

Kristján Kristjánsson

VIRTUES AND VICES
IN POSITIVE
PSYCHOLOGY

A Philosophical Critique

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VIRTUES AND VICES IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology is one of the biggest growth industries in the discipline of psychology. At the present time, the sub-field of 'positive education' seems poised to take the world of education and teacher training by storm. In this first book-length philosophical study of positive psychology, Professor Kristján Kristjánsson subjects positive psychology's recent inroads into virtue theory and virtue education to sustained conceptual and moral scrutiny. Professor Kristjánsson's interdisciplinary perspective constructively integrates insights, evidence and considerations from social science and philosophy in a way easily accessible to the general reader. He offers an extended critique of positive psychology generally and 'positive education' in particular, exploring the philosophical assumptions, underpinnings and implications of these academic trends in detail. This provocative book will excite anyone interested in cutting-edge research on positive psychology and on the virtues that lie at the intersection of psychology, philosophy of mind, moral philosophy, education and daily life.

Kristján Kristjánsson received his PhD in moral philosophy from the University of St Andrews, Scotland. He has taught at the University of Akureyri, Iceland, and at the University of Iceland as a professor of philosophy of education. Kristjánsson has recently been appointed professor of character education and virtue ethics at the University of Birmingham and deputy director of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values. He has been a visiting Fellow at Cornell University, University of Konstanz, St Edmund's College (Cambridge University) and Institute of Education (University of London). Kristjánsson has written six books in English (three published by Cambridge University Press) and three in Icelandic. He has published numerous articles on topics in moral philosophy, moral psychology, emotion theory and moral education in international journals in philosophy, psychology and education. He is a member of the International Society for Research on Emotions and a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Moral Education*. In 2011 he was awarded the Ása Guðmundsdóttir Wright Award, the most prestigious scholarly award given in Iceland across the sciences and humanities.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 The Personal, Psychological, Philosophical, Educational and Historical Contexts of Positive Psychology	1
1.1. The Personal Context	1
1.2. The Psychological Context	11
1.3. The Philosophical Context	16
1.4. The Educational Context	21
1.5. The Historical Context	24
2 Happiness and the Virtues	33
2.1. Three Accounts of Happiness	33
2.2. Positive Psychologists on Happiness	48
2.3. Measuring Happiness	54
2.4. Positive Psychology's Virtue Project	60
2.5. An Individualist Bias in Positive Psychology?	64
3 Personality and the Virtues	68
3.1. Positive Psychology on Moral Character versus Personality	68
3.2. Personality and the Five-Factor Model ('The Big Five')	70
3.3. The Five-Factor Model: Empirical Evidence and Some Initial Criticisms	74
3.4. The Five-Factor Model, Morality and Selfhood	79
3.5. Lessons for Positive Psychologists	83
4 Moral Ontology and the Virtues	86
4.1. The Positive Psychologists' Dilemma	86
4.2. Moral Realism, Anti-Realism and Hume's Two Laws	89
4.3. Social Scientific Manifestations of Hume's Laws	93
4.4. Objections to Hume's Laws	98
4.5. Lessons for Positive Psychologists	107

5	Moral Motivation and the Virtues	110
5.1.	The Allure of Motivational Internalism	110
5.2.	Motivational Internalism-Externalism and Aristotelian Naturalism	112
5.3.	The Internalism-Externalism Debate	115
5.4.	Enter Aristotle	121
5.5.	Lessons for Positive Psychologists	128
6	Situations and the Virtues	131
6.1.	A Lacuna in the Positive Psychology Literature	131
6.2.	The Dispositionism-Situationism Debate in Philosophy	134
6.3.	The Dispositionism-Situationism Debate in Psychology	138
6.4.	What Is There in a Situation?	141
6.5.	Lessons for Positive Psychologists	149
7	Conflicts, Practical Wisdom and the Virtues	151
7.1.	Recurring Aristotelian Criticisms of Positive Psychology's Virtue Theory	151
7.2.	Aristotelian <i>Phronesis</i>	156
7.3.	The Special Problem of Emotional Ambivalence	160
7.4.	Moral Optimality, Proportionality and the Virtues	167
7.5.	Lessons for Positive Psychologists	170
8	Positive Experiences and the Virtues	173
8.1.	The Notion of 'Positive Emotions'	173
8.2.	Flow	177
8.3.	Pleasant Emotions and the Broaden-and-Build Thesis	181
8.4.	A Test Case: Classroom Emotions	186
8.5.	Lessons for Positive Psychologists	191
9	Education and the Virtues	194
9.1.	The Nuts and Bolts of Virtue Education, VIA-Style	194
9.2.	The Paradox(es) of Virtue Education	202
9.3.	Resiliency and Mindfulness	205
9.4.	Harsh Criticisms of Positive Education	211
9.5.	Lessons for and from Positive Education	214
10	Concluding Remarks	218
10.1.	The Personal Context	218
10.2.	The Psychological Context	220
10.3.	The Philosophical Context	222
10.4.	The Educational Context	225
10.5.	The Historical Context	228

