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A Tale of Two Default Approaches: Some Old Answers for a New Theory

Response to Valerie Tiberius

Kristján Kristjánsson

1. Introduction

Ecumenism between philosophy and psychology is all the rage these days. At worst, it can degenerate into psychologists showering philosophers with a deluge of empirical data (as if philosophers have never been interested in facts about the real world before) or philosophers sitting psychologists on their knees, teaching them some elementary conceptual analysis (as if psychologists have never given any thought to the concept of a “concept”). At best, however, transdisciplinary work of this kind can be mutually enriching and illuminating.

Valerie Tiberius’s careful analysis of a set of problems in positive psychology and how to resolve them clearly falls into the latter category. It is instructive without being patronizing, helpful without being high-handed. Tiberius identifies a “default approach” in positive psychology on the nature of value in general, and the value of well-being in particular. On this default approach, well-being (or happiness) is understood as subjective, either along the familiar lines of hedonic accounts, life-satisfaction accounts, or a synthesis of both (*SWB*). She then observes that much of the current empirical research conducted under the rubric of positive psychology is simply aimed at exploring correlative or causal relationships between certain character qualities (most prominently, virtues), understood behaviorally, and *SWB*. This research seems to yield a lot of data about what is good for people, at least if they care about their well-being – and positive psychologists seem to take that for granted by referring to well-being as “the ungrounded grounder” of all human strivings (Peterson 2006: 75). However, positive psychologists are dead scared of falling into the trap of moralism. They do not want to issue moral prescriptions to people, as that would take them out of the scientific mode by violating the proverbial is–ought distinction. So they seem in the end to want both to have their cake and eat it: produce normative-relevant findings and yet refrain from making normative claims.

Tiberius correctly notices that positive psychologists generally do not want to give a subjective theoretical justification of their well-being recommendations. Sentimentalism (presented as expressivism, emotivism, or projectivism) is at least a respectable, if a seriously

controversial, position in moral theory, but it is not one that positive psychologists typically adopt.¹ They are, however, wary of (Aristotelian) rationalism also, for pretty obvious reasons, having to do with their antipathy towards moralism, paternalism, and elitism. What they end up proposing is, therefore, a somewhat ambivalent position, according to which the objects of their study are not really normative (but simply empirical generalizations about what people happen to value) and no truly prescriptive claims are being issued.² In their own words, positive psychological writings on virtue are “descriptive of what is ubiquitous” rather than “normative” (Peterson and Seligman 2004: 51). However, as Tiberius puts it, this “dodges the problem rather than facing it head on” and “it leaves positive psychologists in a weaker position than they need to accept.”

Most of Tiberius’s paper is taken up with a proposal that is meant to help positive psychology contrive a way out of this slightly awkward dilemma. It takes the form of *constructivism* about value and well-being. Now there are many kinds of constructivism; some would claim that Aristotle’s careful distillation of the views of “the many” and “the wise” about well-being at the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and his attempt to bring those into some sort of reflective equilibrium, amounts to a form of constructivism. However, Aristotle arguably believed that we had reason to trust the *endoxa* (common beliefs) because they tracked objective truth about well-being, not that well-being was simply to be defined in terms of the *endoxa*. In any case, Tiberius relies on a more specific conception of constructivism, as defined for instance by Lenman and Shemmer (2012), according to which constructivism holds that normative claims are justified by a rational procedure guided by ordinary norms that inform our best thinking. Constructivism, on this understanding, “essentially” – as Tiberius puts it – “ignores the metaphysics of value and focuses entirely on the epistemology of reasonable judgment.” She thinks that constructivism is a good bet for positive psychologists because, while it speaks to their subjectivist leanings, it also provides a theoretical justification for normative claims.

¹ Jonathan Haidt might seem to constitute an exception here as some of his work has been associated with positive psychology (see esp. Haidt 2006). However, his recent well-known work on social intuitionism has no apparent connection with positive psychology.

