

Philosophical Critiques to Positive Psychology Scholarship

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This paper critically reflects the positive psychology movement and its major derivative problems as a social science: (1) positive essentialism or determinism in moral agenda, (2) positive objectivism, and (3) separation of positivity from negativity. Borrowing from the several perspectives in the field of philosophy of science, this paper offers useful insights to solve the current problems of positive psychology.

Key words: Positive Psychology, Positive Essentialism, Positive Objectivism,
Separation of Positivity from Negativity

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I . Introduction

In the 21st century, there is a paradigm-shift movement in the field of psychology that praises a person's inherent positive characteristics and emphasizes the human's optimal functioning. That is *positive psychology* movement. Positive psychology primarily emphasizes the positive subjective experience or states (e.g., feelings of happiness, pleasure, joy, gratification, fulfillment, subjective well-being, etc.), individual traits (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-determination, excellence, courage, originality, etc.), and institutional and organizational activities (e.g., empowerment, philanthropic activities, nurturance, civility, etc.) that involve individuals' positive experiences and traits (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2003; Seligman, 2002).

Historically, positive psychology has emerged as a response to what traditional psychologists consider a preoccupation with the negative and pathological in the study of human behavior. As a hopeful message to the gloomy world, positive psychology presents an ambitious vision of the sunny side of life, which is based on the humanistic orientation. Despite the initial agenda of positive psychology, there have been serious concerns about the over-emphasis on "positiveness" of human-being (Fineman, 2006).

- *Will the discipline of positive psychology become wane due to its positive-skewed radical assumption and unrealistic blueprint for human behavior?*
- *Otherwise, will this discipline keep broadening its boundary and stand out as an alternative paradigm for conventional psychology?*

This article will not offer a yes-or-no type of simple answer. Instead, this article will try to provide feasible suggestions by integrating several critical perspectives in the field of philosophy of science into the ongoing concerns of positive psychology. In particular, hermeneutics, epistemological anarchism, and Neo-Aristotelian's perspectives will be introduced. Each philosophical angle may present unique insight to make positive psychology more rounded and sound for its next move.

II. The Emergence of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology or what we call “positiveness” is an emerging fad in the field of social science, focusing on understanding the *utmost* of the human condition (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003). Research on positive psychology has gone on for decades, and might be traced back to the origins of psychology itself. For example, the notion of positive psychology is found in the classic book written by William James, as one of founders of psychology: “healthy mindedness” (James, 1902). Later on, several psychologists have initiated the positive discourse in the field of psychology to get out of the negativity-obsessed tradition that focuses on disorder, and illness in human mind. For example, Rogers (1961) emphasized the full functioning of human-being, and Maslow (1968) paid particular attention to human’s self-actualization and the study of healthy individuals.

More recently, the official advent of positive psychology movement can be traced back to Dr. Seligman’s Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association in 1998 (Seligman, 1999). He delivered a reflective message that psychology had largely neglected the latter two of its three pre-World War II missions: *healing mental illness, helping all people to lead more productive and fulfilling lives, and identifying and nurturing high talent*. Then his speech was catalyzed by a series of academic meetings and increasing number of scholars that informed the conceptualization and initiated early development of positive psychology movement, and established the official institution like Positive Psychological Steering Committee.

Later, Gable and Haidt (2005: 104) defined positive psychology as “[T]he study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” The Journal of Positive Psychology publicly defined it as “Positive psychology is about scientifically informed perspectives on what makes life worth living. It focuses on aspects of the human condition that lead to happiness, fulfillment, and flourishing” (The Journal of Positive Psychology, 2005)

Unlike the initial blueprints of positive psychology, however, it has been pointed out that positive psychology exhibits its chauvinistic stance on “positiveness” of human-being (Fineman, 2006), such as positive essentialism or determinism in moral agenda, positive objectivism, and the separation thesis in the relation between positivity and negativity. Positive essentialism or determinism indicates that because humans are essentially good, human’s moral faults lie in the social environments, not in the person

(Linley & Joseph, 2004). Positive objectivism indicates that there are certain objective criteria of what means by being “positive”. Finally, the separation thesis of positive psychology is frequently observed in the research on emotions, assuming that positive emotion should be distinct from negative one.

