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Excerpts from “The Positive Humanities: Culture and Human Flourishing”

When I was a little girl, my father would frequently take me to the Art Institute of Chicago on Saturdays. During one of these visits, I happened upon a painting that changed my life. To this day, more than sixty years later, I remember looking up at Jules Breton’s *The Song of the Lark*, taking in the picture of a girl with a bandana in a field looking up at a bird that was barely visible in the distance. Something happened to me in that moment. I understood something profound about human longing and how it can fuel our dreams and actions, transforming our lives. When I walked away from my encounter with the painting that day, I knew I could do anything.

-Selma Holo

As a high school student, I got a summer job and began considering how my life as an adult would unfold. As I thought about the path I was on, it did not seem satisfying to me. That is when I came across the essay “The American Scholar,” in which Ralph Waldo Emerson writes about how each one of us individually can have an original relation to the universe, how we can make meaning and have valuable lives. I found this essay transformative, making me think about success not just in materialistic terms, but in terms of what it is to lead a flourishing life, to live life well.

-John Stuhr

After a pretty bad first year in college, I dropped out and joined the U.S. Army. Two years later, I was in Vietnam, where I spent a year as a combat infantry advisor in the Mekong Delta. I returned to the U.S. in the summer of 1969, at a time when the country was literally blowing up because of the war. I went back to school, to the same place I had been before. I had the great fortune to meet a prominent member of the philosophy department, J. Glenn Gray, who was himself a veteran of World War II. He had written an extraordinary book called *The Warriors*, which was very much a reflective work on his experience in combat. Reading that book changed my life because it gave me a way of situating and understanding my own experience and coming to terms with it.

-William “Bro” Adams

I entered college planning on a career as a performer, playing classical music on the cello. An injury my junior year made it impossible for me to continue my performance career, so I became a musicologist. Two years ago, I decided to take up a new hobby and began taking jazz piano lessons and playing in ensembles with students and other musicians. I have been thoroughly enjoying the freedom to create something new for the pure joy of

it—not to be a professional, not to earn money, just for the joy of being with others and making music.

-Anna Celenza

Despite having visited Philadelphia many, many times, I had never been to Independence Hall. So the last time I was in town I got up early one morning and headed over. All kinds of people from all across America were there—and also from all around the world. The guide from the National Park Service was wonderful. And there I was in this magical place where America happened. I'm not an American historian, but I still felt that juice. It was like doing a workout, and it made me feel great.

-Darrin McMahon

I remember attending a student production of Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which presented the pain of police violence, anti-Black prejudice, and exploding racial tensions in a major American city. I heard amateur voices breathe life into the words of Rodney King. I recall being profoundly affected by the way theatre not only mirrors society but also offers insights into how to actively engage in it. It seemed possible that the plague of racism could be whittled away—and perhaps eliminated—through the arts.

-Harvey Young

Engagement with art, literature, philosophy, music, history, theatre, and other forms of culture can greatly enrich our lives. As indicated by these first-hand accounts, it can help us expand our inner worlds as children, choose rewarding life paths as adolescents, come to terms with difficult life experiences as adults, feel the joy of creativity in collaboration with others, connect more deeply to our civic identities as members of a society, and rekindle hope and choose effective actions in the ongoing work of social justice.¹ A careful consideration of these kinds of vital experiences can reveal how engagement with the humanities can help individuals and communities thrive.² This is the domain of the new field of the Positive Humanities.

The Positive Humanities are fundamentally concerned with the connection between culture and human flourishing. Human flourishing, of course, is a botanical metaphor. Derived from the Latin word for flower (*flos*), to flourish is “to blossom,” or more generally “to thrive.” Moving from plants to persons, *human* flourishing is a condition of prospering or doing well (OED). As with human flourishing, culture, too, is a metaphor. Derived from the Latin *cultura*, meaning “cultivation,” culture refers to a process of raising plants. When successful, culture results in the flourishing of those

¹ These first-hand accounts were taken from interviews conducted by the author as part of the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project, of which he is the founding director. For the full interviews and more information about the Project, visit www.humanitiesandhumanflourishing.org.

