

# **Five Historic Philosophers Discuss Human Flourishing and Happiness in Positive Psychology:**

## **A Speculative Dialogue in Three Acts**

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### **Prologue**

Positive psychology constitutes at present the largest growth industry in psychology.

However, its academic terrain—as well as that of its most recent incarnation as positive education—is a hotly debated one. Positive psychology purports to draw upon an array of historical and philosophical sources, ranging from Aristotle and the Stoics to utilitarianism and existentialism. Some theorists consider this to be an example of laudable ecumenism. Others think of it more in terms of an eclectic mixture of ill-assorted elements and complain that too many cooks spoil the broth.

In the following dialogue we draw speculatively upon a range of sources to trace selected historical influences on positive psychology and its application in the increasingly influential domain of positive education. We rehearse controversies that have confronted the emerging field through the time-honoured, yet often-neglected medium of a philosophical dialogue. This unconventional yet respected literary form allows our chosen historical figures to offer their respective takes on a number of key topics, such as positive psychology's understanding of human fulfilment, happiness, spirituality, transcendence, forgiveness, hope and (positive) education. In addition to promoting philosophical critique through the ensuing dialogue, this approach also permits us to add one or two humorous embellishments.

There used to be nothing *avant-garde* about dialogues, which were a fairly standard form of philosophical writing not only in ancient Greece but up to the Enlightenment (e.g., Berkeley), and even into modernity (e.g., Kierkegaard). Nonetheless, they are few and far between these days, despite being a valuable means of presenting academic argument in a lively and engaging manner. To this end we have attempted to recover the genre to address a field that is becoming increasingly dominant and influential.

The dialogue features the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE) whose popularity has increased with the recent interest in virtue ethics and whose *eudaimonic* understanding of human happiness has been explicitly referenced by positive psychologists. Having said this, however, positive psychology is probably still too much tainted by a hedonic view of wellbeing to be attractive to Aristotelians, though it would be very much to the taste of British philosopher and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham’s utilitarian approach to happiness has been wholeheartedly endorsed in the present day by Lord Richard Layard, a British economist. Layard is an advocate of the ‘science of happiness’ (a theme of positive psychology), having published a book entitled *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*’ (Layard, 2005). He also co-edited the first *World Happiness Report*’ (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012).

The Greek Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus (279–206 BCE) is another discussant. The concept of resilience central to Stoic thought features a great deal in positive psychology, particularly in its applied form of positive education, through a link provided by cognitive behavioural therapy, a modern form of Stoicism (Robertson, 2010). Schools in the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and throughout the world have been touting the

importance of instilling resilience in childhood to better enable young people to face the trials of life and mitigate the pernicious effects of pessimism and depression (see Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). The emphasis on increasing positive emotions, a key tenet of positive psychology, sits however at odds with Stoic apathy (*apatheia*), the condition of being *free* from passions such as pain, fear, desire, and—notably, pleasure. Furthermore, the notion that it is even possible to divide emotions into the discrete categories of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ is questionable and a matter with which Aristotelians (and others) would take issue ( Kristjánsson, 2013).

In addition to examining the nature of human fulfilment (a life well-lived or the pursuit of happiness), positive psychology has also turned its attention to transcendence and spirituality. Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) taxonomy of twenty four cross-culturally valued human strengths identifies humour, hope, gratitude and spirituality as ‘strengths of transcendence’.

The classification of spirituality as a human strength that some people possess and others do not would have unsettled our fourth contributor to the dialogue, Danish existentialist philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). Doubtless he would also have weighed in on positive psychology’s grasp of the particular virtues of forgiveness, gratitude and hope, and would have been disappointed with the positive psychological tendency to instrumentalise them as means of effecting emotional regulation. For more debate concerning the question of how theological and (positive) psychological approaches to these excellences of character might relate to one another, see Watts and

Gulliford (2004) concerning forgiveness; Gulliford (2011) on forgiveness, gratitude, hope and courage, and Gulliford (2013) on forgiveness and hope.

Gratitude has been a particularly prominent theme in many positive education interventions as it has been consistently found to deliver successful outcomes (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). The two principal methods used to promote gratitude in school contexts are variants of writing and delivering thank-you letters (Seligman et al., 2005) and gratitude journaling exercises (see Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Geraghty, Wood, & Hyland, 2010a, 2010b), which put into practice the age-old wisdom of ‘counting one’s blessings’ (see Seligman et al., 2005, for their use in school contexts). A third type of intervention involves ‘gratitude reframing’ and teaches young people to think more gratefully by moderating appraisals of benefit exchanges (Froh et al., 2014). While positive education initiatives involving gratitude have been reliable promoters of increased positive affect and decreased negative affect (Seligman et al., 2005; Seligman et al., 2009), positive educational programmes have also incorporated resilience and learned optimism as themes (Seligman et al., 2009).

