

# IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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THE WISDOM OF IGNATIUS' *Spiritual Exercises*, as the 2006 Jubilee Year celebrations have reminded us, is over 450 years old. Yet Ignatius' extraordinary genius continues to lead individuals to a critical encounter with God that enables them to live joyfully in the plan of the Creator. Crucial to Ignatian spirituality is the practice of gratitude to God, as well as the set of habits which Christians know as virtues, and the character traits which Christians recognise as gifts of the Spirit.

In recent years, some influential empirical psychologists, initially in the USA but now in various parts of the world, have begun to take note of the gracious and grateful attention to life characteristic of Ignatian spirituality. Rather than centring their attention on problems and ill-health, they advocate what is called Positive Psychology. Their strategies focus on life's positive features rather than on the negative events assumed to be the root causes of depression or dysfunction. The chief proponent of Positive Psychology is Martin E. P. Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, a former president of the American Psychological Association, who defines Positive Psychology as a way of speaking of 'positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions'.<sup>1</sup> Seligman and his followers take issue with the dominant assumptions among their colleagues:

A science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless. The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living. Hope,

<sup>1</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman and others, 'Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions', *American Psychologist*, 60/5 (July-August 2005), 410-421, here 410.

wisdom, creativity, future mindedness, courage, spirituality, responsibility, and perseverance are ignored or explained as transformations of more authentic negative impulses.<sup>2</sup>

Ignatian spirituality seeks to help individuals ‘choose what is more to the glory of His Divine Majesty and the salvation of my soul’ (Exx 152). It too is in many ways positive in its approach to the world and the self, but it is rooted explicitly in the Christian understanding of God’s reality. Further, Ignatian spirituality is predisposed to Catholic terminology and teachings.

Both Positive Psychology and Ignatian spirituality have as a particular focus the freeing of the individual to engage the world in social commitment. Both, too, can be applied in group settings. While they diverge widely in their grounding and practice, each can be seen as assisting and informing the other. Positive Psychology researches how, why and under what conditions positive emotions, character traits and enabling institutions can flourish. Ignatian spirituality is concerned in its own way with these areas, and perhaps Positive Psychology can offer the Ignatian movement some useful techniques and resources. But in its concern for an explicit relationship with God, Ignatian spirituality is more than merely a therapeutic method.

This paper explores the areas of overlap between Positive Psychology and Ignatian spirituality. It begins by looking at how Positive Psychology has borrowed some of its *terminology* from Christian spirituality, and considers what this might imply. It then compares some of the *practices* of both these methods of human growth, exploring how Ignatian consolation and desolation might be related to the Positive Psychology concept of ‘flow’, and comparing what Ignatius and the Positive Psychology school say about gratitude. Finally it addresses a more general question: what is right and what is wrong with seeing Positive Psychology and Ignatian spirituality as secular and sacred versions of the same fundamental effort—the effort to free the individual for engagement with the world in social commitment?

<sup>2</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, ‘Positive Psychology: An Introduction’, *American Psychologist*, 55/1 (January 2000), 5-14, here 5.

### **Overlapping Terminologies**

Positive Psychology uses specific terminologies to describe its goals and its successes. The essential overall goal is 'happiness', which is defined as the absence of such clinical symptoms as depression, anger and withdrawal. The goal of 'authentic happiness', as presented by Seligman, is gauged by a 'happiness formula':  $H=S+C+V$ . 'H' refers to Enduring Level Happiness; it arises from an interaction of 'S' (the Set Range of inherited emotional traits), 'C' (Circumstances), and 'V' (Voluntary Control).<sup>3</sup> Seligman carefully distinguishes between 'momentary happiness' and an 'enduring level of happiness'. Transitory or momentary happiness is the result of transitory events or stimuli: a new article of clothing, a piece of chocolate, a funny film. Enduring happiness is more complex. It is not simply, despite the addition signs in the formula, an accumulation of emotional traits, circumstances and control. It occurs when we break out of 'S', the Set Range of traits, when we accept 'C', the Circumstances of our lives, and when we exercise whatever possible 'V', Voluntary Control, over these circumstances and emotions. This latter is especially important:

To the extent that you believe that the past determines the future, you will tend to allow yourself to be a passive vessel that does not actively change its course.<sup>4</sup>

Already we can begin to see both the overlaps and the differences between Positive Psychology and Ignatian spirituality. Individuals following Ignatian spirituality learn early on to distinguish transitory pleasures from the causes of genuine happiness, and to recognise the negative affections arising from specific unfreedoms, whether or not these are sinful. But they acquire these skills in a context of a growing grateful understanding of God's gifts. And the goal is not simply happiness, but rather the personal recognition of God's gifts and will that comes from careful attention to the pattern of consolations and desolations, both inside and outside times of formal prayer.

