

Citation: Hogan, M. J. (2005). The way of the positive psychologist. Review of William C. Compton "Introduction to positive psychology". *PsychCRITIQUES – Contemporary Psychology: APA Review of Books*, (50) 44

The way of the positive psychologist

An introduction to positive psychology

By William C. Compton

Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005. 276 pp. ISBN 0-534-64453-8

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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 (Siu, 1957). The way we look influences what we see, and our perspective shifts in time as we strive to adapt to Nature.

The way of the positive psychologist begins with the observation that, although we value human happiness, we have focused the majority of our attention on alleviation of negative psychological outcomes. So what happens when the focus of attention shifts away from negative emotion, character weakness and human vice? How will this executive control over action influence the act of seeing? Each thinker must observe themselves. Will you, for example, acquire the insight and perspective of the Zen master who said, *my seeing is always to see my own errors; my non-seeing is to not see the evils of people in the world?* Will 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 you delve deeper into the complexity of your co-functional insights and outsights, and work to develop understanding of the co-dynamic facts of a living system, where positive emotions act with negative emotions, character strengths act with character weaknesses, and human virtues act with human vices?

Naturally, in optimizing any given path of development, we accept that no pattern of seeing allows us to see everything; we select one act of seeing at a time, and hope the power of the schema generated over time supports successful adaptation.

William Compton introduces us to the vision of positive psychology, with its focus on positive emotions, character strength and virtue, and the institutions that facilitate their development. Advancing on earlier perspectives, Compton recognizes some challenges that lie ahead as the positive psychology movement grapples with developing an integrated understanding of how positive outcomes can emerge, develop adaptive resilience, and be sustained. Nonetheless, although the book provides a very coherent introduction to many of the facts and relations gainfully assimilated as we work to understand positive developmental outcomes, the systems model of human action undergirding the emergence – and developmental change – of the facts and relations, is somewhat lacking. As such – as with the bulk of current positive psychology thinking – the reader must engage their own working memory to build a unified model from the multiplicity of schemas as they read. Further, although some attention is paid to co-dynamic relations between positive and negative emotion, little attention is paid to co-dynamic relations between character strengths and character weaknesses. Having said that, it should be recognized that positive psychology has not yet fully embraced dynamic systems thinking and the thinking of developmental psychology. With few empirical facts available on the structure, process, and function of character strengths, it is not surprising that the co-dynamics of character strengths and character weakness has yet to be considered.

Positive Thinking?

Each generation of psychologists must learn how to think. The historical context of problematic situations changes and the research must go on. Our survival and well-being are a function of how well we adapt, how well we *defend-and-grow*, how well we think. Aesthetics, sentiments, and formal logic are shaped not only by emotions, moods, personality dispositions, and contexts, but by the goals that emerge from the problematic situations that focus the spotlight of our attention. The positive thinking of positive psychology draws our attention to the goal of promoting the good life, neutralizing negative assumptions that human beings are driven by base motivations, and offering us an appreciation of how highly adaptable human beings can be. Recognizing the importance of positive states of *being* and *doing* for health, well-being, and longevity, the positive psychology movement has invested considerable energy to further our understanding of the biological, psychological, and social antecedents and consequences of these positive states.

In this context, Compton provides a critical and comprehensive overview of central theories and research findings, with insightful discussions on subjective and psychological well-being, optimal performance, love, positive coping and mental health, religion, spirituality and well-being, positive work experiences, and positive community and cultural processes. Compton also does an excellent job of critical evaluation in many sub-domains of positive psychological thinking, such as the role of positive illusions in mental health, how adaptation processes impact emotions in the short- and long-term, the complex action patterns associated with religious and spiritual experiences, etc. At the same time, without broaching the subject area from

a single theoretical frame, there is some redundancy from chapter to chapter as the focus shifts from one dimension of the positive to another.

