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Positive Psychology: Historical, Philosophical, and Epistemological Perspectives

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This article describes underlying philosophical and historical assumptions of positive psychology. The metatheoretical positions are explored because it is mainly on this level of scientific activity that positive psychology contributes to a reorientation.



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In science and scientific work, and, therefore, for positive psychology, it is important to reflect on historical roots. There are at least three reasons for such analyses:

- 1. Historical analyses of roots and forerunners contribute to make visible the a priori, taken-for-granted suppositions, premises, or positions on human nature on which the field or tradition rests.
- 2. Historical analyses can explicate on which philosophical and philosophy of science traditions mainstream psychology builds and, thus, which perspectives and bases of knowledge contemporary psychology neglects or even excludes.
- 3. Looking back on historical roots, especially in a phase of reestablishing and reformulating themes and perspectives in psychology, may allow us to avoid reinventing the wheel: Most basic questions about human nature have indeed been raised in philosophy and psychology. It is, therefore, fruitful to identify and examine historical roots to see how various questions about core human nature have been formulated and discussed. (We use the concept *human nature* in this analysis because insofar as debates take place concerning underlying axioms and assumptions in mainstream psychology today, it is *human nature* that grasps and delimits the substantial core of these debates; see Gergen, 1982; Wrightsman, 1992).

The philosopher of science Mendelsohn (1977, p. 3) maintains: «Science is an activity of human beings acting and interacting, thus a social activity». As a consequence, Mendelsohn emphasizes:

«Scientific knowledge is therefore fundamentally social knowledge. As a social activity, science is clearly a product of history and of processes that occurred in time and in place and involved

human actors. These actors had lives not only in science, but in the wider societies of which they were members». (p. 4)



However, because psychology's subjects are historically anchored beings who are formed by their own times in quite another way compared to most other sciences' objects of study, psychology as a science becomes especially historically situated and formed by its (social) times (Allport, 1954; Gergen, 1973, 1985). Further, because the subject and the researchers themselves are always historically situated and formed by their own times' views on humanity and ways of viewing the world (*weltanschauung*), it is critically decisive for positive psychology's self-understanding to reflect on and analyze its historical and philosophical roots. Martin and Sugarman (2001, p. 370) formulate the historically situated nature of a priori assumptions more precisely: «because people are embedded inextricably within the world that they are compelled to make use of those assumptions, preconceptions, meanings, and prejudices provided by their historical, sociocultural contexts ...».

Our purpose is to describe some of the underlying philosophical and historical assumptions and forerunners of positive psychology. We do this by exploring roots of the metatheoretical positions developed and/or revitalized by positive psychology because it is mainly on this level of scientific activity, the meta-theoretical level, that positive psychology contributes to a reorientation. On other levels, positive psychology is, as is shown, more in line with mainstream psychology. Thus, we are undertaking an analysis of what the philosopher Lakatos (1970) terms the *hard core of science*, that is, scientific disciplines' or traditions' metatheories or the a priori basic assumptions. Analyses on this level constitute a most important and necessary task of scientific research.

A Revitalization of Aristotelian Philosophy

In his famous review of the history of social psychology, Gordon Allport (1954, p. 6) claimed: «one thing is certain: Platonic and Aristotelian strands of thought are found in all western theory, past and present». In fact, 50 years in advance, Allport was right, also, about positive psychology's philosophical roots: The Aristotelian tradition is a core root of positive psychology. Positive psychology concentrates on positive experiences and positive character or virtues. Hence, positive psychology strongly associates itself with the Aristotelian model of human nature. However, it is obvious that the ancient Greek philosophers formulated their frames of understanding of the human individual in a totally different social and material situation, without today's basic conditions



characterized by threatening environmental pollution and a globalization that affects and changes every local culture (Arnett, 2002). Thus, parts of the basis of psychology's approaches to human beings must necessarily be formulated or reformulated as to contemporarily given conditions. Positive psychology is indeed well under way with this task (see Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). But even though positive psychology must shape its approaches and research questions based on human life situations and conditions of today, it is, as now underlined, necessary to inquire into historical roots and forerunners. Such exposure is especially important because psychology as a science has a long past, but a short history (Allport, 1954; Farr, 1996).

The Aristotelian tradition is a core root of positive psychology

We, therefore, now trace positive psychology's central roots, in particular, the Aristotelian frame of reference. At the same time, we point out the state of today's mainstream psychology to show why positive psychology is needed as a corrective.

From a Pathology-Oriented Understanding to a Perspective of Growth and Positive Development

Foucault (1972, 1980), a key postmodern philosopher, argues that science in different time periods develops what we might term *regimes of truth* about human nature. Foucault's (1973) works include critical analyses of how today's medical conceptual frameworks define and determine modes of human thought. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) also maintain that contemporary psychology gives priority to a conception of human beings that to too great a degree is based on pathology, faults, and dysfunctions, that is, a medical-oriented psychology. Basic assumptions other than those that focus on lacks, dysfunctions and crises have been given little possibility to direct and form contemporary (clinical) research. The ideology of illness is, thus, a priori given priority in today's psychology (Maddux, 2002; see also Maddux, Snyder, & Lopez this volume). Seligman (2002, p. 21) also quotes the critical psychiatrist Thomas Szasz for having said: «Psychology is the racket that imitates the racket called psychiatry». Positive psychology attempts to be an important corrective and demands of predominant mainstream psychology not to continue to marginalize or exclude, but bring in again and revitalize the positive aspects of human nature: *positive subjective experiences*, *positive individual traits*, and *civic virtues* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Rather than taking

the medical-oriented model as given, the human being should, as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi maintain, be conceptualized and understood as a being with inherent potentials for developing positive character traits or virtues. This idea is the core of the actualizing tendency as described by Rogers (e.g., 1959) and self-actualization as described by Maslow (e.g., 1968).



