

Positive psychology and philosophy-as-usual: An unhappy match?

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Introduction

Twenty years ago, positive psychology started off with the goal of redressing the bias towards the negative and pathological which is widely found in psychology. Even though a similar goal had already been pursued for several decades by humanistic psychology, the need for a new positive psychology was felt because of the perceived shortcomings of humanistic psychology in terms of rigorous science.

We well recognize that positive psychology is not a new idea. It has many distinguished ancestors, and we make no claim of originality. However, these ancestors somehow failed to attract a cumulative, empirical body of research to ground their ideas. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 13)

This holds even more so with regard to the relationship of positive psychology with philosophy and religion. When, for example, Mihaly Csikszentmihaly tried to understand why some people managed to display serenity and keep their integrity and purpose despite the chaos of World War II, he observed that

[r]eading philosophy and dabbling in history and religion did not provide satisfying answers to that question. I found the ideas in these texts to be too subjective, to be dependent on faith or to be dubious assumptions; they lacked the clear-eyed skepticism and the slow cumulative growth that I associated with science. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 7)

Hence, being *scientific* is an essential part of the *raison d'être* of the field of positive psychology.

Recently, the focus of attention has shifted somewhat, so that the nature of the “positive” in positive psychology has become the primary subject of current debate (for example, (Kashdan, Biswas-Diener & King 2008; Vittersø 2016; Alexandrova 2017; Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan & Kauffman 2017; Kristjánsson 2018; Thorsteinsen & Vittersø 2020)), with contributions not only from psychologists but also from philosophers. In particular, Intelisano et al. (2020) noted interest in integrating the two disciplines, added that philosophers have been interested in happiness and well-being since the Hellenic period, and asserted that ‘the terms ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’ refer to highly distinct philosophical traditions but are used interchangeably by some researchers of both disciplines’. (p.161f) These authors also referred to philosophical theories of well-being as being ‘normative’ in contrast to philosophical theories of happiness, which they referred to as descriptive, with this distinction in turn apparently being different from that between hedonic and eudaimonic accounts in psychology (p.162). In this, Intelisano et al. (2020) evidently take it as a given that research integrating philosophy and psychology is desirable or maybe even necessary, without stating *why* this should be the case. But, as Alexandrova (2017, xv) observed, ‘It is no good

clamouring for a greater attention to philosophy if philosophy does not have much to offer.’ This sets the topic of the present paper: what, if anything, has *philosophy* to offer to the *science* of positive psychology?

The answer to the previous question depends of course to some extent on what philosophy is. A comprehensive discussion of this is way beyond what is possible in this paper; it seems nevertheless safe to assume that conceptual clarification would be a major part of it, given that, on one hand, philosophers tend to see this as a skill central to their trade, and on the other hand this frequently constitutes the basis of philosophical criticisms of positive psychology: Statements like ‘Philosophers often prioritise conceptual rigour (and the study of conceptual relations)’ (Kristjánsson 2018, 541), or ‘although conceptual analysis has come under pressure in recent years, it is still the standard procedure in mainstream analytic philosophy, to the extent that there is a standard procedure’ (Overgaard, Gilbert & Burwood 2013, 71) illustrate the first claim, while examples for the second are provided by Kristjánsson (2018, 542) attesting ‘terminological disarray’ in the field of wellbeing research, and Nussbaum (2008, S108) accusing it of being ‘riddled with conception confusion’.

Many psychologists are indeed aware that terms like happiness, wellbeing, and *eudaimonia* have been used in multiple ways (see for example Vittersø (2016, Table 1.2 on p.10f)) as well as of the difficulty in translating the ancient Greek term *eudaimonia* into contemporary English (Vittersø 2016, 7f). Thus, it would not be surprising if many positive psychologists indeed have faith in the idea that philosophers contribute value through the necessary enforcement of conceptual rigour.

Purpose of the first part of the present paper is to pour cold water on this idea.¹ This is done by pointing out important examples of failures by philosophers to apply conceptual rigour to positive psychology concepts like the contemporary term ‘flow,’ or even to philosophical terms like ‘normativity.’ The emphasis will be on the discussion of putative differences between *eudaimonia* and ‘happiness.’ In addition, some of the current challenges to usual philosophical methodology are recalled, challenges which most psychologists may not be aware of. Finally, the paper very briefly sketches how an alternative to philosophy-as-usual may be conceived in order to obtain a mutually beneficial relationship between philosophy and positive psychology.

Conceptual rigour through philosophy-as-usual?

Example 1: “Flow” and the concordance thesis

Background

It is a widely (but far from unanimously) held belief that there is an important dichotomy between positive emotion and/or positive cognitive evaluation of one's life on the one hand, and ‘flourishing’ on the other. Here, flourishing is often understood along the lines of Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* (which in turn is related to the ancient Greek *arete*, which means *excellence* but is often (mis-)translated as ‘virtue’²). In addition, emotions and cognitions are often viewed as subjective forms of well-being, supposedly distinct from allegedly objective *flourishing*.

Recently, Kristjánsson (2018) argued against one attempt by the philosopher Julia Annas to bridge this apparent divide, an attempt which was based on Aristotle's suggestion that virtuous activity is

1 What exactly this amounts to will be discussed in the final section.

2 Adkins (1978, 297) : ‘*arete* denoted and commends "excellence," not "virtue"’; Urmson (1990, 30) : ‘*aretê*: excellence or goodness of any kind. [...] *aretê* is commonly translated virtue, a transliteration of the Latin *virtus*, but neither *aretê* nor *virtus* means virtue, except in such archaising expressions as ‘the virtues of the internal combustion engine’

pleasant to the mature virtuous person. (Annas 2008; Annas 2011) According to Annas, this suggestion can be understood in terms of the psychological concept of flow:

The virtuous person, like the expert in a practical skill, responds dynamically to challenges, but this is, we may think, experienced in action as a selfless kind of flow. (Annas 2008, 33)

Referring to work by Besser-Jones (2012), Kristjánsson claimed that truly virtuous activities are not likely to produce flow, and in addition provided four examples that he believed to be counterexamples to what he called the 'concordance thesis': flourishing (Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, supposedly an objective version of wellbeing) and happiness (positive affect and/or satisfaction with life, supposedly subjective forms of wellbeing), when correctly conceptualised, go hand in hand.

