

# Virtue in Positive Psychology

## Abstract

### 1. Introductory Remarks

This paper was inspired by Don Browning and Terry Cooper's *'Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies'* (2004), a book that reveals, examines and evaluates the picture of the human person, images of human fulfilment and principles of ethical obligation implicit in a range of modern psychotherapeutic psychologies. In this essay, Browning and Cooper's methodological approach will be extended to positive psychology, with special reference to Martin Seligman who is widely recognised as its founder.

Building on Browning and Cooper's foundational work (2004), it will be suggested that, akin to humanistic psychology, the principle of ethical obligation implicit within positive psychology is the non-hedonistic ethical egoism of bringing one's unique set of potentials to realisation. Whereas the humanistic psychologists identified this as 'self-actualisation', Seligman refers to a person's unique constellation of potentials as 'signature strengths', the practice of which leads to fulfilment. Positive psychology is characterised by humanistic psychology's 'culture of joy', an image of the good life that consists in giving expression to and actualising the innate human potentials everyone has – with little thought devoted to the possibility of competing interests between individuals, or to addressing personal weaknesses which are taken to be 'buffered' by strengths (Seligman, 2003, p. 13).

Alongside the 'culture of joy' of the humanistic psychologies, positive psychology seems also to incorporate elements of the 'culture of calm reason' which characterises the cognitive therapies (Browning & Cooper, 2004). Such 'neo-Stoic' therapies embody the idea that human reason can be educated to eradicate the anxiety and depression whose root cause is 'dysfunctional thinking'. As such, the final ground of optimism in Seligman's *'Learned Optimism'* (1992; 2006) is confidence based on the self's ability to change and manipulate maladaptive beliefs. Hope (taken to be synonymous with optimism and other concepts allied

under the umbrella term 'future-mindedness') is therefore largely under our control, is fundamentally cognitive, and is amenable to conscious modification.

Positive psychological research has been heavily influenced by cognitive psychology and its applied manifestation in cognitive therapies and cognitive behavioural therapies. As such, it is also freighted with the implicit vision of human fulfilment that Browning and Cooper (2004) discerned in the therapies of Albert Ellis, Aaron Beck and Murray Bowen, essentially the 'Stoic, non-reactionary, almost imperturbable self', able to exercise calm and reasoned control of emotional reactivity in the service of the self's best interests.

Seligman portrays human excellences as means to a largely hedonic end; a happier life. While he recognised that he had earlier placed too much emphasis on happiness as the goal of positive psychology, most of the empirical interventions he outlines in his more recent work (*'Flourish'*, 2011) continue to use satisfaction with life or subjective wellbeing as dependent measures, suggesting measurements of happiness still play a principal role in his thinking. In both *'Authentic Happiness'* and *'Flourish'* Seligman seems to conceive of character strengths primarily as individual aptitudes that are promoted because they enable an individual to enter a state of flow; 'you need to deploy your highest strengths and talents to meet the world in flow' (Seligman, 2011, p. 11). In both the earlier and revised theories, strengths contribute to an aspect of wellbeing identified as 'engagement' ('being one with the music...the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity', 2011, p. 11).

This understanding of character strengths is incomplete. There is more to the practice of virtues than their role in fostering an individual's 'engagement' and 'flow'. Second, the idea that people have diagnosable 'signature strengths' and need not be concerned with addressing deficiencies in other strengths depends a great deal on the strengths under consideration. Finally, the understanding of human excellences as individual aptitudes occludes the fact that many virtues are profoundly relational; they are conceived, practised and sustained *in relation to* other agents and exercised in the service of our common human life.

Key words:

Virtue; Character strengths; Positive Psychology; Don Browning; Terry Cooper; Martin Seligman

## **2. The ‘Vision of Positive Psychology’**

Positive psychology not only aims to promote well-being and flourishing, Seligman also claims it offers a scientifically-grounded way of elucidating the good life and demonstrating what makes life worth living (Seligman, 1999, p. 562; Seligman 2011, p. 1-2). As such, it goes *beyond* science in extending notions of what constitutes human fulfilment. My emphasis will be on positive psychology as it is understood by Martin Seligman, who is widely credited as the field’s founder. Indeed, Seligman believed himself to be establishing a new field when he spoke of ‘Positive Psychology’ as one of the unique initiatives of his Presidency of the American Psychology Association (APA) in 1998.

Seligman revised his views with the publication of *‘Flourish’* (2011). In his earlier work *‘Authentic Happiness’* (2003), three elements (positive emotion, engagement and meaning) contributed to an individual’s happiness, operationalised as satisfaction with life. He later augmented these three elements of his earlier theory with two new components (accomplishment and positive relationships) and identified the goal of the new theory as increasing flourishing by increasing all five elements which each contribute to - but do not in themselves define - wellbeing (Seligman, 2011, p. 15). The mnemonic ‘PERMA’ was coined to reflect these five elements of wellbeing: **P**ositive emotion, **E**ngagement, **p**ositive **R**elationships, **M**eaning and **A**ccomplishment.

A common thread linking both Seligman’s earlier and later thinking, however, is the view that we choose our course in life by maximising our performance in each of the elements of the theory (Seligman, 2011, p. 25). Whereas in *‘Authentic Happiness’* we make our choices based on how much life satisfaction we estimate will result, PERMA (wellbeing) theory is more

complex insofar as our choices in each area of the five elements of wellbeing may conflict with one another, so that we cannot reduce flourishing to a single overarching variable.

