Problematic Ontological Underpinnings of Positive psychology:

A Strong Relational Alternative

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Running Head: Relational Alternative

Abstract

In this article, we contend that many of the problems delineated in this special journal issue on positive psychology stem from an unexamined philosophical premise – its ontology. The world of "ontology" is vast and somewhat ill-defined, but here we mean simply assumptions of what is ultimately real and fundamental, especially regarding the self. We first clarify and compare two major ontologies of the self, one that we argue underlies and spawns problems for positive psychology and one that we will describe as a promising alternative for the project of positive psychology. We focus on three important features of this project: 1) commitment to an ideal of the "disinterested observer;" 2) emotional satisfaction as a key conception; and 3) the tendency to view human phenomena as decontextualized from culture, history, and even physical situations. These features will display both how one set of ontological premises has underlain mainstream positive psychology and how the alternative offers a fresh perspective that addresses many issues within the field.

Problematic Ontological Underpinnings of Positive psychology:

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The articles in this special journal issue all argue in different ways that the problems of positive psychology are deeply rooted. Although many positive psychologists think that the project of "promoting the highest qualities of civic and personal life" (Seligman, 1998) is an essentially empirical enterprise, several of the authors of this special issue argue convincingly that this project is a moral and philosophical enterprise as well (Becker & Maracek, this issue; Christopher & Hickinbottom, this issue; Richardson & Guignon, this issue). In fact, many of the problems identified in this special issue could be said to be philosophical in nature. Perhaps most pertinently, Christopher & Hickinbottom (this issue) contend that even though positive psychology "clearly is concerned with the development and enhancement of the self," it fails by and large to offer any reflective or critical discussion of the self it assumes (p. 4).

The nature of the self is an obviously fundamental issue for the field of psychology. Christopher & Hickinbottom (this issue) make a strong case that positive psychology largely assumes the "universal truth" of a "Western atomistic and interiorized self" (p. 6). Failure to appreciate that one relies on a philosophical premise of this sort may be naïve or inadvertent. Still, they note it risks a cultural imperialism that may be damaging to some individuals or groups. Plus, it may deprive anyone who uncritically assumes it the opportunity to learn from others and deepen ones understanding of what it means to be human. Moreover, clarifying such philosophical commitments goes hand-in-hand with the moral underpinnings, research methods,

and socio-political implications of positive psychology (or any type of social inquiry). In the end, progress in one of these areas will likely require delving into the others.

Indeed, many of the problems delineated in this special issue on positive psychology, we contend, stem from an unexamined philosophical premise – its ontology. The world of "ontology" is vast and somewhat ill-defined, but here we mean simply assumptions of what is ultimately real and fundamental, especially regarding the self. We first clarify and compare two major ontologies of the self, one that we argue underlies and spawns problems for positive psychology and one that we will describe as a promising alternative for the project of positive psychology. We focus on three important features of this project: 1) commitment to an ideal of the "disinterested observer;" 2) emotional satisfaction as a key conception; and 3) the tendency to view human phenomena as decontextualized from culture, history, and even physical situations. These features will display both how one set of ontological premises has underlain mainstream positive psychology and how the alternative offers a fresh perspective that addresses many issues within the field.

Two Types of Ontology

As mentioned, the term "ontology" is not easily defined, but here we mean the field of philosophy that studies and postulates what is ultimately real and fundamental. For example, materialism is a prominent ontology in psychology and elsewhere that assumes the material or the biological is the most real and fundamental of the world's entities. On this view, mental, moral, and spiritual realities either do not exist or are ultimately derivable from (and reducible to) more basic material events. We think it may be useful here to focus on two large categories of ontology that seem especially relevant to psychology, namely *abstractionism* and *relationality* (Slife, 2005). These terms certainly are not universally employed. However, we would contend

that the ideas which anchor the terms are widely discussed and readily recognizable as central to

questions of psychology, human action, and the self (Gadamer, 1975; Guignon & Pereboom,

1995: MacMurray, 1999; Richardson & Fowers, 1998; Slife, 2005; Taylor, 1985a). We believe it

is imperative to introduce the reader briefly to the general features and major issues of these

ontologies, especially as they concern the self, before demonstrating their usefulness to the

positive psychologist.

General Features

   Abstractionism. Abstractionism assumes that *all* things, including the self, are the most

real and the best understood when they are abstracted or separated from the situations in which

they occur. Consider the relatively simple examples of an apple and a hammer. They are best

understood as objects in themselves, divorced from the context in which they are found or play a

role. In other words, there is no need to take into account these contexts to completely

understand the nature of these objects. Indeed, the notion of "object" and even "objectivism" in

science connotes that the abstracted thing or event is basically the same in most any situation

(e.g., a laboratory) and thus is real over and against its situation.

   The prominence, and perhaps even dominance, of this ontology in our professional

culture is evidenced in the many ways such abstractions are elevated and considered

fundamental. For example, a person who is objective in this abstracted sense is to be praised

because the person is not swayed or changed by differing contexts. Indeed, to be objective in this

sense is to have a self that is the most real and best understood when it is divorced from differing

contexts. The common notions of "personality" and "traits" tend to connote this essential

unchangeableness. Analogously, unchanging abstractions frequently are taken to define and

characterize the most fundamental aspects of our world, such as truths, natural laws, and ethical

principles. All these aspects are considered to *apply* to distinct contexts but *exist* apart from them. Their abstracted existence allows them to be seen as essentially unchangeable from circumstance to circumstance, even though they may be manifested somewhat differently depending on how they are applied in a particular circumstance.[1] A natural law, for instance, may have to be communicated or applied differently in a pre-scientific culture, or the application of an ethical principle may have to be qualified in a society with strong tribal loyalties. However, the law or principle itself remains the same, existing as it does apart from any such changing contexts.