From a paradigmatic standpoint, however, positive psychology may confront ongoing criticism of the existing paradigm. As Kuhn mentioned in his early book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*²⁾, the legitimacy of anomaly (i.e., positive psychology) should be thoroughly tested by normal science (i.e., traditional psychology) for its survival. Put differently, in order for positive psychology to change and govern the existing paradigm, it must get through possible rejections from the conventional psychology, and provide a better vision toward the field into which positive psychology aims to enter and thrive.

In this regard, this paper will not simply criticize the dark sides of positive psychology but rather help positive psychology become more rounded and sound alternative that leads to a paradigm shift in the field of psychology. To this end, several possible philosophical critiques will be introduced.

III. Problems of Positive Psychology and Philosophers’ Responses

1. Positive Essentialism or Determinism in Moral Agenda vs. Hermeneutics

One of the most controversial assumptions of positive psychology is that humans are essentially good (Rogers, 1995); that is, *positive essentialism*. Positive essentialism implies that humans have a “bright nature” that guides them to act in a way that comes to be judged by self and others as good (Horney, 1945; Linley & Joseph, 2004). While traditional psychologists like Freud have been wrestling with the dark side of human nature (e.g., impulsive, greedy, etc.), positive psychology offers a portrait of human-being ready to connect with the world positively and prosocially.

Notably, this insight has led positive psychologists to make an attractive agenda that people’s moral misconducts are determined by situations rather than by people

2) On page 65 in this book, Kuhn stated, “[P]aradigm will not too easily surrendered, resistance guarantees that scientist will not be lightly distracted and that anomalies that lead to paradigm change will penetrate existing knowledge to core”

themselves. In other words, positive determinism implies that since humans are essentially good, an individual's moral faults lie in the social environments, not in the person (Linley & Joseph, 2004). As expected, positive determinism is particularly attractive to modern for-profits that have been disenchanted with the steadfast materialism of advanced economies and work environments that appear to lack the compassion or philanthropic cares toward their members.

However, positive determinism rooted in positive essentialism should be checked by two things. First, although it might be true that human behavior is heavily affected by situations, it is also true that social environments are just subjects created by humans. Thus, human behavior and situation are not separable and inevitably interdependent. Therefore, it is self-contradictory to claim that moral faults lie in the situation, not in the person.

Second, positive determinism often allows wrongdoers to justify what they have done by ascribing their faults to situations and outer conditions. Dr. Albert Bandura, a prominent social psychologist, already pointed out that the process of moral justification allows for the detrimental conduct which is the contrasting way of positive psychology to view human-being. For example, extreme terrorists like Islamic States (IS) tend to attribute terrorism to so-called God's will or great causes, while preserving their positive moral self-construal (Bandura, 1999). However, positive determinism is problematic, since it attenuates the sense of responsibility of wrongdoers, and as a result they might lose the great opportunities to correct the wrongdoings.

With respect to the potential problems of positive essentialism or determinism, hermeneutics informs us why this matters and how to solve. In effect, positive essentialism, the core assumption of positive psychology, is at odds with that of hermeneutics: *human finitude*. Hermeneutics postulates the imperfectness and boundedness of human understanding, which is the contrasting way of positive psychology to view human-being. For example, Hans-Georg Gadamer criticized the Cartesian Legacy presupposing that "there is no intrinsic defect or imperfection in human's will and understanding" (Bernstein, 1983: 116), and claimed, "[O]ur understanding, while containing no intrinsic imperfection, is limited and finite. We cannot understand everything that an omniscient being understands... Human finitude is most sharply expressed in the realization of our complete dependence on a beneficent God for our sustained existence..." (Bernstein, 1983:117).

Moreover, hermeneutics also underscores the role of prejudice in human understanding.

