

Journal of Humanistic Psychology

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Barbara S. Held

Journal of Humanistic Psychology 2004; 44; 9

DOI: 10.1177/0022167803259645

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THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY



BARBARA S. HELD is the Barry N. Wish Professor of Psychology and Social Studies at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. She is the author of *Back to Reality: A Critique of Postmodern Theory in Psychotherapy* (1995), in which she provides theoretical and philosophical analysis of the postmodern/linguistic turn in psychotherapy. She is currently at work on its sequel, in which she extends her philosophical critique to interpretive trends in psychology. She has served on several editorial boards, including the

Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology. Her popular book *Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching: A 5-Step Guide to Creative Complaining* (2001), in which she challenges what she calls the “tyranny of the positive attitude in America,” has garnered worldwide media attention. A clinical psychologist, she practiced psychotherapy for many years. She lives with her husband on the coast of Maine, although she escapes as often as possible to New York City, where her kvetching is seen in a positive light.

Summary

This article explores three ways in which the positive psychology movement’s construction and presentation of itself are negative. First, the negative side is construed as the negative side effects of positive psychology’s dominant, separatist message. Second, the negative side is construed as the negativity that can be found within the positive psychology movement. Here the author elaborates on the negative or dismissive reactions of some spokespersons for the movement to ideas or views that run counter to the movement’s dominant message: (a) negativity about negativity itself, which is explored by way of research in health psychology and coping styles; and (b) negativity about the wrong kind of positivity, namely, allegedly unscientific positivity, especially that which Seligman purports to find within humanistic psychology. This constitutes an epistemological position that contributes to “reality problems” for positive psychologists. The author concludes with the implications of positive psychology’s “Declaration of Independence” for psychology’s

Journal of Humanistic Psychology, Vol. 44 No. 1, Winter 2004 9-46
DOI: 10.1177/0022167803259645
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much discussed fragmentation woes. She appeals to the wisdom of William James for guidance in finding a third, more positive meaning of positive psychology's negative side. This third meaning can be gleaned from a not-yet-dominant but more integrative message emerging within the movement, one compatible with the reactions of some humanistic psychologists to positive psychology.

Keywords: *positive psychology; scientific realism; defensive pessimism; fragmentation; postmodernism; optimism; negativity*

Although positive psychologists claim to study what is good or virtuous in human nature and call for a separate and distinct science to do so (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003a; Seligman, 2002a, 2002b; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2001; Seligman & Peterson, 2003; Sheldon & King, 2001; Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002), there nonetheless is within that movement a negative tendency, or what I will call a "negative side." In this article, I explore three senses or meanings of this so-called negative side of positive psychology. First, the negative side is construed as the negative *side effects* of the positive psychology movement, especially of its dominant, separatist message. These side effects have been enumerated before (e.g., Bohart & Greening, 2001; Guignon, 2002; Held, 2002a; Woolfolk, 2002), and so about these I will be brief. Second, the negative side is construed as the *negativity* that can be found within the positive psychology movement. Here I elaborate on the negative or dismissive reactions of some (but not all) positive psychologists, especially of some spokespersons for the movement, to ideas or views that run counter to the dominant message of the movement—in particular, (a) negativity about negativity itself, which I explore by way of research in health psychology and coping styles; and (b) negativity about the wrong kind of positivity, namely, allegedly unscientific positivity, especially the "unscientific positivity" that Seligman (Seligman, 2002a, 2002b; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2001) purports to find within humanistic psychology and that has been discussed in the *Journal of*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This article is based on a paper presented at the 110th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Chicago, in August 2002, as part of a panel entitled "Positive Psychology and the Human Condition." I thank David Bellows, Arthur Bohart, Rachel Hare-Mustin, Suzanne Lovett, Al Mahrer, Julie Norem, Harvey Siegel, Hendrika Vande Kemp, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

Humanistic Psychology's special issue on positive psychology (e.g., Greening, 2001, p. 4; Rathunde, 2001, pp. 146-147; Resnick, Warmoth, & Serlin, 2001, pp. 78-80; Taylor, 2001, pp. 22-24). This is an epistemological position that contributes to "reality problems" for positive psychologists, problems that call for further consideration. In my conclusion, I consider the implications of positive psychology's so-called "Declaration of Independence" (Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002) from the rest of psychology for the much discussed fragmentation woes within psychology. I also appeal to the wisdom of William James (1902), both directly and as interpreted by Rubin (2000), for guidance in finding a third, more positive meaning of positive psychology's negative side. This more positive meaning can be gleaned from a not-yet-dominant, more integrative message emerging within the movement.

My aim is not to challenge the empirical findings that constitute the positive psychology movement; there are, in my view, important contributions to psychological science being made within the movement's ranks. Nor do I challenge the study of human strengths in general, which, needless to say, is not necessarily done in the movement's name. Rather, my critique—or "discourse analysis"—focuses upon the way in which those who have heretofore spoken most vociferously on behalf of the positive psychology movement present/promote the movement to the public and to the profession of psychology. This "dominant discourse," or dominant Message with a capital "M," as I now call it, is contrasted with a not-yet-dominant discourse, or message with a lowercase "m," just emerging within the movement—or so I argue. This "second-wave" message, as I now call it, challenges the dominant Message in ways sometimes quite consistent with challenges made by humanistic psychologists in these pages.

MEANING 1: THE NEGATIVE SIDE EFFECTS
OF THE POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY MOVEMENT—
THE TYRANNY OF THE POSITIVE ATTITUDE AND
POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY'S DOMINANT MESSAGE

The Tyranny of the Positive Attitude

On a panel at the American Psychological Association (APA) convention in 2000 entitled "The (Overlooked) Virtues of Negativ-

ity,” Held (2002a) lamented what she dubbed the “tyranny of the positive attitude,” a problem that, she claimed, dominates the contemporary American mind-set. By this she meant that our popular culture and now—owing to the dominant, separatist Message of some spokespersons for the positive psychology movement (e.g., Seligman, 2002a, 2002b; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2001; Seligman & Peterson, 2003; Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002)—our professional culture are saturated with the view that we must think positive thoughts, we must cultivate positive emotions and attitudes, and we must play to our strengths to be happy, healthy, and wise.

The tyranny of the positive attitude lies in its adding insult to injury: If people feel bad about life’s many difficulties and they cannot manage to transcend their pain no matter how hard they try (to learn optimism), they could end up feeling even worse; they could feel guilty or defective for not having the right (positive) attitude, in addition to whatever was ailing them in the first place. This is a possible unintended consequence of trumpeting positivity, whether in popular or professional circles (see Held, 2001, 2002a, pp. 969, 986-987). For according to the wisdom of our popular culture, what ails one in the first place might have been avoided, or at least ameliorated, with positive thoughts. This popular message is certainly reinforced by extensive research findings that reliably demonstrate that optimism and positivity are linked to health and longevity, whereas pessimism and negativity have the opposite effect (e.g., Brennan & Charnetski, 2000; Byrnes et al., 1998; Larsen, Hemenover, Norris, & Cacioppo, 2003; Peterson & Bossio, 2001; Peterson, Seligman, Yurko, Martin, & Friedman, 1998; Raeikoenen, Matthews, Flory, Owens, & Gump, 1999; Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). About this, more later.

Positive Psychology’s Dominant Message and Challenges to It

Whether research about the salutary effects of positivity has been done in the name of positive psychology, some who speak for the movement deploy that research without nuance or ambiguity in their dominant, polarizing Message: Positivity is good and good for you; negativity is bad and bad for you. (Indeed, Seligman’s call for a separate and distinct science of positive psychology rests on

this foundational assumption.) Farewell to individual differences; one size fits all. Or so the dominant Message—especially as articulated by Seligman, whom I quote in due course—appears to me, but evidently not only to me: An emerging but still nondominant message of some members of the movement (I take them to be members in virtue of their authorship of chapters in edited books about—or issues of the *American Psychologist* devoted to—the movement’s progress) gives evidence of the dominant Message by expressing dissatisfaction with it. This discernable but not-yet-unified voice of protest suggests to me a desire for a more nuanced and integrative—a less separatist or polarizing—message, one that makes contact, though only implicitly, with some of the postulates of humanistic psychology set forth in every issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. Consider the following statements made by authors of chapters in Aspinwall and Staudinger’s new edited book entitled *A Psychology of Human Strengths: Fundamental Questions and Future Directions for a Positive Psychology* (2003a), and note among them the dialogical impulse for the integration, holism, dialectic, realism, engagement, and contextuality that characterizes the responses of humanistic psychologists to positive psychology’s dominant, separatist Message of polarization (e.g., Greening, 2001; Rathunde, 2001; Resnick et al., 2001; Rich, 2001).