Relationality. The general features of a relational ontology, on the other hand, are quite different. Here, it is impossible to understand or describe what is real and fundamental without taking into account the context in which the real occurs and is used. The hammer can be a paper weight in some contexts and a nail-driver in others. An apple can be the epitome of health and goodness in one situation, because one a day "keeps the doctor away," and a symbol of corruption or evil in other contexts because it could "spoil the entire barrel." A self can really be honest in one situation and a liar in another—with neither indicating the "real person" more than the other. A particular language, such as English, may have one noun to describe a hammer, an apple, or a self in these varied contexts. Still, this does not mean that the referents for this noun are the same. Indeed, the relationist views language as somewhat of a reduction of what the hammer, apple, or self *really* are (ontologically). From this relational perspective, ordinary language tends to be relatively "thin," omitting much of the richness and complexity of the "thickness" of the real world.

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[1] Materialism is thus a species of abstractionism because matter is viewed as essentially the same regardless of its situation.

A relational ontology also does not presume the unchangeableness of objects across time. If the hammer really can be different from context to context, then there is sense in which the hammer literally changes from context to context – from a nail-driver to paper weight to art object, etc. There can be similarities as well (e.g., the shape and weight of the hammer), but the relationist views the abstractionist as elevating similarity *over* difference, and thus not taking into proper account the whole or totality of relations – *both* similarities and differences – in what is real and fundamental. Consequently, abstracted understandings of truth, ethical principles, or personal identity put undue emphasis on qualities of similarity. This emphasis makes truths and principles appear unchangeable or universal across their many applications, when in practice there are many important differences between them that are overlooked. In ethical practice, for example, there are situations in which we should definitely steal the bread (e.g., the play, *Les Miserables*) and situations in which, just as definitely, we should not.

Issues and Clarifications

Three bones of contention typically arise in debating the merits of these two broad ontologies: the specter of relativism, the role of these ontologies in the natural sciences, and the import of abstractions and relations for both views.

Relativism. First of all, a relational ontology is often thought to involve a harmful kind of relativism. For example, it might seem that there is nothing to prevent us from claiming that dishonesty or theft is good in any situation where someone or some social group defines it that way. Relativism, as we mean it here, is the notion that there simply is no Truth (with a capital "T") across contexts. Relativism manifests itself in a number of ways, perhaps not always appealing or admirable, in our popular culture—"to each his own," "different strokes for different folks," and "whatever floats your boat."

It is true that a relational ontology assumes that all things, people, and events are the most real and the best understood in relation to their contexts. However, this relationality does not mean that there cannot be truths across contexts, or that there cannot be, as it were, a wider Context of contexts of some sort (Slife, 1999). The main issue is that many people conceive of truth in terms of similarity and unchangeableness exclusively, whereas the relationist insists that our general understanding of what it means for something to be right or good must also make potential differences of contexts *necessary* to the reality of goodness or rightness in human life (Clegg & Slife, in press). For example, a difference in context could make it very wrong to adopt a rigid abstractionist truth and *never* steal the bread.

The relationist, in this sense, is not a relativist because the truth (or Truth) can still be preserved; it is just a truth that includes contextual uniquenesses and differences as well as contextual commonalities and similarities. Indeed, relativism could be a high-level abstractionist principle to the effect that "all moral values are strictly relative to the opinion of one or another social group" (e.g., social constructionism, Gergen, 1994). In this sense, relativism is itself grounded in a nonrelative principle. Such a claim could only be made from a "god's-eye" or absolute viewpoint that is itself abstracted from all contexts, and thus denied to any ordinary humans from a relational perspective (Richardson and Christopher, 1993).

Natural Sciences. Another issue between these two ontologies involves their role in the natural sciences. Some may view modern science as exclusively concerned with abstracted "truths" or abstracted "objects," especially as they focus on physical laws and models of the natural world (cf. Dupre', 1993; Griffin, 2000). The law of gravity, for instance, is often considered to be the same regardless of the situation in which we encounter gravitational phenomena. To be sure, many natural scientists adopt a strictly objectifying stance toward things,

according to which we abstract objects away from "subject-related qualities," such as the

meanings and relationships of ordinary experience that are concerned with our shifting desires,

values, and aims (Taylor, 1989, p. 31).

For a long time, this fruitful kind of objectification in the natural sciences seemed to

require an abstractionist ontology. However, that is no longer the case. Today, Einsteinian

relativity theory, Bohrian quantum mechanics, and the Heisenberg uncertainty principle – to

name just a few – all assume that to know the "object" of inquiry requires understanding the

context of the knower. Even within the objectifying viewpoints of natural science, not only is an

abstractionist ontology misleading at times but a relational ontology is often required to

successfully explain events.

Abstractions and Relations. A third issue concerns whether or not each type of ontology

recognizes the significance of both abstractions and relations. It is important to appreciate that

both of them do, in their own way. In other words, abstractionism, even in its strongest and most

extreme sense, still recognizes that the objects of reality interact and relate to one another in a

myriad of consequential ways. However, these objects are first and foremost self-contained and

independent of one another, with their qualities and properties supposedly inherent within them.

Only later and secondarily do they interact with other objects. Moreover, objects are not

essentially changed by these interactions. Combinations of objects may provide a new synergy

that is not available from the elements of the combination alone, but the elements are thought to

remain essentially the same *in* the combination (e.g., the Periodic Table of Elements). The

abstract is still the basic unit of reality, with the synergy having significance but ultimately being

derived from the abstract.

Similarly, ontological or strong relationality presumes the importance of abstractions. Many forms of communications, such as this article, take the form of linguistic abstractions, so descriptions of relationality cannot avoid such reductions. Without such linguistic abstractions, knowledge or understanding of the relations among events would be impossible, in theory or in practical life. Even so, the relational thinker does not consider these abstractions the most real or fundamental entities. Their importance is that they point to or are derived from the real, such as social practices (Bourdieu, 1980; Certeau, 1980; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Westerman, 2005).