Gadamer clearly described, “Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth...They are simply conditions whereby we experience something...” (Bernstein, 1983: 127). Thus, it is argued that because there is no absolute knowledge due to the prejudice of human understanding, it is dangerous for positive psychology to rely on a chauvinistic assumption of positiveness in human being.

Taken together, according to a hermeneutic perspective, the danger of positive psychology does not stem from the emphasis on the positive aspects of human beings per se, but from the obsession with human positiveness and the ignorance of human finitude. In fact, Fineman (2006) pointed out that “positive scholar’s quest to explicate the good life appears locked into a deterministic, totalizing picture of the positive person, who realizes his or her self in values of individual resilience, fair play, and kindness” (p. 274). Therefore, in order to address this concern, hermeneutics might suggest that positive psychologists need to not only reconsider the research hypothesis that humans are essentially good, but also understand human moral failures through an angle of interaction between individual and situational components with great caution.

2. Positive Objectivism vs. Epistemic Anarchism

Another controversial assumption of positive psychology is that there are certain “objective” criteria of what is meant to be “positive”; namely, *positive objectivism*. Positive psychologists presume that positiveness closely links to self-promotion, self-esteem, expressive optimism, individual subjective well-being, happiness, and productivity as a positive outcome, separating from negative self-appraisal, understatement or emotional restraint, and failure as a negative outcome.

What matters with positive objectivism is that the objective criteria of positiveness are primarily rooted in American individualism and market-oriented mentality. For instance, the subjective well-being, self-esteem, and personal experiences of positive emotions are in line well with what the American individualism values and rewards, whereas the positive scholars’ emphasis on productivity is also welcomed by the market-oriented mentality.

However, such a positive objectivism might be challenged when collectivistic, non-capitalistic cultures are under consideration. For example, the quest for self-esteem is

not a major driving force in collective cultures such as Japan where negative self-appraisals are taken as a path to self-improvement (Baumeister, 1987; Heine et al., 1999; Held, 2002). Also, Confucianism, especially Confucius, recommends the virtues of emotional restraint and understatement as an expression of humility, and teaches how these can influence psychological health and preserve interpersonal harmony and loyalty (Levenson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1994; Russel & Yik, 1996). In addition, Mencius even maintains that negative moral emotions (e.g., a sense of shame) can serve as a moral compass indicating whether or not one goes morally wrong. Moreover, it is widely admitted that Confucianism views a failure as a lesson for improvement so that productivity and success are not necessarily of worth.

With regard to positive objectivism, epistemic anarchism, the radical version of relativism, explains why positive objectivism matters and how to fix it. Epistemic anarchism highlights the pluralistic approach in understanding human knowledge. For example, in his book, *Against Method*, Feyerabend stressed the importance of pluralism by stating that, “[P]roliferation of theories is beneficial for science, while uniformity impairs its critical power...Variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge” (Feyerabend, 1993: 24); and “[T]he chauvinism of science is a much greater problem than the problem of intellectual pollution” (Feyerabend, 1993: 163). In particular, Feyerabend’s notion of “anything goes” clearly indicates that there are no absolute, objective criteria of “positiveness” in the world. Of course, it should be aware that the epistemic anarchism has been wrestling with a challenge that relativism and pluralistic approach may focus too much on the “differences” at the expense of generalization that enhances external validity for the arguments under consideration (Hooker, 1991).

Taken together, in order to address the concern of positive objectivism, epistemic anarchism might encourage positive psychologists to focus more on cross-cultural studies and to interpret research findings in a more relativistic manner. Such attempts may bring pluralistic thoughts and balanced approaches to human nature and behavior.

3. Separation of Positivity from Negativity in Emotions vs. Phronetic Scholarship

Emotion is one of the most widely studied subjects in the field of psychology, since emotion is the basic phenomenon of human being. Emotions are such complex experiences that we could use all the words of dictionary to express different emotions. Thus, due to the infinite extension of emotional phenomena, it is almost impossible to

make a full description of all the emotions that we experience. Nevertheless, traditional psychology has sorted out myriads of emotions into two simplistic categories: positive vs. negative emotions. This is not so much as value judgment as it is a mere description of the main action of each group.