Indeed, as presented in Annas (2008), Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is a sufficient condition of living happily, as it is conducive to experiencing flow in that

virtuous activity, as opposed to merely self-controlled activity, is pleasant, not in involving extra feelings but in being unimpeded by contrary impulses, and in harmony with all of the person's thoughts and feelings. In the virtuous, virtuous activity can be thought of as an example of 'flow' because it is an unforced expression of the person's reasoning and feelings, in harmony with the rest of her character and structured system of goals (p.30).

Against this, Besser-Jones (2012) claimed that flow states demand a balance of challenge and skill, so that

[f]low experiences occur when individuals engage in complex and challenging activities that test one's capacities [...] cognitive engagement is crucial, as part of the enjoyment lies in the exercise of her intellect—in the problem-solving (p.96)

and concluded from this that most virtuous activities are not the kinds of things that generate flow experiences.

Along similar lines, and partly based on this, Kristjánsson (2018) asserted that

most of the virtuous activities that Aristotle sees as flourishing-constituting are pretty dull and uninspiring in themselves [and] not likely to produce flow, (p.546)

which, according to Kristjánsson, provides a strong counterargument to the concordance thesis. In addition, Kristjánsson presented four supposed counterexamples to this concordance thesis: three of them purely fictional, the sole non-fictional one being Ludwig Wittgenstein. These examples will be discussed later, after exploring the conceptualizations of flow in the psychological literature, and their implications.

Disambiguating 'flow'

This section argues that the psychological literature uses the term "flow" to denote a number of different concepts. This observation is not entirely new, but seems to be widely ignored even though highly relevant to the present topics.

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, the founder of what is today usually known as *flow theory*, a theory of intrinsic motivation which was based on the study of human activities that are not primarily driven by the expectation of external rewards, but were done rather for the sheer enjoyment of doing them.

(Csikszentmihalyi 1975) Interview studies in various populations world wide led him to the conclusion that the descriptions of what makes an experience enjoyable were similar even though “what the [interviewees] did to experience enjoyment varied enormously—the elderly Koreans liked to meditate, the teenage Japanese liked to swarm around in motorcycle gangs.” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 48) At first, he called this the *autotelic* experience, later “to use more accessible language” (Csikszentmihalyi 2012), *flow*. Csikszentmihalyi (1999) again identified flow with the autotelic experience and also stressed the importance of the *autotelic personality*, “those who have such flow experiences relatively often, *regardless of that they are doing*” (p.824, emphasis added). In fact, his studies “have suggested that happiness depends on whether a person is able to derive flow from whatever he or she does.” (p.825) He furthermore claims that flow is necessary to happiness (compare also Tse, Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi (2020)).

As noted in the introduction, early attempts in psychology to study human flourishing, for example in humanistic psychology, were criticised for lack of scientific rigour. Psychology as a science rightly places importance on empirical research and experimental validation of theories. In order to make the flow concept amenable to experiments it was necessary to operationalize the flow construct by constructing models of it. The simplest flow model describes flow as the state in which one is neither anxious nor bored because “skills” and “challenges” are perceived as being roughly equal, later models added more states like apathy (when skills and challenges match, but are both at a low level), or divide “anxiety” into anxiety proper, worry, and arousal as well as “boredom” into boredom, relaxation, and control. (Moneta 2012)

Kawabata and Mallett (2016) pointed out a number of conceptual problems in the literature on flow, including problems with the notion of challenge as used in flow theory. Specifically concerning the skills-challenges balance, Landhäußer and Keller (2012) noted that in most cases, researchers purportedly investigating flow actually investigated correlates and consequences of skills-demands compatibility – which is a precondition of flow, not the flow experience itself. They then point out that

researchers seem to equalize the precondition of flow [...] with the experience itself [...] Because the association between the preconditions of flow and the experience itself is definitely not deterministic [...] this is problematic. [...] a measure of skills-demands balance should not be used (or interpreted) as a measure of the flow experience per se.

Consistent with this, a meta-analysis (Fong, Zaleski & Leach 2015) of the relationship between skills-demands balance and flow experiences revealed it to be only moderate. This fact is even more problematic since sometimes the skills-demands balance is often referred to as a characteristic of (rather than a precondition for) the flow experience, for example in Csikszentmihalyi (1990). In fact, even calling it a “precondition” seems inappropriate since it misleadingly suggests necessity for, rather than just raising the probability of, a flow experience happening; and also because flow conditions differ across models. (Nakamura, Dwight & Shankland 2019, 174) In short, flow is related to, but should not be defined via, perceived skills and demands during an activity.

In fact, the term flow has been used to refer to many related but distinct concepts, including:

- a) the experience of autotelic (intrinsically motivated) behaviour;
- b) optimal experience, which in turn has several definitions including
 - i. inner harmony (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 24) (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 39) ,
 - ii. a ‘complex and positive state characterized by deep involvement and absorption, supporting personal growth, well-being and optimal functioning in daily life’ (Delle Fave & Bassi 2016, 3), and

- iii. the experience ‘where action becomes automatic and conscious thought seems to meld together with the action itself’ (Järvilehto 2016, 95);
- c) the experience of total involvement in what one is doing (Jackson 2016);
- d) being ‘beyond boredom and anxiety’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1975), or beyond arousal, control, relaxation, boredom, apathy, worry, and anxiety. (e.g., (Bassi & Fave 2016));
- e) action following upon action according to an internal logic needing no recognizable external intervention by the actor which is experienced as a unified flowing from moment to moment (Nakamura et al. 2019) referring to Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 36);
- f) skill-demand balance, e.g., (Baumann 2012).