We contend that the final discussant in the dialogue, French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), would have been likely to question whether these school-based curricula are merely misguided patches to ‘fix the kids’ which fail to address the underlying social structures that create the depression and anxiety such interventions aim to reduce. In this respect, Bourdieu echoes Fromm’s call for a ‘sane society’ (1955). Some of our discussants might well have welcomed a ‘common-sense’ approach to making the world a happier, more resilient place, while others might have argued that implementing positive

psychological insights into school curricula calls for greater attention to the *conceptual* and *educational* subtleties this would involve. For instance, gratitude interventions should promote children’s understanding of what gratitude *means* and when it is appropriate. Whilst this could well have the consequence of making children happier, it would also allow young people to learn the complex ‘grammar’ of gratitude (see Morgan, Gulliford, & Carr, 2015; Carr, Morgan, & Gulliford, 2015).

In the light-hearted dialogue which follows we mount a number of challenges to positive psychology’s understanding of both individual and collective human flourishing and happiness, and its treatment of select values (or virtues), placed in the reconstructed mouths of distinguished philosophers. We hope our attempts to resurrect this time-honoured literary form prove illuminating, educational and entertaining, and—most importantly—that they promote ongoing dialogue regarding the place of positive psychology in the education of values and in the promotion of human well-being.

### **Participants in the Dialogue**

Aristotle: Ancient Greek philosopher, 384–322 BCE

Chrysippus: Greek Stoic philosopher, 279 –206 BCE

Jeremy Bentham: British utilitarian philosopher, 1748–1832

Søren Kierkegaard: Danish existentialist philosopher and theologian, 1813–1855

Pierre Bourdieu: French social theorist, 1930–2002

## **Act 1: Puzzles about Pleasure**

*Aristotle:* Welcome to this gathering, dear brethren in philosophical spirit. Let's rejoice once again in pondering 'The Big Questions' as we wander leisurely through these well-groomed gardens. For all of us, I hope, it'll be a welcome distraction from the endless violin noise that grates on our ears and the silly cherubs who keep grinning up at us without ever having engaged in the reflective life. It's indeed a privilege for me to be able to enter into a dialogue with a group of true luminaries whom I never had a chance to meet during my earthly existence. As I told you in the invitation notices, I received a commission from 'down under' to explore the credentials of a new approach to human wellbeing called 'positive psychology'. I've learnt that it draws collectively on various ideas close to our own hearts—on *eudaimonia*, resilience, subjective happiness, transcendence and the cultivation of positive institutions—and even refers directly to *some* of us in person. I, for one, am flattered that I'm still being remembered 2300 years after I left that transient place; I'm sure you are, too. I hope you don't mind if I start the discussion?

*Kierkegaard:* Thank you, Aristotle, no of course we'll not object to your acting as a moderator of the discussion. I hope you take no offence, however, in my remarking that your mentor Plato would perhaps have been better suited for that role; I must admit I'm slightly disappointed at not seeing him around. Not only was Plato a more eloquent writer than you—again, no offence, I hope—he was also a true master of philosophical dialogues, a method that I, incidentally, did try to replicate in my own imperfect and modest ways. I'm not sure you have the same true sense of the subjective, sublime and mystical that Plato has, and there is a tad too much of Hegel in you for my own liking. All that said, please do commence.

*Aristotle*: I'd have thought that there is something of me in Hegel rather than vice versa, but I'll let that pass here. As no one else seems to want to comment on my leading the discussion, I'll start, without further ado, by exploring the key concept of positivity as it appears in this new approach. Please do chip in with your own reflections or objections as I proceed. So, to cut a long story short, the positive-psychology movement started off with a pretty hedonic view of wellbeing—of the sort that I dismiss quickly at the outset of my majestic *Nicomachean Ethics*. The movement has, however, been moving recently towards a richer and more eudaimonic account, a move that quickens my pulse and lightens my spirit, especially since my own work gets mentioned there from time to time.

*Chrysippus (smirking)*: Down vanity, Aristotle, down vanity! We're all at the mercy of external luck, anyway, and that includes our posthumous reputations...

