

**What's Missing from Positive Psychology?**  
**Thoughts Including a Lesson from Historical Paintings**

Roger G Tweed<sup>1,2</sup>, Carmel Proctor<sup>3</sup>, Megan Palmer<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Douglas College, <sup>2</sup> Kwantlen Polytechnic University, <sup>3</sup> Positive Psychology Research Centre

**Abstract**

*Memento mori*, a historical style of art that includes reminders of death, hints at a failure in positive psychology. In particular, this art can remind us that positive psychology's research and rhetoric have promoted a narrow and needlessly fragile vision of the good life. In contrast, a broader vision of a good life that can withstand difficulty is suggested by this art. Empirical research and Aristotelian philosophy supports this broader vision of the good life. This paper is part of a festschrift for Paul Wong, who has devoted much of his work to a vision of having a good life in a difficult world (Wong, 2007a, 2011). His work points to a broader vision of the good life that includes eudaimonia, wisdom, and virtue but also goes much further by adding a spiritual-existential perspective to the human search for happiness and well-being, a vision for an existential positive psychology. His vision is more complete than much of positive psychology as it is frequently practiced. His vision suggests that well-being and flourishing come from overcoming suffering. Indeed, he posits that sustainable well-being and flourishing are achieved through a harmonious balance of dialectical interactions between positives and negatives (Wong et al., 2021). *Memento mori* art suggests that some artists in the past also recognized the value of some of these perspectives.

## What's Missing from Positive Psychology?

### Thoughts Including a Lesson from Historical Paintings

A surprising number of historical paintings include images of skulls. At times, the inclusion makes obvious sense, such as when the dominant subject matter involves death or medicine or religious themes or when the artist seeks shock value. In those cases, the inclusion of a skull can fit with the obvious theme of the painting. In many cases, however, the inclusion of a skull might seem incongruous with the theme of the painting. In one notable example, Frans Hals completed a painting in the 1600's that is now called *Young Man Holding a Skull* (Hals, 1628). The youthful subject of the painting holds a skull even though he appears to be healthy, perhaps expensively dressed, and by no means emotionally upset or distraught. No other elements in the image portray or represent death. His cheeks have color. He looks lively. He gazes away from the skull. He appears preoccupied with another matter, gesturing as if engaged in a conversation. He appears not in the least disturbed or even distracted by the presence of the skull.

Many other paintings in this genre depict still-life scenes. At times, the images represent work desks or tables stacked with books, and writing tools, but somewhere in the image is a skull, sometimes prominently and other times less prominently. Others, called *vanitas* (vanity) paintings, include not only the skull(s) but also flowers or other symbols of life, such as in Adriaen van Utrecht's (1642) image entitled *Still Life with Bouquet and Skull*.

To the unfamiliar observer, these skulls could create the impression that home decorators in the Middle Ages and early modern era merely idealized the beauty of skulls. As modern decorators can purchase throw pillows or candle holders to add an attractive aesthetic, it might seem that these historical decorators found skulls beautiful; perhaps, they could pick up a skull or

two at the local home decorating shop. In reality, the artists probably intended to convey a number of messages, including providing reminders of the brevity of life.

For positive psychology, the images might hint at an error in early positive psychology. To get at that error, there is value in mentioning the occasion of this manuscript and then briefly reviewing some of the historical background of positive psychology.

The current manuscript was written to be included as part of a Festschrift for Paul Wong. Paul has provided a vision for an existential positive psychology, for living a good life in a difficult world (Wong, 2007a, 2011; Wong & Bowers, 2018). He is a pioneer of existential positive psychology (Wong, in press-a). Paul has written extensively from an EPP perspective that encourages people to confront and transform suffering through a spiritual-existential psychology that moves beyond cultural limitations (Wong, in press-b) . His work helped initiate some of the realizations we share in this paper.

A story about a tree surgeon might help clarify Paul's role. I (Roger) once spoke to a tree surgeon who tried to explain his love for trees. He recounted driving down a highway and seeing a beautiful tree. He said the tree was not only beautiful, but it was dynamic. As he passed, he continually saw changing images because the tree looked different from every angle. He found much wonder and pleasure in watching trees, and he thought all people should experience the same wonder. Our experience of people, and Paul in particular, can be like that tree surgeon's experience of the tree. Paul, in particular, has many various aspects to his ideas. He has shared a grand vision of existential positive psychology (Wong, 2021), but that vision includes many facets including love, hope, meaning, virtue, wisdom, and much more. We could focus on many different aspects of Paul's ideas, such as his dual process model (Wong, 2012), his vision for meaning (Wong & Wong, 2012), mature happiness (Wong & Bowers, 2018), his vision for

acceptance of death (Wong et al., 1994), or his vision for spiritual well-being (Wong, 2023), or his vision for a culturally-informed psychology (Wong & Cowden, 2022), or his moving and heartfelt discussion of tragic optimism, which we recommend everyone read (Wong, 2007b). All of these deserve attention, but we will focus on only one of the ways he has helped our thinking, the correctives he offered to positive psychology's vision of the good life. Positive psychology largely avoids the existential themes of suffering, death, and many other themes that real people cannot avoid.