For positive psychology, the concept of *good character* thus becomes the central concept. Referring explicitly to Abraham Lincoln's historical presidential inauguration speech with its oratorical expression, «the better angels of our nature,» Seligman (2002, p. 125) formulates what may be termed the basic assumptions of positive psychology:

- There is a human «nature».
- Action proceeds from character.
- Character comes in two forms, both equally fundamental – bad character and good, virtuous (angelic) character.

Further, Seligman (2002, p. 125) states: «Because all of these assumptions have almost disappeared from the psychology of the twentieth 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 (p. 128) also maintains: «Any science that does not use character as a basic idea (or at least explain character and choice away successfully) will never be accepted as a useful account of human behavior». At the same time, Seligman's point of view is that the individual has the capacity for both good and evil: «evolution has selected both sorts of traits, and any number of niches support morality, cooperation, altruism, and goodness, just as any number support murder, theft, self-seeking, and badness» (p. 211).

Thus, the major distinction between mainstream psychology and positive psychology is that mainstream psychology gives priority to negative behavior and various forms of dysfunctions. Positive psychology, on the other hand, concentrates on positive experiences and positive character or virtues. Positive psychology is thus articulating the presumptions of the Aristotelian approach to human nature and development. This includes the view of the good person; the idea of the individual with a positive character, strengths, and given virtues; and the idea of the basic distinction between «man as he happens to be» and «man as he could be if he realized his essential nature» (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 52). This approach focusing on the positive human being is consequently at odds with the

widely disseminated medical model with its purely negative frame of reference emphasizing failure, fault, illness, and classification of mental disorders.



The perspective of the individual as egoistic and directed by self-interest has been, and still is, the a priori position on core human nature in theoretical psychology

There are different approaches to positive psychology, but here we focus primarily on the approach put forward by Seligman (e.g., Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) as the foremost advocate of positive psychology. However, what is common to all approaches is this basic starting point: The human being has given potentials for a positive character or virtues. Or, as Sheldon and King (2001, p. 216) answer the question, What is positive psychology?: «Positive psychology revisits ‘the average person,’ with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving».

From the Individual as Asocial to the Individual as Socially and Ethically Responsible

The anthropologist Fiske (1992) is among those today concerned with analyzing fundamental starting points or cornerstones on which psychology and the social sciences rest. Fiske states concerning today's metatheoretical situation:

«From Freud to contemporary sociobiologists, from Skinner to social cognitionists, from Goffman to game theorists, the prevailing assumption in Western psychology has been that humans are by nature asocial individualists. Psychologists (and most other social scientists) usually explain social relationships as instrumental means to extrinsic, nonsocial ends, or as constraints on the satisfaction of individual desires». (p. 689)

Fiske ascertains that the predominant approach, in both psychology and the other social sciences, is the axiomatic postulate of human beings as asocial and egoistic individuals. A person is thus a priori defined as a self-interested being constantly preoccupied by consuming, using, or even exploiting the social, collective, and material world with the goal of gaining benefits or the best possible result, physically as well as psychologically. Nafstad (2002, 2003) and van Lange (2000) draw similar conclusions about the prioritizing of this idea about asocial human nature in mainstream psychology. Van Lange concludes:

«Within the domain of psychological theory, this assumption of rational self-interest is embedded in several key constructs, such as reinforcement, the pursuit of pleasure, utility

maximization (as developed in the context of behavioristic theory, including social learning theory), psychoanalytic theory, and theories of social decision making». (p. 299)



The individual is thus, as shown in contemporary psychology and the other social sciences, often a priori limited to a being constantly occupied by consuming the social and material world, with the goal of attaining the best possible situation for himself or herself, physically as well as psychologically. To keep order in this egoistically motivated consumption of the material and social world, society needs rules of morality. Without such moral rules or social norms, the individual as acting subject would not give any consideration to others as long as this might affect his or her own welfare and comfort negatively. It was the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) who was first to argue in favour of such a view of human nature. The Greek philosophy that dominated until then held the view that human beings were positive and fundamentally social by nature. Hobbes, however, launched the doctrine that maintained that human beings were basically bad, and not much could be done about it. Thus, morality cannot be anything but social contracts between self-seeking and ruthless human beings. Morality is, therefore, the same as obedience to law. This view of human nature, often termed *psychological egoism*, is a deeply negative view of human nature.

