Defining the "Positive" in Positive Psychology:

Part II. A Normative Analysis

James O. Pawelski

University of Pennsylvania

Forthcoming, *Journal of Positive Psychology*

Author Note

James O. Pawelski, Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania.

This research was supported in part by a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to James O. Pawelski, Positive Psychology Center, 3701 Market St., Suite 200, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Contact: pawelski@psych.upenn.edu

Abstract

Positive psychology has made a remarkable impact on psychological research and practice in recent years. Significant further work is needed, however, to clarify its core concepts. In a two-part project, the author presents the first systematic analysis of the most basic concept in positive psychology: the "positive." Part I consists of a descriptive analysis. Based on a close reading of founding documents in positive psychology, this analysis reveals six discrete meanings of the positive in these texts, then probes the considerable tensions that arise within and among them and lead to unfortunate confusions in theory, research, and practice. In Part II, presented here, the author draws various distinctions to help relieve these tensions and offers a normative definition of the positive, with the goals of providing direction for inquiry and practice and encouraging further analysis of this and other basic concepts in positive psychology.

Keywords: positive psychology, positive, definition, preference, sustainability, Seligman, Csikszentmihalyi

Defining the "Positive" in Positive Psychology

Part II. A Normative Analysis

Positive psychology has made a remarkable impact since its founding less than two decades ago, yet significant work is still needed to clarify its core concepts. As Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2011) have pointed out, the domain of positive psychology—the "set of rules, procedures, and knowledge" that distinguishes its ideas from others—is still in the process of evolving (p. 6). The present two-part project is intended to support the development of the domain of positive psychology by undertaking the first, sustained analysis of its most basic concept: the "positive." Part I (Pawelski, 2016) consists of a descriptive analysis, a close reading of seminal documents within positive psychology that reveals six discrete meanings of the positive, meanings that have now become part of the DNA that is widely replicated in the writings of researchers and practitioners in this area. The positive in these texts refers to a particular orientation, topography, target population, type of process, set of ultimate aims, and kind of preference. The descriptive analysis also reveals considerable tensions within and among these definitions, leading to seven basic questions positive psychology needs to address.

Part II of this project builds on this descriptive analysis of the way the positive is understood in positive psychology and suggest ways in which it *should* be understood. We will begin with a lexical analysis of the positive, as a way of understanding more deeply the various relevant definitions of the term itself. This will help clarify some of the sources of the tensions its use causes within positive psychology and will suggest some ways of minimizing those tensions. Finally, we will take up the task of suggesting a normative definition for the positive in positive psychology.

Lexical Meanings of the Positive

The positive is a term rich with meanings in a variety of domains, including philosophy, theology, law, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, physiology, linguistics, and photography. Many of these meanings, not surprisingly, are irrelevant to our present purposes. Other meanings are unhelpful or potentially misleading. For example, meanings of certainty, irrefutability, or being laid down by authority seem to be contrary to the scientific basis of positive psychology. Perhaps even more potentially misleading is the meaning "marked by or indicating acceptance, approval, or affirmation" ("positive," 2014). If this is taken to mean (even subconsciously) that positive psychology is claiming to be the accepted, approved, or affirmed way of doing psychology, this will lead to profound misunderstandings and to understandable resistance from those who are not engaging in positive psychology and would thus presumably be doing work that is not accepted, approved, or affirmed.

Among the many meanings of the positive, there are a few that are relevant and important for positive psychology. The word "positive" is derived from the past participle of the Latin *pono*, *ponere*, a verb with key meanings having to do with making something present. In later usage, the term has taken on meanings of optimism and a focus on those things we prefer, as well as a sense of progress or proliferation. Thus, there are two basic meanings of the positive that are most relevant to positive psychology: an older one and a newer one. The older meaning has to do with presence, with having a quality vs. lacking it. The newer meaning has to do with preference, with what is desirable, what is good.