This is undeniably an important revision in Seligman's understanding of the role Positive Psychology can play in promoting the good life, though the underlying similarities in the theories may be greater than their differences. Both theories presuppose that a scientifically-grounded psychology can promote the goal of human flourishing (albeit differently conceived), and both suggest that a self-conscious cost-benefit calculation ensures we maximise well-being (whether that is construed narrowly as satisfaction with life, or more broadly across the five elements contributing to PERMA).

Since its beginnings, Positive Psychology can be located within a tradition of psychotherapeutic psychologies which have aimed to improve the quality of human life in the twentieth and twenty-first century. These various psychological schools make different (often unacknowledged) assumptions about human nature, locate the cause of human suffering in distinctive struggles, and propose diverse ways of extending healing based on these 'diagnoses'. For example, a distinction can be drawn between those psychologies which see the human person as somehow divided against itself (Freudian theory springs to mind), and those psychologies that subscribe to a more essentialist view of the human person, wherein an individual may experience incongruence due to conflict between their innermost self and familial and societal pressures from without, but not because they are fundamentally divided against themselves. Humanistic psychologies tend to exhibit variations on this theme.

The central thesis of both the original and revised editions of *'Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies'* (Browning & Cooper, 1987; 2004) is that modern psychotherapeutic psychologies should be viewed as disciplines that blend psychological insights with ethical and metaphysical assumptions. Browning and Cooper argue that it is impossible for psychologists embedded within different psychological schools, to avoid making assumptions about human nature and ethics while inhabiting the worldviews implicit within these psychologies.

Following the legacy of Paul Tillich's 'theology of culture' (Tillich, 1964), Browning and Cooper propose that beneath the scientific veneer, modern psychologies enclose hidden worldviews

of which proponents of these psychological schools may be unaware. Such a position could be deemed a step too far for many people, who could look upon this undertaking as an unfair foisting of 'false consciousness' onto a cultural product, be that psychotherapy, a film or an expressionist painting. This 'hidden meaning' could be denied outright by a poet, painter, philosopher, or indeed by a psychologist.

Nonetheless, it can be argued that cultural products contain embedded ideologies, worldviews (even quasi-religions) of which their originators may be unaware. Browning and Cooper (1987; 2004) analysed the discourse of a range of modern psychotherapeutic psychologies, revealing the implicit principles of ethical obligation, the image of the human person, and the nature of human fulfilment presupposed within these psychological schools. They encouraged others to follow them in examining and evaluating the implicit 'functional religions' of contemporary psychologies, and this paper takes up their invitation, applying a similar approach to Positive Psychology.

### **3. Positive Psychology: Its Origins and Aims**

In 1998 Martin Seligman became President of the American Psychological Association (APA). His inaugural address focused on 'Positive Psychology' - a branch of psychology he was set to launch. He proposed that Positive Psychology would correct a psychology that had become almost completely preoccupied with treating pathology and argued that a concentration of research efforts on damage repair had neglected what was positive in the individual and how personal strengths could be promoted.

In his early work Seligman conducted research on 'learned helplessness' in animals (Overmier & Seligman, 1967; Seligman & Maier, 1967; Seligman & Beagley, 1975). Learned helplessness describes what happens when an animal is repeatedly subjected to an inescapable aversive stimulus (usually an electric shock). Eventually, the animal will stop trying to avoid the stimulus and behave as if it is utterly helpless to change the situation; it has 'learned' that nothing it can do will enable it to escape the shock.

Seligman extended the animal model to examine the role of learned helplessness in depression (Seligman, 1975; Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978), which was linked to the

concept of explanatory (or attributional) style. Explanatory styles describe characteristic patterns which explain how people attribute the causes of events in their lives, leading to either a positive (optimistic) outlook or a negative (pessimistic) one (Peterson & Seligman, 1988; Peterson, Semmel, von Baeyer et al, 1982).

Through the concept of 'explanatory style', Seligman and others had begun to examine the possibility of a more positive turn in psychology long before Seligman's inaugural APA address in 1998. In this presidential speech, Seligman spoke of his desire to launch a new science of human strengths; '...what I call 'Positive Psychology', that is, a reoriented science that emphasizes the understanding and building of the most positive qualities of an individual: optimism, courage, work ethic, future-mindedness, interpersonal skill, the capacity for pleasure and insight, and social responsibility' (Seligman, 1998, p. 559).

Positive Psychology became, therefore, not merely a call for a reorientation of clinical practice away from what might be psychologically 'wrong' with people; it also brought with it a substantive change of *research focus* to include the psychological investigation of strengths and virtues.

It should be noted, however, that in developing the focus on strengths, Seligman came to develop a unique understanding of the relationship between character strengths and virtues – a difference that may not reflect the way in which these concepts are used by philosophers, psychologists or even in ordinary language (Gulliford, Morgan & Jordan, under submission). There seems to be substantial overlap in the meaning and use of the terms 'character strength' and 'virtue' in common parlance, yet Peterson and Seligman (2004) defined virtues as superordinate categories exemplified by subordinate 'character strengths'.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified six superordinate virtue categories: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, transcendence and temperance, and proposed that these six virtues are operationalised through twenty-four subordinate character strengths. This understanding of character strengths as embodying 'routes to the virtues' is therefore rather specialised, and the current examination of virtue in Positive Psychology does not uphold a distinction between character strengths and virtues, except when referring to Seligman's own work.