The doctrine opposed to Hobbes', the view that human beings are born as moral beings with a potential for goodness, was proposed by Rousseau (1712–1778). In psychology, Spencer (1871–1939) and McDougall (1820–1903) around the turn of the previous century also attempted to oppose the negative position of psychological egoism. McDougall (1908) argued that human beings have an empathic instinct. However, this view did not gain approval. Thus, as Fiske (1992) and van Lange (2000) concluded, the perspective of the individual as egoistic and directed by self-interest has been, and still is, the a priori position on core human nature in theoretical psychology. However, egoism or hedonism within psychology is more than a historic and culture-bound ideology or a major assumption of human nature. It is also modern psychology's predominant theory of human motivation. According to mainstream psychology, the individual has only one motivation system (Darley, 1991; Nafstad, 2002, 2003). *Self-interest* is regarded as the primary and true motivation, the one from which other motives, including moral and social ones, derive.

Positive psychology, however, rejects this predominant negative assumption of human motivational nature. Positive psychology takes as its starting point the individual as a socially and morally motivated being. Seligman (2002, p. 211) argues this position very strongly: «Current dogma may say that negative motivation is fundamental to human nature and positive motivation merely

derives from it, but I have not seen a shred of evidence that compels us to believe this». The task of psychology, therefore, must be also to describe and study positive individual and social character or virtues. As Seligman formulates this claim of an alternative presumption about the human being as a social and moral individual: «This unpacks the meaning of the claim that human beings are moral animals» (p. 133).

Positive psychology argues a Darwinian or evolutionary perspective

By taking the standpoint that humans are fundamentally social and moral, positive psychology places itself again in the midst of the Greek tradition and virtue ethics. In Greek philosophy, the individual was not considered to be such an enough-unto-itself-being – an individual concerned only with taking care of his or her own interests. Goods, resources, and advantages, Aristotle maintained (cf. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*; Barnes, 1984), were not mine and yours to such a great degree as is implied in our social time and culture. In the Aristotelian frame of reference, the person who acts egoistically is making a fundamental error, which in practice excludes the person from social relationships and, therefore, from the good life. Social relationships were concerned with sharing, giving, and taking care of each other (Vetlesen, 1994). For example, in the Aristotelian frame of understanding, a friendship would be a relationship of equality and mutuality, not a «one-way affair» (Vetlesen & Nortvedt, 2000) in which other people are considered to be a means for gaining something or becoming better off. As Vetlesen and Nortvedt described the social relationship of friendship in the Aristotelian approach: «friendship is inseparable from sharing with the other and reciprocating the feelings received» (p. 23). Aristotle thus maintained that individuals have characteristics that serve to preserve their own welfare, as well as *civic virtues* concerned with preserving the welfare of other(s). Central to Aristotle's philosophy of human nature is existence of a human core nature that entails positive relations and communal responsibility.

On Aristotelian Developmental Theory

The philosopher Wartofsky (1986) argued that on a superordinate level, we may distinguish among three main approaches to the individual and human development in Western science:

- 1. The Aristotelian or essential frame of understanding of the individual as a virtuous creature.
- 2. The Darwinian or evolutionary perspective.

– 3. The social and cultural-historical or Marxist perspective.



Each of these major perspectives represents different a priori basic assumptions about human nature and human development. They are not neglected doctrines today but instead represent vitally ongoing projects in current science.

Positive psychology argues a Darwinian or evolutionary perspective (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, as has been shown, positive psychology, with its fundamental idea of positive personal traits and individuals' desire to improve themselves as good people and to be living in truth according to their own potentials, represents an approach squarely in the Aristotelian tradition. Therefore, we next review some aspects of Aristotelian theory to explicate in more detail the philosophical roots and forerunners of positive psychology.

The Aristotelian model focuses on the virtuous individual and those inner traits, dispositions, and motives that qualify the individual to be virtuous. Moreover, in the Aristotelian model, the virtues of the soul are of two sorts: virtue of thought and virtue of character. «Virtue of thought arises and grows mostly from teaching; that is why it needs experience and time. Virtue of character (i.e., of *ethos*) results from habit (*ethos*)». Hence, it is also clear, as Aristotle states, «none of the virtues of character arise in us naturally» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, quoted in Morgan, 2001, pp. 205–206). The topic of intellectual activities, giftedness, creativity, and exceptional cognitive performance is central to positive psychology. But equally important, positive psychology stresses that there are virtues of a different kind: The concept of *good character* constitutes, as shown, one of the conceptual cornerstones of positive psychology. Moreover, for positive psychology, wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence are categories of virtue, which are postulated to be universal virtues (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2001; Seligman, 2002). Further, the individual normally undergoes continuous development or growth toward a realization of the given virtue potentials. Aristotle further maintains: «Since happiness is a certain sort of activity of the social in accord with complete virtue, we must examine virtue, for that will perhaps also be a way to study happiness better» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, quoted in Morgan, 2001, p. 204). It is also these ideas of a common core nature for all human beings and continuous development and realization of these human potentials as the source of well-being or happiness that are the central suppositions in positive psychology.

