

What is the Good Life?  
A Place for Positive Psychology

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*“It is not life, but rather the  
good life, that is worth living.”*  
Socrates

The desire to define a life worth living has been the quest of some of the world’s greatest thinkers. Some argue this question – what is the good life? – was the spark that ignited Greek philosophy (Borradori, 2008). Aristotle, Socrates and Epicurus each proposed their own theory on how *eudemonia*, their term for the “good life,” is attained: through fulfilling one’s capabilities, through virtue and knowledge, through pleasure, respectively. Other great philosophers have tackled the same question, such as Thoreau who advocated simple living and self-knowledge as the means by which peace in life is attained (Thoreau, 1854). Today, the question remains as relevant as ever, and the question of the good life is fair game for far more than philosophers. Psychology as a science has a unique contribution to make; as the scientific study of the behavior of individuals and their mental processes (APA, 2009), it has the potential to provide objective, verifiable answers to the question of the good life.

In order to understand the good life and what makes life worth living, *positive* human experience must be understood. Psychology today has been criticized for its overemphasis on mental illness (Seligman, 2003). However, the question of the good life is could also be interpreted as the question of optimal mental health. In order for psychology to provide adequate answers, it needs to have a firm grasp on mental health, not just mental illness.

In reaction to the prevailing disease model of modern psychology, the field of Positive Psychology was introduced by Martin Seligman in 1998 with three aims: for psychology to be just as concerned with strengths as weaknesses; to be just as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst; and to be just as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling as with nurturing high talent as with healing pathology (Seligman, 2002; 2004).

In order to achieve these three aims, Positive Psychology has to understand strengths, to understand what the best things in life actually are, and what a fulfilling life looks like. In essence, Positive Psychology is asking, what is the good life and how can this life be achieved?

As Positive Psychology rapidly gains popularity as a new and “revolutionary” field, it is important to understand how Positive Psychology fits into the field of psychology as a whole. Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (2006) and others have suggested that Positive Psychology could lead to a “genuine paradigm shift in the human sciences” (p. 5). Critics have countered this excitement with the accusation that Positive Psychology does not understand its historical roots, and thus its claims of revolutionizing psychology are too bold (Taylor, 2001). Many view the work of Positive psychologists as nothing more than the work of empirically minded Humanists (Cloninger, 2005). “If ‘positive psychology’ is to become an enduring movement in American psychology,” Eugene Taylor, an outspoken critic of Positive Psychology, says “it must become more historically informed and more philosophically sophisticated” (Taylor, 2000).

This paper addresses the first criticism—that positive psychology should become more historically informed—by looking at the work of a prominent Humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow. Maslow’s study of self-actualizing individuals is the prime example of how the study of the positive, specifically the study of the “good life,” has been a part of psychology long before the Positive Psychology movement. This paper will then compare some of the studies within Positive Psychology related to the good life—the Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the concept of “flourishing” (Keyes, 2003), the three kinds of “happy lives” (Seligman, 2004)—to the work of Maslow in order to illustrate that the subject material of Positive Psychology is not novel.

While Positive Psychology is not new in its idea to study the good life from a psychological perspective, Positive Psychology claims that it is new and distinct from Humanistic psychology in its scientific emphasis: theories or findings in Positive Psychology must be grounded in a cumulative, empirical body of research (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, this claim of empiricism touches upon the second portion of Taylor's (2000) critique—that Positive Psychology needs to become more philosophically sophisticated. The second portion of this paper will show that although Positive Psychology aligns itself with scientific, empirical psychology<sup>1</sup>, there are some common epistemological similarities in the foundations of both Humanistic psychology and Positive Psychology that complicate this clear-cut alignment. The philosophical grounding of Positive Psychology will be explored to illustrate the unique position of Positive Psychology: empirical in theory, yet Humanistic in its assumptions.

### **Positive Psychology's Historical Narrative**

*History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.*  
— Napoleon Bonaparte (1769 - 1821)

Positive Psychology has a distinct history of psychology that is described in virtually all introductions to Positive Psychology (e.g., Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2003; Compton, 2005; Peterson, 2006). Its narrative is as follows: Before World War II, psychology had three distinct missions: to cure mental illness, to make everyone's lives happier and more fulfilling, and to nurture and identify high talent and genius. However, after the war, psychology forgot its latter two missions and focused all of its energy on the curing of pathology. "For the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, "empirical," "scientific," or "experimental" psychology will refer to the prevailing science of psychology as endorsed in academia today.

last half century psychology has been consumed with a single topic only—mental illness” (Seligman, 2002, p. xi). The resulting disease model led to huge advancements: at least 14 grave mental illnesses are now treatable, and two are even curable. Yet, in focusing on the healing of mental illness, the positive aspects of psychology’s mission were neglected. Martin Seligman (2004), the founder of Positive Psychology, outlines three costs of the dominant disease model:

- The disease model has turned psychologists into victimologists and pathologizers.
- Psychologists have forgotten about improving normal lives and properly fostering high talent.
- Psychologists failed to develop positive interventions.

To oppose the prevailing disease model, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called for a new field, the field of Positive Psychology, which has three aims:

- To be just as concerned with strengths as weaknesses.
- To be as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst.
- To be as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling and with nurturing high talent as with healing pathology.

The historical narrative offered by positive psychologists is true in the sense that the *prevailing* psychological model certainly revolved and still revolves around understanding and treating mental illness. However, the narrative is incomplete. Mental health *has* been studied in the last half century, and Positive Psychology is not the first to react to this focus on pathology. As Peterson (2006) apply describes, “positive psychology has a very long past but only a very short history” (p.4) – a pun on Herman Ebbinghaus’ description of psychology in general: “Psychology has a long past, but only a short history” (Boring, 1950, p.ix).

### **Those Left Out of Positive Psychology's Historical Narrative**

The study of the “positive” began as early as William James and the “healthy mindedness” movement of the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. James (1982) was a psychologist-turned-philosopher (Marty, 1982) who sought to understand the good life: “If we are to ask the question: ‘What is human life’s chief concern?’ one of the answers we should receive would be: ‘It is happiness.’ How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all time the secret motive of all they do” (James, 1982, p. 78).

The most well-known “positive” movement after James’ healthy-mindedness movement is Humanistic psychology, which arose in the 1950’s. Humanistic psychology is often termed the “third wave” in psychology, following the first two waves: psychoanalysis and behaviorism. The Humanistic movement emphasizes “the goals for which which people strive, their conscious awareness of this striving, the importance of their own choices, and their rationality” (Peterson, 2006, p. 8).

One of the founding fathers of the Humanistic movement was Abraham Maslow. Abraham Maslow focused his studies on self-actualizing individuals – individuals who he believed were fulfilling human’s highest potentials and thus, truly living the good life. The following section will show how Maslow’s work helped pave the way for Positive Psychology, yet before diving into the details of his work, it is important to note some of the other influences on Positive Psychology. Important areas of research, cited by Compton (2006), include: Humanistic psychology outside of Maslow (e.g. Rogers, 1951); research on improving education (e.g. Neil, 1960); the creation of primary prevention programs based on wellness (e.g., Albee, 1982 and Cowen, 1994); work on human agency and efficacy (e.g. Bandura, 1989); studies on



giftedness (e.g. Winner, 2000); studies on quality of life among medical and psychiatric patients that focused on more than their symptoms and diseases (e.g., Levitt, Hogan, & Bucosky, 1990).

### **Abraham Maslow**

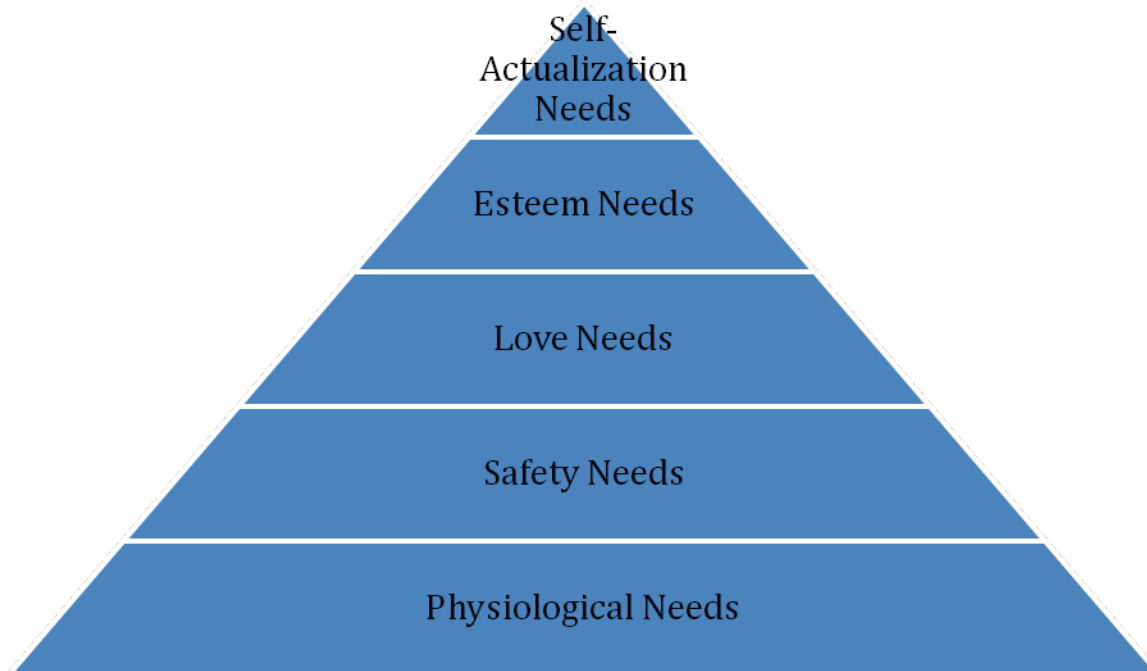
Maslow is perhaps most famous for developing the “hierarchy of needs,” a positive theory of human motivation that culminates with self-actualization. The term “self-actualization” was actually first used by Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965), a German neurologist and psychiatrist, in his book *The Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology Derived from Pathological Data in Man* (1939, 1963). The purpose of Goldstein’s book was to expound a comprehensive, holistic methodology of science to contrast the prevailing reductionist and positivist methodology of his day:

We have said that life confronts us in living organisms. But as soon as we attempt to grasp them scientifically, we must take them apart, and this taking apart nets us a multitude of isolated facts which offer no direct clue to that which we experience directly in the living organism. Yet we have no way of making the nature and behavior of an organism scientifically intelligible other than by its construction out of facts obtained in this way. We thus face the basic problem of all biology, possibly of all knowledge. The question can be formulated quite simply: *What do the phenomena, arising from the isolating procedure, teach us about the "essence" (the intrinsic nature) of an organism? How, from such phenomena, do we come to an understanding of the behavior of the individual organism?*" (p. 7, emphasis in original).

As part of Goldstein’s answer to this question, he proposes a simple theory of motivation: that there is one all-encompassing drive: self actualization. “Normal behavior corresponds to a continual change of tension, of such a kind that over and again that state of tension is reached which enables and impels the organism to actualize itself in further activities, according to its nature” (p. 197). Goldstein asserts that the drive for an organism to actualize itself is the basic drive, in fact, the only drive by which the life of the organism is determined.

*Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation*

Maslow took the term “self-actualization” and made it famous. However, he used the term in a more specific and limited way (Maslow, 1943). Whereas Goldstein saw self-actualization as one all-encompassing drive, Maslow proposed a theory of human motivation composed of multiple drives, with self-actualization being the “highest” drive. Maslow (1943) described self-actualization as “the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (p. 383). Maslow’s theory of human motivation began with his identification of individuals who, according to his standards, were “self-actualized.” He then attempted to create theory of personality development—a positive theory of motivation—based on the idea that man is a perpetually wanting animal, driven by a state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives (Maslow 1943; 1954). His theory, which relied primarily upon clinical experience, delineates the “hierarchy of needs,” a set of five basic goals or “basic needs” that are related to each other and arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency: physiological needs, safety needs, love needs, esteem needs, and the need for self-actualization. The lower needs, more closely linked with survival, take precedence over higher-order needs. Once one need is adequately satiated, a new, “higher” need emerges. This cycle continues until, for the rare few, one steps into the plane of self-actualization.



*Figure 1.* Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

The first basic needs are the “physiological” – drives for homeostasis and the satisfaction of appetites. These physiological needs are based upon the human, biological drive to survive and are the foundation of human existence. Maslow asserts that “if all the needs are unsatisfied, and the organism is then dominated by the physiological needs, all other needs may become simply non-existent or be pushed into the background” (Maslow, 1943, p. 374). He then goes on to state that “for the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food” (Maslow, 1943, p. 375).<sup>2</sup>

“Safety needs” are the second of the basic needs, and these emerge after the physiological needs are met. People need to believe that they are relatively safe from physical harm and

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<sup>2</sup> This latter assertion needs to be qualified, as it is easily refuted by Ghandi's hunger strikes, a pious man's fasting, or Frankl's description of those who gave away their food at the cost of death when in the concentration camp. While Maslow does admit there are exceptions to the rule—those who will sacrifice a lower need for a higher one—he also says they will eventually gratify the lower need (Maslow, 1943, p. 388). Maslow also touches upon the idea that there are other determinants of behaviors than desires. Might he have meant values? These “exceptions” touch upon the problem of values present in any motivation theory, a problem which Maslow recognized but never adequately answered.

societal chaos, and that they have some degree of control over their own destinies (Peterson, 2006). This need for safety and order is best exemplified by infants and children.

“Love needs” are the third set of basic needs, and include both giving and receiving love. Love needs cause one to yearn for friends, a lover, a companion, or children. Love needs allow individuals to feel connected to and appreciated by others, leading to feelings of belongingness. The neglect of these needs commonly results in maladjustment and more severe psychopathology.

“Esteem needs” are the fourth drive—needs that lead to feelings of “self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world.” Thwarting these needs results in “feelings of inferiority, weakness, and helplessness” (Maslow, 1943, p. 383).

Because we are “perpetually wanting animals,” even if all the previous needs are satisfied, we “may still often (if not always)” hunger for something else or become restless. The fifth need is the need for self-actualization. “What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization” (Maslow, 1943, p. 383). The need for self-actualization reflects an individual’s need to develop his/her unique potentials.<sup>3</sup>

Maslow does not claim that the hierarchy is rigid or absolute; there are “degrees of relative satisfaction” (Maslow, 1943, p. 389). For example, an individual could theoretically have 70% of his love needs met before the introduction of esteem needs; then the individual would be feeling both love and esteem needs. It is not always a smooth or clear-cut transition from one set of needs to the next.

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<sup>3</sup> Later in life, Maslow (1969) made an addition to his model, placing self-transcendence as a sixth motivational step beyond self-actualization. Nevertheless, his previous and conventional hierarchy persists (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Maslow assumes these needs to be innate, and the fulfillment of all five needs must be met in order for an individual to feel fulfilled in life. Maslow divides these needs into two categories: deficiency needs (D-needs) and being or growth needs (B-needs). D-needs include the physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs. Only B-needs are associated with self-actualization. Thought of in another way, D-needs are those that bring you from negative to 0; B-needs bring you from 0 to positive.

### *Self-Actualization in Maslow's Hierarchy*

Self-actualizing individuals are described by Maslow in a number of ways: as distant and rare idealized figures, but also as normal, healthy individuals that have their flaws; as people who differ from others in degree, but have also achieved a state of “Being” self-actualized. These varying, and sometimes contradictory, descriptions are more easily understood when the concept of self-actualization is broken into two descriptions. Maslow at one point discusses self-actualization as a state of “Being” and at another point, he discusses self-actualization more in terms of “Becoming.”

“Being” self-actualized implies a sort of qualitative difference from other, average human beings. According to Maslow, self-actualized individuals are not common: “Though, in principle, self-actualization is easy, in practice it rarely happens (by my criteria, certainly in less than 1% of the adult population)” (Maslow, 1968, p. 204). For many familiar with Maslow’s work, talk of “self-actualizers” conjures up ideas of enlightened individuals, perpetually living in some state of nirvana, and rightly so, for much of Maslow’s writings are filled with admiring praise and descriptions of these Utopian human beings: “self-actualizing people, those who have

come to a high level of maturation, health and self-fulfillment, have so much to teach us that sometimes they seem almost like a different breed of human beings” (Maslow, 1968, p. 71).

Maslow recognized the problem with this concept of self-actualized individuals: “one major difficulty with the conception as so far presented is its somewhat static character. Self-actualization, since I have studied it mostly in older people, tends to be seen as an ultimate or final state of affairs, a far goal, rather than a dynamic process, active throughout life, Being, rather than Becoming” (Maslow, 1968, p. 26). Self-actualization, as he first defines it, is too fixed and unrealistic to be relevant or interesting to the average person.

To remedy this issue, Maslow redefined what he meant by self-actualization (Maslow, 1968) to incorporate the idea of “Becoming,” and this definition of self-actualizing individuals is the definition most commonly referenced today. In addition to his previous emphasis that self-actualizing individuals are not perfect – they do not exhibit self-actualized traits all of the time (Compton, 2005) – he distinguishes the state of self-actualization as a difference in *degree* from healthy, non-actualized people. Maslow proposed that non-actualizing individuals are capable of having self-actualizing experiences, or peak experiences.<sup>4</sup> According to this second definition, what distinguishes self-actualized individuals from individuals who have self-actualizing experiences is that for self-actualizing people, these episodes come “far more frequently, and intensely and perfectly than in average people. This makes self-actualization a matter of degree and of frequency rather than an all-or-none affair” (Maslow, 1968, p. 97).

While this latter definition is more widely embraced, a problem with Maslow’s redefinition is that it does not reflect how Maslow focused and described most of his research.

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<sup>4</sup> Peak experiences are defined by Maslow (1964) as “secularized religious or mystical or transcendent experiences; or, more precisely...the raw materials out of which not only religions can be built but also philosophies of any kind...[Peak experiences] are well within the realm of nature, and can be investigated and discussed in an entirely naturalistic way” (p. xii).

He hoped to identify the core features of a self-actualizing person in such a way that they do seem like some qualitative “other.” According to Maslow’s redefinition, theoretically one could study the “self-actualizing experiences,” or peak-experiences, of non-actualizers in order to learn about self-actualizing individuals. However, Maslow’s particular focus remained on identifying the characteristics of self-actualizing individuals – on those who were “Being” self-actualized.

### *The Fifteen Personality Traits of Self-Actualizing Individuals*

Maslow offered fifteen personality traits that he believed were characteristic of self-actualizing individuals. These traits are perhaps the most lasting contribution of Maslow to empirical psychology, as these traits were the basis for over a thousand studies (Compton, 2005).

Compton (2005) divides these fifteen traits into four categories for clarity:

<b>Openness to Experience</b>	<b>Positive Relationships with Others</b>	<b>Autonomy</b>	<b>Strong Ethical Standards</b>
<i>More efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it.</i>	<i>Gemeinschaftsgefühl (“social interest”)</i>	<i>Autonomy; independence of culture and environment.</i>	<i>The democratic character structure.</i>
<i>Acceptance of self, others, and nature.</i>	<i>Interpersonal relations.</i>	<i>The quality of detachment; the need for privacy.</i>	<i>Discrimination between means and ends.</i>
<i>Continued freshness of appreciation.</i>	<i>Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor.</i>	<i>Resistance to enculturation.</i>	
<i>Spontaneity.</i>	<i>Problem centering.</i>		
<i>Creativeness.</i>			
<i>The mystical feeling, the oceanic feeling.</i>			

A more detailed description of these 15 traits, as described by Maslow in *Motivation and Personality* (1954) and further detailed in Compton (2005), is provided below:

- *More efficient perception of reality and more comfortable relations with it.*

Maslow believed that self-actualizing individuals have a superior perception of reality.

This “perception” is heightened both in their rational logic as well as their intuitive sense for situations. They tend to have a superior capacity for reason, to perceive the truth, to be logical and cognitively efficient. They also are more adept at detecting dishonesty and accurately judging others. Because self-actualizing individuals have a firm sense of self-esteem, they are generally freed from the distorting biases or their own wishes, hopes, and anxieties. They are generally unthreatened by the unknown, and more comfortable accepting reality as it is.

- *Acceptance (self, others, nature).*

Just as self-actualizing individuals are able to accurately perceive others, they are also able to accurately perceive themselves, shortcomings included. In fact, they are able to accept themselves as they are, with their faults, without feeling a profound sense of guilt or concern for things they cannot change. They accept these unchangeable faults as a part of nature, an inherent imperfection in the human race. They are not completely self-satisfied, however, and self-actualizers do try to change the things they can, such as improvable personal shortcomings, the shortcomings of the dominant culture, or the “stubborn remnants of psychological ill health, e.g., prejudice, jealousy, envy” (Maslow, 1954, p. 157).

- *Continued freshness of appreciation.*

This characteristic is similar to the idea of not taking things for granted. Everyday experiences and the goods of life, no matter how commonplace to the average person, are enjoyed by the self-actualizing individual with awe and wonder. The workday, one’s



spouse, a sunset, a baby—all are just as exciting and beautiful to the self-actualizing person the thousandth time he or she sees it as the first.

- *Spontaneity.*

All self-actualizing people can be described as relatively spontaneous. By this Maslow means a self-actualizing person does not strain for effect or act artificially; instead they are simple, natural, and easy-going. Their actions are not so spontaneous as to be considered strange, however. Understanding the norms and conventions of their culture, they abide by them when appropriate with good-humored grace; they are simply not constrained by them.

- *Creativeness.*

Maslow has written chapters on creativity alone. Creativity is a difficult concept, because certainly some of the most mentally ill have produced some of the most creative and beautiful art (e.g. Van Gogh) (See chapter on “Creativity” in Maslow, 1968). Self-actualization is not a prerequisite for creativity, yet the creativeness of the self-actualizing individual is unique; this creativity seems to be the creativity common to human nature—the potentiality given to all human beings at birth but is generally lost with enculturation. The self-actualizing individual taps back into this innate creativity and manifests it in all aspects of life. The manifestations of creativity in which Maslow was most interested were originality, inventiveness, adaptability, and spontaneity in the solution of problems.

