

COMMENT

ON HAPPINESS—PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

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As the preceding essays illustrate, the new field of positive psychology offers a fuller picture of human flourishing than does disorder-oriented clinical psychology, but it also presents certain dangers itself that need to be recognized and either avoided or, if possible, corrected. In my comments I will touch on each essay and then close with a few general observations about positive psychology.

Robert Garnett uses the insights of positive psychology to analyze and correct F. A. Hayek's critique of philanthropy as an atavistic activity incompatible with the modern extended order. In Garnett's account, Hayek argues that "Modernity has spawned a new moral code in which humane ends are better served by commerce than philanthropy by 'withholding from the known needy neighbors what they might require in order to serve the unknown needs of thousands of others' " (Garnett 2008, 1-2). This touches on one of the problems Hayek investigated throughout his career—"the knowledge problem." If all we can know is what we can see with our own eyes, we are necessarily tied to the biblical world of one's neighbor or Aristotle's world of a small, face-to-face economic community that can be organized and controlled by one man. As Hayek's discussion of Adam Smith shows, however, the great advantage of markets is that they provide signals that allow individuals to act in ways beneficial to people far beyond their circle of personal acquaintance.

Hayek's appreciation of Smith is linked to Smith's articulation of the advantage of division of labor and the non-personal economic system that can be developed on the basis of market signals (Hayek 1978, 268). Market signals provide knowledge to each individual far beyond the person's ability to see for himself. The new moral code of modernity, however, requires a commitment

to the exchange-oriented mechanics of the market system. One might even argue that if we take the most radical view of Hayek's argument, this commitment to base one's actions on "the abstract signs of the prices" constitutes the totality of the new moral code spawned by modernity.

Hayek's Critique of Philanthropy

Thus we arrive at the "Hayekian impasse" that concerns Garnett, which I will reformulate: the moral commitments undergirding the open or free society require that we restrain our own freely chosen actions to assist our friends and neighbors and replace that personal foundation of action with a commitment to the impersonal and abstract demands of market signals. I realize that Hayek could respond that such actions are not really "freely chosen" but are merely the residual effects ("inherited instincts") of the earlier morality of "the horde or the tribe" (Hayek 1978, 268).

Before offering Hayek a tentative way out of this impasse, I will simply note two ironies of this position. First, as Garnett suggests, it seems to be paradoxical in that it wants to restrict the free activity of members of the free society. Second, this argument contains echoes of the critique of charity offered by American progressives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The general view of progressivism was that individual charity was harmful because it not only targeted specific "known individuals" for aid and left others out but also failed to identify the causes of the social distress under attack. Thus according to the progressive critique, private charity had to be replaced, not supplemented, by a scientific analysis of social dynamics which would effectively target underlying causes (Ealy and Ealy 2006). While Hayek would undoubtedly argue that the progressives assumed they could achieve a level of knowledge which is in fact unobtainable, his view that a system can deal with these problems more effectively than individual effort does seem to parallel the progressives' position. Also, interestingly, it seems to deny the importance of local knowledge that elsewhere is crucial for Hayek in laying a groundwork for understanding entrepreneurial discovery and places maximum emphasis on abstract and universal market signals.

Hayek's reservations concerning philanthropy seem to stem from his view that philanthropy provides the moral impetus for socialism's pursuit of "social justice," a concept Hayek finds totally without content and groundless but that he recognizes energizes much political activity. Hayek's primary target is

socialism, and because many socialists have used the religious and moral language of the traditional concern for one's neighbor, philanthropy itself is subject to collateral damage.

This reasoning can be seen in Hayek's brief newspaper article on "Adam Smith's Message in Today's Language". Smith's great achievement in articulating the importance of the division of labor, Hayek argues, "was the recognition that men who were governed in their efforts, not by the known concrete needs and capacities of their intimate fellows, but by the abstract signals of the prices at which things were demanded and offered on the market, were thereby enabled to serve the enormous field of the 'great society' that 'no human wisdom and knowledge could ever be sufficient' to survey" (1978, 267-269).

It is crucial to note that this argument for division of labor and the importance of market signals focuses on the increased productivity this system makes possible. Hayek's basic critique of socialism is that it claims to know *a priori* what men want and need and proceeds to make command decisions about what goods and services should be made available to society. Just as the socialist does not have knowledge of what should be produced, neither does the philanthropist, and therefore neither the socialist nor the philanthropist is in a position to direct the productive capacity of society.