### **Early Positive Psychology: A Breath of Fresh Air, but Flawed**

When Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association (APA) at the end of the 1990's, he decided that his primary aim would be to develop a field called *positive psychology* (Seligman, 1999). Such a move was surprising. In his early research, Seligman studied depression, and he conducted research on animals, some of which in retrospect might sound quite cruel and shocking (Seligman, 1975; Seligman & Beagley, 1975), and so championing happiness was a significant shift.

He claimed that an incident with his daughter made him realize he was grumpy and needed to change (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Also, a chance encounter with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on a holiday led to some valuable conversations that affected both of their lives (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). These and other events propelled him to the founding of positive psychology.

Admittedly, many others had engaged in forms of positive psychology before that date, including Paul Wong and his collaborators (Reker et al., 1987; Wong, 1989). Nonetheless,

Seligman still deserves some credit because he successfully rallied many to join this cause and marketed the field to scholars and the general public.

### **Rhetoric Narrowed to Focus on Happiness**

That era under Seligman was an exciting time. The problems of that early focus were not obvious to us at that time. One of the authors of this current piece is old enough to remember the pleasure of receiving issues of the *APA Monitor* newspaper during Seligman's presidency and looking for his column to hear the latest word on advances in positive psychology (Seligman, 1998). As with any new field getting its legs (and there were debates about whether the field had durable legs; Lazarus, 2003), there were shortcomings (Leong & Wong, 2003).

For the current discussion, one major problem from that era relates to the rhetoric of positive psychology. Seligman's (2002) popular book exemplifies the problem. The book was entitled *Authentic Happiness* (Seligman, 2002). A close reading could clarify that Seligman valued many outcomes beyond happiness, but the dominant rhetoric created a different impression. That widely selling introduction did not merely have one chapter devoted to happiness among chapters on other valued life outcomes.

On the contrary, *Authentic Happiness* was devoted to the topic of *happiness*. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) had originally defined positive psychology as the study of positive states [e.g., happiness], positive traits [e.g., courage and generosity], and institutions that enable those [e.g., schools that enable happiness and virtue], but in practice, the rhetoric of Seligman and many others created the impression that positive psychology valued only happiness. Perhaps the focus on happiness is understandable, given the public appetite for the topic. Perhaps the interests of journalists and the public drove the early positive psychologists to this emphasis out

of a desire to better market their field. Nonetheless, the rhetoric was and continues to be a problem because other valued life outcomes were relatively neglected. As will be discussed, the rhetoric may have promoted an unstable form of well-being, less able to cope with the rigors of life.

### **Measurement Narrowed to Focus on Hedonia**

The rhetoric was not the only source of imbalance. In psychology, the variables that you choose to and are able to measure often determine what you study and discuss. Within research on positive psychology, measurement strategies exacerbated the problem discussed above by focusing almost exclusively on hedonia (pleasure). Paul Wong has written in more detail about the problems of measurement in positive psychology, which extend beyond hedonia (Wong & Roy, 2017). Still, for now, we will focus on issues regarding hedonia.

Hedonia refers to outcomes related to pleasure and the absence of pain. Positive psychologists have most typically measured hedonic outcomes (e.g., happiness) or measures that give much more weight to hedonia than eudaimonia or other well-being indicators.

Even when they go beyond hedonia, positive psychology researchers frequently implement measures of subjective well-being (SWB), a construct defined as high positive affect, low negative affect, and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984). Problematically, however, SWB is approximately 83% composed of hedonia, thus undervaluing other aspects of well-being. In particular, frequent positive and infrequent negative emotions, the first two elements within SWB, represent pure indicators of hedonia, meaning that at least two-thirds of SWB is hedonic. The third element within SWB is life satisfaction, which overlaps with hedonia and eudaimonia (Proctor et al., 2015), suggesting that approximately an additional sixth of SWB is hedonic. A

little rough math would suggest that SWB is approximately 5/6 or 83% composed of hedonia. Considering the subscores individually would fail to solve the problem because none of the three components provide a pure measure of any non-hedonic construct.

It might seem that another widely used measure of well-being, the scales of psychological well-being (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) could solve this problem because these were designed to broadly sample different elements of well-being, including autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. However, PWB may similarly fail to provide a distinct measure of eudaimonia (Disabato et al., 2016), and the same applies to another alternative measure, the flourishing scale (Diener et al., 2010) which also shows significant overlap with hedonia (Proctor et al., 2015). Despite the excellent theory and interesting research with which these scales have been involved, these scales may have been part of the problem rather than a solution.

Misguided rhetoric and measurement will lead to misplaced effort. The business world can offer lessons here. Doerr's (2018) bestselling book *Measure What Matters* describes cases of organizations that failed because they measured the wrong outcomes. For example, some companies measure sales staff success almost only by examining sales, and then pay staff proportionately to short-term sales volume. This approach may generate high sales in the short term. Still, without measurement of other outcomes such as follow-up, service, and satisfaction, the company can fail because staff will neglect elements essential to long-term business success. Positive psychology could learn from that example. In early positive psychology, hedonia became the major focus of rhetoric and measurement. This could cause consumers of positive psychology to undervalue and fail to develop other essential elements of the good life such as the ability to transform suffering into well-being.

