INVESTING IN HAPPINESS:

PHILANTHROPY AS A GUIDE TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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After a century in which behaviorism and Freudianism were the dominant schools of psychological thought, positive psychology is a breath of fresh air. Behaviorism assumed that humans were reactive mechanisms whose internal mental, emotional, and spiritual lives could be dismissed as mere epiphenomena. Freudianism reduced the complexity of human motivation to a few fundamental "drives" associated with sex and aggression, and dismissed our understandings of our motives as delusions. Both regarded as irrelevant nonsense any view of human beings as intentional agents.

Positive psychology, by contrast, has rediscovered that our experience as intentional beings is intimately related to our ability to experience happiness. It has thereby validated many traditional notions of well-being, including the importance of meaning and purpose in our lives and the importance of virtue, character, and transcendent belief. After a hundred years in which the field of academic psychology promulgated paradigms alien to the experience of our lives as human beings and hostile to the world's wisdom traditions, it is gratifying that academic psychology has finally come around to a perspective that is more attuned to our lives as we experience them.

However, although positive psychology validates much of human experience and traditional beliefs, it includes a highly questionable assumption: that through the experimental method it has derived evidence-based findings that afford it an expertise on the issue of happiness that is superior to what is available to people through their own experience. Given the historical biases of social science (against common sense, wisdom and classical liberalism), philanthropists interested in investing in endeavors they think will increase human happiness ought to examine carefully the assumptions of positive psychology as a social science, to ensure that their investments bring a positive return.

Positive Psychology and Traditional Notions of Virtue and Character

Martin Seligman, the founding father of positive psychology, explains in *Authentic Happiness* that positive psychology has three pillars:

"First is the study of positive emotion. Second is the study of the positive traits, foremost among them the strengths and virtues, but also the "abilities" such as intelligence and athleticism. Third is the study of positive institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and free inquiry, that support the virtues, which in turn support the positive emotions" (2002, xi).

He goes on to assert that "in times of trouble" the positive emotions and the virtues prevent the most extreme experiences of unhappiness. Most people are happy sometimes, and positive psychology aspires to explain why some more consistently experience happiness more than others. It turns out that happier people more consistently focus on their more positive emotions and have character virtues that support them when times are tough, according to positive psychology.

Making reference to Abraham Lincoln's appeal to the "better angels" of human nature, Seligman acknowledges the role of character and virtue in nineteenth century America: "These words, 'the better angels of our nature,' by Lincoln, exhibit several rock-bottom assumptions held by most educated minds of mid-nineteenth century America:

• That there is a human 'nature'
• That action proceeds from character
• That character comes in two forms, both equally fundamental—bad character and good or virtuous 'angelic' character

Because all of these assumptions have almost disappeared from the psychology of the 20th century, the story of their rise and fall is the backdrop for my renewing the notion of good character as a core assumption of Positive Psychology" (Seligman 2002, 126).

Seligman goes on to specify the intimate relationship between the rise of social science and the decline of a belief in virtue and character:

"By 1886, violent confrontations between labor (largely immigrant workers) and the enforcers of management were epidemic. . . . The 'obvious' explanations of bad behavior to the man in the street were entirely characterological. . . . Bad character caused bad actions, and

each person was responsible for his or her actions. . . . Theologians, philosophers, and social critics . . . suggested that the mission of preachers, professors, and pundits should change from pointing out how every person is responsible for his or her actions to finding out how their ranks were responsible for the many who were not. The dawn of the twentieth century thus witnessed the birth of a new scientific agenda in the great American universities: social science. Its goal was to explain the behavior (and misbehavior) of individuals as the result of not their character, but of large and toxic environmental forces beyond the control of mere individuals" (2002, 127).

It is helpful that Seligman so clearly acknowledges that opposition to character and personal responsibility was fundamental to the social scientific outlook from the start.

It is little remembered today that the genre of "self-help" was founded by Samuel Smiles with his book *Self Help* published in 1882. But Smiles' advice to individuals on how to cultivate their strengths and virtues so as to be happier and more successful came to be regarded as "reactionary" in the face of the new social sciences that were premised on the notion that individuals were not responsible for their fate. Had social science not been categorically opposed to the idea of personal responsibility, generations of parents, educators, journalists, and policymakers might have continued to develop and deepen the insights of Smiles and others. Of course, many did persist in doing so despite the almost unanimous opposition, neglect, and hostility of the social science community. But there is reason to believe that social science had some impact on the beliefs of the public in the twentieth century, and insofar as the discipline's impact on public beliefs was in the direction of undermining personal responsibility, that impact contradicted the more recent findings of positive psychology as well as common sense.

