

# PURSUING THE HAPPY SOCIETY: FACULTY VERSUS POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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History does not repeat itself, but some questions are worth asking repeatedly. Such are questions about the nature of the good life: What is it? How do we get it? Every age has posed these queries, but because the answers have been so varied, the hope of many has been to seek a core element in a common human nature that will finally settle the matter.

It is no surprise that in our present age we try to bring the powers of science to bear upon these questions. This has been the object of positive psychology. It is an appropriate inquiry in America, where a concern for the pursuit of happiness was set down at the outset of our political life. That concern was itself influenced by an earlier idea of human understanding that historians have termed faculty psychology (Howe 1997, 63-103). So the question arises: Is our current pursuit of this question in line with our earlier notions of what constitutes a life worth living, and do these notions sit well with the institutional structures we have put in place? Or do the implications of positive psychology fundamentally challenge the very foundations of our civil life?

Faculty psychology was the basis from which the critical distinction between government and society was most fully developed in the modern era. The higher faculties of the mind were seen as constituting the basis for what the ancients had regarded as the higher virtues of private morality, epitomized by a regard for others and a rational, long-range view of one's self-interest. Whereas the ancients looked to the well-ordered city as the means of controlling the base passions of the multitude so that a few might be free, the contributors to faculty psychology had a more expansive object. They saw the corruption of power as the central cause of the degradation of social life for the many, and tried to distinguish between the base passions unleashed by unrestrained governments and the creative energies fostered by a society of individuals enjoying equal liberties. The two realms were inextricably

connected, but their distinction was critical to a proper conceptualization of a *free society*. Without a limited government dedicated to the administration of equal laws, the liberty of individuals could never be secure, and society would languish. Daniel Walker Howe takes note of this distinction between government and society when he observes, “The disposition of the Scottish thinkers to minimize the importance of law as compared with other social forces had lasting consequences. It helps explain the determination of their followers, across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to rely whenever possible on custom, moral exhortation, voluntary societies, and education as instruments of virtue in place of legal sanction” (1997, 54).

There is much to recommend what we now call positive psychology. It has thrown off the limitations of nineteenth and twentieth century clinical psychology and its almost exclusive focus on pathology, moving on to investigate the potential of individuals to seek and find happiness. It does so by attempting to work with the person’s inner capacities for making choices among ends that are consonant with a proper sense of self. Like earlier faculty psychology, it even recognizes that the mind is composed of parts that “sometimes conflict” (Haidt 2006, xi). The key is to find the right way to mediate these conflicts.

### ***Limitations of Positive Psychology***

What positive psychology lacks, however, may be far more important than what it has discovered or rediscovered. It seems to lack a clear idea of the limitations of human nature. Where faculty psychology posited the existence of base passions that must be controlled and even suppressed, positive psychology speaks of overcoming the negative emotions with positive thoughts and therapy. As Jonathan Haidt observes, “Life itself is but what you deem it, and you can—through meditation, cognitive therapy and Prozac—redeem yourself” (2006, 44). This is a strategy for happiness no matter what we do, as opposed to a considered reflection on the different ethical circumstances in which human activity takes place. The former strategy leaves morality entirely subjective, while the latter attempts to find a basis for morality that is *objectively* grounded in a common human nature. Positive psychology reasons as if the normative and political order of society were a given, and leaves aside the institutional aspects that were so much a part of faculty psychology’s

focus. Yet positive psychologists make no end of prescriptive recommendations for the better ordering of our individual and even *collective* selves.

Here we find an interesting bifurcation among positive psychologists. There are those who see the individual as the primary unit for analysis and celebrate the *capacity* for making meaningful choices, and then there are those who look to the external environment as the critical factor in managing the happiness of individuals through the communal or collective regulation of choice.<sup>1</sup> David G. Myers, for example, writes, “To counter radical individualism and cultural corrosion a new, inclusive social renewal movement is emerging; one that affirms liberals’ indictment of the demoralizing effects of poverty and conservatives’ indictment of toxic media models; one that welcomes liberals’ support for family-friendly workplaces and conservatives’ support for committed relationships; one that agrees with liberals’ advocacy for children in all sorts of families and conservatives’ support for marriage and co-parenting.” He concludes, “A new communitarian movement offers a ‘third way’—an alternative to the individualistic civil libertarianism of the left and the economic libertarianism of the right. It implores us, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., ‘to choose between chaos and community.’” (2000, 1-12). The implications of such expostulations for policy run the gamut from the voluntary to the politically mandated.