In their own chapter, editors Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003b) give advance notice of the emerging message:

In trying to define and study human strengths, it is crucial to acknowledge contextual dependencies. . . . Another central task for a psychology of human strengths is to understand whether and how positive and negative experiences depend on each other and work together. Thus, a call for the scientific study of . . . positive states . . . should not be misunderstood as a call to ignore negative aspects of human experience. That is, a psychology of human strengths should not be the study of how negative experience may be avoided or ignored, but rather how positive and negative experience may be interrelated. . . . Indeed, some philosophical perspectives suggest that the positive and negative are by definition dependent on each other; that is, human existence seems to be constituted by basic dialectics. (pp. 14-15)

It would be a major mistake to assume that all that is positive is good. . . . Instead, efforts to understand when positive beliefs are linked to good outcomes, when they may not be, and why will yield a more realistic and balanced view. (p. 18)

In a chapter entitled “Three Human Strengths,” Carver and Scheier (2003) stated,

The picture of human strength as reflected in persistence and performance is a familiar one. . . . Commitment and confidence interact to foster persistence and perseverance, even in the face of great adversity. These ideas form the cornerstone of a good part of what is touted as “positive psychology” (e.g., Ryff & Singer, 1998; Seligman, 1999; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Taylor, 1989). . . . Discussions of these theories usually emphasize the positive—the idea that continued effort can result in attaining desired goals. . . . Put simply, the attempt is to turn pessimists into optimists. . . . [However,] a critical role in life is also played by doubt and disengagement—by giving up. (pp. 88-89)

Even perseverance and giving up, which seem so antithetical, may not be. . . . A psychology of human strengths is no less than a psychology of human nature. (p. 98)

In a chapter subtitled “On the Virtues of the Coactivation of Positive and Negative Emotions,” Larsen et al. (2003) wrote,

Given that negative emotions do affect health outcomes, it is likewise understandable that [traditional] lines of research have treated negative emotions as something to be avoided or at least diminished, rather than dwelled on. . . . The thesis of this chapter, however, is that this discomfitting mode of coactivation [of positive and negative emotions] may allow individuals to make sense of stressors, to gain mastery over future stressors, and to transcend traumatic experiences. (pp. 212-213)

Although positive psychology has made it clear that an exclusive focus on negative emotions [i.e., “negative psychology”] is insufficient, the present perspective implies that an exclusive focus on positive emotions may also ultimately prove insufficient. (p. 222)

In a chapter entitled “Ironies of the Human Condition,” Ryff and Singer (2003) stated,

Recently, we have witnessed a drumroll on behalf of positive psychology. Chastised for its preoccupation with human failings, the field of psychology has been admonished to attend to human strengths. . . . However, we also underscore the need to move beyond false dichotomies that separate positive and negative features of the human condition. [We argue for an appreciation of] inevitable dialectics between positive and negative aspects of living. (pp. 271-272)

Human well-being is fundamentally about the joining of these two realms. . . . Positive psychology will fulfill its promise not by simply marking what makes people feel good, hopeful, and contented, but by tracking deeper and more complex processes. . . . We propose that these challenges of “engaged living” are the essence of what it means to be well. (pp. 279-282)

And last but not least, in a chapter section entitled “What’s Wrong With a ‘Positive’ Psychology Movement?,” Carstensen and Charles (2003) wrote,

Readers may expect that we’d be delighted by the prospect of positive psychology. But we see as many problems as advantages. Deconstructing the scientific status quo and revealing evidence that negative presumptions have guided much of the research is one thing. Carrying a banner for a movement forcing the pendulum to swing in the other direction is quite another. . . . The lesson in this is not to . . . join a movement to be more “positive.” Rather, it is to generate an even-handed characterization of the problems and strengths associated with aging. Scientific psychology should not have an objective to prove or disprove positive aspects of life. It should instead seek to understand psychological phenomena in their totality. . . . We cannot do it by succumbing to a polemical movement to search for the positive. . . . Social scientists must study the strengths of older people, but just as surely they must understand the problems of older people. (pp. 82-84)

The second-wave/nondominant message contained in the above quotations makes common cause with the message contained in the following quotations of contributors to the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*’s special issue on positive psychology. Laura King’s quotation is especially noteworthy, given her receipt of a Templeton Positive Psychology Prize in 2001:

Another pitfall of focusing on positive emotional experience as definitive of the good life is the tendency to view any negative emotion as problematic. Thus, the experience of distress, regret, and disappointment are often viewed as negative experiences, certainly to be avoided. How realistic is it to expect that adults will weather all of life’s storms with nary a regret? . . . Yet, the focus on the maximization of positive affect and the minimization of negative affect has led to a view of the happy person as a well-defended fortress, invulnerable to the vicissitudes of life. . . . Perhaps focusing so much on subjective well-being, we have missed the somewhat more ambivalent truth of the good life. (King, 2001, pp. 53-54)

Humanistic psychology is also nondualistic. From its holistic perspective, polarizing psychology into “good” and “bad” splits the fullness of the paradox . . . and therefore misses the complexity and nuances of the phenomenon. Holistic, humanistic psychology understands that the good, or the positive, takes its meaning from its dialogical relationship to “the bad” or “the negative.” (Resnick et al., 2001, p. 77)

If we take all of the above quotations from Aspinwall and Staudinger’s (2003a) edited book in concert as a discernable message, we may be tempted to think (with optimism) that the rapprochement some humanistic psychologists have called for (e.g., Rathunde, 2001; Resnick et al., 2001; Rich, 2001) is in reach.¹ I myself am not quite so optimistic, especially since positive psychology leaders Seligman and Peterson (2003) reiterated the movement’s dominant Message, with all its rhetoric of separatism/polarization, in *their* chapter (entitled “Positive Clinical Psychology”) in Aspinwall and Staudinger’s (2003a) book:

The science of positive psychology, as we see it, has three constituent parts: the study of positive subjective experience, the study of positive individual traits, and the study of institutions that enable the first two (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In this chapter we shall discuss possible changes that a science of positive psychology, if successful in becoming a discrete approach within the social sciences, would likely wreak on the field of clinical psychology. (p. 305)

The professional press of *APA Online*, the *Monitor on Psychology*, and the *American Psychologist* has reinforced the dominant Message (not least through announcements of Templeton Positive Psychology Prize winners). So has the extensive popular press coverage of positive psychology, where, for example, the positive psychology movement made the cover of the September 3, 2001, issue of the *U.S. News and World Report* and the September 16, 2002, issue of *Newsweek*. The professional press is seemingly no accident: As Eugene Taylor (2001) boldly proposed, “Seligman appeals to science but relies on public support through the prestige of his position in the APA” (p. 26). In due course, I give more examples of the press coverage. Just here note that in the science section of the *New York Times* on November 19, 2002, there was an article entitled “Power of Positive Thinking Extends, It Seems, to Aging.” The “it seems” is a clue; although one would never guess from this headline that about half of the article was devoted to research with

opposite findings: for example, “cheerfulness . . . was linked to shorter-than-average life span” (attributed to Dr. Howard S. Friedman), “older pessimists were less likely than the optimists to suffer from depression” (attributed to Dr. Derek M. Isaacowitz), “cantankerousness . . . has been found to be a protective characteristic among the elderly. . . . Those who were ornery and argumentative with the nursing home staff members lived longer than those who were not” (attributed to Dr. Morton A. Lieberman).

