



The Scientific of Positive Psychology The Road Out of the “Parking Lot of Life” or “Just Another ... Fad”?



Holowchak MA*

Department of Philosophy, Rider University, USA

***Corresponding author:** Holowchak MA, Department of Philosophy, Rider University, 2083 Lawrenceville Road, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648, USA,

Submission: 📅 May 04, 2018; **Published:** 📅 October 30, 2018

Introduction

Positive Psychology, a prodigiously influential global movement in psychology today, is defined as “the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive.” It is grounded on the notion that “people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play ¹.” Turning away from psychopathology and in-clinic approaches to wellbeing, Positive Psychology seems to offer itself in some sense as an alternative to psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy. Psychoanalysis, for instance, which focuses on clinical assistance over time to persons poorly adjusted to reality, is of limited applicability to most humans, who would likely benefit little or nowise from its methods just because they are relatively well-adjusted to reality. Moreover, Positive Psychology founder, Martin Seligman, says flatly, not on-lee does psychoanalysis not deliver, it also is founded on false and outrageous claims.

Promising to enhance the happiness and wellbeing of non-pathological persons, Positive Psychology is said to be a practical application of the “scientific method” to real-life scenarios of everyday people to enhance or give free reign to their “signature strengths” for the sake of hap-pines. Adherents, through numerous questionnaires designed to assess their measure of happiness, are “taught” techniques for enhancing their wellbeing, and the best tutors are, of course, those trained in the science of Positive Psychology. There is avowedly nothing prescriptive or evaluative is such quizzes and tutorials; they, it is said, aim to be at the level of dispassionate, above-board scientific inquiry. Because it concerns humans’ feelings, traits, and strengths or virtues, Positive Psychology has limitless applications in everyday life. It promises and the mountains of interdisciplinary literature on it, its adherents say, have already shown this collaborative research with numerous sciences or disciplines, even psychotherapy. Such collaboration is evidence of its abundant fruit-fulness and scope two seemly feathers in its cap and it does everything in a tight theoretical frame that is, it is theoretically simple.

Yet those very successes viz., that it seems to do everything and do everything well should give us pause. Science seldom ever works out so neatly, so cleanly. In short, this “signa-true strength” that it promises to help just about everyone in all aspects of life could be its greatest flaw. Is Positive Psychology, in the words of Seligman, “the road out” of “the parking lot of life” or, in the words of Richard Lazarus [1], “just another one of the many fads that come and go in our field”? Moreover, if it is viable, is it proposed as an alternative to traditional psychopathological approaches like psychoanalysis or a method that is complementary to all or some of them? This essay offers answers to those questions. In what follows, I focus on but do not limit my critique to Martin Seligman’s highly influential *Authentic Happiness*, which is for many adherents of the movement the closest thing to a Positive Psychology bible. Criticisms I offer related to that work have not been sufficiently ad-dressed by Seligman or adherents of his movement in subsequent publications.

Positive Psychology in Gist

In *Authentic Happiness*, Martin Seligman states somewhat casually that traditional psychology, focusing on mental illness, has been a “puzzling disappointment” to most people, just because of its focus on mental illness. “People want more than just to correct their weaknesses. They want lives imbued with meaning, and not just to fidget until they die.” According to the Positive Psychology Center’s website, “Human goodness and excellence is [sic] just as authentic as distress and disorder, that life entails more than the undoing of problems” (2002, x). And so, Seligman has birthed a “new movement” to teach people how to be happy.

For all intents and purposes, Positive Psychology can be outlined by the theoretical sketch Seligman gives in an appendix of the book. “Happiness and well-being,” he begins, “are the desired outcomes of Positive Psychology,” and Positive Psychology is about “enhancing them” (2002, 261). The movement has three pillars: positive emotions, positive traits and abilities (strengths and virtues as well as intelligence and athleticism), and positive

¹<http://www.positivepsychology.org/>

institutions (e.g., democracy, strong families, and free inquiry). Thus, the discipline has three parts, each corresponding to one of the pillars. The positive emotions are oriented to the past (satisfaction, contentment, pride, and serenity), the future (optimism, hope, confidence, trust, and faith), and the present (bodily emotions of scrumptiousness, warmth, and orgasm; higher pleasures of bliss, glee, and comfort; and gratifications of activities like reading, rock climbing, dancing, good conversation, volleyball, or playing bridge) (2002, 262).

Next there are gratifications “activities we like doing” which are especially important for happiness. “The gratifications absorb and engage us fully; they block self-consciousness; they block felt emotion, except in retrospect; and they create flow, the state in which time stops and one feels completely at home” (2002, 262). Gratifications are not readily obtainable. They require the exercise of strengths. “The belief that we can rely on shortcuts to gratification and bypass the exercise of personal strengths and virtues is folly. It leads not just to lizards that starve to death, but to legions of humanity who are depressed in the middle of great wealth and are starving to death spiritually” (2002, 262).

Concerning positive strengths, sometimes called “virtues,” willing and character are needed. “Virtue ... depends crucially on will and choice, whereas the underside of life stems more from external circumstances” (2002, 262). In a later work in collaboration with [2] for something to be a virtue, he says, it must

- A. Relate to living a good life,
- B. Have intrinsic value and produce beneficial outcomes,
- C. Not harm others,
- D. Not be able to be transformed easily into something negative,
- E. Be capable of stable measurement,
- F. Be distinct from other virtues,
- G. Be found in esteemed persons,
- H. Be lacking in some people, and
- I. Have existing mechanisms within a culture to develop and maintain it.

The account here is essentially Aristotelian (Aristotle writes of knowledge, choosing, and stability of character over time as requisite for virtuous activity) (1990, II.4 ff.). “One can display the virtue of justice by acts of good citizen-ship, fairness, loyalty and teamwork, or humane leadership. I call these routes strengths, and un-like the abstract virtues, each of these strengths is measurable and acquirable” (2002, 137).