*Aristotle*: There is no need to smirk here, colleagues; after all, I hope you recall my compelling moral justification of healthy pride. In any case, to return to our prescribed topic: despite this eudaimonic turn, positive psychologists are still rather obsessed with pleasure, dressed up as 'positivity'. This obsession shines through in their focus on the value of 'positive emotions' which for them simply seems to mean 'pleasant emotions'. They hold that experiencing such emotions is, other things being equal, good. I've three complaints about this claim. First, if 'positive' here meant 'morally positive', the claim would be true, at least on my virtue-based account, and perhaps even platitudinously so. However, how can it be good, per se, to experience *schadenfreude*—pleasure at another's undeserved bad fortune—even if those who experience it enjoy it in their wicked ways? And how can it be

*bad* to experience that mother of painful emotions, compassion, since that is also the mother of morally commendable emotions? Second, I'm sceptical of the very distinction drawn between 'positive' and 'negative' emotions according to what the psychologists call 'valence'. I don't even know how to translate this funny word into my ancient Greek. We have '*hedone*' for pleasure and '*lupe*' for pain, but what in the world is 'valence'? The idea appears to be that there are emotions which are exclusively pleasant or exclusively painful, but that seems blatantly wrong. My view of emotions—if we try to couch it in this new-fangled terminology—is that all emotions are of 'mixed valence'. I'm sure you all recall my account of anger as partly painful, partly pleasant. Classifying emotions into two discrete categories according to a valence criterion is, as my nemesis Bentham would put it, 'nonsense upon stilts'. Third, those positive psychologists get into all kinds of trouble when they instrumentalise the value of what they call 'positive emotions', such as gratitude, as that of broadening and building other personal resources. For if that is the main value of positivity, then each pleasant emotion would in principle be substitutable by any other emotion—or indeed any other intervention, such as taking cod-liver oil!—that contributed as much or more to such a broadening-and-building effect. However, they also call gratitude a positive character strength that is intrinsically related to the good life; but if gratitude is a constitutive part of the good life, then surely it must be irreplaceable by anything else...?

*Chrysippus*: I'm not here to defend positive psychology, lock, stock and barrel, although I do incidentally believe that it draws more importantly on my Stoic view of resilience than your slightly passé view of virtue. At least the former view resonates more with 21st century sensibilities, I'm sure. After all, the method of 'Cognitive Behavioural Therapy' or CBT,

which I'm told is quite popular these days and also used by positive psychologists, is Stoic through and through. Mindfulness may have entered positive psychology via Buddhists (I know you didn't invite Buddha because he rarely leaves the compound of Gods and semi-Gods where Nietzsche also insisted on living—the vanity!), but it has just as much in common with Stoic equanimity and suspension of judgement. The sort of positivity that positive psychologists are really after has, in my humble estimation, more to do with a positive mindset, in the Stoic sense, than the sort of *hedone* that you rightly despise. And come on, Aristotle, have you never heard of movements with different spokespeople who do not all sing from exactly the same hymn sheet? Gratitude as an emotion and gratitude as a character strength have been reflected upon by different people within the movement, I believe, and perhaps they have not co-ordinated their accounts completely. Do all Aristotelians concur on everything in Aristotelianism? Lastly, my dear friend, it sounds to me like a case of the pot calling the kettle black when you start to rant about gratitude. Not only did you not acknowledge gratitude as a moral emotion, you positively denounced it in the dreadful section on those arrogant *megalopsychoi* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

*Aristotle (visibly offended)*: You were never a stickler for academic nuances, were you, Chrysippus? It's perhaps no wonder that the only thing that most 21st century philosophy students learn about you is that trite joke about your dying of laughter at a logical error by one of your disciples. If you'd read my masterpiece carefully, you'd have understood that I exempted a small exclusive group of public benefactors from any distracting, time-consuming emotions, such as gratitude, solely for the sake of the public good—in order to enable them to devote all their time to philanthropy. I say a lot of positive things about

gratitude in one of my other classics, the *Rhetoric*, although unfortunately some English translators have mistranslated my term for gratitude, *charis* as kindness, thus creating all sorts of misunderstandings.

*Chrysippus*: You never accept defeat, do you, old man? Well, you must know that I'm also pretty suspicious of the positive psychological emphasis on positive emotions, but for radically different reasons from yours. I don't believe that valence—be it positive, negative or, as you call it, mixed—has any relevance for the evaluation of emotions as salient and good. Feelings are, in general, only inessential, ephemeral features of emotions. (If you don't believe me, read that current earthling Nussbaum who also claims to be your disciple!) Emotions are, in essence, cognitions or beliefs about the world. They are good when they are true—that is, when they involve true beliefs about the external world as causally determined and unchangeable—but bad when they are false. Because of the inexorability of external events, only one general emotional attitude is in the end commendable, psychologically and morally; namely, detached equanimity. Desensitisation to the outside world creates inner peace and tranquillity which forms the essence of the good life. Positive psychologists seem to have a partial grasp of this truth when they talk about resilience, CBT training and mindfulness, but they often forget it when they start to enthuse about positive emotions—and also that debased state of mind, 'flow', the idea of which they have most regrettably plundered from your misconceived notion of 'un-self-conscious pleasure in unimpeded activity'.