- *The mystical feeling, the oceanic feeling.*

The “mystical feeling,” or the “oceanic feeling,” was later termed “peak experience.” Peak experiences are described more fully in Maslow’s work: Religion, Value, and Peak Experiences (1964). These peak experiences, or mystical feelings, are described as “a

tremendous intensification of *any* of the experiences in which there is loss of self or transcendence of it” (Maslow, 1954, p. 165) (e.g., intense concentration, intense sensuous experience, intense enjoyment of music or art, intense mystical or religious feelings of connection with the divine).

- *Gemeinschaftsgefühl* (“social interest”).

Alfred Adler invented the word “Gemeinschaftsgefühl” as part of his criteria for optimal mental health. Maslow believed it was the only word that captured self-actualizing people’s feelings for mankind. “Gemeinschaftsgefühl,” translated as social interest, is a deep feeling of identification with, sympathy, and affection for mankind, and a genuine desire to help humanity based on a sense of shared identity. Despite having an acute sense for the imperfections of the average person, humanity is understood to be one human family; “self-actualizing people are simultaneously autonomous and deeply connected to others” (Compton, 2005, p. 165)

- *Interpersonal relations.*

Self-actualizing individuals are capable of much deeper and more profound interpersonal relations—with greater love, identification and vulnerability—than the average adult.

Most self-actualizing people have few, very close relationships, yet they are kind to everyone that they meet. Maslow noted that they particularly care for children.

- *Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor.*

Self-actualizing individuals do not consider jokes at the expense of others (e.g., hostile humor or superiority humor) to be funny. Instead, they find humor in irony or the general imperfections of the human condition, including their own. Their humor is more thoughtful and closely tied to philosophy. They find the foolishness of human beings to

be the most funny (e.g., when people lose perspective or forget their place in the universe).

- *Problem centering.*

Maslow found that his subjects were generally focused on problems outside of themselves: “problem-centered” rather than egocentric. They generally have a mission in life—a service to others—to which they give selflessly because of a sense of duty or responsibility. Their concerns are generally ethical or philosophical in nature, with larger, more universal and timeless intentions rather than momentary concerns.

- *Autonomy; independence of culture and environment.*

Self-actualizing individuals, because they are motivated by growth needs, are not dependent on the praise of others or external circumstances for happiness. This contrasts with the average person who experiences deficiency motivations, and thus depends upon other people and their appraisal for gratification. What propels self-actualizing individuals is the progress of their internal development, and this is less dependent on the external world. They are relatively self-contained.

- *The quality of detachment; the need for privacy.*

Because self-actualizing individuals are not dependent on the extrinsic responses of others for gratification, they do not need to be around others all of the time. In fact, Maslow believed that self-actualizing individuals actually like solitude and privacy much more than the average person. Self-actualizing individuals are also much more detached from difficult situations, from social relations, and from strong societal forces. Maslow even goes so far as to claim that they have more “free will” and are less “determined” than the average person.

- *Resistance to enculturation.*

Maslow's self-actualizing subjects maintain a sense of detachment from their respective culture. Although they all outwardly abide by cultural norms, their inner attitude is unique and dispassionate. They are autonomous, "ruled by the laws of their own character rather than by the rules of society" (Maslow, 1954, p. 174).

- *The democratic character structure.*

By democratic character structure is meant that self-actualizing individuals are able to see and treat everyone as equal—regardless of age, sex, race, class, education or political background. They are able to learn from anyone who has something important to share, and deal with others without pretense, dishonesty, or manipulation.

- *Discrimination between means and ends.*

This is the least clearly defined of the fifteen criteria. In general, self-actualizing individuals are more focused on ends, or the outcome of actions, rather than on means. At the same time, the end does not justify the means (i.e., they would never use unethical means to achieve some ethical end). Along with this acute discrimination between means and ends, they are also able to distinguish between right and wrong, or good and evil, very well. They are strongly ethical and live according to definite moral standards (Compton, 2005).

### **Critique of Maslow: Methodology**

*These studies have proved to be so enlightening to me, and so laden with exciting implications, that it seems fair that some sort of report should be made to others in spite of its methodological shortcomings.*

—Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p. 149

*Were it not for the historical urgency of the topic, and also, I must confess, were it not for my own eagerness and impatience, it would have been preferable and more traditionally scientific to have gathered more data and to have lifted this whole enterprise to a higher level of reliability before making public my personal conclusions.*

—Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*, p. xv

*There is now emerging over the horizon a new conception of human sickness and of human health, a psychology that I find so thrilling and so full of wonderful possibilities that I yield to the temptation to present it publicly even before it is checked and confirmed, and before it can be called reliable scientific knowledge.*

—Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, p. 3.

Maslow's theories, while revolutionary in thought and progressive in their contributions to psychology as a whole, are imperfect due to their lack of empirical evidence and vague terminology. The most common critique of Maslow is that he did not empirically validate his claims (see Kendler, 1999). Maslow assumed others would follow in his footsteps to provide the necessary empirical foundation. Unfortunately, no one did. This lack of empirical support may be due to the fact that the concepts Maslow sought to measure were very difficult to define and measure. Any study of the positive in psychology confronts this dilemma: positive concepts (e.g., creativity, growth, mental health) are much more difficult to bracket and define.

Nevertheless, Maslow fully believed that his theory and terminology could and would be empirically validated to some degree:

[Self-actualization] stresses “full-humanness,” the development of the biologically based nature of man, and therefore is (empirically) normative for the whole species rather than for particular times and places, i.e., it is less culturally relative. It conforms to biological destiny, rather than to historically-arbitrary, culturally-local value-models as the terms “health” and “illness” often do. It also has empirical content and operational meaning (Maslow, 1968).

This quotation reveals that Maslow was aware of what kind of attacks his work would face: of not being biologically based and of being historically and culturally relative. While he asserts the opposite of these critiques, he fails to justify them. He never provided support for the concept of

self-actualization as a biologically driven state, and the major critiques against Maslow are exactly what he predicted: that the term is too culturally relative.

Beyond the issue of never validating his theoretical claims—Maslow did not describe his theory with operational definitions or base it on objective experimental methodology—Maslow developed his theoretical claims in a subjective way. “He simply selected people who shared his moral code and his conception of fulfillment and thus assigned them the honorific status of being self-actualized” (Kendler, 1999, p. 830). In other words, Maslow decided *a priori* who was self-actualizing and who was not, grounding the development of his theory on personal impression, and then studied these individuals to develop his fifteen signature traits.<sup>5</sup> Maslow began with famous people such as Albert Einstein, Eleanor Roosevelt, Walt Whitman, and Ludwig van Beethoven (Sheehy, 2004), and later moved to others. In this sense, Maslow was worse than being culturally or historically relative; he was “Maslow-relative.”

### **Maslow’s Contributions to Psychology**

Although lacking in stringent empirical support himself, Maslow nevertheless made lasting contributions to the field of psychology. Most obviously, Humanistic psychology benefitted from his ideas immensely, as Carl Rogers and others went on to explore and add to his ideas in a Humanistic context. However, scientific psychology also benefitted from Maslow’s ideas. While no one followed in Maslow’s footsteps to empirically validate his theories in general, there were many who sought to empirically examine his concept of self-actualization. Most studies fail to support Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as is (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976), yet studies of positive mental health, based on self-actualization as a descriptor of optimal mental

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<sup>5</sup> Maslow was aware of his possible selection biases. In one of his journals, he even wrote: “How come I pick so many more girls than boys, and how come they’re all very pretty?” (Lowry, 1973, p. 34)

health, are many (Compton, 2005). Research literature focusing on the *traits* of self-actualizing individuals actually support Maslow's self-actualization criteria as useful indicators of positive mental health (Knapp & Comrey, 1973; Welch, Tate, & Menderios, 1987; Richard & Jex, 1991; Jones & Crandall, 1986). In general, studies have found that people who score higher on measures of self-actualization also score higher on other indices of mental health (Compton, 2005).

The most popularly used assessment of self-actualization is Shostrom's Personal Orientation Inventory (POI), first introduced in 1964. This 150-item forced choice questionnaire measures three concepts: self-actualization, self-acceptance, and self-regard. Self-actualization is regarded here as the ability to maximize personal growth, whereas self-acceptance is accepting oneself while recognizing personal weaknesses and self-regard is realizing the worth in oneself (Breytspraak & George, 1982). These three concepts are measured with 12 subscales: inner directedness, time competence, self-actualizing values, existentiality, feelings of reactivity, spontaneity, self-regard, self-acceptance, nature of man, synergy, acceptance of aggression, and capacity for intimate contact (Breytspraak & George, 1982). Many other measures with similar goals of empirically measuring Maslow's traits have been developed since. Jones and Crandall's (1991) Short Index of Self-Actualization and Sumerlin and Bundrick's (1996) Brief Index of Self-Actualization are good examples of some of the more recent attempts.

### **Maslow's Call for a Positive Psychology**

Through his study of self-actualization, Maslow paved the way for the field of Positive Psychology by emphasizing mental health and the realization of human potential as an important psychological concern. Maslow has an even more direct link to Positive Psychology, however, in

that he was the first to use the term, raising the call for a “positive psychology” in 1954 (Maslow, 1954). Just as Positive Psychology is a reaction to the prevailing disease-model of psychology, Maslow was reacting to the prevailing pathological focus of his day that arose out of psychoanalysis and behaviorism.

The inception of the field of Positive Psychology mirrors the beginnings of Humanistic psychology in many ways. Maslow (1965) declared that “psychology ought to become more positive and less negative” (p. 27). Likewise Seligman (2003) has said that if we focus on repairing damage, the best we can achieve is zero; he has introduced Positive Psychology in this context, “How can we go from zero to plus two, or even to plus six?” (p. xii) Maslow (1965) declared that a positive psychology “should have higher ceilings, and not be afraid of the loftier possibilities of the human being” (p. 27). Likewise Seligman (2003) has said, “My dream is that a science of positive psychology will be developed...Its mission will be to assess and build human strength.” Positive Psychology, according to Gable and Haidt (2005) is “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (p. 104). The following sections will explore three research agendas of Positive Psychology that address the good life, and thus fulfill Seligman’s—and one might also say Maslow’s—dream: a classification of human strengths and virtues, the development of the concept of flourishing, and the exploration of three kinds of happy lives.

### **Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification**

*In the various enumerations of the moral virtues I had met with in my reading, I found the catalog more or less numerous, as different writers included more or fewer ideas under the same name.”*  
 – Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*



*Psychology is not just the study of disease, weakness, and damage.  
It is also the study of happiness, strength, and virtue.*  
– Seligman, 2003, p. xiv

Just as Maslow sought to identify the personality traits characteristic of self-actualized individuals, Positive Psychology has endeavored to create a systematic classification tool that will specifically identify the strengths of character that make the good life possible (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The question, “Can we hold hope that positive psychology will be able to help people evolve toward their highest potential?” inspired two Positive Psychologists, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, to create the *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (CSV) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Colloquially referred to as the “Manual of the Sanities” or the “unDSM,” this handbook seeks to make a science of human strengths possible. Just as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* provides a common classification tool and vocabulary for speaking about mental illness, the CSV hopes to provide a common vocabulary for measurable positive traits that will better allow Positive Psychologists to work together.

In order to make such a manual, the authors had to make certain assumptions. The first is that “the good life” exists, and that central to understanding the good life is an understanding of individuals and their traits: “The good life is lived over time and across situations, and an examination of the good life in terms of positive traits is demanded. Strengths of character provide the needed explanation for the stability and generality of a life well lived” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 12).

