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Today, Tomorrow, and the Day After Tomorrow: A Case Study for the Theology of Joy Project

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On October 13, 2000, I was one of 400 people gathered in the Great Hall of the Gallup World Headquarters in Washington, D.C. for the start of the first public meeting on positive psychology. As a young, pony-tailed philosopher attending my first psychology conference, I was very much in the minority, but I was filled with excitement—and I would even say a kind of joy—as I listened to Martin Seligman describe the nascent field of positive psychology. Seligman contended that the current state of psychology was “not good enough,” as it was almost exclusively focused on pathology and the identification and treatment of mental illness and paid little attention to positive emotions, strengths, and the other things that make life most worth living. He presented positive psychology as a much-needed corrective to this imbalance, reported on the growth the new field was already beginning to experience, and inspired us all to work for a new tomorrow in psychology and in the world.

Fourteen years later, that new tomorrow is well on its way. Hundreds of millions of research dollars have been awarded for work in positive psychology. A number of journals including the *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, the *International Journal of Well-Being*, and *Psychology of Well-Being* have been founded to publish the results of this research. Some 18,000 scholarly articles have now been published by researchers around the world on positive psychology topics ranging from creativity to optimism, from mindfulness to post-traumatic growth (Rusk & Waters, 2013). This “positive turn” is moving into other areas of inquiry, as well, with serious work underway in positive psychiatry, positive organizational scholarship, positive health, and positive education, to name a few. Not
only is this emphasis on the positive changing theory and research in these fields, but it is also having an enormous impact on the way practitioners approach their work, with an increasing number of psychotherapists, educators, life coaches, business consultants, physicians, and attorneys incorporating the results of positive psychology research into their professional endeavors (Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, & Nakamura, 2011; Seligman, 2011; Pawelski & Moores, 2013).

On October 9, 2014, I will be one of a small number of scholars who will gather at the Yale Divinity School to think about the current state of theology. We have been called together in the belief that theology today is “not good enough,” that all too often its focus is on the pathology of sin and brokenness. We will discuss a movement toward the Theology of Joy that is intended to correct this imbalance by focusing on the power of joy to transform lives and bring about greater human flourishing. We will be inspired to work for a new tomorrow in theology and in the world.

What will the state of theology be tomorrow? By October of 2028, will hundreds of millions of research dollars have been committed for the study of joy? Will a number of research journals have been founded to publish the results of this research? Will nearly 20,000 scholarly articles have been published on the topic? Will it have deeply influenced theory, research, and practice in a number of other fields, as well? Or will there be a completely different set of outcomes from this movement?

Our consultation is focused on questions concerning the connection between today and tomorrow. Given where we are today, what goals should we set for where we want to be tomorrow? What steps can we take to achieve those goals? What obstacles will we face that
will put the achievement of those goals in danger, or that could potentially co-opt those goals and lead to outcomes we cannot foresee and may not welcome?

The case statement prepared for our consideration describes the Theology of Joy project (with qualifications) as “something like a theological parallel to ‘positive psychology’.” I believe I can be of most help to the current project by presenting a case study of the development of positive psychology as I have experienced it over the last fourteen years. Considering key factors that helped positive psychology move into its tomorrow may help us in making decisions for moving the Theology of Joy into a successful tomorrow of its own. I will also discuss ways in which positive psychology currently finds itself torn between tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, with an eye toward helping the Theology of Joy project avoid this conundrum.

Five Key Factors in the Success of Positive Psychology

I will begin by discussing five key factors that have helped positive psychology succeed in the years since its founding. The first of these is leadership. In its early days, positive psychology benefitted from the support of some outstanding leaders in psychology. Most prominent is Martin Seligman, who developed the idea of positive psychology as one of his presidential initiatives when he served as president of the American Psychological Association in 1998. This gave the field immediate visibility. He was joined by a number of other prominent psychologists who had been working in areas of positive human experience before the name

1 It might help the reader to know that, since meeting Martin Seligman at that fateful meeting in Washington, D.C., I have played several roles in positive psychology. Since 2005, I have served as the Director of Education and Senior Scholar at the Positive Psychology Center, where I worked with Seligman to develop the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program, which I now direct and in which I teach. Since the founding of the International Positive Psychology Association in 2007, I have served as its executive director, and I am a steering committee member of the newly founded International Positive Education Network. Some of my most recent scholarly activities in the field include serving as editor of the philosophy section of the Oxford Handbook of Happiness (2013), as co-editor of The Eudaimonic Turn: Well-Being in Literary Studies (2013), and as co-editor of Human Flourishing: An Anthology of Eudaimonic Poetry (in press). Most recently, I have completed a paper on “Defining the ‘Positive’ in Positive Psychology.”
positive psychology was coined. Chief among these was Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, then of the University of Chicago, whose work on flow had already been enormously influential and who is considered to be a co-founder of positive psychology. Ray Fowler, the long-time CEO of the American Psychological Association, was also integrally involved, providing important support and advice. Seligman put together a Positive Psychology Steering Committee, which included Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Ed Diener (University of Illinois, founder of subjective well-being research), George Vaillant (Harvard University, custodian of the Grant study of long-term well-being), and Christopher Peterson (University of Michigan, creator of the VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues). This group met regularly and made a number of key strategic decisions on how to move the field forward.