Good theory, in this relational view, is not first reasoned abstractly and then subsequently applied to a concrete context. Good theory is an outgrowth of the relations among the particulars and practices of that context. Practice theorists like Bourdieu (1980), Certeau, 1980, Flyvbjerg (2001), Polkinghorne (2004), and Schön (1987) propose a striking reversal of our conventional (abstractionist) wisdom in this regard. They contend that truly proficient human performances – from skillful parenting to effective leadership to the practice of psychotherapy – are not guided by the kind of rule-based rationality that relies on abstract, universal principles or theories to tell us what to do in relevant particular situations. Rather, the

> best performances within a given area require a qualitatively different expertise based on intuition, experience, and judgment…Intuition is the ability to draw directly on one's own experience—bodily, emotional, intellectual—and to recognize similarities between these experiences and new situations…Existing research provides no evidence that intuition and judgment can be externalized into rules and explanations, which, if followed, lead to the same result as intuitive behavior. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 21).

Thus, relational ontologists do not deny the significance of truth propositions or ethical codes – or theory in general – but they do view them as secondary to more basic realities that are

ultimately and inextricably contextual, including the context of our bodies, histories, experiences, physical situations, and even communities and cultures.

What separates one ontology from another, then, is not the existence or even importance of abstractions or relationships, but rather what each ontology assumes to be the more fundamental and real. Abstractionists consider abstractions to be the more fundamental and real, whereas relationists consider relations to be the more fundamental and real. This prioritizing does not keep either type of ontology from acknowledging the significance of abstractions and relations. It just means that relations for the abstractionist have little *ultimate* (ontological) status, derived as they are from abstractions such as decontextualized and reified objects, whereas abstractions for the relationist are derived from concrete relations such as practices. The philosopher Gilbert Ryle once caught some of the spirit of this the latter view with his observation in *The Concept of Mind*, "Intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary theorising is one practice amongst others and is itself intelligently or stupidly conducted."

<div align="center">*Implications for Positive Psychology*</div>

This rather thin rendition of these two ontologies begs for thicker exemplification. Critical analyses of positive psychology, such as this special journal issue, provide an excellent way to illustrate the practical implications of these divergent philosophical outlooks. We will not tread the same ground as the other articles of this special issue. However, we will build on some of their conclusions in describing the ontological problems and alternatives of positive psychology. As we mentioned at the outset, there is a sense in which the current project of positive psychology is an exemplar of an abstractionist approach. To borrow a phrase from Isaac

Prilleltensky (1989), we feel that positive psychology runs the danger of "perpetuating the status quo" of an abstractive outlook in psychology (see Christopher, 2003).

We will try to make this case by identifying what we take to be three problematic features of the positive psychology program: 1) commitment to an ideal of the "disinterested observer;" 2) emotional satisfaction as a key conception; and 3) the tendency to view human phenomena as decontextualized from culture, history, and even physical situations. We attempt to identify the abstractionist roots of these problematic features and briefly explore how a relatively unexplored, alternative ontology of strong relationality might better serve the best aims of positive psychology.

The Disinterested Observer.

As Christopher and Hickinbottom (this issue) argue, one of the primary assumptions of many positive psychologists, taken from psychology more generally, is the notion of the "disinterested observer" (p. 3). Richard Bernstein (1983) characterizes this outlook as the inevitable result of an abstractionist approach to social inquiry. Indeed, it represents the favored epistemological stance of many Western social scientists, one that reflects a particular cultural perspective – the Western atomistic and interiorized self (Christopher and Hickinbottom, this issue). This view presumes that the human agent or self is a highly individualized, abstracted, and detached observer of a world that is taking place quite separately from the observer and her observations. This approach is "disinterested" because it denies that it incorporates any particular cultural aims or moral values while writing its own particular cultural biases into the nature of things.

Dualism. One such cultural bias, the ideal of the disinterested observer, presupposes what is known as dualism. According to dualism, the subjective and the objective realms of

being are sharply distinguished, with the subjective realm containing values, opinions, feelings, and beliefs that occur independently of the objective realm of all events outside the observer's skin (the natural world). Because values are thought to reside solely in the subjective realm, there is nothing in the objective realm that is inherently more valuable or meaningful than anything else. Hence, disinterested observers can value or deem meaningful whatever they choose in the objective realm. As Christopher and Hickinbottom (this issue) put this positive psychology perspective on values, "meaning and value are made, not discovered" (in the world beyond the self) (p. 8).

This abstracting of the subjective and objective realms (from one another) goes hand in glove with a highly individualistic conception of a person as a "bounded, masterful self" (Cushman, 1990, p. 600). Taylor (1995, p. 7) argues that this notion of the self is as much a moral ideal as an epistemological stance. It "connects with...central moral and spiritual ideas of the modern age" such as the modern ideal of "freedom as self-autonomy...to be self-responsible, to rely on one's [own] judgment, to find one's purpose in oneself." This abstracted subjectivity is, by definition, ontologically independent of the surrounding environment. This independence does not mean that the "disinterested observer" could survive without the environment, but it does mean that this self is real and essentially understandable apart from the specifics of the particular situation in which it finds itself. This self-contained conception of the individual also implies that the self is relatively consistent across situations. Subjectivity can incorporate cultural and social elements of its environment, but once incorporated they too would exist essentially independently of the immediate environment, allowing the self to be quite stable across time and place. "Personality" or "integrity" in this abstractionist sense implies an essential stability and unchangeability across contexts.

Moral Implications. The articles in this special issue are replete with illustrations of how positive psychology uncritically assumes such an abstracted and individualist self, with commentary about the sorts of problems this approach incurs. Here we would like just to highlight a few of the moral and political ramifications of such an abstractionist approach. Because the self-contained self is the maker or chooser of meanings and values in this view, it seems likely that most positive psychologists presuppose some version of what the political philosopher Michael Sandel (1996) calls "minimalist liberalism" (p. 17). This version of individualism assumes that everyone can define the good life for themselves so long as they do not interfere with the right of others to do the same. I can practice teapot worship so long as it does not interfere with your vegetarian lifestyle, and vice versa.

