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Enlightened Happiness and Pragmatic Systems Science – Positive Psychology meets Colin Feltham's Anthropathology Thesis

We begin in the madness of carnal desire and the transport of voluptuousness, we end in the dissolution of all our parts and the musty stench of corpses. And the road from one to the other goes, in regard to our well-being and enjoyment in life, steadily downhill: happily dreaming childhood, exultant youth, toil-filled years of manhood, infirm and often wretched old age, the torment of the last illness and finally the throes of death.

Schopenhauer

To be interested in the changing seasons is a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with spring.

George Santayana

Consider two books: Sonja Lyubomirsky's positive psychology book, *The How of Happiness* [1], and Colin Feltham's negative psychology book, *What's Wrong with Us?: The Anthropathology Thesis* [2]. Sonja Lyubomirsky and Colin Feltham are worlds apart. Lyubomirsky is a psychological scientist who makes reasonable and practical suggestions about how to boost individual happiness levels – practice acts of kindness, express gratitude, learn to forgive, commit to your goals, savor life's joys, avoid social comparison, and so on. Colin Feltham is a counselor who writes for anyone who feels that our current way of life is dreadfully misguided and probably not substantially improved by minor interventions and adjustments. Feltham is aware of the positive psychology interventions, but he's not impressed. He thinks that more radical solutions are needed if human beings are to survive, adapt, and flourish in the 21st century.

When *The Irish Psychologist* requested an analysis of Colin Feltham's thesis, a decision was required: (1) analyze Colin Feltham's anthropathology thesis in isolation; or (2) analyze his thinking in relation to the thinking of positive psychologists. The Aikido masters tell us that all decisions can be made within seven breadths. This decision is an easy one: analyze Colin Feltham's anthropathology thesis in relation to the thinking of positive psychologists, and work toward an enlightened, pragmatic synthesis and a solution to the positive/negative psychology conflict that grumbles in the face of reason.

Metaphor meets Nature

We opened with a quote from Schopenhauer and another from Santayana. The optimist will immediately dislike Schopenhauer's outlook on human development and will shout a resounding *Yes* to Santayana: *Yes, to be interested in the changing seasons is a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with spring! Schopenhauer is a hopeless pessimist*. But

the scientist observing from behind the veil of emotions will probably pause to think before speaking.

In truth, we each respond to the changing seasons in different ways, and there is no way of predicting and controlling all of the contingencies that shape our life and death. The scientist can happily consider the metaphors of Schopenhauer and Santayana -- bouncing them off one another, extrapolating any kernel of truth, working with various interpretations -- but the working scientist is less interested in the play of metaphors and more interested in *the how of Nature* [3], including, for example, how our mood is influenced by seasonality and seasonal climate changes [4, 5], how we use metaphors to reflect and shape emotions [6], or how we each deal with the fact that we cannot predict and control all of the contingencies that shape our life and death [7-9]. Ultimately, the scientist requests careful consideration of Schopenhauer's analysis -- quoted twice in Colin Feltham's book, mirroring Colin Feltham's position -- and Santayana's pithy reply, an easy reply that reflects Sonja Lyubomirsky's easy pragmatism.

For example, in light of recent research it is difficult to agree with Schopenhauer's statement that, in regard to our well-being and enjoyment in life, things go steadily downhill in adulthood. Surely this is a generalization. Carstensen and colleagues [10] have found that older adults are generally better than younger adults at regulating negative affect and maintaining high levels of positive affect. And if we use the overall ratio of positive : negative emotion as an indicator of overall enjoyment in life [11], then perhaps the reality of change is the opposite of what Schopenhauer predicted: our well-being and enjoyment in life goes steadily uphill in adulthood.

But Carstensen's research findings do not go uncontested: her results may reflect sample bias (volunteers, extraverts) or cultural bias (older American participants being somehow unique), or both [12], and Colin Feltham is unconvinced. Feltham points to the principle of entropy and its psychological consequences: "all phenomena begin well, energetically, before gradually and inevitably deteriorating and dying…[and] the insecurity of life and knowledge of death necessitated by entropy, destruction and uncertainty has always troubled humans and has informed our efforts to survive and to try to overcome or deny these facts." (p. 234). Nevertheless, science paints a picture more complex that any simple metaphor can capture, much more varied than any simple optimistic or pessimistic realism can contain. And much like the real influence of seasonality and seasonal climate changes on mood, the real influence of age on well-being and enjoyment in life can only be understood by reference to the real dynamics of intra- and inter-individual variability [13]. For the scientist, it is simple-minded beyond belief to state that human ageing and development canalizes a limited set of negative (or positive) psychological outcomes. Longitudinal research highlights significant emotional variability in adulthood. Different people gravitate toward different styles of affect *optimization* and affect *complexity* [14, 15]. Some people favor a simple view of themselves, others and the world: they work to optimize positive emotion and they also close themselves off from negative experiences by denying certain aspects of reality. As a consequence, positive and negative emotions are poorly integrated in their worldview, and although scoring high on measure of positive affect, they tend to score low of measures of empathy. A second group adopts

the opposite position: they favor a more complex view of self, others and the world and they open themselves up to doubt and empathy and a greater collection of negative experiences. But they fail to sustain positive affect in the process. They trade happiness for a complex realism that is poorly integrated with the full spectrum of emotional experience. There is a third group Labouvie-Vief and colleagues point to who experience low levels of positive affect and low levels of cognitive complexity, a cognitive-emotional profile that is correlated with the lowest levels of well-being, empathy, health, and relationship security, but there is also a fourth group who appear to strike an optimal balance. Specifically, the fourth group point to are those that tend to report the highest levels of well-being, empathy, health, and relationship security. Their descriptions of self, other, and world contain the highest levels of positive-negative affect *integration*: they sustain high levels of positive emotion along with a complex worldview that supports adaptation.

So where does this leave Schopenhauer? Scientists may well describe adult cognition and emotion, but there is nothing in the great field of scientific thought that can prevent people from thinking that Schopenhauer's analysis is true, or from responding emotionally to the contingencies of their own language use [16]. There are potential benefits and costs to both optimism and pessimism [17], and endorsing Schopenhauer's position may simply mark one as a pessimist. But if by endorsing Schopenhauer's view, a person responds to the contingencies of their own language use by failing to investigate the reality of adult development, all the joy and all the suffering, then one cost of pessimism is a biased view of reality. But the same applies to those who endorse Santayana's pithy reply, and the apparently easy pragmatism is invokes. Santayana's words represent a positive prescription, an adaptive ideal that some portion of the population endorses and then thinks about every now and then. But people think about lots of things [18-22]. How useful and true are these things we think about?