*Bentham*: I can't resist using my old phrase here, 'nonsense upon stilts'. You two old Greeks are both speaking nonsense. As some positive psychologists are aware, the only value that is unreservedly good and at which all human beings aim is pleasure. If gratitude is good, for example, then it is good *because* it promotes pleasure. Positive psychologists should stick to SWB (subjective wellbeing to you guys) and forget all this gibberish about *eudaimonia*. Pleasure is a raw feeling; there are no qualitative differences to it. However, it obviously differs a lot in quantity, and people estimate that quantity in different ways. Some people derive a lot of pleasure from reflective thought and reading poetry, others from playing pushpin. Some people may even prefer the pleasures that remain available to a miserable Socrates to the pleasures of a satisfied pig. That is fine with me but does not threaten my thesis. You are a hypocrite, Aristotle, for you obliquely bring in pleasure as the ultimate goal of life by claiming that 'flow'—your euphemistic term for pleasure—completes virtuous activity like the bloom on the cheeks of the young. Yes, sure, if virtue is good, then it's good because it produces pleasure rather than pain. But why don't you then simply say so? Chrysippus, your whole metaphysics is simply too far-fetched to be taken seriously. If everything in the world is pre-determined, why is our attitude towards it then not also pre-determined and beyond conscious control?

*Bourdieu (looking exasperated)*: You may have been playing too much pushpin yourself, Bentham, or engaging in other silly bourgeois pastimes. I feel out of place here, comrades. I never considered myself a philosopher but simply a social theorist. Yet I do think I have something important to contribute to your discussion. You all seem to suffer from the misconception that ideas travel unproblematically across social fields. How can I converse in

a constructive way about a 21st century psychological theory with people who did not experience the horrors of the Vietnam War or other atrocities of the 20th century? Ideas only carry symbolic capital at a certain time and place—indeed in a certain class context—and they have no traction when transported to radically different social fields. Do you really think the *habitus* of people in ancient Greece was similar enough to that of 21st century earthlings for them to be able to discuss ideas through a common socio-linguistic currency? It's nice to meet you all, guys, but our debate will never have any relevance for late-capitalist ideologies such as positive psychology.

*Kierkegaard:* You toss around too many fancy terms I simply do not comprehend, Bourdieu. I do understand what the main apples of discord are, however, between Aristotle and Bentham. I think their basic problem is developmental. They've both stagnated at different low levels of the trajectory towards full maturity. Bentham has stagnated at the level of the hedonist, Aristotle at the level of the moralist, but neither has reached the highest level of the religious person who has grasped the spiritual essence of human subjectivity and has gained the capacity to take an existential plunge into the unknown and mystical. The aspect of positive psychology that interests me—and signifies at least some elusive grasp of positivity—is its putative examination of transcendence, including features such as hope, spirituality, and the appreciation of beauty. I think we should now turn our attention away from positivity as positive emotionality towards these features instead.

*Aristotle:* Go ahead, Kierkegaard, and lead the discussion on this exciting topic; I trust you'll be speaking 'as yourself' today?

## **Act II: Puzzles about Transcendence**

*Kierkegaard*: I must confess that while I'm, in some respects, glad to see that hope, spirituality, and forgiveness feature in this positive psychology, I'm more than a little discouraged, even dismayed, to discover the manner in which they have been interpreted by some key players in the field...

*Bentham (interrupting sarcastically)*: Not like you to be on a downer, old boy. What's the problem; is it all a bit too 'positive' and happy for you, eh?

*Kierkegaard (unabashed)*: Well, the first thing I take issue with is the idea that a scientifically grounded way of elucidating the good life is possible. Have you heard some of the claims? I managed to get my hands on a document, a special issue of some journal or other where, to my horror, I found the following assertion: 'Positive psychology does not rely on wishful thinking, faith, self-deception, fads, or hand-waving; it tries to adapt what's best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behaviour presents to those who wish to understand it in all its complexity'. The hubris! The scientific method cannot solve the most fundamental of human problems...

*Bentham*: But it can alleviate some of these problems, can't it? I mean, the methods of positive psychology have been empirically shown to make people lastingly happier, haven't they?

*Kierkegaard:* As I was saying, Bentham, the scientific method cannot solve the most basic human problem: I am, of course, referring to sin!

