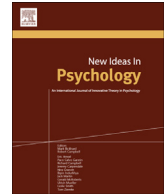




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Positive psychology on character strengths and virtues. A disquieting suggestion[☆]

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ABSTRACT

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The Values in Action (VIA) classification of character strengths and virtues has been recently proposed by two leading positive psychologists, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman as “the social science equivalent of virtue ethics.” The very possibility of developing this kind of an “equivalent,” however, is very doubtful in the light of the cogent criticism that has been leveled at modern moral theory by Alasdair MacIntyre as well as the well argued accusations that positive psychology, despite its official normative neutrality, is pervaded by specifically Western individualism and instrumentalism. In order to evaluate whether the VIA project can be considered as substantially rooted in virtue ethical tradition, the classification was assessed against two fundamental features of the classical version of the latter: (1) the substantial interconnectedness of individual virtues, as expressed by the thesis of the unity of virtue, and (2) the constitutive character of the relationship between virtue and happiness. It turned out, in result, that the two above features are not only absent from but also contradicted by the VIA framework with the latter’s: (1’) construal of individual virtues and character strengths as independent variables and (2’) official endorsement of the fact/value distinction. As soon as the arguments for the superiority of the classical virtue ethical perspective are provided, the potential responses available to the VIA’s proponents are discussed.

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1. From MacIntyre’s disquieting suggestion to Peterson and Seligman’s classification of character strengths and virtues

At the beginning of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (MacIntyre, 2007; cf. MacIntyre, 1984), arguably one of the most influential books in 20th century analytic philosophy, the reader is asked to imagine that humanity has suffered a great catastrophe after which civilization has reverted to the Dark Ages. All natural sciences and technology have virtually vanished. Some time after this great disaster,

however, the situation changes for better and some “enlightened people” undertake the mission of reviving scientific knowledge.¹

Their noble endeavor, however, is very deeply, if not thoroughly, undermined by the fact that they have only scarce remains of a once sophisticated system of thought and practice. In fact, “they have *largely forgotten what it was*” (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 1, emphasis added): both the real nature and the meaning of their predecessors’ achievements is obscure to them. The revived science turns out to be nothing more than “a knowledge of experiments detached from any knowledge of the theoretical context which gave them significance; parts of theories unrelated

[☆] Christopher M. Peterson, one of the authors of the VIA classification investigated in this paper, sadly passed away on 9 October 2012. The obituaries of this great contributor to psychological studies of the good life and virtuous character can be found in Park, Oates, and Schwarzer (2013).

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¹ MacIntyre’s somewhat science-fictional piece of imagery is based on the post-apocalyptic novel written by Walter Miller (1960): *A Canticle for Leibowitz*.

either to the other bits and pieces of theory ... or to experiment; instruments whose use has been forgotten; half-chapters from books, single pages from articles, not always fully legible because torn and charred.”

These ambitious restorers, importantly, are not only ignorant of the real character science in the past but also mostly unaware of their own ignorance. Working under the illusion that they are rebuilding real science they advertise the return of physics, chemistry, and biology. They are deeply wrong, however, because “what they are doing is not natural science in any proper sense at all.” The context that once used to provide meaning to their practice, including scientific standards of consistency and coherence, has “been lost, perhaps irretrievably.”

The analysis of this imagined situation is only an introduction to a deep and sophisticated investigation into the condition of modernity. The striking and very influential thesis that comes to be founded on this investigation is that “in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world” (p. 2) described above. Modern so-called moral philosophy, according to this “disquieting suggestion,” is not moral philosophy in any proper sense at all.