This disparity within positive psychology may arise from a modern unwillingness to make moral judgments about emotional states or behaviors. Rather, the positive psychologist would prefer to describe such states as either more or less healthy, or more or less useful to the attainment of a positive mental state, but not right or wrong in some objective moral sense. That same hesitancy to pass moral judgment on individual actions and attitudes makes it difficult to conceptualize the question of responsibility as it pertains to individual choices. Consequently, the discipline passes over those aspects of personal behavior that informed the conceptual distinction between government and society that was central to faculty psychology. Personal choice becomes just one of many possible approaches to seeking happiness, but there is little or no concern with assigning ethical responsibility for those choices. Without the moral distinction that sets choice apart from compulsion, positive psychologists offer no principled opposition to public interventions but instead ask only if they are efficacious to their utilitarian calculus. Consequently they

run the danger of fostering, not a society of persons capable of internalizing the values and actualizing the capacities for personal self-government, but a brave new world of external stimulus management and control. Such a world would do the very thing faculty psychology warned against: it would unleash the power of some over the many. That would not be an advance but a throwback to a very ancient way of thinking about individual potentialities.

Throughout most of human history, monarchical absolutists denied the capacity of individuals *on a general scale* to give order to their own lives. Only the great had such ability, and if they were sometimes arbitrary, it was better to submit than to resist, for order of any degree was thought to flow from the supremacy of an elite. The multitudes were considered ungovernable without the terrors of a prince to hold them in line. Order was external and flowed from those who were regarded, either by accident or divine right, to be superior. As different as they are in their philosophical approaches, both Robert Filmer and Thomas Hobbes gave voice to this ancient belief. Hobbes noted that “men have no pleasure (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all” (1986, 185). Filmer simply stated, “There is, and always shall be continued to the end of the world, a natural right of a supreme father over every multitude” (1991, 11).

### ***Sense of the Good***

The rise of commercial society in modern times altered perceptions of the naturalness of order in society, however. The increase of wealth through trade occurred at the same time as the growth of the sciences and a belief in the ability of men to discern the natural laws governing an orderly universe. That experience stimulated efforts to discover equivalent grounds for orderliness in human relations, to find sources of human order that were independent of force and fear. It was by the general application of the idea of a naturally occurring capacity for reasoned social intercourse that the Scottish philosophers began the search anew into man’s faculties and potentialities for the prospects of a truly *free society* (Appleby 1992, 60).

If it could be shown that men in general had some means built in, by design or by nature, through which to internalize a sense of the good and perceive correctly their own interests in relation to that good, then the perceived need for princely terrors would be substantially undermined. John

Locke had invested much in the capacity for reason itself as providing the means to happiness, enjoining his readers to make a careful distinction among ends. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke argued, “the highest perfection of intellectual nature lies in a careful and constant pursuit of true and solid happiness, so the care of ourselves, that we mistake not the imaginary for real happiness, is the necessary foundation of our liberty.” Those who followed in Locke’s footsteps, however, were less impressed by his reliance on unaided reason for individual and social flourishing. They wanted to understand the general contours that defined human motivations themselves. Reason, they observed, was a means to any number of ends, but what, they asked, was the moral quality of those ends, and how did men know them to be good?

Henry Home, Lord Kames, for example, wrote, “But self-preservation, is of too great moment to be left entirely to the conduct of reason” (2005, 47). Expressing similar doubt about the sufficiency of reason in moral considerations, Francis Hutcheson wrote, “The weakness of our Reason, and the avocation arising from the Infirmitie and Necessities of our Nature, are so great that very few Men could ever have form’d those long Deductions of Reason, which shew some Actions to be in the whole advantageous to the Agent, and their Contraries pernicious” (1725, 9).<sup>2</sup>

What came to be called Scottish moral theory developed a line of thought that tried to supplement reason by way of an inborn moral sense or sentiment. A number of variations on this idea were hammered out in the voluminous debates that characterized the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and these ideas profoundly altered the course of liberal or Whig ideas in the English-speaking world.

As opponents of monarchical absolutism, the Whigs were drawn to the Scottish moralists’ robust conception of social order, rooted as it was in natural faculties supposedly available to most people. The faculty of the moral sense required only the right social conditions to provide the opportunity for its development and exercise to be widely realized. Thus if the depredations of a few could be effectively constrained by law, and the incentives of commercial life were left free to operate to their fullest, civil society would flourish. Government, therefore, had only to be restricted to a few basic operations to allow for the incentives of society to draw men into associations for all manner of good purposes, both philanthropic and self-interested.