Is it fair to hold the movement’s leading members responsible for the way the press presents their message? I know of no objections from them to any of the press coverage, although some may be trying to mitigate the “tyrannical” tone of the dominant Message by claiming that the science that supports it is merely descriptive, not prescriptive (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003b, p. 18; Seligman, 2002a, pp. 129, 303). This, despite Seligman’s (2002a, pp. 130, 261) prescriptive inclinations. In any case, Snyder & Lopez et al. (2002) expressed concern about media hype in the final chapter of the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*:

In the excitement that may be associated with this new and invigorating approach, it may be tempting to overextrapolate so as to convey a sense of the progress that is being made. This can be even more possible when a person from the news media is almost putting words in our mouths about the supposed discoveries and advances that already have occurred. Contrary to this “breakthrough” mentality, however, science typically advances in the context of slow, incremental increases in knowledge. Therefore . . . researchers must be very careful to make appropriate inferences from their data. Claims that go beyond the data are never appropriate, and they can be especially damaging to the credibility of a new field. When one positive psychologist makes an unwarranted claim, this undermines the trustworthiness of all positive psychologists and the “movement” more generally. Accordingly, we must carefully monitor both our colleagues and ourselves. (pp. 754-755)

Which positive psychologists have made unwarranted claims? The authors do not say, but they sound like they have some in mind. At the least, they sound worried.

Aspinwall and Staudinger’s edited book nonetheless gives hope that a less separatist incarnation of the movement may be on the horizon. Chapters by Aspinwall and Staudinger, Carstensen and Charles, Cantor, Carver and Scheier, Ryff and Singer, and Larsen et al. all find virtue in giving negativity of one sort or another its due—for example, finding value in a focus on problems as well as

strengths, in (defensive) pessimism, in giving up, or in the coactivation of positive and negative emotions. These authors are critical of the dominant Message, as the quotations of them provided earlier indicate. But their more nuanced message is not, by my lights, the movement's dominant Message, at least not just yet: For example, in *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002a) himself finds little use for negative experience; there he remains a stance lacking in nuance, a stance I discuss in due course. And so, a fundamental question for some positive psychologists remains a technical one: how to get the negatively inclined (by nature, nurture, or both) to develop more positivity—for their own good. Yet some positive psychologists sometimes seem to have difficulty taking their own advice. As Taylor (2001) put it in discussing Seligman's now-famous dismissal of humanistic psychology (see Greening, 2001, p. 4; Seligman, 2002a, 2002b; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2001), "Seligman may have to cultivate a more positive attitude toward the very movement he now wishes to exclude" (p. 27). In his review of the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, M. Brewster Smith (2003) summed up the negativity to be found in positive psychology succinctly: "A substantial part of the message of positive psychology is negative" (p. 160).

MEANING 2: THE NEGATIVITY OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGISTS

I am coming to believe that lurking within the positive psychology movement there exists a dark side—a shadow of sorts—owing to a failure to acknowledge (its own) negativity. Because a case has been made for "The (Overlooked) Virtues of Negativity," first by critics of positive psychology (Held & Bohart, 2002) and now by a second-wave message from within the ranks of the positive psychology movement (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003b; Carstensen & Charles, 2003; Carver & Scheier, 2003; King, 2001; Larsen et al., 2003; Ryff & Singer, 2003), this is not necessarily bad. Negativity is, after all, a normal and at times adaptive aspect of human nature, and so the negativity even of positive psychologists may be said to have its virtues. The question, rather, is this: What are some positive psychologists negative about? To be sure, some are negative about negativity itself. And some are also negative

about the wrong *kind* of positivity. I call these “Negativity Type 1” and “Negativity Type 2,” respectively.

Negativity Type 1: Negativity About Negativity

On the surface, it appears that prominent positive psychologists hold balanced views about positivity and negativity. In *Learned Optimism*, Martin Seligman (1990) said one should not be a “slave to the tyrannies of optimism. . . . We must be able to use pessimism’s keen sense of reality when we need it” (p. 292). In *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002a) said, “Positive Psychology aims for the optimal balance between positive and negative thinking” (pp. 288-289). And he recently reported that, among the elderly, “extreme optimists may be more at risk for depressive symptoms than pessimists when faced with negative life events” (Isaacowitz & Seligman, 2001, p. 262). Christopher Peterson (2000) warned of the risks of unrealistic or blind optimism. He resolved that “people should be optimistic when the future can be changed by positive thinking but not otherwise” (p. 51). Lisa Aspinwall said, “It would be premature—and likely incorrect—to say that all positive beliefs and states are salutary” (Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002, p. 754). She later stated,

A second caution [in developing a psychology of human strengths] involves the possibility that there are situations and contexts where attributes or processes that work as strengths in one setting may be liabilities in another, and vice versa. . . . Among certain people . . . and in some non-Western cultures . . . pessimism has been found to be adaptive rather than dysfunctional, because it promotes active problem solving. (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003b, p. 18)

Despite these nods to negativity (and acknowledgment of the limits of positivity), when Seligman reportedly said in the *Monitor* that the positive psychology movement “does not replace negative social science and psychology, which are flourishing enterprises that I support” (Kogan, 2001, p. 74), his pledge of support failed to reassure. First, his professed support for so-called negative psychology is not the same as finding virtue in the experience of negative events and the expression of negative thoughts and feelings, virtue which is found by various authors in Aspinwall and Staudinger’s (2003a) edited book, who seem to be in search of a more dialectical approach to positive psychology. Finding virtue in

the experience/expression of life's negatives is not accomplished by Seligman, who sticks to the movement's nondialectical dominant Message in *his* chapter in that same book: "Positive emotion undoes negative emotion. In the laboratory, movies that induce positive emotion cause negative emotion to dissipate rapidly (Fredrickson, 1998)" (Seligman & Peterson, 2003, p. 306). Compare this message with the one given in Larsen et al.'s (2003) chapter, where the independence of positive and negative emotional systems is emphasized (Seligman himself acknowledges this elsewhere [2002a, pp. 56-57]), as is our need for an optimal balance in the coactivation of positive and negative emotional systems to attain beneficial health and coping outcomes when faced with stressors.

In *Authentic Happiness*, Seligman (2002a) reinforces his negative views about negativity, including the (defensive) pessimism and/or negative emotion in which Aspinwall and Staudinger, Cantor, and Larsen et al. find virtue. For example, he says, "Pessimism is maladaptive in most endeavors. . . . Thus, pessimists are losers on many fronts" (p. 178); "Positive emotion . . . has consequences that are broadening, building, and abiding. Unlike negative emotion, which narrows our repertoire to fight the immediate threat, positive emotion advertises growth" (p. 209); and "Depression readily spirals downward because a depressed mood makes negative memories come to mind more easily. These negative thoughts in turn set off a more depressed mood, which in turn makes even more negative thoughts accessible, and so on" (p. 210). He then goes on to make the case for an "upward spiral of positive emotion" (pp. 210-211). Larsen et al. (2003), by contrast, say we must keep negative emotions and memories of negative events in working memory long enough to organize and integrate them, which may allow individuals to "transcend traumatic experiences" and "transform adversity to advantage" (p. 213). This sounds to me like the potential for growth from engaging the negative that Seligman denies over and over.

Health psychology and longevity. One "trump card" of the positive psychology movement is the empirical link between positive affect and attitudes, on one hand, and health/longevity, on the other hand. Indeed, as described earlier, this research forms one foundation of the movement's dominant Message: Positivity is

good (for you), negativity is bad (for you). Even Larsen et al. (2003), in setting up their argument on behalf of the health and mental health benefits of the coactivation of positive and negative emotions, state that “one of positive psychology’s most impressive lines of research has examined the beneficial effects of optimism on health and well being” (p. 219). For instance, an article in the *Monitor* reported that Barbara Fredrickson, winner of the top Templeton Positive Psychology Prize in 2000, found that “positive emotions help undo the detrimental effects of negative emotions on the cardiovascular system” (Azar, 2000). And an *APA Online* (“Psychologists Receive,” 2002) press release reported that the top Templeton Prize in 2002 went to Suzanne Segerstrom, who found that “optimistic dispositions and beliefs” are linked to the “functioning of the immune system.” Here we find no hint of the second-wave, integrative message, such as the one given by Larsen et al. (2003). Exemplary of the popular press is this headline from the *Maine Sunday Telegram* (February 27, 2000): “Happier Means Healthier: Optimists Live Longer, and Optimism Can Be Cultivated.” And recall the *New York Times* (November 19, 2002) piece entitled “Power of Positive Thinking Extends, It Seems, to Aging.”