Seligman described his 'mission' in running for President as a desire 'to partake in launching a science and a profession whose aim is the building of what makes life most worth living' (Seligman, 1998, p. 562). Furthermore, in a later article Seligman and co-author Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asserted that this science would articulate a '*vision of the good life that is empirically sound*' while being '*understandable and attractive*' (2000, p.5, my italics).

In speaking of a 'vision of the good life', Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi took a far from a value-free stand on the purpose and end of the new science they described. Yet they claimed to present two alternatives for their re-orientated science. Positive Psychology could either take the course of being a purely *descriptive* science in which research findings are summarised and presented in a manner that would be dispassionate about the desirability of implementing the findings, or it could become a *prescriptive* discipline akin to clinical psychology, in which the paths out of pathologies are not only described, but also held to be desirable (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.12).

All this said, Positive Psychology is quite clearly, and by the authors' own admission, in the business of 'prescribing' what is good for people. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi predicted, '...a psychology of positive human functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families and communities' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 13). 'Thriving' is an unabashedly prescriptive concept. Seligman's Presidential Address the previous year underscored this same aspiration; 'We can show the world what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities, and to a just society' (1999, p. 560).

It is interesting, at this juncture, to note former President George Miller's inaugural lecture to the American Psychology Association (APA) in 1969, where he made two points of current relevance. First, Miller was aware that psychologies incorporate ideologies that may be pernicious to humanity's view of itself. He was especially concerned with behaviourism's overriding and dehumanising metaphors of control and mechanisation, foreshadowing Browning and Cooper's later work in revealing the deep metaphors embedded in the conceptual systems of psychotherapeutic psychologies. Secondly, Miller's address drew attention to the fact that psychology, at least under the guidance of the APA, is *already* a prescriptive science, committed to promoting human welfare, though he was far less certain

the role psychology as a discipline and the APA should play in promoting human welfare than Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi; ‘...we should keep clearly in mind that society has not commissioned us to cure its ills; a challenge is not a mandate’ (Miller, 1969, p. 1063).

Similarly, Marie Jahoda an Austrian-British social psychologist while noting a one-sided development in psychological knowledge of malfunctioning (Jahoda, 1958), had also questioned whether it was possible for psychology to be a purely descriptive science. Definitions of mental health ‘...often contain implicit personal or general philosophies- they often specify how human beings *ought to be*’ (1958, p.4, my italics). She acknowledged that the principal subject matter of psychotherapeutic psychologies inevitably involves the intermingling of value and fact.

But as Miller later cautioned, Jahoda warned against grandiose schemes where psychology is construed as providing a complete account of how positive mental health is to be fulfilled; ‘The experts in the mental health field have no special right to usurp this weighty decision; politicians, humanists, natural scientists, philosophers, the man in the street, and the mental health expert must jointly shoulder this responsibility’ (Jahoda, 1958, p. 83). This contrasts sharply with Seligman’s later ambitions for Positive Psychology; ‘We can show the world what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities, and to a just society’ (1999, p. 560).

#### **4. Strengths, Weaknesses and Flourishing**

Seligman describes the key moment to which he credits his reorientation to the positive, though a change in his thinking seems to have been in the air in his examination of ‘learned optimism’ (1990). He attributes his change of direction to an epiphany with his five-year old daughter who helped him realise he did not have to ‘correct’ behaviours but could focus instead on building strengths. It spawned the idea that if strengths could be nurtured they could ‘buffer’ individuals against weaknesses (Seligman, 2003, pp. 27- 29).

Seligman’s approach to human strengths consisted of identifying, defining and classifying human excellences and developing means of measuring and promoting them. In September 2000, the late Christopher Peterson was invited to be scientific director of the Values in

Action (VIA) Institute in Pennsylvania. For the next three years, Seligman and Peterson collaborated with international researchers to devise a classification of strengths based on their cross-cultural ubiquity. The result of this initiative was the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues, which since its beginnings in 2004 has been operationalised in self-report scales, including the original VIA-IS and more recently the VIA-R, VIA-M and VIA-P (McGrath, 2017).

Seligman used the twenty-four strengths of the VIA classification in the self-help book *'Authentic Happiness'* (2003) where he suggested that rather than correct weaknesses psychology should focus on building strengths (Seligman, 2003, p. 13). Whereas initially this proposal represented merely a different and neglected way of *doing psychology*, by the time he wrote *'Authentic Happiness'*, enacting personal strengths had assumed a *causal* role in the realization of 'authentic happiness'; 'Authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating your most fundamental strengths and using them in work, love, play and parenting' (Seligman, 2003, p. xiii).

Seligman's stated aim in *'Authentic Happiness'* was, '...measuring happiness's constituents - the positive emotions and strengths - and then telling you what science has discovered about how you can increase them' (Seligman, 2003, p. 16). Positive Psychology equips people to increase ('maximise') their level of happiness, which was described as 'the goal of the whole positive psychology enterprise' (Seligman, 2003, p. 262). Though Seligman later reappraised the measurement of happiness (understood as satisfaction with life) as the cornerstone of his thinking (Seligman, 2011), his conception of character strengths as primarily sources of engagement and flow did not change appreciably in his more recent work. The range of human excellences identified by the VIA classification, the exercise described to identify one's 'signature strengths' and the rationale for identifying these 'characteristic strengths' appear unchanged in Seligman's later work in *'Flourish'* (Seligman, 2011, pp. 38-9). 'Signature strengths' continue to be an important element of Positive Psychology by providing a key means of realising personal growth.