Confusions can arise when we assume both of these meanings of the positive always go together. There are certainly many times when they do; for example, when a couple who have long been wanting a child get back a pregnancy test that is positive. There are, however, many

times when these two meanings do not go together. Testing positive for cancer is anything but positive. In this case, the absence of something is what is preferred. If we consider the two different possibilities for each of these two meanings of the positive, we can identify four general types of cases, as shown in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

	Preference	Dispreference
Presence	Presence of the preferred (e.g. positive pregnancy test for couple wanting a child)	Presence of the dispreferred (e.g. positive test for cancer)
Absence	Absence of the preferred (e.g. negative pregnancy test for couple wanting a child)	Absence of the dispreferred (e.g. negative test for cancer)

Table 1

Two of these cases are desirable (the presence of the preferred and the absence of the dispreferred) and two are undesirable (the presence of the dispreferred and the absence of the preferred). Language can become confusing here because we might be tempted to say that the presence of the preferred and the absence of the dispreferred are both preferable and thus both positive. We can avoid confusion, however, by making a distinction between direct and indirect preference. We can say we have a direct preference for the presence of what we prefer and an indirect preference for the absence of what we disprefer. Similarly, having what we prefer is

directly positive and not having what we disprefer is indirectly positive. Using this language, the position of positive psychology is that the indirectly positive goals of mainstream psychology are not sufficient for human flourishing. By the same token, however, it is also important to acknowledge that insofar as the goals of positive psychology are merely directly positive, they, too, are insufficient for human flourishing.

Much of the confusion here is due to the fact that the conceptual space of the positive has not yet been adequately mapped. Such a conceptual mapping is crucial for understanding the relation between the positive and the negative, for constructing a strong theoretical foundation for positive psychology, and for helping to avoid a number of basic confusions. The distinctions we have just made between the directly positive and the indirectly positive, and between the directly negative and the indirectly negative, form the basis for the kind of conceptual map that is needed.

To complete the map, we need not only the various forms of the positive and the negative but also the various operations under each form. For each of the four forms we have identified, there is a dynamic and a conserving operation. The forms, with their accompanying operations, constitute the conceptual map of the positive and are laid out schematically in Table 2. Operations that increase or maintain the preferred can be considered supportive of the presence of the preferred. Operations of promotion and preservation are thus directly positive. Operations that decrease or avoid the dispreferred are supportive of the absence of the dispreferred. The dynamic operation of mitigation and the conserving operation of prevention are both indirectly positive. On the negative side, operations that increase or maintain the dispreferred are supportive of the presence of the dispreferred. Aggravation is a dynamic, directly negative operation, and entrenchment is a conserving, directly negative operation. Finally, operations that

decrease or avoid the preferred are supportive of the absence of the preferred. Destruction is a dynamic, indirectly negative operation, and obstruction is a conserving, indirectly negative one.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Positive	Negative
Directly positive – presence of the preferred • Promotion – increasing the preferred • Preservation – maintaining the preferred	Directly negative – presence of the dispreferred • Aggravation – increasing the dispreferred • Entrenchment – maintaining the dispreferred
Indirectly positive – absence of the dispreferred • Mitigation – decreasing the dispreferred • Prevention – avoiding the dispreferred	Indirectly negative – absence of the preferred • Destruction – decreasing the preferred • Obstruction – avoiding the preferred

Table 2

This mapping of the conceptual space of the positive and the negative shows that identifying positive psychology with promotion limits it to only one part of the positive. Even extending it to prevention leaves out the important positive operations of preservation and mitigation. Clarity about the full range of positive operations should help positive psychologists occupy the domain of the positive more comprehensively. It should also help with the embarrassing question of what to call areas of psychology outside of positive psychology. Gable and Haidt (2005) helpfully point out that most of psychology is not valenced, as it focuses on neutral topics, on neither well-being nor distress. But this still leaves the embarrassing question of what to call the part of non-neutral psychology that is valenced in a way opposite to positive

psychology. The natural tendency, of course, is to call those areas "negative psychology." But this tendency is clearly both inaccurate and unsatisfactory, and positive psychologists have suggested the term "business-as-usual psychology" as one alternative (Peterson, 2006, p. 16). A related problem arises from trying to avoid calling all of psychology "positive psychology," since it is all intended to help improve the human condition (Sheldon, 2011). Both of these problems can be addressed by understanding that positive psychology focuses mainly on the directly positive and clinical psychology, for example, focuses largely on the indirectly positive. On this analysis, positive psychology is not necessarily more positive than other areas of psychology; it is simply positive in a different way.