Thus the Scots underscored the need to limit the abuses and corruptions of arbitrary power in human society. According to this perspective, individuals could be trusted with their liberty. Indeed, not only could they be trusted with freedom, they required it as a precondition for the exercise and development of those faculties or capacities necessary for personal self-government. Thus Benjamin Franklin proposed in 1732, to the group he helped found for self-improvement and education, that the essence of good character constitutes a “faculty of reasoning justly and truly in searching after and discovering such truths as relate to my Happiness. Which Faculty is the Gift of God, capable of being improved by Experience and Instruction into Wisdom” (1732, 210).<sup>3</sup> This did not mean that all persons would exercise their faculties to the fullest, but it was nevertheless something each must be left free to attempt without force or the threat of force. Francis Hutcheson, one of the early Scottish moralists, argued powerfully, as early as 1725, that to be coerced into virtue made no sense and was ultimately counterproductive because such coercion takes “away all the pleasures of generosity, honor, charity, which cease when Men can be forced to these Actions” (1725, 187). Underscoring the need for limited government, he later asked, “what plan of polity will ever satisfy men sufficiently as to the just treatment to be given themselves, and all who are particularly dear to them, out of the common stock, if all is to depend upon the pleasure of magistrates and no private person allowed any exercise of his own wisdom or discretion in some of the most honorable and delightful offices of life? Must all men in private stations ever be treated as children, or fools?” (1755, 322-323).

The reason for confidence in “men in private stations” was elaborated in 1751 by Hutcheson’s student Henry Home, Lord Kames: “Nothing contributes so much to improve the mind and confirm it in virtue, as being continually employed in surveying the actions of others, entering into the concerns of the virtuous, approving their conduct, condemning vice, and showing an abhorrence at it, for the mind acquires strength by exercise, as well as the body” (2005, 18). In the absence of the opportunity to exercise their moral sense freely, men would fall back into a brutish existence, he argued: “for passions, as they gather strength by indulgence, so they decay by want of exercise,” and, “Were everything furnished to his hand without thought or labor, he [humanity] would sink below the lowest of brute creation” (21-22).

### ***The Centrality of Liberty to Happiness***

It was by the happy accident of western history that such a free civil society had evolved. Commercial civilization was seen to constitute the highest stage of both refinement and personal independence. It was in this milieu that the Americans imbibed their notions of self-government (Howe 1997, 53).

Just five years before penning the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson both recommended and paraphrased Kames directly in a letter to his soon-to-be brother-in-law, Robert Skipwith:

“I answer, everything is useful which contributes to fix in the principles and practices of virtue. When any original act of charity or of gratitude, for instance, is presented either to our sight or imagination, we are deeply impressed with its beauty and feel a strong desire in ourselves of doing charitable and grateful acts also. On the contrary when we see or read of any atrocious deed, we are disgusted with its deformity, and conceive an abhorrence of vice. Now every emotion of this kind is an exercise of our virtuous dispositions, and dispositions of the mind, like limbs of the body, acquire strength by exercise” (Jayne 1998, 71).

Thus happiness helped constitute a society in which individuals internalized a sense of their moral obligations and achieved fulfillment by exercising those obligations *voluntarily* for all manner of purposes, whether commercial, philanthropic, social, or religious. Politics was certainly a part of this equation, but it was only one aspect of a far richer set of social relations embraced by the eighteenth century idea of civil society.

Under liberty, individuals could and would experience the consequences of their actions more directly, because they could not deny that they were the product of choice. Liberty was thus a moral instructor, informing everyone positively by drawing us together through our natural dispositions. Thomas Paine put the distinction between the free and forced at the very opening of his essay on *Common Sense*, the work that helped distill Americans’ resolve for independence, observing, “Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices” (1955, 6).