Rather than asking what is the ‘right’ definition of flow, the issue here is which way of understanding ‘flow’ is relevant to the discussion of wellbeing and *eudaimonia*. Here it seems clear that Aristotle was interested in autotelic experience: *eudaimonia* is desired for its own sake (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics* book 1.5), and the mature virtuous person enjoys inner harmony:

Aristotle famously expresses this as the difference between the virtuous and the merely ‘enclatic’ or continent person, who acts in the same way as the virtuous, but is not yet virtuous, because acting virtuously comes up against his feelings and attachments. (Annas 2011, 67)

Therefore, the notion of flow relevant in the present context is that of autotelic optimal harmonious experience. Skill-demand balance, in particular, is only an enabling condition making flow more likely, but is not identical to the flow state. (Nakamura et al. 2019, 174)

Concept clarification failure

In light of the above discussion, Besser-Jones’ and Kristjánsson’s criticisms of Annas’ work seem cases of the widespread confusion between enabling conditions of flow and the flow experience itself: There is no reason why a mature virtuous person should not be able to experience flow while ‘keeping one’s promises, helping someone pick up papers she has dropped on the sidewalk, being a whistleblower, loaning money to a friend, raising money to help victims of natural disasters, and so on’ (Besser-Jones, 2012, 100). After all, as seen above, an autotelic personality ‘has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances’ and ‘derive flow from whatever he or she does,’ hence also when picking up dropped papers. In fact, there is even a questionnaire that allows measurement of flow proneness in maintenance activities (e.g., chores) by Ullén et al. (2012). Table 3 in that paper seems to suggest that in such activities flow proneness may be about as widespread as in work or leisure activities. This is not meant to deny that finding flow in activities which most of us most of the time find boring or anxiety-provoking may be difficult; but difficult does not imply impossible. All one can conclude is that autotelic personalities and mature virtuous persons are rare – but that is neither news nor a good reason to resign oneself to lower standards.³

There are more problems with the accounts by Besser-Jones and Kristjánsson. In the former case, she gives the example of a rock climber and asserts that in all flow experiences “cognitive engagement is crucial, as part of the enjoyment lies in the exercise of [the] intellect.” There may indeed be activities that involve heavy use of the intellect and still allow flow experiences (playing chess comes to mind as a possible example), but this seems already doubtful about rock climbing: do you really cognitively figure out which grip will bear your weight? Not to mention that many

³ Aristotle seems to see this the same way, see EN 1177b31-1178a4.

flow experiences, for example while dancing Tango Argentino, or while hiking a long-distance trail, seem to have nothing to do with exercising the intellect. In fact, flow has been discussed as prototypically non-deliberative 'type 1' information processing (see below).

Overall, one has to conclude that the arguments provided by Besser-Jones and Kristjánsson against Annas' account of virtue and flow are unconvincing. This alone of course does not imply that Annas is right, a fuller evaluation would necessitate discussing the merits of the skills analogy. This, and topics like the 'unity of virtue' thesis, are nevertheless not the focus of the present paper. Nor is it intended as a full discussion of the flow concept(s), for a more complete discussion see for example Abuhamdeh (2020). What it does establish is that ambiguity in the flow concept could be found in the literature for decades already before Besser-Jones and Kristjánsson, two highly regarded philosophers, failed to analyse the concept of flow, despite it being central to their argument. This is relevant in the present context as this is not an exclusively inter-philosophical problem: Kristjánsson (2018) appeared in a psychology journal.

Assuming that the above is right, it might conceivably be objected that 'flow' is a psychological concept, so that it is unfair to expect philosophers to deal with it rigorously. Therefore, the following sections discuss examples of philosophers paying insufficient attention to the intricacies of what appear to be concepts central to the *philosophy* of wellbeing and which are claimed to be relevant to psychology as well.

Example 2: "Objective wellbeing"

According to Kristjánsson (2018, 541), accounts of wellbeing typically 'congeal into one of the two antitheses of *subjectivism* or *objectivism*,⁴ with subjective accounts supposedly focusing either on pleasure (hedonic accounts) or on life satisfaction, whereas 'objective ones tend to hark back to the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia* – constituting so-called *flourishing* or *eudaimonic* accounts.' According to him, happiness and flourishing correspond reasonably well to subjective and objective wellbeing, respectively.

What is missing is a clear definition of 'objective' and 'subjective.' Kristjánsson does seem to say that some components of models like PERMA, PWB, or SDT (p.542), including 'relationships, engagements, the exercise of capabilities/virtues' (p.543), are objective at least if measured objectively, again without making explicit what is meant by measuring objectively. Nevertheless, the examples provided and the approving reference (p.544) to the classification by MacLeod (2015) may indicate that Kristjánsson has the same usage as MacLeod in mind. Unfortunately, that is quite problematic as it is based on a substantial assumption:

Subjectivity can refer to somewhat differing things. A view can emphasise the importance for well-being of positive feeling states like happiness—someone has high well-being to the extent that they feel happy. Or, subjectivity can be characterised as the extent to which people define their own well-being in whatever way they choose, as opposed to having others define it by reference to external standards. These two aspects can be combined if it is assumed that when people are left to define their own well-being subjectively experienced happiness is central to that definition. (MacLeod 2015, 1075)

This is a highly non-obvious assumption as it implies, for example, that people can not base their subjective appraisal of their wellbeing on, say, post-traumatic growth (trauma is almost by definition not conducive to positive feeling states even after the fact), while many view such growth positively at least in retrospect. Nor is it clear why an externally imposed standard would

4 All italics in quotes are in the original, unless otherwise indicated.

necessarily deserve being called objective: What if, for example, the standard is just one person's opinion? That is external, but surely not thereby any less subjective.

What is also confusing is that Kristjánsson (2018, 542) approvingly refers to the 'trenchant critique' by Keyes and Annas (2009), of departures from Aristotle's original notion of eudaimonia, while himself ignoring their observation that the 'distinction between objective and subjective does not map well onto Aristotle' (p.198) —which flatly contradicts the premise of his paper that there is such distinction.

