

# **A Critique of Positive Psychology— or ‘The New Science of Happiness’**

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*This paper argues that the new science of positive psychology is founded on a whole series of fallacious arguments; these involve circular reasoning, tautology, failure to clearly define or properly apply terms, the identification of causal relations where none exist, and unjustified generalisation. Instead of demonstrating that positive attitudes explain achievement, success, well-being and happiness, positive psychology merely associates mental health with a particular personality type: a cheerful, outgoing, goal-driven, status-seeking extravert.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is easy to poke fun at positive psychology or ‘the new science of happiness’ for offering facile, naively simplistic answers to age-old questions concerning the meaning of life, paths to fulfilment and ‘the good life’. Many critics in the media have pointed out, and with some justification, that it appears to be little more than ‘self help’ (with all its attendant deficiencies) repackaged and given the veneer of respectable science. More perceptive commentators have drawn a distinction between happiness as the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure (with which they equate positive psychology) and happiness as the pursuit of the good life, in which meaning and fulfilment result from transcending immediate desires and impulses, cultivating the virtues and striving for some ideal of what it is to be human. As Richard Schoch complains, ‘Somewhere between Plato and Prozac, happiness stopped being a lofty achievement and became an entitlement’ (Schoch, 2007, p. 1). The answers are more likely to lie in the wisdom of the ages, in religion and philosophy, not in the pat answers of positive psychology.

But there is a lot more to positive psychology than some of its critics perhaps allow. Even a cursory reading will reveal that it is not concerned with the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure, at least not in the sense of immediate sensual gratification; instead, it proposes that absorbing activities and engagements (including selfless, altruistic ones) are central to a happy, meaningful life, and it is through these that the traditional virtues can be cultivated. The scientific basis of its claims lies firmly in evolutionary psychology, which explains the ultimate motivations and values of people in terms of needs that have evolved through natural selection, and

which explains the positive emotions people feel as having evolved to stimulate the behaviour that confers adaptive advantage. Its 'positive thinking' prescriptions are justified by reference to practised cognitive therapeutic techniques. And perhaps most significantly of all, it appears to offer a scientifically grounded recipe for personal fulfilment in a liberal, utilitarian, materialistic age. Old beliefs rooted in common social structures, culture and religion have atrophied (at least in the West) and it is to evolutionary science and psychology that we must now look for the answers.

The appeal of positive psychology, whether to corporate managers, economists, educationalists or managerially minded politicians in search of optimal solutions, should not be under-estimated. In his book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, the eminent economist Richard Layard is sufficiently convinced to attempt 'a new evidence-based vision of how we can live better' founded on 'the new psychology of happiness' (Layard, 2006, p. ix). Hundreds of courses in positive psychology are now available in American colleges and both the University of East London and the City University now run courses in the UK. Anthony Seldon has pioneered classes in 'well-being' at Wellington College and in the autumn of 2007 it was announced that all state schools in England would teach 'social and emotional intelligence'—or, as the media reported it, 'happiness lessons'.

Positive psychology has particular appeal in education where, in common with its close relations 'emotional intelligence' and 'multiple intelligences', it seems to promise achievement and empowerment for all. The 'SEAL' programme for developing 'the social and emotional aspects of learning', already piloted in primary schools, might well prove to be the first step toward a re-crafting of the whole of the school curriculum to take account of the new psychology. Unlike its forerunner 'PSHE' (Personal, Social and Health Education), SEAL is directly inspired by the work of Daniel Goleman on emotional intelligence, a field that has much in common with positive psychology.<sup>1</sup> It argues that both behaviour and attitudes to learning will be improved if, amongst other things, pupils learn to manage their emotions, 'feel optimistic about themselves and their ability to learn', 'reflect on longer-term goals' and 'learn to feel good about themselves' (Banda Pilot Site, 2007, 2.3). Moreover, it argues that the learning and teaching approaches that foster these attitudes should be adopted across the curriculum: collaborative group challenges, group enquiry, 'experiential learning opportunities' etc (5.4). It would be a logical next step to re-craft the curriculum itself, as Goleman advocates, so that pupils' learning matches their 'profile of natural competencies' and they can thereby 'gain flow from learning' (Goleman, 1996, pp. 93–5). The much-vaunted idea of 'personalised learning' could then be realised. Whether this will eventually happen remains to be seen, but the consequences for education if it did would be profound.

Much of the debate about the merits of positive psychology has centred on the 'research evidence' i.e. does it work or not? Advocates of positive psychology claim that its assertions are proved by a vast amount of research; opponents point to research evidence to the contrary. So we can read on the very same day in the *Sunday Times*, in relation to the 'SEAL'

classes, that on the one hand, ‘research found that teaching the subject in 300 primary schools had boosted the children’s concentration by helping them understand and deal with their emotions’ (Griffiths, 2007), and on the other, ‘there is little evidence that the classes . . . led to any long-term improvement in emotional well-being or academic success’ (Waite, 2007). We are reduced to choosing between rival pieces of research evidence.

But ‘research evidence’ in education purporting to prove a causal relation between two posited variables is notoriously unreliable and fraught with methodological difficulties. The research evidence, however voluminous (and whether for or against), is only as good as the assumptions underlying the concepts, terms and relationships being tested. As Richard Smith argues, it is a problem endemic right across the social sciences that a narrow concern with ‘scientific’ research techniques has tended to displace the exercise of broader judgement and insight concerning the validity of the underlying concepts and ideas themselves (Smith, 2006, pp. 159–61). This paper is concerned with the logical validity of the arguments and underlying concepts of positive psychology. What are these?