Positive Psychology involves 'exercises', through which individuals' habitual negative emotions can be positively and permanently changed,

<sup>3</sup> Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 45-61.

<sup>4</sup> Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, 66.

Core Virtues		Signature Strengths	
1	Wisdom and Knowledge	curiosity, interest in the world	1
		love of learning	2
		judgment, critical thinking, open-mindedness	3
		ingenuity, originality, practical intelligence, street-smartness	4
		social, personal and emotional intelligence	5
		perspective	6
2	Courage	valour and bravery	7
		perseverance, industry, diligence	8
		integrity, genuineness, honesty	9
3	Humanity and Love	kindness, generosity	10
		loving, allowing oneself to be loved	11
4	Justice	citizenship, duty, teamwork, loyalty	12
		fairness, equity	13
		leadership	14
5	Temperance	self-control	15
		prudence, discretion, caution	16
		humility, modesty	17
6	Spirituality and Transcendence	appreciation of beauty and excellence	18
		gratitude	19
		hope, optimism, future-mindedness	20
		spirituality, sense of purpose, faith, religiousness	21
		forgiveness, mercy	22
		playfulness, humour	23
zest, passion, enthusiasm	24		

often in conjunction with traditional therapeutic methods. While the term 'exercises' is not unique to Ignatian spirituality, the fact that psychologists have adopted both specific practices and the term demonstrates that modern psychology can recognise the soundness of Ignatius' foundations. At the present state of Positive Psychology's development, it involves six initial exercises that build on each other and foster key dispositions:

1. Three Blessings, teaching a person to be routinely grateful;
2. Gratitude Visit, helping the person to become profoundly grateful;
3. Savour a Beautiful Day, making the person more appreciative of creation;
4. Signature Strengths, developing self-appreciation;
5. Active and Constructive Friendship and Love, fostering positive other-directedness;
6. Meaning and Positive Service, promoting service outside the self.

Positive Psychology's proponents report empirical studies that demonstrate increased happiness after three to six months among those who follow this programme.<sup>5</sup>

Key to Positive Psychology is a classification proposed by Seligman and Christopher Peterson, according to which the 24 'Signature Strengths' can be grouped into six 'Core Virtues'. Peterson and Seligman report three empirical findings: adults worldwide report 'a remarkable similarity in the relative endorsement of the 24 character strengths';<sup>6</sup> US adults and adolescents report similar rankings; and, while a character strength is defined as something that 'contributes to fulfilment', the 'strengths of the heart'—zest, gratitude, hope and love—are more robustly associated with life satisfaction than are the more cerebral strengths such as 'curiosity' and 'love of learning'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Seligman and others, 'Positive Psychology Progress', 416. There are multiple ongoing studies.

<sup>6</sup> Seligman and others, 'Positive Psychology Progress', 411.

<sup>7</sup> Seligman and others, 'Positive Psychology Progress', 412; see also Nansoon Park, Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, 'Strengths of Character and Well-Being: A Closer Look at Hope and Modesty', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 23/5 (2004), 628-634.

# FAITH & HOPE & CHARITY

The 'Core Virtues' and 'Signature Strengths' of Positive Psychology can find some correlation in the terms of Christian spirituality. The six 'Core Virtues', defined by Positive Psychology in secular terms, are: (1) Wisdom and Knowledge; (2) Courage; (3) Humanity and Love; (4) Justice; (5) Temperance; (6) Spirituality and Transcendence. These terms correspond somewhat to several traditional terms of Christian spirituality, particularly the Theological Virtues (Faith, Hope and Charity), the Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude), and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit (Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and the Fear of the Lord).

However, while the words used may be the same, the meanings they carry for scientists interested in Positive Psychology and for those pursuing spirituality may diverge considerably, essentially because psychology is rooted in an appeal to reason, whereas authentic Christian spirituality is grounded in a recognition that all depends on God. Hence a term like 'gratitude' has richer, more specific nuances in Christian spirituality, arising from a sense that all things depend for their very existence on a creator God. When empirical scientists investigate what a person says about the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, they simply note the statement and proceed as if the terms meant what the client believes or needs them to mean. But within a religion the question of truth has to be raised. Talk of faith implies the question: 'faith in what?' At least in conventional settings, the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises involves a specific form of faith: faith in the teachings of the Catholic Church. Because these teachings necessarily involve a particular understanding of the nature of God, and especially of the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, one can transfer the dynamic of the Exercises to other religious belief systems, or to a wholly secular system, only up to a point.