Moreover, in the Aristotelian model with its four causal factors (*causa materialis*, *causa formalis*, *causa efficiens*, and *causa finalis*), *growth* or *change* becomes a fundamental dimension of the object or phenomenon. The individual is thus understood as a being constantly driven forward by a dynamic principle, toward that which is better or more perfect. In Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle clarifies his perfectionism concept: «Every craft and every line of inquiry, and likewise every action and decision, seems to seek some good; that is why some people were right to describe the good as what everything seeks» (Morgan, 2001, p. 195). The good is what everything strives toward. Therefore, the Aristotelian frame of understanding is the perspective of a core human nature in which change(s) toward something good, better, or more perfect comprises a fundamental aspect. The individual is hence a being who introduces positive goals and values and strives to realize and reach them. The Aristotelian model then takes into account a teleological aspect: The individual as a being lives a life in which thoughts and ideas about future positive goals also influence the direction of actions here and now. The Aristotelian model introduces a distinction between the individual's *possibilities* or *potentials* on the one hand and the individual's factual characteristics or realization of these on the other hand. Aristotle's idea is, therefore, that we should habituate people to realization of their positive virtues in more perfect or complex ways, so that as a goal, moral and goodness become almost instinctive.

The individual is further, according to Aristotle, a being who is characterized by experiencing joy when exercising his or her inherent or acquired abilities and striving toward realizing them in ways that are experienced as better, more complex, or more perfect. As the philosopher Rawls (1976, p. 426) states on this positive or motivational dynamic principle that Aristotle formulated: «the Aristotelian Principle runs as follows: other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater the complexity». Thus, it is the process of exercising that is central in the Aristotelian frame of reference.

Positive psychology argues, as does Aristotle, that human beings enjoy the exercise of their capabilities. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 12) reformulate this Aristotelian view on exercise:

«Enjoyment, on the other hand, refers to the good feelings people experience when they break through the limits of homeostasis – when they do something that stretches them beyond what

they were – in an athletic event, an artistic performance, a good deed, a stimulating conversation.

Enjoyment, rather than pleasure, is what leads to personal growth and long term happiness ...»

If psychologists allow themselves to see the best as well as the worst in people, they may derive important new understanding of human nature and destiny

As shown, positive psychology clearly adopts and revitalizes an Aristotelian frame of reference and argues that the science of psychology should once again include assumptions about the good or essence-driven motivation and the good person within its hard-core basic assumptions of what a human being is. For positive psychology, in congruence with the Aristotelian model, goodness and morality thus do not come from outside the person. They do not arise from cultural sources nor from the moral rules of society, but from the potentials of the human being himself or herself. Positive psychology, therefore, in accordance with the Aristotelian root, takes as its point of departure that the human being is preprogrammed with a moral software of justice, courage, fairness, and so on. Aristotle, moreover, claims: «none of the virtues of character arise in us naturally ... Rather we are by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, quoted in Morgan, 2001, p. 206). As the philosopher Vetlesen (1994, p. 30) formulates this Aristotelian view of human nature: «It is only through such an ongoing process of education and habituation that the individual acquires the virtues ...» Thus, it is up to the individual to realize his or her full potential. In addition, positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) argues that strengths and virtues can be and must be cultivated. As Sheldon and King (2001, p. 217) advocated the position of positive psychology: «If psychologists allow themselves to see the best as well as the worst in people, they may derive important new understanding of human nature and destiny».

The Concept of Optimal or More Perfect Functioning in Modern Psychology

When an activity becomes cultivated, more complex, or optimal, what is implied? What does it mean to be stretching beyond what we are as psychological beings? What does it imply to flourish, for example, as a social being? In psychology, it was Gestalt psychology and Heinz Werner (1926/1957a) who first and most thoroughly inquired into this question. As Harvey (1997) summed up Gestalt psychology's idea that the individual continually strives to structure, to improve, or to be stretched: «A Gestalt, defined by Kohler as 'any segregated whole' (Kohler, 1929, p. 192) is rendered maximally distinctive through the processes of 'making precise' and 'leveling', terms used



originally by Wulf to describe transitions of memory toward the attainment of good form, a better and more harmonious fit with the whole (Petermann, 1932, p. 247)». Werner's (1926/1957a) idea was that it is possible to postulate on a very general level that all individuals as cognitive, affective, and social beings go through a common developmental process toward what is better, more distinct, precise, or perfect. The hallmark of this general developmental process is, Werner (1957b, p. 126) maintained: «that wherever development occurs it proceeds from a state of relative globality and lack of differentiation to a state of increasing differentiation, articulation, and hierarchic integration». Werner's developmental principle, his orthogenetic principle, moreover postulates that positive change must always be assumed to shift from a diffuse state toward constantly more differentiation, variation, progression, and hierarchic integration. The orthogenetic principle represents the most systematic abstract attempt in modern psychology to describe optimal functioning (Baldwin, 1967). According to this principle, when actions become differentiated, that is, when development takes place, there is, moreover, simultaneously a hierarchic integration: Some functions and goals come first and are superordinate compared to others. Development toward the more mature and perfect action was then for Werner (1926/1957a) a process that moves from the simple to the more distinct, complex, or perfect action. This entails further a process that moves from a diffuse to a more ordered system of action, from an indistinct to a more articulated system of action, from a rigid to a more flexible system of action, and from a labile to a more stable and consistent system of action.