Going back to the beginning – joy meets positive psychology

Colin Feltham may be depressed, because "the mass of human beings are alienated from their full consciousness, all societies and cultures are likewise fragmented and problematic, and it is possible that humanity will sooner or later cause irreversible and catastrophic damage not only to itself but to the Earth's environment" (p. 235), but not everyone is depressed, and positive psychologists hope that fewer of us will be depressed in the future.

It is no surprise that in the year Martin Seligman launched the positive psychology movement with his book, *Authentic Happiness* [23], I experienced a positive transformation [24]. Joy was the emotion that led me to investigate positive psychology. I read every positive psychology textbook I could find and I asked lots of questions: How exactly do positive psychologists conceptualize this science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and foster positive institutions? Do positive emotions really foster creativity and flexibility? Is the path to authentic happiness to be found through the exercise of character strengths -- creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective, bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality, love, kindness,

social intelligence, citizenship, fairness, leadership, forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence, self-regulation, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality? But why this virulent attack on the view that certain behaviors deemed virtuous on one level (e.g., altruism and kindness) might have attached a negative underbelly of darker motivations that are not altogether 'positive'? How best to think about strength, the absence of strength, the opposite of strength, and the exaggeration of strength [25, 26], and how useful are these thoughts? Can positive psychology really help individuals, societies, and the global community?

A conceptual battlefield opened up. There was much commentary and critique of the meta-theory, theory, and methodology of positive psychology [27, 28]. I observed an unfortunate admixture of strong sentiment and weak formal logic, and my evaluation of the thinking of positive psychologists was initially negative, but less so with time [29-31]. Nevertheless, certain aspects of positive psychology thinking remained problematic: the one-sided linguistic and empirical focus on 'strength' and the relative disinterest in the operational analysis and synthesis of 'strength with weakness'; the strong focus on 'self-determination' [32] and the relative disinterest in the analysis of contextual influences on human behavior; and the failure to embrace the science of complexity and applied systems science [33, 34].

There are many layers of conceptual conflict to consider. One way to begin thinking about this field of thought is to consider Coan's dimensions of psychological theory [35] and higher-order philosophical perspectives that influence the aesthetics, sentiments, and formal logic of individual thinkers in the field (see figure 1). For example, prior to a full analysis of the problematic situation created by positive psychology, my positive emotion was deeply rooted in Daoism [24]: all is as it should be – do not interfere. You will discover the joyous path when you transcend verbal control and come to know the ever-present power of Nature. Martin Seligman's book, on the other hand, advocated Confucianism (follow these rules and all will be well) and an explicit version of Aristotle's teaching (the exercise of virtue is the source of authentic happiness).

Prior to the synthesis that comes after a full analysis, it is easy to perceive irreconcilable conflict between different philosophical and theoretical perspectives, that is, until one realizes that the whole field of thought contains ideas that are either useful or not in any given context (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, in my reading of science and philosophy, Daoism is loosely aligned with dynamic systems thinking [36], some of which borders on pure subjectivism [37], but most of which is simply more fluid and less restrictive in theoretical orientation, and more functional and synthetic and less structural and analytical in reasoning[i]. And because Daoism is non-interventionist in nature, it is more aligned with *descriptive* systems science, which describes system interdependencies by reference to the self-organizing nature of the system itself and, at the biological and psychological levels of analysis, by reference to endogenous functional relations that operate in temporal cycles to produce constant system reorganization [40]. Although clearly sensitive to context, descriptive systems science makes clear its philosophical position: *the action of the organism transforms the system*. This assumption is problematic from other philosophical perspectives [41, 42].

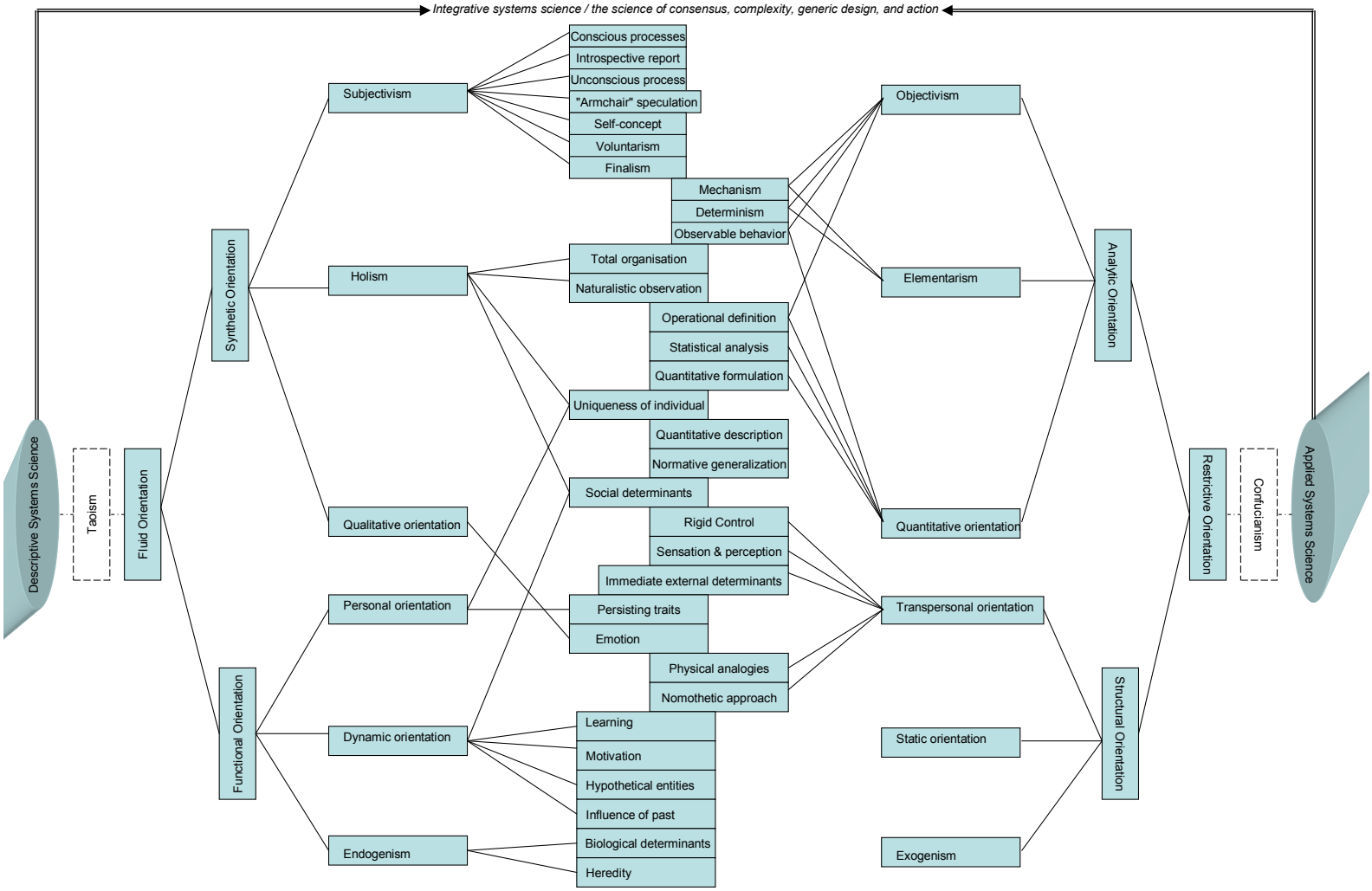
Confucianism is interpersonal and transpersonal in nature and aligned more with exogenism and the analytical, structural, and restrictive theoretical orientations. And with its strong focus on social engagement and social intervention, Confucianism is also more aligned with *applied* systems science. Applied systems science is not concerned with 'self-organization' or 'dynamic systems theory' *per se*. The focus is on functional relations that impact real world behavioral dynamics. And to the extent that contextual manipulations can alter functional relations, then we can control and transform the behavior of the system. Applied systems science works on the principle that *finding the solution to problematic situations involves mapping of a logical problem structure that informs the logic of action in the problem field* [43].

