

Governance for Human Social Flourishing

Jenna Bednar

Government has become something that happens to us in service of the economy rather than a vehicle driven by us to realize what we can achieve together. To save the planet and live meaningful lives, we need to start seeing one another not as competitors but as collaborators working toward shared interests. In this essay, I propose a framework for human social flourishing to foster a public policy that rebuilds our connections and care for one another. It is based on four pillars – dignity, community, beauty, and sustainability – and emphasizes not just inclusiveness but participation, and highlights the importance of policy-making at the local level in the rebuilding of prosocial norms.

By many aggregate measures, the human condition has improved spectacularly.¹ Life expectancy, GDP per capita, opportunities for self-expression, and the probability of not living in poverty have all surged over the last half century. This period of remarkable advances has scaffolded a neoliberal political economy that prizes self-reliance and prosperity. Yet for all of the successes produced by the prosperity frame, it has proven incapable of meeting the challenges of climate change and bungled a pandemic response, turning what might have been a moment to celebrate scientific achievement and human commitment to care for one another into a time of greater polarization and science skepticism. Racism persists and we are unable to lift people out of lives of despair.²

These failures call into question our focus on economic prosperity metrics like GDP and the constellation of institutions that supports that goal.³ Economic prosperity has a far from perfect correlation with the less material and measurable goals that create meaningful lives: feeling needed by and belonging to a community, having purposeful work and agency in one's life, and having opportunities to feel satisfaction and joy.

By ignoring these other dimensions, the prosperity frame creates other harms. Its valuation of self-reliance subverts the human drive to mutualism.⁴ It casts government as a grabbing hand instead of an engine for collective action. In downplaying the importance of our relationships with one another, it undermines the social norms that support democracy, capitalism, and other social institutions.

For these reasons, many now suggest that our political economy needs to expand its frame beyond economic growth to include collective flourishing. But what is flourishing, and what would it take to reorient our political economy to value it?

There exists no universal or straightforward definition of a meaningful life. A strength of the neoliberal paradigm is that as long as you can price things, you can exchange money or its equivalent for your heart's desire, and every heart can sing its own song. But there is no guarantee that what you can procure on the market is what makes your heart sing. And choice is not agency.

In this essay, I argue that flourishing requires an emphasis on community, human dignity, sustainability, and beauty. None of these can be priced and they are not straightforward to measure: community and dignity are emergent phenomena, and sustainability and beauty require collective commitments. Three of these themes can be found throughout this issue of *Dædalus*, for example, in Chloe Thurston's dissection of the housing crisis, in John Ahlquist's call for employers to respect their employees' broader needs, in the explicit and deliberate inclusivity called for by Grieve Chelwa, Darrick Hamilton, and Avi Green, and in Rebecca Henderson's call for corporations to be sustainability leaders.⁵ The fourth, beauty, is unique to this essay.

I piece these threads together to create a general frame of flourishing. Because there are ten thousand ways to live a meaningful life, this frame does not pretend to prescribe the picture inside. But each thread does point to the second missing piece of the focus on prosperity: our relationships with one another. The impossibility of a universal vision, and the importance of collaborative connection to rebuild prosocial norms, means that supportive public policy needs to be local, enabling different communities to envision their own way forward. I sketch components of a research and policy agenda toward this aim.

Repairing the social fabric – the norms that sustain democracy and collective achievement – requires a vision that is both intimately interpersonal and thoroughly universal, encompassing both individual dignity and planetary sustainability. Dignity recenters our concern for justice and relations among individuals. Sustainability highlights the existential and universal threat of climate change. Efforts toward sustainability require shared purpose and trust. Dignity implies respect, agency, and belonging. Thus, we need community too: the reprioritization of healthy society and “place-making,” what urban planners call the creating of spaces where people interact, walk, and pause. And finally, community is enriched and made meaningful through beauty, embracing the human need for wonder and pleasure. In Aristotle's terms, it is *eudaimonia*, a political economy that prioritizes meaningful lives for all, not merely as individuals, but as interconnected, interdependent people.⁶

Dignity conveys our mutual worth. Humans need to feel a sense of purpose and belonging, to be seen as equally valued without being identical, to be appreciated despite and even because of our differences.⁷ Humans have a need for dignity.⁸

Dignity begins with relational equality – in philosopher Elizabeth Anderson’s terms, putting people at the same level legally, socially, and morally – and then takes a step further, to erase barriers to participation and to value and respect one another’s agency.⁹ In law, relational equality means not prioritizing one person over another. Socially, it is a welcoming mutual respect. Morally, it is the right and opportunity to be heard as well as the moral obligation to listen. Dignity is most clearly expressed when we include others in making decisions that affect our mutual interests.