What is a strength? A strength is a trait, “a psychological characteristic that can be seen across different situations and over time,” and “a strength is valued in its own right” (2002, 137). The exercise of signature strengths cannot be done in a vacuum. Just as

Aristotle noted, hap-pines cannot be merely possession of virtue, for then someone could be asleep the whole of his life and be virtuous, but no one would call such a person virtuous (1990, I.8 and X.8). Virtue is activity (Greek, *energeia*), and virtuous activity requires the rights sort of institutions for Aristotle, a polis so structured for virtue, which then benefits each citizen; for Seligman, a strong family and healthy political institutions that allow free inquiry. Again, nothing Seligman has so far done seems to go beyond in gist anything Aristotle says about happiness.

Happiness “comes by many routes.” We are told that the good life is a matter of “using your signature strengths to obtain abundant gratification in the main realms of your life”; that the meaningful life “adds one more component to the good life” in that it is a matter of “using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are”; and that the full life, adding to the meaningful life, “consists in experiencing positive emotions about the past and future, savoring positive feelings from the pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using these strengths in the service of something larger to obtain meaning.” The meaningful and full lives must be something beyond mere happiness, as the meaningful life is “beyond happiness,” and the full life is beyond the meaningful life (2002, 263). Yet we throughout are never straightforwardly given a definition of “happiness” as we were promised.

Crambe repetita?

What of this “new movement” which promises to take those of us experiencing few pleasures, minimal gratifications, and meaningless lives on a trip “through the countryside of pleasure and gratification, up into the high country of strength and virtue, and finally to the peaks of lasting fulfillment: meaning and purpose” (2002, xii). Is it so new? Seligman vaunts that Positive Psychology is a response to the Freudian view that “happiness is inauthentic” what he dubs the “rotten-to-the-core dogma. In gist, the dogma, Freudian, in-sits that any actions that might seem benevolent are really acts of repression that is, infantile sexuality and aggression. Such repression in each person is responsible for civilization (2002, x).

Seligman has no qualms about calling this view “Freud’s philosophy,” and he adds that the philosophy “finds its way into daily psychological and psychiatric practice” and “pervades the understanding of human nature in the arts and social sciences.” Despite such things, “there is not a shred of evidence that strength and virtue are derived from negative motivation” (2002, xx-xi). The criticism, aimed at Freud’s repression etiology, is of course not new. The suggestion that an etiology based on repression and other met empirical constructs is a philosophy, not an empirical science, is also not new. Freud himself recognized that there was much that was met empirical in his theory, as he often employed the term “metapsychology.” Yet Freud never looked upon the motives of human behavior as positive or negative, as he steered clear of terminology that could be interpreted evaluatively.

Does positive psychology fare better than Freud's repression etiology?

Freud, it is commonly acknowledged, was more of a compiler than an innovator. Still, psychoanalytic theory, though borrowing from numerous sources, was something new. Can the same be said of Positive Psychology?

If you listen to Seligman, the sentiment is clearly that Positive Psychology is something new. It is a science that studies positive emotions, positive traits and abilities, and positive institutions.

Yet the gist of what Positive Psychology has to say concerning happiness or human thriving was given by Aristotle [3] and the Stoics (fl. 300 BC-200 AD) millennia ago and it is packaged by Seligman and cohorts in a much less engaging manner. Aristotle, for instance, posited that virtuous activity, a state of the soul, was the chief ingredient in human happiness (though bodily and external goods also were factors); that emotions (Greek, path) of the right sort were needed for virtuous activity (e.g., the right amount of anger for just actions); that a virtuous state of soul is acquired through knowledge and choosing, and after long habituation; and that virtue could not be had, or not readily had, without the right sort of political institutions to prompt virtuous activity.

There are 10 references to Aristotle in the index, only two of which are non-trivial, and none to the Stoics. One non-trivial reference to Aristotle is a curt account of Aristotle on eudaimonia, which Seligman tendentiously and wrongly translates as "gratitude" (2002, 112). The other is a lengthy footnote in which Seligman speaks of reading Aristotle as "tough going" (2002, 289n112). It is clear from the text and endnotes that Seligman's knowledge of the ancients has come chiefly from secondary sources. Still Positive Psychology does not differ in gist from the virtue ethics of Aristotle (and to a lesser extent, the Stoics), and the sentiment or suggestion that Positive Psychology is something new which presumably began when Seligman's daughter, at the mere age of five, challenged him to quit being such a grouch (2002, 28), and effloresced after the tragedy of 9/11- "since September 11, 2001, I have pondered the relevance of Positive Psychology" (2002, xi) cannot be defended. It is merely an attempt at an empirical spin on some-thing philosophical.

Does that empirical spin work?

Empirical Succor and Theoretical Flimsiness: The Positive Psychology webpage "The Pursuit of Happiness" states, "A thousand gurus tout different remedies for human misery." Which work? "We need to consult one of our greatest gurus, the scientific method." There are a great number of scientific studies on "Positive Psychology and the science of happiness," and "many of these studies point to specific ways of thinking and acting that can strongly impact our sense of well-being and happiness." Those discoveries, we are told, have profound implications for counseling, clinical psychology, psychiatry and life coaching².

Many of the scientific studies to which the webpage refers are their own-some 15 plus years of data gathering to support their conclusions. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman state that Positive Psychology is the result of scouring all the major world religions, all the most significant philosophers on happiness (Buddhism, Confucianism, Greek and Roman philosophy, and Christianity), and an abundance of empirical research (e.g., Thorndike's' views, Kohlberg's stages of morality, Gardner's multiple intelligences, and Erikson's psychosocial stages). They even studied children's books from varied cultures and did thought experiments by imagining cultures without one or another of a signature strength (2004, 51). That is eerily like the work philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has done in his work for After Virtue, yet no mention is made of MacIntyre. However, the scientific rigor of many of those studies can be called into question [1] as attested by the growing number of papers that is critical of the movement. I offer some critical comments.