Positive Psychology and "The Study of Positive Institutions"

To return to the Seligman quotation above, "Positive psychology has three pillars. . . . Third is the study of positive institutions, such as democracy, strong families, and free inquiry, that support the virtues, which in turn support the positive emotions" (Seligman 2002, xi). Although positive psychology has made good strides in recovering attention to human nature and human character,

Seligman and others say less about the exact relationship between positive psychology and positive institutions. This is generally acknowledged to be the most underdeveloped aspect of positive psychology. Seligman, for example, provides extensive research on the ways that positive emotions and virtues contribute to happiness, but he provides no evidence that democracies and free inquiry actually contribute to happiness. In fact, there is much evidence, some of it cited by Seligman, that strong families contribute to happiness more than other social institutions do (Diener and Seligman 2002).

The inclusion of democracy and free inquiry as "positive institutions that support the virtues" seems more like boilerplate academic piety than evidence-based social science. The inclusion of free inquiry, in particular, is ironic insofar as there is evidence that religious belief and homogeneity of religious community contribute to happiness and well-being.[1] This does not mean that such communities are necessarily inimical to free inquiry, nor that free inquiry is necessarily inimical to happiness, but based on the evidence it might have been more natural to suggest that "strong families, religious belief, and religious homogeneity" are "positive institutions that support the virtues." Thus it turns out that "the study of positive institutions that support the virtues" amounts to the banality that strong families support the virtues, combined with reflexive but unproven praise for democracy and free inquiry.

Elsewhere we find that one of Seligman's goals is to create a positive alternative to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), that may then be used to design public school programs. Diagnoses based on the DSM carry significant legal authority in decisions made in courtrooms and by insurers, and have spilled over the boundaries between health care and education to influence public school authorities in the design and implementation of educational programs.

Seligman recounts the genesis of this research agenda at a weekend conference devoted to "sponsoring and disseminating some of the best positive interventions for youths." The project to create a positive alternative to DSM was first suggested by a comment at the retreat by Joe Conaty, the head of the U.S. Department of Education's half a billion dollar after-school education programs: "We can't intervene to improve the character of young people until we know more exactly what it is that we want to improve. First we need a classification scheme and a way of measuring character" (Seligman 2002).

Despite the lack of clarity about the relationship between positive psychology and positive institutions, the creation of a positive psychology DSM is an ambitious project that might have far-reaching implications for public policy and legal interventions into the family, the workplace, schools, and other institutions in our society.

Seligman's desire to reshape the public institutions that grew up in the twentieth century under behaviorism and Freudianism and the general hegemony of the turn-of-the-century social sciences reveals a characteristic social science blindness. In his search for "positive institutions that support the virtues," it seems not to have occurred to him that public schools may not be effective at supporting the virtues. Instead of rigorously examining and fundamentally questioning a broad array of institutions, positive psychology thus far has taken for granted mainstream institutions.

The Case for School Choice as an Application of Positive Psychology

In the absence of an external philanthropic nudge, social scientists are unlikely even to consider the hypothesis that school choice may be the policy option that most effectively fosters increased happiness in our society because only in private schools is it possible to create a coherent virtue culture for young people.

William Damon is a leading expert in the moral development of children. Because of the intimate role between moral development, character, virtue, relatedness, and well-being, Damon's work is often included in the literature of positive psychology. I once heard him give a talk to a group of educators about moral development, in which he pointed out that it was important for young people to belong to a community with a shared moral vision and in which they had close relationships to mentors who supported their participation in that shared moral community. During the Question and Answer after the talk, I said that in my experience as an educator it had proven easier to create the type of moral community specified by Damon in a private or charter school than in a public school. Before a room full of public school educators, he prevaricated, saying that although it was difficult to do so in a public school, we must try anyway. Afterwards, at the wine and cheese reception, I asked him again, and he acknowledged directly that, yes, it was easier to form a moral community at a private or charter school than in a conventional public school.