Interestingly, Sandel argues that a key feature of this moral outlook is the notion of a "liberal" or "unencumbered" self, the ideal of an abstracted self that is subject to no attachments or obligations it has not itself authored or chosen (excepting only an obligation to respect the independence and rights of others). Sandel goes on to strike a distinctly relationist or contextualist note with his observation that this ideal of personhood fails to make sense of many of our most cherished connections and commitments to others, communities, or traditions. Indeed, instead of individuals defining the good life for themselves, he makes the relationist case that these connections and commitments define many of our deepest feelings and much of our very identity, even if they often call for critical examination and revision.

In his influential book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,* the philosopher Bernard Williams (1985, p. 129) seems to agree with Sandel on this point. Everyday relationships and commitments are "thick ethical concepts" that make sense of our deepest evaluative commitments, the judgments we regularly make of another's actions and the aspirations we have

for being a certain kind of person. This vocabulary of assessment and aspiration gains its meaning from its place in the dense weave of practices and forms of life that makes up our shared background of understanding as agents in the world. Generally, people who have been raised in a particular culture are adept at understanding how to apply these thick ethical concepts in appropriate ways, even though they shift and evolve in meaning, depending on context. We often take them for granted, which is why we say they make up a shared *background* of intelligibility. In this view, our justification for particular judgments or actions is that they serve as *constituents* of the sort of complete or overall life we are realizing in all that we do.

Instrumental Ethics. When we abstract individuals out of such moral and cultural entanglements, it becomes difficult to make full sense of thick ethical concepts, even if they continue to play an important role in our lives. The only way left to explain or justify such moral values seems to be not as attitudes or actions essential to being a person, but as *instruments or means* to the end of reaching some set of goods, results, or payoffs—prominent examples being physical health, longer life, subjective feelings of well-being, personal autonomy, or purely self-defined goals or satisfactions in living. Clearly this instrumentalism is the strategy taken by most positive psychologists. For example, Seligman, et al (2005) has discussed five "exercises" that they feel have the potential to "increase individual happiness" (p. 416). Even the "religious" arm of this movement tends to view a flourishing life through these abstracted lenses. Robert Emmons, in his book *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns* (1999), asks the question: "What advantage for psychological well-being is there in holding spiritual goals?" (p. 108).

This kind of instrumental justification of ethical ideals is a morally serious approach that intends to advance individual autonomy and well-being while preserving a moral focus needed for sustaining our sincere commitment to advancing human welfare. However, in our view, it

just will not work. Procuring such results or satisfactions is simply not what we *mean* by many of our core commitments in their original context. These commitments represent components of what we or our community take to be the good or right life even if adhering to them entails considerable effort, sacrifice, or dis-ease. Without such commitments involving the possibility of sacrifice, it becomes very hard to make sense of someone dying for the liberty of future generations, as many great souls have done. It also turns into virtual nonsense the notion of "losing one's life in order to find it" that appears in different forms in most spiritual traditions.

A Relational Alternative.

Relational Self. An abstractionist ontology is inspired by the idea of a self that has a pristine core beyond cultural definition and thereby can direct a person's living and choices in an authentic manner. A relational ontology, however, "dispenses with the pre-formed 'individual in the state of nature' of early modern political theory as well as the independent ego or 'real self' of much 20th century personality and psychotherapy theory" (Richardson, Rogers, and McCarroll, 1998, p. 508). In this view (Slife, 2005, p. 159), "Each thing, including each person, is first and always a nexus of relations." All things "have a shared being and a mutual constitution." They "start out and forever remain in relationship." Their "very qualities, properties, and identities cannot stem completely from what is inherent or 'inside' them but must depend on how they are related to each other. The outside is as important as the inside." According to Sacks (2002, p. 150), "One of the great intellectual discoveries of the twentieth century" is that the "I" of what we are calling an abstractionist ontology "is a fiction, or at least an abstraction." In reality, "we develop a sense of personal identity only through close and continuous conversation with 'significant others.'" Genuine individuality is not sacrificed but re-envisioned in this approach.

Although each particular lived experience is unique in its qualities, these unique qualities

are a nexus of the experience's relation to the whole, including the experienced past…In

this sense, the nexus is rich and thick with contextual and historical relations, and

subjectivity and objectivity are inextricably intertwined as interpreted reality (meaning).

(Slife, 2005, p. 166)

Engaged Agency. On this account, the "disinterested observer" of an abstractionist

ontology is replaced with what relationists Taylor (1993) and MacMurray (1999) would term

"engaged agency." Rather than a subjective, self-defining self that largely creates its own

worldly meanings, the relational self is born into a waiting and already developed world that it

must adopt to thrive and survive. Thus, our cultural meanings and moral values are not merely

projections or constructions of individual subjectivities but substantial parts of the world itself.

This dependence on the world (and the world's dependence on the self) means that the two

cannot be completely separated.

What makes some people uncomfortable with the engaged agency of a relational view is

that it seems to encourage individuals to harbor commitments or a sense of identity that strongly

risk compromising personal autonomy or individual responsibility. For two main reasons, the

relationist thinker sees it differently. First, our contemporary conceptions of individual

separateness and autonomy are partly illusory and distorted. There is no such thing as a largely

self-defining individual (or even self-defining culture) who first "internalizes" possibilities and

values from the surrounding world and then evaluates and disposes of them at will (Bishop,

2005; Yanchar, 2005). Rather, the "self arises within conversation" (Taylor, 1991, p. 312).

Indeed, the self is part of a scene or locus of dialogue among various commitments,

identifications, and points of view about what is the overall good or right kind of life for humans

(Bakhtin, 1981; Richardson, et al., 1998). Long before a person takes a stand on one side or another of an issue, he or she has been deeply socialized in terms of what questions, assumptions, or dimensions of meaning are important and define those issues.[2] Those assumptions and meanings inter-define us and link us together in profound ways.