References 231

Index 249

The Personal, Psychological, Philosophical, Educational and Historical Contexts of Positive Psychology

1.1. THE PERSONAL CONTEXT

Philosophers come in two main camps: cloud hoppers and clod choppers. Truth is always up in the sky for the cloud hoppers, high above the rough ground of practical matters, and real life rarely measures up to their expectations. For the clod choppers, on the other hand, truth consists of a meticulous analysis of what everyone has always known. Their real-life message tends to remain at the level of the platitudinous and non-transforming. As a philosopher of education, I believe in trying to forge a middle path between these two camps. My first rule of thumb in distinguishing between the chimerical and the trivial is always this: *Trust the teachers!* If experienced teachers tell you that an idea is salient, practical and teachable, you are well advised to give it a second hearing.

As this general rule has served me well in the past, I knew I was on to something when more than thirty hard-nosed, seen-it-all teachers, pursuing postgraduate degrees in values education (or 'life-skills education' as it is called in my country), told me they had never read a textbook as useful and life-changing as Ian Morris's (2009) *Teaching Happiness and Well-being in Schools: Learning to Ride Elephants* (which has now been translated into Icelandic). They said that 'this elephant book', as it came to be known, 'is going to create a radical change in the way we teach our students – not only in values-education classes, but across the whole spectrum of schooling – and it is going to have an impact on our personal lives as well'. I must say that I was amazed, because, given no better offering, I had merely chosen this book through a last-minute process of elimination in the library – not because I honestly believed it to be outstanding. What my students liked was not only the author's wonderfully irreverent and politically incorrect style (although they really did like that!) – as when he describes lighting a fag to come to grips

with a difficult moral problem – but, more significant, the overall perspective on schooling, bringing up children and life in general which permeates the book. That perspective is called ‘positive psychology’ – and, lo and behold, my interest in it was kindled: an interest which has now resulted in the present work.

Although Kant used to tell us that the place of definitions is at the end rather than the beginning of scholarly works, I begin with a quick brief on the nature and provenance of the theory of positive psychology. We should bear in mind from the outset, however, that positive psychology is not merely a *theory*. It is also a *movement*, and movements, as distinct from periods, are started by people. Characterised as ‘the scientific study of what goes right in life, from birth to death and at all stops in between’ (Peterson, 2006, p. 4) and driven by a concern for the systematic study of human happiness in all its guises, this theory was allegedly conjured up during the winter of 1997 during a holiday conversation between Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman, two well-known psychologists discontented with the self-limiting grooves in which mainstream psychology had become stuck (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Its official manifesto as a movement appeared three years later (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and soon afterwards eminent University of Michigan professor Christopher Peterson was drafted as the movement’s ‘director of virtue’. To put it as succinctly as possible, 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’ (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104), with special emphasis on the moral virtues and character strengths that sustain a thriving, well-rounded life.

Recent years have witnessed an exponential growth in the output and influence of positive psychology, 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 ideology, held in Philadelphia during the summer of 2009, attracted fifteen hundred delegates from fifty-two countries. Some commentators say that Seligman and his colleagues are already the greatest entrepreneurs in the history of psychology and that positive psychology is the largest growth industry in psychology. At such top universities as Harvard, the positive psychology class has become the most popular psychology course offered. In an age of increasing academic fragmentation and grand narrative scepticism, in which we have been told in no uncertain terms by postmodernists that ‘Leviathans’ are out and ‘Lilliputians’ are in, there is suddenly a strong sense of a major social scientific movement in the making, with its own steering committee and manifesto.

Positive psychology is a theory with enormous scope, and it leaves few of life's stones unturned. It aims not only at revolutionising the way academic psychologists look at their subject, but also at the way we bring up our kids and how we educate them in the home and at school. Positive psychology has practical ramifications, therefore, at almost all levels of engagement. But as interest has soared, the armies of celebrators and detractors have drifted further and further apart. It is now one of the most divisive and hotly debated theories in contemporary psychology. Whereas its supporters say that positive psychology is heralding a new era, its opponents consider it exaggerated in its claims and cultlike in its aspirations. Coming as I do from a discursive tradition in analytic philosophy, in which even the harshest of criticisms tend to be hidden behind a veneer of subtle politeness, I have been taken aback by some of the heat and pace in the discussion over positive psychology that has occurred within psychological circles. Witness Richard Lazarus's incendiary (2003a) *Psychological Inquiry* critique of it as methodologically suspect, conceptually unclear and faddish – and the various fiery rejoinders in that same journal issue.