### **What's the Problem? What *Memento Mori* and Other Evidence Suggests**

The artists who created the *memento mori* pieces were trying to contribute to human well-being, and their methodology hints at the relevance of a vision of well-being greater than hedonia or happiness. In particular, they believed that reminders of death could positively impact their viewers, and they believed that a form of well-being exists that allows a person to appear and be contented even while accompanied by reminders of death.

This belief might seem odd because reminders of tragedy can be largely incompatible with the happy feelings idealized by much of positive psychology. Few, if any, psychologically healthy people could consistently maintain the ideal of positive psychology – that is, happiness and other indicators of hedonia – during moments of tragedy or reminders of coming tragedy. Thus, *memento mori* art reminds us that the dominant ideals of a hedonia-focused positive psychology are incompatible with the reality of life lived amidst reminders and realities of current and impending tragedy. Thus, to live the ideal of positive psychology, at least the ideal portrayed by some of the dominant rhetoric and measurement, one needs to be privileged enough to avoid tragedy or instead perform psychological tricks to distract oneself from the realities of life.

As an example of the value of a broader vision of well-being, we can start by considering eudaimonia, which may offer a more stable foundation for well-being than hedonia. Eudaimonia involves virtue and excellence. Paul and Lillian Wong (2012) have long proclaimed the value of virtue as an essential element within personal life meaning, in particular in the PURE model which includes responsible action as a central element in a life of meaning. Huta and Ryan (2010) showed that an intervention nudging participants toward a eudaimonic orientation



(seeking virtue and excellence) caused an increase in well-being 3-months later, while a nudge toward a hedonic orientation (pursuit of pleasure), though possibly offering short-term benefits, did not have the same longer-term effect. Furthermore, in other research (Steger et al., 2008), hedonic behaviors failed to consistently contribute to eudaimonic outcomes, thus indicating that merely promoting hedonia may not effectively promote eudaimonia. In contrast, in that same study, eudaimonic behaviors contributed to both eudaimonic and hedonic outcomes.

Furthermore, a eudaimonic orientation may also contribute to well-being for the self and others, which was not true for a hedonic orientation (Huta et al., 2012). We have provided a review of existing instruments that researchers can use to assess eudaimonia (Proctor & Tweed, 2016), and even though further expansion and improvement in the available measures would be desirable, good quality measures do exist.

Even then, eudaimonia and virtue will be an incomplete vision of the good life. An existential perspective would suggest that willingness to face the reality of death and other tragedies will be necessary for living a balanced life, a life that is good not only when times are easy but also when they are hard. Wong (2012) has long promoted a dual systems model of well-being in which well-being focuses not only on happiness and hedonia but also on the ability to respond to the negative aspects of life, such as suffering and death. Given his existential orientation, he has directly addressed topics such as attitudes toward death (Wong et al., 1994). He has argued that suffering need not always be harmful because it can be transformed into growth (Wong et al., 2021; Wong & Roy, 2017). Indeed, PP 2.0 was developed to fill the gaps in PP 1.0 and correct the deficiencies created by elitism, scientism, and the conceptual and methodological limitations fundamental to it (Wong & Roy, 2017); living meaningfully with sustainable well-being requires us to confront and transform suffering through meaning-focused

interventions (Wong, 2019). Interestingly, Paul reports (Personal Communication, June, 2023) that he has long been fascinated with *Memento Mori* art.

This realization that a complete psychology needs to propose ideals of well-being realistically attainable by people facing difficulty is something Paul Wong has been acting on and promoting both recently (Wong & Tweed, 2022) and also earlier in his career (Wong et al., 1994), so had Paul's messages been heeded, these errors in positive psychology might have been avoided. This message has relevance not only for clinicians but also for researchers.

Accordingly, Paul proposed a second wave of positive psychology (PP 2.0), that not only complements the limitations of positive psychology (PP 1.0) as pioneered by Martin Seligman but also contributes to counselling psychology by including the dark sides of human existence (Wong, 2019).

**Incomplete Relief.** Positive psychology has been a welcome relief from all the negative psychology that preceded it, but Paul Wong helps us realize that positive psychology cannot merely replace negative psychology. Some integration is needed. The good life will involve a willingness to pursue and enjoy the positive, but also a willingness to face and carry on in the face of tragedy, just as did the individuals in the *Memento Mori* pictures and as Paul did himself in his fight against cancer (Wong, 2020a, 2021; Wong et al., 2021). Long before positive psychology was announced at the turn of the century, Paul already realized the value of integrating the light and dark aspects of life and the dangers of a psychology that focuses on one or the other. His vision speaks to a need for an existential positive psychology because life's dark and light sides are two sides of the same coin or the black and white sides of the yin-yang model (Wong, 2012) . As noted by Paul (Wong, in press-a):

One cannot live a meaningful life without finding meaning in suffering. Meaning and suffering are two sides of the same coin...In short, suffering becomes meaningful when we address ultimate concerns and transcend the dark side of life with courage, faith, wisdom and meaning-centered positive transformation...

Some other positive psychologists have spoken about the value of this type of integration (e.g., Linley et al., 2006), but they are the exception rather than the norm among positive psychologists. Paul Wong's vision is for a complete account of well-being. His view of existential positive psychology goes beyond a distinction between hedonia and eudaimonia to a conceptualization of flourishing through suffering, toward a mature and spiritual-existential well-being (Wong, 2020b, 2021, 2023, in press-a).

