

**“That at Which All Things Aim”:  
Happiness, Wellness, and the Ethics of Organizational Life**

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Recent scandals in the business world have underscored the need for a more effective application of ethics in organizational life. Business executives, governmental regulators, and educators at all levels have been asking tough questions about how moral reasoning and ethical behavior can be most effectively cultivated. These scandals, we believe, also point out a need for a more adequate theoretical understanding of ethics. In order to create more responsible organizational structures, more enlightened public policy, and more relevant curricula, we need to have a more articulate understanding of the good we are trying to achieve.

Aristotle (1934) understood the importance of a careful study of the Good as a beginning point for ethics. The entire first book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* is dedicated to a detailed analysis of the Good, which he defines as “That at which all things aim” (I. i. 2). In the realm of ethics, he concludes, the End at which all actions aim is happiness (*eudaimonia*) (I. vii. 8).

More recently, positive psychologists have initiated a program for research that intends to help “articulate a vision of the good life that is empirically sound...” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Still in its infancy, positive psychology (PP) is already making important empirical contributions to our understanding of the good life and how it can be cultivated. The vision of the good life articulated by PP, however, must not only be empirically sound; it must also be theoretically sound. As with any empirical inquiry, PP is in need of continual care to ensure that the data being collected is interpreted properly and is properly integrated into the developing vision. This theoretical work is especially important now, when PP is still in its formative stages.

We believe careful attention to a theoretical understanding of the Good is crucial for PP. Since different teams of researchers are investigating different positive aims, it is easy to become

confused by the various terms used in PP and by the different ways in which the same terms are sometimes used.

By paying adequate attention to conceptual clarification, positive psychologists can avoid the unfortunate and dangerous confusions to which the vague and ambiguous use of terms typically leads. As PP moves more and more into the realm of practice, the need for avoiding these confusions becomes especially acute. Adequate clarity will help protect practitioners of PP from the dangers of overreach—of claiming more for their interventions than is empirically warranted.

We believe a comparison of the aims of PP with those of wellness can help make valuable contributions to the conceptual clarifications of which PP is in need. Accordingly, we discuss the relation between the Good at which PP aims and the Good at which wellness aims. This comparison makes possible some suggestions for the application of PP to organizational life in a way that minimizes the risk of overreach.

### **Positive Psychology and Wellness**

The Good at which PP aims is clearly happiness. Martin Seligman, the acknowledged leader of the field, chose “*Authentic Happiness*” as the title of his book on positive psychology. Elsewhere (2003), Seligman writes, “Positive psychology is about ‘happiness....’” Acknowledging that ‘happiness’ is a “promiscuously overused word,” he explains more clearly what he means by it: “I use ‘happiness’ and ‘well-being’ as soft, overarching terms to describe the goals of the whole positive psychology enterprise” (p. 127). Happiness can be achieved, he explains, in a variety of ways. Most basically, it can be achieved through the pleasant life (through cultivating positive emotions), through the good life (through cultivating strengths and

virtues), and through the meaningful life (through cultivating the application of one's strengths and virtues to something much larger than oneself).

The Good at which wellness aims is broader than the happiness of PP. Wellness is a positive state of affairs, brought about by the simultaneous and balanced satisfaction of personal, relational, and collective needs; needs that are met by cogent values and adequate material and psychological resources (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001; Nelson & Prilleltensky, in press). Our conception of wellness, as illustrated in Figure 1, entails four domains created by two intersecting continua. The individual – collective continuum tells us that wellness is a function of attributes present in both people and communities. The deficits – strengths continuum, in turn, indicates that wellness increases by reducing negative factors and increasing positive qualities in people, communities, and environments. Thus, while wellness is experienced at the individual level in terms of happiness, joy, meaning, longevity and health, many of its causal factors extend well beyond the individual. Similarly, while wellness promotion strives to increase the joy, meaning, health and longevity of individuals, its strategies go well beyond the individual and include environmental, social and collective interventions (Stokols, 2000, 2003). The basic assumption behind this conceptualization, well-supported by extensive research, is that the wellness of the individual is influenced not only by internal factors, but also by transactions between the person and the social and physical environment (Eckersley, Dixon, & Douglas, 2001; Jamner & Stokols, 2000; Keating & Hertzman, 1999; Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999; Shinn & Toohey, 2003).