First, the movement itself is founded on vague axial concepts greatly in need of clarification as well as undergirding precepts greatly in need of amplification or justification. For instance, the first chapter of Authentic Happiness ends with a "Fordyce Emotions Ques-tinnier." We are asked, "In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?" We are then encouraged to answer on a scale from 0 (extremely unhappy: utterly depressed, completely down) to 10 (extremely happy: feeling ecstatic, joyous, fantastic). Yet what precisely are we measuring? Are we to assume that readers are working from the same general definition of "happiness" and its lack? That seems gratuitous. Moreover, the way the question is posed is suggestive. Use of "feel" might lead a responder to analyze the shifting moods of a typical day. Use of "are" instead might lead a responder to ignore moods and look to things more stable, such as dispositions or states.

It is the same with many of Seligman's 24 "signature strengths," which are described in vary-in degrees but rarely defined. Some are defined. "By judgment, I mean the exercise of sifting information objectively and rationally, in the service of the good for self and others" (2002, 142). "Curiosity about the world," he says, "entails openness to experience and flexibility about mat-terms that do not fit one's preconceptions." The entailment relationship merely indicates that openness and flexibility are needed conditions for a definition, not that the two jointly make for a definiens. Numerous other strengths e.g., ingenuity/originality/practical intelligence/street smarts; perseverance/industry/diligence; kindness and generosity; etc. are merely described, not defined, and that is problematic, for the VIA questionnaires

are then meant to measure what is loosely described. Imagine Newton in his Principia Mathematica beginning his work by offering loose descriptions of terms such as mass, velocity, innate force, impressed force, and centripetal force, and other terms critical to his theory of universal gravitation without defining them.

²(2016) Positive psychology and the science of happiness.

The theory would never get off the ground and would be senseless.

There are then the 24 accompanying questionnaires from the Values-In-Action Institute of Peterson and Seligman. Let us look at several instances. Concerning social, personal, and emotional intelligence, we are asked to finish (i.e., rate our-selves apropos of) the following statement: “No matter what the social situation, I am able to fit in’ is...,” and we are encouraged to answer on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 being very much like me, 5 being very much unlike me, and 3 being neutral). Here fitting in is clearly a strength or virtue and the higher the score, the better. Yet why is it a strength always to fit in? Ought I to be able to fit in when the KKK comes to town? Consider perseverance. We are asked to rank “I always finish what I start,” and perseverance is strength. What if we come to recognize that a book that we have begun to read is vacuous? Ought we to finish it, because we are told perseverance is always a strength? That is gratuitous, and here, silly. And so on, for several other strengths or virtues.

Consider loving and allowing oneself to be loved. We are asked to rank “I have trouble ac-citing love from others,” and here “very much unlike me” is the best answer. Yet this one is very misleading. What of “love” given too freely i.e., without the proper forethought? Ought I to accept all declarations of love, or even of friendliness, without consideration of level of maturity or ulterior motives?

Consider fairness and equity. We are asked to rank “I treat all people equally regardless of who they might be,” and here “very much like me” is the best answer. Yet do all people in all circumstances deserve equal treatment? For Aristotle and the Stoics, each person is to be treated pursuant to his moral worth, though it is not always possible to give to each what he deserves. Consider leadership. We are asked to rank “I can always get people to do things together without nagging them.” Again “very much like me” is the preferred answer, though I suspect Seligman would acknowledge that much too few would score “five.”

Consider forgiveness and mercy. We are asked to rank “I always let bygones be bygones,” and again to score highly is desirable. Yet forgiveness is a Christian conception, not one that is Greek or Roman. The Aristotelian sense of justice requires remediation, not forgiveness. To them, something has gone horribly wrong when a wrongdoer is not held responsible for his wrongdoing. People never held accountable for wrongdoings continue to do wrong and to harm others, and themselves. Finally, some of the questions are too vague to be meaningful. Consider judgment/critical thinking/open-mindedness. We are asked to rank “When the topic calls for it, I can be a highly rational thinker.” Who would not score this five, because it is so vague?

And so on...Seligman of course would counter that no one is expected to score fives on all signature strengths. We are not all wired that way, and scoring highly on one signature strength might keep us from scoring highly on another e.g., scoring highly on leadership might be at odds with fit-ting in. Yet that is not the point. The point is that not all questions are unambiguous tests of what is in principle to be tested. Moreover, as some of my objections show,

it is not at all clear that “5” is the best answer to each question. For fitting in and perseverance, perhaps “4” is the best possible answer, given that it seems best in some circumstances not to fit in or to persevere.

There is also the matter of the usefulness of those questionnaires which are presumably the result of correlations between variables. Consider acceptance of love and happiness. Just how useful is that information for any person. As Aristotle and the Stoics note, there is a complex tapestry to each person’s life and it is begun by at-birth disposition and weaved by life experiences and choices over the years. That cannot be grasped by a “prepackaged list of techniques.” Individual choice and values come into play (2008, 582-84). That is why the Stoics be-lived that ethical maxims were of little use to those other than children. That is merely a matter of remembering (reminisce); while knowing (scare) requires “making everything one’s own” and not at all times “glancing back at the master” (2002, 233-41). Let me now turn to undergirding precepts. There are at least three unjustified underlying as-assumptions that drive Positive Psychology.

First, there is the assumption that human actions are at least mostly under conscious control. We can set and attain goals, for Seligman, so long as our attitude is sufficiently positive. While human behavior is rationally explicable I can offer a rational explanation of why someone did what she did that does not imply that what she did was under conscious control. Take for example *akrasia*—a situation in which one decides on right course of action, but ultimately and regretfully does otherwise. The behavior is rationally explicable, in that the regretful course was chosen, but not given the sanction of reason (593-97). Right human behavior, as Aristotle noted long ago, is shaped not only by cultivation of rationality, but also by conditioning and even sometimes luck. Moreover, many human goals are externally driven e.g., a student who measures success in college by parental approbation or disapprobation. Thus, they depend on circumstances not under an agent’s control. Second, there is the assumption that describing behavioral outcomes in terms of optimistic and pessimistic dispositions Seligman’s “learned optimism” being the topic of the final section of this paper is etiological fruitful. Writes Miller:

Tendencies toward ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’ ... are really aspect of a much more complex whole. ... It is questionable whether the terms optimism and pessimism have any value at all as freestanding descriptor of personality. At best, they can only describe attitudes to particular-lar future events situations and circumstances. It is the mental health and integra-ty of the person that must be considered, the totality of his attitudes and motivations, not the degree of perceived negativity or positivity of free-floating personality traits and descriptors (2008, 599).