The second assumption is that of free will. The authors reject the notion of determinism or radical environmentalism, and emphasize the individual’s own will and choice. While

acknowledging that heredity plays a role in development, the authors largely view character as something that is shaped by individual choices in response to the environment (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The third general assumption is to understand character based on a more contemporary trait theory stemming from personality psychology. Rather than talk about character in a unitary and categorical way as in the DSM (e.g., one either has character or one does not), Peterson and Seligman (2004) decided to talk about character as generally stable across time while also being shaped by the individual's setting and thus capable of change. They assume character is plural, so they outline separate strengths and virtues that vary from individual to individual.

### *Defining Character Strengths and Virtues*

In order to specify the particular strengths and virtues that make up character, these ideas themselves need to be defined. Peterson and Seligman (2004) define virtues as universal, core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers. The “High 6” are wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (p. 13). The authors suggest that all virtues need to be displayed in order to deem an individual of good character.

Each virtue is made up of three to five character strengths, adding up to 24 strengths in all. The authors suggest that only one or two of the character strengths under the subset of a specific virtue need to be displayed in order to manifest that virtue.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) define character strengths as the psychological processes or mechanisms that define virtues; they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues (p. 13). Peterson, Seligman, and other positive psychologists created a list of criteria

to help define character strengths. A positive characteristic must satisfy most of the following ten criteria to be considered a character trait (taken from Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 16-28):

- **Criterion 1.** A strength contributes to various fulfillments that constitute the good life, for oneself and for others. Although strengths and virtues determine how an individual copes with adversity, our focus is on how they fulfill an individual.
- **Criterion 2.** Although strengths can and do produce desirable outcomes, each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes.
- **Criterion 3.** The display of a strength by one person does not diminish other people in the vicinity.
- **Criterion 4.** Being able to phrase the “opposite” of a putative strength in a felicitous way counts against regarding it as a character strength.
- **Criterion 5.** A strength needs to be manifest in the range of an individual’s behavior—thoughts, feelings, and/or actions—in such a way that it can be assessed. It should be trait-like in the sense of having a degree of generality across situations and stability across time.
- **Criterion 6.** The strength is distinct from other positive traits in the classification and cannot be decomposed into them.
- **Criterion 7.** A character strength is embodied in consensual paragons. The larger culture highlights strengths of character in stories, parables, creeds, etc.
- **Criterion 8.** We do not believe this feature can be applied to all strengths, but an additional criterion where sensible is the existence of prodigies with respect to the strength.

- **Criterion 9.** Conversely, another criterion for a given character strength is the existence of people who show—selectively—the total absence of a given strength.
- **Criterion 10.** As suggested by Erikson’s (1963) discussion of psychosocial stages and the virtues that result from their satisfactory resolutions, the larger society provides institutions and associated rituals for cultivating strengths and virtues and then for sustaining their practice.

The definitions of virtues and strengths, as well as the criteria, resulted from multiple, intense brainstorming sessions with some of the most renowned positive psychologists (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). However, if that had been all, their methodology would not be very different from the methodology of Abraham Maslow. Maslow simply thought up character traits based on observation of who he deemed to be self-actualized. In essence, their brainstorming just involved more people and a more developed vocabulary.

However, in order to add some objectivity to their creation, they tried to empirically address the assumption that their list of strengths and virtues were valued in all contemporary cultures around the world. Although a daunting task, the authors used a historical exercise to show a strong convergence in certain core virtues across time, place, and intellectual tradition. They initially performed a literary search to identify previous influential attempts to list virtues crucial to human thriving. They focused on written texts from “ancient cultures recognized for their influential and enduring impact on human civilization” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 34). The second task was to identify whether the virtue catalogues of these early thinkers would converge regardless of tradition or culture. The result of this historical search was to illustrate

that there are indeed ubiquitous virtues and therefore nonarbitrary reasons for focusing on certain virtues rather than others.

A simplified table labeling the “High 6” virtues and the 24 character traits is provided below as outlined by Peterson and Seligman in the CSV (2004):

**Table 2. Classification of Character Strengths** (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

- 
1. **Wisdom and Knowledge**—cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
    - *Creativity [originality, ingenuity]*: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
    - *Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]*: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
    - *Open-mindedness [judgment, critical thinking]*: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; *not* jumping to conclusions; being able to change one’s mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
    - *Love of learning*: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one’s own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add *systematically* to what one knows
    - *Perspective [wisdom]*: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people
  2. **Courage**—emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
    - *Bravery [valor]*: *Not* shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
    - *Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]*: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door” taking pleasure in completing tasks
    - *Integrity [authenticity, honesty]*: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions
    - *Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]*: Approaching life with excitement and energy; *not* doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
  3. **Humanity**—interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
    - *Love*: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

- *Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, “niceness”]*: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
  - *Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]*: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
4. **Justice**—civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
- *Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]*: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one’s share
  - *Fairness*: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; *not* letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
  - *Leadership*: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
5. **Temperance**—strengths that protect against excess
- *Forgiveness and mercy*: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second change; *not* being vengeful
  - *Humility/Modesty*: Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves; *not* seeking the spotlight; *not* regarding oneself as more special than one is
  - *Prudence*: Being careful about one’s choices; *not* taking undue risks; *not* saying or doing things that might later be regretted
  - *Self-regulation [self-control]*: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions
6. **Transcendence**—strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
- *Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]*: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
  - *Gratitude*: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
  - *Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]*: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
  - *Humor [playfulness]*: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
  - *Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]*: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.
-

The 24 character traits were validated further by empirical studies in 40 countries. Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004) found that the most commonly endorsed strengths to be kindness, fairness, authenticity, gratitude, and open-mindedness; the lesser strengths are consistently prudence, modesty, and self-regulation. The findings defied cultural, ethnic, and religious differences, and the correlation between countries was very strong (in the .80s).

### *Similarities Between Maslow and the CSV*

Peterson and Seligman (2004) recognize that previous classifications of character strengths were created by psychologists before them. They examine some of the similarities between their virtue catalogue and those of William Bennet (1993), the Boy Scouts of America (1998), Benjamin Franklin (1790/1961), Charlemagne (Turner, 1880), and Merlin (2001), as cited in Peterson and Seligman (2004). Others with similar virtue catalogues include Erikson's Psychosocial Stages, Greenberger et al.'s Model of Psychosocial Maturity, Ryff et al.'s Dimensions of Well-Being, the Big Five, Cawley et al.'s Virtue Factors, among others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Maslow is mentioned, and a rough correspondence between the CSV's virtues character strengths and Maslow's characteristics of self-actualized individuals is provided. The following table, however, is more in-depth analysis of the correspondence between Maslow's traits and the virtues of the CSV as well as the character strengths of the CSV. Some of Maslow's traits have been mapped to both virtues and specific character strengths:

**Table 3. *Similarities Between Maslow's Characteristics of Self-Actualized Individuals and the Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues*** (inspired by Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 63)

<b>Virtues (CSV)</b>	<b>Self-Actualization Characteristic (Maslow)</b>
Wisdom and knowledge	~More efficient perception of reality
Humanity	Gemeinschaftsgefühl ("social interest")
Justice	Democratic character structure

Temperance	
Transcendence	~Problem centering; The mystical feeling
<b>Character strength (CSV)</b>	<b>Self-Actualization Characteristic(s) (Maslow)</b>
Creativity	Creativeness
Curiosity	~Continued freshness of appreciation
Love of learning	
Open-mindedness	More efficient perception of reality
Perspective	More efficient perception of reality
Authenticity	Acceptance (self); More efficient perception of reality; Spontaneity
Bravery	
Persistence	~Problem centering
Zest	Continued freshness of appreciation
Kindness	
Love	Interpersonal relations
Social intelligence	More efficient perception of reality
Fairness	Discrimination between means and ends; Democratic character structure
Leadership	
Teamwork	Democratic character structure
Forgiveness and mercy	Acceptance (others)
Modesty and humility	
Prudence	
Self-regulation	
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	Continued freshness of appreciation
Gratitude	Continued freshness of appreciation
Hope	
Humor	Philosophical, unhostile sense of humor
Religiousness/spirituality	The mystical feeling

Generally speaking, there are three main differences between Maslow's list of character traits and that of the CSV. First, Maslow's traits of autonomy—autonomy/independence of environment, detachment/need for privacy, and resistance to enculturation—were not included in the CSV. Peterson and Seligman (2004) excluded these traits after the preliminary historical analysis, because they are believed to be more culturally relative.

Second, the CSV's traits which touched upon a withholding of self—self-regulation, modesty and humility, prudence—were generally not included by Maslow. Maslow may have



been less culturally relative in this regard, however, because prudence, modesty, and self-regulation are consistently the least commonly endorsed traits from nation to nation according to the findings Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2004).

There is also a general disconnect in that many of the traits described by Maslow describe general states of “Being.” In Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, he identifies the first four stages (physiological, safety, belongingness and love, and esteem) as being motivated by deficiency needs, or “D-needs,” the basic needs for psychological adjustment. Self-actualizing people, on the other hand, are more strongly motivated by being needs, or “B-needs,” some of which are truth, justice, beauty, wholeness, richness, playfulness, meaningfulness, and goodness (Maslow, 1968, 1971; Compton, 2005). Those driven by D-needs focus more on “Becoming” while those motivated by B-needs focus more on “Being.” Thus, many of the traits described by Maslow are general states of Being (i.e., how one views and understands the world and one’s place in it). The CSV character strengths, however, are more a description of behavior or actions. For example, kindness is described as *doing* favors and good deeds for others; bravery is *acting* on convictions; love of learning is *mastering* new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge; leadership is *encouraging* a group to get things done; self-regulation is *regulating* what one feels and does. This specificity made an exact comparison between the two difficult, yet in stepping back, the general ideological similarities become quite apparent.

### *How Do You Assess the CSV’s Character Strengths and Virtues?*

What distinguishes the CSV from previous attempts to classify good character, according to Peterson and Seligman (2004), is its heightened concern with assessment. The practical application of this manual was the purpose for its creation. Peterson and Seligman (2004) utilize

surveys and structured interviews to assess strengths and virtues. While such assessment work relies upon self-report and may be compromised by social-desirability issues (Crowne & Marlow, 1964; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the authors are “quite willing, as researchers and practitioners, to trust what individuals say about their problems” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 625). In fact, psychological disorders are most often measured through symptom questionnaires or structured interviews; Peterson and Seligman (2004) thought wellness could and should be understood the same way.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed an inventory to measure character strengths in adults and another to measure young people (ages 10-17). The survey for adults is called the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS). The VIA-IS uses 5-point Likert-scale items to measure the degree to which respondents endorse items reflecting the 24 strengths (10 items per strength) in the VIA classification (see Appendix A for sample questions). Scores are formed by averaging responses within scales, with high numbers reflecting more of the strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

As of 2004, the VIA-IS had been reworked five times and completed by more than 150,000 adults. Some information on the reliability and validity of the test as presented by Peterson and Seligman (2004, p. 631) are as follows:

- All scales have satisfactory alphas ( $>.70$ )
- Scores are skewed to the right but still show variations.
- Test-retest correlations for all scales over a 4-month period are substantial ( $>.70$ ) and in almost all cases approach their internal consistencies.
- Marlow-Crowne social desirability scores do not significantly correlate with scale scores, with the exception of prudence ( $r = .44$ ) and spirituality ( $r = .30$ ).