I began my career as an educator in Mortimer Adler's Paideia Program, in which we were attempting to create a sense of moral community in public schools based on a commitment to free inquiry. This experience made me acutely aware of the difficulties in creating a moral community in a public school. It also made me acutely aware that many parents, especially religious ones, regard free inquiry as a dangerous instrument that often undermines virtue and character. Having seen educators use Socratic inquiry irresponsibly, I would have to agree that it can be used to undermine respectful behavior. Although Socrates is a martyr to intellectuals everywhere, there are numerous parents today who would argue that Socratic questioning corrupts youth and undermines belief in the gods.

Despite these fears, we found that it is indeed possible to create a moral community founded on free inquiry seen as a virtue. I had studied at St. John's College, where there is an intense moral community focused on the Greek passion for pursuing ideals of the true, the good, and the beautiful by means of free inquiry. I attempted to replicate this experience of a coherent moral community in the programs I developed. After years of classroom work, my colleagues and I discovered that it was possible to cultivate new inquiry virtues in a particular classroom, but that it was difficult to do so if the teacher in the next period undermined those virtues.

In addition, it became clear that the program would work only if teachers elected to participate in it. When I first began training teachers in classroom Socratic inquiry, the programs involved schools at which philanthropists had donated funding for training, and the administrator had signed on to the program, but many rank and file teachers were indifferent or hostile to changing their way of teaching to an unfamiliar and more challenging approach. In addition, many teachers have seen wave after wave of school reform and are largely cynical about each new fad. Thus, wherever possible, we shifted to a "school within a school" model in which teachers self-selected into the program.

These programs were more effective at engaging students in authentic learning, but their long-term survival depended on the support of a sympathetic principal, district administrator, or school board member. One by one I saw successful programs, developed through years of effort, gradually dissolve after the key advocate left. This erosion of successful special public school programs

is in fact widespread. Deborah Meier, who won a MacArthur Genius Award for her work in creating Central Park East, a great inner-city school in Manhattan, has said that it is too painful to visit her old school because it has regressed back toward the norm (Levin 2006).

In *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, James Collins and Jerry Porras document the practices of a set of companies that have dramatically outperformed their peers over many decades. Their discovery is that these companies create a very strong internal culture that is independent of any particular leader. Such companies are rewarded with success in the marketplace—thus there are direct payoffs to the creation of a strong corporate culture. In addition, these companies reinforce their cultures through diverse policies, rhetoric, criteria for hiring and promotion, corporate symbols, celebrations, and other ways of communicating an integral commitment to a coherent vision, set of values, and culture (2004).

These widely embraced tools for corporate success are not available to public schools. The latter typically enroll students regardless of performance, and when their performance is evaluated by the state, it is typically based on test scores. Faculty are largely hired and promoted by means of formal criteria established by governments and union contracts. A superintendent's performance is evaluated by political popularity, and the school is evaluated based on compliance with state and federal regulations. A public school principal must satisfy the politically appointed superintendent, the media-sensitive state department of education, and legalistic federal mandates before satisfying the immediate "customers"—the parents and students. Thus educational leaders in government systems lack the autonomy necessary to create and cultivate a community of educators united by common moral commitments. The mechanisms of government control prevent the creation and deepening of virtue cultures for young people at public schools.

The charter school movement was founded in an attempt to free public school educators from some of these conflicting multiple layers of control and thereby encourage greater innovation. There is, to date, conflicting evidence on the extent to which charter schools result in improved academic performance, but there is unambiguous evidence that charter schools result in greater parental and student satisfaction and fewer disciplinary problems (see Imberman 2007; Gill et al. 2007). Given this suggestive evidence, one might

expect adherents of positive psychology to place structural reforms, such as charter schools and educational vouchers, on their list of "positive institutions that support the virtues." Unfortunately, like Damon when speaking to the public school teachers, if they believe that school choice could be a prerequisite for the creation of schools more closely resembling "positive institutions that support the virtues," they have been quiet about such beliefs. To his credit, Damon endorses charter schools in two of his books on adolescent moral development, but that endorsement has not been widely publicized.