Nevertheless, it is all too easy to move illogically between the two sides of the field defined by figure 1, and the problems created by this illogical movement have remained [44] ever since Confucius first grappled with Daoist subjective enlightenment. At the same time, when one's goal is to use, communicate, and promote a method that will help others to better adapt to the contingencies of their world, then even the unspeaking Doaist and the strict descriptive systems scientist is pushed in the direction of applied systems science. Confucius understood this and he made the leap[ii].

The modern manifestations of different worldviews are ever-present. And because many people like to describe themselves as scientists and pragmatists, the fluid and restrictive orientations foster distinct styles of scientific pragmatism. The fluid, dynamic systems view directs attention to the set of possible empirical observations that describe hypothetical processes of self-organization and the practical implications of these observations and hypothetical processes. The restrictive, applied systems view focuses on contextual manipulations that alter observable behaviours, including any instructions coded in a language that informs action[iii]. At the same time, we need to distinguish styles of scientific pragmatism that are informed by the science of complexity and generic design [43, 46] from those that are not [1, 23, 47, 48]. Positive psychology falls into the latter category. Positive psychology interventions are not designed with issues of system complexity in mind. Nevertheless, by focusing on relatively simple and clearly defined goals -- increase positive affect and happiness levels in a group of college students -- positive psychologists have demonstrated that certain behaviours influence self-reported happiness [49, 50], and it is likely that they will continue to find new ways to realize this goal, the benefits of which are now being investigated [11, 51, 52].

Ultimately, with a relatively clear and simple focus on self-reported happiness levels, it is difficult to find fault in Sonja Lyubomirsky's logic in *The How of Happiness*. If her goal were to promote high levels of positive-negative affect integration, empathy and relationship security [14, 15], then perhaps her logic and her methods would differ. If her goal were to advocate and then use John Warfield's applied systems science method to map the relations between sub-problems in the field of positive and negative psychology, then her logic and her methods would be different. But if happiness is open to manipulation, if this is a goal that science can successfully pursue -- more positive emotions -- then presumably other cognitive-emotional profiles are also open to

manipulation (e.g., higher levels of positive-negative affect integration). And perhaps via good description, prediction, and control we can foster a new kind of enlightened happiness that is informed by pragmatic systems science, a science of consensus, complexity, generic design and action that fosters better developmental outcomes for everyone [43]. Perhaps we can identify the functional relations that impact real world



behavioral dynamics and find the solutions to previously intractable problematic situations by mapping a logical problem structure that informs the logic of action in the problem field. But thinkers beware: if we are unaware of the ways in which aesthetics and sentiments influence formal logic, and if we fail to understand how to map a logical problem structure that informs the logic of action in the problem field, then we may as well revert to pure subjectivism or simply focus on simple problems that have simple solutions.

Character psychology and the character of positive and negative psychology

Sonja Lyubomirsky and Colin Feltham would certainly agree on one point: not everyone is happy -- and conflict at the level of meta-theory, theory and methodology is not the only kind of conflict at play here -- some positive psychologists want more: they want strength and virtue. They want to describe, predict, and control more than your personality. They want to describe, predict, and control your character, and they want you to *exercise* your character strengths.

When we move into the field of character psychology, there are sentiments other than those captured by Daoism and Confucianism that shape individual perspectives, and Coan's analysis of theoretical orientations provides an insufficient map of the terrain. Consider the sentiments of Colin Feltham and Martin Seligman[iv], two thinkers who look beyond observable behavior, beyond the ethics of traditional personality psychology, and deep into Pandora's Box.

- *Humanity suffers a terrible pathology*, and what we need is "a transdisciplinary study of the pervasive and incorrigibly dysfunctional aspects of human beings and human societies" (Feltham, 2007, ix)
- *We can experience authentic happiness*, and what we need is "a science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding what Aristotle called the "good life". (Seligman, 2002, xi)

In order to understand Feltham and Seligman, we need to appreciate how their thinking reflects sentiments captured in Koltko-Rivera's psychology of worldviews [53], which adds to Coan's analysis: *Moral Orientation* (good/evil), *Mutability* (changeable/permanent), and *Complexity* (complex/simple). The Moral Orientation dimension refers to beliefs about the basic moral orientation or tendency of human beings, and Koltko-Rivera suggests that the options, *good* and *evil*, are non-mutually exclusive. The Mutability dimension refers to beliefs about the changeability of human nature, and the Complexity dimension refers to beliefs about whether human nature is complicated. Colin Feltham and Martin Seligman clearly differ along all three dimensions.

In Feltham's worldview, ***evil*** currently dominates good, and the dysfunctional aspects of human beings and human societies are incorrigible -- persistent, incurable, ***unchangeable***. Also, a major source of our dysfunction derives from the utterly ***complicated*** nature of human beings and human societies and our inability to think our way toward reasonable solutions to problematic situations. Feltham's focus is on the "negative underbelly of dysfunctionality, destructiveness, deceit, folly, suffering and death…[and his belief is that]…at some era in our evolution we lost touch with our animal-like innocent, subsistence-centred, primarily sensuous nature and developed time, language, tools, measurement, property, patriarchal dominance, art, religion and thought that, as well as conferring some survival advantages, also came to be imperceptibly internalized to the extent that we became cognitively dominated, self-deceived, and alienated from our deeper (affective, somatic) selves" (p. 234).