Particularly prominent are the much heralded findings of Shelley Taylor’s research team: Unrealistic optimism predicts greater longevity. According to Taylor et al. (2000),

HIV-seropositive gay men who were *unrealistically* [italics added] optimistic about the future course of their infection were better adjusted and coped more actively with their situation than those who were less optimistic. . . . *Unrealistically* [italics added] optimistic beliefs are associated prospectively with somewhat greater longevity. (pp. 102-103)

And so optimism, especially unrealistic optimism, is to be endorsed. (About the realism of the optimism, more later.) This, says the hermeneutic philosopher Charles Guignon (2002), is a good example of a particular strategy for justifying value claims:

Positing some set of nonmoral goods, such as physical health, longer life or subjective feelings of well-being, and then trying to show that the ideals in question are conducive to achieving or sustaining those goals. . . . Thus, a great deal of research on optimism, hope, altruism . . . aims at showing that there are clearly defined and precisely measurable outcomes from expressions of these traits. (p. 90)

To be sure, the waters are deeper than they seem, for there also exists research which contradicts the well-supported link between positivity and health/longevity. We have already considered Larsen et al.'s (2003) "coactivation model of healthy coping" (p. 217). Another example is Hybels, Pieper, and Blazer's (2002) finding that older women who are mildly depressed (i.e., they have a subthreshold level of depression) are more likely to live longer than nondepressed or more highly depressed women ($p = .002$). The relationship did not hold for men, although Friedman et al. (1993), who used a data set from a seven-decade longitudinal study begun in 1921 by L. M. Terman (Terman & Oden, 1947), reported that people (especially men) who were conscientious as children lived longer, whereas those who were cheerful as children (defined as optimism and sense of humor) died younger (also see Martin et al., 2002). Moreover, Friedman et al. (1993) emphasized the importance of attending to individual differences, by cautioning "against overgeneralizing from short-term studies of coping to long-term (life span) styles for reacting. Rather, analyses of the particular challenges faced by particular individuals during their life may provide better information about what it means to be healthy" (p. 184). Even positive psychologists David Watson and James Pennebaker (1989) questioned the link between positivity and health/longevity when they said that people high in "trait negative affect"

complain of angina but show no evidence of greater coronary risk or pathology. They complain of headaches but do not report any increased use of aspirin. . . . In general, they complain about their health but show no hard evidence of poorer health or increased mortality. (p. 244)

Given the large body of data that links positivity of various kinds to health and longevity (and negativity to illness), it would be foolish to make too much of these contradictory findings, except to question how such contradictory evidence is handled by spokespersons for the positive psychology movement. My point is that findings such as these tend not to become part of the dominant Message, which seems to me and others to eschew the dialogical impulse found in the movement's more nuanced/dialectical second-wave message and in the response of some humanistic psychologists to the dominant Message. Moreover, if longevity is, as Guignon (2002) suggests, positive psychologists' criterion for cultivating certain tendencies, then these new data should be taken seriously

by positive psychologists. But given Seligman's negativity about negativity, I would be surprised if Hybels et al. (2002) or Friedman et al. (1993) were to be considered for a Templeton Positive Psychology Prize for finding that some forms of negativity, or at least the absence of positivity, may be conducive to longevity.

Coping styles: The case of defensive pessimism. In her many research articles and in her book *The Positive Power of Negative Thinking*, Julie Norem (2001a, 2001b) provides compelling evidence for the benefits of the coping strategy known as "defensive pessimism." Defensive pessimists set their sights unrealistically low and think about how to solve potential problems in advance of the daunting task. Most important, Norem has found that defensive pessimism can work to enhance task performance for those riddled with debilitating anxiety. Her data are conclusive: Trying to make defensive pessimists function like strategic optimists, who set their sights high and prefer not to think about potential problems, erodes the functioning of defensive pessimists, as does trying to make strategic optimists function like defensive pessimists. In short, one size does not fit all. Because constructive coping is one of the positive psychology movement's alleged interests, one might expect positive psychologists to celebrate Norem's breakthrough findings as a positive contribution to coping. But celebration has hardly been their response.

Instead, Norem has typically either been ignored—she is not even cited, let alone given a chapter, in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002)—or she has been dismissed explicitly. For example, in the *Handbook*, Carver and Scheier (2002) and Watson (2002) speak of the possibility of changing those with negative temperaments (whether caused by genes, early environment, or both). Watson advocates focusing outward—doing rather than thinking, perceiving our goals to be important, and understanding the cycles of energy and lethargy we all experience (p. 116). Carver and Scheier cautiously advise cognitive-behavioral therapies to call attention to, challenge, and eradicate the irrational, "unduly negative," "automatic thoughts" in the minds of pessimists (p. 240). As they say, "Once the [pessimistic] beliefs have been isolated, they can be challenged and changed" (p. 240). (Although Carver and Scheier, 2003, also seem to question "the attempt to turn pessimists into optimists" [p. 89].) Never mind that Norem's defensive pessimism has been demonstrated reliably

to be a constructive coping strategy; Carver and Scheier incline toward an affirmative answer to their own question, “Is optimism always better than pessimism?” (p. 239). Although, to be fair, they seem here to be speaking of *dispositional* pessimism (which is trait like) rather than *defensive* pessimism (which is a domain-specific strategy to cope with anxiety). (Still, the two—dispositional pessimism and defensive pessimism—are moderately correlated, according to Norem, 2001a). In a previous article, Scheier and Carver (1993) certainly acknowledged that “defensive pessimism does seem to work,” in that defensive pessimists perform better than “real [i.e., dispositional] pessimists, whose negative expectations are anchored in prior failure” (p. 29). But they also went on to say that “defensive pessimism never works better than optimism” and has “hidden costs”: “People who use defensive pessimism in the short run report more psychological symptoms and a lower quality of life in the long run than do optimists. *Such findings call into serious question the adaptive value of defensive pessimism [italics added]*” (p. 29).

Norem readily admits that there are benefits and costs of *both* strategic optimism and defensive pessimism (Norem, 2001b; Norem & Chang, 2002). So we may ask why the negatives of defensive pessimism are considered *true* negatives, whereas the negatives of strategic optimism tend to be ignored by positive psychologists who compare *defensive* pessimism to *dispositional* optimism, instead of to *strategic* optimism, which is what Scheier and Carver appear to do in the quotations of them just above. After all, comparing defensive pessimism to strategic optimism would be the more appropriate comparison, given that Norem’s constructs are more situation specific than dispositional. Moreover, to appreciate the virtues of defensive pessimism, Norem and Chang (2002) say we must acknowledge the presence of the trait (or dispositional) anxiety that *precedes* the use of defensive pessimism. That is, although “strategic optimists tend to be more satisfied and in a better mood than defensive pessimists,” it would be mistaken to “conclude that strategic optimism is clearly better than defensive pessimism, even if defensive pessimists often perform well,” because this conclusion “ignores the crucial point that people who use defensive pessimism are typically high in anxiety” (p. 996). Thus, they say, we must “compare defensive pessimists to other people who are anxious but do not use defensive pessimism” (p. 997). When Norem and Chang make that comparison, they find that

Defensive pessimists show significant increases in self-esteem and satisfaction over time, perform better academically, form more supportive friendship networks, and make more progress on their personal goals than equally anxious students who do not use defensive pessimism. . . . This research converges with that contrasting strategic optimism and defensive pessimism to suggest quite strongly that taking away their defensive pessimism is not the way to help anxious individuals. (p. 997)

Yet taking away their defensive pessimism is what Scheier and Carver (1993, p. 29) seem to me to imply, in the spirit of the dominant Message.