[Insert figure 1 About Here]

Our definition of wellness entails the balanced satisfaction of needs at three points along the individual – collective continuum: (a) personal needs such as physical and psychological

well-being, (b) relational needs such as social support, affection, caring and compassion, and (c) collective needs such as social justice, fairness, equality, and public resources (Nelson & Prilleltensky, in press; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 2002; Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001).

Within the context of the wellness framework, one would expect PP to be located mostly within Quadrant II. Among the social sciences, psychology is the one that has historically focused most on the individual, and the very name of PP is intended to distinguish it from the deficits approach of Quadrant III. Indeed, this expectation is born out in the current development of PP. Although it acknowledges the value and importance of deficit approaches in mainstream psychology, PP is focused on the development of a strengths approach to human flourishing. And although it defines itself as a “science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” that seeks to “understand and build the factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5), PP has so far made the most progress at the subjective and individual levels of development. Research on subjective well-being, positive affect, and life satisfaction, the development of the Values in Action Classification of Strengths, and the study of how those strengths can be applied by individuals in their social interactions are all very important components of Quadrant II. But these important components are circumscribed areas of research residing within this quadrant. Physical health, educational attainment, and economic security, as measured by fairly objective tools, are other key components of wellness located within Quadrant II.

While PP represents a significant advance in wellness in the domains in which it is active, the position it occupies in the total landscape of wellness presents potential ethical dilemmas related to its scope. As with all approaches to health and human development, proponents should

make sure to define what aspects of wellness are covered by their research and what kinds of persons it is uniquely qualified to help.

### **Ethics of Scope**

As we have noted, the Good at which PP aims is happiness. Yet it is as true today as it was in Aristotle's that "What constitutes happiness is a matter of dispute" (1934, I. iv. 2). For Seligman, happiness serves as the ultimate goal of PP, but itself is not a technical term in the discipline. His emphasis is not so much on attempting to find a rigorous definition for the term as it is on describing various paths to its attainment. For Seligman (2002), there are three general means of access to happiness: the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life. The pleasant life is about maximizing one's good feelings about the past (through gratitude and forgiveness), about the present (through savoring and mindfulness), and about the future (through optimism and hope); the good life is about cultivating the strengths and virtues; and the meaningful life is about applying these strengths and virtues in the service of something larger than oneself. The full life—a life that integrates the pleasant, good, and meaningful life—would then seem to be, for Seligman, the ultimate desideratum of PP.

A different approach is taken by Sheldon, Lyubomirsky, and Schkade (2003). For them, happiness is a technical term within PP, a term roughly synonymous with "subjective well-being." They write, "In this article, we will define happiness as it is most often defined in the literature—that is, in terms of frequent positive affect, high life satisfaction, and infrequent negative affect. These three constructs are the three primary components of subjective well-being, according to Diener and colleagues....[W]e will use the terms 'happiness' or 'subjective well-being,' although we will also discuss mood and life satisfaction at times, based on the specific ideas and data being presented" (p. 11). These writers continue:

It is also important to note that we use a subjectivist definition of happiness, which commonly relies on people's self-reports. We believe this is appropriate and even necessary given our view that happiness must be defined from the perspective of the person. In other words, happiness is primarily a subjective phenomenon, for which the final judge should be "whoever lives inside a person's skin".... Our primary focus in this article is on a person's characteristic level of happiness during a particular period in his or her life which we term the *chronic happiness level*. We define happiness this way because we wish to identify a quantity that is more enduring than momentary or daily happiness, but that is also somewhat malleable over time, and thus amenable to meaningful pursuit. By this definition, while it is possible to alter one's chronic happiness level, it is much more difficult to do so than to alter one's happiness level at a particular moment or on a particular day. Operationally, one might define a person's chronic happiness level in terms of his or her retrospective summary judgments regarding his/her mood and satisfaction during some recent period (such as the last 2, 6, or 12 months), or as the average of momentary judgments of mood and satisfaction made at several times during the selected period (Sheldon, Lyubomirsky, & Schkade, 2003, pp. 12-13).