Paul Tough, an editor at *The New York Times Magazine*, summarizes the evidence that charter schools provide a superior environment in which to instill the character virtues that lead to greater happiness and superior academic performance:

"[T]he last decade—and especially the last few years—has seen the creation of dozens, even hundreds, of schools across the country dedicated to . . . delivering consistently high results with a population that generally achieves consistently low results. The schools that have taken on this mission most aggressively tend to be charter schools— the publicly financed, privately run institutions that make up one of the most controversial educational experiments of our time. . . . [T]hey make a conscious effort to guide the behavior, and even the values, of their students by teaching what they call character. Using slogans, motivational posters, incentives, encouragements, and punishments, the schools direct students in everything from the principles of teamwork and the importance of an optimistic outlook to the nuts and bolts of how to sit in class, where to direct their eyes when a teacher is talking, and even how to nod appropriately" (2006).

David Levin, a founder of the KIPP Academy, the most successful of all charter school chains, and Dacia Toll, a founder of Amistad Academy, another successful charter school chain, both profiled in Tough's article, are explicitly implementing Seligman's ideas. One of Seligman's graduate students recently published a paper studying charter schools, in which she documents the importance of these efforts: "noncognitive' abilities like self-control, adaptability, patience, and openness—the kinds of qualities that middle-class parents pass on to their children every day, in all kinds of subtle and indirect ways—have a huge and measurable impact on a child's future success" (Tough 2006).

Tough also quotes Toll, who has rediscovered the nineteenth century idea of a work ethic: "I think we have to teach a work ethic in the same way we have to teach adding fractions with unlike denominators. But once children have got the work ethic and the commitment to others and to education down, it's actually pretty easy to teach them" (2006). While Toll deserves credit for stating this fact and successfully implementing a program based on these principles, some older readers might be forgiven for being somewhat nonplussed that such a statement qualifies as newsworthy, cutting-edge educational practice in 2006 (when the *New York Times Magazine* article was written). Pretty much all of our great-grandparents knew this.

Regardless of whether social scientists ultimately conclude that a movement toward charter schools and/or private schools is the most effective means of applying the insights of positive psychology, there is enough prima facie evidence that the thesis ought to be considered. Again, it is peculiar that Seligman lists "free inquiry" as an institution that supports the virtues (after all, Socrates was put to death for "corrupting the youth") while it never occurs to him that privately supplied education ought to be considered such an institution.

The Bias of Social Science Against Classical Liberalism

The bias of social science against classical liberalism is the greatest factor preventing obvious candidates for positive institutions, such as school choice, from being recognized as a policy implication of positive psychology. In the nineteenth century before the rise of the social sciences, classical liberal thinkers such as William Graham Sumner sought to explain the institutions that had produced the dramatically increasing standard of living taking place at the time: "Some men have been found to denounce and deride the modern system—what they call the capitalist system. The modern system is based on liberty, on contract, and on private property" (Sumner 1883, 64).

Sumner's defense of free institutions came as the emerging social sciences were launching their efforts to manage the complexities of modern life by influencing government, social, and educational policies and institutions. A key organizing concept for many in this new academic professional class was social control, a concept that would be pitted against traditional American concepts of liberty.

Only now are economists beginning to rediscover the importance of free

institutions. Compare, for example, Sumner's description of key institutional elements with that from Elhanan Helpman's recent survey *The Mystery of Economic Growth*, which reaches the following conclusion after 141 pages summarizing the current state of academic debate on economic development: "Although it has been established that property rights institutions, the rule of law, and constraints on the executive are important for growth, the exact ways in which they affect income per capita are not well understood" (2004, 141).

Cautiously, hesitantly, after 120 years during which academic opinion almost unanimously rejected "the modern system . . . based on liberty, on contract, and on private property," we have come full circle. Had Sumner's institutional insights been considered expert opinion throughout this period and successfully implemented in nations around the world, poverty could have been eliminated long ago.

Scholars who were not so dismissive of classical liberal principles in the twentieth century are now seeing their convictions validated. Milton Friedman, among others, attributed Hong Kong's remarkable economic success to the policies implemented by Sir John Cowperthwaite, a British civil servant who believed passionately in nineteenth century classical liberalism when he became the financial secretary of Hong Kong in 1961 (Friedman 2006). By 1964, Leonard Read was arguing that Hong Kong should be considered a model for economic development and the alleviation of poverty (Read 1964, ch. 13). In 1960, Hong Kong's GDP per capita was 28 percent of Great Britain's and 33 percent of Venezuela's (Friedman 1998; Dorn 1998, 171). Today it is about 110 percent of Great Britain's and 520 percent of Venezuela's, despite the latter's oil wealth, according to my calculations based on IMF PPP estimates. Cowperthwaite's attitude toward social science is telling: when Milton Friedman met him in 1963, Friedman asked about national statistics. Cowperthwaite replied, "If I let them compute those statistics, they'll want to use them for planning" (Friedman 1998).

