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The point below

**A Primer in Positive Psychology**

By Christopher Peterson

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"This is "*dong jing*" or understanding energy…the ability to clearly distinguish between the positive and the negative and to react accordingly in order to take full advantage of the changes" (Sim & Gaffney, 2002, p. 163).

Our character is reflected in our every action. And even when a writer places himself in the background -- achieving style by affecting none -- his character is soon revealed (Strunk & White, 1979). In essence, character, for a time, is the energy carried by the words. Christopher Peterson, while writing the preface to his book, *A Primer in Positive Psychology,* says it loud and clear, "My personality will show itself in the pages to come."

But positive psychology is unique in this regard. It is a field of study that focuses explicitly on human character, on strengths like modesty, zest, persistence, bravery, humor, kindness, love, and perspective. More than that, it is a field of study that aims at accentuating and enhancing the positive – positive emotions, positive experiences, positive (strengths of) character, and positive (enabling) institutions. Arguably, there is little point following E.B. White's advice on style when writing positive psychology. Although Socrates when counselling his listeners "Know thyself" didn't add "And tell others about thyself," were he a scientist, Socrates may have agreed that insight can facilitate outsight (Siu, 1957).

Importantly, in revealing himself to his readers – divulging his personal happiness profile, describing experiences relevant for positive psychology in practice, etc. -- Christopher Peterson moves gracefully, with gravitas and humour, and provides an honest account of positive psychology. Peterson provides a good overview of

research findings on important themes such as pleasure and positive experience; happiness; positive thinking; character strengths; values; interests, abilities, and accomplishments; wellness; positive interpersonal relationships; and enabling institutions. Peterson also does a fine job of critical evaluation in many sub-domains of psychological science -- the thorny issue of psychological measurement; the subtle complexities of optimism research; the origin, structure, and function of values, etc. Importantly, Peterson recognises many of the limitations inherent in accentuating and enhancing the positive. He recognizes that many of the core sentiments held by positive psychologists, for example, that "virtue pays," still require much by way of good science before quality arguments can be mounted in their favour. Ultimately, Christopher Peterson's words carry an energy that works to move his readers toward the point below, the point in which understanding informs choice.

**The point below – Taijiquan meets positive psychology**

The best dancers and the best fighters have something in common: they flow with and beneath their partner—ready to catch them should they fall while dancing, topple them should they attack while fighting—prescient of every move. Taijiquan masters love to dance and fight. However, when fighting, they focus not on winning; they put aside pride and arrogance, and focus instead on connecting and merging with the action of their partner. In Chinese culture, Taijiquan is the supreme ultimate form of "flow." And given that flow is central to happiness in the positive psychology scheme (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), one can only assume that most masters would report being happy. The Taijiquan masters are widely respected in their culture because they "understand energy" (translated *dong jing*). Contrary to Nietzsche's "overman," the master in possession of *dong jing* can be described as "underman" --

*untermensch* – (s)he moves from a point below positive and negative, demonstrating stillness in connected movement, so that (s)he can be fully adaptable.

Christopher Peterson's unique take on positive psychology, a reflection of his unique character, possesses something of the qualities of a Taijiquan master: his primary objective is to facilitate understanding. Like a master working to hone his skills, Peterson identifies his strengths and acknowledges his weaknesses; he admits to what he does not know; he stays well-rooted, grounding himself in the facts he is aware of. And Peterson is explicit: he wants to avoid "happiology," claims that positive psychology represents a paradigm shift in the field of psychological science, and any bandwagon of bad company who commit the sin of "overlooking the science except when it suits them" (p. 19). Certainly, as the "director of virtue" (p. 137) for his school of thought, Peterson wants to facilitate positive emotions, positive experiences, positive (strengths of) character, and positive (enabling) institutions, but with a style of expression like that of Harry Frankfurt, he wants to demonstrate that positive psychology can be achieved without the need for bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005). Like a master's stroke of the brush doing calligraphy, Peterson's stroke of the pen, with his knowledge of psychological science behind it, is spontaneous, weighty, and definitive.

Naturally, we must admit that every thinker is influenced in their selection of facts by their unique aesthetics and sentiments, and from a systems science perspective (Warfield, 2003) it is arguable that everyone commits the sin of overlooking elements of "the science." Certainly, whether or not he is aware of it, Christopher Peterson overlooks plenty. For example, the important work by Alex Zautra on the co-dynamics of positive and negative emotion is not referenced (Zautra, 2003), and

Zautra's work will be central to the future of positive psychology as the field works to develop a more balanced and integrative perspective (Hogan, 2005a).

At the same time, noting key limitations in practice, Peterson recognises the value of insight, outsight, and virtue; and again there resonates links between positive psychology and Taijiquan. Positive psychology is all about developing outsight -- the science of positive states, positive traits, and positive institutions -- to facilitate insight and positive (virtuous) action. Naturally, the facts and relations described within any science are only useful when a thinker uses them to facilitate action. Nonetheless, the possibilities are infinite. Chen Xiaowang, the head of the Chen family, notes that development in science is boundless, as is the study of Taijiquan. There is no end to the benefits that can be derived from developing insight and outsight. Understanding how certain actions make people happy, more productive, more cooperative, etc. may prove to be a powerful source of influence in changing people's lives for the better. Anyone who denies this fact denies pragmatism (James, 1975).