As these writers use the term happiness, then, it seems more closely aligned to Seligman's notion of the pleasant life (or even to one component of that life). Happiness as subjective well-being is then one component of happiness as the overall end of PP. Is either of these notions what Aristotle meant by the term "happiness"?

For Aristotle, it is impossible to separate one's happiness from external goods. He argues that there are certain external factors, such as good birth, satisfactory children, and personal beauty that are essential for a happy life. He also points out that friends, wealth, or political

power are often prerequisites for noble action. He concludes that happiness seems to require external prosperity (1934, I. viii. 15-17). While we might take issue with the specific items (such as good birth) that Aristotle finds essential for happiness, his approach underscores the important relation between happiness and objective factors in our environment. This seems to point beyond the scope of PP proper to the entire domain of wellness.

We believe the particular challenges of conceptual clarification that PP must meet are not due simply to differences of opinion or usage among positive psychologists. Rather, they are due in part to the origins and dialectical trajectory of the PP movement itself. Its origins lie in a reaction against the tendency of mainstream psychology to focus predominantly on the amelioration of deficits. PP, by contrast, emphasizes the importance of the cultivation of human strengths in the quest for human flourishing. This opposition between the thesis of mainstream psychology and the antithesis of PP is an unstable one, however, since it is clear that deficits and strengths cannot be held absolutely separate. Both the reduction of deficits and the cultivation of strengths are essential for human flourishing. The irony in mainstream psychology is that it has failed to acknowledge adequately the deficit inherent in the deficit approach itself. While removing negatives yields overall progress, this process by itself can never take us into positive territory. Paying off one's debts increases one's net worth but not one's income. The irony in PP is that the human flourishing we seek is more positive than that which PP alone can yield, and that this higher level of flourishing comes precisely through the acknowledgement of the importance of the deficits approach. Increasing one's income may not increase one's net worth if one's debts are large enough.

The instability of this polarity points to the need for a synthesis between mainstream psychology and PP—for, say, an “optimal psychology.” An optimal psychology would study

when it is best to use a deficits approach and when it is best to use a strengths approach to human flourishing. But an optimal psychology is also unstable, since human flourishing is not dependent solely on psychology. Also at issue here are questions of economics and sociology, of politics and law, of business and the physical environment. In short, the dialectic that begins with PP must end with wellness. That is, a dissatisfaction with the limited approach to human flourishing provided by mainstream psychology will not be overcome until we have a science that covers the full scope of human flourishing.

This inexorable drive is something of which many positive psychologists are at least implicitly aware. Positive psychologists are quick to point out that their work is intended as a complement to, and not a replacement for, mainstream psychology—thus allowing room for an optimal psychology that integrates both. Positive psychologists are also interested in fostering the development of a positive social science and a positive humanities, thus acknowledging the importance of integrating psychology with other disciplines. The scope of the science and profession that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi envision for the coming century must then be broader than that of PP proper. It must cover the entire scope of wellness.

Clearly, much more needs to be done to work out the details of this dialectical complexity. Provisionally, we suggest that the current PP movement is both about the science of PP and about something much larger and more comprehensive. PP proper involves the application of the methods of empirical psychology in the study of a strengths-based approach to psychology. The larger science of which PP itself will be only a part has yet to be named. But we predict that its scope will be roughly coterminous with that of wellness.

What then is the Good at which PP aims? Understood as a discrete science, PP aims at happiness—at understanding the nature and causes of subjective well-being, but also at

understanding the cultivation of strengths and the finding of meaning in life. But understood developmentally, PP is aiming toward something larger than itself. In this sense, the Good at which PP aims seems quite similar to the Good at which wellness aims.

This dynamic state of affairs in PP is quite understandable in a nascent area of study. But it also has important and profound implications for the application of PP in individual, relational, organizational, and communal contexts. One of the greatest dangers presented by this state of affairs is that of overreach. By confusing the domain of PP proper with that of the larger science of human flourishing, practitioners could unwittingly become blind to important factors crucial for wellness in a variety of contexts. Let us consider more carefully how this might happen.