Political and economic dignity means respecting and valuing the participation of all. Importantly, dignity is not satisfied merely by offering choice: choice is not the same as agency. Pursuing dignity requires developing people’s capacities to participate meaningfully, including providing quality public education.¹⁰ In the private sector, it means stakeholder-driven decision-making. Equality, especially equality of opportunity, requires inclusion and integration.¹¹

Dignity can be established – or undermined – in every form of social organization. Gross material inequity creates a barrier to social equity; redistribution of material resources can be necessary to restore or maintain social equity, but with care to prioritize social equity through participatory inclusiveness rather than pity. Aid agencies can patronize those they assist, or recognize their dignity.¹² In sum, dignity supports human agency through mutual respect, an awareness of shared fate and meaningful participation.

Sustainability is a precondition to flourishing. Once, working for a more just world was sufficient. Now, climate change has made sustainability a central concern. The planetary climate crisis is acute, felt globally and by every individual. No one seriously disputes that climate change is connected to human activity. What remains controversial is whether we have passed the tipping point where we cannot reverse the changes. Global compacts like the Paris Treaty and regular meetings like the United Nations Climate Change Conference aim to reduce emissions. But these global plans need support, need commitment.

Even if we could implement a single government plan, it would not save the earth, for the same reasons that no government can fully direct the economy. Climate change does not have a single effect, but ten thousand. It is not proceeding at one rate, but altering ecologies and environments in ways both slow and alarmingly fast. Human actions that reverse it will occur industry by industry, innovation by innovation, and community by community. One policy cannot fit all, even if one cause unites all.

Global prescriptions also often overlook the asymmetry in sacrifice and effect. Some countries, subpopulations, and localities have less capacity to meet policy goals, and they are often the very populations that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Peering even more closely at the subnational level, we are more likely to perceive environmental injustice, whether in effect or in capacity to address climatic challenges.

A third problem with broad general regulation is that it removes individual agency, making people feel that their individual actions do not matter. They become spectators to a contest between regulation and a polluted climate, instead of adopting marginal behavioral changes that could make big differences in aggregate, like decarbonizing our homes and cars. If people do not feel involved, and if they feel that their local climate concerns are overlooked, they lose the will to support large-scale action.

Global plans stand the best chance of growing from the bottom up through local, focused actions meaningful to those who are making the sacrifice of changing their behavior, and where they can witness one another making those changes. These local achievements can then be leveraged to garner support for broader action as needed.

Here we see how tightly intertwined sustainability is with dignity. Sustainability requires us to entrust our fate to one another; dignity means that we take one another's input seriously. Striving for a world of human dignity widens the pathway to sustainability.

Community, the third pillar of human flourishing, promotes shared understanding and trust. It creates the potential for a whole that is more than its parts. Community is both social and physical. If a physical space is a community, it means something to the people collected within it. Urbanist Jane Jacobs understood the connection between spatial design and society, and economist Edward Glaeser reminds us that cities are people, not buildings.¹³ Sociologist Eric Klinenberg's ode to public libraries and other spaces has sparked a national conversation about the relationship between public spaces – social infrastructure – and community health.¹⁴ Municipal advocates argue that although place-making may seem more expensive, it is consistent with a longer view plan for economic growth, and one that is more likely to be stable.¹⁵

Social communities are apartment buildings, neighborhoods, teams: a set of people who are interconnected and known to one another. They may form spontaneously, as people recognize that they value something in common: a community of moms, political supporters, or school volunteers. Or they may be constructed, actively or passively: a department community, a neighborhood organization, a school cohort, a baseball team. They may persist or be ephemeral: standing associations with bylaws can become communities but those surrounding you in

a political protest can form a community for just a day, joined in shared effort, tending to one another's needs and sharing water and snacks, but never exchanging names. A structured organization may fail to support community in the sense invoked here. Members may be bound only by the rules and function of the organization, their interactions mere transactions conducted according to those rules.

