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## Symposium:

# Is it true what they say about positive psychology?

A spectre is haunting the social-science world – the spectre of positive psychology. Briefly identifiable as ‘the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between’ (Peterson, 2006, p. 4), this spectre was allegedly conjured up in a conversation between psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman during a holiday of snorkelling and margaritas-drinking in the winter of 1997 (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Despite its inconspicuous beginnings, recent years have witnessed an exponential growth in positive psychology’s output and influence, a growth that amazes even its most ardent supporters. The movement has drawn hundreds of millions of dollars in research grants, and an international conference on its credos in the summer of 2009 attracted 1,500 delegates from 52 countries who treated the positive-psychology gurus like celebrities, seeking their autographs as well as hanging enthusiastically to every word emanating from their lips. Moreover, at respected universities such as Harvard, the positive psychology class has become the most popular one on offer. In an age of increasing academic fragmentation, where postmodernists had told us that Leviathans were out and Lilliputians in, there is suddenly a strong sense of a major social-scientific movement in the making, with its own steering committee and manifesto. For some, it is almost like the ultra-modernist 1960’s all over again.

According to one of its two founding fathers, Martin Seligman, the movement of positive psychology has *three pillars*: First is the study of positive emotions; second the study of positive traits, in particular personal virtues and strengths; third the study of positive institutions, such as democracy, strong families and free public inquiry (Seligman, 2002, p. xi). The point of departure away from mainstream ‘business-as-usual’ psychology lies in the claim that such psychology has succumbed to an exclusive focus on *pathology* (what goes wrong in our lives, and how that damage can be repaired) instead of *apithology* (what goes right in our lives, and how positive qualities and experiences can be enhanced). The main aim of positive psychology is to buck this trend and – through ‘massive research on human strengths and virtues’– increase our knowledge of ‘what makes life worth living’ (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, pp. 5, 8). More specifically, positive psychology is the study of human happiness: the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions. It is worth mentioning the predilection of leading positive psychologists for Aristotle’s ideas on human flourishing, and their

endeavour to forge bonds with moral and educational outlooks anchored in his works, such as contemporary virtue ethics (see, e.g., Peterson & Seligman's claim that their project is the 'social science equivalent of virtue ethics', 2004, p. 89).

Positive psychology has educational ramifications at almost all levels of engagement. Indeed, it seems to us that educationists who choose to turn a blind eye to this movement do so at their peril. There have been thinkers at different times and of diffuse theoretical orientations (ranging from Aristotle to Noddings, 2003, and Brighouse, 2006) who have considered happiness in various guises to be the fundamental aim – or at least one of the fundamental aims – of education; for those who concur, positive psychology will be an object of immediate, albeit perhaps indirect, interest. More directly, insofar as positive psychology is gradually establishing itself as an independent approach to education (*qua* 'positive education') with suggestions for practical classroom interventions, some of which are even being incorporated via 'happiness lessons' in schools (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich & Linkins, 2009), the movement has firmly entered the educational arena and needs to be assessed there on its own merits.

In a recent issue of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, four educational philosophers harshly criticise educational ideas typically associated with positive psychology (Cigman, 2008; Miller, 2008; Smith, 2008; Suissa, 2008). Is its notion of happiness, for example, unsophisticated and un-Aristotelian, as well as its celebration of positive emotions and its call for the educational enhancement of a few 'signature' virtues? Does positive psychology contribute to the undue psychologisation of education? This is just a brief sampling of the questions that crowd in and will be dealt with in this symposium.

More specifically, in his presentation **Presenter 1** subjects to scrutiny positive psychology's general doctrines on happiness and virtue. He argues that positive psychology suffers from internal divisions (such as divergent views of its proponents on what happiness is), ambiguities (for example, regarding the possibility of non-virtuous happiness), and at least one serious misconception (the assumption that any view which makes overall evaluative judgments thereby prescribes). Nevertheless, many of the charges commonly urged against the movement, in particular by Aristotelian theorists, do not stick as they are directed at older versions of positive psychology, prior to Peterson & Seligman's 2004 path-breaking virtue-ethical turn.

**Presenter 2** explores the concept of happiness/well-being in three domains: a) positive psychology, b) Aristotelian ethics and c) literature (in particular the writing of George Eliot). She takes issue with **Presenter 1's** suggestion that positive psychology has taken a 'path-breaking virtue-ethical turn' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and demonstrates the error of associating

Seligman et al with Aristotle by examining some positive psychology writing. She argues that the language of positive psychology reveals an incoherent level of generality, a peculiarly modern obsession with bullet-pointed lists, and a tolerance of banality. It bypasses the intimate contexts that are essential for Aristotelian moral education, as well as the rich poetic meanings of great literature. A passage by George Eliot shows that literature, rather than positive psychology, has the power to articulate the complex relations between the particular and the general that lie at the heart of the Aristotelian quest for a good life (see Williams, 1985, chapter 1).

**Presenter 3's** contribution broadens the view by considering the methodological question how educational philosophy should handle its responsibility to react to 'junk educational science'. Taking the articles on positive psychology in the *JOPE* as source material, he proposes a catalogue of five typical postures: (i) ignore it; (ii) change the subject; (iii) complain and trivialise; (iv) criticise unsound applications of basic psychological research; and (v) criticise unsound conceptualizations of core constructs (e.g., 'happiness', 'virtue', 'positive emotions'). He concludes by pleading to take the fight to the enemy. Philosophy's prospects for advancing the cause of the responsible application of educational science will improve when educational philosophers engage directly with the enthusiasts for junk educational science, in publications they read, using language they understand, and by proposing informed and realistic correctives.

**Presenter 4** finally addresses **Presenter 3's** plea to 'take the fight to the enemy'. In her contribution, she defends the view that to go down this route is to concede victory to the very thinkers and practitioners we are critiquing, for it implies that there is such thing as 'good educational science'. While there is, no doubt, good and bad science, and some of this will and should play a part in educational research, she cannot make sense of the term 'educational science'. Questions about what education is for, and what matters, in our own lives and in the lives we want for the children we educate – are not, and cannot be, empirical questions, and it is precisely in implying that they are that thinkers like Seligman distort discussions about education. She approaches this discussion through a critical exploration of the differences between the educational approach promoted by leading positive psychologists, and that of some well-known educational theorists who advocate 'happiness' as an educational aim.

The presentations will be relatively short to allow for more exchanges of opinion between the presenters and with the audience.

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