Feltham collates a substantial list of problems: survival hysteria; violence and hatred; capitalism's negative characteristics; psychological/neurotic problems; the restless mind;

irrationality; tradition and habit; men as aggressive and problematic; a culture of lies as normal; cosmic-existential absurdity; child abuse as normal (physical, sexual, educational abuse); the uncontrollable nature of historical momentum; the illusion of progress; culture's suppression of our animal instincts; tribalism, nationalism, and 'us versus them' thinking; the traps of dualisms (reason/emotions; public/private self); the scarcity of intelligence and vision; being time-blinkered and living by unnatural clocks; information overload; fear of being wrong; fragmented/hypocritical selves; the demands of modern life; the futility and boredom inevitable in any prospective utopia; entrapment in symbolic activity; the taboo against obviousness and simplicity; enmeshment in anthopathological loops, where there is inevitable frustration associated with every attempt to solve our problems, and with the endless production of solutions that are as bad if not worse than the original malady.

Feltham points to others who point to similar problems: J. Krishnamurti (fragmentation, sorrow); Kant (crooked timber of humanity); Bohm (systemic fault); Freud (universal neurosis; death drive); Fromm (human destructiveness); Zerzan (pathology of civilization); and so on. And although the true extent and the limiting nature of the problems Feltham identifies are open for analysis, it is true that many of the problems listed (and many more) can be openly perceived. Nevertheless, the fundamental question Feltham needs to answer is whether or not his perception of the problems facilitates any useful action. Unfortunately, his belief that our problems are ***unchangeable*** and ***complicated*** does little to facilitate useful action. Feltham appears stuck in a complicated, unchangeable field: he sees problems everywhere and his ability to identify any reasonable course of action is stifled. He also treats *all* of the sub-problems in the problem field *as part of one* bigger problem. He creates an anthropathological mesh that he cannot escape from. But neither the sub-problems nor the relations between the sub-problems are coherently represented in his scheme. This is not his fault per se, because he is unaware of any method that facilitates forward movement, and it is this sense of helplessness that ultimately depresses him. If we were to describe his personality using Labouvie-Vief's scheme [54], we might say that Feltham sacrifices his positive emotion in favor of a complex (but nevertheless fragmented) representation of self, other, and world. And if we were to describe the cycling of his perception and action, we might say that his perception interferes with his action, because he fails to see the world clearly and, unfortunately for the rest of us, he imposes his perception of the world on all of us.

The whole of humanity is painted with the same brush: all of us suffer this universal pathology Feltham points to. He ignores the fact that a significant portion of the population experience integrated complexity: they see what he sees -- the negative aspects of self, others, and world -- but nevertheless see it in a more integrated, coherent way and in the operational context of generalized well-being, empathy, health, and relationship security [54]. And presumably these same people see anthroresilience alongside anthropathology: they see courage and transcendence in the face of death alongside survival hysteria; love and compassion alongside violence and hatred; capitalism's positive characteristics alongside capitalism's negative characteristics; resilience and well-being alongside psychological/neurotic problems; Zen-like concentration alongside the restless mind; reason alongside irrationality; men as wise and

loving alongside men as aggressive and problematic; a culture of honesty alongside a culture of lies; cosmic-existential connection alongside cosmic-existential absurdity; and so on. Having said that, aside from being slightly more optimistic than Feltham and presumably possessing a personality profile and an intuitive style of reasoning that maintains the checks and balances necessary to maintain high levels of well-being, empathy, health, and relationship security, presumably very few of these people go about solving problematic situations by formally mapping a logical problem structure that informs the logic of action in the problem field. And some of the bigger problems Colin Feltham points to certainly require a more formal logical approach, for example, the design of systems of education that prepare people for the modern world of work without destroying their physical and psychological health.

Feltham is calling for courage and honesty in the face of the negative aspects of human existence. Unfortunately, his perception is biased, his thinking confused, and his action impotent. Feltham is not fully aware of the way his aesthetics and sentiments influence his formal logic. He tends toward pure subjectivism and he gravitates toward simple solutions to complex problems. The ultimate cost of his pessimism is that he is less interested in the solutions and more interested in the 'complex problems'.

On the other hand, when Martin Seligman (2002) says, "In spite of the widespread acceptance of the rotten-to-the-core dogma in the religious and secular world, *there is not a shred of evidence that strength and virtue are derived from negative motivation* …[and]…if there is any doctrine this books seeks to overthrow, it is this one*"* (pp. xii – xiii; original italics), then presumably his Moral Orientation is defined by ***good***, not evil. And although Seligman believes "that evolution has favored good and bad traits" (p. xiii), he clearly dislikes the evil worldview and he does not wish to overcomplicate ***simple*** solutions to human happiness, a thoroughly ***changeable*** aspect of human nature[v]. Specifically, Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson have argued that it is *the exercise of character strengths* that fosters authentic happiness by contributing "to various fulfilments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004, p. 17). And while Colin Feltham's reference to positive psychology as one amongst a possible set of "proposed solutions to anthropathology" (p. 209) implies that he is looking for some good to offset the evil he perceives in the world[vi], Martin Seligman makes no attempt in his book to organize a set of facts and relations necessary for non-mutually exclusive thinking -- *good* and *evil.* In this sense, it is tempting to say that Seligman is Feltham's polar opposite: he works to optimize positive emotions and promotes a simple view of self, other, and world.

Seligman assume that we have made significant *progress* in dealing with negative psychological outcomes: "…we have learned how to relieve these disorders…But this progress has come at a high cost. Relieving the states that make life miserable, it seems, has made building the states that make life worth living less or a priority. [Many positive psychology books open with this sentiment.] But people want more than just to correct their weaknesses. They want lives imbued with meaning, and not just to fidget until they die" (Seligman, 2002, xi). This is curious thinking: it closes off one set of problems from consideration when thinking about a related set; and it is easy to question the assumption

of *progress* on empirical grounds [63-65][vii]. We can also question the more general assumption that the correction of *weaknesses* is less satisfying than is the exercise of strengths, and we might find it difficult to understand the difference between both sets of exercise in practice[viii]?

And what happens when we shift attention away from negative emotion, character weakness, and human vice? Consider yourself. Do you acquire the insight and perspective of the Zen master who says, "my seeing is always to see my own errors; my nonseeing is to not see the evils of people in the world"? Or do you acquire the outsight and perspective of the scientist who maps the facts and relations in the system of positive emotions, character strengths, and human virtues? Or will your thinking and action somehow be informed by the codynamics in the field: the how of positive emotions with negative emotions, the how of character strengths with character weaknesses, and the how of human virtues with human vices?

Neither Feltham nor Seligman selects the third option. Feltham is hunting for weakness and he fails to see the codynamics of strength with weakness. Seligman is hunting for strength and he fails to see the codynamics of weakness with strength. And neither is talking to one another: their distinct Moral Orientations (good *versus* evil) keeps them apart. But neither of them appears to understand this simple fact: regardless of your initial sentiments, when you open Pandora's Box, the one (good *or* evil) implies the other (good *and* evil) and the clarity of perception necessary to facilitate effective action in this field is never guaranteed (see Figure 2)[ix].