However, positive scholars attempt to make a value-laden categorization for emotions. They claim that positive feelings should be uncoupled with negative feelings, since positive emotions and outcomes can be understood in their own right (Fredrickson, 1998; Peterson, 2004; Seligman & Pawelski, 2003). For example, positive scholars argue that negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, guilty, and sadness, are thought to be sources of disruption or destruction, and therefore, should be sidelined in the positive emotions, whereas positive emotions, such as hope, joy, happiness, and love, should receive particular attention, since they bring positive consequences like harmony, fairness, and strength.

This separation is, however, also controversial. A main contradiction is that the separation between positivity and negativity in emotions is not applicable any more when situations are taken into account. (Campos, 2003; Ryff, 2003). For example, in some situations, love can be mixed with bitterness and jealousy; anger can make people distressed but feel energized; jealousy can feel unpleasant but soften injured pride; pride can be a positive feature of a job well done, but also subject to hubris and narcissism; hope can give strength, but also shut out one's receptiveness such as blind hope (Fineman, 2006)

Philosophically, such a situation-based notion is aligned with the foundational stance of Neo-Aristotelian that focuses on *phronesis*. Phronesis is marked by pragmatic, action-oriented, context-dependent practical knowledge and ethical know-how. As the founder of phronetic science, Aristotle asserted that in the study of human activity people cannot be satisfied with a single focus on universals; rather, the study of human activity must be understood in the relation between universal and particular (Flyvberg, 2001). In terms of the nature of phronesis, Aristotle states, "[Phronesis] is not concerned with universals only. It must also take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances." (Aristotle, 1976: 112) Further, Neo-Aristotelian like Flyvberg also highlight that phronesis requires an interaction between the general and the concrete, which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules (Flyvberg, 2001). In this regard, phronetic scholarship might propose that positive emotion is viewed as "positive" in general but

it also could be regarded as “negative” in specific situations.

Such a phronetic insight provides a unique solution to overcome the separation thesis of positive psychology. The solution could be the use of case study. In his book, *Making Social Science Matter*, with defenses of several misunderstandings of case study, Flyvberg, as a prominent phronetic scholar, stresses the importance of case study as a tool to make social disciplines more effective and sound. He says, “[A] discipline without a large number of thoroughly executed case studies is a discipline without systemic production of exemplars, and that a discipline without exemplars is an ineffective one” (Flyvberg, 2001:87).

Flyvberg is not the only example of a researcher who has underscored the context-dependent knowledge and case study. Dreyfus, Donald Campbell, and Hans Eysenck are the scholars who also agree with the importance of case knowledge. For example, although Eysenck originally did not regard the case study as anything other than a method of producing anecdotes, he later realized that “sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases - not in the hope of providing anything, but rather in the hope of learning something” (Eysenck, 1976:9).

Taken together, phronetic scholars might suggest that positive psychologists should not naively conclude positive emotions as “positive” and negative emotions as “negative”. Instead they need to go beyond the demarcation between positivity and negativity by taking context-dependent knowledge into account. And as a solution, case study could be one of the solutions. For instance, positive scholars should be attentive to the “cases” where love can be negative like jealousy. In a more synthesizing fashion, it is further suggested that positive psychologists need to conduct in-depth case studies as well as large-sampled traditional quantitative studies in its research, while admitting the lack of generalizability of cases that create context-dependent knowledge.

IV. Discussion and implications for business Research

Positive psychology is an emerging fad in the field of social science, focusing on understanding the *utmost* of the human condition (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003). Positive psychology emphasizes the individuals’ positive states and traits, as well as positive institutional and organizational activities that promote individuals’ positivity (e.g., Park & Peterson, 2003; Seligman, 2002). Such positiveness is prevalent in other

disciplines. Indeed, it has stretched over the whole disciplines of social science. For example, the fad of “positiveness” has transformed churches into rehabilitation clinics; and as a result, pastors like Joel Osteen (Lakewood Church, Houston, Texas) are forced to become a “positive” messenger who fervently delivers the hopeful messages to public with being mute on the evilness of humans. And in the field of education, young children have been growing with “you-can-do-it” type of positive-colored educations and forced to learn about how to claim the victory in the competition rather than how to admit the mistake and failure.