As such, the relationship between insight and outsight is clear in both positive psychology and Taijiquan. Notably, the Chen family dictum states that understanding the nature of self, other, and world without being respectful, honest, sincere, kind, courageous, and magnanimous is insufficient for *dong jing*; understanding energy in the Taijiquan sense means accepting a simple principle -- a principle that all good positive psychologists advocate -- "Other people matter" (p. 249). Importantly, even if Sartre's Garcin thinks that "Hell is other people," and even if Peterson admits to his "frustration with other people" (p. 309), psychological science has clearly established that a large portion of the variance in life satisfaction derives from interpersonal

relationships -- finding love, being securely attached to family and friends, having quality social support networks, etc. Simply stated, positive states of being are dependent on interpersonal dynamics.

Further, within every category of virtue (i.e., the positive traits) championed by the positive psychology movement – wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence – there exist strengths of character that pertain to interpersonal dynamics, and it is meaningless to talk about enabling institutions without reference to other people. *Other people matter* and translating this value into specific actions (i.e., knowing how to apply one's understanding) can make possible all sorts of valued outcomes for individuals and societies. However, achieving valued outcomes is far from easy, and Christopher Peterson recognizes this fact. There is no easy path to optimizing insight, outsight, and virtuous action.

When Taijiquan meets positive psychology, it raises the possibility that both together can facilitate the development of better fighting skill, assuming that part and parcel of what it means to be virtuous is the ability to fight and win. For example, if virtue is good and evil is bad, then the good must battle the bad. This is an age-old fight, central to the virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence -- each and every one of these virtues facilitates the ability to fight. More generally, Taijiquan masters say that, without deep respect for your opponent, without knowing your opponent, you cannot connect with him and fight the good fight. A Chen master cannot be a good fighter without requisite virtue. A master cannot bully others, be a coward, oppress the weak, be conceited or boastful. A master does not compete with the arrogant, argue with the ignorant, or be influenced

by worldly possessions. A master does not waste time in idleness, does not obstruct public or personal efforts, or hunger for power and position. The Chen family may accept these dictums on faith, but central to positive psychology is testing a more specific claim linked to the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonian* -- "…well-being is not a consequence of virtuous action but rather an inherent aspect of such action…" (p. 281). In the modern era, many people believe that this age-old insight needs the support of outsight: positive psychology implicitly recognises that virtue has weak legs in our heady Western culture. This view is shared by those involved in character education (Lapsley & Power, 2005).

But more than simply adopting a top-down strategy of convincing us using reason that "virtue pays," positive psychologists advocate a bottom-up strategy, whereby students are given exercises, like identifying routes to happiness, using signature strengths in new ways, changing a habit, etc. Again, the Taijiquan masters would agree with this strategy, only the exercises would differ.

Unlike Taijiquan training, those spearheading the positive psychology movement do not specify a clear developmental progression, whereby the novice moves through weakness to strength (or from lesser strength to greater strength). In fact, Peterson recognizes that little is known about how strengths of character develop. Quality longitudinal studies have yet to be conducted.

Peterson does, nonetheless, modify earlier views advocating that positive psychologists "not try to improve character weaknesses (lesser strengths) but instead try to burnish their signature strengths (Seligman, 2002)...[because] given that certain

strengths of character are robustly associated with life satisfaction…it is glib to advise you to forget about them." (p. 196).

Notably, having achieved the insight that character strengths and weaknesses (lesser strengths) must both be analysed as part of the co-dynamics of a living system, Christopher Peterson, as "the director of virtue" (p. 137) for his school of thought does well to recognise the full extent of the challenges that lay ahead for positive psychologists. I will close with one example.

**The challenge of strength with weakness**

If the goal of the researcher is to intentionally select actions designed to optimize an outcome, then, the thinking undergirding the selected action is best optimized. In other words, the laws of probability dictate that our thinking on the nature of human action, and our use of this thinking for the optimization of human action, is beneficial if correct (Hogan, 2005b).

Thinking presents some difficulties. For example, if your system of values in action contains 24 distinct elements (strengths and lesser strengths) -- as does the current positive psychology system (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) -- then heeding Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety, it will soon be revealed to the controller of this system that it is not very easy to control (Warfield, 2003). Ashby's Law of Requisite Variety states that for effective control, the variety available to the controller should be the same as the variety available to the system to be controlled. Within any given action, with 24 elements and their interactive effects to control, only two options are available: give up the desire to control the system or reduce the number of elements

specified by the user. If the user selects the second option, they have, by positive psychology standards, an incomplete characterization of their structure, thus limiting their process and function. In other words, the user will lack insight into how some of the core values in action (deemed universal to human nature) function for them.

Because positive psychology is interested in optimizing human development, it must address how, as a systems science (Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006), it plans to deal with the issue of optimizing the flow of beneficial action in a living system.

**In conclusion**

Abstract systems thinking aside, and the limitations of insight and outsight aside, it is foolish to ignore the relationship between positive states of *being* and *doing* for health, well-being, and longevity, and the positive psychology movement has certainly enhanced our understanding of the biological, psychological, and social antecedents and consequences of these positive states. Christopher Peterson's book is an excellent introduction to the area of positive psychology. Let us hope that positive psychology in all its emergent forms has a bright future!

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