Positive psychology also holds a fundamental assumption that living systems are self-organizing and oriented toward such an increasing differentiation and complexity. Deci and Ryan (2000, p. 230) maintained about this principle of more elaborate or complex functioning: «We suggest that it is inherent in people's nature to action in the direction of increased psychological differentiation and integration in terms of their capacities, their valuing processes, and their social connectedness». Or, as Massimini and Delle Fave (2000, p. 27) formulate this position of optimal functioning:

«... a person will search for increasingly complex challenges in the associated activities and will improve his or her skill accordingly. This process has been defined as *cultivation*; it fosters the growth of complexity not only in the performance of the flow activities but in individual behavior as a whole». (original italics)

Consequently, from Aristotle, via Gestalt psychology, to positive psychology, cultivation, complexity, and optimal functioning are central concepts: Living organisms are oriented toward increasing complexity.

The meaningful life is using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are



Further, in both the Aristotelian and the positive psychology approaches, the concept of optimal functioning is associated with the concept of *the good life, well-being, or happiness*. Aristotle's model of the good life, *eudaimonia*, is «the state of being well and doing well in being well» (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 148). Thus, for Aristotle, what constitutes the good for man «is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary and central part of such a life ...» (p. 149). In positive psychology, however, there are two different approaches to *the good life*: hedonic approaches and eudaimonic approaches. Seligman (2002, p. 289) states, on his view of the differences between these two approaches that we may: «divide research into hedonic approaches that concentrate on emotions, and eudaimonic approaches that concentrate on the fully functioning person» (cf. Rogers, 1963). Psychological hedonism, or the principle of utility, as the philosopher Bentham (1748–1832; see Bentham, 1789) calls it, is thus also part of positive psychology. However, far more positive psychologists take a eudaimonic approach to the good life (Seligman, 2002). The eudaimonic approach is concerned with the whole person and his or her optimal functioning and development in all areas of life. For instance, Ryan and Deci (2001) define the good life as «optimal functioning and experience» (p. 142) or as «the striving for perfection that represents the realization of one's true potential» (p. 144). Ryan and Deci thus maintain that the good life is well-being, which arises when the individual is functioning optimally. The good life is thus characterized by development from simple to more complex or optimal functioning. However, we next discuss how positive psychology has advanced the Aristotelian model on «the state of being well and doing well in being well».

The Eudaimonic Approach to the Good Life in Positive Psychology

Having the Aristotelian model of a developmental continuum from the simple to the more complex as his point of departure, Seligman (2002) postulates a model of four different forms of the good life. Seligman terms the simplest of the four forms of good life as a *pleasant life*. Seligman describes the pleasant life as, «a life that successfully pursues the positive emotions about the present, past and future» (2002, p. 262). The pleasant life is characterized by positive emotions. The pleasant life is similar to an understanding of the good life characterized by a hedonic approach to the issue of what

good life is. But in contrast to, for example, Diener's (2000) theory of subjective well-being, which focuses on positive emotions, absence of negative emotions and a judgment about an individual's life, Seligman focuses only on positive emotions in this form of the good life.



What Seligman (2002) terms *a good life* is more complex than the pleasant life. *A good life is*, according to Seligman: «using your signature strengths to obtain abundant gratification in the main realms of one's life». (p. 262). A good life is, therefore, a life in which you use your special character properties, «signature strengths, «in important areas of life to experience «gratifications». *Authenticity* is an important concept for Seligman in this connection. Authenticity describes the experience that comes from using your own special character properties to obtain «gratifications». An authentic life is thus a prerequisite for a good life. Therefore, Seligman's standpoint is that the good life is to be using your signature strengths, being true to your own character or fundamental nature of virtues.

Seligman (2002) maintains further that a good life cannot be attained as a permanent state, but is a continuous development of the individual's strengths and values. A good life is, therefore, a life in continuous development or growth. Seligman thus takes the view that the individual is normally in a process of development, and the individual naturally has a given capacity for using his or her innate character traits. A good life is, therefore, not unattainable for human beings: Normally, they have the capacities that are necessary for this form of the good life.

The third form of the good life, which is closer to the optimally functioning individual, is for Seligman (2002) *the meaningful life*. The meaningful life adds, in addition to the good life, an affiliation to something «larger than yourself». Seligman defines the meaningful life in the following way: «The meaningful life: using your signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are» (p. 263). Seligman, however, leaves the question of what can be conceived of as larger than yourself up to the individual to define. Moreover, it naturally follows that the most complex form of the good life is for Seligman *the full life*. This builds on all of the three previous forms of the good life and includes their characteristics. Seligman defines the full life: «Finally, a full life consists in experiencing positive emotions about the past and future, savoring positive feelings from pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using these strengths in the service of something larger to obtain meaning» (p. 263). The full life is, therefore, for Seligman, a life in which the individual uses his or her capacities in an optimal way to serve something larger than himself or herself to give life meaning.