There is another problematic point about Kristjánsson (2018): He professes to believe that counterexamples to his concordance thesis are 'fairly common in daily life' (p.549), but presents only fictitious examples, except for one: Ludwig Wittgenstein. The relevant passage reads

It is almost de rigueur to invoke Wittgenstein as an example of an unhappy flourisher. His famous last words, 'Tell them that I've had a wonderful life' [...] are typically taken to mean that he considered himself to have flourished in life [...] However, by all accounts, he was a grumpy and miserable person with a serious happiness deficit.

I am baffled why this should be a counterexample to the concordance thesis, as such a counterexample would have to show a discrepancy between subjective and objective wellbeing. In the case of Wittgenstein, if he had a serious happiness deficit this might imply low subjective wellbeing (if he himself also perceived such a deficit), but I see nothing whatsoever relating to an objective form of wellbeing: After all, "Tell them that I've had a wonderful life" is in no way no less subjective than "Tell them that I've had a (highly) satisfactory life," and Kristjánsson classifies such life satisfaction statements as subjective wellbeing. Thus if anything, his example speaks *against* his claimed dichotomy between flourishing and subjectivity.

Example 3: "Normativity"

It seems to be *en vogue* to lecture scientists about the allegedly unavoidable "value-ladenness" of the sciences in general, and supposedly intrinsically normative character of positive psychology in particular. This paper will not discuss the claim of general value-ladenness (see author, 2019a, for a critical discussion), it does argue that it is problematic that philosophical contributions tend to neglect providing the necessary clarification as to what concept of normativity they employ:

After all, there seem to be different ways in which the word can be understood. For example, laws of nature are in sense normative: You will obey the law of gravity, whether you want to or not, and whether you are aware of it or not. You have no choice, and human beings never had one. On the other hand, the belief that certain actions be better avoided because otherwise some god will put you in hell for eternity is normative in a different sense: at least in principle you can refuse to obey—unadvisable as this may seem to a believer—and it is only applicable since the time at which humans invented⁵ moralizing gods.

Far less obvious is where the supposed normativity in various theories in contemporary moral philosophy might be coming from, and what exactly it might consist in. For example, what does the 'ought' mean when Prinz (2020forthcoming, 2) asserted that 'Aristotle, Bentham, and Mill [...] interested in [...] what goals we ought to pursue.' Is this 'ought' a law of nature? A divine command? Kant's command? Prinz's command? Is the Aristotle's 'ought' the same as Bentham's? Is it an evaluation or a prescription? ... Is it not a pity that for example Alexandrova (2017) writes a whole book full of claims of normativity in positive psychology, without the word 'normativity' being found worthy of as much as a definition or an entry in the index? Similarly,

5 An invention that seems to have come only after the development of complex societies: Whitehouse et al. (2019)

Nussbaum (2008, A 108)—approvingly quoted in the handbook of eudaimonic well-being (Vittersø 2016, 12) —accuses positive psychologists of ‘normative naïveté’ without explaining anything about how she uses the term normative.

Fortunately, there are some positive examples. One is provided by Kristjánsson (2018), who acknowledged at least in an endnote that there is an important difference between normativity understood as evaluativeness versus normativity as prescriptivity. This difference is crucial to positive psychology, as it is at least possible that the former understanding (evaluativeness) might be compatible with it being a *bona fide* science, whereas the latter clearly is not.

But don’t we need to have ethical theories to tell us what to do? Here, the “need” is doubtful, and the “we” is even more so in view of the well-known false consensus effect (Mullen et al. 1985; Ross et al. 1977). It is helpful to recall that many normative theories seem highly problematic: Of particular relevance is of course Aristotle, few today would agree with his views on women, “barbarians,” and slaves. Moeller (2009) also pointed out that not only many assertions in the ethics literature seem bizarre, specifically discussing Bentham and Kant (e.g., quoting Kant as asserting that ‘A child that comes into the world apart from marriage is born outside the law (for the law is marriage) and therefore outside the protection of the law’, p.63) but noting that ‘Kant and Bentham have in common is their level of presumption. Both claimed to have identified *scientifically* the principles of good and evil.’

How about today? Naturally, the current majority opinion looks reasonable to the current majority, but how about future views of current opinions? On the one hand one could argue that, if past ethical theories turned out to be untenable, one might expect the same of current ethical theories.⁶ On other other hand, one might hope that contemporary philosophy is different as it supposedly emphasizes openness and tolerance—unfortunately, empirical evidence speaks against this supposition (Peters, Honeycutt, Block & Jussim 2020).

Another highly interesting area of philosophical and psychological research, unfortunately badly neglected in the area of wellbeing research, concerns the nature of ethical expertise (if any) and practical application thereof. Thankfully, some philosophers and psychologists did research which appears relevant to this question. A number of studies showed not only that moral philosophers’ judgements in ethical matters are influenced by irrelevant factors (e.g., Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2012); Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2015)), but —maybe even more relevantly in the present context—they seem to steal at least as many books as other academics (Schwitzgebel 2009), and under some additional measures as well it does not seem like they act in accord with what their theories might prescribe (Schwitzgebel 2013), results that have recently replicated in a new study (Schönegger & Wagner 2019).

Overall, it appears that philosophers , by neglecting to point out all the intricacies and problems involved in claims of normativity, again fail at concept clarification and rigour.

Example 4: “Eudaimonia”

Those positing a dichotomy between forms of wellbeing often take recourse to the ancient Greek notion of *eudaimonia*, and particularly its form as articulated in Aristotle’s two writings on the subject: the *Nicomachean Ethics* (EN) and the *Eudemian Ethics* (EE). (Kristjánsson (2018, 541) , Intelisano et al. (2020, 188)). Would returning to the source (Fowers 2016) help reduce conceptual confusion in wellbeing research?

6 I.e., appealing to a pessimistic induction on ethical theories analogous to the pessimistic induction in the philosophy of science.