### **Qualification: Pieces of Broader Vision Not Completely Absent from Positive Psychology**

#### **1.0**

A qualification deserves mention here. The preceding material may give the impression that early positive psychology completely ignored anything other than hedonia. Still, the issue is one of balance rather than complete absence. For example, Csikszentmihalyi (2014) was involved in positive psychology from the beginning, and he gave attention to virtue (Gardner et al., 2001) and other eudaimonic variables (Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Even Seligman himself collaborated with Peterson on a book discussing character strengths. Their definition of character strengths maps closely onto traditional definitions of virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Nonetheless, a number of writers (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2009) have criticized positive psychology for an unbalanced focus on happiness. As the current manuscript suggests, many of their criticisms have been well-founded.

Furthermore, some major figures within positive psychology have moved toward a greater focus on eudaimonia. Seligman (2011) eventually admitted the error of his early focus on happiness and developed his PERMA (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishments) acronym representing a list of components of well-being. That list included more eudaimonic outcomes, such as meaning, engagement, and achievement, but by then, the early form of positive psychology had already been defined.

*Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving* (Su et al., 2014). In line with Seligman's focus moving from primarily hedonia to more inclusion of eudaimonia, the late Ed Diener, who was known for his groundbreaking work on life satisfaction and SWB (Diener, 1984; Oishi et al., 2011), more recently contributed to the *Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving* (Su et al., 2014). This measure incorporates elements of basic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000), psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), subjective well-being (Diener, 1984), optimism (Scheier & Carver, 1993), meaning (Wong & Wong, 2012), and elements of PERMA (Seligman, 2011) – thereby representing constructs from many major theories and conceptualizations of well-being.

### **The Pain of Broader Well-Being**

Admittedly, happiness and other indicators of well-being (e.g., forms of well-being that can endure suffering) may sometimes counteract each other. For example, imagine a courageous person, such as Sophie Scholl who worked in the White Rose movement to oppose Hitler; she gave up her freedom for others and went to a tortuous prison and even death unjustly (Scholl, 2012). A person like that will not necessarily experience hedonic well-being either momentarily or regularly once they begin this type of behavior; however, their overall behavior is still eudaimonic – an expression and exercising of multiple virtues, such as justice, fortitude, and

prudence. Thus, in some cases, eudaimonia may be genuine but still hinder hedonia in the self, at least not in the short term. Thus, hedonia within the self is a fallible indicator of eudaimonic acts and perhaps has the greatest fallibility with acts that are demonstrations of the greatest steps toward eudaimonia, though this is compatible with Paul's recognition that suffering and vulnerability can typically be used to build the foundations of flourishing (Wong, 2020c).

Aristotle argued that eudaimonic acts (e.g., self-discipline) might be painful in the short-term, but once the virtue (of temperance, for example) is fully attained, the eudaimonic act will come naturally and not bring pain, but pleasure (i.e., hedonia). Because the eudaimonic life will never be completely achieved, there will always be some acts of excellence that will bring short-term pain. Some eudaimonic acts will not produce measurable increases in hedonia in the self; they may instead contribute to the SWB of others or may even fail at that and may be attempts to contribute to the well-being of others that ultimately fail. For example, a person could give themselves up to an enemy in an effort to save others (this being an expression of eudaimonia), but if the actions are futile, this may fail to produce SWB in the self or in the others even though the underlying eudaimonic intention is genuine. Eudaimonia is a process, not a destination, and the hedonic consequences of eudaimonia may be unfaithful indicators of what is truly a step toward eudaimonia even though in the long run, eudaimonia may tend to contribute to hedonia, as suggested earlier. Paul suggested that Eastern psychological systems within PP 2.0 offer valuable insights into the nature of self and the attainment of ultimate happiness (Wong & Cowden, 2022). That is a theme worth exploring further, but we will not expand on that here.

### **Virtue and Wisdom**

We and Wong are not alone in arguing for a focus on more than hedonia (e.g., Vitterso, 2016), yet even among those who argue for a focus on well-being, two elements seem largely absent or at least underemphasized, and once again, as with ideals of well-being, if the work of Paul Wong had been heeded, these lacunae may not have occurred.

***Virtue.*** In our review of existing measures of eudaimonia (Proctor & Tweed, 2016), we suggested that even positive psychology scholars devoted to a broader vision of well-being seldom include measures of virtue. This inattention is surprising, given that the concept of virtue is essential to the traditional idea of eudaimonia. Aristotle portrayed eudaimonia as a combination of excellence and virtue. The very etymology of the term eudaimonia suggests the role of virtue. The word begins with the Greek prefix “eu,” and those who have heard of the concept of “eustress” can guess the meaning of the first element of eudaimonia. Eustress refers to good or beneficial stress, such as practicing self-discipline or receiving feedback from a helpful mentor. These experiences are called eustress because the experience can seem stressful, but it is good and beneficial stress. The modern word “demon” hints at the root of the second part of eudaimonia. The second part of the word comes from a term related to spirits or deities. Thus, people who have eudaimonia are not only receiving desirable experiences, they are in some sense *good* in a way that relates to some transcendent element (or “activity of soul”; Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1980, p.14). Wong has espoused this point by calling for a paradigm shift in dealing with the global mental health crisis. That is, that humanity can help solve the problem of pain and suffering by fully using our conception, experience, and cultural ideas of faith, hope, and love (Wong, 2023) Wong's Faith-Hope-Love model can be summarized striving to achieve spiritual-existential well-being – through awareness of a need to change, belief in the activity of soul, and a commitment toward meaningful living.