The problem of political life is the problem of coercive power. Unconstrained power insulates people from the consequences of their bad

choices. Without the ability to experience the social costs of one's decisions, the individual need not accommodate him- or herself to others' feelings. Without the need to accommodate others, even the signals of individuals in society would be distorted. The fawning disposition of a courtier, for example, masked his contempt, fear, or ingratitude toward the magistrates or lords. How, then, could the magistrate act knowledgeably regarding the wellbeing of others *even if* motivated by his or her higher faculties or capacities? At all levels of society, power unconstrained by law distorts the information that occurs naturally in a society of equal liberty, and power becomes a license for the expression of baser instincts. Those passions are certainly natural, but their consequences, when unconstrained, foster social dislocation, inefficiencies, dependencies, and individual personalities characterized by aggression, lust, subservience, and fear.

Where Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine spoke of society in its best form as understood by faculty psychology, it was Madison who applied this understanding to the realm of government and coercive power. One need only look to the tenth, thirty-ninth and fifty-first essays of Publius to see its application. Many have detected an ancient quality in Madison's ethics because he often spoke of finding ways to ensure the representation of the general interest in the offices of the senate, executive, and judiciary. But Madison's ultimate hope was not with the virtue of men in politics but instead with the cancellation of their base passions or interests by other such passions in an elaborate system of checks and balances. It was through a careful consideration of how powers could be limited by other powers in government that he hoped to ensure the effective containment of coercive force and its potential abuses (Howe 1997, 96-100).

The sovereignty of the people, Madison argued, would be channeled through various offices at both the state and federal levels, and these would in turn be divided according to the powers and responsibilities of executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Each branch would have some means of exercising power over the other branches, and in each case it was hoped a wide expanse of territory would make it less likely that some regional interest would hold sway over the whole. Passion would check passion, and government would be so limited by its structure as delineated in a written constitution and later the added check of a bill of rights, that society would be

left free to enjoy the flourishing of a highly developed civil associational life.

In sum, faculty psychology had a robust sense of the individual in both political and associational capacities. I say *associational* because voluntary organization was the basis for a wide variety of different activities about which we tend to forget when we use the more current designation of “private.” Individuals might well associate for reasons of commerce and profit, but this by no means exhausted all the possible reasons for organizing; others include reasons of faith, fellowship, and philanthropy. In a society under law that respected the equal liberty of each person’s most basic rights, individuals could be trusted to follow their natural inclinations toward these various endeavors and to associate freely to pursue them. With the collective containment of quarrelsome and contentious persons who abuse their strengths, and with legal limits placed upon public authority, the natural affections of the heart would serve as the springs to action of the higher faculties of personal self-government. The baser passions would be strictly controlled by carefully crafted institutional limits on political power that directed the use of force towards proper ends such as defense and the enforcement of law.

Today, this basic understanding of the two realms is nearly forgotten. Now we speak of self-government as if it were synonymous with the rule of the majority or the casting of a ballot. The personal element of the older definition of government of the self is even designated as antiquated by some modern sources.<sup>4</sup> It should come as little surprise, therefore, that in our present age positive psychology makes prescriptions without considering their wider institutional and social ramifications.

### ***Challenges for Positive Psychology***

In its effect on the individual, positive psychology does make valuable contributions. In many ways we might say that positive psychology has reinvented the wheel of faculty psychology. Like the latter, positive psychology points to certain intrinsic motivators that seem to undergird the happiness of individuals in society. A powerful orientation toward others and a sense of altruism and of the long-run benefits of paying attention to opportunities all reveal the social complexity of motives that define individuals’ social engagements in both positive and faculty psychology. The difference is that modern science has given positive

psychology the empirical tools to verify what for the Scottish moralists was only a strong inference backed by anecdotal evidence.

Reminiscent of Adam Smith, Martin Seligman notes that a happy disposition reinforces positive-sum transactions: “Almost every technological advance (for example, the printing press or the hybrid tea rose) is a win-win interaction. The printing press did not subtract an equivalent economic value from somewhere else; rather it engendered an explosion in value” (2002, 43-44). The principle of mutual gains from trade was of course at the heart of Smith’s explanation for the rise of a highly complex and spontaneous commercial system of exchange. Of more particular note is Seligman’s fascination with recent rediscoveries of moral sense theory that root positive emotions in an internal propensity toward cooperative behaviors. Robert Wright’s *NonZero* is just one of a number of such works, including articles by Stephen Pinker and Matt Ridley, that consider the biological basis for moral actions. Seligman is moved by Wright’s research to ask a question that was at the very heart of faculty psychology: “Could it be that positive emotion, then, has evolved to motivate and guide us through win-win games? When we are in a situation in which everyone might benefit,... joy, good cheer, contentment, and happiness motivate us and guide our actions” (257)

Kames asked much the same thing:

“May we not apply to justice, what is so beautifully reasoned concerning society, in a dialogue upon happiness, ‘If society be thus agreeable to our nature, is there nothing within us to excite and lead us to it? No impulse, no preparation of faculties? It would be strange if there should not,’ If we be fitted by our nature for society; if pity, benevolence, friendship, love, dislike of solitude and desire of company, be natural affections, all of them conducive to society, it would be strange if there should be no natural affections, no preparation of faculties, to direct us to do justice, which is so essential to society” (Home 2005, 54).