Each of the six 'Core Virtues' includes one or more of the 24 'Signature Strengths'. When, therefore, Positive Psychology speaks of its third 'Core Virtue' as Humanity and Love and names the 'Signature

Strengths' of Kindness and Generosity and Loving and Allowing Oneself to be Loved, what is being said does not fully conform to the Christian understanding of *caritas*, Charity. The most we can say is that there may be some overlap, or that Humanity and Love could be included within *caritas*. Similar points can be made about the Cardinal Virtues: there is some convergence with the fourth and fifth 'Core Virtues' of Justice and Temperance, and their associated 'Signature Strengths' such as Loyalty, Self-Control and Modesty—but the Christian terms are richer, and presuppose a whole framework of belief. Again, the traditional classification of the Gifts of the Spirit corresponds roughly to the 'Signature Strengths' associated with the first and second 'Core Virtues': Wisdom and Knowledge and Courage. A person rich in these Core Virtues will show an interest in the world, a love of learning, open-mindedness, intelligence of various sorts, valour, diligence and integrity. But there is little in Positive Psychology's classification that coincides with the gifts of Piety and of the Fear of the Lord, both of which presuppose a quite definite Christian conception of faith. Positive Psychology's sixth 'Core Virtue' is indeed called Spirituality and Transcendence, and its 'Signature Strengths', such as Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Sense of Purpose, Forgiveness, Humour and Enthusiasm, echo themes in much spiritual writing. But these 'Signature Strengths' are not necessarily to be equated with Christian virtues, with habits of behaviour informed by Christian belief. On the contrary, the realities denoted may be very different. Indeed, as Positive Psychology uses the language of Christian virtue in abstraction from Christian belief and practice, it may be providing a rationale for the increasingly popular notion that one can be 'spiritual' without being 'religious'.

### **Practices**

Central to Positive Psychology is the identification and refinement of the 'Signature Strengths'. Through this mechanism individuals regain or retain self-worth in ways that overlap to some extent with the practices of Ignatian spirituality, and invite comparison. There are other features, too, of Positive Psychology that demonstrate striking similarities with Ignatian practice. We can look, for example, at the initial exercises mentioned above: Three Blessings; Gratitude Visit;

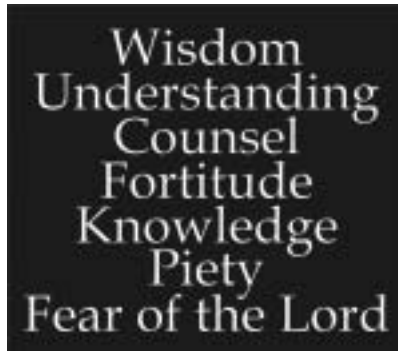
Savour a Beautiful Day; Active and Constructive Friendship and Love; and Meaning and Positive Service.

### *Three Blessings*

Ordinarily, the Three Blessings is the first of the Positive Psychology exercises. Each night before retiring, the individual is asked to write down three things that have gone well during the day just completed, and also to note why they have gone well. After a week has passed, the exercise continues, but the actual writing becomes optional. Individuals report an increased facility in recognising and remembering positive events and, within three to six months, an overall increase in happiness. More statistical studies by graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania reveal that depressive symptoms decrease. The Three Blessings exercise has obvious similarities with the Ignatian Examination of Consciousness, which is rooted in the expression of gratitude to God for the gifts and blessings of the day.<sup>8</sup>

### *Gratitude Visit*

In the second Positive Psychology exercise, the Gratitude Visit, individuals are directed to recall someone who was a positive influence on



them earlier in their lives. In particular, and if appropriate, they are asked to remember someone whom they have not properly thanked and who is still alive. The exercise comprises writing down a three-hundred word testimonial about how that person has touched their lives, then making contact with the individual and visiting him or

<sup>8</sup> Exx 43. The steps of the Examen can be understood as: 1) ask the Holy Spirit's assistance in reviewing the day; 2) look at the day in gratitude and give thanks for its gifts; 3) ask the Spirit's assistance in looking at the response to God's gifts; 4) review the day, attempting to note and feel interior freedoms and lack of freedom; 5) seek reconciliation and make a resolution. The Examen ends with the 'Our Father'. See Phyllis Zagano, 'Examen of Consciousness: Finding God in All Things', *Catholic Update* (March 2003), <http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/CU/ac0303.asp>.



her in order to read the testimonial aloud. The results are predictable, and touch both parties.