² Although distinctions of various sorts are sometimes made in the meanings of words like flourishing, thriving, and well-being, these terms are used in a general way and function synonymously in this chapter.

plants. Applied to human beings, culture has come to mean “the cultivation of the mind, faculties, manners, etc.; improvement by education and training,” and more generally, “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively” (OED). As indicated by the botanical metaphor, just as the culture of plants, when successful, results in their flourishing, so human culture, when successful, results in human flourishing.

It is important to articulate clearly what is—and is not—meant by the Positive Humanities, since this term may initially conjure up a range of unrelated associations from positivism to positive thinking. The humanities can be broadly defined as the “branch of learning concerned with human culture” (OED). The Positive Humanities are the branch of learning concerned with human culture *in its relation to human flourishing*. They seek to understand the conceptual nuances of this relationship in a variety of contexts in different societies across time. They also investigate the practical effects of cultural engagement on human flourishing, with a particular emphasis on how such engagement can be intentionally optimized to help individuals and communities thrive. Grounded in the wisdom, narrative, aesthetic, and performance traditions of cultures across time and around the world (and thus always inclusive of the arts), they seek insights into the nature and development of human flourishing from this vast storehouse of human experience. The Positive Humanities are also informed by more recent efforts in the sciences to bring empirical methodologies to bear in the investigation of wellbeing, and their practical emphasis connects them to the educational institutions, creative industries, and cultural organizations through which the humanities are often studied and experienced. This chapter provides an introduction to the Positive Humanities, examining their complex relationship to historical and contemporary work in the humanities; exploring their connections to the science of well-being (especially positive psychology); identifying their domains of practical influence; clarifying their definition, aims, and commitments; and suggesting important future directions for the field.

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The Science of Human Flourishing

Although human flourishing has traditionally been in the domain of the humanities, the sciences have increasingly become interested in this area. In fact, the eudaimonic turn is perhaps nowhere more advanced than in psychology, where it has led to the founding of a new branch of the discipline. Here, too, the eudaimonic turn is a kind of *return*, since human flourishing is at the root of psychology, as well. William James (1885), the Father of American Psychology, observed at the beginning of the twentieth century that happiness is one of human life’s chief concerns and noted, “How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is...for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure” (p. 71). James (1982) went so far as to call for the founding of a new branch of empirical psychology to study optimal human functioning (Pawelski, 2018). This call went largely unheeded, however, as psychologists

turned to Freud's psychoanalytic theories and to the behaviorism of John Watson, B.F. Skinner, and others. Abraham Maslow (1968) and Carl Rogers (1961) worked to refocus psychology on human flourishing, publishing ground-breaking work on what they respectively called "self-actualization" and the "fully-functioning person." In spite of these efforts, however, mainstream psychology at the end of the twentieth century was firmly focused on obstacles to human flourishing, on understanding and treating psychopathology and other human weaknesses.

The present eudaimonic turn in psychology was catalyzed in 1998 by Martin Seligman when he was president of the American Psychological Association. In his presidential address (Seligman, 1999), he noted that, since World War II, psychology had focused largely on healing. The results were remarkable, with some fourteen mental disorders rendered curable or at least effectively treatable. Seligman argued, however, that healing disease is only part of the mission of psychology, which should also concern itself more broadly with making the lives of all people better. Exclusive focus on pathology, he noted, leaves out the study of flourishing individuals and thriving communities. He contended that an understanding of optimal human functioning can both help increase well-being and decrease pathology, since one of the most effective ways of buffering against mental illness is cultivating human strengths. To support psychology's broader mission, he proposed the founding of the new field of positive psychology.