Perception and action cycle continuously [66]. Perception informs action, action modifies perception, and the process of change is shaped by the goals we pursue. Unlike the positive psychologists, who have a clear goal in mind, Colin Feltham has no goal clearer than to launch "a transdisciplinary study of the pervasive and incorrigibly dysfunctional aspects of human beings and human societies" (p. ix). This makes movement through the field more difficult for Feltham than it does for Seligman or Lyubomirsky. Central to Feltham's thesis is an emphasis on entropy, suffering, denial, futility, and death. But presumably people have some goal in mind when they focus on the obvious fact that living systems eventually die -- entropy eventually dominates negentropy. Being a pragmatist, I might choose to think like a Buddhists thinks: life entails suffering. But if my goal is to survive, adapt, and flourish in this world -- like an enlightened Buddhist -- then I would select this thought only because it represents a good starting point for the enactment of the solution: suffering is caused by craving; suffering is cured by awakening; and awakening occurs when we follow the Noble Eightfold Path -- holding right views and practicing right resolve, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

At the same time, much like positive psychologists rushed to their ultimate goal – extrapolating a science of action that focuses on how best to optimize our potential for a good life [23, 47] – in advance of developing a meaningful science of description [31,

33][1], so too does Feltham propose solutions (pp. 209 – 230) to a problematic situation that is poorly defined. Interestingly, he does point to Eastern enlightenment as one such solution, but his style of pessimistic pragmatism forces him to set it up as an idealized goal state rather than a behavioral path: "a person …living wholly outside the typical human state of suffering" (p. 214), and "a final breakthrough in human consciousness" (p. 234). This forces him to back away from goal pursuit: "Does authentic enlightenment really exist at all? Is the hope for enlightenment not the most difficult obstacle to enlightenment?" (p. 214).

What is unsurprising is that, much like positive psychologists, Feltham ultimately proposes that we cultivate whatever is most preciously human about us – warmth, compassion, emotionality, individuality, humour, forgiveness, wisdom, realism, non-judgementalism -- while reducing, defeating or undermining the 'inhuman'. His list of precious human attributes does not overlap completely with the list of strengths positive psychologists promote (for example, he suggests we cultivate imperfection and realism), and he also advocates solutions to anthopathology that nowhere appear in positive psychology literature: radical honesty, the overthrow of patriarchy, and although somewhat skeptical about it, he has a soft spot for anarcho-primitivism. But the problem remains for both anthopathology and positive psychology: both movements are informed by strong sentiments and weak formal logic that precludes a proper analysis of facts and relations necessary for understanding, first, the problems within the problem set and, second, the relations between problems in the problem set (see figure 2).

Pause for modesty

But perhaps we should pause for a moment and exercise modesty: in optimizing any given path of development we must accept that no act of seeing allows us to see everything; we select one act of seeing at a time and hope our vision supports successful adaptation. And by virtue of the fact that successful adaptation implies adaptation over an extended period of time, development itself becomes a problem. We are faced with multiple problem sets that require multiple, discrete acts of seeing. However, if we are thinking like scientists, the term "problem" should not be interpreted negatively here: it is an abstract term used to illustrate how different individuals and groups conceptualize and adapt to the circumstances associated with development.

We also see problems by reference to different ways of seeing. For example, as we develop, we acquire two inseparable ways of seeing, looking in and looking out. *Insight* looks to consciousness, and sees what wisdom, enlightenment, and skill can be found from mastering the contents of consciousness; *outsight* looks to the system – to reduce the facts and relations of the universe to system - and sees what wisdom, enlightenment, and skill can be found from mastering the system. The way we look influences what we see, and our perspective shifts in time as we strive to adapt to Nature.

[1] Three things are needed prior to developing a science of action appropriate for resolving an problematic situation in a systematic and controlled manner: a science of description; a science of generic design, and a science of complexity [34].

In thinking about human development we quickly recognize that, throughout the ages, different individuals and groups have conceptualized the 'problems' of development in different ways, depended on their experience and the reasons they have provided for what it is they have experienced. Echoing Schopenhauer, there is no denying the inevitability of death or the fact that ageing is associated with biological decline, but the way in which people deal with death and the way in which they adapt to decline varies considerably within the population [67].

The history of thinking in relation to human ageing has always reflected a sentimental preference for one set of facts and relations over another set. We can contrast Seneca's solemn observation in the first century AD that *senectus morbidus est* (old age is a disease) with Cicero's observation that reflection, force of character, and judgement in middle to late adulthood are the source of great things, not the physical speed, dexterity, or strength of youth. Nevertheless, what modern thinking adds, and modern science in particular, is more thoroughgoing peer review of the facts and relations individual thinkers take into their scheme. As described earlier, we can reject Schopenhauer's view on the grounds that it simply ignores the science of human ageing, but the "problem" of ageing still remains: only now the facts and relations relevant to a description of the problem (and the various descriptions of the problem itself) have changed. For example, not only has our cultural evolution facilitated the demographic transition toward longer life – and significantly so since Schopenhauer's time -- it has driven a process whereby the answers provided by science about the nature of human development have become increasingly complex. This fact, in and of itself, has changed the description of "the problem" of ageing.

