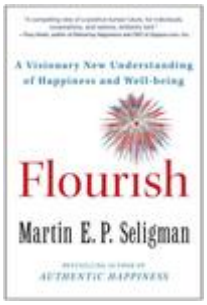
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Big Money, Big Science, Big Names, and the Flourishing of Positive Psychology

A review of



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Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being

by Martin E. P. Seligman

New York, NY: Free Press, 2011. 349 pp. ISBN 978-1-4391-9075-3. $26.00

Reviewed by
Paul T. P. Wong

Love him or hate him, Martin Seligman is arguably the most famous positive psychologist on earth. No other psychologist has ever achieved the kind of dominant presence Seligman has in positive psychology. It is difficult to evaluate the work of such a legendary figure without being affected by the halo effect. I have only two modest objectives in this review: (a) assess the scholarly merits of *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* and (b) critique the role of big money that contributes to Seligman's extraordinary accomplishments.

Flourish begins with an introduction of Seligman's new theory of well-being and a summary of a number of exercises and strategies that can be used to boost happiness and well-being. The remainder of the book is Seligman's personal account of the rapid expansion of positive psychology into major domains of human activities in education, business

practice, the military, and medicine. In sum, it is a book more about the flourishing of Seligman's brand of positive psychology than about the positive psychology of flourishing.

I am not clear about the intended audience. When Seligman said to his wife, "I don't have an audience in mind," she replied by suggesting, "Just write for yourself" (p. 267). Indeed the book feels like he is writing for himself and the posterity of his legacy. *Flourish* makes for fascinating reading only if one is interested in entering into the mind and heart of a brilliant psychologist, introducing readers to the fairy-tale world of big money, big science, and big names, and to Seligman's megaprojects.

Science or Pop Psychology?

It is difficult to do full justice to this book because it is neither a purely scholarly monograph on the psychological science of flourishing nor a full-fledged self-help book. Only the first three chapters are devoted to the theory and research on well-being; even then, the book does not have the depth or sophistication of a scientific treatise on the five elements of his PERMA (Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) model. For example, there is a great deal of research and application regarding the role of meaning in enhancing well-being (Wong, 2010; Wong, in press; Wong & Fry, 1998), which receives very little mention in his book.

On the other hand, it is also not a very useful self-help book because it does not provide clear, step-by-step instructions and practical tools for readers to use to enhance their PERMA. In fact, some of the happiness-inducing and strength-enhancing exercises described in *Flourish* have already been reported many times elsewhere. No new evidence-based exercises are introduced.

On many occasions, Seligman makes the same sales pitch one would find in other self-help books: for example, "This book will help you flourish" (p. 1) or "Glimpsing the vision of a flourishing human future is life changing. And so this book will increase your well-being—and it will help you flourish" (p. 2). Needless to say, there is no empirical proof that the mere act of reading *Flourish* will actually lead to flourishing.

Another common sales tactic is to provide testimonial evidence. Here is an example of expert testimony by Seligman: "The people who work in positive psychology are the people with the highest well-being I have ever known" (p. 2). This statement is like the pope claiming that all people working in ministry are people with the highest moral standards. There are no a priori or empirical reasons why people doing research in positive psychology are any better or worse than psychologists working in other areas.

The Emperor's New Clothes

Related to the lack of scientific rigor is the absence of a clearly articulated formal theory of flourishing. Seligman proclaims that he has developed a new theory of well-being:

> I now think that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing. This theory, which I call well-being theory, is very different from authentic happiness theory. (p. 13)

Is There a New Theory of Well-Being?

My immediate reaction is: By what scientific criterion does Seligman conclude that PERMA provides the gold standard of measuring well-being? Many researchers in the field of well-being, such as Steger (in press) and myself, think that Ryff and Singer's (1998; see also Ryff, in press) model of well-being is the gold standard. There is no conceptual or theoretical innovation that makes PERMA "very different from authentic happiness theory" (p. 13). Furthermore, there is no compelling evidence that PERMA represents a new theory of well-being "with a radical rethinking of what positivity and flourishing are" (p. 9). At most, Seligman's PERMA is an expanded version of his authentic happiness theory, adding two new elements (relationship and accomplishment) to his original three pillars of positive psychology.

"Well-being theory is about all five pillars, the underpinnings of the five elements is the strengths" (pp. 24–25). However, nowhere in the book does Seligman explain how each of the five pillars is anchored to a particular set of strengths. Nor does he specify what mechanisms underlie the connection between strengths and the five pillars of well-being.

Is There a New Theory of Intelligence?

Seligman also claims to have developed a new theory of intelligence. It turns out that this new theory is not so much about intelligence as it is about the importance of grit and character in achievement, which has to do with achievement motivation rather than intelligence. The formula, Achievement = Skill × Effort, can be traced back to Bernard Weiner's attribution theory (Weiner, 1985). To define effort in terms of self-discipline and grit is as old as the Chinese tradition of education. He has added nothing new theoretically or empirically to the construct of intelligence.