It is also crucial to note that this argument concerning the division of labor provides no guidance on how the individual entrepreneur should spend his new wealth, and Hayek himself recognizes this in this discussion of Smith. "It is an error that Adam Smith preached egotism: his central thesis said nothing about how the individual should use his increased product; and his sympathies were all with the benevolent use of the increased income" (Hayek 1978, 268). So while Smith famously argues that it is not out of benevolence that the "butcher and baker" provide the products they make available for sale (Smith 1981, 26-27), there is nothing in Smith's understanding that prevents the butcher or baker from using a part of their profits for benevolent or philanthropic purposes. Indeed, the thrust of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is that man's natural sympathy toward his fellow creatures will incline him to do just that.

I will leave this issue by noting that Garnett points to certain apparent tensions or contradictions within Hayek which may be resolvable if Hayek's critique of philanthropy is aimed only at efforts to direct economic production on the basis of a moral vision instead of on the free interplay of natural

economic forces. The argument I have articulated does not resolve the impasse Garnett investigates, however, if Hayek goes beyond Smith and argues that the benevolent use of one's own resources is detrimental to the open society. And, I should add, neither does my argument address the possibility that large philanthropic foundations might have the purchasing power to "distort" market signals by intense and focused activity such as the purchase and distribution of particular drugs or medical equipment.

Aristotle's Distinction Among Sciences

Garnett is correct to link positive psychology with Aristotle, for to some extent this field follows the model of science as exemplified in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*. Positive psychology is Aristotelian in beginning with a model of man at his best (human excellence), placing man within his social context, and emphasizing the importance of character and the development of virtue. Perhaps, however, positive psychology is not Aristotelian enough, in that it fails to note Aristotle's important distinction between theoretical and practical science, and seeks to be both simultaneously.

Theoretical science, according to Aristotle, deals with "necessary things," and the goal of theoretical science is knowledge. Physics, which identifies the elements found in nature and their relationships to each other, and which discovers laws governing these relationships, is the prime example of theoretical science. Practical science, on the other hand, focuses on "contingent things," and its goal is to guide action. Ethics and politics are the preeminent examples of Aristotle's practical science (Aristotle 1962, 4-6, 295-302). In his discussion of science, Aristotle cautions against seeking more precision than a subject allows. For Aristotle, we may expect great precision in mathematics and physics, but it would be a mistake to expect the same level of precision in an investigation of the political world. Prudence, a key characteristic of practical science, involves insight into the dynamics of a situation and the ability to weigh a number of incommensurable elements (likelihood of success of various strategies, rank ordering of priorities, likely reactions to one's action, an assessment of one's strengths and weaknesses in the context of decision) and arrive at a plan of action. In contrast to theoretical science, which can enunciate laws which have both descriptive and predictive force, practical science operates on the basis of insight and rules of thumb which do not necessarily apply universally.

The effort “to create a positive alternative to the DSM, the diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders” (Strong 2008, 38) illustrates the theoretical drive of positive psychology. The vision at the foundation of positive psychology, if not the current reality, is of a psychological science able both to identify areas of weakness in individuals, families, and communities and to remake them scientifically. Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, founders of the movement, “believe that a psychology of positive functioning will arise that achieves a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 13).

Both Michael Strong and Hans Eicholz acknowledge that positive psychology provides a more complete account of human fulfillment and health than traditional psychology when its focus is on the individual happy person, but both express grave reservations when positive psychology makes a leap from personal happiness to social happiness. Strong argues that positive psychology’s emphasis on “positive institutions” necessary for establishing and nurturing character development and the inculcation of virtue should lead it to endorse private or charter schools. “Virtue communities” which undergird and reinforce moral development are difficult to create in the environment of public schools, Strong argues, but are more easily achieved within private schools. This difference is related to the greater unity of expectation and commitment to a common curriculum and educational philosophy on the part of administration, teachers, and parents, in private settings. Strong argues that the reason for this failure to endorse private schooling is that positive psychology shares “the bias of social science against classical liberalism” (Strong 2008, 43). Perhaps this is true, but Strong’s analysis suggests that the conditions necessary to form these “virtue communities” run counter to a powerful force in contemporary American society. Increasingly we seem to be a society committed to the importance of diversity, yet character formation and personal happiness appear to be related to a homogeneous religious environment (38).