² For some reason, positive psychologists typically insist on this claim in the context of explaining why they refrain from positing a “master virtue,” such as Aristotle’s *phronesis*, to adjudicate virtue conflicts (see e.g. Peterson and Seligman 2004: 51). According to the background theory of motivational internalism which they seem to endorse (see Section 3 below), *specific* moral judgments about the moral good of particular virtues will, however, entail moral prescriptions no less than *general* moral judgments.

As an Aristotelian realist about value (see e.g. Kristjánsson, 2010), I would be tempted to spend the remainder of this response critiquing constructivism. However, that would be self-indulgent and not speak to the aim of the exchange, which is to make sense of – and possibly ameliorate shortcomings in – positive psychological ideas about the nature of value, well-being, and normativity. My alternative strategy will be this, then. In the second section, I question Tiberius’s assumption of a clear subjectivist default approach on well-being in positive psychology. I elicit Seligman’s book *Flourish* (2011) to show how mainstream positive psychology seems to be taking an objectivist turn by drawing, to a greater extent than before, on Aristotelian insights. Rather than remedying the problem about normativity and prescriptivity that Tiberius identified, however, this development seems to exacerbate it, by turning positive psychologists into the sort of moralists they are loathe to be. The root of the problem lies, I argue, in a default approach in positive psychology that is rarely made explicit: motivational internalism. In the final section, I argue how adopting motivational externalism may help positive psychologists attain the best of both worlds: lubricate their gradual move towards Aristotelian realism while staying clear of prescriptive moralism.

2. A Shifting Default Approach on Well-Being

When someone told Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoa, that Theophrastus, the head of the Aristotelian Peripatetic school, had more students than he did, he answered that although Theophrastus’s chorus may be more numerous, his was more harmonious (cited in Knuuttila 2004: 47). This citation often comes to my mind, as a consolation, when I think of the tiny group of Aristotelians to whom Tiberius refers as critics of positive psychology (such as Schwartz and Sharpe 2006; Fowers 2010; Kristjánsson 2013a), compared to the hordes of academics plying their trade as positive psychologists. The latter group comprises an eclectic mixture of people who draw on background normative theories as distinct as Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Buddhism, Benthamite utilitarianism, and even existentialism – theories with a widely varied take on meta-ethical issues regarding subjectivism, objectivism, etc. Is there any convergence in this sea of divergence: any default position on anything apart from the platitude that we should focus on human strengths rather than (just) human weaknesses?

Consider well-being. There is no denying that Diener, to whom Tiberius refers repeatedly, is a subjectivist on well-being (see e.g. Diener, Lucas, and Oishi 2005). Things already become

more complicated, however, with other key players in the movement such as Csikszentmihalyi, Fredrickson, and Duckworth. Csikszentmihalyi is best known for his work on *flow* (1990) which, admittedly, is a sort of pleasure. However, it is not hedonic pleasure but rather a variation on Aristotle's pleasure in unimpeded activities which is, *inter alia*, meant to ice the cake of a flourishing life. Such supervenience of pleasure on virtue is a major theme in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; yet Aristotle is an objectivist about well-being *qua* flourishing (see various references in Kristjánsson 2013a). Fredrickson, who focuses on positive emotions (2009), and Duckworth on grit (2013), are both instrumentalists about value. It may be slightly moot what the values they explore are supposed to be instrumental to – the building of personal resources, health, school attainment, etc. are often mentioned – but instrumentalism in psychology rarely stops with such intermediate goals until it reaches the rock bottom of *SWB* (see Fowers 2010). Hence, Fredrickson and Duckworth can probably be considered to subscribe to what Tiberius calls the default approach.

Things become seriously more complicated, however, with the leading writers in the positive-psychology movement on virtue, Peterson and Seligman, who claim to be pursuing “the social science equivalent of virtue ethics” (2004: 89). One of their explicit criteria of character strengths and virtues (making up the famous 24) is that although those “can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes” (2004: 19). They go on to explain that the strengths/virtues in question are constituents of, rather than just instruments towards, well-being – a leaf apparently taken straight out of Aristotle's book. Little was seen of this assumption in Seligman's original bestseller on *Authentic Happiness* (2002).³ There is a simple reason for that. “I used to think [at that time],” Seligman says, “that the topic of positive psychology was happiness, that the gold standard for measuring happiness was life satisfaction, and that the goal of positive psychology was to increase life satisfaction” (2011: 13).