We can (and often should) allow them to be called into question, leading to a shift in our goals and directions in of living. But we can never question or stand apart from all such assumptions at once, in what could only be a bewildering vacuum. Rather, we must *take for granted* many of them as a basis for any questioning or critique when that seems needed. Psychologists (positive or otherwise) who adopt an abstractionist ontology may believe that they are enlightening us as to the nature of the "true" or "real" self and at the same time advancing human welfare. But from a relational perspective, it looks like they are surreptitiously promoting a particular, highly individualistic vision of the good or best life. This vision is hardly the last word on the subject and begs to be put into critical interchange with other possibilities and insights.

A second reason for believing that an engaged agency does not mean the loss of individuality and responsibility concerns the relational nature of moral argument and justification. A relationist view offers *substantive* rather than merely instrumental justifications for individual actions and ideals. Substantive justifications appeal to our reigning convictions about character, community, and the good life, actions that reflect the best sort of courageous, compassionate, or spiritually enlightened kind of life as we understand it. For example, we hope

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[2] In a liberal democracy many matters are decided by majority rule, with the majority obtaining the right to set policy or wield authority, while in a Quaker meeting or traditional Japanese village key matters are decided by persisting in reflection, conversation, or prayer until a full consensus is reached. These are very different worlds of meaning and practice. They don't represent different means of reaching the same ends but at least partly different understandings of the good life or what ends or kind of life should be cultivated in the first place.

that everyone would embrace certain fundamental conceptions of human rights and individual

dignity.[3] But these rather abstractive or "formalist" (Taylor, 1985b, p. 231) values always come

embedded in particular worldviews or assumptions about the good society or the fundamental

nature of justice about which we will always differ in some ways. Moreover, what we *mean* by

human rights and dignity in particular contexts will vary to some extent, depending on these

philosophical premises. Also, the *reasons* we give and the *motivations* we encourage for

adhering to these ideals will vary as well. Our conceptions of human rights and dignity will

overlap to a significant extent, we believe, but the perceived nature of the common ground or the

overlap itself will vary from community to community.

 Humility. Does this variance from context to context mean the death of reason and civil

discourse? In the relational view, it does not. Without abandoning their core convictions, it is

possible for advocates of human rights and individual dignity to appreciate that they are

outgrowths of particular traditions of understanding and have evolved in response to particular

contexts and challenges. Their views and values are tied to and, in a sense, relative to those

contexts. A relational ontology requires us to cultivate a sense of humility and a deep

appreciation of enduring human limitations (Richardson, 2003), something that Woodruff (2001)

terms "reverence" and argues is a cardinal virtue in its own right.[4] In Woodruff's view,

reverence is as much political as it is religious in the sense that it is a condition of embracing

"thick ethical concepts" without their hardening into dogmatism or tyranny in all human

contexts, secular and religious. That kind of humility entails both a need and an obligation, from

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[3] As set out, for example, in the Declaration of Universal Human Rights of the United Nations. However, this document has been significantly revised several times and will never be interpreted in exactly the same way by different communities or nations.

[4] Woodruff traces the deep roots of this notion in Greek and Chinese civilizations. Our current culture might appear to celebrate "irreverence" and neglect this virtue, Woodruff notes. But that is not entirely the case. A deep appreciation of human limitations and proper awe in the face of them actually encourages us to mock the pretensions and arrogance of tyrants and bullies of all sorts.

time to time, to consult the perspectives of others and to register the impact of their core ideals as fully as possible.

Jonathan Sacks (2002) captures this humility in an especially powerful way with his notion of "the dignity of difference." This notion alone, he feels, allows us to go beyond both a narrow "tribalism" and the kind of "universalism" that hastily and presumptuously claims to define the way of the universe. In his view, truth is "on the ground" and always "multiple, partial" (p. 64). Thus progress in understanding, including ethical insight and even religious faith, requires that we not merely tolerate or respect differences, but "make space for another deeply held belief" and engage in a disciplined "conversation" with it, a "sustained act of understanding" (p. 83) in which I may humbly find aspects of the other's perspective compelling and myself changed in the process. According to Sacks, such conversation is the only true "antidote to violence" (p. 2). It is hard to imagine a richer illustration of the human meaning of strong relationality than a humble and vulnerable acknowledgement of the dignity of difference.

Emotional Satisfaction

A second pivotal feature of the positive psychology program is its theme of emotional satisfaction. This theme has many variants in this program (Seligman et al., 2006), including "positive emotion" (p. 410), "individual well-being" or "happiness" (p. 413), "feeling good" (p. 414), and "fulfillment" (p. 412). Advocating emotional satisfaction or individual well-being may seem like safe ground to positive psychologists. Who could object to these "positive" outcomes in living? As some positive psychologists are aware, however, it is easy to doubt whether this approach represents an adequate humanism or an adequate social or moral program for the field. A little reflection can cause one to worry that making experiences or outcomes of this kind into the be-all and end-all of living risks slipping into a very coarse egoism, if not hedonism: "It is

the good life because *I* say it gives me *pleasure*." Consider this quote from one of the leaders of

positive psychology, Martin Seligman (2002):

> Imagine a sadomasochist who comes to savor serial killing and derives great pleasure
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> from it. Imagine a hit man who derives enormous gratification from stalking and
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> slaying. Imagine a terrorist who, attached to al-Qaeda, flies a hijacked plane into the
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> World Trade Center. Can these three people be said to have achieved the pleasant life,
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> the good life, and the meaningful life, respectively? The answer is yes. I condemn their
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> actions, of course, but on grounds independent of the theory in this book (p. 303, note
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> 249).