## 5. Growth and Self-Actualisation in Humanistic Psychologies and Positive Psychology

There are clear parallels between humanistic psychologies and Positive Psychology insofar as both these schools of psychology emphasise growth, personal fulfilment and individual choice in realising one's authentic self. Humanistic psychology (also known as 'third force' psychology because of its ascendancy after the schools of psychoanalysis and behaviourism) brought concepts of growth, self-realisation and purpose into the remit of psychological discourse.

In contrast to the passive, behaviourist conceptualisation of the human person, humanistic psychologists put forward the view that human beings actively strive to realise inner potentialities. Jung paved the way for this with his concept of 'individuation', while Rogers suggested that people exhibit a fundamental motivation towards growth which he called the 'actualising tendency' (Rogers, 1961). Humanistic psychologies such as those of Abraham Maslow and Fritz Perls, emphasised how an individual's *unique* choices help or hinder their path to self-actualisation, in stark contrast to a behaviourism which sought to discover universal *determinants* of human behaviour. Behaviourism implicitly promoted a disempowering and incomplete understanding of the human person as essentially a stimulus-response 'machine'.

Though the self-actualisation that lies at the heart of humanistic psychologies may offer a more palatable and complex picture of the human person than the image portrayed by behaviourism, self-actualisation is far from an unproblematic concept. One thorny issue is the question of how individual courses of self-actualisation pursued by different persons can ultimately harmonise with one another. How can it be that my self-actualisation can never conflict with another person's, particularly among closely affiliated individuals? What underlying beliefs must be inherent within the worldview of humanistic psychology for self-actualisation to be pursuable by individuals without conflicting with other people's trajectories of fulfilment?

Browning and Cooper (2004) characterised humanistic psychology as exhibiting a 'culture of joy', '...an image of the good life that sees it consisting primarily of a rather uncomplicated matter of giving expression to and actualising the innate human potentials that everyone

has. These potentials are seen primarily as positive, benign, creative, and socially constructive. Through a simple process of discovering one's own potentials and expressing them, individual fulfilment can be experienced and social harmony achieved (Browning & Cooper, 2004, p.61). They contend that belief in some sort of 'preestablished harmony' is a necessary ideological pre-requisite of the worldview of humanistic psychology, for unless there is an existing though perhaps indiscernible harmony within the world, the notion that individuals should follow their own trajectory of self-actualization is problematic as these courses could potentially compete with one another. To avoid this contradiction, an at least implicit belief in the ultimate compatibility of all trajectories, by a kind of 'invisible hand' is presupposed.

The notion of self-actualisation, central to the humanistic psychologies is also present in Positive Psychology through the enacting of what are described as one's 'signature strengths'. David's Norton's (1976) philosophical examination of the ethic of self-actualisation considers the concept of *eudaimonia* – a notion to which Seligman also appeals (Seligman, 2003, pp. 112, 290<sup>1</sup>). According to Norton's individualistic reading of the Greek concept, a life well-lived consists not in the hedonistic ethical egoism of pursuing pleasure, but in the non-hedonistic ethical egoism of 'bringing forth or *leading out (eudaimonia)* one's unique set of potentials- one's *daimon*' (Browning & Cooper, 2004, p. 70).<sup>2</sup>

These potentialities can be brought to fruition or suppressed but cannot be changed. In a manner redolent of Seligman's inattention to personal weaknesses, Norton's analysis maintains that there is '...no need to suppress or repress errant or recalcitrant aspects of human nature. One need only remain loyal to the telos of one's own *daimon*- one's own unique set of innate, biologically grounded potentialities' (Norton, 1976, cited in Browning & Cooper, 2004, p.70).

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<sup>1</sup> In this footnote, Seligman cites Carol Ryff's description of well-being as 'the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potential' [Ryff (1995). Psychological wellbeing in adult life. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 4, 99 -104.]

<sup>2</sup> Norton is well known as one of the best Hume scholars. His book *Personal Destinies* is thoroughly philosophical. His acknowledgment of the dynamic aspects of the Aristotelian proposal, i.e. happiness as an activity (cf. *Nic. Ethics*, 1095b-1101a, 1168a13-15) neglects the social aspects of the Greek framework (cf. Plato, *Republic, passim* and Aristotle, *Politics* book 1) that implies human fragility and vices.

On this reading, Seligman's Positive Psychology seems to have at least one foot in the humanistic psychology camp. For instance, self-report scales based on Peterson and Seligman's VIA classification are used to 'diagnose' strengths that could be regarded as formerly immanent potentialities (Seligman, 2003, chapter 9; Seligman 2011, pp. 38-39). According to Seligman, some of these strengths are deeply characteristic of an individual whereas others are not. He calls the former a person's 'signature strengths' and distinguishes them from weaker potentialities. He also believes that signature strengths 'buffer' against personal weaknesses (though the mechanism for this is unclear). Consequently, Seligman believes that an individual need not 'devote overly much effort to correcting weaknesses...the highest success in living and the deepest emotional satisfaction comes from building and using your signature strengths' (Seligman, 2003, p.13).