In community spaces, we observe the behavior of strangers, people unknown to you but with whom you share at least one thing: you are there on the same day at the same time. It is a space that is somehow aligned with your identity, and because of that, you subconsciously recognize the other people sharing this space share this affinity. While sharing this space, you can observe the behavior of others, seeing whether the social norms that you thought were in place are still respected. You might witness a violation of a prosocial norm – perhaps you overhear a racist comment, see someone being impatient with a slow-moving elderly vendor, or injuring a freshly planted shrub with a careless step – and if no one else admonishes this norm violation, then you begin to wonder whether those norms still hold. Our communities, whether social or physical, are places where we learn a lot about what motivates others, and whether norms are intact.¹⁶ Communities are places of belonging and central to the creation and maintenance of prosocial norms.

Public spaces can also show disdain. Artist Danicia Monét writes of how we can feel a sense of “unbelonging” in a place. Our built environments convey a message about who is included in a community: “Our public spaces, our built environments have been designed to condition us to understand who belongs (and who doesn't), who is valued and protected (and who isn't).”¹⁷ Place-making needs to be inclusive: spaces should be designed by the communities they are for, appreciating who they might become. Again, we are reminded about the importance of inclusion for dignity, and of embracing diversity and local agency, here intertwined with the building of community space.

Beauty – a word that stands in for grace, delight, creativity, pleasure, and awe – is closely related to place-making and community, dignity, and sustainability. It is cultural expression, fine arts, urban design, and the words we say to one another. It conveys our narrative: it is how we tell our stories about ourselves, who we are, who we have been, and who we hope to be.

It may be natural or built or conceptual. Natural beauty inspires wonder. Well-designed spaces make people feel their own dignity, the meaningfulness of their interactions with others that occur within those spaces. When conceptual, as art, beauty doesn't change the world directly. But it can alter our perceptions of the world entirely.

A commitment to beauty reminds us that community can be embodied in a physical place. Those physical spaces should mean something to those who fre-

quent them. They are the places where connections are born and sustained, at many scales, from lobbies to libraries to cafés to public squares to national parks. The stately, beautiful Stockholm Public Library reminds people that they matter, that ideas matter too, and that knowledge belongs to and is created by the community. The many Carnegie Libraries spread across the United States did the same. And newer libraries are even more broadly welcoming, eschewing the intimidating Greek architecture in favor of welcoming airy spaces that reflect their surrounding neighborhood. Social infrastructure, even libraries seemingly designed for individual study, can build connections between people.

The health benefits and human affinity for natural beauty is well-documented.¹⁸ Exposure to natural spaces promotes heightened cognition, well-being, calm, and prosociality.¹⁹ The Japanese practice of forest bathing – taking a mindful walk in the woods – reduces stress.²⁰ The forest’s beauty catalyzed one of the greatest collaborative political agreements: the United Nations. When delegates from fifty-one nations gathered in San Francisco in 1945 to create the organization’s framework, they visited Muir Woods, a nearby redwood forest. Organizers hoped that the forest’s majesty as a “temple of peace,” where some trees were standing at the time of the signing of the Magna Carta, would inspire delegates to set aside their differences and short-term concerns to focus on how they might ensure peace for future generations.²¹

Whatever form it takes, beauty invites and conveys respect. It can strengthen a community and root us in history. It can inspire. It shapes our present, and our reaction to our present. It offers a vision for a better future. It reminds us that we are so much more to one another than transacting agents. Ultimately, it reminds us that we are human.

From this quick description of each of the sides of our flourishing frame, I have alluded to some important theoretical implications that affect how society might chart a path forward. First, law cannot instill dignity: the designation of rights is not sufficient to change people’s perceptions of one another and often not sufficient to change the way we treat one another. Second, awareness of climatic challenges is not sufficient to change people’s behaviors voluntarily, nor is it sufficient to create the political will to force behavioral change through law. Third, networks of people are not communities: they have connection, but no social investment in one another. Fourth, beauty, broadly defined, is not frivolous, but necessary for healthy human life, and so should not be reserved for those who are wealthy.