Third, Seligman believes that one need not have all the six core signature strengths to be virtuous or “of good character.” “To be a virtuous person is to display, by acts of will, all or at least most of the six ubiquitous virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence” (2002, 137). In a later writing with Peterson, they asserted that “someone is of good character

if he or she displays but 1 or 2 strengths within a virtue group” (2004, 13). For instance, if one scores highly in one or two of the subcategories of Wisdom and Knowledge.

- A. “Curiosity/Interest in the World,”
- B. “Love of Learning,”
- C. “Judgment/Critical Thinking/Open-Mindedness,”
- D. “Ingenuity/Originality/Practical Intelligence/Street Smarts,”
- E. “Social Intelligence/Personal Intelligence/ Emotional Intelligence,” and

F. “Perspective” then one can be said to have enough wisdom and knowledge for good character or happiness. By what metric Seligman Ian intuition? does he determine that? Moreover, some of the groupings in the subcategories e.g., four and five of Wisdom and Knowledge seem discretionary.

Here the chief problem is that Seligman does not follow the lead of Aristotle or the Stoics. For those ancients, the virtues are mutually entailing that is, to have one fully implies to have all fully. Why? Virtue in the large is for those ancients a disposition of soul and to be virtuous means to have a soul fully disposed to take on any situation, seemingly prosperous or debilitating, without being harmed. In short, virtue is a matter of a human being meeting fully a situation, not a human being exercising a virtue in a situation through some formula, given from a Positive Psychologist.

That leads to another difficulty. Positive Psychologists are wont to speak of “using,” “exercising,” “possessing,” “owning,” “displaying,” and even “celebrating” signature strengths e.g., “Each person possesses several signature strengths ... [which] a person self-consciously owns, celebrates, and ... exercises every day in work, love, play, and parenting” (2002, 160); marriage goes better when it is an everyday vehicle for using our signature strengths” (2002, 196); and “to be a virtuous person is to display, by acts of will, all or at least most of the six ubiquitous virtues” (2002, 137). The terminology is telling. It suggests that being happy is not a matter of being virtuous, but of giving exercise to certain signature strengths Positive Psychologists sometimes avoid “virtue,” being “abstract” like a carpenter using a hammer. For Aristotle and the Stoics, happiness through equanimity is qualitative a manner of living and thinking as a complete human not quantitative. Says Seligman, “I call these routes strengths, and unlike the abstract virtues, each of these strengths is measurable and acquirable.” Says Aristotle, “Virtue then is a settled disposition of the mind which determines the choice of actions and emotions.” For Seligman, strengths are to be employed in situations that call for them. For Aristotle, virtue is a manner of being and acting in accordance with that being.

Furthermore, there is reason to question some of the “discoveries” of Positive Psychology. Consider the finding that hopeful people are more optimistic, energetic, creative, and zestful (2002, 92-101). Is that a finding, or merely a conceptual truth? Does not optimism, energy, creativity, and zestfulness all or at

least most—follow from the definition of “hopeful”? Might not one identify a hopeful person by looking for optimism, energy, creativity, and zest in a person? The same can be said for certain other strengths. If so, to what extent is Positive Psychology making discoveries?

These difficulties lack of scientific rigor, poorly articulated concepts, vague or misleading questions, unwarranted assumptions, and so on are pressing, and call into question the scientific of the movement. Here we need to heed the words of Richard Lazarus, who cautions us about being overly excited concerning the results of sloppy science. “If we, as researchers, measure emotions poorly, our efforts to answer the important questions will be inadequate or, worse, misleading for example, as to whether so-called positive emotions are a ticket to the heaven of health and well-being and how this works” (2003, 104). He also bids Positive Psychologists to work toward “a sounder and well thought ... theoretical or philosophical rationale than they have up till now. Slogans alone rarely win the day” (107).

Finally, there are Seligman’s muddled met empirical thoughts on finding meaning in life to-ward the end of Authentic Happiness. Recall that a meaningful life is a matter of using “signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are.” How do we find meaning or purpose in life? Seligman, a secularist, has something to say for other secularists, who might incline toward atheism. “I have come to believe that there is a secular view that leads to God, and it leads to meaning because it’s grounded outside yourself.” Most religions, he adds, ascribes four properties to God: Creator of the universe, omnipotence, omniscience, and righteousness. “If you accept the Big Bang theory of creation, you are left with a God who isn’t a creator but is omniscient, omni-tent, and righteous” (2002, 258-59).

With the Big Bang, there is no need of God as creator, but the other attributes still obtain. Why? Because most religions assert the omnipotence, omniscience, and righteousness of God? Ought we to place so much weight on the presumptions of most religions when examining the issue? Moreover, are atheists, because they are not wedded to the notion of something much larger than themselves, destined to a meaningless existence? Seligman then asks whether God can be omnipotent, omniscient, and righteous. The problems of evil and free, he states, rule out such a God for now (2002, 259). We are alone, it seems, in a godless universe and mired in an existence, meaningless.

Yet Seligman then asks if there ever will be such a God. Yes, says he. “I have intimations of a God that those of us who are long on evidence and short on revelation (and long on hope, but short on faith) can believe in” (2002, 258). Since evolution works toward increasing complex-ty “I also think of this increasing complexity as identical with greater power and greater knowledge ... [and as] greater goodness, since goodness is about a ubiquitous group of virtues that all successful cultures have evolved” (2002, 258) “in human history, we are going from knowledge to omniscience, from potency to omnipotence, and from ethics and religion to righteousness.” Humans, it appears, are part of a process of becoming

God emergent theism and we can choose to “be a small part of furthering this process” (2002, 260). That is a deity and a religion, he says, that he can accept, though he does not insist that we must go beyond the good life to be happy.