Adam Smith had articulated the basic principles of economic development in 1776, and for the next hundred years economists and political philosophers elaborated Smithian economics. The United States and Great Britain became the first two nations on earth to raise the working class standard of living steadily, decade by decade, and their accomplishment was based on the twin pillars of free enterprise and personal responsibility.

As Seligman notes, there was indeed labor unrest, poverty, and squalor during this time of steady economic growth and spreading of wealth. Yet when academic social science originated, informed by the assumption that behavior was to be explained by "large and toxic environmental forces beyond the control of mere individuals," there was no body of evidence suggesting that any other economic system could raise living standards more effectively than free enterprise, nor was there any body of evidence showing that people were more likely to be happy or successful if they believed that their lives were dictated by large and toxic environmental forces.

Academic social science was founded in opposition to classical liberalism, and only after a hundred years has it been forced to acknowledge, in economics and positive psychology, that classical liberal insights seem to have been at least partly valid. Whatever modifications and concerns may have been legitimate in the face of late nineteenth century suffering and labor violence, any need for modifications of classical liberalism in no way justified a wholesale, century-long rejection of sound principles.

As philanthropic investments go, twentieth century social science may have been the worst one in history. Had academic social science maintained a commitment to classical liberal economics and the importance of personal responsibility, we might have avoided some portion of the 100 million deaths due to Marxism, the post-colonial poverty of the developing world (imagine if every post-colonial government had had an indigenous Cowperthwaite), and the massive unhappiness associated with the innumerable failures resulting from an educational world that for generations did not believe in cultivating responsibility or virtues. The scale of this tragedy and the responsibility of specific academics for leading us in this direction have yet to be documented.

The collapse of communism has taught us all that central planning does not work, but due to a misguided belief that "public education" is a necessary foundation for democracy, most social scientists still assume that "improving education" means improving government-run schools while retaining the system in which they lost their way. In most other fields, creative destruction through new enterprise creation is an accepted fact. In the 1970s, for example, Wang, DEC, Cray, and IBM were leading names in the computer industry. Today only IBM remains as an influential corporate presence, and even there it is more of a service provider than a manufacturer of business machines. Similarly, KIPP

academies and other charter school chains ought to be free to expand to the point where they can put the public school system out of business if parents find they serve their children best, and new entrants into the market ought to be in the pipeline now that will later put KIPP and the current generation of charter school companies out of business. If Seligman's ideas are superior and do indeed achieve the desired results, then not only KIPP but other school chains will continue to implement them. If not, his ideas will gradually be placed in the dustbin of history.

Physicists and engineers anticipate a world of constantly changing and developing technology, but social scientists almost invariably aspire to influence policy instead of work to create a better product or service. Seligman, to his credit, is very much an entrepreneur who has developed potentially useful knowledge and products, but he has not yet envisioned a dynamic market in education in which his ideas (and better ones) are rapidly brought within reach of millions of young people.

Given modern academia's bigotry against classical liberalism, philanthropists must take the leadership in guiding research to include possibilities beyond the ken of most of those currently in the academy. These academicians may be intelligent, well-intentioned, and highly regarded experts in their field, but they are too often blinded by professional assumptions that have prevented them and their predecessors from seeing the obvious for a hundred years. It is a blessing that the obvious, in economics and psychology, is beginning to be seen again in the halls of academe. Philanthropists today must understand, however, that knowledge does not necessarily result in good judgment. We must not let another hundred years of bad social science impoverish generations of children. Hence our best course today is to try to help positive psychology come alongside and complement the knowledge already embedded in human experience and the best traditions of free societies.

NOTES

1 For instance, a 2005 Pew Charitable Trust Survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,014 adults found 46 percent of those who worship weekly or more were "very happy," compared with 26 percent of those who attend seldom or never (Taylor, Funk, and Craighill 2006). The oft-cited Diener and Seligman study, by contrast, found no correlation between "very happy people" and participation in religious activities— among a sample of 222 college undergraduates (Diener and Seligman 2002). For research on religious homogeneity and suicide rates, see Ellison, Burr, and McCall 1997, 273-299.

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