- Demographic correlations are modest but sensible. For example, women score higher than men on all the humanity strengths. Younger adults score higher than older adults on the scale for playfulness. Married individuals are more forgiving than those who are divorced.

The VIA-IS is commonly used today as a popular measure of character strengths and virtues.

The CSV has created the means for achieving its goals: to provide a consensual vocabulary for talking about positive traits and to devise a means of measuring these traits (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). While it has not been universally accepted by those outside of the field of Positive Psychology (see Cloninger, 2005), it is a productive step in laying the foundation for the greater goal of building such strengths among the young and old.

### **Flourishing in Positive Psychology**

*“Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”*

– World Health Organization, 1946, p. 100

Just as the CSV studied the character strengths and virtues that make the good life possible, the study of “flourishing” in Positive Psychology is the study of the good life. Keyes and Haidt (2003), the authors of *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well Lived*, state that their purpose in studying flourishing is to “begin to study ‘that which makes life worthwhile,’ and to investigate some possible mechanisms for promoting the ranks of healthy, productive, happy, and flourishing individuals” (p. 6).

Pathology-centered psychology has focused on alleviating mental illness, but as Keyes (2003) has argued, alleviating mental illness does not mean you necessarily bring someone to the state of mental health. The World Health Organization’s widely endorsed definition of health as

“a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (1946, p. 100) supports the concept that the absence of mental illness is not the same as mental health. Yet, at the same time, the absence of mental health is not mental illness, either. Thought of in terms of the good life, the absence of a bad life is not necessarily a good life, and the absence of a good life is not necessarily a bad life.

Positive psychologists use the term “languishing” for the in-betweens—those devoid of both mental health and mental illness. “Languishing is defined as a state in which an individual is devoid of positive emotion toward life, is not functioning well psychologically or socially, but has not been depressed during the past year” (Keyes, 2003, p. 294). Languishers do not live a bad life, yet they do not live a good life, either. Languishing is “silent and debilitating epidemic in the United States” (Keyes, 2003, p. 294). While individuals are not diagnosed as clinically depressed, life nevertheless feels hollow and empty; emotional distress and psychosocial impairment are common (Keyes, 2003). Because languishing is the absence of mental health, the study of flourishing, or how to achieve mental health, becomes especially important.

Frederickson and Losada (2005) define flourishing as such: “to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience” (p. 678). Flourishing for Keyes (2003) is the exemplification of mental health. Keyes (2003) argues that mental health, just like mental illness, should be viewed as a syndrome of “symptoms.” Thus, the concept of mental health can be able to be broken down into its constituent parts. Keyes (2003; 2007) defines flourishing as a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially. Flourishing, based on this definition, can be broken down into three clusters of symptoms: Positive emotions (i.e., emotional well-being); Positive psychological functioning (i.e., psychological well-being);

and Positive social functioning (i.e., social well-being) (Keyes, 2005; 2007). The following table, taken from Keyes (2005; 2007), provides the operational definitions for the symptoms that make up each of these parts:

**Table 4. Factors and 13 Dimensions Reflecting Mental Health as Flourishing**

Dimension	Definition
<i>Positive emotions (i.e., emotional well-being)</i>	
Positive affect	Regularly cheerful, interested in life, in good spirits, happy, calm and peaceful, full of life.
Avowed quality of life	Mostly or highly satisfied with life overall or in domains of life.
<i>Positive psychological functioning (i.e., psychological well-being)</i>	
Self-acceptance	Holds positive attitudes toward self, acknowledges, likes most parts of self, personality.
Personal growth	Seeks challenge, has insight into own potential, feels a sense of continued development.
Purpose in life	Finds own life has a direction and meaning.
Environmental mastery	Exercises ability to select, manage, and mold personal environs to suit needs.
Autonomy	Is guided by own, socially accepted, internal standards and values.
Positive relations with others	Has, or can form, warm, trusting personal relationships
<i>Positive social functioning (i.e., social well-being)</i>	
Social acceptance	Holds positive attitudes toward, acknowledges, and is accepting of human differences.
Social actualization	Believes people, groups, and society have potential and can evolve or grow positively.
Social contribution	Sees own daily activities as useful to and valued by society and others.
Social coherence	Interested in society and social life and finds them meaningful and somewhat intelligible.
Social integration	A sense of belonging to, and comfort and support from, a community.
Note. The 13 dimensions are from Keyes (2005, Table 1, p. 541).	

### *Flourishing & Self-Actualization*

Seligman oftentimes uses the term “self-actualization,” but “flourishing” is more common as it is a more precisely defined concept in Positive Psychology that has been systematically studied. As illustrated previously, the character strengths described in the CSV are

generally a description of actions and behavior. Maslow’s concept of self-actualization, on the other hand, is more a study of “Being.” Positive Psychology, through the study of flourishing, also allows the study of a state of “Being,” the state of optimal mental health. The following table shows the correspondence between flourishing symptoms and Maslow’s character traits:

**Table 5. Similarities Between Maslow’s Characteristics of Self-Actualized Individuals and the Symptoms of Flourishing**

Symptoms of Flourishing	Self-Actualization Characteristic
<i>Positive emotions (i.e., emotional well-being)</i>	
Positive Affect	
Avowed Quality of Life	
<i>Positive psychological functioning (i.e., psychological well-being)</i>	
Self-acceptance	Acceptance (self)
Personal growth	Autonomy
Purpose in life	Problem-centering
Environmental mastery	
Autonomy	Autonomy; Resistance to enculturation
Positive relations with others	Interpersonal relations
<i>Positive social functioning (i.e., social well-being)</i>	
Social acceptance	Acceptance (others, nature); Democratic character structure
Social actualization	
Social contribution	Problem centering
Social coherence	
Social integration	

Why certain self-actualization characteristics were mapped onto specific flourishing symptoms may not be obvious as it was with the CSV. Therefore, the mappings that are harder to understand at face value will be described in more detail.

Personal growth was associated with autonomy, because personal growth is characterized by seeking challenge and personally developing one’s own potential (Keyes, 2003; 2005). Likewise, a core component of autonomy is the personal motivation for growth needs; self-actualizing individuals are propelled by the progress of their own internal development (Maslow, 1954). Both emphasize internal, personal growth as an important motivation.

Purpose in life, or finding direction and meaning in life (Keyes, 2003; 2005), was associated with problem-centering. Maslow characterizes problem-centering as focusing on problems outside of themselves, which results in the discovery of a mission, duty, or responsibility in life to which one is able to give selflessly (Maslow, 1954). Both emphasize finding a “calling,” direction, or purpose for one’s life.

It is easy to accept why Maslow’s trait of autonomy was mapped onto flourishing’s autonomy. It is less obvious why resistance to enculturation was also included here. According to Maslow (1954), resistance to enculturation means having a sense of autonomy; individuals are internally motivated by their own goals. Just as flourishing individuals who manifest autonomy are guided by their own internal standards and values, self-actualizing individuals are also “ruled by the laws of their own character” (Maslow, 1954, p. 174).

Democratic character structure was mapped along with acceptance (of others and nature) to flourishing’s social acceptance. Social-acceptance in flourishing is defined as the holding positive attitudes toward, acknowledging, and being accepting of human differences (Keyes, 2005). Similarly, Maslow (1954) described the democratic character structure as the ability to see and treat everyone as equal, regardless of his or her respective differences.

Finally, problem centering was mapped onto social contribution because both concepts emphasize a giving to others and more broadly, society. More specifically, problem centering suggests that one’s mission in life is a service to others, which is seen by the self-actualizing person as intrinsically valuable. Maslow (1954) emphasizes the internal realization of the value of that service, whereas social contribution as defined seems to emphasize the externally rooted satisfaction that comes from the belief that others and society value their contributions.

Interestingly, Maslow's traits did not correspond well with flourishing's subsection of emotional well-being. Maslow did not emphasize the personal happiness or positive emotions of self-actualizing individuals, while this is a critical component of flourishing (See *How Do You Diagnose Flourishing?* below). Furthermore, many of the social well-being symptoms (social actualization, social coherence, and social integration) did not correspond with any of Maslow's traits. Social well-being is defined by a number of symptoms that suggest a relationship, identification, and comfort with society, which is not seen in Maslow's (1954) description of self-actualizers. On the contrary, Maslow's (1954) description of a self-actualizer depicts a lone individual who functions well in society, yet does not necessarily identify or depend upon it.

Maslow's traits of autonomy, on the other hand, were more easily mapped onto flourishing's symptoms of psychological well-being than they were in the CSV. Because the CSV excluded Maslow's traits of autonomy due to their culturally relative nature, this may suggest that the symptoms of psychological well-being that depend upon individual growth and personal autonomy here may also be too culturally relative to be universally applied. However, research in flourishing may not have the same desire as the CSV to make universal claims.

### *How Do You Diagnose "Flourishing?"*

Fewer than one quarter of adults between the ages of 25 and 74 in the United States fit the criteria for flourishing in life (Keyes, 2003), but how does one diagnose flourishing, or mental health, or the good life? Similar to the attempts of previous psychologists who sought to create questionnaires to assess self-actualization, Keyes (2002) has attempted to create a measurement for flourishing.



Keyes (2002; 2003) presents two dimensions that compose one's mental state: the mental illness continuum and the mental health continuum. He proposes that mental health and mental illness are not simply polar opposites. In order to diagnose an individual's complete mental state, two diagnoses are necessary: one for mental illness and one for mental health. The mental illness continuum is diagnosed using the DSM criteria. The mental health continuum is based on a number of diagnoses that were modeled on the DSM-III-R (American Psychiatric Association, 1987).