To fight inequality, dehumanization, and a difficult life with the help of a psychology based on the medical-oriented model focusing on sickness, weaknesses, and diagnostic categories is bound to fail



Accordingly, the full life is for Seligman (2002) the same as optimal functioning. This is how human beings are functioning at their best or most complex. At their best, individuals, furthermore, act both in concert with their own premises and capacities and in concert with the surroundings. Thus, positive psychology and Seligman explicitly both defend and revitalize the Aristotelian model with its emphasis on acting from both self-benefiting as well as other-benefiting virtues. Seligman also emphasizes that when the individual functions best, he or she has a good experience of life. The good life is thus not a fixed state, but for Seligman it is a life in striving toward the realization of your true positive human «potentials» in ever better ways. Positive psychology is, as now shown, clearly in accordance with an Aristotelian tradition in which the good life is one in which human beings are always in a process of development from the simple to the more complex or more perfect. Positive psychology, however, offers a more fully-fledged life span theory of development of well-being or happiness, identifying and elaborating four different forms of the good life, varying from the simple to the more complex good life.

Might it be that such views of human nature, focusing on strengths and positive potentials, are just what psychology and the social sciences need when embarking on the huge and challenging problems of our time? To face the pressing problems of our civilization with knowledge based on the prevailing position of the individual as an asocial egoist is totally insufficient (Nafstad, 2002, 2003; Thurow, 1996). Moreover, to fight inequality, dehumanization, and a difficult life with the help of a psychology based on the predominant medical-oriented model focusing on sickness, weaknesses, and diagnostic categories is an endeavor bound to fail.

The Multicultural Perspective

In contemporary research, a multicultural perspective is maintained as an increasingly dominant and ethical imperative for psychological research and practice: «multiculturalism is, at its core, a moral movement that is intended to enhance the dignity, rights, and recognized worth of marginalized groups» (Fowers & Richardson, 1996, p. 609). One objection to the normative and universal ideals inherent in the Aristotelian position is that it does not accommodate the core principle of a



multicultural perspective encompassing respect for all types of optimal functioning, development, and good life. Such a criticism was indeed made of Werner's perspective on optimal functioning when it was proposed (see Glick, 1992). An objection against the dynamic perspective, as Werner formulated it, is that every concrete actualization of such an ideal, abstract developmental principle of more complex activities inevitably will be influenced by predominant cultural, social, political, and personal values. Notions or ideas about ideal development are, in the end, inevitably created and formed in a subtle interplay between the values and ideals in society, the social and cultural conditions in which the researcher in question works, as well as the traditions of the discipline (Baumrind, 1982; Bruner, 1986; Cirillo & Wapner, 1986). Maintaining and giving priority to certain developmental goals and not others is thus an expression of the predominant values and power structures of the culture and time period in question (Bruner, 1986; Cirillo & Wapner, 1986; Foucault, 1972, 1978; Gergen, 1989, 1991). Seligman (2002) also argues that «fully functioning» is a culture-bound concept. An objection to Werner's orthogenetic principle was that it merely reflects the modern, dominant Western value pattern: modernism's ideal of just such a constantly greater progression toward more ordered, complex, articulated, and consistent developmental systems.

This type of criticism may also be directed toward positive psychology when attempting to establish parameters for development toward the good life. In fact, the concept of positive development as now demonstrated must be defined and analyzed in terms of five elements or dimensions: *motivation, action, goals, context*, and *(social) time*. Hence, when conceptualizing in terms of what is good or bad, wise or not wise, noble or ignoble, admirable or deplorable, positive psychology must decide how to deal with the influences of culture and social or historical time. Indeed, in the end, almost all discussions about approaches and paradigms in psychology thus are related in some way to this theme of the individual, history and social context(s), and/or the interaction among them (Blakar & Nafstad, 1982; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992; Lewin, 1935; Nafstad, 1980, 1982; Pettigrew, 1997; Walsh, Craik, & Price, 1992).

The Human Being: Universal, Local, or Unique?

In psychology, the Gestalt-oriented social psychologist Kurt Lewin's (1935) *field theory* has often been used as a frame of reference for discussing how theories take into account both personal and environmental factors and the interaction between them. In Lewin's schematic model, human actions

or behavior (*B*) were conceptualized as a function (*f*) of both the person (*P*) and the environment (*E*): $B = f(P, E)$. Thus, a most crucial question for psychology throughout its history has been: Where are the defining and stabilizing forces of individual functioning to be found? in the individual? in the contexts? or in the interactions between them? As we have argued, dispositions, character, motivation, and goals represent central conceptual cornerstones of positive psychology. How person-centered is, then, positive psychology's approach? Is positive psychology arguing in favor of a universal psychology or for indigenous psychologies?



We again start our analysis by examining Aristotle's position. He argues that when we travel and meet people in different cultures, we nevertheless «can see how *every human being* is akin and beloved to a human being» (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII, quoted in Morgan, 2001, p. 268; italics added). Aristotle, thus, as demonstrated, argues the position of common features in different cultural groups. Parts of psychology and other social sciences have also always taken as a starting point that people in the past, present, and future have some given common capacities or characteristics. Furthermore, it has been assumed that *existing* and *adapting* are experiences that also give common characteristics and similarities (Darwin 1809–1882; see Darwin, 1859). The task then becomes to describe validly that which is common or universal to human beings. In such a universalist approach, groups of people are thus compared in order to illuminate aspects of the assumed common and homogeneous core. As Rohner (1975, p. 2) formulated the universalist position: «The universalist approach asks about the nature of human nature, or, more specifically, about researchable features of 'human nature'».