The positive psychology movement encompasses a broad research programme, but the central arguments advanced by Martin Seligman, the acknowledged founder of positive psychology, are the twin ones that happiness—‘authentic happiness’ and not merely pleasure—can be achieved if a person utilises and develops the positive personality or character traits they are endowed with (their ‘signature strengths’) in purposeful activity; and that a positive, optimistic attitude toward oneself and to events in general helps enable a person achieve his goals (Seligman, 2006 and 2007). Happiness itself comprises positive feelings or emotions about the past and future—satisfaction, contentment, pride, serenity, optimism, hope, confidence, trust and faith—along with the positive activities that generate these feelings and in which they find expression (Seligman, 2007, p. 261).

These arguments are, however, founded on a number of assertions that are highly questionable: first, that life can be conceived in terms of the setting and achieving of goals (an assumption of psychological models in general); second, that the traits, dispositions, emotions, feelings, desires, beliefs and values that together comprise a person’s attitudes or personality (and which psychology conceives as explaining or causing people’s behaviour) can be consciously managed or controlled; third, that people can broadly be categorised as pessimistic or optimistic (with the optimists having the ability to persevere, achieve their goals and attain happiness); and finally, that expressing one’s ‘signature strengths’ or positive traits and virtues in absorbing activities is the key to well-being.

In this paper I examine these assertions and the assumptions that underlie them.

## **GOALS, ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOUR AND THE FALLACY OF CONSCIOUS CONTROL**

A marked characteristic of psychological explanations of behaviour in general is the idea that life can be conceived instrumentally as comprising

a series of goals that one is in the process of trying to achieve. For psychology to be able to explain human behaviour at all, behaviour must be conceived as intentional, with actions determined by motives and goals (Taylor *et al.*, 1982, p. 584). Positive psychology simply takes this further and promises that all can achieve their goals, provided that attitudes are sufficiently positive: 'Optimism is a tool to help the individual achieve the goals he has set for himself' (Seligman, 2006, p. 291).

The idea that all can achieve their goals would appear to be an illusion, particularly when goals and achievement are conceived in terms of social status and recognition, and so the proviso is added that goals must be realistic and achievable. But this begs the following questions: first, if a realistic goal is defined as that which is attainable now (given all existing constraints including motivation and circumstances), how does it differ from plans and actions that would be undertaken anyway; and second, if a realistic goal is defined more ambitiously as that which could be achieved if current constraints on behaviour (motivation and circumstances) were altered, how could a person possibly know in advance whether or not their goals were realistic? In other words, if one is motivated to achieve something in life, there is no need for setting it up as a goal; and if one is not motivated to achieve that thing, there is no point in setting it up as a goal. Either way, extraneous goal setting would seem to be redundant.

The very ideas of conscious goal setting and goal achievement conjure up images of Gilbert Ryle's 'ghost in the machine' and of the 'homunculus' that bedevils computer theories of the mind.<sup>2</sup> Though it is perfectly legitimate to distinguish intelligent, purposeful behaviour from instinctive, unconscious behaviour, to speak of consciously controlling your own attitudes, motivation, thoughts or actions implies an infinite regress of controllers or managers sitting one inside the other. It is only because computers, machines and businesses do not have minds of their own that they need plans, goals, targets and programmes. As Ryle comments, 'motives and moods are not the sort of things which could be among the direct intimations of consciousness' (Ryle, 1990, p. 111). George Miller and Robert Buckhout make essentially the same point: 'It is the result of thinking, not the process of thinking, that appears spontaneously in consciousness' (Miller and Buckhout, 1973, p. 70).

Explanations of behaviour in terms of personality traits or dispositions, emotions, moods, feelings, beliefs and values are all perfectly legitimate. They help provide intelligible, rational explanations of people's actions and by the same token enable us to interpret these actions as purposeful or goal-driven. What is questionable is whether any of these explanatory factors can by their very nature be considered as being under conscious control. And though we can evidently reflect on our motives and attitudes, subject them to rational examination, even choose to reject them altogether, this very process of reflection must itself be motivated by some emotional impulse, unconscious need or end. In the language of evolutionary psychology, 'without a specification of a creature's goals, the very idea of intelligence is meaningless' (Pinker, 1999, p. 61).

For most people most of the time, interests, passions, dreams, plans, goals and purpose emerge out of life and circumstances as possibilities and opportunities arise; and they are determined by traits of personality, aptitudes, dispositions and inclinations, none of which are *consciously* chosen or managed as instrumental means to the achievement of goals. Of course people may choose to make promotion at work, for example, their overriding goal and make all behaviour instrumental to that end. But it takes a certain sort of person with a certain sort of personality in very particular circumstances to be inclined or motivated to do that in the first place—the sort of person for whom promotion and the status that comes with it are all-important.

