

The Dialectics of Well-being

Tim Lomas, Ph.D.

Introduction

It is a real honour to be standing up here. It is been such a great conference, with such a beautiful spirit. I have heard so many fantastic talks, met many great people, and I feel very honoured that Paul asked me to do a keynote talk, particularly because he has been so influential for me and my colleagues. For instance, our conceptualisation of the second wave of positive psychology is directly influenced by his prior and similar idea of PP 2.0. And beyond that, his scholarship on Eastern philosophies and traditions has been equally important and inspiring. Moreover, Paul is not merely influential, but encouraging and supportive, acting as a mentor figure to me and others, and I would not be standing here without his kind attention.

And what I would like to talk about is the dialectics of well-being. More broadly, this presentation is about what we've been calling the second wave of positive psychology (PP 2.0). I am going to give you my take on where I see the field as having come from, where it is, and where it might be going. To begin with though, I would briefly like to let you know a bit more about who I am, partly because I feel scholarship is a function of the nature of the person undertaking it, their background, their history, their story, and so on. So, I would like to mention a few things about myself which have fed into the way in which I have approached positive psychology.

Personal Background

The first thing to mention is that before I went to university, when I was 19, I went to China to teach English. I spent six months there and travelled around a lot, including visiting various Taoist and Buddhist monasteries. The trip was mind expanding in many ways, emotionally, physically, intellectually. I was encountering all these fascinating ideas relating to the person, to the mind, to well-being. And I had the sense that there were many ideas and paradigms relating to the mind that were not necessarily found in my own culture. This impression was reinforced when I went to university back in Britain. It was a comprehensive course, but there was a sense that much was missing based on what I had encountered in China, this sense that psychology as I was in encountering it was relatively western-centric. Relatedly, I had the vivid impression that there was much to be gained from engaging with other cultures and their approach to the mind. So that is one of the things that has fed into my scholarship here.

Another significant experience that has influenced my scholarship was the six years I spent after graduation working as a psychiatric nursing assistant (while also trying to make it as a musician). That was a strange and significant time. It was full of very intense moments which on the face of it were negative, such as when I had to keep watch over people who are at risk of self-harm. I would often feel real sadness at their plight or anxiety over how they were doing. However, these experiences were also very meaningful and highly charged. I felt I was doing something of real value. Moreover, even amidst the negativity there was often a real sense of compassion and connection with the people I was caring for. And in some sense, it was that very sadness and anxiety that compelled me to reach out to them in compassion. Similarly, I might feel anger at their situation and the failures of the psychiatric system, but this very anger motivated me to speak out and advocate for the patients. As a result, it seemed difficult to label

these negative emotions as entirely negative, since they also had positive dimensions or outcomes.

So then, fast forward a few years, after I obtained my Ph.D., I got a job as a lecturer in positive psychology. Although my Ph.D. was related to positive psychology, I was not familiar with much of its literature, and so I found myself trying to get to grips with the new field. And in that sense, my conception of the second wave is really based upon my engagement with and reconciliation with the field as I found it.

Second Wave Positive Psychology

Paul, of course, has his influential and related notion of PP 2.0, and we have drawn strongly on that in forming our notion of the second wave. But I do particularly like the wave metaphor because it is very fluid and dynamic. I think it is important to say that because the notion of the second wave can sometimes be misinterpreted, as if we are rejecting or negating the scholarship that has happened before, but that is definitely not the case or our intention. But that being said, I do feel that the notion of the second wave captures something important and valuable.

Let us back up a moment. Initially there was the first wave of the field, namely positive psychology as initially proposed and instantiated. Here the narrative was that psychology as usual had a somewhat negative bias, being primarily focused on disorder and dysfunction. That is obviously not the whole story—there were pockets of scholarship, particularly in humanistic psychology, which focused on happiness and flourishing. But on the whole, it does seem to be a fair characterization of psychology. In that sense, the initiation of positive psychology was a very necessary and welcome development.

Even so, it created some strange dynamics, since it inevitably creates a kind of dichotomous polarization. For positive psychology is founded on the argument that certain phenomena are positive. This then necessarily makes other phenomena negative. In some senses, that is fine, because the notions of positive and negative can be used in different ways. So, if we are referring to valance, then some phenomena are self-evidently positive, in that they feel pleasant and good, and other phenomena are negatively valanced in that they feel unpleasant.