There is cause for optimism nonetheless in the more integrative, less dismissive second-wave message: Editors Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003a) include a chapter by Nancy Cantor (2003), who cites the benefits of the defensive pessimism she herself researched with Julie Norem. Still, positive psychologists who continue to deliver the dominant Message of polarization to which humanistic psychologists rightly object (e.g., Resnick et al., 2001, p. 77) advocate the use of cognitive therapy to challenge and change the allegedly automatic *unrealistic negative* thoughts of pessimists. Seligman (2002a) himself advocates the “well-documented method for building optimism that consists of recognizing and then disputing pessimistic thoughts” (p. 93): “The most convincing way of disputing a negative belief is to show that it is factually incorrect. Much of the time you will have facts on your side, since pessimistic reactions to adversity are so very often overreactions” (p. 95). But what about the (automatic) *unrealistic positive* thoughts of optimists? (More about this in the next section.) These are not the target of challenge for positive psychologists. Indeed, Seligman extols the virtues of “positive illusions” (p. 200), owing to their salutary consequences: “It is [the job of Positive Psychology] to describe the consequences of these traits (for example, that being optimistic brings about less depression, better physical health, and higher achievement, *at a cost perhaps of less realism* [italics added]” (p. 129). Thus, the realism of the thoughts is evidently not the determining factor in this matter. And yet, positive psychologists of all stripes tout their dedication to rigorous science, with all the realism and objectivity such science bestows upon their claims. Moreover, Seligman, though actively promoting the power of positive illusions, also finds a “reality orientation” (p. 142) in everyday knowing to be virtuous. It therefore appears that there is equivocation

about realism itself, or “reality problems,” as I shall now call them, among positive psychologists.

Negativity Type 2: Negativity About the Wrong Kind of Positivity: “Unscientific Positivity” and Positive Psychology’s “Reality Problems”

The charge of unscientific positivity and the response of humanistic psychologists. Positive psychologists ground their quest for positivity in a modern/conventional science of psychology—with all the warrant and conviction that scientific realism and objectivity impart. As Sheldon and King (2001) define it in their introduction to the special section on positive psychology in the *American Psychologist*, “[Positive psychology] is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” (p. 216).² They liken the science of (positive) psychology to other “natural and social sciences” (p. 216). And in his introductory chapter in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Seligman (2002b) says, “[Positive psychology] tries to adapt what is best in the scientific method to the unique problems that human behavior presents in all its complexity” (p. 4). In both quotations, the science of (positive) psychology is set forth in conventional terms. There is, for example, no special antirealist/antiojectivist or postmodern meaning given to (positive) psychological science.

Moreover, the now-famous dismissal by positive psychologists of another movement grounded in positivity, owing to that movement’s alleged failure to attain scientific grounding, makes the point. In their introductory article in the January 2000 issue of the *American Psychologist* devoted to the positive psychology movement, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) acknowledged and appeared to praise the “generous humanistic vision” (p. 7) of the humanistic psychology movement. But they then went on to dismiss humanistic psychology as unscientific, lamenting its allegedly seminal role in the nonscholarly, nonscientific, and narcissism-promoting literature of the self-help movement that regrettably now dominates the psychology sections of our bookstores: “Unfortunately, humanistic psychology did not attract much of a cumulative empirical base, and it spawned myriad therapeutic self-help movements. In some of its incarnations, it . . . encouraged a self-centeredness that played down concerns for collective well being” (p. 7).

Bohart and Greening (2001) responded to this charge persuasively, by calling attention to the scientific research tradition and empirically warranted knowledge base of humanistic psychologists. About the charge of self-centeredness, they replied,

We wish that Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) themselves had done a more scholarly job of investigating humanistic psychology. Neither the theory nor practice of humanistic psychology is narrowly focused on the narcissistic self or on individual fulfillment. A careful reading of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow would find that their conceptions of self-actualization included responsibility toward others. . . . Blaming them for misinterpretations of their ideas makes no more sense than blaming Seligman for potential misinterpretations of his ideas on optimism (e.g., one could misuse this idea to blame the victim for not having the proper optimistic attitude to achieve self-improvement in the face of massive social oppression or injustice.³ (p. 81)

In their rejoinder, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2001) repeated their dismissal of humanistic psychology nonetheless by emphasizing positive psychology's dedication to "replicable, cumulative, and objective" science (p. 90): "We are, unblushingly, scientists first" (p. 89). Seligman (2002b, p. 7) reiterates this message in his introductory chapter in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*: "They [Allport, 1961; Maslow, 1971] somehow failed to attract a cumulative and empirical body of research to ground their ideas." And he does so again in *Authentic Happiness* (2002a): "The reasons for [humanistic psychology] remaining a largely therapeutic endeavor outside of academic contact probably had to do with its alienation from conventional empirical science" (p. 275). As Smith (2003) put it in his review of the *Handbook*, "He [Seligman] refers to the emphasis on positive functioning by Allport (1961) and Maslow (1971) but otherwise ignores humanistic psychology as not adequately based in research" (pp. 159-160). In my opinion, this dismissal can be understood in the context of positive psychology's dominant, separatist Message: If one claims that one's movement constitutes a "discrete approach within the social sciences" (Seligman & Peterson, 2003, p. 305), then one must eliminate competing approaches that can challenge that distinction. Because humanistic psychology cannot be eliminated on the basis of its focus on human potential and growth, another basis must be found. And so one was: its alleged failure to constitute a scientific enterprise.

In the special issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* devoted to positive psychology, Eugene Taylor (2001) rebutted “Seligman’s Three Marks Against Humanistic Psychology” (p. 17), namely, that humanistic psychology “generated no research tradition” (pp.17-21), that it “has created a cult of narcissism” (pp. 21-22), and that it is “antiscientific” (pp. 22-24). Regarding the latter, Taylor made this point:

After 1969 . . . the content and methods of humanistic psychology were appropriated by the psychotherapeutic counterculture, causing the humanistic movement in academic psychology to recede. . . . Seligman mistakes this group for the original personality theorists who led the humanistic movement for more than a quarter of a century in the academy and were concerned first and foremost with generating a “rigorous” research tradition—variously called personality, personology, and a science of the person (Allport, 1968; Rogers, 1964). (p. 23)

Along with Taylor, some in that same issue of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* defend the scientific status of humanistic psychology by challenging Seligman’s/positive psychology’s allegedly “reductionistic/positivistic” approach to knowledge acquisition, and by calling for more epistemological discussion/debate and self-reflection about how science should be conducted (e.g., Rathunde, 2001; Resnick et al., 2001). Although he lauds Seligman’s placement of the “discriminating person above the blind dictates of science” (p. 25), Taylor (2001) takes Seligman to task for failing to grasp the contradiction (of “injecting a value judgment into an allegedly value-free system”) that this placement carries in the context of his alleged adoption of a “reductionistic determinism” (p. 25):

The crux of the matter appears to be whether the scientist’s model of reality is a better substitute for reality than one’s personal experience. According to the humanistic viewpoint, one can only acquiesce to the equal power of both objective analysis and subjective experience when one’s theory becomes self-reflexive in a reexamination of what constitutes objectivity. Reductionistic epistemology may be required to launch a science, but in its mature phase, all sciences, even the most exact ones, must confront the underlying philosophical issues of the fundamental relation of the subject to the object. Seligman’s theories about positive psychology contain no such reflexive elements as yet, so the theory must be judged as still being in its infant stages.⁴ (pp. 23-24)

This call from humanistic psychologists for positive psychologists to reflect upon their own epistemological (and ontological) assumptions will be addressed in due course—although just here I confess little optimism about a positive response from Seligman to the humanists' call. In any case, the message of positive psychologists, both dominant and second-wave, is clear: A conventional/modern scientific realism/objectivism is central to positive psychology's claim to a new and improved approach to studying what is good or virtuous in human existence.

Positive psychology's "reality problems." Despite the call for a conventional scientific realism and objectivism and the dismissal of humanistic psychology owing to its alleged failure to adhere to that standard, some leaders of the positive psychology movement proclaim the virtues of having *unrealistic* optimism/expectations. Recall, for example, Taylor et al.'s (2000) report of the correlation between unrealistic optimism and greater longevity in HIV patients. Here, then, we may begin to explore the "reality problems" of positive psychologists: Positive psychologists stand their movement on the rock of scientific realism and objectivity when they make their truth/reality claims with all the conviction that scientific realism and objectivity warrant. But at the same time, they sometimes tout the benefits of holding beliefs that are themselves unrealistic. Although no contradiction emerges just yet, a double epistemic standard surely does: The standard of securing objective/unbiased evidence is necessary for warranting *scientific* knowledge but not *everyday* knowledge, which requires only a pragmatic standard of warrant, namely, whether one's beliefs have beneficial consequences (see Held, 2002b).