*(There is a collective groan from everyone present.)*

*Aristotle:* I don't think that is helpful, Kierkegaard. Why do you always have to mix the doctrines of Christianity into the philosophy?

*Kierkegaard:* You know very well why; I'm a philosopher (though I never really wanted to be one, not in the traditional sense anyway), a psychologist and above all a theologian—not to mention quite a story-teller; a rare breed...

*Bentham:* You can say that again!

*Kierkegaard:* Besides, no one can seriously deny that the human person is divided against itself, ~~that it is not essentially good~~—that it is not at one with God.

*Bourdieu:* The cause of alienation lies in social structures. It isn't something *within* each individual. You really *are* a rare breed!

*Kierkegaard:* Gentlemen please; though I'm accustomed to being pilloried and mocked, I'd like to continue with my reflections without too many interruptions. Now, as I was saying, this positive psychology apparently does not rely on wishful thinking or faith to illuminate 'problems in human behaviour'. Faith is not mere credulousness; there's a lot more to it than that. In fact, I don't think these people have much of an idea what faith is! To go back to what I was saying earlier, I am concerned—deeply concerned—about the way that spirituality is

conceived by some of these positive psychologists as a strength on a par with other strengths. A single individual's faith is the lens through which virtues like hope, forgiveness, gratitude, and courage are beheld. I baulk at the notion of this being a 'signature strength' for some people and not others: why, faith is at the heart of everything!

*Aristotle:* Well, Kierkegaard, given what you say about the human condition, you must at least be pleased that positive psychologists accord a place to forgiveness within their framework of the twenty four character strengths of the 'Values in Action' Classification?

*Kierkegaard:* (*sighing*) Oh dear, they do refer to it as a 'classification', don't they? I shudder to think of these things in such taxonomical terms. You do know, don't you, that the justification for these virtues being selected in this 'VIA' is that they are supposedly cross-culturally valued and have stood the test of time...

*(There are murmurs of dissent all round.)*

*Kierkegaard:* This is what I think about forgiveness, Aristotle: I don't really see how forgiveness makes much sense unless you posit—as I do—that there is a human *need* for forgiveness, that humanity is beset by internal conflict (sin) from which it seeks deliverance. God's forgiveness of our sins (if only we would believe it) is the source of all forgiveness. We all fall short, we are all sinners...

*Bentham:* Your father left his mark on you, didn't he? But listen, I'm rather interested in what this guy Seligman has to say about forgiveness and happiness: 'My aim is merely to expose the inverse relationship between unforgiveness and life-satisfaction'. Gratitude *increases*

subjective wellbeing, and so (apparently) does forgiveness. Seligman talks about the two in the same chapter, so I understand: gratitude *amplifies* positive emotions by capitalising on positive events, while forgiveness helps neutralise negative emotions stemming from aversive life events, making us feel better. Seems like a good idea to me—notwithstanding, of course (*looking at Aristotle*) the crude bifurcation of emotions into the categories of positive and negative...

*Chrysippus*: Yes, it seems to me that forgiveness is being advocated by the positive psychologists as a means of effecting emotional regulation. I was actually rather impressed by some of the psychological approaches to forgiveness I learned about: this ‘reframing technique’ in particular. We all know the false light that inflamed passions set one’s thought in! I’m much taken by the attribution theory that undergirds this approach: examine the causes (both proximal and distal) of the offender’s offending behaviour and re-examine the attributions of blame you have made towards them. Once you see the circumstances that led the person to behave as they did, your attributions of blame towards the person are loosened. Make your attributions ‘external’ (to circumstance) rather than ‘internal’ (to a quality of the person) and forgiveness will come more easily—equilibrium will be restored.

*Kierkegaard*: You’re advocating condoning the offender’s behaviour then? Or excusing it on ‘external’ grounds? No, Chrysippus, you have no conception of the scandal, the stumbling block, which forgiveness presupposes. You are making it sound so... reasonable. There is an inherent *paradox* in forgiveness: in a sense one can only forgive what *cannot* be excused,

pardoned, condoned. To understand all is *not* to forgive all. There are heinous offences the human person could never begin to ‘understand’.

*Aristotle*: But surely, in *some* cases the offence is not that great. Let’s add some nuance here. It seems to me that standing back from the offence and reflecting on it in the way suggested by the positive psychologists has something to commend it? Besides, I hear that the eighteenth century Anglican divine, Joseph Butler, suggested something similar in his sermon ‘Upon Forgiveness of Injuries’? He was a Christian...

*Kierkegaard*: That is always debatable. He was a Bishop and part of the institutional Church of England.

*Chrysippus*: Hmmm, I must look this Butler up. He sounds rather interesting...