This differentiation between directly positive psychology and indirectly positive psychology can be helpful for making broad distinctions. The conceptual mapping presented above, however, can be useful for more fine-tuned—and more accurate—analyses, as well. Considered more carefully, any psychological approach has a particular profile of emphases and effects covering all of the operations—both positive and negative—identified above. This detailed mapping allows us to provide a far more nuanced analysis of the value of any approach or specific intervention by considering its effects on each of the positive and negative operations.

The picture that emerges here is one of variation and complexity that captures more accurately the similarities and differences between positive psychology and other psychological approaches. This analysis provides a way out of untenable claims that only positive psychology is positive, as well as of the equally undesirable conclusion that there is nothing unique about positive psychology. What distinguishes positive psychology from other approaches is not its endeavor to understand and cultivate positive outcomes, but the particular way in which it seeks to do so.

Normative Meanings of the Positive

Keeping in mind the lexical analysis of the positive and the conceptual mapping it has allowed us to create, we now turn to the question of whether it is possible to formulate a definition of the positive that would bring together the various meanings that have been provided to date, that would ease the tensions within and among them, and that would help guide research and practice in the future. Some might argue this is not possible, either for theoretical or for practical reasons. On the theoretical level, some might invoke Wittgenstein's (1953/2001) *Philosophical Investigations*, where he observes that resemblances among family members do not depend on one essential feature that all share, but rather on a variety of overlapping similarities. Wittgenstein argues that concepts often cannot be adequately defined by means of a single essential common feature, but rather by a series of overlapping ones. It may be, then, that the positive in positive psychology does not refer to one essential thing, but rather to several overlapping notions. Another theoretical objection might be that no domain can be required to define all of its basic terms. Some must just be assumed. Turning from the theoretical to the practical, some might object that positive psychology has become so complex, with so many different researchers and practitioners espousing so many different views of it, that it is not possible to expect agreement on what the domain means by the positive. A second practical objection might be that it is not desirable to define the positive in positive psychology, since this could lead to a rigid orthodoxy, an overly strict limitation on what would be allowed to be a part of this dynamic domain (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 2011).

Although these objections will be helpful to keep in mind to avoid overconfidence or unjustified narrowness in defining the positive in positive psychology, it is surely not helpful to leave unaddressed the confusions, tensions, and inconsistencies that have arisen because of a

lack of clarity of what is meant by this core concept. On the contrary, it is important to work toward as clear a definition as the domain will admit, as this will help provide better guidance for researchers and practitioners in their work creating and applying new knowledge, and it will help critics focus their concerns more helpfully on the areas where the domain needs to grow, instead of on areas where there is merely conceptual confusion.

As we have already seen in the section above, the positive means much more than is intended by the domain of positive psychology, since it has meanings across a variety of theoretical, scientific, and practical domains. Even if we restrict the meanings of the positive to those that are related to well-being, however, it is still not entirely clear what area positive psychology properly covers. In his book *Flourish* (2011), Martin Seligman writes, "Positive psychology, as I intend it, is about what we choose for its own sake" (p. 11). More specifically, when explaining his PERMA model of well-being (PERMA is an acronym standing for Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment), he states, "Well-being…is essentially a theory of uncoerced choice, and its five elements comprise what free people will choose for their own sakes" (p. 16). Seligman seems to have in mind here a kind of choice, or preference, that is not forced by other people or influenced by negative circumstances. In its purest sense, we might refer to this kind of preference as idealized vs. contextual. In our everyday lives, we are always bound to some degree by the circumstances surrounding our choices. Seligman, however, is envisioning a kind of preference that is free from these particular limitations. In addition to putting forward a notion of idealized preference, he is also arguing for a kind of preference of things people choose for their own sakes as opposed to for some other reason. For example, meaning is something we choose for its own sake, whereas money is something we choose for the things to which it gives us access: possessions, power, prestige, and

the like. Seligman is here arguing that positive psychology should be about non-instrumental preferences vs. instrumental preferences.