Imagine a positive psychology practitioner (PPP) just beginning her career. She reads in the PP literature that happy people have greater longevity, better health, and increased productivity over unhappy people. She notes Seligman's statement that research leads to an "unambiguous picture of happiness as a prolonger of life and improver of health" (2002, p. 40). She wants these important benefits for her clients, and she wonders what sort of interventions will work best. She is told by PP researchers that circumstances typically do not matter very much for people's happiness. With respect to socioeconomic level, they state that above a certain threshold wealth adds little to reported happiness. With respect to physical conditions, they claim that "objective good health is barely related to happiness" (Seligman, 2002, p. 58). Finally, with respect to education, climate, race and gender, they observe that "surprisingly, none of them much matters for happiness" (Seligman, 2002, p. 58).

If the PPP understands her job to be that of helping her clients become happier, she may discourage them from focusing too much attention on the circumstances of their lives in favor of interventions focused on savoring, gratitude, mindfulness, the cultivation of signature strengths,

and the like. While there is nothing wrong with these interventions, the danger comes in forgetting that happiness might include anything outside of them. If Aristotle is right that happiness is the End at which all actions aim, then it would be a mistake simply to identify happiness with subjective well-being. Overreach would occur when the PPP would take subjective well-being to cover the entire domain of happiness, not making room for the important elements of happiness that lie outside of subjective well-being.

If subjective well-being were taken to be the End at which all actions aim, then there would be little incentive for working on the objective factors that underlie so much of wellness. One of these factors, for example, is social justice. If the PPP's clients belong to a relatively high socioeconomic class (which is likely to be the case, since they can afford to work with her), working for social justice may have only very marginal effects on their subjective well-being. Or it may have significant negative effects if it presents obstacles to their life satisfaction. So if the PPP takes subjective well-being to be the End at which all actions aim, it seems unlikely that she would encourage her clients to fight for social justice. All the more so since one could argue that being the victim of social injustice does not necessarily result in a sustained decrease in one's subjective well-being. So if the victims of injustice are happy, why should a client risk making himself unhappy in order to change their social conditions, which will not likely have much of an effect on their happiness, anyway? Seen in this way, the practice of PP could become an unwitting argument for and ally of injustice.

Clearly, the full life and wellness must help fill out our conception of happiness. Subjective well-being by itself is insufficient to cover the entire domain of human flourishing. Indeed, at times it seems difficult to reconcile self-reports of subjective well-being with more objective perspectives that take into account more of the wellness domain. As Eckersley has

noted, “there is a range of evidence that suggests a positive bias in the results of happiness and life satisfaction surveys” (2001, p. 63). In a careful review of measures used in assessing levels of happiness and life satisfaction, Eckersley (2000) found great inconsistencies between people’s report of happiness and a number of objective measures of well-being. He found that levels of happiness reported by people, usually quite high across a number of countries and contexts, are incommensurate with rather pronounced levels of stress, mental health, sleeping problems, depression, low self-esteem, lack of energy, worries about weight, lack of satisfaction with their economic situation, and other measures. The inconsistency between elevated reports of subjective happiness and depressed measures of physical, psychological, and collective wellness was found in studies across different countries and contexts. In summary, Eckersley writes, “there are several aspects of measures of subjective well-being (SWB) or happiness that present a problem....These are the relative stability of SWB despite dramatic social, cultural and economic changes in recent decades; the complex, non-linear relationship between objective conditions and subjective states; and the positive biases in measures of SWB” (2000, p. 274).