Positive psychologists could reply that the venerated scientific objectivity is limited to the empirical relationships that obtain between holding certain beliefs on one hand and well-being/longevity on the other hand. So it does not matter whether the (beneficial) *beliefs themselves* are objectively true or unbiased, so long as the *scientific findings* are assuredly so. In short, they might simply say (as in effect they do) that it is scientifically/objectively true that people benefit from holding beliefs that are themselves biased or not objectively true. (To the extent that scientific knowing depends upon objectivity in everyday knowing [see Held, 1995; Pols, 1992], what is to prevent the endorsed positive illusions from

infecting their scientific knowledge?) *But if the double epistemic standard poses no reality problems for positive psychologists, then why, we may ask, do they work hard to convince us that the positive illusions/optimistic bias they propound are not at odds with epistemological realism? What might motivate these efforts?*

Two answers to this psychological question seem possible, and they are not unrelated. First, by claiming that positive illusions/optimistic bias can be realistic, or at least not all that unrealistic, (a) the standard for *everyday* knowing then squares with (b) the standard for *scientific* knowing; the latter is, after all, what is said (repeatedly) to distinguish the movement from prior “positive psychology” movements, which are judged inferior scientifically. The double standard, though not itself contradictory, may also create discomfort by way of its link to a bona fide contradiction, one which provides a second possible answer to the psychological question of why positive psychologists insist on the realism of positively biased beliefs: (a) on one hand, positive psychologists proclaim the benefits of positive illusions and (unrealistic) optimism in the context of *everyday* knowing. Recall Seligman’s (2002a, p. 129) claim that optimism is good for us, even at a “cost perhaps of less realism.” Yet, (b) on the other hand, he also says that “learned optimism . . . is about accuracy” (p. 96) and that having a “reality orientation” in the context of *everyday* knowing is good. Seligman (2002a, p. 142) lists “judgment” and “critical thinking” as strengths (in everyday knowing) that give rise to the virtues of wisdom and knowledge: “By Judgment, I mean the exercise of sifting information objectively and rationally. . . . Judgment . . . embodies reality orientation. . . . This is a significant part of the healthy trait of not confusing your own wants and needs with the facts of the world.” Of course, part (b) of the second possible answer to my psychological question contradicts not only part (a) of that same answer, but also generates conflict between the objectivity that is required for scientific knowing and the positive (pragmatic) bias that is preferred for everyday knowing.

Here, evidence of arguments about the alleged realism of positive illusions and optimistic bias is in order. Snyder, Rand, King, Feldman, and Woodward (2002), for instance, say that if their “high-hope people” (who, according to Snyder, Sympson, Michael, & Cheavens, 2001, share some, but not all, features of optimists) are unrealistic, it is only mildly or slightly so:

We believe that high-hope people do make use of positive illusions that influence their views of reality . . . but that they do *not* [italics added] engage in *blatant* [italics added] reality distortion. . . . [Rather, they] *slightly* [italics added] bias that reality in a positive direction. It is useful to examine this “bias” in the context of Taylor’s (1983) work on positive illusions. . . . These *slight* [italics added] positive illusions include overly positive self-conceptions, an exaggerated perception of personal control, and an overly optimistic assessment of the future. (p. 1005)

Snyder et al. (2002) go on to say, “Having high hope means that a person may have a *slight* [italics added] positive self-referential bias, but *not an extreme* [italics added] illusion that is counterproductive” (p. 1007). Here, the qualifiers “slight,” “not blatant,” and “not extreme” are emphasized, whereas in the quotation of Taylor et al. (2000, pp. 102-103) presented earlier, no such qualifiers are used. There, Taylor et al. speak of “unrealistic optimism,” not of “slightly unrealistic optimism.” Moreover, Taylor and Brown (1988) spoke of “positive illusions” and “overly positive self-evaluations.” Contrary to Snyder et al. (2002), Taylor and Brown referred to these as “substantial biases” (p. 200). On the other hand, Taylor herself has also spoken of a “situated optimism,” one that stays within “reasonable bounds”: “Optimism, even unrealistic optimism, is not unreasonably so” (Armor & Taylor, 1998, p. 349). There evidently is some equivocation about just how unrealistic “unrealistic optimism” is. For example, Sandra Schneider (2001), in seeking a conceptual basis for “realistic optimism,” casts Taylor’s optimism on the extreme or unrealistic end of the spectrum, whereas Baumeister’s optimism is characterized by her as occupying a “middle ground,” owing to his call for “an optimal margin of illusion” (pp. 250-251). (To be sure, the question of just how much people distort reality positively, and the correlation between the degree of that distortion and optimal functioning, is, as Taylor and Brown demonstrate, an empirical one.)

Other positive psychologists have dealt with impending reality problems by going further: Those who have an optimistic bias are found not only to be realistic without qualification but also to have more wisdom. For example, Segerstrom said, “[Some say] optimists are naïve and vulnerable to disappointment when they come face to face with reality. My evidence suggests that optimists are not naïve; they are however, wiser in expending their energies” (“Psychologists Receive,” 2002). In the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*

(Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002), Lisa Aspinwall, who won a Templeton Positive Psychology Prize for her reformulation of optimism (Azar, 2000), said, “Happier and Wiser: Optimism and Positive Affect Promote Careful Realistic Thinking and Behavior” (p. 754), although she also acknowledged that not “all positive beliefs and states are salutary” (p. 754).

Even if it is indeed the case that an optimistic bias is pragmatically useful in coping with life, the psychological question remains: Why do positive psychologists work hard to convince that an optimistic bias and epistemological realism/objective knowing are not at odds? I have suggested two possible reasons, which may be summed up in this way: If positive illusions and optimistic bias are shown to be realistic in *all* senses—that is, they are not only *pragmatically useful* but are also objectively grounded—then reality problems owing to the double standard between everyday and scientific knowing are eliminated. So too is the contradiction of finding virtue (within the context of everyday knowing) both in having positive illusions and in having a reality orientation, because these then allegedly become one and the same. That is, if an optimistic bias is compatible (enough) with an objectivist epistemology, then any contradiction arising from the endorsement of objectivity in everyday knowing *and* the endorsement of a positive bias in everyday knowing can be said to be lessened, if not eliminated altogether.

SHOULD POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY ADOPT A (QUASI) POSTMODERN “SOLUTION” TO ITS REALITY PROBLEMS?

In an article entitled “In Search of Realistic Optimism: Meaning, Knowledge, and Warm Fuzziness,” which appeared in the March 2001 section of the *American Psychologist* dedicated to positive psychology, Sandra Schneider took the bull of positive psychology’s reality problems by the horns. To me, she sounds slightly postmodern, although I am quite certain that was not her intent. Her stated intent was to preserve the conceptual distinction between realistic and unrealistic optimism, and so, I think, to solve the reality problems I have just set forth. I do not think she succeeds in her intended mission, however, because she challenges the idea of objectivity itself, at least implicitly, a challenge that

undermines the scientific realism/objectivism of positive psychology. Of course, many postmodernists, especially radical social constructionists and constructivists, also challenge the idea of objectivity. But unlike Schneider and other positive psychologists, they reject all scientific realism and objectivity. Indeed, they happily dismiss even the possibility of objective knowledge of reality, often preferring a pragmatic standard of warrant (e.g., see Held, 1995, 1998, 2002a, 2002b).

Contrary to any such postmodern doctrine, Schneider (2001) commits herself to a form of realism both by affirming a conventional psychological science and by seeking a realistic form of optimism, an optimism that expressly incorporates attention to reality's constraints (which constraints are for her and others in the movement [e.g., Taylor, Aspinwall, Segerstrom], unlike for radical postmodernists/constructionists, presumably knowable with some objectivity). The latter she attempts by pleading the distinction between "fuzzy meaning," which "arises from interpretive latitude" (p. 252), and "fuzzy knowledge," which "arises from factual uncertainty or lack of information" (p. 253). But in defining realistic optimism, she conflates *epistemology* (which concerns the nature of knowledge and of knowing) with *ontology* (which concerns the nature of being or existence—of reality itself). Her conflation derives from insisting sometimes that *reality itself* is fuzzy (an ontological matter about existence), and at other times that *knowledge of reality* is fuzzy (an epistemological matter about knowing), or both. Regarding "fuzzy reality," she speaks of "the fuzzy nature of reality" (p. 251), "the fuzzy boundaries of reality" (p. 257), and of how "reality can be fuzzy" (p. 252). Regarding her conflation of "fuzzy reality" (ontology) with "fuzzy knowledge" (epistemology), she says that "reality is fuzzy in these instances [where we lack complete causal models] because of our uncertainty about the situation of interest" (p. 253). Notice here that it is our lack of *certainty/knowledge* (an epistemological matter) that literally *makes* reality itself fuzzy (an ontological matter).⁵ And she goes on to say, "One specific, objectively verifiable state of affairs may not exist and . . . even if it did [a (partly) ontological matter about existence], people might lack the necessary tools to become completely aware of it [an epistemological matter about knowing]" (p. 252).