How this metaphysical detour of the “observed” path of human history relates to finding meaning in life in a scientific manner is anyone’s guess. Moreover, precisely what has he observed from human history that shows humans to be going from science to omniscience and potency to omnipotence? (2002, 260). The argument is presumptuous, bizarre.

The platonic problem

Plato in his dialog [4] proposes a puzzle concerning definitions. If one knows the definition of something, then inquiry is unneeded. If one does not know the definition of something, then inquiry is unhelpful, as you will not recognize what you are looking for when you come across it. There is a similar problem for the “science” behind the Positive Psychology movement. To have a science of “happiness” and to be able scientifically to disclose the “seven secrets of happy people,” one must first know what happiness is. Otherwise inquiry is impossible. Positive Psychologists readily resort to thousands of studies on happiness and happy people most today done by members of the movement to support their contentions, yet we are never told the metric used for gauging happiness in those studies. Did every study use precisely the same metric? If not, of what use are the results? Consider again the “Fordyce Emotions Questionnaire” concern-in happiness of chapter 1 of Seligman’s magnum opus. The problem is best expressed by Aristotle, who notes at the beginning of [4] that everyone agrees that happiness is the proper end of all human activity, but few agree on what happiness comprises: The many believe it is pleasure; political persons, honor or virtue; and intelligent persons, thought.

And so, for Seligman, there is a noxious presumptuousness. He begins with a disarticulated notion of “happiness” in his Fordyce questionnaire to get a base metric of the happiness of the average American. Yet this base metric is wholly worthless if different respondents have different conceptions of happiness.

Disarticulation aside, there is also the problem of the ambiguity of “happiness.” Seligman and his cohorts draw both from the Aristotelian, objectivist tradition on happiness one’s luck, health, wealth, experiences, conditioning, and availability of resources make happiness possible and those are in principle measurable and the subjectivist tradition where subjects themselves are the sole arbiters of their own happiness [5,6]. The two are incompatible, and the first normative, while the latter is normatively neutral. The Fordyce Questionnaire is subjectivist, yet much of what goes on with assessing the virtues aims at objectivism. And so, we have good reasons to question the Positive Psychology measurements of happiness. In the words of Judith Suisse, “One cannot offer a useful measurement of a phenomenon without an adequate understanding of what it is one is measuring” (2008, 576).

Prescription or description?

One of the standards of standardized scientific practice is that

it steers clear of value judgments that it is normatively neutral and stay at the level of what is intemperately descriptive. Freud was abundantly aware of that. He often compared psychoanalytic practice to surgery. A surgeon needs to work dispassionately to work successfully; so too does a psychoanalyst [7]. There is an ineluctable normative dimension to the research on happiness to which Seligman refers as well as to his own research. The VIA questionnaires for each signature strength strive for value-neutrality, but do they achieve it?

One who lacks curiosity about the world or who is readily bored is psychologically defective and lacking in a signature strength. It is the same with lack of love of learning, open-mindedness, practical or emotional intelligence, a broad perspective, courage, industry, integrity, kindness, love of self and others, loyalty and a teamwork, a sense of fairness, leadership, self-control, caution, modesty, love of beauty, gratefulness, hopefulness, a sense of purpose, forgivingness, and zest. Each of those is a “signature strength,” and though Seligman acknowledges that not all of us are significantly strong in each, it would be better if each of us should possess as many signature strengths as our constitution allows. It is hard not to see this as normative.

Furthermore, we are encouraged to utilize each of our signature strengths as fully as possible to live happily. Is that not a normative or prescriptive agenda? As Miller notes, in analyses of personality types, psychologists must wholly steer clear of assertions that “one type is better, superior, preferable or even ‘happier’ than another” [8].

Again, Seligman’s terminology seems to be value-laden. The dichotomizing of emotions, traits, and strengths into “positive” and “negative” and the ceaseless prompting to eschew the negative and pursue the positive to live happily seems anything but axiology-neutral. He even titles his book *Authentic Happiness*.

Concerning positive and negative emotions or traits, Richard Lazarus maintains that such a segregation is spurious, indiscriminate, and not at all scientific. First, emotions are “positive”

- A. When they feel good,
- B. When favorable life conditions bring about them, and
- C. When they have a hoped-for outcome (2003, 98).

Moreover, context is critical, as a hoped-for outcome for one person might be deemed unfavorable for another. A person with a radically equalitarian notion of fairness will have different expectations than say an Aristotelian. Finally, an emotion, for instance, can at one time be positive in one sense and negative in another sense to a person at the same time. Take love, deemed a positive emotion. It involves essentially a certain warmth of feeling but also a certain vulnerability to loss, which is hard to categorize as positive (100).

In addition, Seligman’s views of the good life (use of signature strengths for maximal gratification), the meaningful life (use of signature strengths in the service of something much larger), and a full life (use of signature strengths over the course of one’s life)

implies I suspect axiological layering of some sort (2002, 262-63). In addition, why must we be wedded to the axiological notion of “something much larger” to live meaningfully? That seems gratuitous and pushes us to dodge atheism by entertaining fictions or metaphysically amusing posits such as Seligman’s no-ton of God-in-the-offing to live meaningfully.

There is an unhappy confusion of interests. Kristjan Kristiansen sums: “Positive psychologists insist on keeping their hands clean of prescriptive moral philosophy. They want to engage morality without moralism: to pursue the factual foundations of what moral philosophers call ‘virtue ethics’ without becoming full-blown virtue ethicists. At the same time, however, Seligman’s analysis of happiness pathways tends to draw on moral/philosophical rather than empirical sources” (2012, 90). Seligman is aware of the charge of normativism. The website for the Positive Psychology Center (University of Pennsylvania) devotes a paragraph to the problem.

