio e consapevolezza. Fondamenti e fenomenologia del coaching* (EDUSC, 2014). Furthermore, another publication collecting some of the major papers and presentations was released in a single volume later on: *Personal flourishing in organizations* (Springer, 2017).

Shortly afterwards, Livia Bastos Andrade finished the first systematic study on *eudaimonia* in the thought of Martin Seligman, a vast and detailed presentation on the movement spearheaded by the American

psychologist. While Dr Bastos published her thesis *L'èudaimonia nella proposta della psicologia positiva di Martin Seligman* (EDUSC, 2019), other doctorate projects were on their way to maturity—works now in the final stage of revision and soon to be included in the *Human Flourishing Series*.

In 2020, *Acta Philosophica* released a monographic issue: “Virtues, Suffering, and the Search for Meaning. At the Crossroads of Philosophy and Psychology,” which featured works from scholars such as Nancy Snow and Antonella Delle Fave.

It is worth noting that from 2016 onwards, our work has received beneficial influence from the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues. In addition, the network of collaboration promoted by James Arthur and Kristján Kristjánsson has allowed us to broaden and deepen our academic friendship and exchange with a considerable number of high-level specialists. The congresses on virtues held yearly in Oriel College, Oxford, have been of particular importance.

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TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

1. *The Main Works of William James*

CWJ1-12	<i>The Correspondence of William James</i> , vols. 1-12
ECR	<i>Essays, Comments, and Reviews</i>
EP	<i>Essays in Philosophy</i>
EPs	<i>Essays in Psychology</i>
ERE	<i>Essays in Radical Empiricism</i>
ERM	<i>Essays in Religion and Morality</i>
LWJ1	<i>The Letters of William James</i> , vol. 1
LWJ2	<i>The Letters of William James</i> , vol. 2
MT	<i>The Meaning of Truth</i>
P	<i>Pragmatism</i>
PBC	<i>Psychology: The Briefer Course</i>
PP1	<i>The Principles of Psychology</i> , vol. 1
PP2	<i>The Principles of Psychology</i> , vol. 2
PU	<i>A Pluralistic Universe</i>
SPP	<i>Some Problems of Philosophy</i>
TT	<i>Talks to Teachers on Psychology, and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals</i>
VRE	<i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>
WB	<i>The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy</i>

2. *Other Abbreviations*

Cf.	Confer
cit.	cited
Co.	Company
ed./eds.	editor/editors

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

Ltd.	Limited
Pub.	Publishing/Publication
trans.	translated
vol./vols.	volume/volumes

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has altered our lifestyle, goals, attitudes, habits, emotions, and perspectives on life drastically and unprecedentedly. When we realized that we could not control the pandemic easily, we took all the preventive measures to keep ourselves safe. We found essential activities like social gatherings, travel, education, sporting events, and religious activities secondary to survival. It does not mean that human aspirations are limited to survival. Once a slow pace of survival was initiated, we looked forward to achieving our ‘temporally halted’ higher needs and goals with the assistance of new technological platforms. This two-way process of ‘adjusting ourselves to the environment’ and ‘adjusting our environment’ is indispensable for human flourishing. It is a contextual application of integrating our goals and efforts to enhance the meaning of our life.

This book, entitled *Teleology and Human Action: Dynamics of a Meaningful Life in William James*, analyses the relationship between teleology and human action in William James’s philosophy and its implications for a meaningful life. It primarily designates human being’s unique teleological nature. The teleological orientation in human beings is qualitatively superior to inanimate objects, plants, and animals. It is marked by human beings’ ability to choose their goals and modify their actions consciously. There is an integration of purpose and action in most of the human affairs. James’s psychological analysis elucidates that conscious, volitional, rational, habitual, instinctual, and emotional activities have teleological functions. His philosophical investigation clarifies further that perception, thought, knowledge, truth, belief, and passion are teleologically directed. His pragmatic approach to life and reality would not reduce them to teleology and action. The divine assistance and life of contemplation are their indispensable and inseparable facets. This work will elucidate that integration (marriage) of purpose and action (ideal and strenuousness) is a requisite to lead a meaningful life. Viktor Frankl’s and positive psychology’s perspectives of life’s meaning

affirm the Jamesian approach to meaning. James's philosophy can be affirmed and modified by drawing relevant inspirations from Aquinas's view of hope.