Let us suppose that a person who has taken one of the VIA questionnaires exhibits the top five strengths of creativity, love of learning, persistence, prudence and leadership. In deciding whether these top strengths represent 'signature strengths', Seligman offers nine criteria. An identified 'top strength' is deemed to be a 'signature strength' if at least one of these criteria applies to each top strength:

- A sense of ownership and authenticity ('This is the real me')
- A feeling of excitement while displaying it, particularly at first
- A rapid learning curve as the strength is first practiced
- Continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength<sup>3</sup>
- A sense of yearning to find ways to use it
- A feeling of the inevitability of the strength ('Try and stop me')
- Invigoration rather than exhaustion while using the strength
- The creation and pursuit of personal projects that revolve around it
- Joy, zest, enthusiasm, and even ecstasy while using it (see Seligman, 2003, p. 160; Seligman 2011, pp. 38-9)

The 'profile' of top strengths of creativity, love of learning, persistence, prudence and

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<sup>3</sup> This criterion is missing from the list in 'Flourish' (2011)

leadership matches these criteria well. For instance, someone who loves learning will probably find that all nine criteria are met for this strength. However, an individual is unlikely to feel ‘excitement’, ‘joy, and ‘enthusiasm’ in displaying prudence, or a sense of ‘yearning to find ways to use it’. It is doubtful whether a person would be ‘invigorated’ by acting with prudence. On the whole, however, the criteria seem applicable to those five strengths – and in any case a minimum of one criterion is sufficient to identify a top-scoring strength as a ‘signature strength’.

If, on the other hand, we imagine another individual whose ‘top strengths’ are love, kindness, forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, and fairness, the criteria seem less fitting. While Seligman describes all strengths (as opposed to talents) as ‘moral traits’ (Seligman 2003, p.134), there is a difference between strengths that primarily concern our *individual aptitudes* (having a taste or flair for learning or creativity) and those strengths that are necessarily evinced in relationships with others, such as forgiveness and fairness.

We might also deem strengths that have been acquired, perhaps at great personal effort, as more admirable than those which are innate (Zagzebski, 2015), and we may find there to be something deficient (even contemptible) about individuals who fail to develop acquired strengths like kindness to a sufficient degree (Zagzebski, 2015). Simply put, there are different *types* of human excellences in the VIA and these do not seem to occupy the same moral standing.

The criteria Seligman supplies to identify a top-scoring strength as a ‘signature strength’ demonstrate a bias towards strengths conceived as individual aptitudes rather than interpersonal moral excellences like the capacity to forgive, be kind or show mercy. It seems highly unlikely that an individual could ever feel ‘excitement’ at their capacity to forgive, to ‘yearn to find new ways’ of using this strength, to feel ‘invigorated’ by it, to create ‘personal projects that revolve around it’, or to feel ‘joy, zest or enthusiasm’ while practising it. Although it is conceivable that forgiveness might become easier over time (depending on the nature of the interpersonal offence being forgiven) there could never be a ‘rapid learning curve as the strength is first practised’ because cases where forgiveness might be deemed appropriate would be so different from each other in terms of their level of difficulty. Possibly the only criterion that may be applicable in this case is the first: ‘a sense of ownership and

authenticity when using the strength' - if forgiveness were already central to a person's moral identity. But even if we admit this point, there seems to be something misguided about conceiving the virtue of forgiveness as a capacity that is somehow 'owned'.

The strengths of the VIA classification encompass a range of types, raising the question of how varied a range of 'signature strengths' a person needs to function adequately both morally and in attaining non-moral goals. It also leaves open the question of how different individuals' signature strength 'profiles' can be reconciled with each other.

It could be argued that it is perhaps not an individual's own strengths that buffer his or her weaknesses, (Seligman, 2003, pp. 27-29), but the strengths of others that fulfil this end. People whose strengths lie in pro-social domains may ultimately 'buffer' those lacking in these virtues. Whether an individual's strengths compensate for defects is an empirical question and surely depends on the strengths in question and on the particulars of a given situation. Seligman's understanding of 'signature strengths' seems to implicitly subscribe to the belief that individual trajectories of self-realisation somehow 'complement' one other – a key characteristic of humanistic psychologies as revealed by Browning and Cooper's earlier analysis. Seligman does not speak of a *daimon*, but he does invoke the concept of *eudaimonia*, believing that the regular use of one's signature strengths brings 'gratification', a state he identifies with it (Seligman, 2003, p. 112). While there may be more to a life that inheres in bringing one's potentialities to full realization than in the pursuit of pleasure, it shares with humanistic psychology a lack of interest in the moral norms of either reciprocity or mutuality; if an individual's ethical obligation inheres in following their inner *daimon*, and that is universalized, then there need be no concern with - nor investment in - the drawing out of anyone else's potentialities.

Though Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi spoke of Positive Psychology in collectivist terms as the 'scientific study of optimal human functioning [that] aims to discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5), questions of social harmony are clearly secondary to an individual's enacting of the personal strengths that lead to their fulfilment. Seligman appears to envisage no potential conflict among constellations of signature strengths and must also - at least *implicitly* -

subscribe to a worldview in which any apparent conflict is transcended. Thus, it can be argued that Positive Psychology espouses the monistic view of the world that Browning and Cooper (2004) ascribe to the humanistic psychologists, in which we encounter ‘metaphysical metaphors...that are used to paint an image of the world whose apparently independent parts are so interrelated, interdependent, and harmonious that they are all identified with one another and identical with the divine itself’ (Browning & Cooper, 2004, p. 74-5).