It is a central contention of positive psychology that people can be re-crafted into goal achievers able to control their emotions and harness all their positive energies in the service of their goals. For example, in Andy Smith's '55 Ways to Increase Your Emotional Intelligence', the reader is urged to 'make a list of what's important to you', 'prioritise your values' and 'discover what you really want' (Smith, 2002, p. 9). But unless you already know exactly what you want, and are therefore by definition motivated to achieve it, these are impossible tasks. The passions, emotions, instincts, dispositions and aptitudes together with the learning and experience that go to make up a person's goals and values are *necessarily* the same passions, emotions, instincts, dispositions and aptitudes that will motivate his attitudes toward the achievement of those goals and the practice of those values. The two cannot be separated.

Instincts, values, attitudes and hence behaviour can, however, be controlled in a rather different sense. On the one hand, they can be learned or inculcated as part of a process of education or training; and on the other, they can be subject to the exercise of 'self-control'. 'Self-control' and 'self-discipline' are needed to choose the course of action that one believes is right or that one most values over behaviour that has more immediate, instinctive appeal. A person might or might not have the self-control or determination, the drive or perseverance (together with the skill, judgement and luck) necessary to achieve his goals or ambitions. But these very qualities of self-control, determination and perseverance are themselves part and parcel of his personality, his history, his circumstances and so forth. They cannot be regarded as being consciously imposed or managed any more than a person's goals or ambitions; otherwise we are back in the situation of the ghost in the machine, the homunculus and an infinite regress. In other words, it is out of a person's life that his goals together with the motivation and the attitudes necessary to achieve them emerge and take form.

The problem or paradox inherent in the very notion of self-control is exemplified in *akrasia*, the situation in which a person having decided after due deliberation that they will or will not do something then unaccountably does the reverse and subsequently regrets their 'weakness of will'. The problem is that if a person acts in a particular way, how can the act not be regarded as rational in the sense of fulfilling some overriding need or interest of the person concerned? In *The Emotions: A*

*Philosophical Exploration*, Peter Goldie argues that the notion of ‘weakness of will’ can only really make sense when considered ethically as a matter of harnessing or controlling the bodily appetites and desires in the name of ‘a rationally conceived goal or end’; and this in turn takes us back to Aristotle’s temperate person habituated through a process of moral education to restrain appetites and emotions in the name of rational desires, goods and ends (Goldie, 2002, p. 113). However, one could go even further and argue that rational behaviour can only ever be conceived in relation to norms and virtues that are socially and culturally validated. To exhibit weakness of will or irrational behaviour is simply to fail to conform to these norms or to live up to society’s ideals of virtue and morality. The Aristotelian notions of virtue and temperance (or self-control) lead on in turn to the notion of a political community in which there is a shared conception of the good life and hence of ‘happiness’—a theme I shall return to later.

A person might exhibit ‘weakness of will’ for a variety of reasons. Education and upbringing (or lack of it), personality, past history and current circumstances might all be factors. But to speak of choosing to behave (or not to behave) rationally, morally or intelligently as if one’s thoughts, attitudes and emotional impulses could be consciously directed or willed is surely to lead us again into an infinite regress. It should be noted, however, that this is not necessarily to argue that thoughts and acts are fully determined by antecedent events i.e. that there cannot be free will in its ‘deep’ sense. It is simply to argue that however we conceive consciousness or the mechanics of the process of rational deliberation, the complex of personality traits, emotions, beliefs and values that go to make up a person (the attitudes, needs and desires of the very subject or self who is deliberating), though continually evolving, are by their nature largely determined by the past history of that person i.e. by what has gone before.

There is, however, another sense in which we can speak of self-control being exercised: the self-control of emotions and feelings. Indeed, civilised life depends on people learning how to restrain their immediate, instinctive impulses, appetites and desires. Goleman is right to emphasise the importance of being able to control one’s emotions and to delay self-gratification (Goleman, Chapters 5 and 6). Courses in emotional intelligence that teach techniques for managing anger, for example, may well be of value in this respect. But it is the *expression* of these impulses, appetites and feelings in actions or in words that is being controlled, not the impulses, appetites and feelings themselves. Therapy may help develop strategies for mitigating the destructive and debilitating effects of negative emotions, as in the case of ‘learned helplessness’ (as we shall see later); but to infer that one’s attitudes and motives can be stage managed is quite another matter.

But even for the sort of person naturally driven by the desire to achieve economic or social status, there are dangers to the instrumental, managerial approach to work and to life. For example, Smith suggests ‘Every time you communicate with someone, have a desired outcome . . . That way, you can know when you’ve achieved what you want’ (Smith, 2002, p. 15); and in Wellington College’s 10-point programme for well-

being, 'productive relationships' are defined in similar terms: a good partner is 'someone with whom you can achieve positive outcomes' (Wellington College, 2007). This approach might make perfect sense in certain situations—at work, for example. But it is also the antithesis of the sort of communication or conversation that would develop mutual understanding, self-understanding, true knowledge and practical judgement—the goals of liberal learning. Worthwhile encounters and experiences, even at work, involve engagement on a quite different level. On this level, one must be open to having one's perceptions and values changed. In short, one must be open to learning, and this attitude, which must be an attitude to life, is simply not compatible with the instrumental attitude of the goal-achiever. By turning life into a series of goals and people into functionaries, life itself is diminished.