Promoting the good life

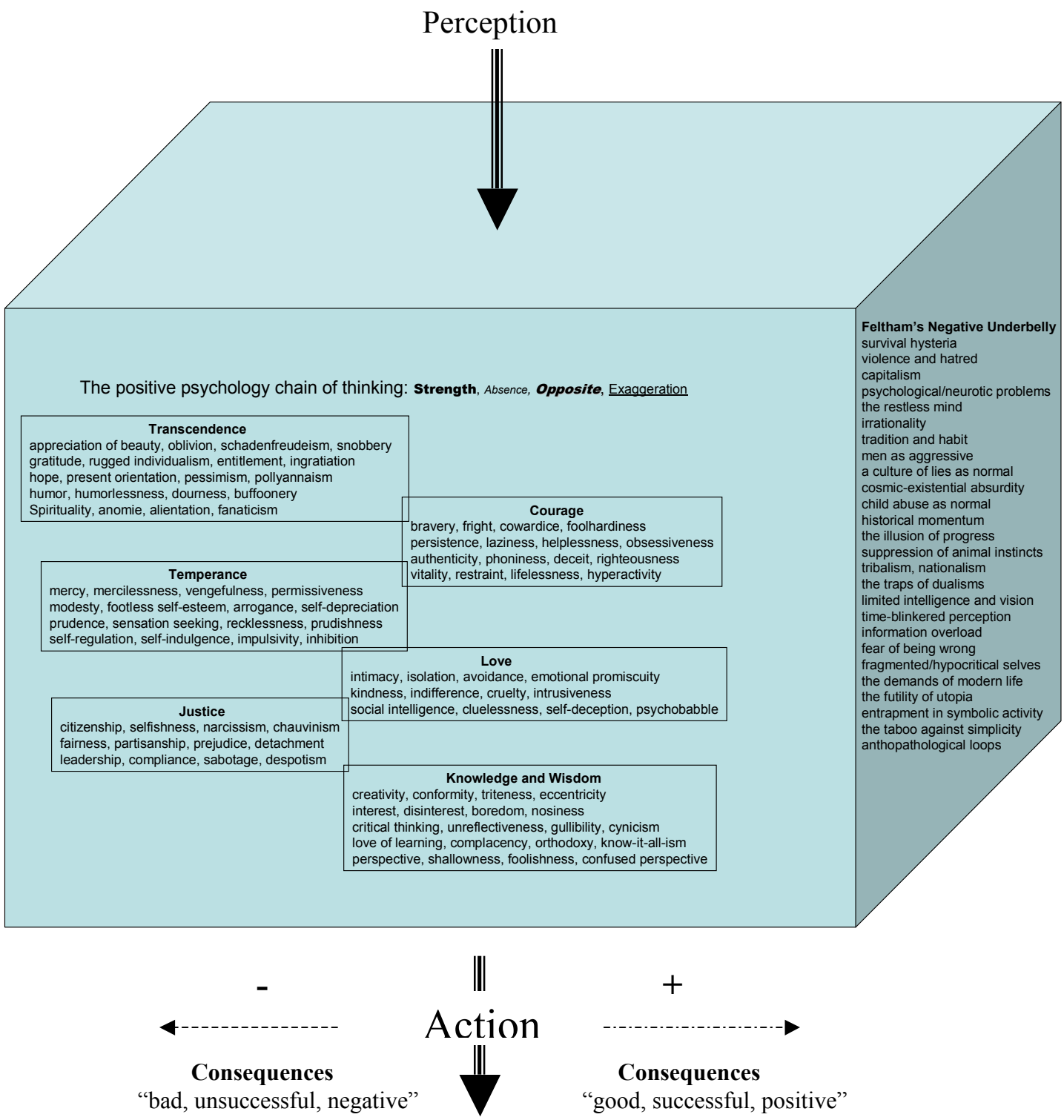
Good and evil are ever-present and they invariably clash. When it comes to descriptions of human nature, we can observe this clash of sentiments throughout the history of thought [68], as often highlighted in the popular contrast between the thinking of Jean Jacque-Rousseau (good, noble savage) and Thomas Hobbes (evil, savage brute). Nevertheless, many 20th century personality psychologists tried to avoid sentiment and ethical proclamations. Gordon Allport, one of the founding-fathers of modern personality theory, was very explicit in drawing a distinction between character and personality psychology: character is personality evaluated, whereas personality is character devaluated, and therefore character is a term more relevant for ethics and philosophy than for psychology [69].

And one can certainly argue that Allport's distinction is valid, but is it useful? If we view the mind as a decision-making organ with other-regarding preferences [70], then is not the skill of evaluating good action from bad action critical for survival, adaptation, and flourishing and thus relevant for personality development [71, 72]? Outside of the psychology laboratory, do we not consider 'character' as equivalent to 'personality' (or simply fail to inhibit our evaluation of the quiet introvert at the party and the vocal extravert at the centre for silent meditation), and did not evolution design brains to evaluate personalities for a reason? Yes, our evaluation of others may be inherently

limited and biased, but doesn't evolutionary science support the idea that our tendency to evaluate the 'moral character' of others was somehow selected for in the process of gene-culture co-evolution, and is not a culture of evaluated action part of the gel that supports effective group functioning in the long term [70, 73-75]? So is it really useful to try and avoid the merger of personality psychology and character psychology?

Perhaps the answer is no. Perhaps avoidance itself is futile and dysfunctional [76]. Nevertheless, now that personality psychology and character psychology search for peaceful co-existence [25, 77], the big question still remains: how exactly will psychologists conceive of character in a culture of scrupulous psychological science?

There are no easy answers [78], and worldview differences will certainly play a role every time we set out to evaluate and solve our personal, social, and scientific 'problems' [43, 53, 70]. It is also clear that simply *looking* into Pandora's Box does nothing to solve our problems. It is only when looking informs action that solutions to problems manifest. And in the cycle of perception and action, much depends on your goal. What exactly is your problem?



Let's define the problem!

Erik Erickson once described wisdom as a kind of "informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself" [79], but he noted how difficult it is to achieve the balance that wisdom entails:

"If the antipathic counterpart of wisdom is disdain, this (like all antipathies), must up to a point be recognized as a natural and necessary reaction to human weakness and to the deadly repetitiveness of depravity and deceit. Disdain, in fact, is altogether denied only at the danger of indirect destructiveness and more or less hidden self-disdain." (ibid., p. 64)

Although very different from the definition of wisdom developed by Paul Baltes, which emphasizes having access to unified system of knowledge and the related pragmatics of action that underlie the resolution of problematic situations [80], Erickson's definition of wisdom as a human strength *developed as a reaction to human weakness* is by no means irreconcilable with the thinking of Baltes and colleagues. A merger of the two definitions suggests a knowledgeable person aware of human weakness who acts with neutral equanimity to resolve problematic situations and thus foster human adaptive strength. In other words, being *detached* in Erikson's definition does not necessarily imply Daoist non-intervention, much like *having access to unified system of knowledge and the related pragmatics of action that underlie the resolution of problematic situations* in Baltes' definition does not imply overt action. A wise person may select strategic action or non-action as the best solution to a problematic situation.

Wisdom is presumably a skill worth cultivating as we work to evaluate and solve our problems. And perhaps Martin Seligman possesses wisdom: he recognises and reacts to human weakness but chooses to focus all his efforts on fostering human strength[x]. Perhaps Colin Feltham possesses wisdom: he expends considerable energy cataloguing human weaknesses before circumspectly examining proposed solutions. But perhaps neither possesses wisdom, because neither chooses to think in a coherent way or work to develop a unified system of knowledge and the related pragmatics of action that aids in the resolution of problematic situations. But maybe it is enough to initiate the inquiry -- the transdisciplinary study of the pervasive and incorrigibly dysfunctional aspects of human beings and human societies, and the science that seeks to understand positive emotion, build strength and virtue, and provide guideposts for finding the "good life" -- and then let others develop the science of description and the science of action that helps us resolve problematic situations. Let's be fair: history tells us that we cannot expect one person to do everything!

Linguistic Adjustments: Replace "The Problem" with "The Problem Set"

More so than any other subject, history reveals to us the consequences of various attempts by human beings to adapt to the contingencies of their world. The writing of history, says Michel Foucault, involves extrapolating from fragmentary information that certain activities transpired. The historian must hypothesize what problems the actors were trying to resolve by engaging in these activities. Given that multiple problems can motivate selected actions, Foucault uses the term "problematique" to communicate the idea of the overall description of a situation. History, then, is the narrative reconstruction of the problems that individuals and groups were striving to solve along with a description of the methods they used to solve their problems.