Positive psychologists have ruffled more than a few feathers by suggesting that much of mainstream psychology, what they call 'business-as-usual' psychology, incorporates a 'misanthropic bias' (King, 2003, p. 129). Their point of departure away from business-as-usual psychology lies in the claim that it 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). Why focus exclusively on the amelioration of life's unhappiness – on how unmotivated students can be motivated, say, or depressed people made less despondent – rather than studying how motivated students can be motivated even further and the non-depressed made happier? Positive psychologists promise to replace the dominant amelioration agenda with an enhancement agenda and – through 'massive research on human strengths and virtues' – to increase our knowledge of 'what makes life worth living' and how that worth can be magnified (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, pp. 5, 8).

Mainstream psychologists understandably take umbrage at being viewed, by implication at least, as negative and obsessed with human tribulations. They ask for a less separatist message and less 'negativity about negativity' – as negative aspects of human experiences have always been studied in the hope of making them more positive (Held, 2004). They also blame positive psychologists for exaggerating the novelty of their views and for perpetuating a fad rather than blazing a trail. In the end, does this theory offer anything more than naïve, crass happiology? Positive psychologists react to reproofs

from their colleagues by reiterating their historic indebtedness to mainstream psychology and by underplaying any hints of the total debunking of its business-as-usual agenda. Yet mutual hostilities and suspicions remain and escalate; as Held asks: 'Is fragmenting psychology with polarising rhetoric good for the discipline?' (2005, p. 7). This rhetorical question is clearly not meant to elicit a positive answer. Yet there may be both a philosophical and an historical reason for answering it in precisely that way. The philosophical reason is the famous Millian one (from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, see 1972) that the best conditions for the emergence of truth are created, not in times of intellectual tranquillity and conciliation, but when radical and opposing views collide. The historical reason is that the psychologists who have made the greatest impact on their discipline (as measured by scholarly citations) happen to be those who take extreme intellectual stances – something positive psychologists have done deliberately and systematically from the outset (see Simonton, 2011).

I have already explained what kindled my interest in positive psychology, and although Chapter 1 is meant mainly to help the reader set positive psychology in the relevant *academic* and *historical* contexts (hence its long-winded title), I first need to say something more about the *personal context*: my aims and aspirations in writing this book, and my credentials and limitations. Philosophers have – in their own view, at least – a licence to stick their noses into almost everything. I do not pretend to be a psychologist, however, and in the following chapters I propose to sidestep as far as possible methodological and other intra-psychological aspects of the debate about positive psychology (apart from a few quick context-setting reminders in Section 1.2). No statistical analysis of the findings of positive psychology is on display here, and the various correlations positive psychologists have found between relevant psychological variables are not analysed in any detail – not because I find them uninteresting, but because I am not qualified to say anything new or notable about them. Positive psychology is unusual, however, in that it is at least partially grounded in a conceptual and moral philosophical framework of virtue ethics that dates all the way back to Aristotle (see Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 9–10). Moreover, it offers a host of educational recommendations on ways to apply its framework in school settings. Here, as an educational philosopher with broadly Aristotelian sympathies, I am on home ground. My explicit aim is thus to *tease out and critique the conceptual/philosophical foundations of positive psychology and its educational implications* – in a nutshell, to give it the full philosophical treatment it calls for and deserves. A few philosophers (but, in my view, too few) have given positive psychology a cursory glance in their writings. To the best of my knowledge,

however, this is the first stab at a book-length study of positive psychology from a philosophical-cum-educational perspective, thus filling a gap in the existing literature. Do philosophers lose their distinctive voices when they try to relate their professional bailiwick to the work of scholars in other fields? I agree with Appiah (2008, pp. 1–3) that this need not be the case, and I shall have much more to say about the potential benefits of interdisciplinary work (but also its potential shortcomings) in Section 1.3 of this chapter.