It might therefore be better to give up altogether the dual psychological concepts of goal-setting and goal-achieving, and instead limit goals to practical everyday situations where planning and setting priorities are needed to get things done with reasonable efficiency—in managing a business, organising one's diary or physical training, for example. Psychology's goal-achievement model seems to rest on little more than the empty assertion that behaviour and achievement are explained by the motivation necessary to bring them about. The very concepts of motivation, goal setting and goal achievement are therefore of dubious explanatory value.

### **OPTIMISM, HAPPINESS AND CIRCULAR REASONING**

In Seligman's 'Learned Optimism', the two pivotal concepts are 'learned helplessness' and 'explanatory style' (Seligman, 2006). Learned helplessness is 'the giving-up reaction, the quitting response that follows from the belief that whatever you do doesn't matter'; and explanatory style, which is categorised as either optimistic or pessimistic, is 'the manner in which you habitually explain to yourself why events happen' (p. 15). Learned helplessness, argues Seligman, is intimately related to a pessimistic explanatory style, a habitual way of explaining bad events that is defeatist, self blaming and produces hopelessness and helplessness (pp.15-16). Explanatory style is a habit of thought learned in childhood and adolescence and 'stems directly from your view of your place in the world—whether you think you are valuable and deserving, or worthless and hopeless'; it is 'the hallmark of whether you are an optimist or a pessimist' (p. 44).

It seems that the concept of learned helplessness does usefully describe or categorise a particular view of the self, a chronic condition that prevents a normal life from being led and actively contributes to unhappiness and depression; and there is evidence that it can be treated effectively by cognitive therapy that breaks the vicious circle of self doubt and negativity, allowing positive thoughts to come into play. Moreover, it is quite plausible that learned helplessness and the pessimistic explanatory style associated with it are strongly influenced by childhood experience: the explanatory style of parents, criticism that leads the child to have a

negative view of himself, and early traumas (p. 135). It is well established in social psychology that ‘self-efficacy’ (a person’s belief or confidence that they can successfully complete tasks or undertake challenges) and ‘attachment style’ as an adult are significantly influenced by the social environment that is experienced as a young child (Matthews *et al.*, 2003, Chapter 8).

Nevertheless, learned helplessness remains a chronic and debilitating condition, a form of mental illness or abnormality, and it requires treatment as such—much as an obsessive-compulsive disorder would require treatment. The problem is that Seligman goes on to equate learned helplessness (or the chronic lack of confidence and self-belief that it perhaps describes in other words) with ‘pessimism’. For Seligman, ‘the defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault’ (p. 4). He goes on: ‘literally hundreds of studies show that pessimists give up more easily and get depressed more often’ (p. 5). Even ‘tendencies toward pessimism’, mere ‘traces of pessimism’ are debilitating.

Seligman himself is at times ambivalent about the value of pessimism. Though he argues the balance is strongly against it, and he explains it as a hangover from the days when a pessimistic attitude was essential to survival in a dangerous and hostile world, Seligman does grudgingly admit that some jobs would suit a natural pessimist better than an optimist and that ‘mild pessimists’ may be ‘merely prudent and measured people’ (p. 112). Pessimists see reality more accurately than optimists (p. 111) and ‘depressed people [now virtually indistinguishable from pessimists in Seligman’s analysis] though sadder, are wiser’ (p. 109). But pessimism’s ‘single virtue’ is more than outweighed by ‘its pervasive, crippling consequences’ (p. 115). Positive psychology’s programme to turn pessimists into optimists, by developing ‘learned optimism,’ is therefore more than justified.<sup>3</sup>

But just because a person suffering from the chronic condition of learned helplessness is permanently pessimistic and liable to depression (almost by definition), it cannot be inferred that a person who is pessimistic *in certain circumstances* is therefore suffering from some form of this debilitating condition and is in need of treatment. Indeed, this is an absurd generalisation. In ‘The Positive Power of Negative Thinking’, Julie Norem explores the cases of people who are clearly natural pessimists but who are notably successful in their careers (i.e. who are ‘high achievers’) and satisfied with their lives (Norem, 2001). Two outstanding things emerge. First, and perhaps unsurprisingly, people are not *just* pessimists or optimists. They have complex personality structures and ‘sometimes the same person will have both positive and negative characteristics’ (p. 24). A person might even at times be ‘both strongly optimistic *and* strongly pessimistic’ (p. 25); it all depends on the circumstances. Secondly, there is a very big difference between the person who has a disposition to be pessimistic ‘all the time or in every situation’ (p. 26)—i.e. who has ‘a pessimistic attributional style’ (p. 110) or learned helplessness—and the person who though anxious about future events is not debilitated by negative interpretations of past events. The latter, termed by Norem the



‘defensive pessimist’, has neither a consistently positive nor a consistently negative attributional style (p. 109), and is neither helpless nor hopeless in the face of setbacks.

In ‘What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology?’, Shelly Gable and Jonathan Haidt acknowledge Norem’s work, accept that defensive pessimists constitute a ‘subgroup of people’ who would not benefit from being taught to be more optimistic, and argue that positive psychology must recognise that ‘what is positive or good is complex and multi-dimensional’ (Gable and Haidt, 2005, p. 108). But much of the problem lies with the very terms ‘pessimistic’ and ‘optimistic’ (or ‘positive and ‘negative’) as personality categories and descriptors. When associated merely with obstruction, hopelessness, defeatism and resignation (or with ‘learned helplessness’), the term ‘pessimism’ has indeed very negative connotations; but when it is associated with justified criticism, realism, the fatalism born of experience, and foresight, it is far more positive. It all depends on how pessimism is defined and interpreted. It also depends on the context, the situation and the other character traits that are brought into play. One could draw up an equivalent balance sheet for the term ‘optimistic’. Both optimism *and* pessimism, so far as they have descriptive or explanatory value, must surely be counted as traits or features of a healthy, mature, balanced outlook.

