

## **Professor Paul Wong: A Philosophical Tribute**

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My friend Paul Wong has been one of the fiercest critics of first-generation positive psychology, but also its most constructive reformer. Disillusioned with early positive psychology's bland valorization of positively valenced (i.e., pleasant) experiences, Paul has been instrumental in broadening its lens to encompass pain and suffering and the developmental resources that can – under ideal conditions if not unproblematically – be gleaned from such apparently “negative” experiences. He has also turned the lens of positive psychology toward other existential affordances and vicissitudes of the human condition, leading to what he calls Existential Positive Psychology (EPP or PP2.0). His thoughts on these matters continue to develop and expand; and the latest version of his theory, which is about wellbeing or flourishing more generally, namely “Existential Well-Being” (EWB), is so much more mature than his earlier reforms of PP1.0 that the label PP3.0 is now perhaps becoming apt. EWB redefines wellbeing in terms of (1) exploiting the light in darkness, (2) a dialectical adaptive life balance, and (3) re-orienting one's overall attitude from egotism to self-transcendence.

It is worth noting that Paul's theoretical positions, in their ever-increasing forms of sophistication and refinement, draw considerably on a personal life marked by trials and tribulations. I will not go into those in any detail here except to note that they furnish his theories with credibility and real-life traction. Paul has often ploughed a lonely furrow in his psychology and been seen by his colleagues (and himself) as the eternal maverick. One of his academic obstacles, in the highly specialised world of mainstream contemporary psychology, is his positioning of himself as a “Renaissance Man,” as it is felicitously put in the Preface to this Festschrift. In times of every-increasing specialisations and isolated academic silos within psychology, Paul continues to draw unapologetically on resources from philosophy, theology,

and the arts. In an academic world that pays lip service to interdisciplinarity, but does not practise what it preaches, Paul has been a beacon of light, showing us what constructive crossover work between areas of learning can really look like.

My own critique of positive psychology in its pre-Paul-Wong form has in many ways followed the same pattern as Paul's, although it has been more restrictively philosophical. I do think mainstream positive psychology tries to both have its cake and eat it (with respect to the threat of value relativism), by replacing a value ontology of the universally valuable with an empirical quasi-ontology of the universally valued. I worry that its theory of universal character strengths and virtues does not provide us with any intellectual metacognitive arbitrator to adjudicate on value conflicts and virtue dilemmas, such as when one's compassion and honesty come into conflict with one another. Finally, my third concern is that positive psychologists tend to believe that one's chain of virtues is as strong as its strongest links, and that the more of each virtue is better – forgetting that each virtue has two extreme forms of deficiency and excess. Too much gratitude can, for instance, turn into a debilitating Stockholm syndrome.

It is especially with respect to this third concern that my critique overlaps substantially with Paul's. We both worry that PP1.0's obsession with "more of the good *qua* more of the pleasant" leads it away from the balance – the psycho-physical and psycho-moral homeostasis – that needs to characterize a life well lived. Paul's arguments here may resonate better with philosophers than social scientists, which is why he is definitely "the philosophers' psychologist" although he may not always find a receptive audience among his own colleagues. I wish therefore to pay a *philosophical tribute* to Paul's life-work and to the enormous contribution he has made to our understanding of human wellbeing in all its complex incarnations.