A second key factor in the success of positive psychology was an effective strategy. Believing it unlikely that they would be able to convince many senior scholars to take up research in the new field, positive psychology leaders deliberately focused on mid-career researchers and on students. For the former, they sent letters to some 50 leading researchers, asking them to recommend the best student they had had in the last decade who might be interested in this research. From those recommendations, some 15 were invited to a meeting with the Steering Committee in Akumal, Mexico. They created “pods,” groups of three or four scholars, to work on specific projects. This group met annually from 1999 through 2002, and many of the leading figures in the field today (Barbara Fredrickson, Jonathan Haidt, Shane Lopez, Dacher Keltner, Kennon Sheldon, and Amy Wrzesniewski, for example) attended those meetings. For students, positive psychology leaders created a Summer Institute where promising young scholars spent a week in a beautiful location learning about the field directly from some of its foremost researchers.
Positive psychology leaders were also interested in the application and dissemination of positive psychology research. The decision was made to offer a one-year professional masters degree in the field at the University of Pennsylvania, and in 2005 we opened the doors to the inaugural Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at Penn. We are now teaching our tenth class of students and have some 350 graduates living around the world. These graduates are accomplished professionals in areas such as education, business, medicine, law, psychotherapy, executive coaching, and media, and they are carrying forward the application of positive psychology in their own professional domains. Since 2005, some two dozen post-graduate programs in positive psychology have been established around the world. In 2007, we established the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), in large part to help with the dissemination of research in the field. We have held three biennial World Congresses so far, with attendance at each ranging between 1200-1500 researchers, professionals, students, and members of the general public coming in from more than 50 countries. This year, we are launching the International Positive Education Network specifically to support the application of positive psychology research and practice in schools around the world. In addition, there are also a number of national and regional organizations who have regular meetings and who support more local initiatives.

A third key to the success of positive psychology was financial support. Clearly, the meetings I have mentioned and the research that has been done could not have happened if there had not been sources of financial support. Some of this support has come through typical channels like the National Institutes of Health, but in the early days and to a significant degree in an ongoing way, the field depends on the generosity of other groups. Atlantic Philanthropies, the Gallup Organization, the Mayerson Foundation, and the John Templeton Foundation were early
generous supporters of positive psychology. The John Templeton Foundation has continued to play a crucial role in helping the field expand in new directions, such as neuroscience, prospection, and imagination; and now the Templeton Religion Trust is joining in to support major initiatives in the humanities, on primals, and on big data. Without the early and ongoing support of these organizations, the field would be nowhere near where it is at this point.

A fourth key factor in the success of positive psychology has been right timing. The field was born into a psychological environment that was ready for it. A number of key scholars had been working on positive psychology themes, and many of those who were not were turned off by the field’s orientation toward pathology. By establishing a name to bring together various strands of research and to encourage others to take up similar work, positive psychology leaders were able to capitalize on conscious or subconscious discontent in psychology and attract a number of bright researchers. Positive psychology was also born into a larger world that was similarly ready for it. The successes of the multi-billion-dollar self-help industry point to a widespread desire among the general population for greater flourishing. Many in this general population have strongly welcomed the evidence-based approaches positive psychology has made possible by applying the methods of empirical psychology to the cultivation of human flourishing.

The final factor I will mention is a unifying method of inquiry. This is not to say that everyone in positive psychology agrees on everything. There are still many healthy disagreements and debates. But there is also a respect for empirical ways of adjudicating those disputes. This respect is unifying in that it gives researchers more-or-less agreed upon ways of advancing the field.
Questions for the Theology of Joy Project

I believe these five factors are ones that will need to be considered for the Theology of Joy project—or for what may become an Alliance of Joy. Of course, this field will not develop in exactly the same way as positive psychology did, but we will need to consider each of these factors carefully. First, what leadership model will be adopted? Will there be a person or persons who will be “in charge”? What processes will there be for making decisions? How can a leadership structure be created that will be efficient in keeping the field focused and moving it forward while at the same time being effective in keeping a broad coalition of members engaged?

Second, what strategies will be adopted for developing the field? For attracting other scholars? For reaching out to students? Practitioners? Parishioners? Members of the general public? The media?