The comparison with the Scottish moralists holds true for Jonathan Haidt as well. How like Kames he is when he writes, “Reason and emotion must both work together to create intelligent behavior, but emotion ... does most of the work” (2006, 13). Kames took exactly the same position, “that, supposing our duty could be made plain to us by an abstract chain of reasoning, yet we have

good ground to conclude, that the Author of nature has not left our actions to be directed by so weak a principle as reason.... Is nature so deficient, as to leave the duty we owe our neighbor, which stands in the front rank of duties, to be directed by cool reasoning? This is not according to the analogy of nature; nor is it fact; witness compassion, friendship, benevolence, and all the tribe of the social affections” (Home 2005, 69).

Haidt also mentions the empirical work of three psychologists who “reviewed the available evidence” and found that voluntary activities, “the things that you choose to do, such as meditation, exercise, learning a new skill, or taking a vacation,” have the most lasting influence on character: “because such activities must be chosen, and because most of them take effort and attention, they can’t just disappear from your awareness the way conditions can” (2006, 91). Thus, like Kames or Jefferson he affirms the necessity of exercising the positive capacities for social engagement as an essential part of the individual’s psychological development. These similarities between Haidt and Kames or Jefferson, however, can mask critical differences between positive and faculty psychology. Positive psychology seeks to discover the conditions and characteristics of happiness, and thereby find the formula for being happy. Faculty psychology not only tried to understand the lineaments of *happiness* but also attempted to say what was *moral*. Another name for the program of the Scottish Enlightenment was *moral philosophy*.

Positive psychology, by contrast, doesn’t say what actions are right or wrong. It tries only to discover what is harmful to health and well-being. Both schools are utilitarian in some sense, but the Scots at least tried to define the good in relation to actions that were the result of *choice*. Thus a harmful choice could properly be judged as wrong, such as when government abuses its power or a thug takes your property. On the other hand, helpful choices, such as trading for mutual gain or a helping act of kindness, were regarded as an exercise in the good. Because personal responsibility was located in moral persons, by definition liberty was a necessary condition of the right order of society.

Positive psychology, by contrast, does not make personal responsibility a necessary condition of happiness. *All* conditions are subject to the happiness formula. Thus Locke’s early encomium to be careful to distinguish real from imaginary happiness receives little or no consideration from positive psychology. Religion may or may not be true, for example, but positive

psychologists will only say that faith tends to make you happier and more optimistic. Pessimists may or may not be more accurate in their predictions, but positive psychologists will tell you only that optimists are happier. Thus in their review of the literature, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi observe, “unrealistically optimistic beliefs about the future can protect people from illness” (2000, 10). The rightness or wrongness of the beliefs is no part of their concern.

Likewise, a real challenge for positive psychologists comes when they try to examine the external conditions for happiness, and here is where the differences from faculty psychology become most pronounced. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi invoke what they call “collective well-being,” which they say is to be understood as a “systemic perspective.” Without much explanation of what constitutes an external, collective measure of happiness, they observe that certain actions within society can be zero-sum, without inquiring about the context in which those actions occur. Thus they pose the question, “If running a speedboat for an hour provides the same amount of well-being to person A as reading from a book of poems provides to Person B, but the speedboat consumes 10 gallons of gasoline and irritates 200 bathers, should the two experiences be weighed equally? Will a social science of positive community and positive institutions arise?” (2000, 12).

If closer attention were given to their intellectual predecessors, to the Scottish moralists and the American Founders, positive psychologists would find ample grounds on which to reflect on these questions. They would certainly know to ask a few more questions respecting the institutions of property and rule of law. Who owns the lake? Did the people on shore accept the rules of the owner? Is the driver of the speedboat in compliance? Is he a trespasser? Upon what basis does he acquire the ten gallons of gas to run the boat? Did he steal it? How is the gas produced? Is it produced through competitive private enterprise or a subsidized, state-run monopoly? They do not pose these more meaningful distinctions because positive psychologists do not use the tools that could address them. The questions require sustained consideration of the basic rules that make society possible in the first place. As their discipline stands now, positive psychologists and their fellow travelers are threatening to reinvent rather badly what already exists—a social science of institutions.