Tendencies toward ‘optimism’ or ‘pessimism’ (assuming that we can speak in these terms and identify such traits) are really aspects of a much more complex whole. In fact, learned helplessness apart, it is questionable whether the terms optimistic and pessimistic have any value at all as freestanding descriptors of personality. At best, they can only describe attitudes to particular future events in particular situations and circumstances. It is the mental health and integrity of the person as a whole 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.

Peter Goldie makes this point forcefully. Not only do personality traits cohere as part of a complex, interactive and dynamic whole, but a particular trait that is positive for one person can be negative for another (Goldie, 2002, pp. 157–160). To be able to understand and interpret a person’s thoughts and feelings (and by extension their actions) at any given time, these need to be seen in the context of the overall narrative that constitutes a person’s life (or the relevant parts of it) and in which they are embedded (pp. 4–5, 44–5). Indeed it is this narrative, of which emotions and personality traits or dispositions form an integral part, which enables a person to conceive of his situation in a certain way at all (p. 158). This in turn explains why it is perhaps the novelist rather than the psychologist who has more to teach us about the human condition.

There is unquestionably a mass of evidence to support the validity of personality traits as predictors of behaviour across a range of situations and to support the dominant ‘Five Factor Model’ in particular: that there are five broad dimensions of personality—neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness (with the first two the most

universally accepted). People *do* have dispositions to behave predictably in particular ways across a wide range of situations. Moreover, there appears to be a strong hereditary influence at work and genetic research promises more discoveries relating particular traits (especially abnormal ones) to individual genes or genetic configurations (see Matthews *et al.*, 2003; Eysenck, 1998, p. 452).

It could be reasonably objected that to really understand or appreciate the complex of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and motives that go to make up a person is quite a different matter from the act of labelling a person with trait descriptors based on the results of standardised personality tests (or questionnaires) that do no more than identify a person's behaviour across a range of typical social and work situations. Nevertheless, personality descriptors such as 'extravert' and 'neurotic' tell us a great deal more about a person than the terms pessimist and optimist. Factor models do at least help provide frameworks in which diverse traits or dispositions of personality can be placed in the context of broad dimensions of personality rather than categorised as free-floating absolutes, as positive or negative, good or bad.

For example, the classic personality types in psychology are 'extravert' and 'introvert'. It is easy to see how in a certain situation the more sociable, outgoing, impulsive extravert might get to be labelled as optimistic (and hopeful, and a host of other 'positive' epithets) and an introvert as pessimistic—the sort of social situation in which the extravert typically feels more comfortable than the introvert. But in another situation, it is the introvert who will come into his own and appear to display a host of positive qualities, traits and attitudes—indeed sometimes the very same ones.<sup>4</sup> There is in the psychology of personality types no suggestion at all that one type is better, superior, preferable or even 'happier' than another. The personalities—their dispositions, inclinations, motivations and temperaments—are simply different. Anthony Storr argues that natural classifications of human beings into extraverts and introverts, divergers and convergers, dramatists and patterners, suggest not that one group is normal and the other abnormal or neurotic, but that people have by temperament different ways of finding meaning in their lives (Storr, 1989, Chapter 7). Whereas extraverts, divergers and dramatists tend to find meaning in their interactions and relationships with other people, introverts, convergers and patterners have a greater imaginative need to find or impose order on their experience, to find systems and patterns, and to make sense of their own lives. Storr further argues that this is true of many creative people, who, necessarily, have a greater need for solitude: 'The creative person is constantly seeking to discover himself, to remodel his own identity, and to find meaning in the universe through what he creates. He finds this a valuable integrating process that, like meditation or prayer, has little to do with other people, but which has its own separate validity' (p. xiv).

Unfortunately, the goal-setting, goal-achieving optimist that positive psychology adopts as its model of mental health and well-being seems to be little more than a caricature of the traditional extravert—a manifestation of what David Ausubel and Floyd Robinson termed 'the cult of

extraversion', the groundless but prevalent association of mental health with a personality that is 'warm, outgoing, amiable, and extraverted' (Ausubel and Robinson, 1969, p. 411). It is perhaps revealing that the terms 'extravert' and 'introvert', the classic descriptors of personality types, are largely conspicuous by their absence from the literature of positive psychology. There is a brief reference in Haidt, who claims that 'extraverts are naturally happier and healthier' and 'when introverts are forced to be more outgoing, they usually enjoy it' (Haidt, 2006, p. 133). Haidt is probably right that the company of others, which all people need to a greater or lesser extent, *is* more enjoyable than solitude. One is more likely to emerge amused, cheerful, and happy—happy in the sense of being amused and cheerful or cheered up. But this is entirely to miss the point, which is that not everyone needs or wants continual amusement or cheering up in order to be happy—happy in the sense of being fulfilled. Ed Diener also makes reference to extraversion as a personality factor related to 'feeling more positive emotions'; but he contrasts it not with introversion but neuroticism (Ed Diener's Website, 2008). The problem is that by defining happiness to begin with as 'subjective well-being' and measuring it according to a person's reported feelings of satisfaction, positive mood, pleasant emotions and so forth, Diener almost guarantees that a certain sort of person—a person perhaps typified by the amiable, cheerful extravert—will serve as our model of mental health.

## PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

In 'Learned Optimism', Seligman argues that a key ingredient of success is persistence, 'the ability to not give up in the face of failure'; without it, 'talent and passion will come to nothing'. Moreover, a person's ability (or lack of it) to persist when faced with challenges or difficulties is explained by his explanatory style: while optimists persist, pessimists give up (Seligman, 2006, p. 101). A pessimistic explanatory style is therefore debilitating because it prevents people from fulfilling their potential. In support of his case, Seligman cites the Princeton-Penn Longitudinal Study in which those students shown to have an optimistic explanatory style (according to an 'Attributional Style Questionnaire' or ASQ) prior to college went on to do much better at the end of the first semester than those diagnosed as having a pessimistic explanatory style in relation to their predicted performance based on past grades and aptitude tests (pp. 150–2).

It seems quite plausible that people who have a pessimistic explanatory style (to use Seligman's categorisation) are more likely to have difficulties in coping or adjusting when faced with new challenges, pressures and circumstances when we recognise that the person who is identified in the ASQ test as attributing the causes of good events to himself rather than to others or to circumstances (i.e. has an optimistic as opposed to pessimistic explanatory style) could be described in other terms: he is simply the sort of person who has confidence and belief in himself in social situations, who adjusts easily to new situations and challenges, who looks forward

rather than back, and who does not worry unnecessarily but takes things as they come—i.e. a person with something of the qualities of a natural extravert and a high degree of intrinsic self-esteem. It is perhaps no surprise that such a person might initially adjust better to the new challenges, both emotional and academic, of college or university.

Moreover, there are as we have seen people who are liable to suffer a collapse of confidence or self-belief at the slightest set back. It may well be, as David Ausubel suggested forty years ago, that failure to develop the intrinsic self-esteem that flows from unconditional parental acceptance and validation produces a person more likely to develop neurotic anxiety when faced with novel situations and challenges (Ausubel, 1968, pp. 401–7). And in these extreme cases, some sort of counselling or therapy may help enable a person to lead a normal life.

However, by the same token, a person's self-esteem and self-belief (or self-efficacy) are not isolated attributes but form part of the whole complex of his personality. And a person's personality together with his aptitudes is necessarily formed by myriad genetic, social, cultural and environmental influences. So long as he is able to find fulfilment in life, which involves coming to terms with who he is and learning what he is capable of, there seems no justification at all for attributing failure in any given situation to a defective personality or to 'negative' attitudes stemming from that personality. It is after all because people *are* different (and they have different personalities) that they cope differently in any given situation.

Indeed, does it make sense to assert that people who fail do so *because* they lack perseverance and persistence? It is in the very nature of a problem that does not yield an immediate solution or of any worthwhile activity or learning experience that one has to apply oneself. But applying oneself does not just mean 'keeping on trying' or 'not giving up' whatever the circumstances; if one is banging one's head against a brick wall, giving up might well be the best strategy. It means on the one hand having the aptitude to tackle the problem or undertake the task, which includes having the requisite skills and techniques, knowledge and experience, and on the other hand having the interest, motivation and dedication (which of course includes not giving up at the first hurdle). We might for example speak of a person having the potential to be a fine violinist if only they practised. But the point is that they do not practise and they do not practise because for one reason or another they are not sufficiently motivated to practise. They therefore do not have what it takes to be fine violinist. But this is not necessarily a failure on their part—unless perhaps they fail to find outlets in other directions for their talents and energies, in which case their failure to dedicate themselves to the violin might result in lifelong regret and unhappiness.

To attempt to isolate the quality or trait of perseverance and designate it an attitude explained by optimistic explanatory style is once again to misunderstand that perseverance, application, motivation, aptitude and ability in a particular field or situation are inextricably intertwined. The point is not that a person cannot change his behaviour or wish to change it

if he feels he is completely debilitated by it, but that a person's disposition to think and behave in a certain way is the result of a whole complex of circumstances—historical, social and personal. The failure to achieve something is *in itself* no more problematic and no more a sign of mental ill health than the inability (through lack of motivation, inclination, aptitude or opportunity) of a boxer to play the violin or a teacher to become prime minister.

### VIRTUE IN ABSORBING ACTIVITY

If the categorisation of people as optimists or pessimists and the goal-achievement model are of dubious value, the other main tenet of positive psychology might seem on the face of it more promising, namely that meaning, purpose and a feeling of well-being are derived from expressing one's positive personality traits or virtues ('signature strengths') in absorbing activities. Since positive emotions and feelings of well-being are generated by engagement in absorbing activities (the state of total absorption which is labelled 'flow'), maximising the feelings of well-being that we can derive from such activities is the key to happiness. Here, there are no elusive goals to achieve; one merely has to play to one's strengths.

