The Evolution of Well-Being and the Good: Part II: A Review of "Happiness Donut: A Confucian Critique of Positive Psychology" by Louise Sundararajan

Thomas Lombardo

In the September issue of *Wisdom and the Future* I reviewed "In Search of Coherence: Sketching a Theory of Sustainable Well-Being" by Timo Hämäläinen (2014), an excellent article providing a contemporary overview and theory of well-being (Lombardo, 2015). At that time, I mentioned that I would be reviewing two other connected articles pertaining to the theme of well-being. As the editorial this month, here is my review of one of these articles. (My reviews of both articles, appropriately integrated, will be found in my forthcoming book *The Psychology of the Future*)

Louise Sundararajan, in her article "Happiness Donut: A Confucian Critique of Positive Psychology" (2005), argues that Seligman's vision of positive psychology (Seligman, 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) not only has a Western bias regarding what constitutes psychological well-being, but it is contradictory or inconsistent in its stated understanding of the relationship between facts uncovered in positive psychological research and ethical thinking.

Consider the latter point first: Seligman (2002) and other positive psychologists identify a variety of different traits and qualities of experience and behavior, such as optimism, perseverance, creativity, wisdom, love, and happiness, that are "positive features" of psychological well being, indeed of the "good life" (Snyder and Lopez, 2005; Haidt, 2006) Seligman and others furthermore argue that these features can be scientifically studied and understood. In fact, according to its advocates, one central strength of positive psychology is that it can provide an empirical (scientific) understanding of those factors that make up the good life or psychological well being.

Yet according to Sundararajan, when Seligman considers whether this research into well-being has any direct ethical implications, Seligman seems to balk on this question, stating that although he can identify the factors of psychological well-being he cannot draw ethical implications; that is, he cannot ethically or morally argue that we should pursue such traits or experiences. Science can list and describe the facts of human psychology, but science cannot prescribe; science has to be value free.

In essence, Seligman seems to buy into Hume's argument that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is," and moreover that science only provides answers to what is. (Psychologists can determine what happiness is and what produces it, but scientists cannot prescribe whether one should pursue it or not.) Indeed, quoting Seligman, Sundararajan illustrates that from Seligman's scientific and descriptive point of view, it is possible that a person can realize psychological well-being (or happiness) in some manner or form—indeed achieving the "good life"—and be immoral or unethical.

Hence, according to Sundararajan, Seligman paradoxically appears to be providing a vision of well-being and the good life that has no moral or ethical dimension (no "moral map"). On the surface, this seems rather bizarre, since when we consider what would constitute a good life, wouldn't we naturally include within our ideas ethical concepts, values, and prescriptions as well as facts?

As noted above, Sundararajan argues that Seligman is inconsistent on the relationship of positive psychology and ethics. At the most general level, in spite of what Seligman says about the connection of science and ethics, he presents a prescriptive vision of human psychology; he does indeed, in several respects, do more than simply describe the facts. Within his positive psychology there is an ethics.

First, consider that in the various lists of "positive" psychological traits and strengths there are numerous items that throughout human history have been identified as ethical character virtues (courage, temperance, wisdom). Seligman and other positive psychologists have selected out as positive states, as aspects of well-being, ethical character virtues. Built into the comprehensive description of well-being, as provided by positive psychologists, are a host of ethical qualities. And also why would they select these qualities as essential or noteworthy qualities of well-being? It would appear that such ethical qualities are deemed important and central to well-being; is this not a prescriptive or normative judgment? As Sundararajan suggests, from a different ethnic-cultural perspective, perhaps other qualities would be selected as "positive" or as human strengths. Within positive psychology there appears to be a prescriptive selection process of ethical qualities that make up the positive psychologist's list of qualities of well-being.