By 2011, when writing his book *Flourish*, however, he had come to believe that the goal of positive psychology is well-being *qua* flourishing. In fact, he came to “detest” the word “happiness” for “well-being,” which is not only “overused” and “meaningless” but continues to denote mere “merriment” and “good cheer” (2011: 9–10). Subjective approaches to well-being

³ The remainder of this section draws on themes developed in more detail in my *Virtues and Vices in Positive Psychology* (2013a: chap 2).

flounder down this cul-de-sac; for example life-satisfaction “*essentially measures cheerful mood, so it is not entitled to a central place in any theory that aims to be more than a happiology*” (2011: 14; italicized in Seligman’s book for emphasis). Always a list maker, Seligman has now devised a new list for the actual “elements” of well-being, understood as flourishing: “positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships, and accomplishments” (PERMA, see 2011: 16). In this new approach, the intrinsically valuable moral virtues and strengths play a much more prominent role, as they now “underpin” all the PERMA-elements (2011: 24). Despite the emphasis on objective elements in his new approach, Seligman acknowledges that one of the elements – positive emotion – is subjective and that the others incorporate some subjective components. He thus prefers to refer to his well-being approach as pluralistic rather than purely objective. Nevertheless, because (a) Seligman’s insistence that well-being “cannot exist just in your head” (2011: 25) unambiguously distinguishes his new account from subjective ones, and (b) Seligman now considers *all* the elements of flourishing to be underpinned by objective moral virtues, I consider his 2011 approach to come closer to an objective than a subjective one.

Objective elements of well-being had always floated close to the surface of Seligman’s concerns (as well as those of Csikszentmihalyi and Peterson). Now that he – the unquestioned father of the movement – has revamped his account to accommodate them in full force, refusing any further truck with (monistic) subjective well-being approaches,⁴ Tiberius’s assumption of a default subjectivist approach in positive psychology has become increasingly strained. More appropriate characterisations would be to say either that the default approach is shifting towards objectivism (namely, moral realism/naturalism) or, simply, that there is no default approach of the relevant kind within the movement any more but rather just a free-for-all. This does not mean that Tiberius is necessarily barking up the wrong tree. Perhaps Seligman was misguided in going in this new objective direction, and perhaps constructivism is, after all, the most promising approach for positive psychologists to adopt. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Tiberius has misidentified the most immediate problem facing positive psychology as it stands at the moment: namely, in its most recent phase of development.

3. The Real Sticking Point: The Default Approach of Motivational Internalism

⁴ It may seem odd to Aristotelian inclined readers of Seligman’s (2011) book that he still relies essentially on subjective methods (self-report questionnaires) to track the alleged objective features of well-being. That said, we must not conflate issues of substantive criteria with issues of measurement.

Although Kohlberg's star has eclipsed in moral education, he still seems to be about the only moral psychologist routinely mentioned in undergraduate textbooks in psychology. In some ways, it seems fair to say that psychologists still tend to read their moral psychology through a Kohlbergian lens. Through that lens, morality is seen as having with do with justice-based duties towards prosocial actions. More importantly for present purposes, moral language is seen as having unique properties of overridingness and categoricity; after all, Kohlberg was a Kantian. Implicit, but rarely if ever stated, in positive psychological theory about value is Kohlberg's strict (Socratic) motivational internalism – "He who knows the good chooses the good" (1981: 189) – or at least some weaker version of that thesis.

Rearing their heads in positive psychological theory (esp. in Seligman 2002, and Peterson and Seligman 2004) are two standard claims making up, or typically associated with, motivational internalism: (1) If agents sincerely pass moral judgments about the goodness or rightness of act *x*, then – unless they are practically irrational on grounds of a general motivational disorder – they will be at least weakly intrinsically motivated to do *x*; and (2) any sincerely advanced theory about the moral goodness or rightness of act *x* necessarily contains at least a *prima facie* (defeasible) prescription to do *x* (for if a judgement is intrinsically motivating, it necessarily contains a prescription; and all moral prescriptions have motivational force).⁵ If mainstream positive psychologists are really on a trajectory towards Aristotelian realism, as the example of Seligman suggests, as well as continuing to presuppose motivational internalism, they are, however, concocting a potentially lethal mixture for any anti-prescriptivists⁶ on morality and virtue. We only need to point to Socrates or Kant (or to Kohlberg in psychology) to see what a combination of moral realism and motivational internalism does to you.