Third, what sources of funding will be available? We are most fortunate to have the support of the John Templeton Foundation for these consultations. Hopefully, this support will continue in the future. What other foundations, churches, organizations, and individuals might be interested in supporting this effort with the resources necessary for carrying out agreed-upon strategies?

Fourth, what indications are there that the timing of this initiative is right? How can we find those individuals and organizations who will be most receptive to this approach and who will want to be a part of it? What directions of development will be most effective in achieving the desired ends?

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2 I am currently spearheading a project funded by the Templeton Religion Trust on “The Humanities and the Science of Well-Being: Toward a Strategic Collaboration for Understanding, Measuring, and Cultivating Human Flourishing.” We are considering these same questions as part of that project. Indeed, I think there are a variety of connections between this project and the Theology of Joy project, and I look forward to finding ways of collaborating as we move forward.
Finally, what unifying methods might be identified to help this field stay cohesive in spite of deep differences in religious orientations and epistemological commitments? A look at the contributions that have been submitted for these consultations reveals a variety of approaches to the Theology of Joy. How might a culture be created from the very beginning that welcomes this variety, that encourages healthy discussion, and that provides ways for members to remain engaged and connected in spite of deep differences? What will the relation of this movement be to the ongoing scientific work being done on human flourishing? Will there be mutual collaboration? Suspicion? Antagonism? In developing a culture for this project, of particular value will be the motto “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” It is crucial, I think, both to be as clear as possible about the essentials and to keep them to a bare minimum. A manifesto that addresses these questions now, and that states what are considered to be the essentials of this field, will be especially helpful in communicating its nature and purpose to others and in avoiding future problems as the move is made from today to the tomorrow that is desired for the Theology of Joy.³

The Day After Tomorrow

Clarification of the essentials of the Theology of Joy project will be especially helpful in thinking about the day after tomorrow. In positive psychology, insufficient attention was paid early on to some of the conceptual underpinnings of the field. As a consequence, some positive psychologists are aiming for tomorrow and some are aiming for the day after tomorrow. That is, some positive psychologists are thinking of flourishing as a complement to the goals of mainstream psychology; others are thinking of flourishing as the comprehensive integration of

³ It might be helpful to examine the manifesto of the International Positive Education Network, which is attached as an appendix to this document.
positive psychology and mainstream psychology. This distinction can be illustrated by considering three books that have been recently published in the field. In 2011, Martin Seligman published *Flourish*, in which he argues for a particular theory of well-being he calls PERMA. This theory is composed of five different factors: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. This in many ways is a complement to mainstream psychotherapy, which typically focuses on treating mental illness by trying to eliminate things we do not want; PERMA, by contrast, focuses on cultivating things we do want. This year, two books have been published that try to provide a more comprehensive framing for flourishing. Todd Kashdan and Robert Biswas-Diener (2014) have just published *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, where they provide numerous examples where negative emotions may lead to positive outcomes. In particular, they point to connections between anger and creativity, guilt and improvement, self-doubt and performance, selfishness and courage, and mindlessness and good decision making. On the other side of the coin, June Gruber and Judith Moskowitz (2014) point out that positive emotions sometimes actually lead to negative consequences. They have recently published an edited volume called *Positive Emotion: Integrating the Light Sides and Dark Sides*, in which they try to present a balanced perspective on the benefits and costs of positive emotions in different contexts.

I believe both the complementary and the comprehensive modes of positive psychology are important. Greater clarity, however, on the nature and relation of these two modes would have been of great use to the field and would have helped avoid debates about whether positive psychology should properly aim at tomorrow or at the day after tomorrow.

I raise this question because I think it is valuable for the Theology of Joy project to consider this conceptual space more fully early in its development. In the case statement we are
considering, joy is described as “the summit of human well-being.” The Theology of Joy project, furthermore, will attempt to recover what can be lost in today’s “pathology’ mode of thinking” by focusing on “the positive account of what human beings are for and what a truly healthy, flourishing life looks like.” Is the vision here that joy is a kind of end point, a destination that we should all seek to reach? That flourishing and joy are synonymous? Or is the vision, instead, that life is a journey and that that journey will be richer if our path lies along more summits? That flourishing describes the whole journey and involves the graceful traversing of both summits and valleys and that neither should be ignored?