This situation could lead to the overreach of PP and to the undermining of objective factors in well-being, a conclusion reinforced by PP’s claim that happiness is determined largely by genetics (50%) and volitional factors (40%) and only moderately by circumstances (10%) (Seligman, 2002; Sheldon, Lyubomirsky, & Schkade, 2003). Although positive psychologists claim that circumstantial factors account for only about 10% of happiness and volitional factors for about 40%, we should keep in mind that the psychological and behavioral variables said to account for the 40% cannot be easily disentangled from the circumstances of people’s lives (McGue & Bouchard, 1998; Turkheimer, 1998); a point acknowledged by Sheldon et al. (2003). In our view, some positive psychologists risk engaging in what Shinn and Toohey have recently

called the “context minimization error,” according to which there is a “tendency to ignore the impact of enduring neighborhood and community contexts on human behavior. The error has adverse consequences for understanding psychological processes and efforts at social change” (2003, p. 428). Shinn and Toohey argue that

Psychologists should pay more attention to the community contexts of human behavior. Conditions in neighborhoods and community settings are associated with residents' mental and physical health, opportunities, satisfactions, and commitments. They are associated with children's academic achievement and developmental outcomes, from behavior problems to teenage childbearing. Contexts also moderate other individual or family processes, suggesting that many psychological theories may not hold across the range of environments in which ordinary Americans live their lives. For example, optimal types of parenting may depend on levels of neighborhood risk. Further...contextual effects may masquerade as effects of individual characteristics, leading to flawed inferences (2003, p. 428).

### **Ethics in Organizational Life**

Positive psychologists wish to promote values that enhance personal and institutional development. While most attention has hitherto been devoted to the former, the latter remains an important goal (Henry, 2003; Seligman, 2002; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). The cultivation of strengths and virtues and of positive institutions is paramount in the pursuit of authentic happiness (Seligman, 2002, 2003; Seligman & Royzman, 2003). This is where PP and wellness promotion converge, for both treat the individual as an agent of change, and both consider the role of institutions, even if PP has not yet fully developed the latter. Agents of change can develop virtues related to the improvement of personal, relational, and collective wellness

through the enhancement of communities and social institutions. Herein lies the potential contribution of PP for the three levels of wellness. Namely, in the use of proven techniques that enhance satisfaction in life, caring and compassion in relationships, and justice in society. It is definitely within the scope of PP to connect the private pursuit of the good life with the public concern for fairness, equity and justice (Baltes & Kunzman, 2003).

The main challenge in organizational life is to identify the persons and contexts most likely to benefit from PP. The goal is the application of PP to the right people, in the right way, at the right time, in the right place. Conversely, we want to avoid prescribing it to the wrong people, in the wrong way, at the wrong time, in the wrong place (Pawelski, 2003a, 2003b).

To achieve these goals we need to be clear with respect to *whose* pleasant, good, and meaningful life we are talking about. In any organizational context, we can identify at least three main constituencies or stakeholder groups: (a) employers, (b) employees, and (c) the community at large that is affected by the operations, products, and services of the organization. These three groups are potential recipients and agents of the three types of happiness reviewed at the outset of this chapter: (a) subjective well-being, (b) the full life (composed of the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life), and (c) wellness (pursued in all four quadrants of Figure 1).

In an ideal situation, the three groups would work together to maximize the three kinds of happiness. In actual fact, however, the three groups are often in conflict. Different interests and levels of power often interfere with the pursuit of wellness for the common good. As a microcosm of society, organizations reflect conflicts and dynamics affecting the well-being of communities around the world. The challenge to harmonize values and interests among groups is, to say the least, humbling. To face that challenge, we identify four tasks for organizational leaders and positive psychologists alike (Prilleltensky, 2000).

1. *Clarify the position of the organization with respect to the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life, and articulate means of achieving these three outcomes for employers, employees, and the community at large.*

The needs of the individual have to be in harmony with the needs of the collective. To achieve a balance between individual and collective needs we require processes that can mediate between conflicting interests. The role of the leader is to help the organization clarify its values and suggest means for balancing the personal wellness of workers with the well-being of the organization and the community as a whole. Such processes usually encourage participation and collective ownership of the mission (Maton & Salem, 1995; Racino, 1991; Senge, 1990).

Although leaders may be sincere in their desire to formulate a mission statement that balances competing interests and values, their good intentions are threatened by a number of risks. The first risk is to remain at a level of abstraction that makes for an internally coherent set of values that is theoretically beautiful but practically useless. A second risk is the confusion between personal preferences and ethical principles (Becker, 1998). Some management books outline processes that rely on what workers prefer, but not necessarily on what is morally right (e.g., Senge et al., 1994).