There is of course nothing new in the idea that one of the keys to a fulfilling life is to find absorbing interests, passions, callings and commitments—indeed, it would be hard to define 'fulfilling' in any meaningful sense except in these terms. The special insight of positive psychology is that it is the engagement and expression of a person's 'signature strengths' that specifically produces the 'authentic positive emotion' (Seligman, 2007, p.138). Seligman has identified 24 positive personality traits, character strengths or 'signature strengths' and has grouped these into six 'core virtues'—the virtues that most commonly and consistently characterise human cultures: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence (Seligman, 2007, Chapters 8 and 9; Haidt, 2006, pp. 167–9). The 'recrafting' of work to enable people to better exploit and express these personal or 'signature' strengths—enthusiasm, valour, originality, social intelligence and leadership are examples cited—will result in both happier people and more effective workers.

But are these signature strengths any more identifiable than the goals that are supposed to motivate us? As we have seen, free-floating positive traits of personality are only of significance or value in particular contexts or situations in conjunction with other personality traits together with the values, beliefs, aptitudes and life experiences that go to form a whole person. It is hard to see how they can be identified or realised apart from life itself; and, as we have seen, it is questionable whether it makes any sense to designate personality traits in isolation as 'positive' to begin with. Moreover, the list of virtues and signature strengths identified by Seligman conflates personality traits (or natural dispositions), learned values and beliefs, and the self-control (or integrity of character or 'will') needed to put these values and beliefs into practice. Because one's signature

strengths are the positive personality traits one is naturally endowed with, everything that is cultivated or inculcated through learning (i.e. the things needing self-discipline, effort and guidance)—values, beliefs, virtues, habits, dispositions and attitudes—therefore becomes somehow optional, relevant only to the minority whose particular natural signature strengths happen to include ‘love of learning’ and ‘self-control’. As Haidt puts it, instead of trying ‘to change any aspect of your personality by sheer force of will’, which is difficult, you simply ‘work on your strengths, not your weaknesses’ (p. 169); and because the exercise of your strengths is intrinsically rewarding and generates ‘flow’, you are much less likely to give up (p. 170).

However, when Aristotle originally listed and categorised the virtues, he was careful to distinguish the moral virtues from the intellectual virtues, the latter comprising wisdom (objective, scientific knowledge or truth) and prudence (practical wisdom or judgement). Though Aristotle recognises that the virtues must perforce have some basis in our natural instincts or dispositions (Aristotle, 1976, pp. 223–4), they are not natural endowments; training and instruction are needed respectively to develop habits of right action (moral virtues) and the rational intellect (intellectual virtue): ‘The moral virtues, then, are engendered in us neither *by* nor *contrary* to nature; we are constituted by nature to receive them, but their full development in us is due to habit’ (p. 91). Moreover, to behave virtuously is not merely to act in conformity with the virtues but to choose to act in a particular way in the *knowledge* that one is doing the right thing (p. 97). Temperance (the observance of the mean) and self-restraint are needed to master the pleasures and the passions. True virtue must have both a moral and an intellectual dimension.

In his broad defence of Aristotle’s account of the virtues in ‘After Virtue’, Alasdair MacIntyre highlights this role of intelligence, of practical judgement (*phronesis*), in transforming moral dispositions into virtues and relates it to Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean: it is precisely because a virtue cannot adequately be distinguished from its corresponding vices independently of circumstances that practical judgement, the knowledge of how to exercise judgement in particular cases, is needed (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 154). Moreover, the virtues are intimately related to each other and this is reflected in the idea of a political community in which there is a shared recognition and pursuit of the good life—‘the moral unity of Aristotelianism’ (p. 156).

MacIntyre goes on to explore how a person’s life can have the moral unity necessary for it to be meaningful and for its acts to be intelligible and accountable. For this to happen, the life of the self must be conceived as a quest for the good life: ‘It is in the course of the quest . . . that the good of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge’ (p. 219). But the quest needs both a starting point and some initial conception of a possible shared future or *telos*, and this is only possible if the life of the self is also conceived as an enacted historical narrative framed in a living tradition i.e. if a person has an adequate sense

of shared traditions and practices, a historical and a social identity (p. 223). The possibilities of the future are inevitably constrained by the events of the past, just as a person's own actions are constrained by the actions of others (p. 215).

To 'realise' himself, a person needs to learn what he is capable of being or becoming; and this in turn necessitates learning values and developing the self-control and integrity needed to put these values into practice. Of course, what he becomes is in part determined by inherited aptitudes, inclinations, traits and dispositions, but these only have significance in their totality and in conjunction with what is learned and experienced in a life framed in a particular social and historical setting. Only then can we speak of a person's 'personality' and begin to identify its positive or negative aspects. And if, as Goldie argues, the complex of traits, emotions, beliefs and values that make up one's personality produce a disposition to conceive of one's situation in a certain way, then they must also colour one's personal conception of happiness and the good life.

Though Haidt claims that the traditional virtues have found a new lease of life in the form of Seligman's diagnostic manual of signature strengths, it is clear that the re-conception is only possible by the virtual elimination from the picture of the very things that, at least in the Aristotelian tradition, make the idea of virtue conceivable at all.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

There is more than an air of circular reasoning and tautologous assertion about the whole positive psychology project. There is, for example, a certain tautological inevitability in the assertion that a person categorised as 'pessimistic' to begin with, and therefore with a tendency always to look at the worst aspect of things, is more prone to depression; or that to achieve a particular goal you need the attitudes, inclinations and motivations that are needed to achieve that goal; or that people with a pessimistic explanatory style, which is characterised by a tendency to give up, are more likely to give up; or that people who are by nature optimistic, amiable and untroubled by worries or doubts are happiest, when happiness is defined as a state of being optimistic, amiable and untroubled by worries or doubts.