In psychology and the other social sciences, however, some researchers adopted a fundamentally different point of departure on the individual: Every individual, every society is unique and different from all others. This assumption, the idiographic tradition, takes its principal arguments from, among others, Kierkegaard's (1813–1855) philosophy. Kierkegaard's (1843/1962, 1846/1968) philosophy did indeed represent a protest against the philosophy of his time, which was concerned only with what was common to all human beings. Kierkegaard's idea was, on the contrary, that it is the individual, the single person, who must be the frame of reference. More-over, the individual as he or she exists and lives is more than the universal human being. The individual is thus a uniquely existing being. Consequently, it is not the species of mankind, but the single individual with whom we should be concerned. Thus, when studying human life and development, we must start with the

individual or the person. All human beings are committed to their subjective truths, and it is always only the single individual who acts.



The idiographic position, with the idea of uniquely subjective experience as the basis of human actions, thus constitutes another important and central approach in psychological research. Gordon Allport was the first to be associated with this debate between nomothetic and idiographic approaches. Allport (1937/1961, 1946, 1960) maintained that both perspectives were legitimate but that an idiographic basis was to be preferred in studies of personality. Eysenck (1947, 1955, 1956, 1967) held, on the other hand, the opposite standpoint: Personality psychology, too, must be nomothetically oriented. Thus, the debate between a nomothetic and idiographic approach in psychology was primarily raised in the field of personality psychology.

Let us then consider the other central concept, the environment, in Lewin's (1935) formula. In anthropology, the unique or radical relativistic approach has maintained that no cultures are alike. Consequently, it is not possible to make generalizations. Hypotheses about cross-cultural or universal similarities and possible common claims of cause and effect are impossible (Benedict, 1934, 1946). Each culture must be considered as a unique configuration and may be understood only in its totality. A cultural element has no meaning except in its context. Thus, the single elements may be understood, and can only be understood, within the network of interpretations that the culture itself represents. The task of seeking what is common is thus meaningless. All cultures are special and unique. Nomothetic-oriented psychology and social science, consequently, represent an impossible idea.

In contemporary philosophy and psychology, there are many who argue that it is difficult or impossible to hold on to this idea of human nature having any such common core potentials (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gergen, 1991, 1994; Kvale, 1992; Shotter & Gergen, 1989). The Aristotelian idea that the individual is preprogrammed with a personal and moral software of justice, wisdom, and so on, and, further, that it is up to the individual to realize, is thus not at all reasonable. Gergen (1982, 1994), therefore, argues in favor of a psychology concerned with understanding and attempting to account for social processes (in terms of social contexts and social and historical time) that create and fill a culture's concepts; for example, the concepts of human nature, the nature of human motivation, our personality or our self, and so on. Each culture thus creates at all times its own content of truth as to what human nature contains. The descriptions and concepts that psychology has at its disposal must not be understood as anything but what they indeed are: cultural and historical objects. Every culture and every historical epoch creates its discourses, its forms of understanding, and its truths,



for example, about the concept of human nature and human virtues. The nomenclature of psychology is thus not given its content through some form of more independent reality, for example, about how human nature really is. Consequently, the task of seeking the common virtuous being, what is common and similar among individuals, is not meaningful. Every culture creates its own content of meaning as to what human nature is. Human nature, virtues, and individuality are thus created by the prevailing concrete cultural patterns. People must adapt to, maintain, and reproduce this pattern of cultural values and images about what human nature and personality is and should be.

The human being is thus, for instance, programmed with a moral software of justice, wisdom, humanity, courage, temperance, and transcendence

Thus, the historical-cultural approach of today argued by the social constructivists (e.g., Cushman, 1990; Gergen, 1989, 1994; Kvale, 1992; Shotter & Gergen, 1989) maintains that it is not a meaningful research issue to seek what is universal, common, and similar. The idea of ordered development, for example, from the simple to the more complex, therefore, is rejected as being a typical idea from the romantic and humanistic tradition in Western culture. And what would be, in any case, better or more perfect development?

As previously discussed, positive psychology argues, in the same way as Aristotle, that there are some common dimensions or dispositions in core human nature. In fact, positive psychology argues in favor of a rather strong universalism position. Human nature within positive psychology is to be understood more as a preprogrammed bundle of psychological software. The human being is thus, for instance, programmed with a moral software of justice, wisdom, humanity, courage, temperance, and transcendence. Human nature is, therefore, not totally plastic and able to be formed by social time and culture. However, this does not mean that positive psychology does not accept the idea that human nature also is a product of history and cultural environment. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2001, p. 90) contend: «We are acutely aware that what one considers positive is, in part, a function of one's particular ethnic tradition and social condition». But at the same time, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi stress:

«... we believe that our common humanity is strong enough to suggest psychological goals to strive for that cut across social and cultural divides. Just as physical health, adequate nutrition, and freedom from harm and exploitation are universally valued, so must psychologists ultimately aim to understand the positive states, traits and institutions that all cultures value». (p. 90)

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi thus take as given and embrace the Aristotelian basic position (1) «...what I strive toward as an individual is the perfection of what it means to be a man» (Vetlesen, 1994, p. 30), and (2) what is good for me as a unique person is what is good for humans as universal beings (cf. Rogers, 1964). As a consequence, social practices for positive psychology will always be compared to and evaluated in the light of a core human nature of virtues that may, and should, be developed and realized.