2. *Promote a state of affairs in which personal power and self-interests do not undermine the wellness or interests of others, but rather contribute to the highest levels of happiness for all.*

This calls for an awareness of how personal power and vested interests suffuse leadership (Boonstra, Bennebroek Gravenhorst, 1998; Bradshaw, 1998). Workers and leaders need to reflect on how their personal lives and subjective experiences influence what they deem ethical for the organization and for the public they serve. Awareness, however, is only the first step. The

satisfaction of personal needs is another important requisite. Workers are more likely to abide by collective values and norms when they feel that their personal needs are adequately met by the organization (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

The process of balancing interests with values can be subverted. One way to subvert it is by developing a discourse that legitimizes self-interests. For example, the notion of a “self-made person,” so prevalent in North America, can lead to a justification of privilege and discrimination (Prilleltensky, 1994). Self-determination, skills and perseverance are, in principle, desirable values, but not when they justify dominance and exploitation.

3. *Enhance zones of congruence among communities, employees and employers.*

Leaders need to create partnerships among these groups in order to foster concordance of values and practices. The primary task in the creation of partnerships is the establishment of trust (Block, 1993; Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivray, 2001). This is achieved by meaningful and collaborative participation in decision-making processes. Democratic and participatory processes among multiple stakeholders require the prolonged engagement of leaders and the avoidance of tokenism. Token consultative processes subvert the intent of true partnerships.

4. *Confront people and groups subverting values, abusing power, or allowing self-interests to undermine the well-being of others in the organization or in the community at large.*

A culture of openness and self-reflection facilitates the resolution of conflict. In a climate of healthy and respectful debate, opposing parties may reach an agreement in line with organizational values. There are situations, however, in which a healthy climate may not prevent disagreements. If the conflict is about ideas and interpretations, chances are that a resolution can be reached. But if the conflict is about personal interests or power, differences may be

irreconcilable, in which case confrontation takes place. Confrontation may be used for the good of the organization and the good of the public. But it may also be used to suppress legitimate discontent. Leaders can impose their power to silence opposing views.

### **Concluding Caveats**

PP is very much concerned with the promotion of virtues and strengths. The context for the promotion of these qualities is crucial. In organizations, there are two contextual forces that threaten and enable the implementation of values at the same time: interests and power. Leaders and positive psychologists invested in the enhancement of institutional life must confront these issues and find ways of enhancing the zones of congruence among power and interests of all concerned. Otherwise, insidious power dynamics and conflicting interests impede the implementation of values and virtues.

We espouse neither Romantic nor Machiavellian views of organizational life. Positive institutions must embrace cogent values but also an understanding of power dynamics (Chambliss, 1996; Dokecki, 1996). We fervently endorse the values of wellness and the virtues of PP. But we equally and strongly appreciate the context where values are supposed to work. Just like Romantic notions of virtue must consider power dynamics, Machiavellian impulses must be tempered by virtues and values. The promotion of happiness at all levels must take both into account.

New disciplines, movements, and theories usually compensate for the shortcomings of their predecessors. PP strives to rectify the inattention to strengths and virtues of many previous schools. Its historical role, however, need not be the promotion of positive qualities at the expense of the elimination of negative forces; nor should it be the promotion of person-based solutions at the expense of collective actions. Rather, its aim should be to reach a balance among

multiple approaches. Happiness at any of the levels we have discussed here is unlikely to emerge from unidimensional approaches that exalt, however innocently, fragmented solutions. Persons flourish in environments. Their very qualities of hope, optimism, wisdom and gratitude develop in interactions with others, in favorable proximal conditions, which are, in turn, affected by enabling distal conditions. Leaders and positive psychologists can work together to make sure that the institutions that affect our lives become distal as well as proximal sites to the promotion of subjective well-being, the full life, and wellness for employers, employees, and the communities they serve. This is an End at which the ethics of organizational life must aim.

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Figure 1

Domains of Wellness