Such a belief is not derived from scientific study but represents a kind of *faith* in an ultimate harmony that is taken to be the natural consequence of individuals realising their authentic selves by ‘living out’ their own unique set of potentialities. Though self-actualization is not a term Seligman uses, perhaps precisely *because* of its coinage in a humanistic psychology from which he explicitly distanced himself (Seligman, 1998, p. 562), the task it describes is conveyed through the concept of ‘signature strengths’ which are offered as means by which individuals can attain authentic happiness and flourishing.

The belief that the cultivation of these special strengths ‘buffer’ against personal weaknesses is problematic for various reasons. At no point are mechanisms advanced to explain how strengths in one domain might compensate for another; this seems to be asserted as a matter of “faith”. Second, and as previously noted, it is not clear why one should not be concerned to correct at least some personal deficiencies (*pace* Seligman, 2003, p. 13), depending on where those shortcomings lie.

The view that everything will finally come out right if people are left to follow their own trajectories of fulfilment was criticized by Browning and Cooper (2004), who demonstrated that it is a pervasive and pernicious myth of most - if not all - humanistic psychologies. There can be no ‘universal harmony’ assumed to evolve from individuals pursuing their own self-interest. Much as we might like to *believe* that different courses of human fulfilment will ultimately harmonize with each other, this is not the hallmark of scientific thinking and instead represents a kind of ‘faith’. On this basis, there seems to be a profound ideological overlap between Positive Psychology and humanistic psychologies.

However, to characterise Positive Psychology as simply ‘humanistic psychology redux’ would

be too simplistic despite the resemblances they clearly share. For alongside the influence of humanistic psychologies, the unmistakable impact of the cognitive therapies on Positive Psychology can also be discerned. This influence is not surprising, given Martin Seligman's huge contributions to applied cognitive psychology in the decades before Positive Psychology was launched.

## **6. Seligman the Stoic?**

Positive psychological literature has been clearly influenced by the cognitive therapies which can be grouped together insofar as these theories share the underlying belief that human reason can be educated to eradicate anxiety and depression which ultimately stem from faulty or dysfunctional thinking. This impact is most evident in the twin concepts of optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles, popularised in 'Learned Optimism' (Seligman, 1990; 2006), though the influence of cognitive therapies on Seligman's understanding of other human strengths is also evident.

Browning and Cooper (2004) chose to address three key figures in the field of cognitive therapy together, while Jones and Butman (1991) dealt separately with Albert Ellis (the originator of Rational Emotive Therapy - RET), Aaron Beck (who coined Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and Murray Bowen (the initiator of Family Systems Therapy). Though there are clearly differences between these therapeutic approaches (not least the emphasis on family dynamics in the latter), they overlap significantly in identifying emotional reactivity as the primary cause of mental distress, and human reason as its cure. These theories might reasonably be identified as neo-Stoic after the Greek philosophical school which arose in the third century BCE and which elevated reason as a means of rising above the grip of passions.

In fact, Albert Ellis explicitly quoted the Stoic, Epictetus, in discussing the theory behind RET; 'Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them' (Ellis, 1978, cited in Jones and Butman, 1991, p. 173). Human emotions are caused by our interpretations of events, which are therefore amenable to revision and reinterpretation. Emotional disturbances whose origins lie in distorted thinking can be reworked. A client comes to see

the ‘**activating experiences**’ (A) that have given rise to their **beliefs** (B), and the associated emotional **consequences** (C), through a process of **disputing** these irrational beliefs (D) under a therapist’s supervision. The letters ABCD are used to sum up a process which Seligman adapted in *Learned Optimism* (2006).<sup>4</sup>

In the case of explanatory styles, pessimistic explanatory style is maintained by a characteristic pattern wherein individuals attribute the causes of failure *internally* (i.e. to themselves, rather than externally to others or circumstances), believe that failure is *permanent* (as opposed to impermanent) and suffuses all domains of their lives (is global or *pervasive*, rather than domain-specific). This can be contrasted with optimistic explanatory style (or ‘Learned Optimism’), which is characterised by the opposite pattern of external, impermanent and specific attributions for say, failing an exam. By taking a dispassionate step back from one’s own thought patterns, explanatory style can be changed and a person can self-consciously take control of the way they systematically locate the causes of success and failure in their lives.

Optimistic explanatory style or ‘learned optimism’ is therefore grounded in confidence in one’s ability to manipulate ‘dysfunctional’ beliefs, substituting them for more serviceable patterns of thought in the future. The final ground of ‘learned optimism’ lies in an individual’s cognitive resources and the self’s ability to change and manipulate the dysfunctional beliefs that sustain depressogenic thinking and anxiety. People seeking to develop a more optimistic outlook are assumed to be able to exercise choices over life, and to be in a position to control favourable outcomes to a significant degree.