*Kierkegaard*: Another thing I dislike about this positive psychological approach to forgiveness is the emphasis on the person forgiving; the need to receive forgiveness oneself seems, for the most part, absent. As far as I can see, much of it is motivated by the instrumentalist *telos* of increasing one’s happiness—or ‘subjective wellbeing’—whatever you said they call it.

*Bentham*: And you object to that?!

*Kierkegaard*: It’s not the whole story. As I said, we all stand in need of forgiveness; it’s the human condition. How did that great 20th century writer Solzhenitsyn put it: ‘If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to

separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?’

*(There is a reflective silence for a few seconds.)*

*Bourdieu:* But there is nothing wrong with people who have been tormented by their oppressors seeking release for themselves, is there—if that is what they want?

*Kierkegaard:* I see what you mean. But I don’t think we should lose sight of our own need to be forgiven. It is the starting point of any understanding of forgiveness.

*Bentham:* I don’t think *you* should lose sight of the value of forgiveness and gratitude as moderators of mood. You should’ve kept one of these gratitude journals I hear about, instead of those melancholic diaries of yours; it might have done you some good! Did you know that keeping one of these diaries can increase scores in indices of well-being? And that Seligman’s ‘gratitude-visit’ intervention can make a significant difference to scores on tests of happiness and depression a week, and even a month, after the visit?

*Kierkegaard:* It all comes down to measurement and quantification with you, doesn’t it? Look Bentham, you should keep your ‘felicific calculus’ to yourself!

*Bentham:* Really? There’s quite a few folks down there who continue to carry a torch for this sort of thing. This stuff could influence public policy, you know. Wellbeing is on the economic and political agenda now. It’s not all about economic capital, you know.

*Bourdieu:* Yes, we know!

*Kierkegaard:* It grieves me that while this... ‘VIA’ classifies gratitude as ‘a strength that exhibits the virtue of transcendence’ (don’t even start me on that), most use is made of gratitude as it pertains to emotional regulation and its role in amplifying the benefits of positive past experiences. This is far too narrow a focus: we should be grateful for *all* that life brings us, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ by faith in the goodness of the Giver—not because of any instrumental benefits gratitude may bring.

*Bourdieu:* And what if you don’t believe in God? What if your habitus prevents you from taking ‘the leap of faith’?

*Bentham:* It seems to me that there are benefits anyway; for the individual and for society. Gratitude leads to ‘upstream reciprocity’ (being generous not only to one’s benefactor’s but to others as well). That can only be a good thing, surely? For similar reasons, I find myself quite persuaded by the positive psychological approach to hope and optimism. I daresay, Kierkegaard, you would disagree with me there too, would you not?

*Kierkegaard:* I would. Once again this so-called ‘strength of transcendence’ is seriously misrepresented by these positive psychologists. They talk of hope, they talk of optimism, but there is nothing transcendent about their treatment of these actually rather different concepts whatsoever. To hope is to ‘hope in’ God by faith. As far as I can see the nature of confidence in these positive psychological approaches to hope and optimism is the confidence of self-belief; beliefs about personal agency; beliefs about one’s ability to overcome obstacles to

reach one's goals; beliefs about one's ability to control one's emotions by 'thinking differently'...

*Chrysippus*: Systematically changing internal and external attributions regarding success and failure seems eminently reasonable, to me...

*Kierkegaard*: But this isn't hope! Where is the *passion*? One can only hope where one has first despaired. Don't you see? We discern hope in hopelessness, strength in weakness, faith in doubt.

*Bentham*: What's he on about? This is absurd!

*Kierkegaard*: Indeed it is! Hope and despair involve the single individual in an absolute and complete way; it is not just a matter of a remedy for their thinking. Moreover, there are things beyond human control as Chrysippus will at least appreciate. People hope for things they have no hope of controlling; they put their faith in an agency beyond their own—unless they're Pelagius. That fellow Gabriel Marcel was on the right lines when he spoke about hope as '*hoping-in*', though he stressed communion and community rather too much for my taste. We're on our own before God. That's one thing about these positive psychologists; at least they put the single individual at the forefront. We must take responsibility for our own existential choices...

*Aristotle*: Well, I guess that ends this discussion on—dare I say it—a 'positive' note?

*Kierkegaard*: It's hardly positive! It's a terrifying responsibility! The cause of angst!

*Bourdieu:* We all know where your angst comes from! We should've had Freud join this discussion; he'd have had a field day with you! Talk about the sublimation of libidinal energies...

*Aristotle:* Well, it seems to me that this focus on the individual is the only ground you share with the positive psychologists, my dear Kierkegaard, so far as I can tell.