Positive psychology is descriptive, not prescriptive, at least in Seligman’s view, although others disagree. We are not telling people which choices they should make; we are merely in-forming them about what is known about the consequences of their choices. The good life for one person is not necessarily the good life for another. Objective, empirical research on the conditions that lead to different outcomes, however, can help people make more informed choices, but we take no theoretical stand on the desirability of the different choices.

The passage does not show a unified front. Nonetheless, it is impossible to believe that the Positive Psychology movement takes not theoretical stand on the “desirability of the different choices.” The movement is built on just such a stand.

Learned optimism

In the chapter on optimism, we are told just how to think concerning outcomes. Concerning neg-active outcomes, the optimist has temporary perspective (“I’m exhausted”), while the pessimist has a permanent perspective (“I’m all washed up”). Concerning positive outcomes, the optimist has a permanent perspective (“I always lucky”), while the pessimist has a temporary perspective (“My lucky day”) (2002, 88-92) [9].

That leads to “learned optimism.” Says Seligman, “Finding permanent and universal causes of good events along with temporary and specific causes for misfortune is the art of hope.” A hopeful person, finding a fleshy lump, will say, “It’s five in ten this lump is nothing,” in contrast to a hopeless person, who says, “It’s five in ten this lump is cancer.” A hopeful person, in a discussion on terrorism, will say, “The U.S. will root out all its enemies,” while the hopeless person will say, “The U.S. will root out the terrorists” (2002, 92).

How does learned optimism differ from positive thinking? “Positive thinking often involves trying to believe upbeat statements such as ‘Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and bet-term’ in the absence of evidence, or even in the face of contrary evidence.” In contrast, “learned optimism ... is about accuracy” (2002, 96).

Is it? First, there is the problem of etiologically bracketing explanations and general terms. Learned optimism, with insistence about adopting a temporary perspective concerning ill events and a permanent perspective concerning good events invites us to live in cloud-cuckoo-land. What good will it do me when I have had good luck on a day to utter, “I’m al-ways lucky”? (89) The logic here is single-shot inductivism, and the implicit argument is a fallacy. Are we justified ever in concluding from one observed instance of something, I won \$200 today in the lottery, that I shall always be lucky? At some point, reality must factor into one’s reasoning.

Let us grant that there are health benefits, both psychological and physical, to optimistic thinking. Yet can we be sure that if we challenge what seem to be pessimistic and hopeless claims that we will in the main have reality on our side?

We cannot. We are never in position to justify any universal claims, whether about good or bad outcomes, however passionately we might believe them to be true. Passion is just the issue.

Consider A lush’s claim, “I’ll never be successful at anything,” indicative of pessimism. Upon what grounds would we ever be justified in that conclusion? Such a claim is usually uttered after a particularly debilitating “defeat.” Yet is one debilitating defeat a good reason for thinking that he will be unsuccessful at all things he undertakes? Pessimism here is unfounded.

Consider Myron’s claim, “I’ll always be successful at everything,” indicative of optimism. Upon what grounds would we ever be justified in that conclusion? Such a claim is usually uttered after a particularly exhilarating “victory.” Yet is one exhilarating victory a good reason for thinking that he will be successful at all things he undertakes? Optimism here is unfounded.

The generalizations we forge are always founded on a finite amount of observations. Thus, they are always amenable to falsification, if we come across an observation inconsistent with them. “I’ll always be successful at everything” can readily be shown false, if Myron tomorrow has a fight with his wife. So too can “I’ll never be successful at anything,” if A lush gets an unexpected promotion at work.

We need always to confine our judgments to circumstances: “Today I’ve suffered a tough setback” in preference to “I’ll never be successful at anything,” and “Today I’ve experienced great success” in preference to “I’ll always be successful at everything.” Generalizations, when we utter them, are hyperbolic. Thus, they’re best left to scientists, like Newton ($F=ma$) and Boyle ($P\approx 1/V$), whose equations, as generalizations, can be amply put to the tests of other scientists.

Second, we cannot merely learn optimism through weeding out negative thoughts, even if at odds with reality. Riddance of a negative thought at odds with reality “I’ll never be successful at anything” does not necessarily mean replacing it with a positive thought, not needlessly exaggerated “I’ll generally be successful at everything.” Positive thinking cannot just be conjured up. It needs to be grounded, otherwise we utter a statement without believing

what we utter. Again, we need to have a track record of successes before we can believe that we shall generally be successful. It would not hurt to define “success” either.

Third, there is the problem concern false dichotomizing viz, bracketing people into optimists and pessimists. Little, if anything, is gained by such dichotomization, for the optimism/pessimism dichotomy is oversample. Seligman tends to link learned helplessness with pessimism and wishes to overcome the problem by conversion of pessimists to optimists. This dichotomization of pessimism/optimism is problematic, because human personality is too rich to be captured by it. Moreover, it is misleading. Too few persons, if any, think of all courses of actions either wholly in terms of results favorable or wholly in terms of results unfavorable. Finally, every emotion can be positive on one occasion and negative on another, and some are coincidentally positive and negative. So, how helpful is the dichotomization? To do so is, in Miller’s words, “to pre-suppose a very narrow range of emotional response” to persons (2008, 606).

Fourth, there is likely a causal fallacy or two behind the etiological façade Seligman gives us. How aimful is the dichotomization for etiological understanding? Even if we could lump every-one as “optimist” or “pessimist,” how can we know that the cause of helplessness in each case is a pessimistic outlook? How do we know that helplessness is not the cause of pessimism? How do we know that helplessness and pessimism are not jointly the result of some other cause say, parental inattention or some prior trauma?