Admittedly, virtue will be difficult to operationalize for research purposes. Self-reports of virtue can be untrustworthy. People who think they are virtuous may or may not be. This realization is not new: The historical classic book *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Bunyan, 2003) suggests this fact with its vast array of people claiming to be good who are not.

However, workplace psychologists have something to offer. For years, personality tests have provided helpful but relatively weak predictive power for selecting the best job applicants (Barrick & Mount, 1991). IQ testing has value, too (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), but may be perceived as distasteful for various reasons. Big advances were made when psychometricians developed tests to assess integrity. These types of tests contributed significantly to predicting employee success on the job (Ones et al., 1993). They didn't necessarily predict who would be most adept at the job, but they helped assure the companies hired people who would be less likely to cause problems. As the name denotes, integrity tests are measures of virtue, but with a twist.

One of the most interesting features of integrity tests is that they do not actually work very well at identifying the applicants with the most integrity, and in some cases, the extremely honest applicants might even score lower than average by admitting to minor past infractions that the merely quite honest people would hide or even fail to recognize. The tests instead function to identify the individuals with the least integrity. In other words, these tests are labelled as measures of virtue, but actually, they measure the opposite, the absence of virtue, and through this, they provide valuable predictive power. Thus, to assess virtue, they assess the opposite, evil, and this strategy provides one of the better predictors of employee outcomes (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). A similar outcome has occurred in the field of forensic psychology. Measures of virtue have not received wide use, but self-reports of its opposite have emerged and have value (Shaffer

et al., 2016). Perhaps eudaimonia researchers could learn from the findings of personnel researchers and forensic researchers, and rather than measuring virtue, could use reversed scores from some commonly used measures of negative traits, such as the dark triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) or dark tetrad (Chabrol et al., 2017), or even integrity tests most often used in employee selection, as indicators of the virtue component of eudaimonia. Integrating these measures of virtue (or more precisely, evil) into positive psychology studies could make the studies more consistent with theory on eudaimonia.

*Is the Study of Virtue Aversive? Did Aristotle Miss Something?* One can wonder why modern positive psychologists so seldom study virtue even though their theory and empirical findings keep highlighting virtue. Is there something positive psychologists find aversive to this aspect of Aristotle's thought? We are limited to speculation here but will nonetheless make a suggestion. Aristotle pointed out that eudaimonia is never achieved, so we can speculate that this awareness of imperfection will be painful for many people. Eudaimonia may thus become a topic from which many people will avert their attention.

As suggested by Girard (2001), people are typically afraid to admit to their own moral shortcomings, so instead direct their attention to the failings of others (e.g., "My neighbor may devote much money and many hours to unfortunate others, but I'm better than him because he's a..."). The news media facilitates this process by devoting hours of media coverage to the failings of others, and that may be why news media is so popular. Religious and philosophical perspectives may also provide psychological means of coping with awareness of imperfection (e.g., belief in divine forgiveness, belief that any failures are due to environmental factors). For a helpful and more complete discussion of responses to the realization of one's own virtue deficits, see Monin (2007).



Furthermore, elevating oneself as a virtue researcher could open oneself up to attack by others who seem surprised that the researcher is far from achieving the end of virtue. Thus, positive psychologists have reasons for avoiding the topic of virtue.

Perhaps positive psychologists and others would be more open to this topic of virtue if our theories more prominently provided a means for dealing with the psychological pain of imperfection, the pain of realizing virtue is never complete. The modern concept of self-compassion might help (Bluth & Neff, 2018). Self-compassion enables awareness of one's limitations while reducing self-judgement and increasing consciousness that the failings in oneself are endemic to the human condition. According to this perspective, failures in oneself merely represent your shared humanity with others. Moral excellence can be sought, but failure is expected and should not create undue moral pain. If positive psychologists accompany discussions of virtue with discussions of self-compassion, perhaps researchers and others will be more open to the virtue aspects of eudaimonia. However, at this point, this suggestion is speculative.

**Wisdom.** Wisdom is a second relatively unattended element of positive psychology, at least among positive psychologists. This inattention to wisdom is surprising because others outside of positive psychology have made significant strides in research on wisdom (Gluck, 2017). Some of that research supports the notion that both performance measures of general wisdom and self-reported measures of wisdom are associated with well-being (Zacher & Staudinger, 2018), possibly because wisdom provides guidance for how to adjust behavior for different situations. Within psychology, there is a long tradition of research on coping with stressors (Folkman et al., 1986), yet in some ways, the messages from this body of research can seem confusing because no single coping strategy will always work. In some situations, active

problem-solving may serve one best, but in other situations, distraction or even giving up may have the most value (Miller & Wrosch, 2007). Thus, discussions of good and bad coping strategies are often drastic oversimplifications. Consistent with this perspective, a Google Ngram search suggests that though mentions of “coping research” in books rose consistently in the 1960’s, it then precipitously declined starting in the 1990’s, at a time when the limitations of coping research began to be more evident. Wisdom may be different and have more universal relevance than discussion of coping strategies because wisdom relates to knowledge of how to adjust behavior for various situations. Thus, a wise approach is consistent with research suggesting the well-being benefits of being flexible (Howell & Demuyne, 2021).