Ellis and Seligman share the belief that humans are basically happiness-seeking individuals, though neither are short-term hedonists; ‘Seek pleasures and happiness today – and also tomorrow! Do cost-benefit calculation to determine if your gains, now and in the future, are too costly’ (Ellis,1988, p. 34). Seligman also favours a maximisation model, as we saw earlier, and advocates the same pragmatism Jones and Butman (1991, p.190) identified as one of two criteria guiding RET; the empirical and the pragmatic. What is taken to be a ‘rational’

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<sup>4</sup> (A- adversity, B- beliefs and C- consequences, D- disputation and E - energization)

belief is determined according to empirical evidence (a criterion Seligman also prizes), and is further established on the basis of whether a belief serves in individual well and contributes to the goal of happiness. This second criterion is very much in evidence in Seligman's thinking about Optimistic Explanatory Style; '...the question to ask yourself is not 'Is the belief true?' but 'Is it *functional* for me to think it right now?' (Seligman, 2006, p. 223, my italics).

It seems likely that Seligman was also influenced by other leading figures in the cognitive therapies, such as Aaron Beck whose approach was nested within broader, evolutionary perspective. Beck believed that human beings had evolved to overreact to threats to survival, leading to hypervigilance and a disproportionate concern with safety. Distinguishing between friends or foes, while essential for survival, led to sweeping generalisations and polarised categories of thinking that gave rise to increased emotional reactivity.

Though Beck 'normalised' the human tendency towards dysfunctional thinking within evolutionary perspective, he offered the same cure as his predecessor, Albert Ellis. Essentially, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) foregrounds 'cerebral control as the cornerstone of an effective life' (Jones & Butman, 1991, p. 230). Its credo is that our affective life can be greatly improved by recognising (and changing) the distorted thinking that gives rise to emotional disturbance.

Seligman's work on optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles, stemming from his earlier research on learned helplessness, stands within the cognitive tradition and shares its legacy of foregrounding the primacy of beliefs in sustaining emotions and influencing actions. It privileges an individual's reason and will, and could be criticised for promoting the view that ultimately our problems are down to how we interpret the world. While this is clearly important, social factors also impact our well-being. The same criticism could be levelled at the Stoics, who rose to prominence in uncertain political times and who retreated to the (controllable) world within.

Seligman's work on optimistic explanatory style emphasises personal control and the functionality of beliefs. As such, it is also freighted with the implicit vision of human

fulfilment that Browning and Cooper (2004) discerned in the cognitive therapy of Ellis, Beck and Bowen, essentially the 'Stoic, non-reactionary, almost imperturbable self' able to exercise calm and reasoned control of emotional reactivity (Browning & Cooper, 2004, p. 217).

Seligman's Positive Psychology seems, therefore, to *blend elements of the humanistic and cognitive psychologies*. It advocates an instrumentalist view of character strengths and virtues wherein an individual's characteristic 'signature strengths' enable them to enter 'flow' and attain meaningful 'engagement' with the world. In addition to the role 'signature strengths' play in living an 'engaged life', character strengths like hope and optimism, forgiveness and gratitude can be capitalised upon to increase positive affect and restrain the negative reactivity that threatens our attainment of happiness, as the next section will show.

## **7. An evaluation of some virtues**

### **7.1. Hope**

Virtues in Positive Psychology tend to have been conceived as inner resources (personal strengths), yet there is a collective dimension to many virtues, which are sustained in participation with other agents. Positive psychological models of the 'omnibus concept' of 'hope/optimism/future-mindedness' (Seligman, 2011, p. 260) tend to foreground its autonomous, self-directed aspects (the ability to exercise control over characteristic patterns of thinking that may be antithetical to hope), rather than those aspects of hope that may be kindled by other people.

Optimistic explanatory style or 'learned optimism' is grounded in confidence in one's ability to manipulate 'dysfunctional' beliefs, substituting them for more serviceable patterns of thought. The final ground of optimism about the future therefore lies in an individual's internal, cognitive resources. On the other hand, hope (and courage – and perhaps many other virtues) may be kindled by confidence understood as trust. This cannot be adequately categorised as a 'personal strength' but rather an 'interpersonal one'; hope exists *between* individuals.

Hope has dependent as well as autonomous aspects since it is often sustained *in relation to*

other people. We know from our own experience that the expectations of significant others influence our own hope, for good or ill. This collective dimension of hope was emphasized in an older psychoanalytic literature that cognitive theories of 'future-mindedness' would do well to consider. Psychotherapist William Lynch argued that at the end-point of inward resource a person's recovery lies in escaping a solipsistic world by daring to trust the vision of another person – often, though not necessarily- their therapist (Lynch, 1974, p. 77). When we become hopeless we may be beyond self-help, unable to buoy up sufficient enthusiasm to rework our patterns of thinking but – importantly – we are not beyond help; trust in others may kindle our hopes where our own efforts have run aground.

Arthur Kobler and Ezra Stotland's (1964) study of a suicide epidemic in an American psychiatric hospital in the 1960s demonstrated that expectations of significant others in the therapeutic environment were crucial in whether a patient could discern a way out of distress or interpreted their situation as hopeless, leading to their eventual suicide; '...suicide occurred in each case when, and only when, all significant and hopeful relationships were broken. The patient, after communicating, testing, and searching for hope, then felt that he was alone in an empty world' (Kobler & Stotland, 1964, p. 260).

I do not doubt that it is beneficial to take control of one's own thinking, mindful that we may not be helping ourselves if we fail to see how habitual patterns of thought can unseat us. However, there is more to hope than an individual exercise in cognitive reappraisal. Moreover, we may not be able to bring about all that we hope for through our own interpretative efforts no matter how hard we might try!