***Crucial Difference Between State and Society***

In an essay dedicated to this very project, John McKnight illustrates the potential challenges and pitfalls of this threatened new “science” of positive institutions by providing a road map to “safe, wise, and healthful communities.” His analysis begins promisingly enough. Like the Scottish moralists, he sees the complexity involved in the processes of economic growth: “We misunderstand economic development if we believe it grows from programs involving the creation of business plans. The soil that has nurtured enterprise and a burgeoning economy is the experiences, relationships and culture of a rich associational life.” Taking advantage of dispersed information through voluntary exchange and association was a central part of Adam Smith’s project, and McKnight recognizes the importance of such local knowledge. He acknowledges that civil associations are various and the extended order from which they spring is complex and dynamic. Hereafter, however, McKnight’s way of grappling with this complexity departs from the Scottish approach. He lumps business in with a number of “growing service systems” and concludes that associations are separate from such “systems.” McKnight then argues that it is these service systems, including business, that are displacing authentic community. If we wish to preserve associations, he argues, policymakers will “need to enhance community power while diminishing system authority” (1996, 18, 20).

This distinction between associations and services, and the incorporation of commerce into the latter, is based on an inadequate definition of both. McKnight asserts, “The system is designed for mass production of goods and services. The community of associations is not designated to produce services. Rather it is the context where care is manifested. Care, unlike service, cannot be produced. Care is the consenting commitment one has for the other, freely given. Care cannot be mandated, managed, or produced as a service can” (1996, 7).

Although McKnight’s critique rings true for the broad host of government-based social services in which bureaucratic administration displaces genuine care, he adopts a basic conceptual confusion about business, one that is common in current academic and popular thought. Because businesses are managed to achieve particular ends, some people think that they do not entail consent or that they lack the element of free choice, but the only condition in

which this is so is under a system of total public ownership. Under a legal regime of private property it is exactly the opposite.

Businesses in an open and free economy are involved in a highly variegated order of dispersed information that rests upon nothing else but the consent of those who organize them and those who enter into exchanges with them. Absent special privileges dispensed as political favors or cartel behavior, the voluntary nature of commerce sets businesses firmly within the realm of voluntary social arrangements in which we find civil associations. Just as business enterprises organize to pursue a variety of purposes, so civil associations (and social enterprises) also organize around a diversity of ends: some groups serve purposes of philanthropy of specific kinds; others serve ends of a social nature such as fellowship, education, or personal growth; and some also provide direct goods and services. Businesses and civil associations are thus alike in their voluntary foundation on *consenting commitment freely given*. This points to a far more crucial distinction when we want to consider civil society writ large: the distinction between the realm of the voluntary and the realm where compulsion is the ultimate principle.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the most democratically organized governments, consent is only crudely approximated by majority rule. Majorities reserve to themselves the ultimate right to compel individual compliance, and that sets even the most democratically elected government apart from associations that are voluntary. An elective government can even be tyrannical. In his first inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson observed that the will of the majority, “to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression” (1801, 492-493). All choices entail costs, but few would find it difficult to distinguish the missionary who converts by the sword and the one who asks for a voluntary commitment, even if the former was approved by a majority of the heathen.

How stunning, then, the statement that leaves our social direction in the hands of *policymakers*, democratically chosen or otherwise. What an unconscious eliding into the hands of raw power is this: “The navigating principle here is a shift in the economics so that income and enterprise are the primary goals enhancing individuals and communities.... Therefore resources will be diverted from secondary service systems to provide choice making income for individuals who are especially vulnerable. The pre-purchase of

services will become investment of last resort” (McKnight 1996, 21). Although we can applaud the intention to elevate the vulnerable by empowering them with greater choice-making opportunities, we must reject the dependence upon policy instead of commerce and civil association as the chief means to this end. Who will be the policymakers who direct this outcome? Who will supply the definitions of the “especially vulnerable?” Who will command that “resources will be diverted?” Who will decide when these goals have been achieved? At the heart of McKnight’s assumptions is what the philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum called the “self-excepting fallacy.” As he sets course by his map and prepares the ship called society for its journey, it never occurs to him to ask, from what source derives the power of these policymakers? How will they define happiness? Can we trust them? He simply assumes that they will be such as himself, sharing his understandings and benign goals (Green 1984, 1216-1217).