The key point of convergence here with Ignatian spirituality is the notion of profound gratitude. Positive Psychology focuses on gratitude to one person. But the Spiritual Exercises, though they certainly direct exercitants towards the recognition of personal interdependence in their lives, do so within a wider context of gratitude to God. While Seligman's research shows that the most grateful people are the happiest people, Christian spirituality usually recognises the most grateful people as the holiest people. The difference between the two, of course, is belief in the centrality of God in personal existence.

This is not to say that Seligman's categories and practices are godless, or that one must renounce belief in any system before engaging in Positive Psychology practices. Rather, these practices can be viewed as secular—and therefore somewhat diminished—correlatives to older religious practices.

#### *Savour a Beautiful Day*

The third Positive Psychology exercise, *Savour a Beautiful Day*, involves setting aside a block of time, whether an hour or a day, and spending that time engaging in favourite activities. The exercise requires that the time be strictly blocked off, and that nothing be allowed to interfere with it. When the appointed time arrives, the individual is to engage in only that activity—whatever it is—without interference. More significantly, the person is not to feel any guilt about it. Instead, he or she is to 'savour' it. Positive Psychology posits that such pleasurable activity, deliberately and knowingly enjoyed, can instil a habit of enjoyment. And this habit can promote the enduring happiness that is the goal of Positive Psychology.

Strictly setting aside a block of time in this way is reminiscent of Ignatius' advice (Exx 13), but it is here that Positive Psychology most clearly diverges from Ignatian spirituality. While the rationale of the 'Savour a Beautiful Day' exercise is deceptively close to the grace of gratitude aimed for at various points in the Spiritual Exercises, the omission of any equivalent to the Principle and Foundation represents a striking and significant difference. Against the background of the Principle and Foundation, with its vision of all life and all creation as directed towards life with God, and its insistence that that the point applies also to the exercitant's own personal life, 'Savour a Beautiful

Day' can be criticized as empty and meaningless, as merely about enjoyment. In the therapeutic setting, 'recovery'—or, in the terms of Positive Psychology, 'happiness'—may well be dependent on a person's acquiring the ability to enjoy creation—including and especially the creation of his or her own self. But in the long term mere enjoyment is not enough and neither does it last.

*'Signature Strengths'*

A fourth exercise focuses specifically on developing the 'Signature Strengths' already mentioned. Participants are invited to identify and own their 'Signature Strengths' more fully by finding new and more frequent uses for them, and by considering how these strengths could be used to improve difficult situations.

Again, there are questions about emphasis and purpose. Positive Psychology encourages people to nurture their 'Signature Strengths' in order to enhance interpersonal relations and personal happiness, not as a by-product but as a goal, whereas the crucial point of Ignatian spirituality, indeed of all Christian spirituality, is to serve God and God's creation. Positive Psychology can appear as a self-seeking and self-serving process aimed simply at obtaining individual and interpersonal happiness; it does not clearly name the end for which such progress is sought other than 'happiness'. Christianity involves facing the question of ultimate confrontation with God; it also sees lifelong happiness as a matter of people living in accord with God's will for them.

By contrast, a programme of Positive Psychology training available on the internet speaks much more of the individual's efforts. The goals are those of self-improvement:

This personalised program empowers you to take control over life's challenges and adversities. First you will measure the characteristics that make up resilience, and get insight into your areas of strength and weakness. Then you are taught how to apply the 7 Skills of Resilience to help you overcome obstacles, steer through day-to-day adversities, bounce back from major setbacks, and reach out to achieve all of which you are capable. The tested results have

helped thousands of people increase their happiness, productivity, success, and balance in their lives.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after the beginning of the Positive Psychology movement, Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi collected fifteen articles in a special issue of *American Psychologist*. These pieces reflected on what made experiences, personalities, communities and institutions 'positive'. Each in their own way addressed the claim that 'the basic building block of a positive psychology' was pleasure—or, more technically, 'the hedonic quality of current experience'.<sup>10</sup> In particular, Ed Diener developed his earlier work on the identification and measurement of subjective well-being.<sup>11</sup> Spirituality—at least in these studies—was only glanced at.<sup>12</sup>

#### *Active and Constructive Friendship and Love*

The point of the fifth Positive Psychology exercise, 'Active and Constructive Friendship and Love' (also termed 'Active and Constructive Responding'), is to help individuals respond more constructively and actively to positive events in their lives. That is, the individual must learn to accept what goes well and learn why and how the event went well. Again, there is overlap here with spiritual direction: in direction, too, the individual might well be encouraged to recognise where there has been positive energy or activity. But again too, a religious discussion of these responses will focus on the acceptance of God's creation of the individual, and on the individual's response to God's graces in a given situation.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.reflectivehappiness.com/AboutUs/ResilienceOnline.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Kahneman, 'Objective Happiness', in *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, edited by Daniel Kahneman, Ed Diener and Norbert Schwartz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 3-25.