We might, therefore, conclude that positive psychology revitalizes not only the Aristotelian idea of the positive individual but also the view of the universal individual. The person, the P component in Lewin's classic formula, is given more weight in positive psychology than is typical for large areas of contemporary psychology.

Different Levels of Scientific Activity

Science may be divided into separate but related levels of activity. A pragmatic division of scientific levels of activity is to distinguish among: (1) metatheory, (2) theory, (3) design, (4) primary method, (5) data, and (6) phenomena. To succeed, a science or particular field of science must continually be concerned with reflection on and analysis of all of these levels of activity, systematically developing all levels and the relationships among them. To claim to be a new paradigm, any field of science must develop new perspectives and tools at each of these levels.

It is the metatheoretical level of positive psychology that we have analyzed. It is also primarily on the metatheoretical level that positive psychology distinguishes itself from contemporary mainstream psychology and attempts to constitute a corrective, demanding that contemporary psychology reflect on and change its views of human nature. However, we conclude that positive psychology does not demand a fundamental paradigm shift in psychology. More-over, concerning the other levels of scientific activity, contrary to shifts in metatheoretical assumptions that positive psychology claims, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000, p. 13) state very clearly: «The same methods and in many cases the same laboratories and the next generation of scientists, with a slight shift of emphasis and funding, will be used to measure, understand, and build those characteristics that make life most worth living». Thus, when it comes to doing specific research, positive psychology connects to mainstream psychology. Positive psychology, therefore, concerns itself primarily with

the attempt to change and redefine the basic a priori assumptions or perspectives on the nature of the individual and the interaction between the individual and its contexts.



In tracing the roots of positive psychology, it has to be emphasized that the positive about humans – human virtues, personal goals, and personal expressions – also constitute the core ideas of humanistic psychology (Jourard, 1974; Maslow, 1965, 1968; Moss, 1999; Rogers, 1959, 1980). However, inasmuch as the intimate relationships between positive psychology and humanistic psychology have already been extensively discussed (see, e.g., Taylor, 2001), we have chosen to try to identify and point out other central historical, philosophical, and epistemological roots of positive psychology. Moreover, because humanistic psychology, but also positive psychology, covers such a huge diversity of different approaches to psychology, a thorough analysis of these relationships would be beyond the scope of this chapter. However, while parts of humanistic psychology confront and reject mainstream psychology's approach in general and argue for fundamental shifts in all of the scientific levels mentioned previously, positive psychology as formulated by Seligman is more clearly in accordance with mainstream psychology as to general methodology (Jørgensen, 2003).

Given the societal and ecological challenges of today, it is important to take responsibility for an imperative shift toward a science of positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive social institutions and values

It is not just in positive psychology that the Aristotelian model of a virtuous human nature is being revitalized today. In the course of the past decade, ethical theory in philosophy has focused more and more on the assumption of the individual as having virtuous motives (Baron, Pettit, & Slote, 1997). As Slote (1997, p. 234) argues: «A truly moral person finds an appeal, say, to benevolence inherently forceful and attractive ...». Or, as the philosopher Tranøy (1998, p. 39, our translation) also maintains: «The two capabilities – the capability to acquire language and the capability to obtain morality – are closely interrelated with each other and together they are *constitutive for becoming a human being*» (original italics). Consequently, in philosophy and ethics today, some contend that the existence of human morality and goodness can a priori be taken for granted and does not need more foundation. As we have demonstrated, this is definitively not true in mainstream theoretical psychology. The foremost task of positive psychology so far has, consequently, been to argue in favor of, and legitimate in psychology, the very idea of the moral and good human being.

The strong interest for positive psychology and ethics in general and for positive character traits or virtues in particular, however, is hardly coincidental. Given the societal and ecological

challenges of today, it is natural and important that someone begin to take responsibility for an imperative shift in psychology's predominantly negative bias toward a science of positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive social institutions and values (Nafstad, 2005).



Concluding Remarks

One of the founders of modern psychology, William James (1842–1910), was concerned with the problem that Foucault (1972, 1980) conceived in terms of *regimes of truth*. James (1890/1962, 1909/1979) formulated what might be termed psychology's ethical imperative: not to exclude any views of human beings. James' (1909/1979) point of departure was that human nature is so complex that psychology cannot afford to exclude any perspectives or points of view:

«We have so many different businesses with nature ... The philosophic attempt to define nature so that no one's business is left out, so that no one lies outside the door saying 'Where do I come in?' is sure in advance to fail. The most a philosophy can hope for is not to lock out any interest forever». (p. 19)

The obligation that James formulated here demands in practice that psychology continually try to identify and analyze its philosophical and historical roots as they constitute the perspectives or horizons that become our range of vision or our windows to the phenomena under study. Psychology needs the window to the human being as morally and socially good and positive to be reopened, so that this vital perspective is no longer a view «left outside the door».

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