On first sight one might expect the answer to be 'no,' since Aristotle's ethical writings have spawned an immense literature containing serious disagreements on a number of interpretive issues. Aristotle has also been accused of being unclear and/or confused.⁷ One pertinent issue, where Aristotle is often taken to be unclear, is the passage in book 10 of the EN where he asserts the superiority of the contemplative life over the political life, with only the contemplative life realizing *teleia* (complete) *eudaimonia*; supposedly this is at odds with the rest of the EN as well as his attitude in his book *Politics*. There is of course the question what level of precision and clarity can be expected in the first place. After all, Aristotle himself noted that the subject matter does not allow for the precision that one might hope for. Nor is the purpose of the EN and EE clear, since we do not know for which audience it was written (though it seems a fair guess that it was not for professional analytic philosophers trying to over-interpret minute details in a pair of unpolished lecture notes, compare (Smith 2000) (Tessitore 1996)). In addition to all that, the works of Aristotle available to us today are only a small part of those listed in ancient lists of his works, and those that survived seem to have been stored in the basement of a house for well over a century—so one may wonder what importance was assigned to them by Aristotle's successors. Unfortunately, such complications often tend to get swept under the rug when philosophers write in the context of wellbeing research.

Does it matter for wellbeing research? Yes, if the nature of *eudaimonia* matters, and if Aristotle's explicit statements carry any weight. For example, he was explicit that *eudaimonia* is a goal in itself. So, when Thorsteinsen and Vittersø (2020; 520) refer to Aristotle's notion of a *telos* to motivate separating feelings into supposedly hedonic and supposedly eudaimonic ones,⁸ and at the same time want to distinguish them by the latter being involved in resource building, this fits badly: resources are by definition instrumental, thus for Aristotle they constitute at best an inferior *telos* rather than something eudaimonic.

Related to this seems to be the idea to develop one's potentials (ibid), or that the ideal behind *eudaimonia* (i.e., 'flourishing in the fullest sense of the term') is 'well-being as the realization of one's potential.' (Haybron 2016, 27) This seems odd: Surely, Genghis Khan realized an incredible amount of his potential, much more than pretty much everyone else. So Genghis Khan came close to the ideal eudaimonic life? I doubt that this is an intended consequence. Maybe Haybron and others mean only certain kinds of potential, but that raises the question of which ones ("positive potential" will not do, since we are trying to figure out what "positive" means). There is another problem: Realizing your potential is presumably easier if you have little potential—again I doubt that this is intended.⁹

Philosophy outside its proper bounds

In the previous section, I provided examples to shed doubt on the belief that psychologists can automatically assume philosophers' arguments will contribute to the scientific rigour that is at the heart of positive psychology. Now I put this into a larger context regarding philosophical methodology.

7 For example in the famous paper by Hardie (1965).

8 The second motivation they provide is the claim that the perception of science as value-free is misconceived—a claim that seems itself misconceived, see the previous subsection.

9 This problem seems somewhat similar to that often assigned to life-satisfaction accounts of wellbeing: That lowering expectations makes satisfaction easier to achieve. In fact here it appears to be more serious, since adaptive expectations often make sense (overly unrealistic expectations tend to be bad for you), whereas lowering one's potential seems dysfunctional.

Kraut's oyster versus Nagel's bat

Kraut (2018) argued for a well-being theory which 'holds that: (A) well-being is composed of many goods; (B) all of them are experiential; but (C) pleasure is only one element of good experience.' (p.4) In this context, he is worried by an example by McTaggart, who

asks us to compare two lives: the first he calls "oyster-like" because it has "very little consciousness and ... a very little excess of pleasure over pain"; the second is that of a human being. His striking thesis is that a sufficiently longer oyster-like life is better than any shorter human life, no matter how wonderful the goods in the human life are. (p.2)

Kraut finds this threatening, as in combination with (C) it comes close to implying that 'attached as we are to the full range of human experiences, we should trade them away for a simple pleasure that is sufficiently long-lasting' (p.5), a conclusion that Kraut finds 'astounding' (p.4) and which he obviously dislikes.

At the start of his discussion, Kraut states that

I will refer to the other creature in this comparison as "McTaggart's oyster" (not just oyster-like). To simplify matters further, I will assume that this oyster feels no pain and only the mildest of pleasures as it takes in nourishment. (p.2)

His goal is to show that 'certain human experiences, when they are of *sufficient* length (not any length, however small), are greater in prudential value than are the combined lifetime pleasures felt by McTaggart's oyster, however long it lives' (p.21) Why would that be true? Here is what Kraut has to say:

We can have some notion of [the oyster's] inner life: it takes in nourishment and (we are assuming) it seeks more of the same because it has a pleasant sensation when it eats. We know through introspection what it is like to get pleasure from the taste of something. We can imagine what it is like to have nothing but that as one's form of consciousness, and can compare that kind of life to the much larger form of consciousness we are lucky enough to have, with respect to how good they are. (Kraut 2018, 23)

The only thing truly astounding here is that anyone would take this train of thought seriously. Kraut can imagine how it is to have nothing but an oyster's consciousness? That is a stunning claim, given that a few pages earlier he quoted approvingly Nagel's classical 'bats' essay, which argued that '[f]orms of experience quite alien to ours must therefore elude our grasp.' (Kraut 2018, 7) Given that bats are at least mammals, whereas oysters are not even vertebrates, what made Kraut believe that an oyster's consciousness is within his grasp whereas that of a bat is not? Even if one assumes that the oyster's experience is restricted to sensations of whatever 'taste' is for a being with the sensory- and neuro-anatomy of an oyster, why should such 'taste' be any easier for us to understand than the sensations the bat obtains from its ultrasound signals?¹⁰

But even assuming that humans could introspect the experience of an oyster, there is a second major problem: humans are notoriously bad at dealing intuitively with very large (or very small) numbers. Presumably, there were few occasions for evolution to select in favour of those who were able to accurately deal with *very* large numbers like, say, the number of grains of sand in the Sahara desert¹¹. This is relevant as Kraut claims one should never trade away what he believes to be quintessentially human experiences even for *sufficiently long-lasting* simple pleasures, i.e., no matter how long the pleasures last or how frequent they are: 'one can be confident, through introspection, that the powerful emotional, visual, auditory, and cognitive experience one is having' (for example when sitting through a Wagner opera 'with appreciation and understanding') 'brings

10 I for my part can not even imagine how locusts taste to humans, even though they are being eaten by many.

11 About 1504000000000000000000000000000000 according to <https://www.quora.com/How-much-sand-is-in-Sahara-desert>

with it more prudential value than is available to any oyster, *however long it lives.*' (Kraut 2018, 212, emphasis added) Can one really introspect how it is to have certain experiences for longer than a human life (say, 200 years, a length which amounts to that of about 300000 Wagner operas)? How it is to have them for much longer than a human life (say, 200000 years)? Or *much* longer, say 20000000000 years? Can Kraut introspect a Vast¹² number of years like, for example, 20000000000²⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰⁰, which is still a trifle compared to *however* long?