The three fundamental notions in the title, (1) Teleology, (2) Human Action, and (3) Meaningful Life, are deliberated in specific senses in this book. The meaning of 'teleology' is principally taken in a non-metaphysical sense, referring to the goals or ends that human beings acquire through their abilities and efforts. However, it does not negate the metaphysical aspects of teleology. Human action primarily refers to what an agent intentionally, consciously, and purposively performs. It also refers to the behaviour of a person like automatic, reflexive, habitual, instinctual, and emotional activities. Their coordinative functioning is illustrated in the work. Although the meaning of life is frequently seen as a subjective and relative notion, this book will take account of the more acceptable criteria like moral, psychological, religious, and social well-being rather than success, economic reward, and social popularity.

The teleological consideration of the universe and the human person was part of the philosophical debates in the history of philosophy ever since the classical Greek thought. The term 'teleology' traces its origin to the Greek terms *telos* (end, goal, or result) and *logos* (logic, reason, or argument).¹ The German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754) began to use it in the philosophical literature. He coined the Latin term *teleologia* in his natural philosophy to explicate the 'ends of things.' He considered 'Teleology' a special science distinct from 'Physics.' The physicist and inventor Georges-Louis Le Sage (1724-1803) adopted the term 'teleology' from Wolff. He proposed to advance a "theory of the ends of nature and art."² Teleology became widespread in scientific and philosophic circles by the second half of the eighteenth century. When William James elaborated his thought, teleology was considered "the science of ends" in contrast to aetiology, "the science of causes."³ The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines teleology as "[...] explanation by refer-

¹ "Teleology," *Online etymology dictionary* [<https://www.etymonline.com/word/teleology>] 2 May 2019.

² M. R. Johnson, *Aristotle on teleology*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 30-31.

³ F. Adler, "The problem of teleology," *International Journal of Ethics* 14/3 (April 1904), pp. 265-280, p. 265.

ence to some purpose, end, goal, or function.”⁴ It is a broader definition of teleology. However, it is analogously used in philosophical literature carrying diverse meanings in different contexts.

Ernst Mayr (1904–2004), a leading evolutionary biologist of the twentieth century, made a reservation in considering teleology a unitary phenomenon. Hence, he adopted the terms ‘teleomatic’ and ‘teleonomic’ to represent teleology’s distinctive use.⁵ Teleomatic denotes the processes in which “[...] the end state of the process is determined by its properties at the beginning.”⁶ All processes in inorganic nature having an endpoint like a river flowing into the ocean come under this category. Teleonomic designates the programmed activities where the goal-directedness of a process is owed to a program’s operation. The programs that control teleonomic processes do not exist in inanimate nature. Mayr further categorises teleology’s meaning into animal’s purposeful behaviour, adaptive characteristics, and cosmic teleology.⁷ Not everyone agrees to follow Mayr’s proposal of adopting distinctive terms. For instance, George F. Oster and Edward O. Wilson accentuate the long-standing term ‘teleology.’⁸ Most contemporary authors continue to use the term ‘teleology’ and clarify its specific meaning/meanings adopted in their works.

This work will consider two principal ways of understanding teleology: (1) functional teleology and (2) purposeful teleology. Functional teleology involves “[...] achievement of a goal without effort or intention, as a natural outgrowth of the thing’s nature or of the arrangements of its parts [...]”⁹ A river flowing to the sea and a leaf turning towards sunshine are examples. Everything in nature has one or more natural function/s that exist/s without human intention, consciousness, or choice. It has been studied in cosmology, natural science, and religious

⁴ “Teleology,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/teleology>], 2 May 2019.

⁵ E. Mayr, “The idea of teleology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53/1 (January–March 1992), pp. 117–135, pp. 125–130.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 125–128.

⁸ M. Ruse, “Teleology and the biological sciences,” in N. Rescher (ed.), *Current issues in teleology*, University Press of America, 1986, pp. 56–64, p. 57.

⁹ P. Croce, “A future-oriented teleology. Evolutionary biology, Jamesian philosophical psychology, and sufficient design” [<http://www.metanexus.net/future-oriented-teleology-evolutionary-biology-jamesian-philosophical-psychology-and/>] 1 February 2019.

studies. Purposeful teleology is associated with functions performed and goals achieved in purposeful ways. It involves “[...] consciousness with its power to anticipate, motivate and select [...]” and implies “[...] achievement of goal with persistence and sensitivity to surrounding conditions.”¹⁰ It is related to human intentions, consciousness, and choices. It is applied in ethics, anthropology, psychology, politics, and other branches of social science.