The real distinction we need to make is not between systems and associations, but once again between society and government. We need a realistic appraisal of human nature as it is subject to the discipline of different circumstances, whether they be based on voluntary agreements or a matter of command. Faculty psychology had a good balance of optimism about the possibilities for happiness within the voluntary realm of society and pessimism about policymakers wielding force for collective ends. Thus Madison, that faculty psychologist extraordinaire of politics, observed in *Federalist* 51, “In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

Because the basic distinction between state and society is so little considered today, positive psychologists flirt with power in ways that promise to undermine the very kinds of self-determination and happiness many of them claim to be advancing. By blurring important distinctions between self, society, and polity, they actually invite power to convert them all into “systems”—the very antithesis of an associational life based on freely committed choices. McKnight cites Karl Polanyi as an authority, and Polanyi was one of the great advocates of social planning (McKnight 1996, 20). What could be more systematizing than a political or communal or collective policy directing the allocation of resources?

In a powerful rebuttal to another current advocate of social intervention, philosopher David Schmidtz recently noted that government redistribution removes responsibility from exactly where a thriving civil society needs it to be: the freely choosing individuals who compose it. The key to personal happiness, he argues, “lies in background institutions, especially property institutions, that lead people to take responsibility for their own welfare.” Happiness, then, is to be found not in the compulsory realm of policymakers but in “whatever helps people to pursue their projects in peaceful and productive ways. It is people living peaceful and productive lives, and the institutional structures that encourage them, that make people better off in the long run. And what helps poor people in the short run—internalized responsibility, and the synergistic combination of self-reliance and spontaneous mutual support that goes with it” (Schmidtz and Goodin 1988, 94-95). Lord Kames, Jefferson’s favorite moral philosopher, understood exactly this in 1758, and the positive psychologists would do well to reconsider what was then a fundamental insight of faculty psychology in general: “[N]ature has not failed us here, more than in the other parts of our constitution. We have a sense of property, we have a sense of obligation to perform our engagements; and we have a sense of wrong in incroaching [sic] upon property, and in being untrue to our engagements. Society could not subsist without these affections, more than it could subsist without the social affections, properly so called. We have reason, a priori, to conclude equally in favor of both, and we find upon examination that our conclusion is just” (Home 2005, 54).

## NOTES

- 1 On the problems of choice as considered by other positive psychologists, see also Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, 8, 10).
- 2 See also Howe (1997) on the question of the Scottish moralists and their consideration of Locke.
- 3 As always, Franklin is among the more complex personalities of the Founding, and his views on human nature are no less difficult to nail down. Howe finds convincing Franklin’s conjecture to James Logan in 1737 that Hobbes’ idea is “somewhat nearer the Truth,” but in actuality Franklin went on to reflect that the “Truth perhaps lies somewhere in between both Extreams [sic].” What was this other extreme? He called

this a “State of Love.” But of course this is more radical than Locke’s position or that of his Scottish followers, who sought only to explain a propensity for cooperative social behavior, not some millenarian state of heavenly beatitude. Given Franklin’s close relationship with Kames and his own indefatigable dedication to voluntary improvement and association, we can reasonably assume that he was making a rhetorical play for some strategy known only to himself, while actually remaining firmly within the Whig camp regarding the faculties of human sociability. See Howe (1997, 23-24).

- 4 Encarta online, for example, lists the definition “the ability to exercise self-control” as archaic (see [http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary\\_/Self%252dgovernment.html](http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_/Self%252dgovernment.html)). Today the primary definition is the political: the right of citizens to choose their own government.
- 5 The philosopher Michael Oakeshott made a more helpful distinction than McKnight’s when he noted the differences between *enterprise associations* and *civil associations*. Enterprises produce specific products or perform specific services, but a civil association serves to create the rules that allow for enterprise associations to more effectively pursue their varied objects, what the Scottish moralists called civil society. The real mistake is to confuse government, and therefore civil society in general, with being an enterprise association; that is to say, an organization set up to produce a single product or outcome such as equality of condition or some other specifically envisioned order of community, instead of as the enforcer of a basic set of rules that allows for both voluntary associations and individuals to seek their own ends (Oakeshott 1975, 111-122).

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