Supposedly, 'experience assures us [...] some amount (a sufficient amount) of one kind of good is preferable to *any* amount of other goods.' (p.170, emphasis added) What *experience* does Kraut have with goods that last for time stretches that vastly exceed human life spans?¹³ (There is also the question who this mysterious, undefined "we" is. It most certainly does not include me.) Frankly, I think he (and not only he, see next subsection) is seriously misguided in believing his experiences and/or intuitions can settle this matter.

Relevance to positive psychology

Richard Kraut may not directly write for a positive psychology audience, so one may wonder whether the above discussion is relevant to the topic of the present paper. There are at least two reasons why it is: One is Kraut's prominence as a scholar of Aristotle and in particular of Aristotle's ethics, together with the possible indirect impact of Kraut (2018). Concerning the latter, note for example that Daniel Haybron, a philosopher who does speak directly to positive psychologists (e.g., Haybron (2016)) wrote in his review of Kraut's book (Haybron 2020), that through reflecting on it his views of well-being evolved significantly, with the review containing no hint that he found anything problematic in Kraut's discussion of the oyster.¹⁴ Maybe even more importantly, Kraut's oyster discussion is symptomatic of a more general problem: His discussion fits into a widespread tendency in philosophy-as-usual to make 'modally immodest' claims of metaphysical (im)possibilities (in this case, the impossibility of comparing 'human' and 'oyster-like' pleasures) based on what is called the method of cases. This method has been heavily criticised for almost two decades by more empirically oriented philosophers and scientists (summarized for example in 'Philosophy within its proper bounds' by Macherly (2017)). Unsurprisingly, many philosophers tried to argue against these criticisms. I find these counterarguments unconvincing, but for present purposes this need not be decided here. What is important is that in an interdisciplinary context philosophers present a distorted image of their results when they neglect to at least clearly mention these severe intra-disciplinary doubts about their methodology.

Discussion

Up to here it has been argued, that it is far from obvious that philosophy as usually practiced in this context is helpful to the psychological study of wellbeing, by providing examples where philosophers importantly failed to perform what is widely claimed to be among their core competencies (clarifying concepts), and by pointing to severe doubts within philosophy concerning some of its methods. Psychologists should thus not be too surprised that one philosopher painted a

12 Daniel Dennett's abbreviation for 'Very much more than ASTronomical,' used to refer to 'finite but almost unimaginably larger numbers than such merely astronomical quantities as the number of microseconds since the Big Bang times the number of electrons in the visible universe.' (Dennett 2018; ch.6 endnote 36)

13 Note that Kraut does not restrict to realistic life spans. E.g., 'There is nothing wrong, then, with McTaggart's idea of a human life that lasts a million years' (p.228)

14 Personally, I find this particularly unfortunate since I do sympathize with much of what Kraut and also Haybron write. There *might* be something relevant to science in there; but as a scientist, I don't like the prospect of having to double check which of philosophers' alleged arguments are really just groundless flights of fancy.

rather bleak picture of what one might call philosophy-as-usual:

Philosophy could be characterized with only a bit of irony as what is left if you begin with the sum total of human thought and subtract those areas in which clear progress has been made. Matters are even less encouraging when it comes to philosophical ethics. The history of ethics looks like a story of progress only if its main texts are read in reverse chronological order. (Brewer 2009, 1)

The present paper does not intend to prove anything as sweeping as this (in fact, I believe this statement is somewhat exaggerated). Nor does it try to develop a complete philosophical analysis (whether a focused one as for example an detailed analysis of flow, or wide ranging one as of the relationship of philosophy and science). The paper is also not concerned with a discussion or an evaluation of the work of particular *philosophers*, only with *some assertions directed at positive psychologists*: For example, take the statement that the 'philosophical core behind [eudaimonic psychology], the ideal in question[, is] well-being as the realization of one's potential. *Flourishing*, in the fullest sense of the term. That, at any rate, is what I will propose in this chapter' (Haybron 2016; 27) This is consistent with Haybron's examples of a Comanche warrior (p.30), and a wolf (p.31), once these are stripped of the romanticising undertone. It may be that in other work Haybron sheds a different light on this issue and makes my critique above irrelevant (as has been suggested by a comment on this manuscript), but it is not the task of a scientist to read the collected works of every philosopher that directs writings at psychologists, just as few would think of reading the collected works of Fisher before calculating a p-value.¹⁵

After these disclaimers the reader may wonder what the purpose is. The main purpose is to point out that a certain form of philosophy, which I refer to as philosophy-as-usual (since it seems to be usual in the philosophical contributions that I read in the positive psychology literature) may not be as easily compatible with positive psychological *science* as seems to be taken for granted. The message to psychologists is: *caveat emptor* when buying into philosophers' work. The message to philosophers is: Before 'philosophy poses questions to psychology' (Nussbaum 2008), it better pose some serious questions to itself.

That much said, this paper is intended as a contribution to the project of *positive psychology*, therefore a very roughly sketch an idea how philosophy *could* play a *constructive* role in well-being research is presented as an appendix.

Appendix: Could the match turn happy?