Thus, Schneider makes her case for realistic optimism either by (a) eroding the concept of *reality itself* (p. 253), (b) diminishing our *cognitive access* to any existing reality (fuzzy or not), or (c) both of

these maneuvers. In seeing reality itself as so fuzzy/in flux that we often cannot get (nonfuzzy) access to it (p. 252), Schneider seems to align herself somewhat with the much more extreme philosophy of postmodernists/constructionists, some of whom (e.g., Fishman, 1999, p. 130⁶) defend their epistemological antirealism (the doctrine that we can have no objective or knower-independent knowledge of reality whatsoever) on the basis of their ontological views. But to whatever extent she leans in their direction, she also undermines the realism/objectivity necessary for the nonfuzzy knowledge (of nonfuzzy reality) that she uses to support her own truth/reality claims about the objective existence of a realistic form of optimism! Indeed, she subverts the objectivity of the modern/conventional psychological science claimed by positive psychologists to ground their movement (Held, 2002a).

To be fair, many postmodernists go much further than Schneider by seeming to eliminate all or much of reality's constraints in their quest for liberation and transcendence. The philosopher Charles Guignon (1998) summarized the appeal of such a radical constructionist/antirealist epistemology succinctly: "Part of the appeal, no doubt, lies in the exhilarating sense of freedom we get from thinking that there are no constraints on the stories we can create in composing our own lives. Now anything is possible, it seems" (p. 566). For example, constructionist therapist Michael Hoyt (1996) said, "The doors of therapeutic perception and possibility have been opened wide by the recognition that we are actively constructing our mental realities rather than simply uncovering or coping with an objective 'truth'" (p. 1) (for more quotations, see Held, 1995, 1998, 2002a).

Optimistic, antiobjectivist claims like the one quoted just above are not incompatible with reasons given by Schneider for a realistic form of optimism. However, there is more direct evidence of a convergence between positive and postmodern psychologies. One exemplary indication of positive psychologists' inclination to incorporate the postmodern psychology movement into their own appears in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002), which contains a chapter by constructivist movement leader Michael Mahoney (2002) entitled "Constructivism and Positive Psychology." There, Mahoney finds much in common between the two movements despite constructivism's explicit rejection of (and positive psychology's embrace of) the objectivist or realist epistemology of modern (psychological) science. The editor of the *Journal*

of *Constructivist Psychology* was clear about this when he said, "Like SC [social constructionism], constructivism takes as its point of departure a rejection of 'objectivist' psychologies, with their commitment to a realist epistemology, correspondence theory of truth, unificationist philosophy of science" (Neimeyer, 1998, p. 141). And working it the other way around, postmodernists Steven Sandage and Peter Hill (2001) explicate the ways in which an "affirmative" brand of postmodernism can help the positive psychology movement make its alleged "constructive move beyond some of the limitations of modernist psychology" (p. 242). Whether positive psychologists stand ready to accept this postmodernist antiobjectivist "help" remains to be seen. What strange bedfellows they would make! And so it seems odd indeed that in the *Handbook* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) we find a chapter by a leading proponent of postmodern antirealism but not by any humanistic psychologists, some of whose epistemologies would surely be more compatible with what positive psychologists propound (see Smith, 2003, p. 160) and to whose tradition positive psychology owes a debt.⁷ Of course, Seligman (2002a, 2002b; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, 2001) did not criticize postmodern psychology as he did humanistic psychology. In any case, I do not foresee him reversing himself by reaching for the helping hand that humanistically inclined psychologists have held out to positive psychologists, whether in a dialogical spirit of holism, dialectic, integration, cooperation, inclusion, and rapprochement (e.g., Follette, Linnerooth, & Ruckstuhl, 2001; Rathunde, 2001; Resnick et al., 2001; Rich, 2001) or with a modicum of indignation (e.g., Taylor, 2001, pp. 26-27).

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY'S
 "DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE":
 MORE FRAGMENTATION FOR PSYCHOLOGY?

Prescriptions for psychology's unification in response to its alleged fragmentation problem abound (e.g., Henriques, 2003; Slife, 2000; Staats, 1999; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2001; Wertz, 1999). Michael Katzko (2002) diagnoses psychology's fragmentation problem on two levels. On one level, science is viewed as a method of knowledge acquisition. Here, epistemic values prevail in the form of "implicit values concerning proper scientific conduct"

(p. 263). One example he gives of an epistemic value is the current tendency among researchers to emphasize the uniqueness or distinctiveness of their findings, a tendency that, Katzko says, results in relabeling phenomena in novel terms and thus in an exaggerated sense of theoretical disorder or fragmentation. On the second level, science is viewed as a society in which theories function as “a process of group formation” (p. 267). Here, for instance, ideology and social cohesion—the power of the movement—supplant the epistemic value of (open-ended) inquiry. This is a social/political, not an epistemic, value, and Katzko likens its expression more to religion and war than to science (cf. Gist & Woodall, 1998). He calls those who adopt this social value “scientist-warriors” rather than the “archetype of the scientist-explorer” (p. 268) in search of truth (cf. Haack, 1996). Katzko (p. 269) suggests it is important to keep the two values distinct rather than hiding behind the epistemic value while enacting the social value.

Although Seligman pays at least lip service to what he calls “negative psychology” and there is no reason to deny the honest search for truth among the legions of “scientist-explorers” within the positive psychology movement, he nonetheless heads a movement with great determination. He and other spokespersons for the movement have worked hard to differentiate their movement not only from humanistic psychology but from the rest of psychology (and social science) as well. Recall the separatist, polarizing rhetoric of his chapter in Aspinwall and Staudinger’s (2003a) edited book, where in the spirit of the dominant Message he defines positive psychology as a “discrete approach within the social sciences” (Seligman & Peterson, 2003, p. 305), even as authors of other chapters broadcast their more dialogical, second-wave message of holism and integration. So it should come as no surprise that in their concluding chapter of the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, editors Snyder and Lopez literally declared positive psychology’s independence: The chapter is entitled “The Future of Positive Psychology: A Declaration of Independence” (Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002, p. 751). There they speak of “Breaking Away” (pp. 751, 753, 764) and refer to what used to be the discipline of psychology as either the “weakness model” or the “pathology model,” in contrast to the “strength model” of positive psychology:

It is our view . . . that the first stage of a scientific movement—one that we would characterize as a declaration of independence from the pathology model—has been completed. The broader field now real-

izes that the positive psychology perspective exists. This handbook, which is built on our belief that a vital science and practice of positive psychology should grow alongside the science and practice of the pathology model, is yet another marker of this declaration of independence. (p. 752)

The chapters themselves may contain nuance—for example, in their chapter, Niederhoffer and Pennebaker (2002) say, “It is somewhat ironic that the writing [about traumatic experiences] paradigm is discussed as a feature of positive psychology. . . . Our paradigm encourages participants to dwell on the misery in their lives. We are essentially bringing inhibited or secret negative emotions to the forefront” (p. 581). But one would never glean this (dialectical) nuance from the editors’ rhetoric, which supports the dominant Message to which Niederhoffer and Pennebaker themselves seem to respond. Smith (2003) responded to the movement’s rhetoric of polarization more directly in his review of the *Handbook*:

Spokespersons for the movement naturally exaggerate its novelty. I think that advocates of primary prevention of mental illness had quite similar overlapping objectives in view, although their focus on mental illness sets off alarm bells to the more doctrinaire advocates of positive psychology. And here I have trouble with the way the latter polarize the contrast between their positive model and what they call the pathological, weakness medical model or ideology. . . . The repeated reference to the pathological, medical ideology in this handbook strikes me as evidence that the advocacy of some [of] the positive psychologists is more ideological than rational. (p. 162)

The rhetoric of some of positive psychology’s spokespersons sounds to me like what we might well hear from Katzko’s (2002) “scientist-warrior”: “A movement is defined by appropriating sets of beliefs as its exclusive domain” (p. 267), in which the staking and defending of territory rather than the search for similar meanings or “descriptive generalization” obtains (pp. 266, 268). Recall that so-called negative psychology and the weakness/pathology model did not exist *as such* until Seligman, in a bold act of social construction, so labeled and separated a large segment of the field. This zealotry of some spokespersons for the movement may in part account for what some perceive as the movement’s excessive or tyrannical aspects, especially its polarizing negativity about negativity and about all that went before (see Aspinwall & Staudinger,

2003b; Bohart & Greening, 2001; Carstensen & Charles, 2003; Held, 2002a; Smith, 2003; Taylor, 2001).