If Strong is correct in arguing that positive psychology has a bias against classical liberalism, perhaps it is grounded in something deeper than the norms of contemporary social science. I earlier suggested that positive psychology wasn’t Aristotelian enough, and now I will suggest that if positive

psychology has an animus against private schooling it is because it is too Aristotelian. For Aristotle, politics is the “master science” which guides the city to the good life, and one primary goal of the city was the inculcation of virtue in its citizens (Aristotle 1962, 4-5; 1997, 93). In spite of the vast differences between the Greek polis and contemporary American society, the Aristotelian view that political institutions should be the preeminent institutions of public and social life, especially in the field of education, is axiomatic for many today (see Ealy 2004).

This view of the preeminence of political institutions appears to be foundational for positive psychology, or at least for some positive psychologists. In their introduction to an issue of *American Psychologist* devoted to positive psychology, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi offer an overview of the field. After a description of the “subjective level” and the “individual level,” they turn to positive psychology’s social dimension: “At the group level, it is about the civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance, and work ethic” (2000, 5). Their understanding of institutional and social life appears to be circumscribed by the political, and they ignore the important distinction between society and government (Eicholz 2008, 17, 22-23).

Political Implications of Positive Psychology

Hans Eicholz deals explicitly with the political implications of positive psychology in his detailed comparison of this school of thought with the older, faculty psychology which was embraced by philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment and influenced many Americans of the founding generation. The heart of Eicholz’s critique of positive psychology is that “It seems to lack a clear idea of the limitations of human nature” (Eicholz 2008, 18).

At one level, the level of the individual, this charge perhaps is not correct. As an example, consider Martin Seligman’s discussion of self esteem in children (1995, 57-63). While Seligman’s explicit discussion deals with children, it strikes me that his argument has application for all human beings, regardless of age. According to Seligman, “Self-esteem is governed by who you blame” when bad things happen (57). Children have two primary options in identifying the source of bad things, that is, they can either “internalize” (blame themselves) or “externalize” (blame others or the circumstances).

Children who blame others (regardless of the reality of the situation) tend to have higher levels of self esteem. Seligman realizes that our inclination is to shift blame and avoid responsibility, and he even admits that “if my only concern were self esteem, I would advocate [teaching children to externalize].” Seligman is concerned with the whole person, however, and understands that this approach would ultimately lead to the child’s inability to accept responsibility. His position is straightforward and firm: “Children must hold themselves accountable when they are to blame for their problems, and then go on to try to rectify the situation” (58). Likewise, Seligman recognizes that myriad problems would be generated if happiness, understood as a shot of positive emotion, were pursued as a goal to the exclusion of a concern with the development of virtue and strong character. He writes, “Positive emotion alienated from the exercise of character leads to emptiness, to inauthenticity, to depression, and, as we age, to the gnawing realization that we are fidgeting until we die” (2002, 8).

However realistic positive psychology may be at the individual level, it doesn’t appear to have a robust view of the problem of political power. Perhaps this is because at times it sounds as if these authors do not even realize that they have moved into the realm of the political—the vision of a psychological science that provides “effective interventions” to “communities” seems to be a technological vision devoid of any political dimension. Whatever the reason for this curious lacuna, it is clear that positive psychology does have a political dimension. Any science that offers to intervene to build better communities is inherently and unavoidably political. It is also clear that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi understand this, even if they don’t always articulate it clearly. After all, the third level of interest they identify, as noted earlier, involves “civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship.”

It is at the level of politics that Eicholz’s concerns are right on target. Positive psychology’s failure to distinguish between government and society is a particularly troubling feature of this young science. A crucial question, one which I can raise but not answer, is whether this limitation is inherent to the discipline or whether positive psychology can deal in a more sophisticated way with the corrosive nature of political power as articulated both by faculty psychology and classical liberalism. The dual concerns of the distinction between government and society and the corrosive nature of political power are perhaps most succinctly addressed in a passage from Thomas Paine that Eicholz quotes, which

is so important that it bears repeating: “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.”

One of the distinguishing features of classical liberal thought, one that clearly distinguishes it from the Aristotelian perspective, is its emphasis on the corrosive nature of political power. The best-known statement of this view is Lord Acton’s aphorism, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” (Dalberg-Acton 1986, 383). Although this view is axiomatic for some, it doesn’t explain the nature of this corruption. For that reason I prefer the formulation found in *Cato’s Letters*: “What is government, but a trust committed by all, or the most, to one, or a few, who are to attend upon the affairs of all, that every one may, with the more security, attend upon his own? A great and honourable trust; but too seldom honourably executed; those who possess it having it often more at heart to increase their power, than to make it useful; and to be terrible, rather than beneficent. It is therefore a trust, which ought to be bounded with many and strong restraints, because power renders men *wanton*, insolent to others, and fond of themselves” (Trenchard and Gordon 1995, 38).