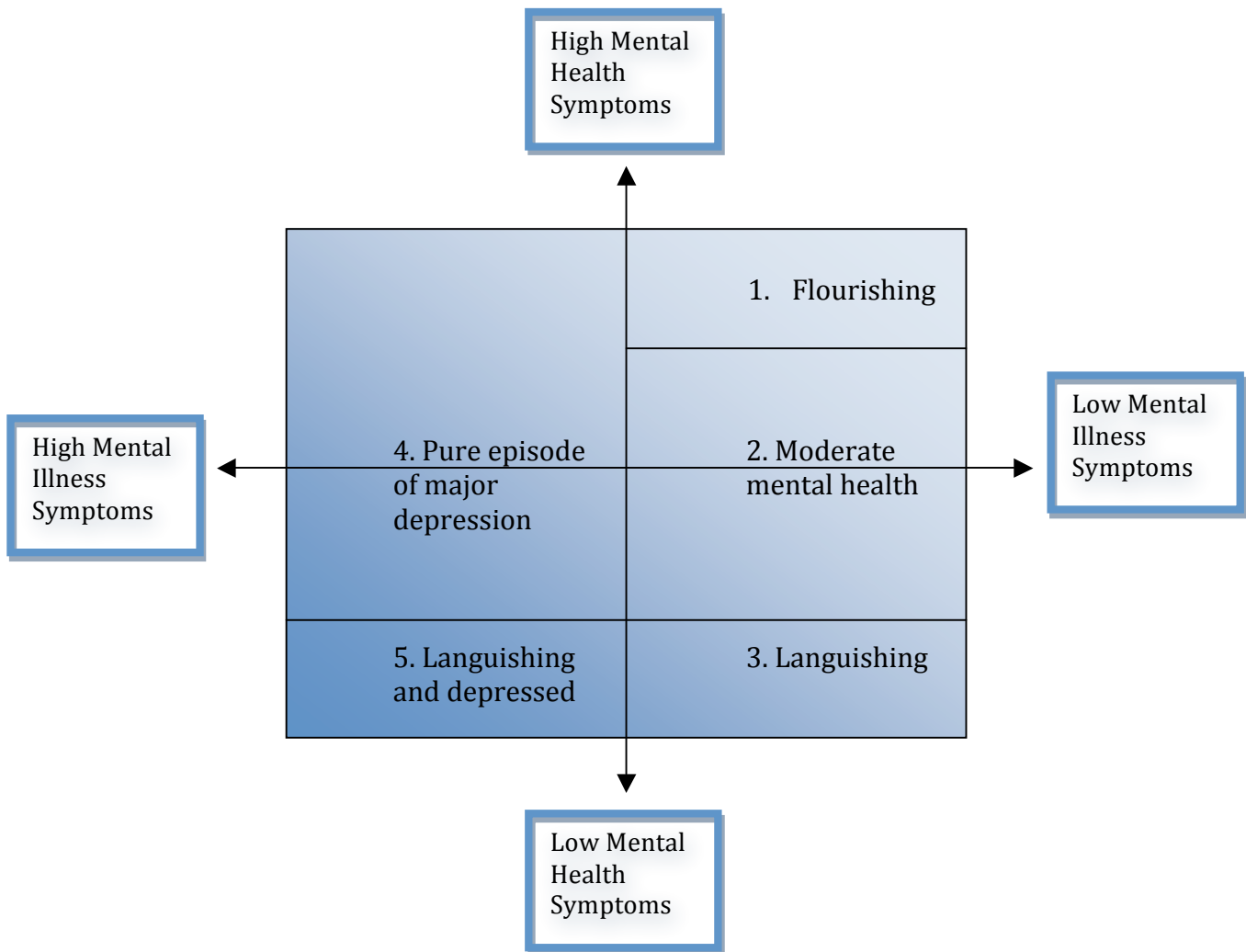


Figure 2. The complete mental health model and diagnostic categories (Keyes, 2003)

In one study on flourishing and languishing, Keyes (2002) diagnosed mental health by having participants complete a structured scale of positive affect, an item on life satisfaction, six scales of psychological well-being, and five scales of social well-being. The first two items (positive affect and life satisfaction) were to measure emotional vitality; the last 11 symptom scales (psychological and social well-being) were to measure positive functioning (Keyes, 2002; 2003).

Keyes (2002) concluded that to be diagnosed as languishing in life, individuals must exhibit low levels (i.e., lower third) on one of the two scales of emotional well-being and low levels on six of the 11 scales of positive functioning. To be diagnosed as flourishing in life, individuals have to exhibit high levels (upper third) on one of the two scales of emotional well-being and high levels on six of the 11 scales of positive functioning. Individuals who are neither languishing nor flourishing are “moderately mentally healthy” (Keyes, 2003).

Keyes (2002) used these diagnoses for mental health based on the findings of one of his major studies, The Midlife in the United States study of adults (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 1995). The study was comprised of 3,025 adults nation-wide between the ages of 25 and 74. Using similar scales, some findings from the study are notable (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 1995):

- 17.2% of the sample fit the criteria for flourishing
- 56.6% were moderately mentally healthy
- 12.1% of adults fit the criteria for languishing
- 14.1% fit the criteria for major depressive episode, of which 9.4% were not languishing and 4.7% were languishing.

- The risk of a major depressive episode was two times more likely among languishing than moderately mentally healthy adults, and nearly six times greater among languishing than flourishing adults.
- Languishing/depression were associated with significant psychosocial impairment in terms of perceived emotional health, limitations of activities of daily living, and workdays lost/cutback.
- Flourishing and moderate mental health were associated with superior profiles of psychosocial functioning.
- Males, older adults, more educated individuals, and married adults were more likely to be mentally healthy.

### *Relevant Empirical Findings*

Studies of flourishing hope to step beyond self-help books in that they offer empirically grounded advice, evidence, and insight into how to get the most out of life. Flourishing by Keyes and Haidt (2003) compiles a number of scientific analyses of the study of the good life, ranging from the investigation of the relationship between optimism and flourishing (Peterson & Chang, 2003) to the construction of meaning through vital engagement (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) to illustrating that helping others does indeed help yourself (Piliavin, 2003). Flourishing can be studied from many different angles, each of which contribute to the creation of a more defined meaning of “flourishing.”

Fredrickson and Losada (2005) sought to understand the predictors of flourishing and languishing, and they wanted to know if predictors are similar for individuals, relationships, and larger groups. Fredrickson and Losada (2005) proposed that a key predictor of flourishing is the

ratio of positive to negative affect, also known as the positivity ratio. The positivity ratio looks at the “affective texture of a person’s life” (p. 679), or the amount of pleasant feelings/actions (e.g., feeling grateful, upbeat, liking) and negative feelings/actions (e.g., feeling contemptuous, irritable, expressing dislike or disdain) (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

Their hypothesis—that this positivity ratio would predict flourishing—was built upon Fredrickson’s *broaden-and-build theory*. The broaden-and-build theory states that positive emotions are evolved psychological adaptations that increased human ancestors’ odds of survival and reproduction. In contrast to negative emotions which are direct and only immediately adaptive in life-threatening situations, positive emotions lead to exploratory behavior, which allows one to build more accurate cognitive maps of what is good and bad in the environment (Fredrickson, 1998). The broaden-and-build theory goes beyond positive affect as a marker of current health and well-being and suggests that positive affects also *produces* future health and well-being (Fredrickson, 2001 as cited in Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Fredrickson and Losada (2005) looked at two independent samples and measured flourishing using a 33-item measure of positive psychological and social functioning (from Keyes, 2002). They then asked participants for 28 consecutive days to indicate the degree to which they had felt each of 20 emotions, both positive (e.g., amusement, awe, compassion, hope, joy, love) and negative (e.g., contempt, anger, fear, embarrassment, sadness) in the past 24 hours, from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*extremely*) (from Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). Fredrickson and Losada’s (2005) findings supported their hypothesis. They looked at data from marriages, and business teams as well. At all three levels of analysis—individuals, marriages, and business teams—they found that flourishing mental health was associated with positivity ratios above 2.9. Fredrickson and

Losada's study and others like it are important because they contribute to a developing theory of positive emotion, and a better understanding for how flourishing can be achieved.

### **The Three Kinds of Happy Lives**

*We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

— The United States Declaration of Independence, 1776

Martin Seligman likes to work in threes. There are three costs of the disease model. There are three pillars of Positive Psychology. There are three aims of Positive Psychology.... Likewise, there are three different “happy” lives. These three happy lives may reflect varying conception of what the “good life” really is. While Maslow's ideology will not be explicitly overlapped onto these concepts, they act as illustrations of further studies in Positive Psychology of the good life; they are pieces of a larger attempt that answers Maslow's call for a “positive psychology.”

Happiness acts as a synonym for the “good life.” People want to live the good life, and fundamental to the good life is being happy. Happy people are healthier, more successful, and more socially engaged (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). But what exactly does “happy” mean? Happiness is assumed by Seligman (2002) to be a scientifically “unwieldy” term, and thus happiness per se may not be able to be studied. Currently, “happiness” denotes a field within Positive Psychology, one that studies particular manifestations of happiness, specifically those that are defined in specific, measurable ways (Peterson, 2006).

Historically, the pursuit of happiness has taken many different forms. Perhaps the most familiar form is the pursuit of pleasure. This pursuit is essentially hedonistic, as maximization of

pleasure, or positive emotion, is the goal (Seligman, 2004). Another easily recognizable path to happiness emerged as early as Aristotle. Inspired by Aristotle's notion of *eudemonia* – being true to one's inner self – this path believes that true happiness lies in recognizing, cultivating, and living in accordance with one's virtues (Aristotle, 2000; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). These two traditions, oftentimes viewed as oppositional to one another, can be reduced to the concepts of pleasure and meaning, respectively.

In order to study happiness empirically, Seligman (2002) dissected the term into distinct, definable routes to happiness. There is the route of pleasure, of meaning, and then Seligman (2002) proposes a third route to happiness: engagement. The concept was inspired by Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) work on "flow." Flow is the psychological state that accompanies highly engaging activities (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When one is in a state of flow, the experience is invigorating, time passes quickly, and all of one's attention is focused.<sup>6</sup> Previous work on flow (Waterman, 1993) aligned the flow state with *eudemonia*, or the pleasure path. Others view flow as a byproduct of activities in a meaningful life. Waterman (1993) concluded that flow was a kind of mix of pleasure and meaning. Peterson et al. (2005), however, argues that flow is not the same thing as a sensual pleasure, nor do all meaningful activities produce flow. They instead argue that flow is its own distinct path to happiness.

When the word "happiness" is used by positive psychologists, it is often used in the atheoretical sense and refers jointly to these three concepts: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Out of these three distinct routes, Seligman

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<sup>6</sup> Flow shares much in common with Maslow's "oceanic or mystical feeling" description.

(2002; 2004) introduces three different kinds of “happy lives”: the pleasant life, the good life<sup>7</sup>, and the meaningful life.

Those in pursuit of the pleasant life want as much positive emotion as possible, and therefore, cultivate the skills that maximize these pleasurable moments (Seligman, 2004). The quality of the pleasurable life can be measured by the number of good moments minus the number of bad moments (Seligman, 2002). There are three drawbacks to the pleasurable life, however: the amount of positive emotion one experiences is 50% heritable and only 15-20% of the skills one cultivates actually affect the amount of positive emotion one feels (Seligman, 2004); secondly, because of its high genetic component, positive emotion is not particularly malleable; and third, positive emotions habituate quickly (i.e., pleasures are fleeting) (Seligman, 2004).

The second life, the good life, is characterized by engagement. The defining characteristic of the good life is flow. Unlike positive emotion when one is acutely aware of feeling positive emotion or pleasure, when one is in a state of flow, an individual is “at one” with whatever he or she is doing. They may not even realize they are in a state of flow. Flow, or intense engagement, is possible in all realms of life: work, parenting, love, or leisure. Seligman (2004) has created a sort of recipe for the good life that begins with identifying one’s individual signature strengths. One can do so by taking the VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire,<sup>8</sup> the questionnaire that arose out of the classification of character strengths and virtues. Once one’s signature strengths are known, Seligman (2002; 2004) suggests people re-craft their lives – their work, their play, their love – so as to use their strengths as much as possible.

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<sup>7</sup> The “good life” in the context of the three happy lives refers to the life of engagement and is not to be confused with the more general “good life” that is the recurring theme of this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Offered online at [www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com)

The third happy life, the meaningful life, builds upon the latter two but adds one more component: the individual uses his or her signature strengths to advance knowledge, power, or goodness (Seligman, 2002). In other words, signature strengths are used for more than individual engagement; they are employed in service to something greater.