Finally, the concept of *grit* is much richer than "the never-yielding form of self-discipline" (p. 121), because grit also connotes the great human capacity for endurance and courage in the face of extreme danger and suffering. Seligman's GRIT does not take into account the large literature on the behavioral mechanisms of persistence under adverse conditions (Wong, 1995).

The Future of Positive Psychology

Right at the outset, Seligman acknowledges the big money that has contributed to the flourishing of his brand of positive psychology. In his statement to the CEO of Atlantic Philanthropies, he confesses that positive psychology "would not have happened without Atlantic" (p. 9). Available records also show that his vision of positive psychology would not have flourished without generous funding from the government and many other big foundations.

With regard to his PERMA vision of making more than half of the world's population flourish, I give him credit for his optimism and bold vision. However, I wonder, what would happen if Seligman had all the money and all the power he needed? Would he have a better chance of success than B. F. Skinner's vision of utopia in *Walden Two*?

In a final analysis, I conclude that even with all the power that big money and big science can afford, it is unlikely that PERMA would succeed for the following reasons: (a) There are competing theories and visions for flourishing (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff & Singer, 2003; Schneider, 2011; Wong, 2011b), (b) different people and different cultures may benefit from different approaches to flourishing, (c) training people to score high on PERMA does not necessarily indicate true flourishing in real life because of problems of internal and external validity, and (d) any project that focuses entirely on the individual will fail because the situation variable always remains an important source of variance.

Although Seligman emphasizes the important roles of ethics and values, he also believes, "What you care about—your values—is more basic than ethics" (p. 229). Furthermore, he prescribes that caring for the five elements of PERMA is most important in life. Here lies the conundrum: If people care more about their own happiness and success than other people's well-being and ethical principles, then we would have an uncaring and chaotic society. Seligman recognizes that many of the problems we have experienced during the financial downturn are due to greed, corruption, and disregard for public interest or ethical rules. But, if doing what one cares about is more important than ethics, then there would be more scandals and crimes on Wall Street.

It is interesting that Seligman defines *flourishing* as PERMA plus at least three of five other qualities: positive self-esteem, optimism, resilience, vitality, and self-determination.

This seems so arbitrary because optimism and resilience are indispensable to well-being (Wong, 2011a). Furthermore, all these elements are not autonomous entities—they are all related intricately.

Quoting from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* on the final metamorphosis of the spirit into the Child Reborn, Seligman visualizes every human being as a reborn child, willingly saying "Yes" to Seligman's five elements of well-being. It seems ironic that Seligman should conclude his book by quoting Nietzsche's existential thought to support his own positive vision. In fact, Nietzsche's sacred "yes" to life actually means to have a Dionysian relationship to life. The Child Reborn represents a tragic hero's religious affirmation of life as it is—in its totality, in all its darkness and questions, including the harsh human sufferings and the horrors of eternal recurrence of the same. To affirm life is to love fate "amor fati"—the inseparability of pain and joy, and the unavoidable unity of the yin and yang dimensions of life.

Conclusion

Flourish is a disappointment as a scholarly work on the subject matter because it is neither comprehensive nor original. The book is full of anecdotal and autobiographical materials and lacks the vigor and sophistication of serious academic publications. There is little discussion about alternative views and findings that challenge the author's position.

Many people have criticized Seligman's positivity bias (Held, 2002; Sheldon, Kashdan, & Steger, 2011; Wong, 2011a). This book still suffers from the same positivity bias. For example, Seligman is fully aware that many nations throughout human history suffer from war, poverty, and so forth. He is also aware that for such nations, survival and self-defense are of uttermost importance.

Nevertheless, he still maintains that human flourishing is occurring at a time of peace and prosperity and suggests that "North America, the European Union, Japan, and Australia—are at a Florentine moment: rich, at peace, enough good, health, and harmony" (p. 237). This poses the question: Are people living in poor and war-torn nations denied the possibility for flourishing, then? A balanced model of positive psychology (Wong, 2011a) maintains that flourishing is possible regardless of one's circumstances if we make meaningful living the cornerstone of positive psychology.

The two chapters I like most are "Army Strong: Comprehensive Soldier Fitness" and "Turning Trauma into Growth." These two chapters show the benefits of including experts outside Seligman's immediate circle. Scholars such as Ken Pargament and Richard Tedeschi have greatly enriched and deepened positive psychology. I particularly like the statement about the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness program; namely, that it "supports and encourages soldiers to search for truth, self-knowledge, right action, and purpose in life: living by a code

that is rooted in belonging to and serving something the soldier believes is larger than the self" (p. 150).

I would not recommend this book as a textbook because it gives students the wrong impression about the enterprise of scientific research. It also does not give students a broad and balanced view of the subject of flourishing. I would also not recommend the book as a self-help book because so much of the book is about Seligman's megaprojects and personal experiences rather than step-by-step guides to increase flourishing for individuals.

To end my review on a positive note, I'll say that I think that Seligman has done a good job in popularizing positive psychology. I think he is a great entrepreneur and communicator in psychology and has done much to educate the public about the relevance of psychology to their lives. Like his previous publications (such as Seligman, 2002), *Flourish* would appeal to many segments of society. However, I believe that its biggest value is the historical and autobiographical account of Seligman's positive psychology movement.

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