However, an issue is that positive and negative can take on other meanings. In particular, normative judgements can often be implied, whereby to label something positive is to suggest it is desirable and to be sought, and even that they have a moral worth. Conversely, phenomena deemed negative are often perceived as intrinsically undesirable and to be avoided, and even more strongly, seen as pathological or wrong in some way.

This discourse can be problematic, and almost carries an implicit blame upon people if they are feeling negative. This is reflected in those statements you see exhorting people to cut negative people out of your life. Now, on the one hand I get it, as there is an ethic of self-preservation there. But then you think, the people who are negative are likely suffering and in pain, and we cannot just cut them loose. Moreover, portraying negativity as wrong, that we should not be feeling it, can almost create this additional burden. In Buddhism, there is an idea called the two arrows. Something that hurts us, an adverse event, and the resulting suffering, is the first arrow, and we feel pain as a result. But sometimes we feel bad about feeling bad—and that pain is the second arrow and that can be just as wounding and perhaps even more so than the first.

I also personally found that dichotomizing discourse difficult, for example, thinking of the negative emotions I felt while working in the hospital. I was not prepared to simply write these off as inappropriate or undesirable or wrong, because I believed they had their place and

their value. I also have had conversations with colleagues who had spoken with students going through a tough time who had felt that positive psychology was not for them at that point, as if one ought to feel bright and cheery in order to be involved with the field.

So, this discourse that positive is good and negative is bad is problematic and arguably over-simplifies the dialectics of well-being. Which is what I would like to talk to you about today. Because out of these reflections on the literature, and inspired by Paul's work, we have been identifying and conceptualising this notion of the second wave. Before I start though, let me emphasise that this paradigm is not a refutation or rejection of what might be called the first wave. It is simply an evolution or development upon it, building on the foundations that are in place, and—supported by these very foundations—taking it in some new directions.

There are various ways of characterizing the second wave. For me, the key term is the notion of dialectics. Dialectics is a complex term used in many ways, but the key meaning here is the dynamic interaction between opposites. This plays out in numerous ways in the literature we have characterized as substantiating the second wave. Specifically, we have identified four dialectical principles in this literature, the principle of appraisal, covalence, complementarity, and evolution. I am now going to briefly touch upon each of these principles in turn, drawing on relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

The Principle of Appraisal

The principle of appraisal rests on the idea that an *a priori* designation of something as being either positive or negative is tricky. Not to sound too paradoxical, but it is the case that positive can be negative and negative can be positive. That is, things we usually perceive as positive can actually be detrimental to well-being, and conversely things usually perceived as negative may sometimes be conducive to it. Here, the key is to recognise that positive and negative can be used in different ways, and to distinguish between valence and outcome. Something can have a positive valence and yet a negative outcome, and vice versa. Ultimately, making these appraisals is always context-dependent. I shall run through a few dichotomies to show how these dynamics can play out.

Take first the contrast between optimism and pessimism. We usually talk about optimism as being positive and pessimism as being negative. Certainly, in terms of valence, that is the case: the former feels good, the latter unpleasant. But certain forms of overweening optimism may hinder our well-being, for instance through an underappreciation of risk and consequent risk-taking. Conversely, at times, types of adapted pessimism can promote well-being, for instance if it means we proactively identify and prepare for future challenges and obstacles.

Here I should point out that the founders of positive psychology were well aware of this point. In his 1990 publication, Seligman talked about needing to be aware of the tyranny of optimism, and the need to use pessimism's keen sense of reality when we need it. This illustrates the point that these dialectical ideas were implicitly present in the field from the very start. And, as I alluded to above, it was only once the field had established a secure first-wave foundation—focusing on the positive—that these more nuanced dialectical ideas could be made more explicit.

The second dichotomy I would like to mention concerns the relationship between freedom and restriction. We usually think of the former as unequivocally positive and the latter as irredeemably negative. However, a substantial literature across psychology and philosophy challenges that assumption. Existential philosophers have suggested that untrammelled freedom can be troubling in various ways. As Sartre famously put it, humankind is condemned to be free. Similarly, Kierkegaard spoke of the dizziness of choice, in that if we have unlimited choice, then

the deliberations can be overwhelming, and moreover we have to take our pick and then take responsibility for the consequences.