In studying these three distinct lives, the target variable is overall life satisfaction. Surely each individual is capable of pursuing more than one path to happiness, however, so naturally the question arises, how do they compare? Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) sought to answer exactly this: As a function of the three different lives, how much life satisfaction do you get?

#### *Empirical Basis for Three Kinds of Happy Lives*

Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) conducted an empirical validation of the three ways of being happy: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. They measured life satisfaction, and asked four questions: Are these three orientations to happiness empirically distinguishable individual differences? Is it possible for the same person to pursue these different ways of being happy at once? Do these three orientations each contribute to life satisfaction, or are some more important than others? And are there interactions among these orientations with respect to life satisfaction?

In order to do so, Peterson, Park, and Seligman (2005) developed a 36-item Orientation to Happiness questionnaire (See Appendix A) and measured life satisfaction through the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (See Appendix B) developed by Ed Diener and colleagues (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). They put the measures online, and 845 adults completed the surveys.

Their results were quite interesting. They found that the three orientations to happiness were distinguishable and each of the orientations predicted life satisfaction: pleasure to a small



degree, and engagement and meaning to a moderate degree, with meaning showing the highest correlation. Pleasure alone shows almost no correlation with life satisfaction. However, combined with engagement and meaning, positive emotion does contribute to an increase in life satisfaction.

Interestingly, when the three-way interaction was examined, higher life satisfaction scores came from those simultaneously near the top of all three Orientations to Happiness subscales; low life satisfaction scores came from respondents simultaneously near the bottom of all three subscales. Peterson et al. (2005) designated those who simultaneously score low on all three orientations as having the “Empty Life,” while those who score high on all three orientations have the “Full Life.” Those living the “Full Life” reported the greatest life satisfaction.<sup>9</sup>

In simple terms, this study showed that the most satisfied people are those who pursue happiness through all three routes, with a stronger emphasis on engagement and meaning (Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005). When one has the foundation of engagement and meaning, pleasure acts as a “cherry on top” (Seligman, 2004). In the “Full Life,” because pleasure alone does not contribute to happiness, the sum is greater than its parts (Seligman, 2004).

### **Philosophical Grounding in Positive Psychology**

The explicit purpose of this review up to this point has been to illustrate how the subject material of Positive Psychology is not new. Using Abraham Maslow, a Humanistic psychologist, and his exploration of self-actualizing individuals, it can clearly be seen that although Maslow’s work and the work of Positive Psychologists are hardly identical, the study of the “positive,” or

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<sup>9</sup> Demographic information also showed some interesting correlations: respondents with the fullest life were more likely than those in other groups to be older, married, and more highly educated. Peterson et al. (2005) suggest this could be because all of the factors open doors to diverse and satisfying experiences.

the good life, occurred long before the inception of Positive Psychology. So if Positive Psychology is not new in its study of the good life, is it new in another way?

The final section of this review will expound the second half of Taylor's (2001) critique—that Positive Psychology should be more philosophically sophisticated—in order to show that Positive Psychology is, in fact, unique. Historical background on the split between Humanistic psychology and Experimental psychology as well as the rise of Positive Psychology will be provided. Next, the methodological foundations of Humanistic and Experimental psychology will be explored along with the philosophical assumptions inherent in their approach to psychological research. Finally, Positive Psychology's unique methodological stance and assumptions as compared to Humanistic and Experimental psychology will be elucidated.

### *Historical Background*

When Humanistic psychology was first founded, it did not intend to create such a divisive split in psychology. Instead, Maslow hoped to redefine psychology and the psychological method in a way that would integrate the positive aspects of the human psyche into the prevailing reductionist model. However, Humanistic psychology, in the hope of righting the wrongs in psychology, swung too far in the opposite direction to be taken seriously by academic psychologists. Although many Humanistic psychologists had scientific agendas (e.g., Rogers, Gendlin, Kiesler, & Truax, 1967) and still do (e.g., Bohart & Greenberg, 1997; Greenberg & Rice, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Cain & Seeman, 2002), an eclectic mix of individuals with nonscientific agendas began to overshadow their work. Finally free from the strict standards of scientific psychology, these less scientifically minded individuals declared themselves Humanists as well, and after 1969 the psychotherapeutic counterculture began to dominate the Humanistic movement (Taylor, 2001; Keyes & Haidt, 2003).

A schism was created and still exists between what many view as “unscientific” Humanistic psychology, which hopes to address the positive, and “scientific,” experimental psychology. This divide has left the field of psychology deeply divided; the advancements made in Humanistic psychology are rarely acknowledged as legitimate in scientific psychology, and scientific psychology rarely focuses on trying to study the positive.

When Positive Psychology first appeared on the scene, Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi (2000) tried to forcefully separate the field from Humanistic psychology, claiming that Positive Psychology is more strongly committed to the scientific method than Humanistic psychology, which they generally portrayed as antiscientific (Seligman & Csikzentmihalyi, 2000; Taylor, 2001). Seligman and Csikzentmihalyi (2000) sought to draw a line between Positive Psychology and Humanistic psychology, perhaps to be more well-received by the academic community.

Yet, as much as Positive Psychology has attempted to separate itself from the so-called “empirically weak” field of Humanistic psychology so as to be accepted as legitimate by scientific psychology, there are some fundamental similarities that bind the two, principally the philosophical assumptions made in order to study the positive, or the good life. This complicates Positive Psychology’s alignment with the reductionist scientific method prevalent in academia today. Positive Psychology’s assumptions are the same assumptions that divide Humanistic psychology and Experimental psychology. The philosophical divides between Experimental psychology and Humanistic psychology will be explored first, followed an analysis of Positive Psychology’s unique philosophical standing.

#### *Reductionism vs. Holism*

The debate between holism and reductionism, between “enchanted science” and “disenchanted science,” between values and facts, has historically divided and continues to

divide researchers today (Kendler, 1999). Reductionism and holism compete for the foundational, philosophical justification in scientific methodology. Within the academic community, there is not much of a competition, however; the prevailing scientific methodology is that of *methodological reductionism* – the scientific strategy of studying wholes by breaking them up into their constituent parts (Tanzella-Nitti, Larrey, & Strumia, 2008). In regards to psychology, this reductionist viewpoint can be seen in the ever-increasing popularity of biological psychology (e.g, neuropsychology, cognitive neuroscience, behavioral neuroscience).

Humanistic psychology endorses an alternative methodology: holism. The philosophy of holism arose as early as Aristotle, when in *Metaphysics*, he gave birth to the “holistic rallying cry, ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’” (Kendler, 1999, p. 828). This view is antireductionist, claiming that the very act of separating a part denatures the whole<sup>10</sup>. A major movement in psychology that was founded in holism was the Gestalt psychology of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gestalt psychologists claimed that perception is not merely an amalgamation of sense data but a field, in which there is a background, which has holistic effects on a perceived figure. Gestalt psychologists were highly connected to the work of Kurt Goldstein, who first introduced the term “self-actualization” when arguing for a holistic approach to science.

Humanistic psychology’s call for a holistic approach to science was one of its primary motivations for breaking off from the pervasive methodological reductionism of behaviorism and psychoanalysis. Maslow (1971), in *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, wrote: "If I had to condense the thesis of this book into one sentence...I would have stressed the profoundly holistic nature of human nature in contradiction to the analytic-atomistic Newtonian approach of the behaviorisms and Freudian psychoanalysis" (p. ix). Humanistic psychologists firmly believe in

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<sup>10</sup> Holism has led to “systems thinking” in science: systems are so complex that behavior cannot be deduced from the properties of the elements alone; behavior is often times “new” and “emergent” (Bertalanffy, 1968).

holism as a viable scientific methodology. Therefore, they do not consider themselves “unscientific;” instead, they simply call for a redefinition of what “scientific” means (Taylor, 2001).

Needless to say, the case for holism, as expounded by Goldstein and the Humanists, was never adopted by academic psychology. It is on the mechanistic, reductionist foundation that experimental psychology operates today.

#### *Facts vs. Values*

One’s endorsement of a reductionist or holistic methodology is also intimately intertwined with other philosophical assumptions—specifically the role of facts and the place of values as well as the assumptions of free will versus determinism. The reductionist view of science assumes that facts cannot logically result in values; empirical evidence can validate facts, but not values or moral truths (Kendler, 1999). One of the reasons Humanistic psychology called for a holistic approach to science was because values were of the utmost importance to Humanists. Holism “allowed for the discovery of scientific attributes that could not be discerned by a mechanistic orientation” (Kendler, 1999, p. 828). In other words, one benefit of a holistic approach to science is that it allows for value and meaning in human existence (Kendler, 1999).

#### *Free Will vs. Determinism*

Humanism argues that needs and values of human beings should be taken into account by the scientific method, and that people cannot be studied as simply part of the material world (Peterson, 2006). This touches upon another controversy, that of free will versus determinism. Although this matter has recently been debated (see Baer, Kaufman, & Baumeister, 2008), academic science has generally assumed determinism, the idea that human behavior is caused by potentially knowable forces (Oltmanns & Emery, 2007). Experimental psychology seeks to

identify cause and effect relationships, so the assumption of determinism is essential in order to do so. Humanism, on the other hand, argues that seeking to understand cause and effect relationships in humans is a far more complicated task; this is because humans have free will. Humanists claim that humans are free to choose their actions, and these choices are shaped by values and moral systems. Because humans are unique in this regard, their actions, values, and moral systems cannot be studied with the same methods used to study material, determined objects. Specifically in regards to the prevailing disease model in psychology, Oltmanns and Emery (2007) state, “because free will, by definition, is not predictably determined, it is impossible to conduct research on the causes of abnormal behavior within the humanistic paradigm” (p. 35).

While research has shown that factors other than one’s field of study determine one’s theoretical foundations—such as personality, which has been shown to moderate researcher’s beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, cognitive styles, and methodological preferences (Johnson, Germer, Efran, & Overton, 1988)—in theory, the field of psychology is left with Experimental psychology, which uses reductionist methods in order to obtain facts, and then Humanistic psychology, which argues for a holistic approach so as to better understand the values and motivations in human beings.

*So Where Does Positive Psychology Fit?*

*Modern philosophy of science tells us that every scientific theory must assume a set of philosophical assumptions.*

– Johnson, Germer, Efran, & Overton, 1988, p. 833

Seligman and others have made it abundantly clear that Positive Psychology is a scientific field, and their work falls within the purview of Experimental psychology. “We are,

unblushingly, scientists first. The work we seek to support and encourage must be nothing less than replicable, cumulative, and objective” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001, p. 89-90). In this sense, Positive Psychology claims to adhere to the reductionist methodology of science as it is defined in academic psychology.

At the same time, Positive Psychology unabashedly acknowledges that it is dealing with the good life, and in so doing, is dealing with values. Csikszentmihalyi, in his and Seligman’s introduction to *Positive Psychology* (2000), wrote “I was looking for a scientific approach to human behavior, but I never dreamed that this could yield a value-free understanding” (p. 7). Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi (2006) later wrote, “When trying to understand what it means to be human, we cannot ignore what we value, and why” (p. 4). Furthermore, going back to the three goals of positive psychology<sup>11</sup>, the concepts of strengths, the best things in life, and what makes lives fulfilling are all value-laden goals. In addition to values, Positive Psychologists rely upon the assumption of free will: each individual is responsible for and capable of changing their own life experience. Positive Psychology acknowledges that notions of choice and will are indispensable to the field (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Peterson, 2006)

Values and free will, however, are generally not considered to be within the realm of the reductionist approach. This leaves Positive Psychology in a strange position. It aligns itself with Experimental psychology, which generally endorses reductionist and quantitative methodology, yet such value-laden goals and assumptions of free will have historically lain in the “unscientific” paradigm of the Humanists. Seligman (2003) and others, however, do not see this to be a problem:

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<sup>11</sup> 1) To be just as concerned with strengths as weaknesses. 2) To be as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst. 3) To be as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling and with nurturing high talent as with healing pathology (Seligman, 2004).