The post-apocalyptic project of a scientific renaissance foundered because of its lack of proper theoretical and meta-theoretical context including forgotten genuinely scientific practices. Modern moral philosophy, analogously, is inevitably entangled in endless and irresolvable disputes because it has been torn from the context that used to supply it with meaning and rational rules. This context included the shared conception of human good, as characteristic of pre-modern societies as it has been uncharacteristic of modern ones, as well as common beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and actions connected with the latter. All of these have been “to a large degree” fragmented and “then in part destroyed” (p. 5). This loss, however, is barely recognized by the majority of moral philosophers who continue to use the language of morality, even though it currently lacks any external foundation or criteria and, thus, can be justifiably considered as subjective. Genuine morality, for MacIntyre at least, can be roughly identified with the tradition of virtue ethics. In the contemporary world, however, we possess only “simulacra” (p. 2) or “meagre substitutes” (p. 243) for any moral system that could be justifiably placed within this tradition. Our theoretical and practical understanding of its nature seems to have been irretrievably lost.

The aim of this paper is to apply the MacIntyrean vision as a metatheoretical perspective from which a recent attempt at reintroducing the notion of virtuous character into scientific psychology will be investigated.² More specifically, it is the Values in Action (VIA) classification of character strengths and virtues developed by two leading positive psychologists, [Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman \(2004, p. 89\)](#) and proclaimed as “the social science equivalent of virtue ethics” that will be subjected to scrutiny.

Before conducting this particular analysis, however, some preparation will be needed. (1) First, *recent criticism of positive psychology* will be briefly summarized. Even though this criticism is usually directed at the program understood globally, rather than at the project of Peterson and Seligman in particular, it still substantially shares philosophical and theoretical perspectives with this paper and is applicable to the VIA classification as highly representative, for better or worse, of positive psychology. (2) Second, *the particular classification of character strengths and virtues* will be briefly delineated with a special focus on its philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. This preparation will enable us to assess whether the VIA classification has really provided “the social science equivalent of virtue ethics” by evaluating this classification against two typical features of the classical virtue ethical perspective: (3) *the interconnectedness of individual virtues*, as embodied in *the thesis of the unity of virtue*, and (4) *the constitutive relationship between virtue and happiness*. What will be investigated, importantly, is not just the ‘faithfulness’ of the psychological classification to its philosophical counterpart but also the validity of any ways in which it may deviate. (5) Finally, there will be some concluding remarks concerning potential responses available to the VIA classification’s proponents.³

2. Positive psychology under fire

The classification of character strengths and virtues proposed by Peterson and Seligman was developed as an integral part of the positive psychology movement, if not a trademark feature. In *Authentic Happiness Seligman (2002)*, till then known mainly for his theory of learned helplessness ([Seligman, 1975](#)), elaborated the project of a new psychological movement that would attempt to do justice to positive aspects of human functioning, which he importantly believed had been neglected by psychological science hitherto. Seligman’s call to develop a new *positive psychology* drew a broad range of responses, leading to the creation of a new and very popular sub-field ([Seligman & Csikszentmihályi, 2000](#); [Snyder & Lopez, 2002](#)).

At the same time positive psychology was subjected to extensive criticism, not only from mainstream psychologists such as [Lazarus \(2003\)](#) but also from philosophers, including [Annas \(2004\)](#) and [Nussbaum \(2008\)](#). The diverse sources of this criticism included insights taken from philosophy, history, psychological anthropology, cross-cultural, and cultural psychology ([Christopher & Hickeybottom, 2008](#); cf. [Christopher, 1999](#)) as well as the ones offered by critical psychologists like [Becker and Marecek \(2008\)](#). In the context of this paper, however, it is the criticism rooted in virtue ethics, especially of its Aristotelian and Neo-Aristotelian brand, as well as that founded on philosophical hermeneutics that are crucial.

³ An argument formally parallel to the one proposed in this paper has been recently made by [Sugarman \(2007\)](#) who claims that positive psychology, as embedded in the modern ideology of technical and instrumental rationality, fails in its attempt to advance the neo-Aristotelian notion of human fulfillment. The theses put forward by Sugarman, however, are never explicitly related to MacIntyre’s diagnosis.

² For a history of this notion’s banishment see [Nicholson \(1998\)](#).

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