There is no denying the predilection of leading positive psychologists for Aristotle's ideas of individual human flourishing and their endeavour to forge bonds with psycho-moral outlooks anchored in his works. Witness, for instance, Peterson and Seligman's claim (to which I refer at various junctures) that their virtue project is to be understood as the 'social science equivalent of virtue ethics' (2004, p. 89). An ongoing concern in subsequent chapters is the appropriateness of that bedfellowship. A major strand in the negative responses to positive psychology concerns precisely the extent to which its proponents claim to avail themselves of Aristotelianism. Although its opponents often commend Seligman and his colleagues for turning their attention to the insights of the ancient Greeks (see e.g. Nussbaum, 2008), their typical reaction has been to dismiss the alleged Aristotelian connection as mere lip service. Positive psychologists either do not understand what Aristotle really meant, we are repeatedly told, or they deliberately use him as a ventriloquist's dummy to air their own philosophical preconceptions. In either case, the argument goes, they fail to derive any light from Aristotle's mind, and we end up with vulgarised or misbegotten Aristotelianism. This line of criticism has been mounted by declared Aristotelians and by academics who provisionally adopt an Aristotelian position to hoist positive psychology with its own petard (see e.g. Held, 2005; Woolfolk & Wasserman, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006; M. W. Martin, 2007; Sugarman, 2007; Fowers, 2008; Nussbaum, 2008; Suissa, 2008). With the exception of two articles (Jayawickreme, Pawelski & Seligman, 2008; Jayawickreme & Pawelski, 2013), positive psychologists have, somewhat surprisingly, shown little effort to meet these myriad Aristotelian objections. This is unfortunate because good ideas tend to germinate and develop through debate and reciprocal critique rather than by whistling in the wind.

Now, I freely admit to having written a book (Kristjánsson, 2007) criticising various allegedly Aristotle-based contemporary lines of thought in education and philosophy for not staying close enough to the thoughts of 'the Philosopher' – namely, for their Aristotelian misinheritance. In this book, however, my aims are less puritanical and deferential. I have no objection to an update and enrichment of Aristotle in the light of state-of-the-art

psychological science. The great empirical scientist that he was, in addition to being a philosopher (in fact, he saw no essential distinction between the two roles), I am sure he would be fascinated by all the evidence contemporary science can provide and the advances that have been made in the study of the human condition in the past twenty-three hundred years. He would take no offence at the psychological 'scientising' of his view and he would definitely view with humour the positive psychologists' quip that they are simply smartening up dowdy old Aristotle by equipping him with a seven-point scale (cited in Evans, 2012, chap. 1). I even propose to elicit possible 'Aristotelian rejoinders' from the arsenal of positive psychology to some of the objections lodged by the Aristotelian purists, trying to stimulate further discourse on positive psychology's Aristotelian credentials. Like suitors grown disenchanted after a long but ultimately unsuccessful courtship, many would-be Aristotelians seem to have given up hope that anything useful can come out of positive psychology's flirtations with Aristotle's philosophy. But I remain more sanguine and soldier on.

My speciality within educational philosophy is values education, which explains why I have decided to focus specifically on the virtue-theoretical and virtue-educational aspects of positive psychology's agenda – hence the title, *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology*. Yet I do not consider that perspective idiosyncratic or unnecessarily restrictive, for two reasons. First, Hart and Sasso's (2011) taxonomy of positive psychological themes, derived from fifty-three published definitions in *PsycINFO*, indicates that the specific aspect of positive psychology most theorists seem to consider its core is the study of positive character traits: virtues and strengths. In Hart and Sasso's view, this finding – which harmonises well with Peterson and Seligman's specification of character strengths as 'the bedrock of the human condition' (2004, p. 4) – suffices to debunk counterfeit characterisations of positive psychology, both within and outside of academia, as mere blissful happiology (witness e.g. Ehrenreich, 2009). Second, all the major themes of positive psychology are so tightly interconnected that it is impossible to do full justice to one of them without considering the whole. My exploration of virtues in positive psychology necessarily diverges in various directions, therefore, and eventually covers most of its extensive agenda, although my point of entry and reference remains virtue oriented. I must admit that in choosing the title of this book, I deliberately followed Held's (2005) precedent in playing with a certain ambiguity in the terms 'virtue' and 'vice'. In addition to their denotations as morally praiseworthy or blameworthy states of character, those terms appear in daily parlance in such locutions as 'to find little virtue in view *x*', in which they simply refer to strengths or weaknesses. This book is not only about

virtues and vices *in* positive psychology, therefore, but also about the virtues and vices *of* positive psychology.