*Kierkegaard:* It's at least a step out of the ant colony. But it seems to me to be stuck in the aesthetic stage; reason being the driving capacity of the aesthetic life. The terrifying question of what one ought to do—the ethical question—where is it? It seems to me to be largely concerned with the individual's own personal happiness: the reason to forgive other people lies in restoring emotional equilibrium and 'subjective wellbeing', not because of any compassion for our fallen fellows. And if you can't reach even the ethical stage, what hope is there of the teleological suspension of the ethical? What hope is there of recognising that even ethical reasoning must, at the last, be transcended by a leap of faith?

### **Act III: Puzzles about Positive Education**

*Aristotle:* I'm afraid Kierkegaard is leading this discussion into the ivory towers of his religiosity. Let me try to bring it down to the ground again. It would be unwise—or, as I would put it, *un-phronetic*—to finish this dialogue without saying something about positivity as understood in 'positive education', the moral-educational incarnation of positive psychology. There are many things I like there, such as the cultivation of positive emotions (in a certain sense of the term) and positive character traits. After all, I've always said that it

is more important to promote virtues than to analyse them. Yet even here I must take exception to many specific claims. When the cultivation of ‘positive emotions’ is touted in positive psychology, ‘positivity’ refers to valence. However, as I explained at the beginning, ‘positivity’ should be understood as a normative notion. For example, shame is a morally positive emotion for the young and should be encouraged although it often feels painful. Regarding the 24 virtues and character strengths, there is much to admire, although the list doesn’t coincide completely with mine. However, it’s detrimental to this theory that wisdom is not understood as an adjudicating meta-virtue, but simply put on a par with the others. Also I don’t believe in the constant enhancement of signature strengths. A person’s chain of virtues is not as strong as its strongest links, but rather its weakest, and any strength that is boosted excessively can turn into a vice of extreme.

*Kierkegaard:* I agree with your first point. It is the sign of true majesty in men how they deal with suffering. Being bullied almost broke me down, for example, but it made me stronger in the end. Suffering presents an opportunity for growth.

*Bentham:* You guys are both philosophers of misery, and you over-complicate things. Moral education should simply be about teaching kids to make the world a happier—a more pleasant—place for themselves and others. Just ask any normal person in the street whether it can ever be bad to increase the total amount of pleasure in the world. Stop over-intellectualising moral education and just listen to common sense!

*Chrysippus:* I agree, Bentham, that Aristotle and Kierkegaard share a penchant for making simple things complicated. Just teach kids a few elementary truths about Stoic metaphysics; it

is, after all, not rocket science. Then they will understand the true nature of the universe and acquire the necessary psychological resource—of personal resilience—and the appropriate mindset—of universal benevolence—to respond to it.

*Bourdieu (looking puzzled and apprehensive)*: I'm shocked at the way all of you conceive of moral education, and how you talk down to young people by conceptualising them as clay to be moulded, in this way or another. Sure, I know positive psychologists pay lip service to the cultivation of positive institutions, but they haven't written much about *that* aim, have they? Especially when it comes to young people, the view that positive psychologists share with Aristotle and most of those historic soapbox moralists is simply about how to 'fix the kids'. What about the underlying social structures? My Marxist friends understand me as a social determinist and my postmodern friends as a social nihilist, just as they are, but actually I'm neither. I do believe in the possibility of empowerment, including moral empowerment, but that cannot be achieved by some facile signature-strength exercises in the classroom or by keeping gratitude journals at night. How people, including young people, reason and behave morally is a function of their *habitus*, and *habitus* refers to a set of deeply ingrained, socially mediated and class-dependent self-conceptions that no single teacher or school can alter through some didactic magic tricks. Social structures need fixing, the kids are alright...

*Aristotle (flustered)*: Hold on, Bourdieu, there might be less to choose between us here than you think. Recall that one of my masterpieces, the *Politics*, is precisely about the political and social structures that need to be in place for the flourishing of society and the flourishing of individuals. There are long sections there about the sort of public institutions that need to be secured for moral education to work. I'm no naïve liberal individualist, like our friend

Bentham. I may disagree with you about the social variance in what you call *habitus*, but I used to call *hexeis*, among different peoples—witness my famous words about the extent to which, in our travels, we can see how every human being is akin to other human beings—but I grant you your point about the need for positive psychologists to be more explicit in fleshing out their account of positive institutions and social reform.

*Bentham (looking surprised)*: What was this stab at me all about? Are you implying that I am not concerned about the creation of happiness-promoting institutions?