Two years later Seligman, along with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, co-edited a special issue of the American Psychological Association's flagship journal *American Psychologist* on the topic of positive psychology. In their introduction to the issue, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi argued that an overemphasis on the study of pathology had left psychologists largely ignorant of things like hope, wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance, all of which make life worth living. They defined positive psychology as a "science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions" and stated that the aim of this science "is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (p. 5). They claimed that such a science would "improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless" (p. 5). Positive psychology brought together the efforts of a relatively small but growing number of psychological researchers working in areas such as self-efficacy, self-determination theory, psychological and subjective well-being, optimism, flow, passion, hope theory, and positive emotions. Building on these perspectives, Seligman (2011) later developed a multi-component model of human flourishing, known by its acronym PERMA, which includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

Positive psychology has particular metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical commitments. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) has argued that positive psychology is chiefly a

“metaphysical orientation.” This metaphysical orientation holds that the positive things in life are just as real—and thus just as worthy of study—as the negative things. It holds that positive emotions are just as real as negative emotions (and not just the relief from or transformation of negative emotions), that mental health is just as real as mental illness (and not just the absence of psychopathology), that strengths are just as real as weaknesses, and that optimal psychological states like flow are just as real as states of anxiety and depression. This metaphysical orientation does not imply, however, that the negative things in life do not exist. Although positive psychology orients itself toward the positive, it is not dismissive of the negative (Pawelski, 2013a). Epistemologically, positive psychology is committed to the best modes of inquiry in empirical psychology. Understanding that science is an ongoing, fallibilistic, self-corrective process, positive psychology seeks to advance investigative techniques and to employ multiple methods in the creation of new knowledge. Finally, positive psychology is committed to an ethical vision of well-being for all and to the realization of this vision, in part, through the investigation, development, and dissemination of evidence-based practices to help individuals and communities thrive.

It is important to note that positive psychology is proceeding in both a complementary and a comprehensive mode (Pawelski, 2016a). In its complementary mode, it defines itself as different in orientation from a mainstream psychology that is largely focused on the identification and treatment of psychopathology, as well as on the biases, irrationalities, and aggressions that stand in the way of individual mental health and optimal social functioning. That is, mainstream psychology seeks to advance well-being indirectly, through the mitigation of what impedes or destroys it. Positive psychology, on the other hand, seeks to advance well-being directly, through the promotion of what causes or constitutes it. Instead of focusing on cures for depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia, for example, positive psychology investigates ways of cultivating optimism, gratitude, and positive relationships. It contends that a direct approach to well-being can be effective both for promoting human flourishing and for mitigating psychopathology. In its comprehensive mode, on the other hand, positive psychology seeks to establish an empirically-based approach to living life well. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) wrote, “the social and behavioral sciences...can articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound while being understandable and attractive. They can show what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities” (p. 5). In this comprehensive mode, positive psychology must rely on a balance between indirect, mitigative approaches and direct, promotional approaches. The ideal of the comprehensive mode is *sustainable preference*, where the short- and long-term well-being interests of each individual and of all groups in a society are respected and supported (Pawelski, 2016b).

Positive psychology has been summed up as “the scientific study of what makes individuals and communities thrive,” and this work itself has thrived. Positive psychologists have been awarded hundreds of millions of dollars for their research; have founded academic journals to publish the results; have established national, regional, and

global organizations, including the International Positive Psychology Association; and are centrally involved in the proliferation of efforts in support of well-being at the personal, academic, professional, and global levels. There is now an abundance of evidence-based books, apps, and online programs aimed at helping people increase their levels of well-being. Colleges and universities are appointing Chief

Wellness Officers and offering courses on the science of happiness. Positive psychology has influenced work in domains such as economics, neuroscience, political science, sociology, and organizational development. Sectors such as medicine, business, education, law, and law enforcement are applying research from positive psychology to help professionals experience greater well-being while also being more effective in their work. At the global level, the United Nations has, since 2012, published an annual *World Happiness Report*, detailing levels of happiness in nations around the world, and in 2018 the Global Happiness Council began publishing a complementary annual *Global Happiness and Well-Being Policy Report*, describing steps countries can take to increase their levels of happiness and well-being. Dozens of nations use well-being measures to supplement economic indicators as benchmarks of growth, and more and more countries are explicitly adopting increased well-being as a governmental goal.