An interesting empirical demonstration of this was seen in a study by Schwartz, involving a comparison between two different selections of jam in a supermarket. These selections rotated by the hour, so that for one hour there was a selection of 26 different options, and the next hour a selection of just six. It appeared that people who bought their jam from smaller selection were happier with their choice. There are various reasons why that might be the case, including the reduced potential for regret over the choices you did not pick when there are less options to weigh up. So, contrary to the ideology of consumer capitalism, it is not necessarily the case that more choice is always better.

Conversely, consider the value of imposing limitations upon ourselves. Consider the example of monastery living. In that context, there are so many rules about what action should be undertaken at a given time—what and when we should eat and so on. But these rules are not designed to hinder the monks' spiritual development, but to *help* it—to free them from the hassle of making continual trivial choices about food, clothing, and so on, and instead to allow them to ascend into more spiritual flights of contemplation. Or in a more mundane way, think of the simple value of an exercise routine. This involves imposing a restriction upon our activity in such a way that we override the vicissitudes of our fluctuating whims, and instead commit to a pattern of behaviour that will serve us well, even if we do not feel like it at the time. We are compelled to act in our better interests even against our present inclinations.

Another interesting dichotomy is between anger on the one hand and acceptance or forgiveness on the other. The latter are generally considered good and positive, and usually they are. However, there is also research that gently challenges that assumption, showing that they can sometimes be problematic if it means one tolerates a situation that one might otherwise resist. For example, work by McNulty and Fincham suggests that in the context of unhealthy relationships, being overly forgiving may lead one to acquiesce to a situation which one might do better to escape or avoid, whereas if one were less forgiving or accepting one might be more driven or empowered to leave.

Flipping that around, there can sometimes be value in anger. We need to be careful here, because anger is very problematic—it can corrode into hate and aggression, and it does feel like we are in a very angry age. But it is the case that anger can sometimes have a moral basis, reflecting the intuition that an ethic has been breached and needs redressing. In that sense, a quality of righteous anger has sometimes been identified as motivating progressive social movements, from civil rights to feminism. People are angry at some iniquity, something not right in society, and are compelled and driven to redress it. Thus, in that context, while anger might certainly be negative in valence, if channelled skilfully it might yet have some positive outcomes.

Finally, even happiness and sadness can be critiqued in terms of their positive and negative categorisation. Happiness might be problematic in various ways. For instance, the pursuit of happiness might actually serve to make this goal further away: the very act of identifying an alternative state to the one you are in, and actively seeking it, can create the very dissatisfaction one hopes to alleviate. When we fixate on the space between how things are and how we want things to be, therein lies unhappiness. And even if we think we feel happy, there can be issues too. Consider the notion of false consciousness, and the possibility that we might be beguiled and misled by modest hedonic satisfactions into thinking we have attained all the happiness there is to have and as a result do not cultivate deeper and more secure forms.

Conversely, there may be virtue or value in sadness. Of course, no one wants to feel sad or enjoys it, but it can have its meaning and its purpose in living a full and fulfilling life. It can serve a protective function, for example: just as physical pain can mean we take care to protect a limb that is hurt, there are arguments that sadness can serve a similar function as a form of psychological pain, such as encouraging us to withdraw from a noxious situation. Sadness is also associated with sensitivity, caring, and compassion—being attuned and receptive to the nature of the world and its suffering, and also being motivated to redress it, to reach out and make things better. It can also reflect an aesthetic sensibility too, an important capacity to be moved by life. Consider the fact that people choose to listen to sad music or attend moving events. There is something about these types of emotions that is integral to a full and well lived life.

Principle of Covalence

The second principle is that of covalence. It is not just that it is hard to categorise phenomena as positive or negative. In addition, some phenomena are a complicated blend of positive *and* negative, of light and dark. There is some interesting research, for instance, into ambivalent emotions. These can take different forms. Sequential ambivalent emotions are when moments of positive and negative valence oscillate rapidly. Conversely, simultaneous ambivalent emotions are when positive and negative valence is activated at the same time. In that latter respect, there is an interesting point to make here about the affect system, in that this may not simply be a linear spectrum, but rather a bivariate two-dimensional space.