Each of these aspirations – dignity, sustainability, community, and beauty – demands an appreciation of the significance of our relationships to one another. And each is at least partially local in scope. That community might be local is intuitive. Beauty is experienced most viscerally not in a global abstract but physi-

cally, sensationally, connecting body and emotion. While rights are abstractable, at any scale, dignity is most acutely felt in close quarters, between humans across differences. And although climatic change is a global phenomenon, it is experienced locally in wildly varying ways. Commitment to action will arise through the common perception of the problem, and witnessing others who reconstruct their methods of living in sustainable ways.

Policy-making must be supported by community involvement. Norms cannot be conjured into existence by legislation, but well-considered policies can encourage prosocial norms by prioritizing aspirations that support flourishing. Those policies must be tuned to local circumstances, histories, beliefs, and social relationships. A social fabric is knit community by community.

Envisioning a more just, sustainable, and inclusive future is an important first step. But what follows? How can we flip from a world of distrust to one of trust, from destructive competition to productive collaboration? How do we create a world of human social flourishing, where people recognize our need of one another, and work together as part of inclusive communities to protect our beautiful planet?

I have suggested that our current political economic systems and the goals they pursue are the problem. We are both self-interested and prosocial, but we currently construct lives, families, and meaning in a system that prizes maximizing GDP, a system that elevates self-interest over collective and common interest.

Changing the system requires reorienting ourselves and our aspirations toward collective interests: sustainability, beauty, community, and dignity. Building those systems is a chicken-and-egg problem. We need institutions and policies that promote flourishing. We also need prosocial behaviors to support them and make them meaningful. We cannot nudge our way toward dignity and sustainability. No amount of redesigning government forms will be sufficient to reverse climate change. And these manipulations only reinforce the sense that government is something that happens to us rather than with us.

How do we accomplish the magic trick of transforming NIMBY to YIMBY, so that prosocial policies succeed?²² We must first see communities as more than real estate, as social spaces as well as physical places. Instead of basing decisions solely on economic costs and benefits, we can evaluate their consequences for community, sustainability, beauty, and human dignity. A new highway may look like a good investment until we realize that it divides and destroys a community and, with it, the dignity of residents, all while promoting energy use.

An emphasis on flourishing encourages a rethinking and reimagining of redistribution. Many progressives support material redistribution to alleviate inequality. Without a doubt, improved access to resources would improve financial resilience, enabling more people to weather financial disasters like the pandemic. But

redistribution alone cannot address the deeper problem that ails our society: a tattered social fabric. Redistribution sets us up as rivals, the haves against the have-nots, who bargain over transferred resources. The haves resent government as a taking hand. The beneficiaries receive material relief – a substantial need met, for sure – but in the current frame of individual responsibility, redistribution diminishes the social status of the beneficiaries. Redistribution and a secure social safety net are critical responsibilities of a democratic government, yet the government must do more than redistribute if it is to help us move to a more just and equitable society. It must help us to see one another as members of a community with shared goals and purposes, and not as rivals splitting up GDP. And so, a policy of heightened redistribution on its own might deepen our social problems by leaving the core premise of conventional political economy unchanged, where the future remains in the hands of the economically powerful.

We are deeply social. We crave to belong, to be needed, to take care of one another, and be cared for: to have dignity. Thus, our nonmaterial behavior is guided by social norms – by the expectations that we have about one another’s behavior.²³ These norms may be morally derived or socially expedient, or some mixture. Our views of right and wrong behavior may be guided by what we consider to be just, or what we perceive to be consistent with our role or identity, or what assignment of responsibilities will bring about collective benefit. We impose these expectations on others not through penalty of law, but instead, through social enforcement: the perks of positive society or the penalty of being shunned.