To examine the connection between idealized, non-instrumental preferences and the domain of the positive, it might be helpful to undertake a thought experiment. Imagine a young woman named Sophia who idly kicks an empty bottle and is astonished to find a genie inside. The genie says he has been waiting for her to come along, that he is very impressed with her, and that he would like to transform her into a superhero. He tells Sophia that before he can do so, however, she must decide what color cape she would like to wear. He gives her two options. If she chooses a red cape, she will have the power to fight against undesirable things in the world, things like poverty, violence, and injustice. On the other hand, if she chooses a green cape, she will have the power to help grow desirable things in the world, things like prosperity, peace, and justice. The genie tells her she must choose one or the other, and asks her which she would like.

Sophia considers choosing the red cape. In fact, she thinks this is perhaps the only responsible thing to do. Given the suffering in the world today, it may seem more important to end that suffering than to add to the pleasure of those who are not suffering. If two children are in a nursery and one is crying and the other is smiling, it seems cruel to ignore the crying child in order to try to make the smiling child laugh. If people are starving to death or killing each other in battle, it would seem irresponsible to ignore them to help well-off citizens of peaceful countries increase their enjoyment of life.

Sophia also leans toward choosing the red cape when she considers that eliminating harmful things will allow the things we value to grow. If a child stops crying, she will be able to notice things that make her smile and laugh. When people put down their guns and stop killing each other, they will be able to invest their time and energy in improving their lives. It is hard to

build schools and community centers, after all, while dodging bullets or suffering from malnutrition.

Additionally, Sophia considers that there would be much more agreement on how to put the red cape to good use. It often seems much easier to agree on what problems need to be solved than on what opportunities should be pursued. This has been played out repeatedly on various national stages when citizens of a country unite to overthrow a dictator and subsequently splinter into bitter rival factions that are unable to agree on how to move the country forward.

Just as Sophia is about to choose the red cape, however, it occurs to her that there may be relative advantages for the green cape because of problems that could arise from the use of the red cape. There are at least some times when focusing on getting rid of harmful things seems to make those things multiply. Fighting violence with violence, for example, often seems to have the effect of spreading violence. Killing terrorists sometimes just seems to increase their numbers, and incarcerating criminals can have the effect of multiplying them. In these cases, the processes meant to put a stop to something actually seem to perpetuate that very thing.

In addition, Sophia considers that there are many cases where use of the red cape does not obviate the need for the green cape but where use of the green cape does seem to render the red cape unnecessary. Getting rid of harmful things does not necessarily result in the growth of beneficial things. Children who stop crying do not necessarily start smiling. People who stop killing each other do not necessarily turn their attention to the founding of civic institutions, the growth of social capital, and the building of economic prosperity. Getting rid of violence will not necessarily bring harmony. Yet, conversely, children who start smiling stop crying. People who turn their attention to the founding of civic institutions, the growth of social capital, and the building of economic prosperity typically stop killing each other. If people feel harmony toward

each other, violence will end. It seems, then, that there are at least some cases where eliminating harmful things does not necessarily result in the growth of beneficial things, but where growing beneficial things does eliminate harmful things.

Sophia also realizes that beneficial things are of great value to our lives. The purpose of life, she thinks, must surely be broader than simply the eradication of the things that cheapen or threaten it. It is the green cape that directly addresses so many of the experiences and conditions that make life worth living. Love, joy, beauty, ecstasy, wisdom, intimacy, belongingness, understanding, respect, and the like are among the things we value most in life. Their enhancement and enjoyment must make up at least part of the core of the good life.