Despite their insistence on the *virtues* as a major – or even *the* major – ingredient in a good life, there has been little overt discussion of *vices* in the positive psychology literature. Take the online Values-in-Action (VIA) test of strengths of character (see Section 7.1 for further details of this test) which revealed that my lowest score was for ‘Appreciation of beauty and excellence’ and ‘Modesty and humility’. The accompanying explanations did not interpret these results to mean that I suffered from the vices of philistinism and arrogance, which one might expect. Rather, these characteristics were described as my ‘least pronounced’ strengths! This sort of interpretative spin may partly be the result of positive psychology’s overt change of compass from *pathology* to *apithology*; partly it may suggest an awareness of the Aristotelian point that vice is more than the absence of virtue, just as virtue is more than the absence of vice. In fact, most people in the Aristotelian developmental schema find themselves perched somewhere between the full-fledged character states of virtue and vice: at the somewhat protean levels of ‘continence’ or ‘incontinence’ (see further in Section 1.5). Vice, by contrast, is a stable, consistent state of wanting and doing evil, albeit typically under some euphemistic self-description like ‘taking care of one’s own interests’. Explicitly wanting and doing evil *qua* evil (that is, a steadfast and deliberate commitment to badness because it is bad) seems to be an uncommonly fiendish sort of vice, however, and probably, in most cases, indicative of pathology rather than mere moral failure (see further in Section 5.3). Nevertheless, vice can be characterised as deep alienation from virtue (cf. Annas, 2011, chap. 7) and needs to be addressed by any psychological or philosophical approach concerned with virtue. Positive psychologists cannot evade such questions as ‘can a vicious person lead a truly happy life?’, for instance; and that question surely differs from ‘can a person who is defective in (some) virtues (as I clearly turned out to be in the VIA-test!) lead a truly happy life?’ This is another reason for including both ‘vices’ and ‘virtues’ in the title of my book.

I believe that I need to say something more explicit in this opening section about what follows in subsequent chapters. But because I hate detailed roadmaps that satiate rather than whet readers’ appetites, I am setting forth my tale as succinctly as possible. In the wake of this context-setting chapter, I proceed in Chapter 2 by analysing the concept of happiness, both in general terms and as used in positive psychology. I argue that positive psychology suffers from internal divisions, ambiguities, ambivalences and at least one serious misconception regarding happiness. Nevertheless, many of the charges commonly levelled against it do not stick, and some of the ‘vices’ of

current positive-psychology conceptions about the ‘H-word’ may be easily ameliorated. Later in that chapter, I introduce positive psychology’s virtue theory and its presumed linkage to happiness, and discuss the charge of an ‘individualist bias’ permeating the theory.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) criticise the popular Five-Factor Model of personality for failing to capture features that are central to us: the virtues. I ask in Chapter 3 if this is a viable position or if we can, in fact, couch everything essential to the human character in terms of personality psychology. In this chapter, I offer further evidence for positive psychologists’ scepticism about the ‘Big Five’. I argue that although Big Five theory has identified relatively stable within-person patterns, it has not shown these patterns to be psychologically meaningful except to the extent that they are morally salient.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 form the ‘philosophical hardcore’ of the book. In Chapter 4, I explore the assumptions and implications of positive psychology’s virtue theory with regard to moral ontology by introducing some key concepts in moral ontology, explaining positive psychology’s take on them and suggesting ways that take could be strengthened. In Chapter 5, I describe how virtue theorists in positive psychology implicitly assume the truth of so-called motivational internalism and how this assumption restricts the force and scope of the message they venture to offer as scientists. I contrive a way out of their impasse by arguing for a version of Aristotelian motivational externalism and suggesting why they should adopt it. In sum, if Aristotelian motivational externalism holds true, positive psychologists can offer a full-fledged theory of virtue without the danger of turning the science of psychology into a prescriptive moralism. In Chapter 6, I inquire if so-called moral situationism in philosophy and social psychology, which questions the very existence of character traits, threatens positive psychology’s virtue theory. I sketch some of the traditional arguments for and against situationism and further argue that the concept of a ‘situation’ underlying the debate between situationists and dispositionists conceals various underexplored complexities. I invoke several distinctions among situations and show how situationists have selectively chosen certain types of situations that, for conceptual reasons, skew the argument in their favour. I introduce the concept of a ‘virtue-calibrated situation’ and argue that if the person–situation debate is to move forward in philosophy and psychology, it must focus upon such situations. All in all, I argue in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 that by taking a certain stand on proverbial philosophical issues concerning moral realism, motivational externalism and moral dispositionism positive psychology can repair and strengthen its theoretical foundation. Notably, I have tried to render the material in these chapters as palatable as possible for readers with little background in philosophy.