Although the compartmentalization of functional and purposeful teleologies is supportive for analysis, they are complexly entangled. Purposeful teleology, in some sense, is rooted in functional teleology. The teleology of the artefacts is a combination of function and purpose. Artefacts are natural objects modified and used for human purposes. Natural objects like pebbles become artefacts when they are used as ashtrays or placed at doorsteps.¹¹ The complexity increases when natural objects are taken to explain social customs. For instance, coconut shells have their natural functions, but they are hung up outside the hut in some tribes to ward off evil spirits.¹² Function and purpose are inseparable in teleological issues of intelligent design and the ultimate purpose. The human experience of creating artefacts metaphorically drew to the idea of the Intelligent Designer.¹³

Functional and purposeful teleologies have a strong foundation in the Platonic and the Aristotelian philosophies.¹⁴ William James, who had a strong background in natural and social sciences, tried to integrate both teleological perspectives. Darwinism’s challenges to teleology captured James’s interest in teleological issues. In contemporaneity, the scholars in natural and social sciences draw inspiration from James and apply his findings in their respective fields of research. This book will principally focus on Jamesian teleology’s implications in social science (purposeful teleology). However, its implications for natural science (functional teleology) will be incorporated wherever it supports the work’s focus.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ A. Woodfield, *Teleology*, Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 111; J. Jacobs, “Teleological form and explanation,” in N. Rescher (ed.), *Current issues in teleology*, University Press of America, 1986, pp. 49-55, p. 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113. The coconut used for warding off the evil spirit may be a superstitious belief, but it has a function as long as a belief is concerned.

¹³ M. Ruse, “Teleology and the biological sciences,” cit., pp. 58-59.

¹⁴ The Platonic and the Aristotelian basis of teleology will be explained Chapter 2, title ‘Pre-Darwinian Teleological Perspectives.’

The central question of the work is: *How does teleology guide human action for a meaningful life within William James's thought?* This question is further divided into two: (1) *How does the thought about the future guide human action?* and (2) *How does the teleological action lead to a meaningful life?*

The general methodology employed is analytical and critical. An inter-disciplinary approach supports the analytical method. This approach is vital because James has followed it in his writings, which links his physiological, psychological, anthropological, pragmatic, moral, and religious perspectives. The hermeneutic method is followed to evaluate the strength and weakness of the Jamesian model. Apart from comparing different formulations of the concepts in James's texts, it incorporates interpretations of influential Jamesian scholars, ideas of the thinkers who take supporting and opposing stands, and personal observations. A synthesis is made in the book to give a holistic perspective of the theme.

It is an irrefutable fact that 'teleology' is a fundamental notion in James's writings. It is evidently seen in his essay "Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" and the works such as *The Principles of Psychology*, *Pragmatism*, and *Some Problems of Philosophy*. Jamesian scholars like Paul Croce, John J. McDermott, Hilary Putnam, Ruth Anna Putnam, Sami Pihlström, and Michael P. Lempert have elucidated certain aspects of it, but no one has undertaken a comprehensive study. No book or research on James is found with the titles 'teleology,' 'purpose,' or equivalent terms. Hence, the fragments of teleological perspectives scattered in James's writings are diligently gathered and presented in this book. It can be considered the most remarkable novelty of the work. Additionally, this book attempts to establish the relation between 'teleology and human action.' James's pragmatism as a 'philosophy of action' focuses principally on teleology with reference to human action. 'Teleology and human action' often function coherently as a single unit in Jamesian philosophy. The major part of the book (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3) concentrates on it.

James has been criticized for not having developed a systematic philosophy. This criticism is partially correct; most of his writings were the edited version of his lectures and essays written in different contexts. Nevertheless, many scholars argue that James has well-defined perspectives on what seems to be unsystematic. This work will give additional support to this argument. Chapters 2 and 3 present 'teleology and human action' as a central theme in James's philosophical psychology,

cosmology, anthropology, epistemology, moral philosophy, and religious thought. Although the partially unsystematic nature of James's writings increases the research's novelty, it has limitations in providing a comprehensive representation of his thought. Analysing and interpreting all his works as a single unit is challenging. In the process of understanding James's perspectives, it is possible to miss out certain links or alter the order of the links.