*Aristotle (apologetic)*: I'm sorry for that Parthian shot, it was a bit unfair. I know we are all—in our different ways—concerned about the state of the world, past, present and future, and would like to see it as a better place for all human beings to thrive. I'm afraid, however, that I now need to draw this discussion to a close. Our daily nutritious, if somewhat bland, treat of manna from heaven is ready for us to consume, and we must now return to our respective lodgings. That includes those hippie groupies who follow you around all the time, Bourdieu; I wonder why I'm not surrounded by a similar army of devotees... This has been quite a riveting experience for me, and I have benefited considerably from talking to all of you, although I cannot say that I've changed my mind about many issues. I think positive psychology has a lot going for it, but it needs to become more explicitly Aristotelian and more sensitive to conceptual, moral and educational subtleties.

*Bentham*: I find its approach rather appealing. I shall return to my abode encouraged by this new turn of events. I hope it goes from, as it were, strength to strength! You know, for the longest time I found myself despairing of psychology; it was just so very gloomy. I welcome

this focus on positivity and happiness. Perhaps psychology is *finally* in a position to actually improve the lot of humanity.

*Kierkegaard*: I'm not sure about that, Bentham. I'm concerned that positivity is far too much in the ascendant here. The notes of trial and struggle are lacking; the approach seems overly 'reasonable' to me: You lack hope: step back, think differently, you'll be OK. The human person is *far* too mixed up for that kind of stuff to heal us. We need the grace of God for that.

*Aristotle*: Given where this discussion is heading, Kierkegaard, I'm tempted to entice one of the gods or semi-gods to join our next meeting. I got an invitation from Buddha to attend one of his mindfulness sessions the other day. Shall I try to ask him around next time?

*(The group departs with some positive, if not overly enthusiastic, noises...)*

## **The End**

### **Epilogue**

The dialogue staged here has demonstrated that positive psychology bears the hallmarks of a wide range of historical influences, both ancient and modern. In a discussion which has ranged over the perennially important topics of the nature of human happiness and transcendence, the role of emotions in well-being, the origin and ends of virtues such as forgiveness and hope, and the place of values (or virtues) in education, we have been able to present a number of controversies positive psychology currently faces.

For instance, positive psychologists have been charged with advocating a hedonic view of happiness and well-being. While psychologists from this camp do place a great deal of emphasis on how ‘positive’ emotions can be increased (and concomitantly how ‘negative’ emotions can be decreased), there are also aspects of positive psychology that present a more *eudaimonistic* view of well-being. As such, it is perhaps to be expected that some degree of dissent will prevail, and that this disagreement reflects underlying differences of opinion with a long philosophical pedigree. The dialogue allows these different perspectives to be aired, whilst acknowledging that a simple resolution to the debate is impossible because common ground with positive psychology can be claimed from a number of angles.

The debate which has played out here has taken in other controversial topics, such as whether the positive psychological tendency to carve up emotions into discrete categories of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ is helpful. This has tended to be accompanied by the propensity to instrumentalise virtues as means of regulating emotions. Forgiveness has been construed as a means of neutralising negative emotions arising from painful past events. Gratitude has been advocated as a way of capitalising on positive events to draw maximum benefit from them in terms of one’s own ‘subjective well-being’. Hope and optimism are regarded as powerfully insulative against low mood, depression and pessimism. As the dialogue was able to show, some theorists upon whose work positive psychologists purport to draw might applaud this pragmatic approach to making the world a more resilient and happier place, while others would deplore the way this reduces intrinsically valuable virtues to mere means to other ends. These contradictions are not likely to be resolved, for these differences of opinion have a long

history and represent fundamentally different modes of evaluation (consequentialist-  
utilitarian or virtue-ethical) that are likely to prevail in the future.

The question of whether positive psychology is sufficiently socially embedded was also raised by ‘reconstructing’ the French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, in the discussion. The same ‘individualist’ criticism might be made of psychology generally, which has tended to privilege personal explanations for pathology (such as individual development or genetics) over societal accounts. This is an important tension within (positive) psychology and—again—it is a topic for debate which almost inevitably leads to another *aporia* (impasse) because fundamental beliefs about whether we should begin with ‘individual men in their solitude’ (James, 1902/1961, p. 42) or society as a whole have not been resolved into a single position throughout history.

This dialogue has offered a medium in which a variety of viewpoints, each offering relevant challenges to positive psychology, could be presented alongside each other. This is not to say that the ensuing conversation has led to a clear resolution. Synthesis is not always possible, and indeed many of Plato’s early dialogues ended in a similarly aporetic manner. This said, we hope the departure from the current ‘standard’ academic form of writing has served to stimulate ongoing dialogue about the role of positive psychology in human well-being.

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