While we are motivated by both intrinsic and material incentives, if I believe that others care only about material outcomes, that they lack a moral compass or a sense of community, then I will question policies that encourage prosocial behavior. As economist Samuel Bowles makes clear, institutions that emphasize material incentives pit our egoist and social selves against one another; they shape our perception of others as rivals for resources. Even if we wanted to act more generously toward other people, if we believe they do not share those preferences, then we would abandon our community instincts. We, too, would act as if we were only motivated by material self-interest. The cycle is self-defeating.²⁴ Nonmarket institutions, such as labor unions, can build a more connected society, even bringing members to care about the welfare and dignity of strangers, with no direct tie to them or their interests. In this expanded “community of fate,” union members do not engage solely in a transactional effort for material gain; instead, they become part of a mission.²⁵

Inclusive institutions, such as labor unions and community organizations, tap into their members’ sense of solidarity. They work when leaders articulate a vision, and the members believe that others share that vision. And so, while we might be tempted to meet the need for monumental transformation from the top down, coercive policy is counterproductive because it highlights the self-interest

we need to overcome if we are going to collaborate. That said, although laws can't engineer norms, they don't need to crowd out solidarity and squash agency. They can also encourage it.

To pivot from a worldview of rivalry and scarcity to one of collaboration and abundance, we need to develop stronger norms of trust, tolerance, and compromise. We must believe in the good faith of others, in the potential of working together, and recognize our mutual reliance, especially across differences. As noted, these beliefs and behaviors cannot be legislated into existence. They must diffuse socially.

That diffusion can be difficult. People do not adopt norms simply when they learn about them, or even if they recognize them as good ideas. Prosociality is as much a part of human behavior as selfishness, but it leaves one exposed and vulnerable to exploitation, while selfishness offers a protective shell. Sociologists Damon Centola and Michael Macy describe prosocial norms as “complex.” Overcoming uncertainty – about the norm's credibility, about whether others will also adopt it – requires more than one social contact, produced by complex contagions across the “wide bridges” of thick networks, with multiple connections and overlapping relationships.²⁶

As part of a project on the science of collaboration, colleagues and I interviewed several dozen leaders from a broad variety of industries.²⁷ When we ask what makes collaboration successful, overwhelmingly respondents mention the importance of trust. To establish trust, people need opportunities to build relationships within the group, allowing them to go beyond shared goals and working together to discover that they care for one another and each member of the group feels valued. In this way, community leverages dignity, which in turn requires transforming transactions into meaningful interactions.

Political scientist Elinor Ostrom's pathbreaking work on community governance of common pool resources rejects top-down, formalized (and formulaic) governance: instead, members of a community collaborate to manage resources sustainably.²⁸ They need a sense of shared mission – to be a community of fate, in John Ahlquist and Margaret Levi's terms – but they also need to know one another's capacities, including times when some members might need a free pass to reduce their effort, perhaps because they are ill, perhaps because they are going through a rough patch. This kind of discretion requires trust, mutual understanding, and committed long-term relationships, where people know and care about one another. It requires being a community, not a network. The term “networks of fate” makes no sense. But a community of fate cannot scale indefinitely.

And so maybe we don't scale. Although counterintuitive, perhaps the most effective path toward dignity and sustainability is to work with and through the communities. Build dignity within and then up. Federalism – distributed and overlap-

ping authority – might be a model for the development and diffusion of complex contagions. Prosociality is easier among neighbors with whom we recognize common interests and mutual interdependence than among disconnected strangers.

Building from the bottom up is not the same as letting human nature run loose. One worry is that of “fortress federalism”: that federal arrangements will create islands of homogeneity that are hostile to outsiders. With a worldview of scarcity and rivalry, homogeneity is not neutral. Discrimination against an outgroup increases as the ingroup circles the wagons, preserving resources for its members.²⁹ Under fortress federalism, localities lose the benefits of diversity and cannot develop a sense of mutual understanding and universal interdependence.³⁰ It feeds polarization and compresses the idea space, so that society becomes less inventive at the system level.³¹

Designing the spaces for interaction matters. There is a rich literature in social psychology that describes characteristics of prejudice-reducing interactions, which can help us move toward prosociality and mutual reliance. Such interactions happen in spaces where groups have equal status, work together toward a common goal, and have institutional support to minimize the risk of mutual reliance.³² These conditions have defied generalization, so that no formula exists. Every community’s needs and potentials differ, and so approaches must also differ, perhaps stymieing comparison and inferences.³³

The work of reversing the vicious cycle of defensive self-interest and catalyzing solidarity begins at the local level. Cities are alive with possibility: they have the resources and diversity to think and act big, but the coherence of identity and space to make building a community of fate conceivable. Constructing communities that are inclusive, where people are welcomed, belong, and are needed across difference, may require some disruption. Global change cannot ignore the neighborhood, and perhaps needs to start with it. The path toward sustainability and dignity starts by diminishing intergroup rivalry, building bridges between fortresses of homogenous communities, and catalyzing communities of fate.