Also, recognizing cultural relativity and avoiding becoming a prescriptive science, a core positive psychology sentiment is that a focus on “good character” - the strengths, virtues, and positive values of people – is necessary if we are to understand an admirable, fulfilling, good life. However, as is clear from reading Compton’s introduction to positive psychology, the meaning, significance, and functional consequences of a focus on “good character” is still poorly developed. One challenge will involve how best to merge the valuable insights of philosophers – who have, for example, debated the role of aesthetics and sentiment in *good-life-reasoning*, and the semantic distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being – with the oversight of psychologists. Both creativity and care will be needed if the collaborative dialogue of critical and constructive thinking is to proceed toward a common goal. As observed in the I Ching, “The creative is successful; this is beneficial if correct.” Positive thinking is beneficial if correct.

Gestalt Thinking?

It is the goal of science to understand Nature. When merged with the reality and demands of evolution, the significance of this goal is crystallized: both insight and oversight enter the same sphere of action, the inquisitive mind of the scientists alights, and many research endeavours follow, the ultimate aim of which is to optimize the action of human beings in their field of affordances and constraints. The starting point for researchers - at every level, in every sphere - is the study of thinking itself.

If, for example, the goal of the researcher is to intentionally select actions – the gestalt of motivation, emotion, cognition, and behaviour - designed to optimize an outcome, then, the thinking undergirding the selected action is best optimized. In other words, the laws of probability dictate that our thinking on the nature of human action, and our use of this thinking for the optimization of human action, is beneficial if correct. In his closing chapter, Compton points to the need for more developed thinking on how to define a full, rich, and fulfilling life, how recognition and integration of positive and negative attributes will be an important dimension of any such definition, and how a systems theory - with research methods to match - will be necessary if positive psychology is to advance alongside mainstream psychology.

We can look forward with optimism if we accept the intensity of time in our consciousness structure, thus avoiding structural fixation, and allowing for developmental thinking to ground us as we work to understand the structure, process, and function of human action in context. Natural Science is a branch of knowledge by general consent not primarily based on the a priori. Rather it endeavours by observation to follow and trace the “how” of what happens in Nature and proceeds further to generalize about this “how.” According to Sir Charles Sherrington (Sherrington, 1955), one of the founding fathers of systems biology, the vigorous expenditure of energy devoted to this pursuit is just part of the human “zest to live.” Its object is to learn the “how” of Nature for the sake of that “how” itself as being one aspect of “Truth.” *How* does not include statement of whether that “how” is “good” or “bad.” As Sherrington has it, for an infinitesimal fraction of the unthinkably complex whole to pronounce on the excellence of that whole is to commit a trespass against its own intelligence and misconceive its own ethical proportions. His duty is

to the meaning of the whole and how well this striving after Truth may well be of true profit to humanity. The discovery of “how” in science involves mapping the energy of the system onto a correspondent mapping and manipulation of energy by the mind. Thinking, in this sense, unites us with Nature.

Ultimately, the way of the positive psychologist must be to reflect on the nature of living systems - systems where positive emotions act with negative emotions, character strengths act with character weaknesses, and human virtues act with human vices - intra-personally, inter-personally, extra-personally. There is little doubt in my mind that, when working to solve problematic situations, both insight and oversight will be necessary; there is little doubt that, when working to acquire the necessary insight and oversight, a thorough critical and constructive reading of William Compton’s introduction to positive psychology will be beneficial.

References

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Reviewer biography

Michael Hogan graduated with First Class Honours from NUI, Galway. In his undergraduate years he was the PSI's Young Irish Psychologist of the year 1994, while winning the Gold Medal Award in 1st, 2nd and 3rd Arts. His PhD topic was 'A critical analysis of Generalized Slowing and Common Cause Models of Aging' (NUI, Galway, 2000). He continued his research at the University of Toronto and Trinity College Dublin. He was appointed to the staff in NUI, Galway in 2001. Michael is currently under contract by Edwin Mellen Press to write a book entitled 'Aging and Adaptation'. His research interests include the following: Systems Science and Integral Frameworks; Human Action and Development; Dynamic Integration of Cognition and Emotion; Executive Control; Learning and Memory; Electrophysiology of Mind; Modelling Intra-individual Variability; The Cerebellum; Circadian Arousal.