Sophia's deliberations do not identify a right and a wrong choice in this context. They do, however, illustrate that there is a real difference here. If Sophia chooses the red cape, she will spend her life searching for problems and working to resolve them; and if she chooses the green cape, she will concentrate on searching for opportunities and working to realize them. Red-cape superheroes live very different lives from green-cape superheroes. Without trying to make any claims about which life would be better, I would like to use this distinction to state what I believe is the fundamental principle of positive psychology: no one can flourish without a green cape. In less colorful terms, the positive is not the same thing as the absence of the negative; well-being is not the same as the absence of ill-being.

A series of examples will help illustrate this point. Exterminating weeds is an important part of what a farmer does. If that is all he does, however, and if he never actually plants a crop, he will get no harvest. If a man visits his doctor and is told that he is completely free of illness, it does not necessarily follow that he is healthy. Or if he visits a psychiatrist and is told that he has no diagnosable mental illness, this does not necessarily mean that he is mentally healthy.

According to the World Health Organization (2006), health is "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (p. 1). Even if he has no disease in his body or in his mind, there are certainly things he can do to improve his physical and mental health.

If it is not possible to flourish without a green cape, is it possible to flourish without a red cape? Can we flourish if we have only the ability to cultivate the desirable things in the world and not the ability to fight against the undesirable things? A bit of deliberation is sufficient to answer this question in the negative. In fact, we can arrive at an important corollary of the fundamental principle of positive psychology by simply reversing its terms. The absence of the negative is not the same thing as the positive; the absence of ill-being is not the same thing as well-being. In other words, avoiding what is undesirable is not always an automatic result of having what is desirable. If a farmer plants his crops but does nothing about the weeds, he is as unlikely to have a harvest as if he eliminates the weeds but plants no crops.

This distinction between moving toward things deemed beneficial and away from things deemed harmful has deep psychological and physiological roots. Following Kurt Lewin (1935), psychologists often put this distinction in terms of approach and avoidance motivation. In accordance with present needs, subjects are motivated to move toward certain stimuli and embrace certain experiences and to move away from other stimuli and reject those experiences. Researchers have argued that this basic tendency for approach or avoidance is an elemental reaction of all organisms to their environment, that it is the result of automatic evaluation processes, and that there are different approach and avoidance systems in the brain (Elliot & Covington, 2001). Clearly, both systems are crucial for our survival, and importantly, they seem to interact in various ways under different conditions.

The result of this thought experiment goes beyond merely pointing out that red cape approaches to life are different from green cape approaches and indicates that both are essential for flourishing. Sophia cannot flourish if she must choose between the red cape and the green cape, and neither can we. Flourishing requires that we have a third choice available to us: a reversible cape, with one side red and one side green. There are clearly times in which we need to focus on avoiding what is undesirable. Indeed, because of the way our brains are hard-wired, it is probably easier for us to focus on the dangers, threats, and problems in our environment. It may be more difficult for us to focus on moving toward what is desirable, because this often seems like a set of more subtle skills. The vision of positive psychology is to use the robust methods of empirical psychology to understand better how we can use the green sides of our capes more effectively. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi's (2000) definitions of the positive in terms of topography, target population, and process, as well as Seligman's more recent PERMA model, are all green-cape approaches to flourishing.