Either-Or. Concern about the possibility of a simple egoism or hedonism has led positive

psychologists to search for other moral resources. Unfortunately, an abstractionist ontology

immediately confronts those who adopt it with an excruciating "either-or" in making sense of

moral values or ideals. Positive psychologists can turn *either* to the "objective" realm *or* to the

"subjective" realm for resources. For instance, we might locate the values and ideals of the good

life in the objective realm. This objectivity fits our perhaps ineradicable sense of these values as

something authoritative that stands over against us and commands our respect, obedience, or

even awe. Nevertheless, to a modern sensibility, this seemingly "absolutist" approach seems to

make final or dogmatic claims about ethical insight that seems presumptuous or serves as a

convenient rationalization for selfish interests.

Instead, we might locate such values and ideals in the purely inward or subjective realm.

Things are good because they (subjectively) "feel" good or result in happiness. This approach

might seem like a safe retreat from dogmatism, but it presents great difficulties, as a few positive

psychologists have acknowledged (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). It represents a kind of *decisionism*

or self-defining of the good life that flies in the face of what most of us mean when we talk about *moral* values. We assent to moral values because they seem intrinsically good or have some genuine authority for us, including the authority—until further reflection leads us to modify them in some way—to define our direction or ends in living Moreover, as we suggested earlier, such a subjectivist or relativist approach is surreptitiously animated by values commitments that it takes quite seriously, indeed, at least some version of our familiar modern commitment to advancing individual freedom and rights.

The psychologist and social theorist Jerome Frank (1978, pp. 5-7) recognized this turn to subjective feelings in psychotherapy generally: "institutions of American society, all psychotherapies...share a value system that accords primacy to individual self-fulfillment," including "maximum self-awareness, unlimited access to one's own feelings, increased autonomy and creativity." The individual is seen as "the center of his moral universe, and concern for others is believed to follow from his own self-realization." However, Frank notes, the implicit value system of modern psychotherapy "can easily become a source of misery in itself" because of its unrealistic expectations for personal happiness and the burden of resentment it imposes when inevitable disappointments occur. In his opinion, the literature of psychotherapy gives little attention to such traditional, possibly worthwhile values or virtues as "the redemptive power of suffering, acceptance of one's lot in life, adherence to tradition, self-restraint and moderation."

"Objective" Gut Feelings. Positive psychologists seem to deal with the abstractionist's either-or dilemma by attempting to combine aspects of both realms, objective and subjective, in determining values and ideals. Perhaps most prominently, their more sophisticated theorists have suggested that the most deeply subjective aspects of human life have a powerfully objective reality or force for us. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (1999) contends:

Emotions are in some sense the most *subjective* elements of consciousness . . . . Yet an

emotion is also the most *objective* content of the mind, because the "gut feeling" we

experience when we are in love, or ashamed, or scared, or happy, is generally more real

to us than what we observe in the world outside, or whatever we learn from science or

logic. (italics added, p. 17).

The "objective content" of such gut feelings is the reason emotional satisfaction is so

highly prized in positive psychology. These feelings are the indicators of such satisfaction. But

there are many problems that afflict this picture of human striving, with a few standing out in

bold relief. Are we compelled or determined to pursue the gut feelings of pleasure or emotional

satisfaction that happen to arise within us? That hardly seems consistent with the positive

psychologist's wish to portray us as actively and creatively achieving a more meaningful life.

Even if we are led willy-nilly in that direction, why is that good rather than a morally indifferent

natural inclination, like water running downhill? If we have any freedom to choose for or against

these inclinations, it is unclear what grounds there are for choosing against sadism, masochism,

or nihilism, as Seligman acknowledges in the quote above. Once objectivity and subjectivity are

abstracted away from one another, it appears that sheer objectivity overrides or oppresses us and

sheer subjectivity sinks us into a disorienting relativism. Trying to blend these opposites, as

positive psychology seems to do, only compounds the problem.

Quality of Desire? In any context of living, humans have always already taken some

stand on their lives by seizing on certain roles, traits, and values. Indeed, they "just are the stands

they take in living out their lives" (Guignon & Pereboom, 1995, p. 189). Taylor (1985a, p. 3)

develops this notion of care with the idea that humans do not simply *desire* particular outcomes

or satisfactions in living. Rather, they make also "strong evaluations" of their desires (Taylor,

1985a, p. 3). Even if only tacitly or unconsciously, they evaluate the *quality* of their desires and motivations and the *worth* of the ends they seek in terms of how they fit their developing overall sense of a decent or worthwhile life. Without a perspective of this sort it simply is not possible to make sense out of the many secular reformers who give their lives for the liberty of future generations or the many parents who make sacrifices for their children or the many religious individuals who find a qualitatively different kind of meaning in suffering than raw pain.

The situation is no different with positive psychologists. We submit that their emphasis on pleasurable outcomes (e.g., Seligman's quote above) does not make sense of their *own* dedication to the advancement of human welfare. This dedication is not so much pure emotional satisfaction as it is a commitment to an instrumental and individualist vision of the good life. Unfortunately, these commitments are not fully acknowledged in positive psychology. If they reflected more on their own cultural context instead of relying so heavily on an abstractionist ontology and presumably decontextualized principles of human functioning, they might notice the extent to which they uncritically perpetuate a questionable cultural status quo.

As Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) argue, the status quo for American culture exists mainly "for the liberation and fulfillment of the individual" (p. 47). We prize individual fulfillment above all and yet wish to be a morally serious people. The "genius" of this moral status quo, according to these authors, is that it "enables the individual to think of commitments--from marriage and work to political and religious involvement--as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives" (p. 47). Consequently, our culture takes these values seriously, but we protect our perception of individual autonomy by conceiving of them as largely subjective, as something that serves individual well-being, abstracted from an outside authority.