Problems are ever-present, but science needs to provide more than a narrative reconstruction of the current set of problems that individuals and groups are striving to solve. If we consider Colin Feltham's long list of anthropathological problems and then add the central problem identified by positive psychologists -- although we value happiness, we have focused the majority of our attention on alleviation of negative psychological outcomes -- and then extrapolate from this central problem, adding to Feltham's list, the set of scientific problems that are generated as a result of our attempts to understand and foster positive emotions, character strengths, and human virtues, we soon have a very long list of problems indeed! But without some cross-talk between the anthropathologists, the positive psychologists, and other psychologists with an understanding of systems science, it appears that all we have to work with here is, at best, a complex problem field -- at worst, a conceptual mess.

And it is easy at this point to be reminded of some of Colin Feltham's pathologies**:** irrationality; tradition and habit; the scarcity of intelligence and vision; entrapment in symbolic activity; and enmeshment in anthopathological loops, where there is inevitable frustration associated with every attempt to solve our problems, with the endless production of solutions that are as bad if not worse than the original malady. In the absence of linguistic adjustments and systems science methods that help us to find order and logic in complexity, science itself does not necessarily help us to solve our problems.

When dealing with complexity, John Warfield suggests that we replace "The Problem" with "The Problem Set". He notes that the often-repeated statement "let's begin by defining the problem" is often the opening scene of an evolving linguistic nightmare. A "problem" can mean each and all of the following:

> a) A **human construct** arising when an individual asserts a condition that the individual finds unsatisfactory, requiring corrective action–a condition which may often be intangible
> b) A **component of a set** of problems (which *cannot* also be called "the" problem, if dialogue is to be coherent, since one needs to discuss individual problems *and* the set of problems in the same linguistic context, along with relationships among members of the set)
> c) A **component of a structure** in which an interrelationship among the problems is shown by means of a graphic called a **problematique**. [39]

And although Warfield has developed systems science methods and technology that allows groups to work toward a consensus and develop problematiques that inform coherent and effective action for the group [43] the majority of psychologists are simply unaware of systems science and its potential. Instead, when we look at Colin Feltham's thinking, and much of the thinking of positive psychologists, we soon recognise that it is largely incoherent and useless as a guide for effective action.

Many positive psychologists do at least have a clear goal in mind – to increase life satisfaction – and it is likely that even in the absence of any true understanding of the dynamics of strength and weakness they will discover many different ways to achieve their goal and proclaim their success. However, with no clear goal in mind, and with no method for developing the "problematique" that informs how best to achieve this goal,

Colin Feltham's noble effort at cataloguing and raising awareness of human weaknesses and the significant role that these weaknesses play in the bigger picture of human adaptation, amounts to something of a pointless exercise. The solution for Feltham is to consider one goal or a related set of key, specific goals and then map out the "problematique" that informs how best to achieve the goal(s). Perhaps then it will become clear that we are dealing with dysfunctional aspects of human beings and human societies that are open to change, or not, and perhaps then we will find that the solutions are simple, or not. There is nothing in the field of applied systems science that says it should be otherwise.

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[i] We have to be careful at this point to distinguish soft systems methodology 38. Checkland, P., *Soft systems methodology: A thirty year retrospective.* Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 2000. **17**: p. S11-S58. from hard systems methodology 34. Warfield, J.N., *A Proposal for Systems Science.* Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 2003. **20**: p. 507 - 520. and systems *thinking* from systems *science* 36. Siu, R.G.H., *The Tao of science : an essay on Western knowledge and Eastern wisdom*. 1957, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press. xii, 180, 39. Warfield, J.N., *Linguistic Adjustments: Precursors to Understanding Complexity.* Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 2004. **21**: p. 123 - 145.. Systems scientists dislike the fluidity of certain forms of systems thinking, but the history of systems thinking makes it difficult for any one group to define the systems thinking niche. The solution to the conflict of dualisms represented in Figure 1 is to bring thinking under the quality control of applied systems science. This allows for the products of thinking to be utilized in the context of a generic science of description, complexity, generic design, and action. People differ in their approach to generating knowledge, but this does not mean that the knowledge generated cannot be synthesized and put to good use. Note also, the application of Q-technique factor analysis would illustrate individual variations in the core factor structure described by Coan, who used F-technique FA to analyze response patterns at the level of the group (see Coan, 1968 for further details).

[ii] Confucius described the cycle from outsight to insight to outsight thus:

> The ancients, who wished to preserve the clear and good character of the world, first set about to regulate their national life. In order to regulate their national life, they cultivated their family life. In order to cultivate their family life, they rectified their personal life. In order to rectify their personal life, they elevated their heart. In order to elevate their heart, they made their will sincere. In order to make their will sincere, they enlightened their mind. In order to enlighten their mind, they conducted research. Their research being conducted, their mind was enlightened. Their mind enlightened, their will was made sincere. Their will being sincere, their heart was elevated. Their heart being elevated, their personal life was rectified. Their personal life being rectified, their family life was cultivated. Their family life being cultivated, their national life was regulated. Their national life being regulated, the good and clear character of the world was preserved and peace and tranquillity reigned thereafter. 36.Siu, R.G.H., *The Tao of science : an essay on Western knowledge and Eastern wisdom*. 1957, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press. xii, 180..

[iii] Again, by arranging conflicts in an abstracted system thus does not imply that these conflicts operate in the minds of all thinkers. Some thinkers see no conflict, for example, between the qualitative and quantitative methodologies 45. Dawson, T.L., K.W. Fischer, and Z. Stein, *Reconsidering qualitative*

and quantitative research approaches: A cognitive developmental perspective. New Ideas in Psychology, 2006. **24**(3): p. 229-239.. However, it is futile to ignore the conceptual conflicts deeply rooted in the language of science itself 39. Warfield, J.N., *Linguistic Adjustments: Precursors to Understanding Complexity.* Systems Research and Behavioral Science, 2004. **21**: p. 123 - 145.. Also, factor analytical studies suggest that thinkers gravitate toward the left or the right of figure 1 35. Coan, R.W., *Dimensions of psychological theory.* American Psychologist, 1968. **23**(10): p. 715-722..

[iv] Sonja Lyubomirsky and Martin Seligman differ somewhat in terms of published perspectives, and it is useful at this point to consider the ideas of the founding father of positive psychology, because his thinking continues to influence the field.