Public policy can play a critical role in supporting the development of the norms that build a community of fate. It ought to look beyond GDP as its North Star, and instead embrace the constellation that comprises social flourishing. No law can confer dignity or create community; these benefits can only come from the quality of our relationships. And so, governance ought to be both human-centered and humble, working with the public. Policies directed toward human social flourishing can repair our society, rebuild our sense of agency and belonging, reestablish our belief that each of us matters, and support our actions to save the planet.

This reorientation may require a new science of public policy. Inspirational examples abound: inventive, exciting experiments are building agency, promoting

prosociality, creating a path toward dignity and sustainability. Children's rights advocate Geoffrey Canada has sparked imaginations by demonstrating that fixing schools entails fixing communities. Chef José Andrés' humanitarian disaster relief organization World Central Kitchen doesn't parachute in food, but instead works with local chefs and members of affected communities to prepare food for one another: food that is familiar, comforting, soul-reviving, and thereby restoring agency, restoring hope.

Sociologist Hilary Cottam's transformation of the British welfare system turns aid into agency-restoration by building teams where recipients are the planners and captains of their own care. Her experiments demonstrate the possibility of building dignity for recipients and aid workers. Paris's Mayor Anne Hidalgo audaciously reconceived the most beautiful city in the world, banishing most cars, opening pedestrian and bicycle pathways, and prioritizing a plan where every Parisian – no matter how unfashionable their *arrondissement* – will have access to work, shopping, health care, schooling, recreation, natural areas, and culture within a fifteen-minute reach. The United States' new offices of environmental justice (one in the Justice Department, one in Health and Human Services) pair dignity and sustainability: even better, they promise to prioritize community agency with meaningful engagement. Framing documentation highlights community partners to identify concerns, and mitigate them with federal resources and assistance.³⁴

Transformative, life-saving work can happen at a much smaller scale. Emergency room physician Eugenia Smith and her team at the University of Pennsylvania counter racial health disparities at the neighborhood level. Rather than focus exclusively on individual behaviors that affect health, they see individuals as part of a neighborhood. Seemingly mundane activities like trash pickup and the greening of empty lots reduce crime and improve the health of people in the neighborhood.³⁵ The American Academy of Arts and Sciences sponsored a two-year study of how to strengthen American democracy, concluding that democratic rebirth begins in communities. The authors recommended public investment in places and programs that would bring people together to collaborate over ends meaningful to them.³⁶

Our diversity of interests and places means there exists no singular vision, no single public good or measure of well-being that suits us all. Rather than see this as inevitable gridlock, we should let these thousands of ways forward coexist. The social fabric of the ultimate public goods – sustainability, dignity, community, and beauty – is made by stitching together many smaller public goods, working within local communities, and letting each express their vision in their own beautiful way. And we must pause to listen, so as to build the trust that can extend our community of fate. The key is to include those affected in imagining and creating their own future, and to acknowledge and respect their work on behalf of one another.

As we work for a world of human dignity and sustainability, we cannot be naive. There is no magical fairy dust we can sprinkle to make people less fearful, less short-sighted, and hate one another less. Shouting and subtweeting will not save us either.

We are at a critical juncture and a moment of choice. We need a reorientation of our public policy and our political economy to make the economy serve society, and not the other way around. One of the best things that government can do is to work with the people, incubating those prosocial norms that can catalyze the switch from a downward social spiral to a flourishing society. Through decentralization and supporting social infrastructure, it can build spaces where prosocial norms can emerge. Through leadership, consistent prosocial messaging, and help to set expectations of what is possible, it can encourage people to act on those expectations. The act of rebuilding those connections, reprioritizing them, will help us stitch back together our social fabric and revive the norms that make democracy and the rule of law work, ensuring progress toward dignity and saving the life-giving beauty of the planet we all call home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenna Bednar is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Michigan, and an External Professor at the Santa Fe Institute. She is the author of *The Robust Federation: Principles of Design* (2008).

ENDNOTES

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