The Importance of Collaboration

The humanities and the sciences both have a deep interest in human flourishing, yet their methods of investigation, social practices, goals, and values differ widely. Although it is notoriously difficult to provide adequate descriptions of the approaches of these domains and the differences between them, various scholars have proposed a number of key characteristics for each domain. They have argued that the humanities emphasize meaning-making through interpretation, critical analysis, creativity, and imagination, valuing individual response and subjectivity and exploring possibilities and ideals, often by playing on ambiguity. They have held that the sciences, on the other hand, emphasize verifiability by developing and employing empirical methods involving measurement, testing, and falsifiability; by valuing universalism, collaboration, objectivity, and skepticism; and by seeking to understand what actually is the case, often by eliminating ambiguity (Shim, et al., 2019).

Rough and contested as these distinctions are, they are sufficient to underscore some of the considerable differences that generally hold between the humanities and the sciences. Although both of these domains have always been included in the liberal arts, epistemological and methodological differences between them are long-standing and deep-seated, going back to ancient times and often becoming acrimonious (Small, 2013). In the Renaissance, as we have seen, humanists intentionally excluded mathematics and science from their program of study. More recently, C. P. Snow (1959) described the humanities and the sciences as belonging to

“two cultures,” each of which tends to be ignorant of and dismissive of the other. Indeed, academic practices of selection, training, and placement encourage increasing specialization within one’s own area of study, so that scholars and researchers are often quite uninformed of work in other specializations, let alone in other domains of inquiry. In spite of the significant overlap in subject matter between the study of human flourishing in the humanities and the investigation of well-being in the sciences, these domains employ very different approaches. When humanities scholars and scientists do notice each other’s work, deep understanding and effective collaboration can be difficult.

In a domain as crucial and complex as human flourishing, however, it is vitally important to find ways to collaborate across these methodological divides. Both the humanities and the sciences stand to gain much from such a collaboration. The humanities can benefit in several ways from working with the science of well-being. First, simply focusing on questions of human flourishing more directly can be of great value. Louis Menand (2001) has argued that there is a “crisis of rationale” in the humanities, with scholars themselves not agreeing on the fundamental nature and purpose of the humanities and thus not able to make a clear case for their importance to the general public. A eudaimonic turn in the humanities could be of considerable help with these problems. A recognition of human flourishing as a central concern of the humanities can provide them with a unifying rationale, giving scholars a common language to describe some of the ultimate motivations and aims of their work. It could help revitalize the humanities by encouraging scholars to understand more clearly the eudaimonic hopes that gave rise to each of its disciplines and to connect their own work more clearly to these hopes. It could invite scholars to join together across disciplines in a vitally important project: an examination of questions of human flourishing relevant for our times. This project would not require absolute agreement among scholars or the establishment of an orthodoxy. In fact, divergences of opinion could lead to important new insights on the nature of human flourishing and how it can be achieved, with each discipline and each scholar having something to contribute. It could, for example, open up new possibilities of human flourishing that are more equitable and widespread and that support the flourishing of the non-human world, as well. Furthermore, this project could enable scholars to make a clear case for the importance of the humanities to the general public, since well-being is a widely-shared human value. The science of well-being has been embraced by the general public because of the knowledge it has created about human flourishing and how to increase it. By learning from and collaborating with these scientific endeavors, humanities scholars can more easily carry out their own project and more effectively communicate their perspectives on human flourishing and its cultivation to a receptive public.