Many historical figures have asserted the value of wisdom. Wisdom may seem too esoteric for applied research, but a few researchers have gathered evidence that wisdom can be operationalized and studied. For example, Paul Wong reported that McLaughlin and McMinn's *A Time for Wisdom: Knowledge, Detachment, Tranquility, Transcendence* (see Wong, 2022a), provides guidelines based on both psychological research and ancient Eastern and Western wisdom on how to live a happy and healthy in a world of suffering (cf. Wong, 2022b) .

Because theory suggests somewhat convincingly that wisdom has a role in well-being and because wisdom has empirically validated relations to well-being (Zacher & Staudinger, 2018), wisdom deserves more attention within positive psychology. Furthermore, the discussion above suggests that several researchers have made progress in operationalizing wisdom and its components, thus enabling other research on this topic.

For much of recent history, the English-speaking world demonstrated a declining interest in wisdom. In particular, Google Ngram suggests that mentions of “wisdom” in books in English drastically declined from the early 1800’s until approximately 1980, when a slight increase

began. Psychology, a field which emerged during this era of declining interest, is consistent with this trend by taking relatively little interest in wisdom, a tendency also repeated within positive psychology. Since 2004, however, a Google Trends analysis suggests that internet searches for wisdom steadily increased in the U.S.A., Canada, the U.K., and Australia. It may be disappointing that positive psychologists are following the crowd if they move on to a greater focus on wisdom. Leading would have been better, but late is better than never.

Paul Wong has been ahead of his time in all the major domains discussed in this manuscript. If his example had been followed for each of the major themes discussed so far, some of the errors of positive psychology might have been avoided. Paul has written extensively on existential positive psychology. He has written extensively about responsible action and the need to attend to virtue (Wong, 2011). It is interesting that at least one researcher looking for an indicator of wisdom to validate her wisdom scale (Ardelt, 2003) chose Paul's Death Attitude Profile (Wong et al., 1994) and found that wisdom was associated with higher scores on that scale.

### **Conclusion**

As we survey the state of positive psychology, we see much of value. The emphasis on happiness and well-being has provided a helpful focus, but the focus has been incomplete. In order to provide a resilient form of well-being, a well-being that can remain even when considering tragedy and death, a state of being that need not fear *memento mori*, we recommend a greater focus on eudaimonia and other indicators of well-being. Admittedly, some researchers already focus on eudaimonia, but even within that domain, two particularly important constructs, virtue and wisdom, tend to receive surprisingly little attention. We suggest attention to ideas

regarding a complete form of well-being that does not require you to not lie to yourself about suffering, but that can instead help you face suffering and transform it into well-being.

This manuscript has been written for a Festschrift in honor of Paul Wong. Throughout this discussion, Paul was ahead of his time in each major consideration. Each of these correctives might not have been needed had the field of positive psychology more closely followed the example of Paul and ultimately followed his ideal of an existential positive psychology. We have touched on only a small part of Paul's work, some of his ideas from his existential positive psychology. We are grateful for the strength and effort he exerted and continues to exert, sometimes against the tide, in standing out for these important themes. Paul has contributed much to the field.

In addition to the important theoretical contributions relevant to this paper, Paul has given much else on a more personal level, and several features illustrate this:

1. He has consistently been welcoming. He has welcomed us into his friendship not only academically but on a more personal level.
2. Paul has been persisting. Even when he lost money running a meaning conference and faced health challenges, Paul continued organizing conferences that have been enlightening and encouraging and that consistently attract impressive lists of presenters. Paul will never be justifiably accused of being a person who gives up easily.
3. Paul has facilitated networking. At gatherings with Paul, a familiar sight is to see Paul waving at a newcomer to join his conversation, not just because he enjoys their company but because Paul helps newcomers meet others who welcome them and possibly eventually collaborate with them.

Perhaps among the most interesting features Paul has contributed to research on meaning is his willingness to welcome and work with people with a wide array of theoretical perspectives. He has helped the “meaning community” encompass and welcome people with divergent and even opposing life perspectives, and Paul has facilitated civility in these enlightening encounters.

## References

- Ardelt, M. (2003). Empirical assessment of a three-dimensional wisdom scale. *Research on Aging, 25*(3), 275–324. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1177/0164027503251764>
- Aristotle. (1980) *The Nichomachean ethics* (D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford. (Originally published in c. 330 BCE).
- Barrick, M. R., & Mount, M. K. (1991). The big five personality dimensions and job performance: A meta-analysis. *Personnel Psychology, 44*(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1991.tb00688.x>
- Bluth, K., & Neff, K. D. (2018). New frontiers in understanding the benefits of self-compassion. *Self and Identity, 17*(6), 605–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2018.1508494>
- Bunyan, J. (2003). *The pilgrim's progress*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198118022.book.1>
- Chabrol, H., Bouvet, R., & Goutaudier, N. (2017). The dark tetrad and antisocial behavior in a community sample of college students. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice, 17*(5), 295–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2017.1361310>
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). *Flow and the foundations of positive psychology: The collected works of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi*. Springer.
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin, 95*(3), 542–575. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542>
- Diener, E., Wirtz, D., Tov, W., Kim-Prieto, C., Choi, D., Oishi, S., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2010). New well-being measures: Short scales to assess flourishing and positive and negative feelings. *Social Indicators Research, 97*(2), 143–156. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-009-9493-y>