A Relational Alternative

    No Dualism. A key feature of a relational ontology is that "objective" and "subjective" realms of being are not ontologically distinguished from one another but overlap and interpenetrate one another. Our relatively outward practices and institutions and our relatively inward meanings and values flow into one another in a holistic life world. In this realm of *praxis*, our shared meanings and values are just as much "out there" in our practices and institutions as "in here" in our thoughts and feelings about outer events. For example, the ideals of a liberal democracy are ingrained in our core characters and sentiments, *and* they shape the very reality of courtrooms, voting booths, and the exercise of bureaucratic power—however, imperfectly. In such a life world all things are profoundly *interdependent* – past and present, one culture and another, individual and society, self and other. They co-constitute and depend upon one another in what we have termed *strong relationality* (Slife, 2005). Each partner in these relations requires the other to affirm its reality, supplement its perspectives, correct its blind spots, and realize its core purposes in an authentic manner. Such is the "dignity of difference" (Sacks, 2002)

    From the abstractionist view, these partners are ultimately instrumental means to the end of one's own satisfaction or well being, however sincerely one may respect the right of others to pursue their own individual well-being. For the relationist, there is a contradiction in first claiming to take moral values seriously and then going on to explain or justify them as something that serves our own interests or enhances our own well-being. On the one hand, if we are free to define our interests or well-being any way we wish, then we are not taking these ideals or commitments seriously, at least in the sense that most of us mean when we talk about *moral* values. They are only more or less useful instruments to whatever ends in living we happen to aspire. On the other hand, if what we mean by our interests or well-being *includes* certain moral

values or commitments – i.e., they constitute our true interests in the way familiar ideals of character do – then we are *not* justifying them merely on the basis that they produce some desired effect; we are justifying them because they seem in some sense intrinsically right.

　　Satisfaction and Relationships. Positive psychologists may insist that they have empirical evidence to support the ultimate importance of emotional satisfaction and feeling good, such as evidence of the Crow Indians (Hickinbottom & Christopher, this issue) reporting satisfaction in helping others. However, the relationist would contend that none of the evidence supporting this thesis has teased apart the chicken-and-egg issues as to whether satisfaction is an effect or a cause. It is almost a matter of common sense that people *often* act for the sake of emotional self-satisfaction, without that entailing the universality of the self-satisfaction scheme promoted by positive psychology. Often, as well, they act for sake of someone else's good, even though this action is not inherently or subsequently emotionally satisfying at all. Or, they do so because it realizes some "higher" ethical or spiritual good of a different but quintessentially human sort.

　　In the relational view, all these human actions take place in contexts of living in which individuals have a great deal of personal responsibility at the same time that they are highly dependent upon others for practical efficacy, ethical maturity, and such spiritual goods as they may honor. To put it another way, these goods are realized in and sustained by *relationships*. Our roles in family and society would have no meaning without the interpersonal relationships that constitute them. We may have a tendency to overlook this interdependent dimension of things in an individualistic society like our own. However, as is well known, it is our true and loving friendships and relationships that matter when we near death, not the quantity of individual emotional satisfaction.

Contextlessness

As a final feature of a positive psychology program, consider its commitment to a kind of contextless view of human action and values, another indication of its tacit acceptance of an abstractionist ontology. Most of the focus and energies of positive psychologists are on constructs, ethical qualities, and beliefs that are abstracted from the contexts in which they occur, including the contexts of culture, history, and even the physical situation. As we have already described, *disinterested observers* are detached from their specific surroundings, history, and biases, while *emotional satisfaction* is a subjective "feeling" or "affect" that is the measure of good and bad contexts without being constituted by them. We describe briefly here three additional themes of how disregard of context is a dominating feature of positive psychology : their focus on empirical objectivities, the absence of the situated nature of their findings, and their use of abstractions as primary interpersonal connections.

Empirical Objectivities. The first sense of this contextlessness is the notion of most positive psychologists that their subject matter is "out there" in objective reality. Although they are specifically interested in the "subjective" emotional satisfactions of people, as we have described, they have to *translate* (or operationalize) these subjective realities into objective, morally neutral entities "out there" or "over there" in the world to be discovered and acted upon. This translation is the ontological price to be paid when the objective and subjective realms are abstracted from one another and made the targets of the gaze of a disengaged and disinterested scientist-observer. Most of the problems with positive psychology discussed in this special issue can be seen as flowing from this abstractionist ontology. Emotional satisfaction is severed from the thick moral concepts that populate everyday life and living. What constitutes a flourishing life can only be decided by the inborn tendencies or self-definitions of individuals. As a result

positive psychologists are bound to treat questions of the good life as a kind of public vote, discerned through research studies. Thus, they view their job as descriptive rather than prescriptive, taking no account of the disguised ideology that leads them to adopt an abstractionist view in the first place and to regard their remarkably biased account of the human struggle as entirely natural and neutral.

Contextless Qualities. This viewpoint and style of investigation yield a second aspect of contextlessness – what Becker and Maracek (this issue) call "abstract qualities" (p. 11). These are the qualities of a good life that supposedly occur without needing to take into account the context of those qualities when defining or deliberating them. For example, positive psychologists endorse such qualities as cheerfulness, optimism, and gratitude as though an empirical "vote" taken has deemed them to be good in general. However, merely listing and describing such qualities is at best weak and unconvincing, at worst completely misleading. In other words, it provides little useful or meaningful information about what one actually does in any real-life, particular context. What does cheerfulness mean, for example, in such concrete contexts as pitching a baseball, performing surgery, or deciding to go to war? Merely celebrating this abstraction does not help us know what it means or whether it is even relevant to the *particulars* of our lives.

Sameness as Social Bond. A third aspect of contextlessness is highlighted when we consider the formation and living out of human relationships. Positive psychologists, like many other social scientists, generally conceive of values, beliefs, principles, and philosophies abstractly or as separable from the contexts in which they occur, and then invoke them as the "glue" of social bonds and community relations. Political communities are perceived to be united through political philosophies, religious communities are bonded by common theologies, and

even civil communities are related by a set of jointly held laws—all abstractions. Put another way, the core of relationship and community is what the philosopher Levinas (1987) calls "sameness." Thus, agreement about the same values, philosophies, or beliefs becomes the main support of any community, whereas difference or disagreement becomes its main threat (Slife, 2005).