The Role of Associations

Eicholz offers a sharp critique of John McKnight’s “twenty-first century map for healthy communities and families” (McKnight 1996). Although McKnight is not a positive psychologist (he is a professor of education and social policy and specializes in community development), his view of healthy communities and families is a concern shared with positive psychology. His article is worth looking at briefly because it illustrates so well the failure to distinguish between society and government that we have been discussing. McKnight distinguishes between systems and associations. Systems are hierarchical bureaucracies designed to provide mass distribution of services or products, whereas associations are “small self-appointed groups [which] solve problems, create new approaches to production and celebrate the local society” (4-5). McKnight correctly points to Alexis de Tocqueville’s discussion in *Democracy in America* as foundational in understanding the nature and importance of associations. At first glance it appears that associations and systems have nothing in common, yet for McKnight they share a crucial common characteristic: the association “is also a tool, like systems, designed to perform vital functions” (6).

McKnight's discussion of associations raises two questions that must be addressed. First, if associations are tools, who holds them, and to whom do they belong? Second, does McKnight believe that these associations have any value beyond their functional utility? McKnight never directly answers the first question, but the context in which he places this discussion suggests that the hand which grasps the tool is government. His concerns are directed toward "policies and programs," "current policy making," "current social policymakers," and "a legislative and planning focus" (McKnight 1996, 1, 22). There is a tension in McKnight's discussion, however, that allows us to question the legitimacy of the view that associations are tools of government. Note in the passage quoted above that associations are "self-appointed groups" that come together to solve problems—they are not the creatures of government either in their founding or in their direction of action. It is fair to say, however, that governments have been unsuccessfully attempting to co-opt them since their first spontaneous appearance on the American scene.

The answer to my second question proves to be a bit surprising, given that McKnight begins his discussion of associations by reflecting on Tocqueville, who found in America's vast associational energy the vital heart of our public life and a primary defense against the reduction of all social power to political power. An early remark of McKnight's even sounds Tocquevillean in nature—the "community of associations" we find in America "is an informal network of groups of citizens creating and maintaining the center of society" (1996, 6). His conclusion, however, is anything but Tocquevillean, for he writes, "The associational community, like systems, is a means—a tool. It has no inherent values" (24). McKnight's final claim is ambiguous—does he mean that associations have only instrumental, but no intrinsic, value, or does he mean that there are no inherent values that associations by their very nature must seek to achieve? I think that he means both of these things. Tocqueville and the twentieth century political philosopher Michael Oakeshott would agree with the second claim and disagree with the first. Tocqueville briefly documents the tremendous diversity of interests towards which associations direct their energy (Tocqueville 2000, 489-492), while Oakeshott understands that "enterprise associations" will pursue varied objectives (Oakeshott 1975, 114-18, 315-16).

After McKnight argues that associational community "has no inherent values" he draws a startling conclusion: "Therefore, as we have seen the Nazis turn systems to their evil purposes, we have seen in Bosnia and Burundi that

local communities and their associations can be turned to evil purposes. The critical issue is the continuing struggle for a culture of civility” (1996, 24). McKnight never asks the question of who or what turned systems and associations to evil purposes, but the answer is that this was done by governments, quasi-governments, or by political parties or factions seeking to gain control of governments. An equally legitimate conclusion to be drawn from McKnight’s reference to the Nazis, Bosnia, and Burundi would be to agree with Lord Acton that “power tends to corrupt” and that we should be wary of placing too much power into the hands of any man, group, or institution.

How can McKnight maintain that “the associational community ... is *merely* [my addition] a tool” and simultaneously that this community is actively “creating and maintaining the center of society”? My brief answer is that McKnight is stuck within the model of Aristotle’s polis that I have discussed above. Even though he writes that associations are “self-appointed,” he doesn’t really believe such a thing possible. In his view, all human action must spring from some legitimate source (read “political authority”), and “self-appointed groups” therefore have no status other than being a tool for policymakers. Here let me suggest that Aristotle himself understood that there were forms of political organization other than the polis, and that we need to consider what Aristotle calls “alliances” as the appropriate model for contemporary social and political arrangements. While the polis is interested in homogeneity and in promoting virtue, alliances are concerned with exchange, mutual utility, and the protection of rights. In an alliance “the law becomes a treaty and a guarantor . . . of each other’s rights” (Aristotle 1997, 93). McKnight says that he is offering a “different map, a paradigm shift” (McKnight 1996, 20) in our understanding of healthy communities, but there is no real paradigm shift in his suggestions. All of the models in McKnight’s world are variations of top-down planning in which there is no independent sector and all social institutions are tools for the policymaker.