Second, Seligman and other positive psychologists do not just list and describe the character qualities of well-being, they present them as desirable, as qualities worth pursuing. That is, the language of positive psychology is strongly prescriptive. One should pursue optimism, courage, tenacity, and wisdom; in essence, ethically one should pursue ethical qualities. As a key illustrative point, although Seligman talks about momentary pleasures and how such short-term states contribute to happiness, in his book *Authentic Happiness*, the major focus of the book is his examination of key character strengths or virtues and how through the cultivation of these strengths one achieves "authentic" and long term happiness. The prescriptive message and focus clearly comes across that one should cultivate and exercise the character strengths.

To put these points in historical perspective, although psychology has aspired to developing itself as a science, which, among other things, entails the ideal of simply describing and understanding the facts of human behavior and the human mind without either assuming or making value (ethical) judgements or prescriptions about whatever facts are uncovered, the historical fact is that within its areas of study, such as personality and clinical psychology, ethical and value judgments have repeatedly and pervasively guided and framed the thinking of psychologists. For example, in both the self-actualization visions of Maslow and Rogers and the converse psychopathological ideas of Freud, positive and negative psychological states are identified, and arguments

presented, implicitly or explicitly, that one should value and aspire toward the positive and work against the negative. Ideals are presented as the cornerstone of theories of psychological well-being and markers relative to which one can judge the attainment or lack of well-being.

In fairness to Seligman and other positive psychologists, they do attempt to turn positive psychology into an empirical discipline grounded in fact through the systemic empirical study of the causes and component factors of positive psychological traits and states, but the traits and states selected as positive ones to be studied depend upon their value judgments; the traits and states are often ethical character virtues; and the repeated message is that we should aspire to developing these states and traits. "Ought" and "is" are intertwined.

The positive psychologists may point out that the positive traits they identify don't simply reflect their individual preferences, but rather are traits that are universally and collectively valued across the globe. Seligman (2002) presents this very argument. But regardless of whether such traits are individually or collectively valued, the message presented is the same: These traits are good things to pursue; we should pursue them. In fact, the contention that the traits are universally valued is presented as an argument why the traits are good ones and should be pursued.

Seligman states in *Authentic Happiness* that he is just presenting the facts about happiness and character strengths, and that it is up to us, the readers, to decide how to use the information; he is not going to tell us what we should do with the information gathered. But on one hand, this stance assumes an underlying value, the value of individual choice, which is a Western democratic view of what is desirable for human action and life. In the West, individual choice is valued, if not seen as essential to human life and human well-being.

But more to the point, if we were to present a set of facts indicating that the way to happiness, well-being, or success involved some set of hypothetical steps or practices, and someone, on being informed by such facts and not doubting the facts, were to decide not initiate the steps to happiness, and perhaps even do the opposite, we would find such thinking and behavior bizarre, incomprehensible, or perverse. Perhaps they want to be miserable? Perhaps they want to be a failure?

And what if, among the traits described, there were ethical character virtues (which is usually the case) and the person decided not to pursue the development of such virtues? Wouldn't we say that they were knowingly working against being ethical? And wouldn't we have the legitimate grounds to judge them (evaluate them) as unethical? So, a person can chose not to be ethical, but that still makes their behavior unethical and we can judge them as such.

The long and the short of it, illustrated through this discussion of Sundararajan's critique of Seligman, is that at least regarding psychological well-being, we cannot avoid structuring our theory in terms of, or embedding within it, normative or ethical concepts.

Psychological well-being is not simply a factual condition. It contains facts, but facts are selected because of values or ethics we believe or assume. Moreover, messages about psychological well-being, whether implicitly or explicitly, contain prescriptive suggestions or recommendations to pursue such states. It seems to me that we will have the same situation in considering social, global, environmental, or ecological well being; we cannot present a value-free or non-prescriptive message about these other dimensions of well-being. Well-being is not simply a fact.

Sundararajan argues that there is a moral philosophy embedded in Seligman's ideas, whether he wants to admit it or not (his presumed inconsistency of message). Further, she attempts to tease out Seligman's ethics from his writings, and then to demonstrate that it has a Western bias that can be contrasted with an Eastern philosophy of the good life, such as expressed through Confucianism.