[v] The heritability of well-being 55. Lykken, D. and A. Tellegen, *Happiness is a stochastic phenomenon.* Psychological Science, 1996. **7**(3): p. 186-189., the stability of personality 56. McCrae, R.R. and P.T. Costa, *Personality in adulthood : a five-factor theory perspective*. 2nd ed. 2003, New York, NY ; London: Guilford Press. xii, 268 p., and hedonic adaptation 57. Frederick, S., & Loewenstein, G. , *Hedonic adaptation.* , in *Well-being: The foundations of hedonic psychology* D. Kahneman, E. Diener, and N. Schwarz, Editors. 1999, Russell Sage Foundation: New York. p. 302-329. . do not imply that emotion is fixed. People respond emotionally to life circumstances and as a consequence of the way they adapt to the contingencies of living. Research suggests that happy people think and behave in ways that reflect and shape their ongoing positive emotion. For example, happy people retrospectively evaluate life experiences as more pleasant than do their less happy peers; when asked to evaluate hypothetical situations, they rate these situations more positively; and they rate strangers more positively, too, expressed a stronger interest in becoming friends with the stranger 58. Lyubomirsky, S. and K.L. Tucker, *Implications of individual differences in subjective happiness for perceiving, interpreting, and thinking about life events.* Motivation and Emotion, 1998. **22**(2): p. 155-186.. The self-perceptions of happy people are less vulnerable to social comparisons -- they do not seem to mind when other people do better than them on performance tasks and, unlike unhappy people, they do not experience more positive emotion when others do worse than them 59.

Lyubomirsky, S. and L. Ross, *Hedonic consequences of social comparison: A contrast of happy and unhappy people.* Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1997. **73**(6): p. 1141-1157.. When asked to choose between a range of desserts, happy people tend to be more satisfied with all of their available options 60. Lyubomirsky, S. and L. Ross, *Changes in attractiveness of elected, rejected, and precluded alternatives: A comparison of happy and unhappy individuals.* Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1999. **76**(6): p. 988-1007.; and happy people are more likely to "satisfice" – satisfied with an option that is "good enough," without concern for alternative, potentially better options 61.

Schwartz, B., et al., *Maximizing versus satisficing: Happiness is a matter of choice.* Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2002. **83**(5): p. 1178-1197.– whereas unhappy individuals are more likely to "maximize" their options – by seeking to make the "best" choice. And although maximizers' decisions may ultimately produce objectively superior results (e.g., securing the "best" job possible), maximizers also experience greater regret and diminished well-being relative to satisficers 62. Iyengar, S.S., R.E. Wells, and B. Schwartz, *Doing better but feeling worse - Looking for the "best" job undermines satisfaction.* Psychological Science, 2006. **17**(2): p. 143-150.. The next wave of research in this area will examine the efficacy of various interventions that attempt to make unhappy people think and behave more like happy people, and this is where the idea that *virtue pays* will be tested.

[vi] Pointing to *learned optimism*, a principle method of engaging with reality advocated by positive psychologist, which involves cultivating *positive illusions* that protect us against the bleak realities of living, Feltham suggests that, "Positive psychology is a way of fighting an otherwise epidemic wave of understandable depression but I cannot see how anything built on admitted illusions can command respect or durability." (p. 220). As with other aspects of his anthopathology thesis – specification of sub-problems and sub-solutions – Feltham's analysis is meager. In the absence of sufficient context, it is impossible to know what his criticism of positive psychology amounts to, other than a sentimental preference for the 'bleak realities of living' over the 'illusions' that people use to protect themselves.

[vii] Feltham talks about the "illusion of progress" (p. 17). For example, although psychologists can argue that we now have the ability to relieve and possibly even cure some forms of mental illness, statistics do

not suggest a reduction in the prevalence of mental illness worldwide 63. Murray, C.J.L. and A.D. Lopez, *The global burden of disease : a comprehensive assessment of mortality and disability from diseases, injuries, and risk factors in 1990 and projected to 2020*. Global burden of disease and injury series ; v. 1. 1996: Published by the Harvard School of Public Health on behalf of the World Health Organization and the World Bank. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. xxxii, 990, 64. Lopez, A.D. and Disease Control Priorities Project., *Global burden of disease and risk factors*. 2006, Washington, DC: Oxford University Press; World Bank. xxix, 475 p.

[viii] These are empirical questions, but consider the increase in life satisfaction generated as a result of experiencing 'the flow state' while working to rehabilitate a physical weakness (a broken arm). Consider the difference in terms of an increase in life satisfaction between daily exercising your greatest strength in Peterson and Seligman's 24-strength scheme (e.g. creativity) and daily working on your greatest weakness (e.g. kindness).

[ix] For example, by focusing on the 'psychological strength' *behind* any behaviour, positive psychologists deemphasise direct analysis of the context of the behaviour, the behaviour itself, and the consequences of the behaviour, thus inhibiting a thorough test of their assumption *that the strength contributes to various fulfilments*. Also, by emphasising the assumed strength in the action rather than the action itself, they set up an unnecessary and somewhat confusing mediational model. Notably, for any given action **X** in context **Y**, any reading of the action as a good example of a *psychological strength in action*, say creativity, fails to recognise that the same action may be judged to demonstrate greater or lesser strength across many other dimensions, say prudence, modesty, self-regulation, and so on. Also, the context **Y** may call for a higher weighting of some of these other strengths because they are more appropriate to the situation. For example, a successful outcome **Z** may depend on *moderate* creativity and *high* self-regulation, rather than *high* creativity and *moderate* self-regulation, but this would depend on the nature of the goal being pursued. Furthermore, by adding all 24 strengths listed in the scheme developed by positive psychologists, we can assume that for any given action **X** in context **Y**, it is invariably the case that, even when a person thinks they are acting with strength and good intentions (for self and others), the action itself will be rated low on some critical strengths and higher on others, depending on what exactly it is the person does in context **Y**. Naturally, whether or not outcome **Z** is rated as a fulfilment by the person will likely depend on the degree of congruence between the goals being pursued (i.e., why the person thinks they should act one way or the other) and the consequences of the action performed, but the classification of outcome **Z** as a fulfilment will also depend on how others judge the person's action and the feedback (i.e., interpersonal consequences) the person experiences – feedback which is difficult to predict in advance because the actor may have no way or knowing if their goals and good intentions correspond with the goals and good intentions of those around them. More generally, the definition of a fulfilment as a fulfilment depends on contextual feedback, and as the context changes the consequences of any given pattern of strength and weakness will change, thus potentially transforming strengths into weaknesses by virtue of the lesser fulfilments they produce.

[x] If Christopher Peterson is right, then the ultimate positive science (of action) needs the perspective of those who focus on strengths and those who focus on weaknesses: Peterson (2006) modifies earlier views advocating that positive psychologists "not try to improve character weaknesses (lesser strengths) but instead try to burnish their signature strengths (Seligman, 2002)...[because] given that certain strengths of character are robustly associated with life satisfaction…it is glib to advise you to forget about them." (p. 196).