The science of positive psychology should not be difficult to create because the science of mental illness has already done most of the methodological work. We can build on the progress in mental illness and use the same kinds of operational definitions, methods of assessment, structural equations, experimental methods, interventions, and outcome testing that the science of mental illness has pioneered. These are applicable, virtually in toto, to the science of positive psychology. (p. xvii)

This quotation is revealing. Seligman appears to be unaware that the reductionist methods—characteristic of the science of mental illness—are incomplete for the study of the good life.

Reductionist methodology is not sufficient for the goals of Positive Psychology, and this can be seen when Positive Psychology is put into practice. While Positive Psychology prefers quantitative methods of Experimental psychology, Positive Psychologists oftentimes need to employ quasi-scientific methods or qualitative analyses<sup>12</sup>—methods which yield results that are not taken as seriously by stringent Experimental psychologists and are more strongly associated with the methodology of Humanistic psychology (Friedman, 2008). In this sense, Positive Psychologists theoretically align themselves with the reductionist methodology characteristic of Experimental psychology, yet also utilize methods beyond the scope of exclusive reductionism.

### **A Difference in Goals**

*The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they're up to.*  
- Clifford Geertz, Anthropologist

Robert Cloninger, a well-known psychiatrist and geneticist known for his integrative—biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual—approach to mental health and mental illness, described the Handbook of Character Strengths and Virtues as such: “the major accomplishment of this book is in showing that empirically minded humanists can measure character strengths and virtues in a rigorous scientific manner” (2005, abstract). Cloninger

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<sup>12</sup> For example, “Turning to Art as a Positive Way of Living with Cancer: A Qualitative Study of Personal Motives and Contextual Influences” was recently published in *The Journal of Positive Psychology* (Reynolds & Lim, 2007).



reveals a characterization of Positive Psychology that is easy to make: Positive Psychologists are simply empirically minded Humanists.

The first section of this thesis showed why such a conclusion can be reached if Positive Psychology is taken at surface-value. The work of Abraham Maslow supports Cloninger's characterization of Positive Psychology; it shows that the subject material of Positive Psychology does not substantially differ from the subject material of previous Humanistic research: both hope to discover answers to the question of the good life. In fact, Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi (2006) once wrote, "Positive Psychology could be described as an effort to revive some of the agenda that had mobilized humanistic psychologists in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (p. 5).

Cloninger was a little too quick to make such a sweeping characterization of Positive Psychology, however. The difference lies in the goals of each of these two fields, or in the famous words of Clifford Geertz, "what the devil they think they're up to." Humanistic psychology sought to change the current reductionist methodology of its day into a holistic science—one with an explicit value orientation and the recognition of what it truly means to be self-determining human. Positive Psychology, on the other hand, does not seek to overthrow the dominant reductionist methodology. Instead, it simply hopes to introduce positive topics into the ocean of pathology-oriented research. This will not be an easy task, however, for as this paper has also shown, Positive Psychology is also introducing ideology—values, free will—that are not easily integrated. Therefore, while running the risk of rejection from traditional Experimental psychologists, Positive Psychology intends to correct the value-free stance of experimental approaches (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2006), or "to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents to those who wish to

understand it in all its complexity” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7). This is an important difference: Humanistic Psychology wants a new holistic foundation for psychology (i.e., holism); Positive Psychology wants to adapt the dominant experimental and reductionist foundation in order to include its positive subject material.

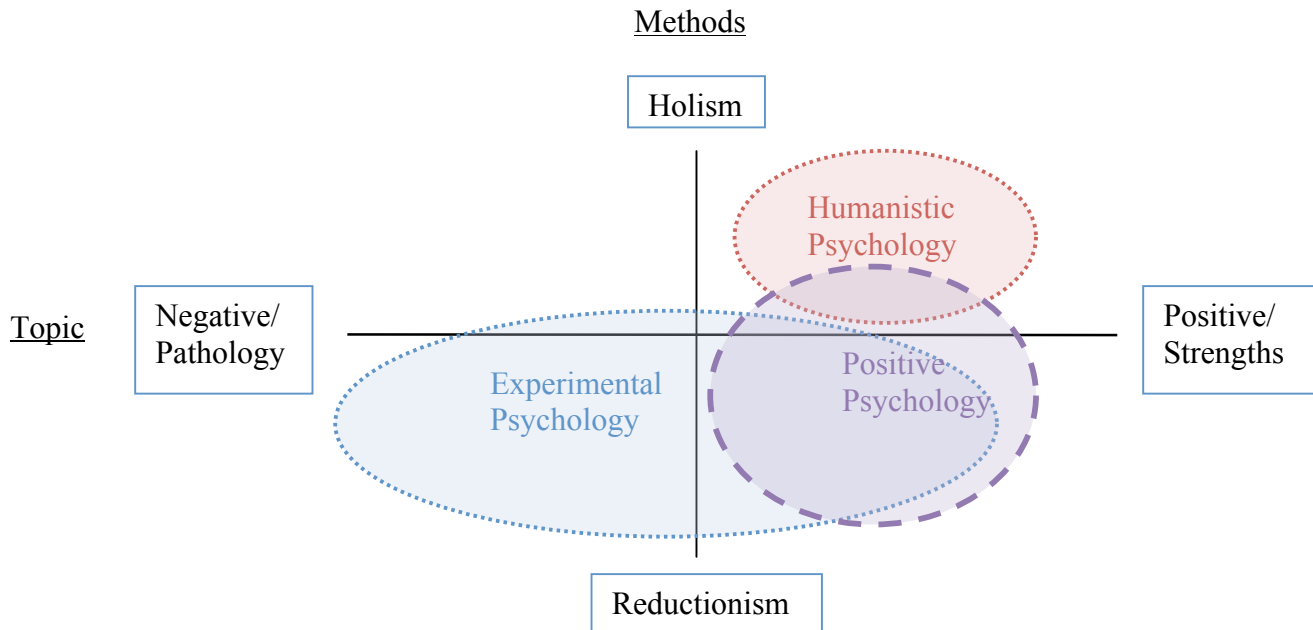


Figure 3. A depiction of the “place” of Positive Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, and Experimental Psychology on a scale of methodology versus positive-negative subject material<sup>13</sup>

Aside from these epistemological differences, Positive Psychology has another distinct mission that separates it from Humanistic psychology and is worth noting. While Humanistic psychology, through researchers such as Maslow, contributed to the study of the good life, this was not its sole purpose. Positive Psychology, on the other hand, has a much more narrow vision: Positive Psychology seeks to create a science explicitly for the study of the good life. The phrase “Positive Psychology” may best be understood as an umbrella term for the study of

<sup>13</sup> Special thanks to Professor Jonathan Haidt for suggesting this model.

positive emotions, positive character strengths, and enabling institutions (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), and the value of this field lies in binding together research that was previously scattered and inconsistent into one field with a common nomenclature and empirical emphasis (Peterson & Park, 2003).

The study of the good life will always remain a focus of human exploration. Just like Maslow and others who came before him, Positive Psychology has arisen to delve into the question of what makes life worth living. Positive Psychology is not simply a continuation of previous efforts, however; it offers a unique and timely approach. It is attempting to integrate positive subject material, values, and the notion of free will into current Experimental psychology. Regardless of whether the field will ever be fully accepted by traditionalists of reductionistic psychology, Positive Psychology believes it has the capability of providing what psychology as a science has the potential to provide: objective, verifiable answers to the question of the good life.

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## APPENDIX A

***Orientation to Happiness Subscale Items***

(Peterson, Park, &amp; Seligman, 2005)

Each question was followed by a 5-point scale: “1 – very much unlike me,” “2 – unlike me,” “3 – neutral,” “4 – like me,” and “5 – very much like me.”

**Life of Meaning**

- My life serves a higher purpose.
- In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will benefit other people.
- I have a responsibility to make the world a better place.
- My life has a lasting meaning.
- What I do matters to society.
- I have spent a lot of time thinking about what life means and how I fit into its big picture.

**Life of Pleasure**

- Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide.
- I go out of my way to feel euphoric.
- In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether it will be pleasurable.
- I agree with this statement: “Life is short – eat dessert first.”
- I love to do things that excite my senses.
- For me, the good life is the pleasurable life.

**Life of Engagement**

- Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly.
- I seek out situations that challenge my skills and abilities.
- Whether at work or play, I am usually “in a zone” and not conscious of myself.
- I am always very absorbed in what I do.
- In choosing what to do, I always take into account whether I can lose myself in it.
- I am rarely distracted by what is going on around me.

## APPENDIX B

***Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)***

(Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffith, 1985)

Each question was followed by a 7-point scale with the range: “1 – strongly agree”, “2 – disagree”, “3 – slightly disagree”, “4 – neither agree nor disagree”, “5 – slightly agree”, “6 – agree”, and “7 – strongly agree.”

- **In most ways my life is close to my ideal.**
- **The conditions of my life are excellent.**
- **I am satisfied with my life.**
- **So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.**
- **If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.**

## APPENDIX C

Sample Questions from the *VIA-IS Signature Strengths Questionnaire*  
(Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

Each question is followed by the choices: “very much like me,” “like me,” “neutral,” “unlike me,” and “very much like me.”

**Creativity:** When someone tells me how to do something, I automatically think of alternative ways to get the same thing done.

**Curiosity:** I am never bored.

**Open-mindedness:** I make decisions only when I have all of the facts.

**Love of Learning:** I always go out of my way to attend educational events.

**Perspective:** People describe me as “wise beyond my years.”

**Bravery:** I have taken frequent stands in the face of strong opposition.

**Persistence:** I finish things despite obstacles in the way.

**Integrity:** I always keep my promises.

**Vitality:** I want to fully participate in life, not just view it from the sidelines.

**Love:** There are people in my life who care as much about my feelings and well-being as they do about their own.

**Kindness:** I am never too busy to help a friend.

**Social Intelligence:** I always know what makes someone tick.

**Citizenship:** I never miss group meeting or team practices.

**Fairness:** I am strongly committed to principles of justice and equality.

**Leadership:** In a group, I try to make sure everyone feels included.

**Forgiveness and Mercy:** I always allow others to leave their mistakes in the past and make a fresh start.

**Humility and Modesty:** I am proud that I am an ordinary person.

**Prudence:** “Better safe than sorry” is one of my favorite mottoes.

**Self-regulation:** I am a highly disciplined person.

**Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence:** I have often been left speechless by the beauty depicted in a movie.

**Gratitude:** I always express my thanks to people who care about me.

**Hope:** I always look on the bright side.

**Humor:** Whenever my friends are in a gloomy mood, I try to tease them out of it.

**Spirituality:** In the last 24 hours, I have spent 30 minutes in prayer, meditation, or contemplation.