The Nature of Happiness

The relationship between individual happiness and the happiness of the community has been a matter of discussion since before the time of Plato, but I will illustrate the problem with a passage from *The Republic*. Socrates has just been describing the arrangements he believes will be appropriate for the city’s guardians, and he is interrupted by Adeimantus. Adeimantus challenges,

“What would your apology be, Socrates, if someone were to say that you’re hardly making these men happy. . . .” Socrates replies, “In founding the city we are not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group among us but, as far as possible, that of the city as a whole” (Plato 1968, 97, 98). Socrates argues that happiness in the city will be the result of the proper ordering of its component classes, just as individual happiness is dependent on the proper ordering of the soul. According to Socrates, the city and the individual parallel each other. The individual is happy when reason rules appetite, with the assistance of passion, while the city will be happy when the masses, driven by desire, are ruled by wisdom in the form of the philosopher king, aided by guardians who are spirited and warlike men. Interestingly, classical liberalism seems to agree with Socrates that the happiness of the community is found in its formal structure, while it disagrees that there is one model of individual excellence and happiness.

Cato’s Letters capture the liberal view that public happiness is the result of limited government which allows for maximum personal freedom. As stated in letter 62, “all civil happiness and prosperity is inseparable from liberty; and . . . tyranny cannot make men, or societies of men, *happy*, without departing from its nature, and giving them privileges inconsistent with tyranny. And here is an unanswerable argument, amongst a thousand others, against absolute power in a single man. Nor is there one way in the world to give happiness to communities, but by sheltering them under certain and express laws, irrevocable at any man’s pleasure” (Trenchard and Gordon 1995, 433).

Richard Gunderman’s meditation on happiness and human flourishing does not provide a critique of positive psychology or stake out a position in contemporary academic arguments. Instead, Gunderman extends an invitation to engage in self-reflection on the place of happiness in the life one lives on a daily basis. This invitation, make no mistake, is a personal invitation—no one can engage in self-reflection for another. (I am reminded of Woody Allen’s joke that he was expelled from metaphysics class when caught staring into the soul of another student.) Rather than burden the reader with my own self-reflections, however, I will simply note some of the lines of thought and add a few footnotes generated by Gunderman’s provocations.

I begin with two very different thinkers, the economist Frank Knight and the theologian Paul Tillich. Knight’s characterization of man as the “discontented animal” (Knight 1982, 361) is as succinct and accurate a

definition of man as I have ever run across. For Knight this discontentment is grounded in envy or the belief that someone is putting something over on one. In “We Live in Two Orders,” Tillich offers a different perspective on the same human phenomenon. Tillich reflects on the paradoxical existence of man—man lives both in the historical order and in the eternal order—which leads to dissatisfaction (1949, 22-23). On the one hand, man is finite in that he has limited ability, limited time in which to achieve, and limited vision; on the other, man is infinite at least to the extent that he can imagine a perfection far beyond his ability to achieve it, and that he can imagine an eternal city that will outlast his few years and which, unlike the cities constructed by his own hands, will not eventually crumble into dust. It seems to me that the tensions of such an existence—the ability to imagine perfection but not to achieve it—lead first toward the discontentment so important to Knight’s understanding of human behavior and then beyond toward idolatry, which is the substitution of some material object for the transcendent.

Gunderman is right in arguing that “Madison Avenue misleads us” and that “Happiness is not a commodity that we can buy off the shelf” (Gunderman 2008, 50). The root problem, of course, is not the deception of Madison Avenue but the self-deception that we practice daily and have practiced as a species since Aaron oversaw the molding of the Golden Calf (and beyond that to even earlier periods of human existence). The psychologist Erich Fromm analyzes this self-deception in many areas of life in *To Be or To Have?* Most of Fromm’s examples involve substituting something material for something intangible. We might wish to be educated, but many will settle for having a diploma or certificate. We may wish to be parents, but many settle for merely having children. We may wish to be honorable or just, but we may settle for a reputation.