It would be difficult to question the assertion that a person with a positive, optimistic attitude is happier in the sense of being optimistic and enjoying uniformly positive feelings about the past, the future and him or herself. We have here simply a description of a particular personality type together with a particular definition (all be it, a commonly accepted one) of the word happiness. The problems begin when this particular account of happiness is held up as a model of mental-health that can be achieved with the necessary re-crafting of people's attitudes.

If, however, life is a quest in which people explore the purpose and meaning of their lives, and develop their own conception of what constitutes a good life—all within the frame of a shared tradition and a

living community—there is no need to make this association at all. You are free to find and therefore to define your own happiness. Gable and Haidt talk of the quest of positive psychology to ‘properly map the domain of human optimal functioning’ (Gable and Haidt, 2005, p. 108). But there is no optimal solution.

The positive, optimistic attitude that Seligman associates with achievement, success and happiness (and which he exemplifies with a successful insurance salesman—see Seligman, 2006, Chapter 6) seems moreover to pre-suppose a very narrow range of emotional response. Indeed, one might argue that it is the mark of wisdom and maturity, of an appreciation of the mysteries, tragedies and ironies of life, *not* to respond unambiguously positively or negatively, optimistically or pessimistically, to any given situation. The model of mental health depicted by positive psychology turns out to be little more than a caricature of an extravert—a bland, shallow, goal-driven careerist whose positive attitudes, certainties and ‘high self-esteem’ mask the fact that he lacks the very qualities that would enable him to attain a degree of true self-knowledge or wisdom, and to really grow as a human being.

Are people who are depressed and unfulfilled by their lives therefore condemned to misery? The sort of cognitive behavioural therapy advocated by Seligman may well be effective (as indeed may various drug treatments) in the case of certain debilitating conditions and psychiatric disorders—in the treatment of the chronic lack of confidence and loss of self-esteem that Seligman categorises as learned helplessness, as in obsessive-compulsive type disorders. But the wider claims of positive psychology to be able to re-craft most people’s lives are grounded on a quite unjustified generalisation of these extreme cases. In breaking the vicious cycle of negative thinking that characterises these debilitating conditions, people are not transformed into optimistic, goal-setting, goal-achieving extraverts. They are simply freed to lead normal lives and to discover what they are capable of making of themselves.

Advances in molecular biology and genetics, however, would seem to raise the prospect that even a ‘normal’ person can be re-engineered (or simply drugged) to be more relaxed, cheerful and optimistic. This utilitarian dream might necessarily be at the expense of the qualities of being critical, perceptive, realistic and perhaps creative (unless a new robotic being could be designed from scratch). But the sum total of human happiness could no doubt be increased. This naturally raises a host of profound philosophical and ethical questions revolving around what it is to be a human being. But it also begs a very straightforward question: what is happiness? And this is a question that I have argued in this paper can only be explored by people engaged in the quest to make sense of their own lives in a wider social and cultural context.

The danger is that instead of fostering the true learning that develops self-knowledge and wisdom, and instead of considering the social and political measures that might really improve people’s circumstances, positive psychology offers a substitute recipe for success, achievement and happiness that ultimately has no substance at all.



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## NOTES

1. Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*, which is cited in the SEAL literature, appeared in 1996 and therefore slightly predates the emergence of the positive psychology movement. Though there are differences in emphasis, the broad themes and conclusions are the same (see Seligman, 2007, p. 294, endnote to p. 144).
2. The dogma of the ghost in the machine, as Ryle terms it, is the Cartesian belief that there are two different levels of existence or status: the things and events that belong to the physical world and the internal workings of the mind (Ryle, 1990, pp. 13–17). See Edelman for an account of the homunculus problem (Edelman, 1994, pp. 79–80).
3. It surely takes only a moment's reflection to appreciate how extraordinary these claims are. In writing off the facility or skill of being able to see reality accurately in favour of 'optimistic illusions about reality' (Seligman, 2006, p. 108)—the spirit of raw, positive energy that Seligman sees as the source of creativity and progress—the whole of philosophy, humane learning and rationality, of everything that has traditionally contributed to self-knowledge, judgement and wisdom is eliminated from the picture. These things do re-appear in the guise of signature strengths that may be cultivated by those so inclined in pursuit of the virtue of wisdom, but 'love of learning' is only one of six strengths leading to the higher-level virtue of wisdom, and wisdom is only one of six higher-level virtues comprising 24 strengths altogether. If education were to be re-crafted according to the insights of positive psychology and centre round the identification and development of a child's 'natural competencies' or strengths, and of the pursuit of 'flow through learning' (Goleman, 1996, p. 95), it would cease altogether in the traditional formative sense.
4. In 'On the Psychology of the Unconscious', Jung provides us with the classic depiction of the introvert and the extravert coming into their own in his story of two youths rambling in the country and coming upon a fine castle (Jung, 1983, pp. 162–4). It is the extravert's optimism and initiative that get them into the castle, but the introvert's delight in the castle's contents that then predominates.

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