Put differently, the question is in what sense joy is thought to be about “the positive.” Language can be confusing here because the word “positive” has two key meanings that need to be kept in mind. The word “positive” is derived from the past participle of the Latin *pono*, *ponere*, a verb with key meanings having to do with making something present. Later, the term positive took on meanings of optimism and a focus on those things we prefer, as well as a sense of progress or proliferation. Thus, there are two basic meanings of the positive that are most relevant to positive psychology, an older one and a newer one. The older meaning has to do with presence, with having a quality vs. lacking it. The newer meaning has to do with preference, with what is desirable, what is good. Keeping these two meanings in mind, we can see that there are two different conditions of the positive: the presence of the preferred or the absence of the dispreferred. For clarity’s sake, we might refer to the former as directly positive and the latter as indirectly positive. But it is important to keep in mind that both are desirable states.\(^4\) When we consider the positive in positive psychology or in the Theology of Joy, are we focusing exclusively on the directly positive, or are we committing to a composite notion of the positive

\(^4\) For a fuller treatment of this analysis, see Pawelski (in progress).
that integrates both the directly positive and the indirectly positive? Are we aiming at tomorrow or at the day after tomorrow?

These basic questions can be surprisingly complex. But they are important to consider when establishing the aims of a project intended to focus on the positive. Whatever answers are given to these questions, they can help avoid distracting critiques of valuable efforts that arise more because of conceptual confusion and indeterminacy than from substantive disagreements.
References


Pawelski, J. O. (in progress). Defining the “positive” in positive psychology.


APPENDIX

International Positive Education Network

A Manifesto for Positive Education

“The aim of positive education is human flourishing”

VISION

We want to create a flourishing society where everyone is able to fulfil their potential and achieve both success and wellbeing. Every institution in society has a moral obligation to promote human flourishing, and none more so than those responsible for educating young people – families, schools and colleges.

MISSION

People flourish when they experience a balance of positive emotions, engagement with the world, good relationships with others, a sense of meaning and moral purpose, and the accomplishment of valued goals. The aim of positive education is to equip young people with the knowledge and life skills to flourish and contribute to the flourishing of others.

THE DOUBLE HELIX

Positive education challenges the current paradigm of education, which values academic attainment above all other goals. Drawing on classical ideals, we believe that the DNA of education is a double helix with intertwined strands of equal importance:

- The fulfilment of intellectual potential through the learning of the best that has been thought and known; and,
- The development of a broad set of character strengths and virtues, which are intrinsically valuable and which contribute to a variety of positive life outcomes.

The twin strands of our ‘character plus academics’ approach complement one another and are mutually reinforcing. This ancient wisdom has been empirically verified by modern science. Academic achievement contributes to wellbeing by increasing engagement, meaning and accomplishment. Conversely, programmes and practices designed to enhance wellbeing though the development of character strengths and virtues have been shown to positively contribute to academic achievement.

By pursuing both strands, positive education aims to enable young people to become the authors of their own life stories, endowing them with the practical wisdom they need to make good choices, overcome adversity, lead happy and successful lives, and contribute positively to society.
**WE CAN ALL FLOURISH**

Character may be destiny, but our destinies are not fixed. Just as cognitive abilities can be improved through rigorous academic study, research has confirmed that our ability to be more courageous, patient, determined, compassionate or helpful can be improved with the right instruction. Character is a skill and it can be strengthened with knowledge and practice. To develop a broad range of character strengths and virtues in young people involves whole-institution approaches in which every aspect of the culture – from the content of curricula to how teachers are trained to what is measured – is designed to promote both academic achievement and character development. Not one, or the other, but both. Only then can we recapture the essential purpose of education, which is to form flourishing individuals with strong moral values.

**UNIVERSAL VALUES**

We believe that the goals of positive education are shared widely, both within societies and across the world. Research has identified a range of character strengths and virtues – such as curiosity, self-control and kindness – that are valued by all major cultures and religions because of their contribution to individual and societal flourishing. Positive education seeks to instil these universal values in people as seeds for societal flourishing. Our movement is global in scope because all humans can benefit from positive education, independent of nationality, race, creed, class or culture.

**A GLOBAL NETWORK**

In order to achieve our goals we will create a global network of teachers, parents, pupils, students, researchers, schools, colleges, universities, charities, companies and governments to promote positive education and bring about a paradigm shift in perceptions of the purpose of education. The network will have three purposes.

1. **Change the policy environment**
   We aim to persuade policymakers to change their policy frameworks so that practitioners are encouraged to educate for character and wellbeing alongside delivering rigorous and stretching academic study. We are deeply committed to the proper use of scientific inquiry and evaluation to support the case for positive education, and our public advocacy will be founded on evidence of what works.

2. **Change education practice**
   We aim to equip practitioners with the educational tools they need to start delivering positive education in the classroom. We will provide evidence-based curricula, teacher training and development programmes, assessment tools, and other items that enable practitioners to begin creating a culture of positive education in their institutions.

3. **Support collaboration**
   We aim to create a growing community of positive educators who are able to collaborate with one another to develop a deeper understanding of the theory and practice of positive
education. We will create a membership-led open-access online learning community, and will hold biennial conferences to bring positive educators from around the world together to learn from one another.