This brings me to another important point in Gunderman’s meditation: “In the moral sphere . . . there are no free riders. Here we cannot reap the benefits of apparent goodness without actually striving to be good ourselves” (2008, 53). While we may settle for the reputation for being just while acting unjustly, this may be a precarious balance that cannot be maintained for long. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Adam Smith argues, “Man naturally desires, not only to be loved, but to be lovely; or to be that thing which is the natural and proper object of love” (1982, 113). This is the opening sentence in a chapter entitled “Of the love of Praise, and of that of Praise-worthiness; and of the dread of Blame, and of that of Blame-Worthiness.” Smith’s argument is that we

can distinguish between having a reputation for being virtuous and actually being virtuous, and that the dynamic of our inner life will not allow us to be satisfied with merely having the reputation. Having somehow achieved an undeserved positive reputation can either make us or break us—it can be the goad that forces us to strive to be the person people already think that we are, or it can lead us to further deception and dissimulation.

Happiness as a “Collateral Benefit”

Gunderman asks, “Is happiness directly attainable?” (Gunderman 2008, 50). It strikes me that the single-minded “pursuit of happiness” will almost guarantee an unhappy life, in part because such a pursuit suggests a confusion of the material and the non-material (having/being), and in part because Frank Knight is right in saying men are naturally dissatisfied with their condition, whatever that condition might be. Unfortunately, in this age we are all acquainted with the notion of “collateral damage”—people who are not targeted but are injured because of their proximity to some police or military action. Perhaps we need a positive parallel of “collateral benefit”—good unintended consequences generated by the pursuit of other objects. The answer to Gunderman’s question seems to be that individual happiness is a “collateral benefit” that comes when one is pursuing something else—the life of excellence or of justice, for example.

This is perhaps a moral that can be drawn from the encounter between Croesus and Solon as related by Herodotus. The wealthy and powerful Croesus wants the wise Solon to tell him who the happiest man in the world is, believing that Solon will tell him that it is Croesus himself. Perhaps Croesus thinks he is the happiest man in the world, yet for his complete happiness he seems to need Solon’s confirmation. He is disappointed when Solon names three others, all of whom are dead. When pressed by Croesus, Solon answers, “Now, I can see that you are extremely rich and that you rule over large numbers of people, but I won’t be in a position to say what you’re asking me to say about you until I find out that you died well” (Herodotus 1998, 15). As is often the case, however, old tales tend to be ambiguous. Solon reflects on the role of the gods in human life and tells Croesus that in judging a man’s life, “until he is dead, you had better refrain from calling him happy, and just call him fortunate” (16).

In conclusion I will briefly return to the field of positive psychology. Throughout this review I have noted a number of its strengths and

weaknesses. Primary among its strengths is its effort at enlarging the discipline of psychology beyond the study of dysfunction and disease. As put by Shelly Gable and Jonathan Haidt, “the aim of positive psychology is to study the other side of the coin—the ways that people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions—thereby addressing the full spectrum of human experience” (2005, 105). An additional strength is positive psychology’s attention to positive traits and the importance of character and virtue.

The field of positive psychology is relatively new, and some of its deficiencies may be corrected over time as it develops. One issue of importance, which I haven’t touched on, is the need to clearly distinguish factual or descriptive statements from normative or moral judgments—the traditional problem of distinguishing the “is” from the “ought.” That one may achieve a state of bliss either through meditation or consumption of drugs may be a factual statement, but that fact in itself does not argue for the moral equivalence of these two alternatives (see Jonathan Haidt quotation at Eichholz 2008, 18). The major deficiency that has been addressed by a number of contributors to this symposium is positive psychology’s inadequate understanding of the political and social spheres of life, and its apparent reduction of all communal and social experience to the political. One hopes that, as the field develops, it will begin to work out as complete a view of social life as it has already started to do at the level of the individual.

Finally, I must express my surprise that positive psychologists seem to have totally ignored the work of Robert Coles (Coles 2003). I will not speculate on the reasons for this, but I will suggest that anyone interested in understanding how healthy, productive, and well-adjusted humans develop, and anyone interested in human resilience, must come to grips with his work. Positive psychology is interested in positive community as the foundation for positive individuals, but Coles has documented the amazing ability of children to survive in the worst of social circumstances and become healthy and creative adults. Resilience may turn out to be at least as important a focus of psychological understanding as happiness.

Happiness has been a part of the human conversation from time immemorial. I think it is fair to say about happiness, in the words of the spiritual, “everybody talkin’ ’bout heaven ain’t goin’ there.” That, however, won’t keep us from talking, dreaming, and striving to achieve happiness.

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