The problem is this view greatly distorts the actual business of living. None of us ever fully agree or hold exactly the same beliefs or values on any important issue. The common ground or agreement among us is more like having different, contextualized, overlapping perspectives on the same realities or experiences. That is what ties us together, limits us, and yet makes us dependent on the perspectives of others to correct, deepen, and revivify our commitments. When we conceive of these beliefs or values as abstracted universals, our only choices are to pretend to a stultifying sameness or to admit to important differences that not only sharply divide us but seem irresolvable. Indeed, to preserve social bonds it may appear that we either have to agree completely or avoid communication about the things we care about the most!

No wonder positive psychologists and others try to salvage this situation by treating these beliefs and values only instrumentally, as means to the end of emotional satisfaction or well being. Still, we have tried to show that doing so simply misses much of the point concerning life as it is lived, and even much of the ethical impetus behind positive psychology itself! This instrumentalism amounts, we suggest, to a sophisticated form of avoiding full disclosure about quintessentially human concerns.

A Relational Alternative

An ontological relationality, by contrast, assumes that the most fundamental and real entities of the world are the contextually situated aspects of our experiences, practices, and actions. In this view, the subjective cannot be divorced from the objective, and our histories, culture, and physical surroundings have to be taken into account when deliberating about a flourishing life or its qualities. This is not to say that ethical principles and value systems are unimportant or do not play a crucial role in human affairs. Rather, it is to claim that these abstractions must be validly derived from and always related to the concrete particulars of the contexts in which they occur. The most abstruse "theory" from this perspective, is ultimately a "form of practice" (Taylor, 1993; Richardson & Christopher, 1993) This contextuality implies a fresh perspective on all three aspects (described above) of a contextless understanding of the good or a flourishing life: focusing on objectivities, overlooking the situated nature of cultural and moral values, and viewing sameness as the core of community.

Interpreted Realities. To begin, do positive psychologists deal only with empirical objectivities? All "data," including the data of positive psychology and the data of everyday experience, require active, though not always conscious, interpretation to be meaningful. In this sense, the relationist assumes that the subjective and objective "worlds" are inextricably intertwined. One way of putting this is that all people, including positive psychologists, experience *interpreted realities* or meanings rather than objective realities or objects. Empirical descriptions, in this sense, always have the describer's interpretive framework mixed in. To understand any description fully is to discern its inescapable moral coloring or thrust, its more or less "disguised ideology." For this reason, positive psychologists are obligated as scholars to acknowledge not just their *descriptive* elements (data, reality) but their *prescriptive* elements (interpretive values, assumptions), and put them into open dialogue with other perspectives and

programs for social change. Such critical thinking should be a necessary function of any discipline (Slife, Reber, & Richardson, 2005).

Situatedness of Values. Secondly, in a relational view, positive psychology must acknowledge rather than obscure the situated nature of any account of the good life or the qualities that seem to be associated with it. An abstract description of these qualities, such as cheerfulness, is not rich enough to be truly meaningful. This suggests to us two general revisions in its approach. First, the positive psychologist has to engage in thicker brands of explanation, such as those deployed in interpretive methods (e.g., ethnography). It is no accident that the most common approach for transferring moral traditions from one generation to the next is through contextually situated narratives or allegories (Ricoeur, 1978). Second, positive psychologists cannot overlook the practical wisdom or *phronesis* (Fowers, 2005) necessary for understanding the particulars of a context sufficiently to know what sort of action is called for in the context. Neither the interpretations of research results by social scientists nor the deliberations of practical social actors can help but rely heavily on contextual involvement and sensitivity.

The Dignity of Difference. The third feature of a contextless understanding of the good life concerned the formation and development of human relationships and a sense of community. In a relational view, the main focus of community – that which brings about social bonds and interpersonal connectedness – cannot be common abstractions, such as beliefs, values, and explicit philosophical outlooks. A relational approach, by contrast, relies upon the realness of relationships themselves. If others constitute us primordially, as a relational ontology implies, then we do not have to build or derive relationships from anything else, including abstractions. We are not first and fundamentally separated from one another, needing to find something (e.g., a shared belief or value) to connect us. We are first and fundamentally related to one another in

our most basic identities and roles. Thus MacMurray (1999) argues, we are dependent upon others from birth and continue to be until death, even though our individualistic culture has led some of us to think that this dependence mysteriously ends after childhood.

In this sense then, a relational ontology implies a radically different perspective on the good life. First, it means that even the best *individual* virtues and character strengths are *shared* goods and *relational* values, such as love, friendship, forgiveness, and sacrifice. Second, it denies an exclusive or heavy dependence on abstracted sameness for connectedness. In this view, difference, indeed the dignity of difference, is as important to understanding relatedness as sameness, something that applies as much to the search for understanding and truth in social inquiry as in everyday life. To love only those aspects of the other that resemble us is, ultimately, to love mainly ourselves. Likewise, to relate only to those aspects of the other that resemble us is barely to relate at all. Thus, the differences, conflicts, and "messiness" of human relationships are inseparable from their richness and rewards. We suspect that a deep acceptance of that fact, a fact not encouraged or developed by positive psychology, would contribute to achieving greater reconciliation and peace in the human struggle.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we suggest that the main question facing positive psychology (and much of social science today) concerns the issue we have termed "disguised ideology." Are these theorists and researchers willing to acknowledge their own situatedness in history and culture, their own inescapable and self-defining ethical commitments, and their responsibility to engage in open dialogue with others of a different mind, here and around the world? Or will they continue, at least in part, to hide those commitments behind a pretense of value-neutrality and the bluster of "scientific validation?" To continue to hide these commitments, we believe, will

perpetuate a significant amount of the dogmatism, elitism, cultural blindness, and pseudo-science that positive psychologists are themselves rightly concerned about but have not successfully escaped.

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