I have argued elsewhere that Aristotle did not believe in motivational internalism, as typically understood,⁷ and that committed contemporary virtue theorists – be they philosophers or social scientists – need not either. One can, according to motivational externalism, pass factual

⁵ Some motivational externalists (such as Svavarsdóttir 2005) go as far as rejecting the motivational force of moral prescriptions. I find such a radical form of motivational externalism implausible and see no good reason to deny (2). Many of the issues hinted at here are explored in more detail in Miller (2008).

⁶ By anti-prescriptivism I simply mean the view that positive psychologists seem to want to subscribe to, namely that a psychological science of virtue must not issue prescriptions for it to remain a science.

⁷ More specifically, I have argued that, for Aristotle, the assumption of motivational internalism applies only to the moral judgments of the select group of the fully virtuous – not of the continent, let alone of those at lower levels of moral development (see Kristjánsson 2013b; for a more general account of motivational externalism, see Railton 1986). Moreover, recall that, for Aristotle, most ordinary people fall somewhere between the levels of incontinence and continence (1985: 190 [1150a15]).

judgments about the goodness of honesty without intrinsically implying “Be honest!” just as one can pass factual judgments about the badness of smoking without intrinsically implying “Do not smoke!” My view is that, through the internalism that is bread into their bones, positive psychologists typically conflate two senses of normativity: the normative as *evaluative* and the normative as *prescriptive*. It is conceptually possible to abandon Hume’s fact–value distinction and explicitly embrace moral realism as at least some positive psychologists seem to want to do – and to make virtue judgments based on evaluative matters of fact rather than mere empirical judgments about what people happen to regard as virtue – without violating Hume’s is–ought distinction and committing oneself to a prescriptive moral theory.⁸ After all, according to motivational externalism, claiming that *x* is morally good is one thing; prescribing *x* as the right thing to do (even *prima facie*) is quite another.⁹

Consider here the analogy of *health*. Positive psychologists are unafraid to make claims about courses of action conducive to health. No one seems to hold against such claims that they violate the is–ought distinction by providing *prima facie* prescriptions. To the best of my knowledge, no motivational internalism exists about health judgments, at least within psychology.¹⁰ That is, no one has held that such judgments are intrinsically motivating by way of conceptual necessity. By severing the conceptual link between moral judgments (about the virtues, for instance) and intrinsic motivation, we have, therefore, removed the very characteristic of moral judgments that has so far made them hotter for psychological scientists to handle than judgments about health. Indeed, the only consideration ruling out the possibility of the sort of motivationally externalist use of virtue judgments that is seen to be unproblematic in the case of health judgments is the Kantian/Kohlbergian heritage. I suggest positive psychologists get rid of that heritage without delay.

To sum up, my motivation in this response has been much the same as Tiberius’s: to help positive psychologists contrive a way out of their self-imposed dilemma about values and normativity. She takes it for granted that subjectivism about well-being is still the default approach in positive psychology and proposes the option of moral constructivism to rectify the current imbalance in background assumptions. I argued, in response, that positive psychology is

⁸ Because positive psychologists typically conflate the two Humean distinctions, they do not seem to have envisaged this possibility.

⁹ I elaborate on this theme in Kristjánsson 2013a: chap. 4.

¹⁰ In philosophy, however, one should never say never, see Bloomfield 2001.

actually moving towards moral realism but that, because of the implicit default acceptance of motivational internalism, this compounds the dilemma even further. I then suggested some old Aristotelian answers for the new theory. If positive psychologists come to accept that virtue judgments describe a world of moral evaluation, rather than evaluating a world of descriptions, and that evaluative judgments do not necessarily entail prescriptions, they will have gone a long way towards making their “social science equivalent of virtue ethics” more rigorous and plausible.

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