Insofar as positive psychology sees itself as a complement to the deficit orientation of mainstream psychology, then, it can be understood as a psychology of the green cape. There is, however, another, more comprehensive way in which positive psychology sees itself, as well. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) also defined positive psychology as an empirical approach to the good life. From this perspective, positive psychology is not just about the green cape or just about the red cape, but about their balanced use. It is a psychology of the reversible cape. Much confusion arises when positive psychologists are unclear about whether they are using the terms flourishing and well-being in a complementary, green-cape mode, or in a comprehensive, reversible-cape mode. This confusion can, ironically, lead to positive psychologists being guilty of much the same kind of imbalance of which they have accused

mainstream psychology. Although it is certainly true that we must avoid overuse of red-cape processes, since they are not sufficient for flourishing, it is just as true that we must also avoid an overuse of green-cape processes. If the focus is on developing complementary positions to those of mainstream psychology, then a green-cape approach may be sufficient. But if the goal is overall human flourishing, then a comprehensive, reversible-cape approach is necessary. In this case, a clearer understanding of the effects of complementary, green-cape approaches on overall human flourishing is crucial, as is a deeper understanding of the optimal balance between the use of the green side and the use of the red side of the reversible cape.

With all this in mind, I would like to present a normative definition for the positive in positive psychology. Before doing so, however, I need to point out the importance of frames of reference when deciding whether or not something is positive. On some frames of reference, something may be positive that on broader or narrower frames would not be considered positive. For example, most persons would consider it a positive to be able to drive one's car to work in the morning, but if we take into account the damage auto emissions may be doing to the environment, we may not consider it a positive and may support governmental restrictions that are sometimes placed on this activity. A robust definition of the positive must take into account both the value of things considered under some frame of reference and the value of those things when the frame of reference is shifted. For this reason, the definition I am proposing has two components. First is an inclusion criterion, which marks a necessary condition that must be satisfied for something to qualify as positive on some particular frame of reference. Second are five continuum criteria, which mark the degree to which something remains positive across shifting frames of reference. I will now explain in more detail what I mean by these two components.

The first component of my proposed normative definition is an inclusion criterion. If and only if something meets this criterion can it be considered positive. The inclusion criterion is simple preference. That is, if something is preferred to its absence, then it is positive. This preference need not hold across all frames of reference, but it does need to hold for at least one. In the example above, driving to work is considered positive on the frame of reference of an individual employee, since that person would presumably prefer being able to drive to work to not being able to do so.

The second component of the definition consists of five continuum criteria. Something can be said to be more or less positive, depending on how it holds up across these various criteria. The first of the continuum criteria is relative preference. For simple preference tests, something is compared to its absence; for relative preference tests, it is compared to something else. Something is called relatively preferred if it is preferred to something else. In general, the broader the frame of reference and the more something is relatively preferred, the more positive it can be said to be. If it is preferred to all other things under consideration, it can be called optimal.

The second of the continuum criteria is sustainability across time. All things being equal, the more something positive endures, the more positive it is. If owning a house is a positive thing, then owning a house that stands the test of time is more positive than owning a house that crumbles. If physical exercise is positive because it is good for one's long-term health, then physical exercise that also has short-term benefits is even more positive.

The third continuum criterion is sustainability across persons. If something is good for just one person, it is a positive thing; but in general, the more people for whom it is good, the

more positive it is. A generator that provides electricity for one family's house is a positive thing; but a power source that provides electricity for an entire village is even more positive.

The fourth continuum criterion is sustainability across effects. If something is good in itself, it is positive; but something good in itself that also leads to many good effects and few bad effects is even more positive. If owning a reliable car is a positive thing, then owning a reliable car with high safety and environmental standards is even more positive.

The final continuum criterion is sustainability across structures. Things which are good for individual or local social structures are positive, but things that are scalable and transferable across organizational and cultural contexts are even more positive. An idiosyncratic curriculum that supports well-being and learning in a single school is a good thing, but a highly adaptable curriculum that can bring the same level of well-being and learning to many schools around the world is even more positive.

I suggest, then, that the positive in positive psychology should be defined as that for which there is a simple preference, and that the positive admits of degrees, in terms of what is relatively preferred and sustainable across time, persons, effects, and structures. The more something remains positive across these various frames of reference, the more positive it can be said to be.

[Insert Table 3 about here.]