Rigour, as a means of weeding out errors, is arguably the characteristic feature of science, but science also crucially depends on creativity, on new ideas and new ways of looking at familiar phenomena. Thus, if contributing rigour may not be what philosophy does, then it appears natural to consider whether instead of narrowing one's view, philosophy might help *widen* it in a relevant way. This appendix intends to outline one specific way that philosophy (not-as-usual) can contribute by challenging a number of established practices in positive psychology, from the over- and misuse of Aristotle to uncritical reliance on the 'convenient and seductive myth' (Melnikoff & Bargh 2018) which is the dual process model in cognitive science.

15 The use of p-values in psychology is controversial, but this does not invalidate the point: The difference is that statisticians have pointed to the intricacies in using p-values for decades but were widely ignored by psychologists (e.g, Cohen 1994, Wasserstein & Lazar 2016), while philosophy-as-usual sweeps the problems under the rug.

Absolving Aristotle

So-called virtue ethics had the chance to widen our “Western” horizon, but squandered it.¹⁶ It had the chance, as the paper that is widely seen as its starting point (Anscombe 1958) explicitly declared

that it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy [...] that the concepts of obligation, and duty — *moral* obligation and *moral* duty, that is to say — and of what is *morally* right and wrong, and of the *moral* sense of “ought,” ought to be jettisoned (p.1)

It squandered it, in that ‘as it has climbed to a position of prominence within Anglo-American philosophy departments, virtue ethics has retreated to an increasingly conventional conception of its central message.’ (Brewer 2009, 3)

The fault is probably not with Aristotle, but rather with the widespread urge to squeeze Aristotle into the ‘myopic ways in which contemporary scholars, particularly those influenced by the global West, tend to understand “morality” as a system of obligations.’ (Lee 2014, 3) As Anscombe (1958, 2) pointed out,

If someone professes to be expounding Aristotle and talks in a modern fashion about “moral” such-and-such he must be very imperceptive if he does not constantly feel like someone whose jaws have somehow got out of alignment: the teeth don’t come together in a proper bite.

The value of returning to the source(s)

Aristotle gets a disproportionate amount of attention in the wellbeing literature. This is surprising from the psychological science viewpoint, as other notions of a well-lived life have proven themselves valuable in psychological practice. For example, stoic (and other ancient) philosophy was an important basis for the development of cognitive psychotherapy (Robertson 2010), the now well-established benefits of mindfulness point to the possible value of studying its Buddhist background, and parallels between the flow concept and Daoism of the classical Chinese philosopher *ZhuangZi* (莊子, also transliterated *Chuang-tzu*) have been occasionally noted, see Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 150f) or Zhang (2019). Nevertheless, these philosophies have been badly neglected. Concerning Daoism, a quick search in PsycInfo found 223 entries for positive psychology & Aristotle, against 1 [sic!] for positive psychology & *ZhuangZi*.¹⁷ The final part of this paper proposes that the philosophy of *ZhuangZi* not only fits well into positive psychology, but that it can even illuminate some potentially fruitful ways forward.

A dao (道 “way”) forward for positive psychology

16 This statement has been criticized for being too much of a blanket statement. I do not see why it would be more problematic than blanket claims of ‘terminological disarray’ (Kristjánsson, 2018, 542) or ‘normative naïveté’ (Nussbaum, 2008, A 108). On the contrary, it seems to me that Brewer (2009) provides good reasons for the claim made in the main text.

17 Admittedly, there have been a number of studies of mindfulness in positive psychology; but see author (2019c) for lacunas in this area, and author (2019b) and author (under review) for the under-explored complications in the relationship between Buddhism and science.

ZhuangZi: The sage in flow

Zhang (2019) focused on discussing possible relationships and differences between flow and “forgetfulness” in the ZhuangZi. Here, forgetfulness is involved in the meditative practice of “sitting in forgetfulness” (*zuowang* 坐忘), which means things fit together harmoniously with the result that self-egoistic judgment is suspended and the distinction between “this” and “that” is forgotten. (Zhang (2019), Graham (2001, 20)) Nevertheless, this suspension of self-egoistic judgment does not require sitting still, it is a state of mind that can also be maintained while acting. Indeed, by dropping pre-conceived judgements as to what must be, it allows mindfulness of the subtle aspects of each situation that presents itself, and thereby facilitates appropriate, spontaneous, effortless action. In other words, the sage following ZhuangZi’s way of life “constantly goes by the spontaneous and does not add anything to the process of life.” (Graham 2001, 81) This is clearly reminiscent of the colloquial expression “going with the flow,” but one has to be careful at this point: it is *not* meant in the sense of mindlessly drifting along: The Daoist’s spontaneous behaviour is not heedless, rather it involves close attention to the situation. (Graham, 2001; 12). In other words, it is ‘not about resigning oneself to life’; rather, it is about ‘moving *in rhythm with* the Dao 道’ (Daniels, 2019). The point is to not pointlessly fight the course of life—akin to the dictum by the famous psychotherapist C.G.Jung that freedom of the will consists in gladly doing what has to be done (Machek (2018) speaks of the Daoist ‘freedom as doing necessary things.’).

Discussing possible parallels to psychological flow theory, Zhang (2019) presented Mihály Csíkszentmihályi as using the metaphorical expression *flow* to denote an experience that is characterized by feelings of a dynamic fusion of on-going activity that is effortless, fluid, and creative, an optimal experience leading to life-satisfaction and joy when one is in such a flow state. While finding much that is congenial between ZhuangZi’s philosophy and the Csíkszentmihályi’s flow concept, Zhang nevertheless believed that

the idea of flow in positive psychology focuses on two key factors, namely, skills and goals. Zhuangzi’s flow, however, accentuates more the idea of forgetfulness, or to be more exactly, the forgetfulness of both self and the goal.

Furthermore, motivational psychology is claimed by Zhang to recognize a correlation between flow and happiness and to emphasize goal-oriented and choice-making action—hence investing in consciously chosen goals and planning according to desired results—instead of operating on “random” actions. This supposedly contrasts with ZhuangZi telling us that flourishing consists in more than feeling happy, and that it goes beyond the nature of goal choice or optimizing the effectiveness of action.