MEANING 3: THE WISDOM OF WILLIAM JAMES

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1902) devoted two lectures to “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness.” This religion is surely one forerunner of the positive psychology movement and, in my view, of the “tyranny of the positive attitude” in general, which may be a side effect of both culturewide and professional negativity about negativity, or Negativity Type 1 (Held, 2002a). These two lectures are followed by two lectures on “The Sick Soul.” Near the end of the second of these two lectures, James struggles with a difficult question:

We can see how great an antagonism may naturally arise between the healthy-minded way of viewing life and the way that takes all this experience of evil as something essential. To this latter way, the morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow. To the healthy-minded way, on the other hand, the way of the sick soul seems unmanly and diseased. . . . What are we to say of this quarrel? It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one’s self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. (pp. 162-163)

Positive psychologists might claim they do not deny “evil facts” of any sort, that they indeed look reality right in the eye when, for example, they strive to find “meaning in bereavement.” This meaning is alleged to be all the more virtuous, owing to the link between finding meaning (in adversity) and longevity (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 106). Positive psychologists might therefore agree that the unexamined life is not worth living, not least because it may mean a

shorter life, if not a meaningless one. But if they face the negative rather than deny it with “positive illusions,” as they now claim to do when they redefine their optimism as actually being quite realistic (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003b; Snyder et al., 2002; Snyder & Lopez et al., 2002), or when, in the emerging nondominant second-wave message, some embrace the potential for coping, health, and growth to be found in negative experiences (e.g., Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003b; Carstensen & Charles, 2003; King, 2001; Larsen et al., 2003; Ryff & Singer, 2003), then how (we may ask) are positive psychologists different from the negative psychologists from whom spokespersons for the positive psychology movement openly declare their independence? After all, when so-called negative psychologists study what is wrong with us, they do so in the positive hope of better living too. Whether negative psychology as construed by Seligman consists in (a) studying what is wrong with us or (b) finding virtue in the experience and expression of the negatives of life, if at least some positive psychologists have begun to advocate its inclusion in positive psychology, as I hope to have demonstrated, then perhaps those who disseminate this second-wave message are neither positive psychologists nor negative psychologists, but rather positive negative-psychologists or negative positive-psychologists. In either case, why not just call them psychologists? As Smith (2003) concluded about the movement, “Its success should result in its demise: Psychology in good balance would not need advocates for positive psychology” (p. 162).

William James found virtue in negative experience, as does his interpreter Jeffrey Rubin (2000), especially in discussing James’s “Three Principles That Provide an Alternative to Pathologizing” (p. 209) and his “Three Principles That Can Be Used When Pathology Terms Are Employed by Others so That the Negative Effects Associated With Their Usage Can Be Reduced” (p. 213). Of most relevance is Principle 2 of the latter: “When pathology terms are employed by others, argue against the simplistic notion that experiences assigned a pathological label by the pathologizers are really ‘bad’ experiences” (p. 215). Here Rubin describes the “valued fruits” that James found in what was taken to be negative or pathological. Rubin’s advice can be applied not only to Seligman’s term *negative psychology* and to his tendency to pathologize negative experiences in general, but also to my own term *the negative side of positive psychology*. Accordingly, I can now find in the movement’s second-wave message a third and more positive meaning of posi-

tive psychology's "negative side"—namely, the open acknowledgement and appreciation of the negative side of human existence/nature, a side that has heretofore been denied or dismissed by promoters of the movement's dominant Message. In this we have the inclusive, integrative, dialectical approach many psychologists have advocated since William James. And so this newer message gives me hope, including the hope that positive psychology will eventually acknowledge its debt to humanistic psychology (among other traditions) without equivocation, just as some positive psychologists now advocate the incorporation of negative human emotion and thought in the movement's science.

But if our field must remain divided along positive and negative lines, I prefer (apropos of James) to cast my lot with the negative psychologists. After all, Shakespeare's tragedies are no lesser plays than are his comedies, and his nuanced understanding of human nature, with all its seeming contradiction, has hardly gone uncredited.⁸ Making lemonade out of life's many lemons is certainly one way to make life meaningful, but it is surely not the only way.

NOTES

1. I am not claiming that the ideas expressed in Aspinwall and Staudinger's (2003a) edited book did not exist prior to their publication there, but rather that in virtue of their collection in this volume they have attained a critical rhetorical mass, one that rises to the level of a discernable message from some "faction" within the movement.

2. Sheldon and King (2001) seem to think that the focus on problems/negativity they find in conventional psychology results from "psychology's reductionist epistemological traditions, which train one to view positivity with suspicion, as a product of wishful thinking, denial, or hucksterism" (p. 216). They fail to see that reductionism favors neither positivity nor negativity, but rather (at least in its conventional meaning) the search for fundamental components/causes, which are often believed to be (molecular) biological or even particle physical. That is, the doctrine of reductionism is independent of any wish to emphasize human strengths or weaknesses. Moreover, they imply that positive psychology breaks out of psychology's "reductionist epistemological traditions," in virtue of studying strengths. But as Eugene Taylor (2001) argued, positivism (which he says underlies "the reductionistic epistemology of modern experimental science") is one of "Seligman's three meanings" of the word *positive* and constitutes a standard "Seligman invokes . . . regularly" (p. 15).

3. See Held (2002a, pp. 970-971) for more discussion of potential unintended consequences of positive psychology.

4. See Pols (1998) and Held (2002b) for discussion of how a type of self-reflection, that is, an inward agentic turn in the act of knowing, can help justify the human capacity for objective knowledge.

5. Schneider (2001) could defend this by claiming that our *knowledge* of reality (e.g., our discourse) determines or affects the reality we ultimately *get* (see Held, 1998), but she does not make this social constructionist argument.

6. As Fishman (1999) says about the pragmatic philosophy he propounds,

Philosophical pragmatism is founded upon a social constructionist theory of knowledge. The world that exists independently of our minds is an unlimited complex of change and novelty, order and disorder. To understand and cope with the world, we take on different conceptual perspectives, as we might put on different pairs of glasses, with each providing us a different perspective on the world. The pragmatic "truth" of a particular perspective does not lie in its correspondence to "objective reality," since that reality is continuously in flux. Rather, the pragmatic truth of a particular perspective lies in the usefulness of the perspective in helping us to cope and solve particular problems and achieve particular goals in today's world. (p. 130)

7. Apropos of this, in the issue of *JHP* devoted to positive psychology, there are articles by Laura King; by Kennon Sheldon, who like King won a Templeton Positive Psychology Prize and who with King coedited a section of the *American Psychologist* entitled "Why Positive Psychology Is Necessary" (Sheldon & King, 2001); and by Kevin Rathunde (2001), who "remains active in the positive psychology research network" (p. 135). Yet to my knowledge there are no chapters or articles by humanistic psychologists (writing *as such*) either in edited books about positive psychology or in special issues of the *American Psychologist* devoted to positive psychology.

8. According to literary critic William Watterson (personal communication, July 17, 2002), Shakespeare's comedies differ from his tragedies not by way of character but by way of generic principles governing closure: The tragedies end with destruction, disintegration, and death for the protagonist, whereas the comedies end with wealth, marriage, and living happily ever after.

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Reprint requests: Barbara S. Held, Department of Psychology, Bowdoin College, 6900 College Station, Brunswick, ME 04011; e-mail: bheld@bowdoin.edu.