Normative Definition of the Positive in Positive Psychology	
Inclusion Criterion	Continuum Criteria
1. Simple Preference – something that is preferred to its absence	1. Relative Preference – the degree to which something is preferred to something else

	2. Sustainability across Time – the degree to which something remains positive regardless of the point in time at which it is being considered
	3. Sustainability across Persons – the degree to which something remains positive for whatever individuals or groups are being considered
	4. Sustainability across Effects – the degree to which something causes maximal positive effects and minimal negative effects
	5. Sustainability across Structures – the degree to which something remains positive when taken to scale and in any organizational or cultural context

Table 3

Several things should be noted about this definition. First, it is based on the two core concepts of preference and sustainability. In a broad sense, of course, sustainability of good things is a preference, but the definition will be clearer and more practically useful if preference and sustainability are treated as separate criteria.

Second, this definition is not intended to be narrow, rigid, or fomulaic. Rather, it is intended to open up ways of understanding the positive that are specific enough to help avoid confusions and flexible enough to make room for the rich variety of work of positive psychology researchers and practitioners. Beyond distinguishing between simple and relative preference, for

example, this definition does not specify the notion of preference being employed. In fact, this definition works equally well with various kinds of preference. If we use Seligman's notion of preference as direct, non-instrumental, and idealized, we arrive at a complementary designation of the positive, where we focus on the best as opposed to the worst things in life. If on the other hand, we include direct and indirect, instrumental and non-instrumental, as well as contextualized preference, we arrive at a comprehensive designation of the positive, where we focus on those things that help us live the best life we can. It is the responsibility of particular positive psychology researchers and practitioners to make sure they clarify which notion of preference—and thus, which notion of the positive—they are using in a specific context.

Third, the continuum criteria are of special importance for considering the ethics of flourishing. Philosophers have long struggled over the relation between well-being and morality (Haybron, 2008; Pawelski, 2013; Pawelski, 2016), although it does not take a philosopher to wonder whether bad people can flourish. If the answer to this question is yes, then it would seem limiting and misleading to think of the positive as belonging exclusively to well-being and thus as separable from morality. Introducing notions of relative preference and sustainability safeguards us against a definition of the positive that disregards ethics, and encourages a valuing of that which is positive, not just for certain individuals on certain occasions, but for as many people as possible and in the most enduring ways available.

Finally, this notion of the positive allows us to think of human flourishing in terms of sustainable preference; that is, preferences that are sustainable across various frames of reference. This is what we may think of as "fractal flourishing." Fractals are fascinating relations that hold in certain mathematical sets and are approximated in natural phenomena as diverse as river networks, mountain ranges, and lightning bolts, as well as heart rates, blood

vessels, and DNA. One key characteristic of fractals is self-similarity, where the same pattern is repeated at every scale of analysis. Perhaps most familiar is the resemblance of a piece of broccoli to an entire stalk, or of a branch to an entire tree. The definition of the positive I have proposed makes possible the consideration of preference across various frames of reference and leads to a notion of flourishing different in an important way from a utilitarian attempt to maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number. A problem with this utilitarian view is that it is sometimes used to justify sacrificing the well-being of the few for the many. Fractal flourishing, on the other hand, is an ideal that holds out for the well-being of individuals *and* groups, that values happiness in the short-term *and* in the long-term, and that seeks approaches that work locally *and* globally.

Conclusion

Positive psychology research and practice has flourished in the years since its founding. If positive psychology were a tree, we could point to a trunk that has reached impressive heights already and that supports healthy and growing branches of research. Maturing from these branches are practical fruits that are of great use in areas as disparate as education, medicine, clinical psychology, and business. To support its continued growth, however, this tree must have deep conceptual roots. Although roots are rarely visible and thus easy to ignore, it is crucial that they never be taken for granted, since they are essential for the life and stability of the tree they support. The rapid growth of positive psychology in the last two decades requires a commensurate deepening of its roots, and much more attention needs to be paid to the basic concepts and theoretical grounding of this domain.