The discussion at the beginning of the present paper implies that flow theory does not put as much emphasis on goals as is often assumed, hence ZhuangZi’s spontaneous action is even more akin to (an appropriate reading of) Csíkszentmihályi’s flow concept than would appear from Zhang (2019). Again using flow in the sense of autotelic harmonious activity, this seems a perfect fit for the Zhangian *yóu* 遊 (Fraser 2014, 545).

Harmony and flexibility

More subtle are the relationships to positive psychology more generally, and to motivational psychology. In both areas of psychology there are indeed theories that put heavy emphasis on goal choice and achievement, for example goal setting theory (Locke & Latham 2019), the hope theory of Snyder (2002), or grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly 2007). Yet, a number of theories de-emphasize the importance of cognitively determined goals, for example in cases when they are incongruent with implicit (i.e., subconscious) motives (Kuhl & Quirin 2011; Grund, Fries &

Rheinberg 2018), or when they are pursued in an obsessive and inflexible way (Vallerand et al. 2003; Vallerand 2015). In fact, in one modern and empirically well-supported psychotherapy method, the ability to respond flexibly to circumstances (“the ability to contact the present moment more fully as a conscious human being, and to change or persist in behavior when doing so serves valued ends”) is considered the hallmark of mental health (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson 2012). This need not mean that ZhuangZi’s ideal sage will never use intellect or will never set goals. Rather, it is about acting without inner conflict and without rigidity; i.e., the ‘resilient, intelligent, flexible, and creative exercise of agency in response to changing circumstances.’ (Fraser 2014, 562)

Viewed this way, ZhuangZi’s take on a *well-lived* life seems compatible with today’s psychological knowledge. The remainder of this paper will argue that paying attention to ZhuangZi’s philosophy can also play a constructive role in positive psychology by pointing to ways forward.

Way-making¹⁸

Beyond the *vita hyperactiva*

Hannah Arendt (1958) famously found the *vita activa* (as opposed to the *vita contemplativa*) to be characteristic of modern life. Today’s epidemic levels of excessive stress, also in the natural environment¹⁹, seem to indicate that instead of a simple reordering of preferences, a *dysbalance* between the active and contemplative aspects of life — a *vita hyperactiva*— may have developed. This extends to flow research as many flow researchers insist on flow being necessarily tied to activities. The present considerations may serve as a corrective in this respect: There is no reason why inner harmony and an autotelic *experience* need involvement an *activity* in the ordinary sense.²⁰

Beyond dual process models

Järvillehto (2016) discussed the flow experience in the context of the popular dual process models (e.g., Kahneman (2011); Evans and Stanovich (2013)) of cognition, arguing that ‘while intuition concerns thinking and generating ideas, flow concerns action. Therefore, it can be roughly argued that intuition is System 1 thinking, whereas flow is System 1 doing.’ Nevertheless, he also noticed that to properly capture the phenomenology of flow, one has to distinguish between different aspects of system 1 processing (which he refers to as instinct and intuition). Similarly, researchers on creativity found it helpful to discuss flow in the context of dual processing, but found that the match is not perfect. (Cseh 2016; Doyle 2017)

This seems an interesting parallel to the present discussion in that at first glance, ZhuangZi and Aristotle may be seen as embodying system 1 and system 2 cognition, respectively. After all, for ZhuangZi

the fundamental error is to suppose that life presents us with issues which must be formulated in words so that we can envisage alternatives and find reasons for preferring one to the other, (Graham 2001)

whereas for Aristotle, deliberation seems central. (Annas 2008, 26)

To finish this paper, I want to very tentatively suggest two points about this:

18 A possible translation of *dao* (Ames & Hall 2003, 57).

19 Which apparently was among the original reasons to develop flow theory, compare the introduction to Csikszentmihalyi (1975).

20 Examples of optimal experience without action may be provided by meditative absorptions (*jhanas*), as even the first stages involve intense joy (*piti*) and happiness (*sukha*) without anything that one would ordinarily call an activity. Compare, e.g., Brahm (2006); Bronkhorst (2012). Aristotle would seem to agree: EN 1154b 26-28.

On the one hand, concerning deliberation and beliefs, relevant for human flourishing may not be so much the *what* than the *how*. I already mentioned above that psychological flexibility is considered crucial in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, also in Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy the dogmatic inflexibility of a patient's demands and musts are what are considered problematic more than their contents. In as far as deliberations are about possible courses of action, this fits nicely with the observation by Zhang (2019) that 'Zhuangzi's recommendation of good life focuses on "how to do" (i.e. following the patterns, processes, and rhythms of the *dao*) rather than "what to do" (i.e., what things that worth doing [sic])' (p.82) and with the observation by Csikszentmihalyi (1999, p.826) that people are happy not because of how they do whatever they do.

Finally, if the study of flow points to the need to refine dual process models of cognition, this is consistent for example with Stanovich (2010), who argued for a tripartite model of cognition in which type 2 processing is subdivided into an algorithmic and a meta-cognitive form of processing; and with views in psychotherapy as those of Milton Erickson (was renowned for talking of a "smart unconscious"), or the "felt experience" in the psychotherapeutic technique called focusing which was developed by the philosopher Eugen Gendlin (1997)— thereby effectively arguing for a partition of type 1 processes into at least two subtypes. This naturally leads to the idea that one could subdivide both type 1 and type 2 processing, and indeed there is at least one psychological theory which does that: personality systems interaction theory. (Kuhl 2001; Kuhl, Kazén & Quirin 2014; Baumann, Kazén, Quirin & Koole 2018) In this, optimal human experience and a flourishing life are posited to depend on the proper *cooperation* of four cognitive systems, *including both a conscious-deliberative and an intuitive-holistic high-level system*. Conceivably, work along the lines suggested by this theory may help understand the relationship between "Aristotelian" intelligent analytic cognition, and "ZhuangZian" intelligent holistic cognition, thereby pointing towards what could be a philosophically grounded path towards human flourishing.

author 2019a , author 2019b, author 2019c , author, under review

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