## 7.2. Forgiveness

In the earlier discussion, it was remarked that the criteria Seligman outlines to identify an individual's 'Signature Strengths' do not seem to fit forgiveness very well and seem to be biased towards describing individual aptitudes, such as love of learning and leadership rather than moral excellences like forgiveness, bravery and kindness. Given that forgiveness only comes into play in the wake of interpersonal offences and may not be appropriate in all circumstances, it is highly unlikely anyone would feel excited or invigorated by it, nor would they create personal projects that revolve around deploying it, actively seeking out new ways to use it.

Alongside this odd casting of forgiveness as a potential 'Signature Strength', Seligman also emphasises the role of forgiveness in effecting emotional regulation. Forgiveness, is advocated as a means of attenuating negative emotions in the person seeking to forgive; 'My aim is merely to expose the inverse relationship between unforgiveness and life-satisfaction' (Seligman, 2003, p. 77). He later describes forgiveness as a '...powerful tool that can transform feelings of anger and bitterness into neutrality, or even, for some, into positive emotions' (Seligman, 2011, p. 41). While forgiveness may have this effect, this represents a limited view of forgiveness which grounds its value in its salutary benefits, and which bears the hallmarks of the cognitive therapeutic tendency towards absorbing negative emotional reactivity.

People are motivated to forgive for reasons other than their own mental hygiene, though this is also a legitimate reason to forgive. We may seek to forgive for the benefit of the person who has wronged us, recognising that part of what it means to share the human condition is to make mistakes that cannot be undone; the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958) called this the 'condition of irreversibility'. If the goal of forgiveness becomes 'hydraulic' (to increase positive and decrease negative affect), it runs the risk of being conceived as something that is primarily 'dispensed' to others when they wrong us. This represents only half of what forgiveness means, for as human beings we share in the need to *receive* forgiveness for the inevitable mistakes we also make.

Clearly, there are degrees of evil and some violations may finally lie outside the scope of human forgiveness. Nonetheless, there is a danger that the more we cast forgiveness in terms of forgiving *other people*, the more real the possibility becomes that we forget to see how much we might need to receive forgiveness ourselves.

It is also debatable whether forgiveness is adequately characterised as an enduring 'signature' strength, for much depends on the circumstances of any given case. Is forgiveness *always* a virtue? While religious beliefs may incline some people to affirm that it is, others may provide good reasons to be ambivalent about its status as a strength of character or virtue (Gulliford, 2018, p. 245 – 248).

As with hope, there are collective dimensions of forgiveness, too. There is more to forgiveness than reworking our attributions of blame to loosen the grip of negative

emotions, though this is not to say this is not a helpful and effective exercise. We learn about forgiveness *in relationship* with others; receiving forgiveness from others creates the example required to potentiate our forgiving other people. While this may resonate with readers familiar with the New Testament, it is surely a supremely developmental point; no one learns to forgive without first being forgiven.

#### 7.4. Gratitude

As was the case with forgiveness, Seligman emphasises the role of gratitude in maximising well-being. He presents gratitude as a means of capitalising on positive events and advocates keeping a gratitude journal as a way of increasing satisfaction with life (Seligman, 2003, p. 75). The 'gratitude visit' Seligman describes in *Authentic Happiness* has become one of the most successful 'positive interventions', reliably increasing subjective well-being and lowering depression in experimental participants relative to controls, for up to a month post-intervention (Park, Peterson, Seligman & Steen, 2005).

In much the same way as Seligman's focus in forgiveness is the person forgiving, in his consideration of gratitude he foregrounds the person giving thanks (the beneficiary). Again, there is much more to gratitude than its salutary benefits; people are unlikely to be persuaded to develop gratitude simply because it is good for their wellbeing, even if this may be a fortunate side effect. People are moved to be grateful to benefactors because they wish to acknowledge and honour their kindness, setting up a virtuous cycle wherein generosity and gratitude are mutually reinforcing and *grow in relationship* with other people.

If we establish the value of gratitude in our own subjective wellbeing or life satisfaction we are only seeing a part of the bigger social picture; the way in which gratitude sustains our lives and highlights our connectedness to other people. This is not to undermine the important role gratitude interventions such as journaling could play in combating low mood, especially in clinical populations, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that gratitude helps build social bonds and makes people feel valued.

Gratitude, forgiveness and hope are complex human virtues that effect far more than emotional regulation and repair, yet the cognitive therapeutic framework from which

Seligman draws, foregrounds the tendency to see these character strengths in terms of their ability to rein in emotional reactivity, minimising negative and increasing positive affect. Similarly, the motivations for being forgiving, grateful or hopeful are grounded in maximising or capitalising on positive outcomes for individual wellbeing, a theme running through both *'Authentic Happiness'* (2003) and *'Flourish'* (2011).

While the humanistic and cognitive therapies that have influenced Positive Psychology are different in fundamental respects, both are individualistic. The humanistic process of self-actualisation describes a personal odyssey. Similarly, cognitive therapies focus on an individual's faulty interpretation of the world which can be transcended by means of their own rational capacities.

The influence of both these psychological schools on Positive Psychology perhaps inevitably puts individual dimensions of human strengths and virtues in the foreground, while their collective aspects are relegated to the shadows. To understand and promote human excellences (virtues) primarily in terms of their effects on individual wellbeing (however conceived) is a limited and reductive enterprise. This conception is incomplete. Virtues are profoundly relational; they are conceived, practised and sustained *in relation to* other agents and exercised in the service of our common human life.

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