The field of business research is not an exception. It has been immersed in linking the beauty of individuals’ positive experiences, states, and traits to the organization’s categorical imperative; namely *performance*. A great deal of research and investigation that support the powerful integration of positive-trinity (states, traits, and institutions) might plant overconfidence about the benefit of positiveness into managers’ heads. In particular, Western capitalism that emphasizes efficiency and performance might hail the favorable evidence in the positive psychology research, such as the correlations between positive traits (e.g., self-efficacy) and an individual’s performance. Obviously, it is a particularly attractive prospect for those disenchanted with the materialism of advanced economies and workplaces that seem to lack compassion or sensitivity toward their members (Fineman, 2006). Furthermore, given the saccharine linkage between positive psychology and positive outcomes, the organizational managers has been favoring the positive equation of success (e.g., employees’ positive attitudes are equal to higher performance), so that “non-positive” (even less positive) employees might lose many opportunities in the workplace.

This study attempts to solve three problems posed by positive psychology with three philosophical critiques. If the problem of positive psychology also permeates the business research, it can be solved with three philosophical critiques as well. For instance, given the danger of positive psychology that overemphasizes inherent positive nature of human-being, business researchers should also focus on the possibility of non-positive individuals who still perform in the organization. Notably, Grant, Francesca, and Hofmann (2011) conducted the research that proposes a power of *introverted* leader (vs. an extraverted one), and showed that introverted leaders can be more effective than the extraverted ones in a specific context where followers are proactive. This is because positivity-colored extraverted leaders could be ineffective due to the lack of receptivity to proactivity. In addition, when exploring the linkage between employee

positive traits and performance, business researchers need to take culture-pluralistic assumptions into account. For example, given the recent corporate scandals that have been attributed to the all kind of positive embellishments like hubris, sense of entitlement, and self-importance of the corporate executives (Boje et al., 2004), Eastern-based traits like humility have begun to be seen as more fundamental to the character of those who lead the organization. Finally, large-sampled traditional quantitative studies in the field of business research should expand its spectrum to the small-sampled qualitative studies or cases that capture the very realities with a full description.

Nonetheless, it should be cautioned that there might exist a sort of universal positiveness across years and cultures. The universal positiveness is mostly centered on human legacy and positive virtues, such as peace, love, or happiness. This article is not positioned to deny the existence of those universal positive qualities, but just try to exhibit some scholarly challenges representing the overemphasis of human positiveness for human behavior and various behavioral outcomes in the field of positive psychology.

In closing, we cannot forecast the destiny of positive psychology. In order for positive psychology to thrive in the literature of social science, positive psychologists should listen to philosophers' advice carefully. This is the message of this article.

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긍정심리학에 관한 철학적 비평

장영균

본 연구의 목적은 최근 사회과학 영역에서 중요한 연구 분야로 주목 받고 있는 긍정심리학(Positive Psychology)을 철학(Philosophy)의 잣대로 재평가해보고자 함에 있다. 본 연구는 긍정심리학이 제공하는 독특한 학문적 공헌은 인정하되, 철학적인 관점에서 제기될 수 있는 긍정심리학의 세 가지 중요한 한계점을 소개한다. 본 연구는 긍정심리학의 한계점인 긍정근원주의(Positive Essentialism), 긍정객관주의(Positive Objectivism), 그리고 긍정-부정 분리주의(Separation of Positivity from Negativity)을 소개하고, 긍정심리학이 이러한 철학적 비평을 건설적으로 극복한다면 보다 성숙하고 균형 잡힌 학문으로 발전할 것임을 제안한다.

핵심어: 긍정심리학, 철학, 긍정근원주의, 긍정객관주의, 긍정-부정 분리주의