The present two-part project is intended to underscore this need and to help deepen the roots of positive psychology. With its descriptive and normative analyses of the positive, it

represents the first systematic examination of the most basic concept in positive psychology. On a descriptive level, this analysis (Pawelski, 2016) has shown that seminal early documents in positive psychology contain six discrete meanings of the positive, laying out the orientation, topography, target population, type of process, and set of ultimate aims of positive psychology, and seeking to show that the positive is not reducible to the negative. This analysis has also revealed considerable tensions that arise within and among these definitions and has pointed to seven foundational questions that arise from these tensions. On a normative level, this analysis began by uncovering confusions that can arise from older and newer meanings of the positive, between thinking of the positive in terms of presence or in terms of preference. It then distinguished between various modes of the positive: direct vs. indirect, ideal vs. contextual, and instrumental vs. non-instrumental. Finally, it presented a normative definition of the positive for positive psychology as that for which there is a simple preference and for which there are degrees of relative preference and sustainability across time, persons, effects, and structures.

Four important observations follow from this analysis. First, positive psychology is not simply the study of the positive. As we have seen, meanings of the positive are far-reaching and extend in directions far beyond psychology. Nor can we say that positive psychology is the psychological study of the positive. There is much in mainstream psychology that must be considered positive. The positive needs qualification in positive psychology if it is to apply properly to the domain of investigation.

Second, different positive psychologists delimit the domain of the positive in different ways. The biggest distinction, no doubt, lies between those who see positive psychology chiefly as a complement to mainstream psychology and those who see it as part of a comprehensive approach to the psychology of human flourishing. The former are more ideologically guided,

focusing their work on the best things in life and wanting to stay clear of the negative; the latter are more pragmatically oriented, emphasizing the contextualized quest to live the best life possible and accepting the negative as part of that quest.

Third, these matters are difficult and complex, and much more work is required to provide the needed clarity. Each of the seven foundational questions posed (Pawelski, 2016) will need to be thought through in careful detail, and the normative definition of the positive will hopefully spark discussion, debate, and development. The work of conceptual clarification in positive psychology needs to extend to other terms, as well. Psychologists, philosophers, and other theorists should continue to conduct careful analyses of concepts such as happiness, well-being, flourishing, meaning, strength, positive emotions, and positive interventions. Some good work has already been done on these terms, but as the field continues to grow, much more will be needed to keep pace with developments and to provide the solid grounding the research and application require.

Fourth, the theoretical, empirical, and applied work of positive psychology is especially important because it is part of a wider, interdisciplinary quest to understand and cultivate the good life. This broad and important quest cannot be undertaken successfully by using a single method of inquiry or by individuals from one particular discipline. It requires each of us not only to do our best but also to reach out to others, to colleagues in economics, in public policy, in neuroscience, in medicine, in organizational studies, in education, in the arts and humanities—in short, to anyone using sound methods of inquiry to try to further our understanding of human flourishing.

This systematic descriptive and normative analysis of the most basic concept in positive psychology is intended as a further step in the maturation of the domain of positive psychology,

as called for by Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (2011). Because careful discussion of these matters is crucial for advancing the science and practice of positive psychology, I trust this discussion will help catalyze an ongoing dialogue about these and other basic concepts. That would clearly be a positive in positive psychology.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the following individuals for their support, encouragement, and reading of drafts as this project took shape: Gordon Bermant, Norman Bradburn, John Cacioppo, Jeremy Clifton, Ed Diener, Robert Emmons, Sandra Foster, Daniel Haybron, Eranda Jayawickreme, Daniel Kahneman, Margaret Kern, Kristján Kristjánsson, John Lachs, Jeanne Nakamura, John Pawelski, Ruth Pawelski, Suzann Pileggi Pawelski, Ann Roepke, Sydney Rubin, Barry Schwartz, Martin Seligman, Chris Stewart, Margarita Tarragona, Louis Tay, Joar Vittersø, Alan Waterman, David Yaden, members of the Seligman Lab, students in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania, and the reviewers at the *Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Funding

This work was supported by the Templeton Religion Trust [grant number TRT0050].

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