Sundararajan argues that based on contemporary psychological and physiological research (a factual foundation) there appear to be two motivational systems in the human brain and mind: an approach/promotion system and an avoidance/prevention system. Positive feelings can result from successfully executing either system, whether it be through attainment of something desirable or avoiding something painful or aversive. From this starting point Sundararajan contends that Seligman values and focuses upon the promotion (approach) system in defining happiness, well-being, and the good life, whereas in the East, exemplified in Confucius, the valued emphasis is on prevention. Moreover, connected with this difference, happiness for Seligman highlights high arousal emotions, whereas happiness for Confucius highlights low arousal states, bringing to the forefront the desirability of calm and balance. Sundararajan describes the related psychological contrast between seeking out affection versus seeking out security in approaches to life. Additionally, the West (Seligman included) is more outer and novelty focused, whereas the East (Confucius) is more inner directed, aspiring toward steadiness in conscious states. Also, she states that positive psychology seems to advocate for maximizing positive emotions and minimizing negative emotions, whereas for Confucius and the East, there is an acknowledgement that a certain amount of negative emotion (appropriate to the situation) is of value. Negative emotion can serve as the foundation and impetus for the development of character virtues. Finally, Sundararajan contends that in the West (inclusive of Seligman), virtues are seen as "optional ideals" to be selectively pursued depending on individual choices (Seligman states in *Authentic Happiness* that we should pursue further development and active exercise of our strongest character strengths), whereas in the East, the practice and development of virtues are integral and essential to everyday life, and it is not a question of which virtues to select and pursue. Again we see this mindset of individual choice, a Western value, in Seligman.

We can question how accurate and clear-cut any of these proposed East-West contrasts actually are (see below), but Sundararajan's general argument illustrates how different value systems and correspondingly different virtues, presumably due to cultural differences, can generate different theories of well-being. Our concept of well being

cannot stand independent of our system of values. Moreover, in so far as different cultures have different values, different cultures will have different views on well-being.

Now if we consider the accuracy of Sundararajan's set of East-West contrasts, it seems to me that we can see in many of these proposed polarities the influence of Western directional (reality is a line) versus Eastern balance (reality is a circle) theories of reality (Nisbett, 2003). The Yin-Yang model of reality (which Confucius embraced) leads to the pursuit of balance and the acknowledgement of the positive and negative in life; directionality leads to the pursuit of novelty and growth. The East highlights stability within well-being; the cycling of the circle creates steadiness. The West highlights growth and change as integral to well-being; progressing along the line leads to transformation. Additionally, whereas the West tends to emphasize individuality and hence individual choice, as Nisbett's research reveals, the East highlights community and conformity; the virtues of well-being, in the East, are not an individualized option.

Hence, although we could argue that theories of well being reflect different sets of values, these different sets of values—of what is the ethical good—reflect different theories of reality.

Yet we can ask how "either-or" is this dichotomy in the way Eastern versus Western minds think about reality, well-being, and the good. As Sundararajan states, humans appear to possess two motivational systems: an approach/seeking system and an avoidance/prevention system. These two systems would generate as consequences change and stability, respectively. Within Western motivational psychology, these two general orientations show up to various degrees in people in the West; people in the West show propensities both toward approach and avoidance, and seek and prevent. Indeed, if the two motivational systems are universal within all humans, irrespective of culture, then it is simply a question of which system tends to predominate in either individuals or groups. Indeed, one can argue for a richness of individual differences in human psychology among both Eastern minds and Western minds, across the approach-avoidance and change-stability continuums. In all fairness to Western positive psychology, the central significance of social engagement, interdependency, and reciprocity has been clearly acknowledged and highlighted (even in Seligman, 2011) (Keyes, 2002, 2007).

But also, at a general theoretical level regarding the nature of reality, it is clearly not the case that the ideas of balance, harmony, equilibrium, interdependency, circularity, reciprocity, and stability are not to be found in Western thinking about reality; it is simply that the East has distinctively highlighted these themes (off a Yin-Yang model), whereas in the West, the complementary ideas of change, direction, growth, independence, and disequilibrium have been distinctively championed.