Fifth, learned optimism is morally flawed. Says Jules Evans, whose critique of Positive Psychology is severe, “It’s actually quite a dangerous idea it trains us to take responsibility when things go well, and to shirk responsibility when things go badly” [10]. He continues, “Seligman and his political backers are so keen to build an ‘objective science,’ and to avoid the charge of moral paternalism, they have built a model of the good life what leaves out moral judgment, ethical debate, and free choice all of which ... are fairly crucial aspects of human flourishing” (215).

In sum, there is little to be gained by adoption of Positive Psychology’s novelty learned op-times. A greatly better account is Stoical: We ought to eschew generalizing at all costs and keep our “judgments” at the level of description that is, we ought to eschew judging, which for Stoics is emotion-laden. On seeing a man, badly dressed and passed out on a downtown street, we ought to assert “That man has had too much to drink” in preference to “That drunkard is a hopeless loser.” Moreover, assertions ought not to be positive and negative or optimistic and pes-sadistic, but oriented to reality, which is not good or bad. Following the Stoics, we will be

gain-erring if we cease evaluatively to judge events and intenerate our emotions for the sake of clarity of reason.

The happiness pill

Imagine a not-too-distant future, in which the science of pharmacology has advanced so such an extent not only that most major illnesses are under control, but also that there are 24-hour poteen-cy pills to enhance just about every aspect of human living. There is, for instance, a pill that can make any person the equal of Vladimir Ashkenazy at the piano, another that can make anyone sing as smoothly as Michael Bublé or Natalie Cole, another that can make any woman as beautiful as Olga Kirilenko, and still another that can make any man as interesting as the World’s Most Interesting Man.

What is more, depression is no longer a major concern, as there is a 24-hour happiness pill. Even better, the pill can be taken each day over the course of a lifetime, as it has no side-effects. The happiness here is not the fleeting giddiness that we sometimes feel, for example, when we receive unexpectedly a windfall in the mail or have a much fun at a party. It is the happiness we feel that comes through equanimity viz., having a virtuous disposition that can be readily exercised. So effective is the pill that all our actions are virtually indistinguishable from those of a genuine virtuous person, like Gandhi, who has devoted a lifetime to the pursuit of virtue. Should we take such a pill, we would be as caring, generous, sympathetic, just, loyal, temperate, and in-different to death as was Gandhi.

Yet we would concur that something disingenuous has happened in this scenario. By taking a happiness pill, we have cheated. We have taken a shortcut we have gotten much work done through the mere act of deglutition and there just are no shortcuts to happiness.

There is just one nagging difficulty. Should we take the happiness pill, we would know that upon ceasing to take the pill, we would return to our old self, and the virtue we formerly dis-played would be gone.

That is roughly the problem with the promise of Positive Psychology.

If only implicitly, it offers itself as a shortcut to happiness answer some questionnaires, read Positive Psychology books, stay focused on optimism, and take a three-week online class³ and voila! We are happy. And if we take the three-week course, we shall have a “Signed and Sealed Certificate of Completion” to prove it. Yet like the path to be an Ashkenazy at the piano, there are no shortcuts to happiness. It is a lifelong process, and the results with the best, most concentrated effort, are not guaranteed⁴.

³(2016) On the Pursuit of Happiness webpage, there is a happiness quiz, comprising 11 questions. After the quiz, readers are invited to click a green button that says, “Learn How to be Happy.” It takes you to an online three-week course on “the science of happiness.” Upon completion of the course, participants are promised a “Signed and Sealed Certificate of Completion.”

⁴elgman (2002, 118) does write of “the overreliance on shortcuts to happiness” as one of the chief causes of unhappiness. Yet he cites television, drugs, shopping, sex for the sake of sex, spectator sports, and chocolate as instances.

Yet let us grant what I believe is disingenuous, and very likely impossible that that the Positive Psychology happiness experts can make us happy. We have taken the three-week course and have gotten our certificate, we have read all the Positive Psychology books, and we have attended Positive Psychology seminars. In a year or two, so well have we absorbed the Positive Psychology slogans that we behave virtuously in situations that call for us to be virtuous. Thus, we behave identically, or relatively so, to someone who has spent a lifetime in pursuit of virtue. Would not we then be virtuous?

Something is still disingenuous. What?

Aristotle states that virtue is a matter of habituation, knowledge, and choice over time and in a complete life. Seligman acknowledges “good character plus the exercise of choice,” but he says little that is precise about the time and effort involved. Things like a three-week online course misleadingly suggest that the time and work involved need not to be substantial. If so, anyone who has absorbed the Positive Psychology principles and aces the questionnaires would merely be behaving as if he were happy, without really being happy. That is a substantive difference.

There is Brobdingnagian presumption in thinking that happiness can be taught that we can be Gandhi-like by reading and rereading a few books, taking and retaking questionnaires, at attending Positive Psychology seminars, or taking an online course. That presupposes that there are teachers of virtue [11] (2007, 90-1), the key to happiness, and that such teachers, by implication, are paradigms or paladins of virtue a frightening thought. If they are not, but merely claim to be able to lead us to virtue, then we are again fronted with the Platonic problem: How can you assert that the Positive Psychology experts have knowledge that leads to virtue if that knowledge has yet not made anyone virtuous?

Happiness cannot be had through simple assessment tests and Positive Psychology tutorials. It is not that simple. As Suisse notes, “One cannot engage in such exercises without an appreciation of the values and meaning of particular events and experiences in the life of an individual” [12], and experiences, as psychoanalysis has shown, are not only numerous, but also difficult to analyze, as each experience affects differently every person.

Aristotle and the Stoics knew that happiness was a lifelong journey a personal odyssey where each day we fight to see things as they are and not as we would like them to be not something to be taught by scientists who have discovered the key to wellbeing through “scientific” investigation. The quest for happiness can only come, as Aristotle noted, through voluntary and persistent effort over time, and the aim is virtuous action through a settled psychical disposition.

A person who goes to another and says, “I’m unhappy, and can you make me happy, or happier?” is one who will never be happy. The reasons are two. First, that person just does not grasp the nature of happiness. Each of us is personally responsible for our own journey [13], for self-knowledge. There are no experts at least,

not ones who can teach virtue. To entrust the journey to happy scientists qua happiness experts is a sure measure that the end is misconstrued and will never be achieved.