I would just like to give a few examples to help bring this notion of ambivalent emotions alive. In doing so, I would like to draw on some recent work I have done around untranslatable words (i.e., words for which we lack an equivalent in our own language). For the past three years, I have been creating a lexicography of untranslatable words relating to well-being and analysing these thematically to create an overarching map of well-being. I have identified six broad categories, grouped into three meta-categories. First, a meta-category of relationships, comprising love and prosociality. Second, a meta-category of personal development, involving character and spirituality. And, most relevantly, a meta-category of feelings, featuring positive and ambivalent emotions.

Now, each of these categories are granular, and you can zoom in on them in finer grained detail. The category of ambivalent feelings comprises five main themes, each of which is comprised of various untranslatable words which are not equivalent to one another and so bring out different nuances of the theme in question. These themes are: hope and anticipation, longing, pathos, appreciation of imperfection, and sensitivity to mystery. I would like to go through these quickly to give you a sense of that theme, picking an illustrative word to depict it.

For the theme of hope and anticipation, one of the words is *magari*, an Italian term which loosely means possibly or maybe, but can also have a wistful sense of “if only” or “in my dreams.” Because hope is a strange thing. It is of course positive and uplifting, but it is also ambivalent, since there is inevitably an element of doubt or insecurity about the outcome (without which we would just have certainty). Now, for each of these words, I have tried to find a haiku to help illustrate it, as I think it can help to mix modalities and bring in artistic ideas and reflections in order to communicate our academic ideas. This first haiku does not conform to the standard template of 5 syllables, 7 syllables, and 5 syllables, but apparently this format is quite flexible anyway. I should also mention that all my haikus here are by the Japanese poet Basho, widely considered the foremost proponent of the art. He has written this haiku which I think nicely reflects the theme of hope:

*Moonlit plumtree
Wait
Spring will come.*

The second theme is longing, which epitomises ambivalence, having been defined by one theorist as a blend of the primary emotions of happiness and sadness. There is happiness in as much as we have things in our life that we care for and love, and yet there is sadness in that we are currently separated from these. One of the terms in this theme is the German word *sehnsucht*, which I have heard defined as “life longing,” but also as almost an addiction to or pining for belonging. It is not simply that we long for things, but that we have a predilection or a tendency towards longing. There is a bittersweet sense that the world is not as it could be, with a kind of utopian cast of mind where we are continually dreaming of and yearning for better futures. Here we have another Basho haiku:

*How I long to see
Among dawn flowers
The face of God*

The third theme is pathos, essentially, being moved by life. Being moved is a strange phenomenon; there is sadness there, yet we often have the sense that we and life would be incomplete were we not moved by it. One of the words in this theme is the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, which is important within the context of Zen Buddhism. It describes a sensitivity to the transiency and impermanence of the world, which are key themes within Buddhism, in which practitioners are encouraged to understand and even appreciate such impermanence. This does not mean it is welcomed as such; it is not that we want the world to be that way. It is more that we can realise that somehow this very impermanence might heighten the beauty and meaning of the world. It is for this reason that *mono no aware* is often symbolised in Zen Buddhism by cherry blossoms, for it is the fact that these evanescent blossoms appear so briefly that heightens their beauty, and our appreciation of them. Were they permanent features of the landscape, we would argue habituate to them and cease to fully appreciate them. This haiku by Basho is regarded as typifying this mood of *mono no aware*:

*Summer grasses
The only remains
Of warriors' dreams*

That theme, and that concept, is then counterbalanced by the fourth theme, which I have labelled appreciation of imperfection, and which I am illustrating here with the term *wabi sabi*. *Mono no aware* recognises the passing of time and the transiency of life. With *wabi sabi* though, it is recognised that in that transiency, phenomena still persist over time, retaining their being, and in this persistence, there can be great dignity, value, and beauty. As such, *wabi sabi* is often illustrated by images such as a weathered tree in winter. Even as things change, weather, and age, a real depth, meaning, and beauty can be retained in that change. We might then apply this sensibility and sensitivity to our own life and our own aging, which can be bittersweet and ambivalent. The haiku here I have to illustrate it runs:

*Solitary now
Standing amidst the blossoms
Is a cypress tree*

The final theme I have called “sensitivity to mystery.” One of the terms here is the Japanese word *yugen*, which is often held up within Zen Buddhism alongside *mono no aware* and *wabi sabi* as one of the main perceptual moods practitioners are encouraged to cultivate. *Yugen* refers to a sense of unknowability and obscurity, and a sensitivity to the mystery of existence. Moreover, we are moved by this mystery, which is ungraspable and ineffable, but which can nevertheless be somehow sensed in fragments and glimmers. This term is grasping after feelings that are very significant and strange. Often when we use the term ambivalent in common parlance, it can imply a feeling that is rather diluted and grey and devoid of charge, as if we do not care one way or another. But many of these ambivalent feelings can be very intense; it is just that their intensity lies in being a complicated blend of strongly positive and strongly negative valence. Here, *yugen* is illustrated rather subtly by the following haiku:

*On a withered branch
A crow is perched
In the autumn evening*

Principle of Complementarity

As we consider the principle of covalence, this leads us directly into the third principle of complementarity. To illustrate this, I would like to consider what is perhaps the most cherished and sought-after of all human emotions and experiences, namely love. For love is inherently covalent, with a real intermingling of feelings both light and dark, highs and lows. It is this very mix that creates the intensity of love. Moreover, in a profound way, the light and dark elements are inseparable and co-creating, which is what makes love so illustrative of this third principle. I shall come back to this point in a second, but first I would like to read some quotes which illustrate this powerful dialectical nature of love.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, wrote, “To love at all is to be vulnerable, love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.” Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman wrote, “To love means opening to that most sublime of all human conditions, one in which fear blends with joy into an alloy which no longer allows its ingredients to separate.” And, of course, there is Khalil Gibran, whose verse on love includes the lines, “When Love beckons to you follow him, even though his ways are hard and steep, and when his wings enfold you yield to him, even though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.”

So, there is the notion that love is an intensely covalent experience. It is not just that if you are in love you might feel negative emotions. They are an intimate part of the experience. It is the very fact that you love someone so intensely that makes you worry about them, feel sad when they are not around, feel jealousy if you think their attention is elsewhere, feel longing to be with them when you are apart. These negative feelings are not an aberration of love but its very condition, two sides of the same coin, the price tag one must pay to be in love, to be with one’s beloved. They are complementary, co-dependent, and co-creating.

Furthermore, this illustrates a more general principle which to an extent applies to all the dichotomies discussed above. The two poles of a given continuum, whether optimism and

pessimism, or happiness and sadness, are also co-dependent and co-creating to an extent. This applies to other things too, not simply emotions, such as high and low, left and right, and so on. The existence of one creates the existence of the other, and one could not eliminate one without eliminating the other. This was one of the central insights of Taoism, as illustrated by its famous *yin yang* symbol, which portrays this co-dependence of opposites. As is written in the *Tao Te Ching*, “When the people also beauty as beauty, there arises the recognition of ugliness; When all know good as good, there rises the recognition of evil.” Moreover, Taoism does not simply acknowledge a static pair of opposites. It is more of a dynamic process, which is why in the *yin yang* symbol there is an element of dark in the light, and vice versa, illustrating the idea that an experience or manifestation of one extreme can often produce or give way to the experience or manifestation of its opposite.

Principle of Evolution

Now I would like to turn to the fourth principle, which applies to the field of positive psychology itself, namely the principle of evolution. I mentioned earlier that the term dialectic has various meanings. One of these is that associated with the philosopher Hegel, who developed an influential dialectical notion of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. A thesis is any kind of proposition or paradigm. This then gets critiqued, producing an antithesis, an antithetical position. In turn, the antithesis can be critiqued. However, this does not mean one simply reverts to the thesis. Instead a higher-order position emerges, a synthesis which preserves the best of both thesis and antithesis.

I think you can see something of this process involved in the development of first and second wave positive psychology. We could think of psychology as usual, before the emergence of positive psychology, as the thesis. This was then critiqued for being overly focused on disorder and dysfunction. Thus, positive psychology emerged as the antithesis, bringing a focus on the positive. In turn, though, this antithesis was critiqued in the ways that I have illustrated above—for example pointing out the dialectical nature of well-being, and the difficulties in characterizing phenomena as positive and negative. However, this critique of the antithesis does not mean one must simply revert to the thesis. Instead, I would say second wave positive psychology has emerged as a synthesis, preserving the insights of positive psychology while also moving beyond some of its critiques. But then this process will keep on going. The second wave will be critiqued, leading perhaps to a third wave, a fourth, and so on. It will be interesting to see how it unfolds!