The theory of reality I have developed in my forthcoming book *The Psychology of the Future*, which among other criteria for its justification includes the intent to present a global or culturally balanced perspective on existence, contained the two fundamental principles of evolution and reciprocity (derivative from the line and circle). Considering

this theory, I would propose that our theory of well-being needs to reflect both of these fundamental principles of reality. (How might the values and virtues highlighted by Sundararajan in her contrast of Seligman and Confucius be integrated?) These two perspectives can be applied not only to reality as a whole but to human nature, human society, and human psychology in particular. Hence, if we are going to ground our vision of well-being in a global, culturally inclusive vision of reality and human nature, then both principles need to be acknowledged and made integral to our theory of well being and the good (Lombardo, 2013).

As one other point to address regarding the connection between well-being and the reality of human existence, Sundararajan states that humans are moral beings. It is within our very nature that we make ethical judgments and guide our actions relative to ethical principles. Hence a good life, in the sense of general well-being—however we conceive it—should necessarily include an ethical dimension. Well-being must say something about excellence in moral functioning. The idea of a good life (well-being) for humans, independent of an ethics, makes no sense.

Sundararajan states that Seligman does not provide a clear moral component in his vision of the good life—there is no explicitly stated prescription for the good—but rather presumably just a set of facts regarding how to become authentically happy (at best) if we chose to use such facts in informing our behavior. Hence, she describes Seligman as presenting a "happiness donut," a moral compass missing its center. As I pointed out above, and Sundararajan notes as well, Seligman does include a prescriptive (if not ethical) dimension in his psychology; he is just inconsistent in how he describes his vision, wanting to sound scientific and fact based on one hand, and yet clearly presenting value judgments connected with these psychological facts on the other hand. But for Sundararajan, the moral component of human nature is a fact, a critical one, and hence any viable theory of well-being must address this fact.

I think Sundararajan's point on the essential moral dimension of human psychology aligns with my theory of future consciousness that humans are inherently purposeful, with the intent to not only improve their surrounding reality but also to improve their psychological and social nature. Our values (which of course may or may not differ) provide the standards relative to which we define better or worse and provide a preferred trajectory for our self improvement (or the improvement of reality). We are all purposeful, and we are all guided by our values; we attempt to purposefully improve ourselves and our world relative to our values. What I am proposing over and above Sundararajan is that it is not just that it is within our very nature to realize the good, but it is within our very nature to improve upon realizing the good. Hence, the good life (as well-being) would need to include excellence in executing this distinctive type of thinking and action. We can refer to this as excellence in "well becoming."

In conclusion, many positive psychologists, with Seligman as one strong advocate, have rallied around the concept of "flourishing" as an integrative theme that captures the general idea of psychological well-being (Keyes and Haidt, 2003; Keyes, 2007; Seligman, 2011). When positive psychologists identify and describe various positive

psychological traits and character virtues, Seligman included, they view these traits and virtues as contributing to—indeed defining the component features of—the overall state of flourishing.

As I would propose, flourishing, as the encapsulating concept for psychological well-being, aligns with an evolutionary dynamic vision of human reality. The concept of flourishing can also be applied to groups and societies, other life forms, and ecosystems, inclusive of the human-environmental configuration. But I would also suggest, following from Eastern ideas and the principles of reciprocity and the Yin-Yang model of reality, that a viable concept of flourishing and well-being needs to also integrate key themes from this perspective on reality and the human condition (Lombardo, 2013).

As one general point, flourishing needs to be seen as holistic—with respect to both human reality and the human-environmental system. A holistic vision of human reality includes the reciprocities and interdependencies of the individual versus society and the group; of the physical and technological versus the conscious-mental dimensions of humans; of the rational and emotional; of stability and order versus change and chaos; and even positive and negative emotional-sensory states. (See my editorial on Hämäläinen's article - Lombardo, 2015.) A holistic vision of the human-environment system requires an acknowledgement that humanity and nature coexist and are codependent; that flourishing within one sphere is connected with flourishing within the other. We are in co-evolution or co-becoming. Well-being or well-becoming will then be understood as a holistic and global phenomenon.

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