Second, and here psychoanalysis is of great assistance, self-knowing takes time, as each person is not only biologically unique, but also uniquely crafted by circumstances over time. Consider the amount of time a patient needs to spend in psychoanalysis to begin to move forward. The therapist uses a variety of techniques to glean information from his patient, and there is an abundance of relevant information, much of which is subconscious. He forges provisional hypotheses, many inconsistent with others, concerning psychopathology. Those hypotheses that are amply confirmed in subsequent sessions are retained; those disconfirmed, discarded. Analyst and patient over time work toward the latter’s improved knowledge of self and adjustment to reality. There is no short-cut to the “dirty work” that must be done, and Positive Psychology seems not to recognize the amount of dirty work in its quest for human happiness for relatively normal persons.

Let us now return to the question raised early in the paper: Is Positive Psychology supposed to be an alternative to psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy? “Positive” here is suggestive.

“Psychology as usual is about repairing damage and about moving from minus six up to minus two,” says Seligman, not about going from “plus two to plus seven.” Traditional interventions, “heavy-handed,” are mostly about external forces and have little to do with will. “Therapies like psychoanalysis, in which the therapist is passive (speaking only rarely, and never acting) and the patient is active do not have a great track record of relieving mental disorders” (2002, ix and 136). Freudian psychoanalysis he couples with Christianity and both are subsumed under “the rotten-to-the-core dogma,” which “this book seeks to overthrow” (x). Freud’s own “hydraulics of emotion” is claimed to have been shown effete by successful cognitive therapies, such as Aaron Beck’s. Freud’s views, he objects, have also led to a “ventilations society,” in which it is judged “honest, just, and even healthy to express our anger.” Not only is the view false, “the reverse is true” (2002, 68-69).

That Seligman speaks highly of cognitive therapies like Beck’s shows that he does not see Positive Psychology as an alternative to all forms of psychotherapy. Positive Psychology, rooted in cognitive psychotherapy, is for Seligman a form of mostly self-psychotherapy for normal, highly volitional beings. He argues merely for space. The singular focus on mental illness “has come at a high cost” for psychology: lack of focus on “building the states that make life worth living” (ix). In focusing on the ill few, psychology has turned its back on the many. Yet the question about whether Positive Psychology offers itself as a “positive” alternative to the relatively dreary and ineffective traditional therapeutic approaches, limited to psychopathology is moot. The numerous arguments [14] I have given show the inadequacy of Seligman’s “new science.” Yet some of the problems I have raised for Positive Psychology e.g., the discipline is more normative than scientific are problems also for all forms of psychotherapy.

Upshot

Aesop tells one story of a tortoise and an eagle. The tortoise, wishing to explore the boundless sky, promised any bird the reward of numerous hidden precious stones in a return for a trip in the sky. An eagle took him up on his promise. Once high in the sky, the eagle asked about the stones, and the tortoise admitted that did not know where to find any such stones. The eagle dropped the tortoise, which was dashed on a rock, and that enabled the eagle to feast on the battered carcass of the tortoise.

It is likewise with Positive Psychology, which makes extraordinary, Pantagruel promises, and has been as a result enormously rewarded both monetarily and politically. It has to date given us numerous stones, but none that is precious. And so, we ought not to be as naïve as the eagle concerning the merits of Positive Psychology. At least, we ought to see some precious stones before investing so irrevocably in the movement.

As psychologists, we tend to be, for whatever reasons, more impetuous and drawn to fads than we are critical and skeptical. Consider the influence of canonical Freudian psychoanalysis in the twentieth century and its near universal denunciation by psychologists today. Thus, so long as Positive Psychologists keep giving us stones, even if none proves to be precious, we shall remain optimistic that a precious stone or two will turn up soon. How can we not be optimistic? After all, optimism is the stuff of Positive Psychology.

References

1. Lazarus RS (2003) Does the positive psychology movement have legs? *Psychological Enquiry* 14(2): 93-109.

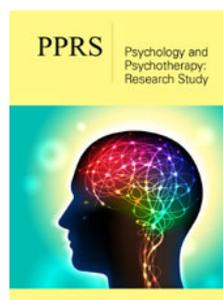
2. Peterson C, Seligman MEP (2004) *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, USA.
3. Aristotle, Rackham H (1926) *Nicomachean ethics*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA.
4. Plato (1924) *Meno*. WRM Lamb (trans.). Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA.
5. Seligman MEP, Pawelski JO (2003) Positive psychology: FAQs. *Psychological Inquiry* 14(2): 159-163.
6. Peterson C (2006) *Primer in positive psychology*, Oxford University Press, New York, USA.
7. Freud S (1958) *The Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII*. In: Strachey J (Ed.), The Hogarth Press, London, UK.
8. Suissa J (2008) Lessons from a new science? On teaching happiness in schools. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42(3-4): 575-590.
9. Seligman MEP (2002) *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. Free Press, New York, USA.
10. Kristjánsson K (2012) Positive psychology and education: Old wine in new bottles? *Educational Psychologist* 47(2): 86-105.
11. Martin MW (2007) Happiness and virtue in positive psychology. *Journal for The Theory of Social Behavior* 37(1): 89-103.
12. Miller A (2008) A critique of positive psychology or the new science of happiness. *Journal of The Philosophy of Education* 42(3-4): 591-608.
13. Evans J (2012) *Philosophy for life and other dangerous situations: Ancient philosophy for modern problems*: New World Library, Novato, USA.
14. Seneca (2002) *Epistles*. In: Richard MG (Ed.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA.



Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

For possible submissions Click Here

Submit Article



Psychol Psychother Res Stud

Benefits of Publishing with us

- High-level peer review and editorial services
- Freely accessible online immediately upon publication
- Authors retain the copyright to their work
- Licensing it under a Creative Commons license
- Visibility through different online platforms