Some of the key terms used in the thesis have analogous meaning. For instance, the term 'teleology' carries a variety of meanings and applications. Its translations into purpose, aim, goal, end, and function are analogously used by different authors in metaphysics, natural science, religious thoughts, political philosophy, history, economics, psychology, and moral philosophy. A similar difficulty applies to the terms like action, meaning, significance, and pragmatism. Although attempts are made to give terminological clarity, they have limitations. Teleology is a vast research area in philosophy with many theories, applications, and literature. This book focuses on 'teleology' from a restricted circumference and consults limited number of literature. Similarly, the book focuses chiefly on the Jamesian version of 'pragmatism' although some important references of Peirce's and Dewey's versions are made. The primary sources of James's works are consulted comprehensively, although the interpretative biases and perspectives of the secondary authors cannot be ignored. However, these limitations are inconsequential against the merit of this work.

This book delivers a combination of *theoria* (theory/thinking) and *praxis* (practical/doing). Often pragmatism is associated with a practical philosophy and its theoretical foundation is ignored. I try to combine both the theoretical and practical dimensions of James's pragmatism. In fact, it is not ideal to disassociate both the dimensions. The theoretical and practical implications of 'teleology and human action' can be seen in the second and third chapters of the work. The last chapter of the work focuses on practical applications: leading a meaningful life. Some essays of James address the theme 'the meaning of life.' However, its place in his entire philosophy is not elucidated. Chapter 4 explicates how 'teleology and human action' presented in Chapters 2 and 3 can be a theoretical basis for the practical application of 'the meaning of life.'

The book will provide relevant indications about the possibilities of linking James's philosophy with the findings/trends of the different historical periods and socio-cultural settings. Some parallel findings of James's and Viktor Frankl's perspectives on the 'meaning of life' eluci-

date the shared elements that both of them highlight independently of each other's influence. Positive psychology, a relatively new branch of psychology, owes remarkably to James's thought. This work will illustrate how positive psychology, in some respect, is rooted in James's pragmatism and how James's philosophy originated more than a century ago continues to influence the research in the present time. The exposition and evaluation of James's teleology with Aquinas's 'hope' indicates the compatibility and relevance of Jamesian philosophy in the Christian traditions. These comparisons are meant to give schematic indications. They require further elaboration and this book can be an aid for future researches.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter will give a general purview of James's life and thought. It focuses on James's life and influences, the nature and characteristics of his works and thoughts, his influence in philosophy and culture, and certain criticisms and responses.

The second chapter will analyse the theme 'teleology and human action' in James's philosophical psychology. It begins with an exposition of the background that motivated James to engage in the issues of teleology. It addresses how teleology in human beings is qualitatively different from that in inorganic matter and animals. The analysis of the teleological nature of consciousness, habit, instinct, emotion, reason, and volition covers the major part of the chapter. The ideals and motives, which James considers as *telos* of human life, are illustrated in the last section of this chapter.

The third chapter is a continuation of the second, but it shifts its focus from philosophical psychology to the central themes of systematic philosophy. From the background of James's pragmatism and radical empiricism, the relation between 'teleology and human action' is analysed in his cosmology, anthropology, epistemology, moral philosophy, and religious thought. Dynamic and prospective nature of reality and truth is a central thread that binds these themes together. This part demonstrates that human effort is a significant factor in achieving a goal. It also indicates the significance of the supernatural/divine elements efficacious beyond human effort.

The last chapter of the book will explicate how teleology and human action can lead to a meaningful life. James's core texts on 'the meaning of life' are methodologically examined, and its three main facets, (1) purposiveness, (2) strenuousness, and (3) religiousness, are highlighted.

The Jamesian dynamics of meaning are appraised with the similar findings of Viktor Frankl. Subsequently, the Jamesian foundation of positive psychology and positive psychology's continuous thrust on the meaning of life are established. Threefold positive psychology applications (*eudaimonia*, virtue ethics, and prospection) are briefly analysed from a Jamesian standpoint. This chapter will be concluded by elucidating James's 'teleology' in relation to St. Thomas Aquinas's idea of 'hope.'