- Disabato, D. J., Goodman, F., Kashdan, T., Short, J., & Jarden, A. D. (2016). Different types of well-being? A cross-cultural examination of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Psychological Assessment, 28*(5), 471–482. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000209>
- Doerr, J. (2018). *Measure what matters*. Portfolio.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009). *Bright-sided: How positive thinking is undermining America*. Metropolitan.
- Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Dunkel-Schetter, C., DeLongis, A., & Gruen, R. J. (1986). Dynamics of a stressful encounter: Cognitive appraisal, coping, and encounter outcomes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 50*(5), 992–1003. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.50.5.992>
- Gardner, H., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Damon, W. (2001). *Good work: When excellence and ethics meet*. Basic Books.
- Girard, R. (2001). *I see Satan fall like lightning* (J. G. Williams, Trans.). Orbis Books.
- Gluck, J. (2017). Measuring wisdom: Existing approaches, continuing challenges, and new developments. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B, 73*(8), 1393–1403. <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbx140>
- Hals, F. (1628). *Young man holding a skull [Painting]*. The National Gallery.
- Howell, A. J., & Demuyne, K. M. (2021). Psychological flexibility and psychological inflexibility are independently associated with both hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science, 20*, 163–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2021.04.002>

- Huta, V., Pelletier, L. G., Baxter, D., & Thompson, A. (2012). How eudaimonic and hedonic motives relate to the well-being of close others. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 7*(5), 399–404. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.705318>
- Huta, V., & Ryan, R. M. (2010). Pursuing pleasure or virtue: The differential and overlapping well-being benefits of hedonic and eudaimonic motives. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 11*(6), 735–762. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-009-9171-4>
- Jones, D. N., & Paulhus, D. L. (2014). Introducing the Short Dark Triad (SD3): A brief measure of dark personality traits. *Assessment, 21*(1), 28–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1073191113514105>
- Lazarus, R. J. (2003). Does the positive psychology movement have legs? *Psychological Inquiry, 14*(2), 93–109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9485-0>
- Leong, F. T. L., & Wong, P. T. P. (2003). Optimal human functioning from cross cultural perspectives: Cultural competence as an organizing framework. In B. Walsh (Ed.), *Counseling Psychology and Optimal Human Functioning* (pp. 124–144). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Linley, P. A., Joseph, S., Harrington, S., & Wood, A. M. (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future. *The Journal of Positive Psychology, 1*(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760500372796>
- Miller, G. E., & Wrosch, C. (2007). You've gotta know when to fold 'em. *Psychological Science, 18*(9), 773–777. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01977.x>
- Monin, B. (2007). Holier than me? Threatening social comparison in the moral domain. *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale, 20*(1), 53–68.



- Oishi, S., Kesebir, S., & Diener, E. (2011). Income inequality and happiness. *Psychological Science*, 6(2), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797611417262>
- Ones, D. S., Viswesvaran, C., & Schmidt, F. L. (1993). Comprehensive meta-analysis of integrity test validities: Findings and implications for personnel selection and theories of job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 78(4), 679–703. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.78.4.679>
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. American Psychological Association.
- Proctor, C., & Tweed, R. G. (2016). Measuring eudaimonic well-being. In J. Vitterso (Ed.), *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being* (pp. 277–294). Springer.
- Proctor, C., Tweed, R. G., & Morris, D. (2015). The naturally emerging structure of well-being among young adults: “Big Two” or other framework? *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 16(1), 257–275. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9507-6>
- Reker, G. T., Peacock, E. J., & Wong, P. T. P. (1987). Meaning and purpose in life and well-being: A life-span perspective. *Journal of Gerontology*, 42(1), 44–49. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronj/42.1.44>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *The American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069–1081.

- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 719–727.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.4.719>
- Scheier, M. F., & Carver, C. S. (1993). On the power of positive thinking: The benefits of being optimistic. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2(1), 26–30.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.ep10770572>
- Schmidt, F. L., & Hunter, J. E. (1998). The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 85 years of research findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124(2), 262–274. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.124.2.262>
- Scholl, I. (2012). *The white rose*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1975). *Helplessness: On depression, development, and death*. Freeman.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1998). Building human strength: Psychology's forgotten mission. *APA Monitor*, 29(1), 2.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1999). Summit 1999 speech by Martin Seligman. *Presented at the Positive Psychology Summit, Lincoln, NE*.  
<https://www.sas.upenn.edu/psych/seligman/lincspeech.htm>
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. Free Press. <http://www.amazon.com/dp/0743222970>
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Beagley, G. (1975). Learned helplessness in the rat. *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, 88(2), 534–541.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/h0076430>

- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 5–14. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066X.55.1.5>
- Shaffer, C., Gatner, D., Gray, A. L., Douglas, K. S., Viljoen, J. L., Tweed, R. G., Bhatt, G., Dooley, S., & Gagnon, N. (2016). Incremental and predictive validity of the antisocial process screening device in a community sample of male and female ethnic minority and Caucasian youth. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, *44*(8), 1599–1612. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10802-016-0130-3>
- Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., & Oishi, S. (2008). Being good by doing good: Daily eudaimonic activity and well-being. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *42*(1), 22–42. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2007.03.004>
- Su, R., Tay, L., & Diener, E. (2014). The development and validation of the Comprehensive Inventory of Thriving (CIT) and the Brief Inventory of Thriving (BIT). *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*, *6*(3), 251–279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12027>
- Van Utrecht, A. (1642). *Still life with bouquet and skull [Painting]*. WUSTL Digital Gateway Image Collections & Exhibitions. <http://omeka.wustl.edu/omeka/exhibits/show/flowerstilllifes/item/7747>
- Vitterso, J. (2016). *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-42445-3>
- Wong, P. T. P. (1989). Personal meaning and successful aging. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, *30*(3), 516–525. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0079829>
- Wong, P. T. P. (2007a). Introduction: A quiet positive revolution. In P. T. P. Wong, M. J. McDonald, & D. W. Klaassen (Eds.), *The positive psychology of meaning and spirituality: Selected papers from meaning conferences* (pp. 1–8). INPM Press.

- Wong, P. T. P. (2007b). The positive psychology of suffering and tragic optimism. In P. T. P. Wong, L. C. J. Wong, M. J. McDonald, & D. W. Klaassen (Eds.), *The positive psychology of meaning and spirituality* (pp. 235–256). INPM Press.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2011). Positive psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 52(2), 69–81.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022511>
- Wong, P. T. P. (2012). Toward a dual-systems model of what makes life worth living. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning* (pp. 49–68). Routledge.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2019). Second wave positive psychology's (PP 2.0) contribution to counselling psychology. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 32(3–4), 275–284.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070.2019.1671320>
- Wong, P. T. P. (2020a). Living with cancer: A case for PP 2.0. *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology*, 11(1), 1–13.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2020b). Existential positive psychology and integrative meaning therapy. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 32(7–8), 565–578.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540261.2020.1814703>
- Wong, P. T. P. (2020c). The maturing of positive psychology and the emergence of PP 2.0: A book review of *Positive Psychology* (3rd ed.) by William Compton and Edward Hoffman. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 10(1), 107–117.  
<https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v10i1.885>
- Wong, P. T. P. (2021). What is existential positive psychology (2.0)? Why is it necessary for mental health during the pandemic. *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology*, 10(1), 1–16.

- Wong, P. T. P. (2022a). The wisdom of the soul: The missing key to happiness and positive mental health? [Review of the book *A Time for Wisdom: Knowledge, Detachment, Tranquility, Transcendence*, by P. T. McLaughlin & M. R. McMinn]. *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology*, *11*(2), 1–14.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2022b). Review of *The Evolution of Life Worth Living: Why we choose to live*. *International Journal of Wellbeing*, *12*(3), 101–112.  
<https://doi.org/10.5502/ijw.v12i3.2395>
- Wong, P. T. P. (2023). Spiritual-existential wellbeing (SEW): The faith-hope-love model of mental health & total wellbeing. *International Journal of Existential Positive Psychology*, *12*(1), 1–25.
- Wong, P. T. P. (in press-a). Pioneer in research in existential positive psychology of suffering and global flourishing: Paul T. P. Wong. *Applied Research in Quality of Life*.
- Wong, P. T. P. (in press-b). An existential perspective on positive psychology: Towards a general theory of global flourishing. In L. Hoffman (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Humanistic and Existential Psychology*. American Psychological Association.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Bowers, V. (2018). Mature happiness and global wellbeing in difficult times. In N. R. Stilton (Ed.), *Scientific concepts behind happiness, kindness, and empathy in contemporary society* (pp. 112–134). IGI Global.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Cowden, R. G. (2022). Accelerating the science and practice of psychology beyond WEIRD biases: Enriching the landscape through Asian psychology. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *13*, 1054519. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1054519>

- Wong, P. T. P., Mayer, C.-H., & Arslan, G. (2021). COVID-19 and existential positive psychology (PP2.0): The new science of self-transcendence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 800308. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.800308>
- Wong, P. T. P., Reker, G. T., & Gesser, G. (1994). Death Attitude Profile–Revised: A multidimensional measure of attitudes toward death. In R. A. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Death anxiety handbook: Research instrumentation and application* (pp.121-148). Taylor & Francis.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Roy, S. (2017). Critique of positive psychology and positive interventions. In L. Brown & T. Lomas (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of critical positive psychology* (pp. 142–160). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Tweed, R. G. (2022). Positive psychology in upper North America (United States and Canada). In E. C. Chang, C. Downey, H. Yang, I. Zettler, & M. Muyan (Eds.), *International handbook of positive psychology: A global perspective on the science of positive human existence* (pp. 17–47). Springer.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Wong, L. C. J. (2012). A meaning-centered approach to building youth resilience. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications* (pp. 585–617). Routledge.
- Zacher, H., & Staudinger, U. (2018). Wisdom and well-being. In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being*. DEF Publishers. <https://doi.org/nobascholar.com>