Second, scientific evaluative methods can help provide further information on the effects of the humanities on well-being. Currently, measurements of the effects of the humanities tend to focus on their instrumental impact on economic, vocational, or academic outcomes. In humanities classrooms, these measurements are typically limited to grades and course evaluations. Scientific collaboration can support the development

and implementation of assessment methods that focus on the intrinsic effects of eudaimonic engagement in the humanities across a variety of contexts. Although much more work needs to be done, it is heartening to see some of this collaboration beginning to take place. (For examples of these efforts, see What Works Centre for Wellbeing, 2016; All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017; Tay, Pawelski, & Keith, 2018; Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2019; World Health Organization, 2019; University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine & ArtPlace America, 2019; Shim, Jebb, Tay, & Pawelski, under review; as well as the chapters in Part IV of this volume on the state of the application of scientific evaluative methods to engagement in music, art, theatre, history, literature, and religion.)

Third, collaboration with the science of well-being could allow humanities scholars to make deeper and more informed contributions to contemporary policy debates about the role of human flourishing in a variety of domains. As the eudaimonic turn takes greater hold in areas as diverse as education, healthcare, and government, thought leaders are turning to scientists for strategic advice. Collaborative efforts could allow important perspectives, insights, and practices from the humanities to inform this work, as well, with the possibility of more robust and culturally sensitive outcomes. (See Part V of this volume for chapters exploring these points in more detail.)

Similarly, the science of well-being can benefit from a collaboration with the humanities, resulting in a strengthening of scientific theory, research, and practice. On the theoretical level, the humanities are a rich repository of information and wisdom about human flourishing across time and cultures. They contain a plethora of ideas about the nature of well-being and myriad accounts of what follows from implementing them. Ideas and information from the humanities can provide powerful foundations on which to ground scientific work. This is precisely what happened with the Values in Action Classification of Strengths and Virtues, one of the first large-scale projects undertaken in positive psychology. In the execution of this project, Christopher Peterson, Martin Seligman, and their colleagues looked to cultures across time and around the world to find strengths and virtues that seemed to be ubiquitously valued. They grounded their classification in virtue ethics. Peterson and Seligman (2004) wrote, “Long before there was positive psychology, or even psychology, philosophers grappled with issues of morality and ethics. In our endeavor to describe good character, we have learned much from these efforts....In sum, we can describe our classification as the social science equivalent of virtue ethics...” (pp. 85, 89).

On the level of research, the humanities can help guide scientific inquiry. Humanities scholars are able to provide deep analysis of the fundamental concepts on which positive psychology is based, bringing to bear a cultural richness that allows for the creation of more robust and nuanced constructs. To cite just one illustrative example, the *Journal of Positive*

Psychology has recently published a special issue on “Joy and Positive Psychology.” The purpose of this issue is to provide a foundation and encouragement for more scientific research on the nature and practice of joy. In his introduction, Robert Emmons (2020), the editor of the special issue, stated, “Our initial research (Watkins et al., 2018) took seriously scholarship on joy as it emanates from the disciplines of theology and philosophy, indeed the empirical investigations we conducted and the measures we developed were highly influenced by recent thought emerging within these fields” (p. 2).

Finally, on the practical level, the humanities are replete with approaches, activities, rituals, practices, and traditions that can open up whole new domains of positive psychology interventions. One recent effort in this direction is *Rituals and Practices in World Religions: Cross-Cultural Scholarship to Inform Research and Clinical Contexts* (2020), a volume that draws from world religions to identify specific rituals and practices that can be scientifically studied, tested, refined, and promulgated. Indeed, many of the chapters in the current volume provide further examples of ways in which the humanities can inspire positive psychology interventions.

To be effective, collaborations between the humanities and the sciences must be robust, going beyond merely cursory reading and polite quotation. These collaborations must bring humanities scholars, creative practitioners, and scientific researchers together to undertake significant, sustained projects. This will encourage the integration of complementary ways of querying human experience, a process of vital importance since no single approach to these questions is sufficient to yield a deep understanding of human flourishing and enable its effective and equitable cultivation. (For more details on how these collaborations can work, see the introductory chapter to this volume, as well as Schneider & Fredrickson, this volume.)