<sup>11</sup> Ed Diener, 'Subjective Well-Being: The Science of Happiness and a Proposal for a National Index', *American Psychologist*, 55/1 (January 2000), 34-43. See also Ed Diener, Eunkook M. Suh, Richard E. Lucas and Heidi L. Smith, 'Subjective Well-Being: Three Decades of Progress', *Psychological Bulletin*, 125/2 (1999), 276-302.

<sup>12</sup> Diener writes: 'Certain coping strategies are consistently related to higher SWB [Subjective Well-Being]. For example, Folkman (1997) found that spiritual beliefs, giving ordinary events a positive meaning, positive reappraisal, and problem-focused coping were all related to positive states in HIV caregivers.' See Susan Folkman, 'Positive Psychological States and Coping with Severe Stress', *Social Science and Medicine*, 45/8 (October 1997), 1207-1221.

*Meaning and Positive Service*

The last of the six Positive Psychology exercises, 'Meaning and Positive Service', overlaps with Christian social commitment. Within the terms of Positive Psychology, the exercise seeks to help the individual find a higher purpose and meaning outside the self. Christian spirituality, for its part, would raise questions about motivation. The donation of time and effort to a cause has positive spiritual value only when the donation is selfless. If a person engages in service only for the sake of personal happiness, the activity is essentially self-centred, and empty of value. Clearly, ulterior motives will often be present when people undertake 'Positive Service' (usually a combination of tax breaks and feel-good); these should not be denied or condemned out of hand. But it is central to the Christian practice of virtue that both the individuals concerned and those who help them by providing such services as spiritual direction constantly question the motives for action. Mere engagement in service is a spiritual trap. Dorothy Day recounts an encounter she once had when enquiring from a social services agency about possible housing for homeless families. She sat for two hours until finally she introduced herself to one of the workers. The worker apologized for letting her wait, explaining he had thought she was 'just one of the clients'.<sup>13</sup>

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***Interpersonal and Impersonal Relationships***

One key to the Spiritual Exercises in particular, and to Ignatian spirituality in general, is the relationship between the director and the directee, even though the Spirit is clearly the ultimate director. Human contact plays an important role, in a way that stands in stark opposition to the impersonal activities of Positive Psychology. Both Ignatian spirituality and the exercises of Positive Psychology depend for their effectiveness on the individual's long-term commitment. But Positive Psychology often lacks any interpersonal teaching component; it can easily become, literally, a programme of self-help. Its proponents clearly intend to reform the general practice of psychology, and to enhance therapeutic relationships by encouraging a focus on the

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 79.

positive and by stressing what is going right rather than what is going wrong. But the fact that Positive Psychology is disseminated to a considerable extent through the internet, with automated responses being given to people through websites, distances it from traditional therapeutic practices, let alone from Ignatian spirituality. Moreover, because Positive Psychology is often not dependent on an interpersonal therapist-client relationship, it can be difficult to assess its possibilities and its impact.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Ignatian Spirituality and 'Flow'***

One of the founders of Positive Psychology likens the notion of 'flow', as defined within Positive Psychology, to features of Ignatian spirituality. The Spiritual Exercises aim to ground individuals in the acceptance of God's creation and graces, and to train people to recognise the movements of the Spirit as God is inviting them to fuller forms of life and relationship. What marks out an individual as a Christian in the spirit of Ignatius is a sensitivity to moments of consolation and desolation, a growth in true discernment, and hence an absolute openness to the will of God.

Within Positive Psychology the claim has been made that the early rapid organization of the Society of Jesus, facilitated in part by the Spiritual Exercises, exemplifies a 'shared optimal experience' or 'flow'.<sup>15</sup> For Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'flow' occurs when,

... all the contents of consciousness are in harmony with each other and with the goals that define the person's self.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The following disclaimer appears on the 'Reflective Happiness' website: 'The Happiness Building Exercises have been demonstrated in the scientific literature to relieve depressive symptoms and to increase happiness, but the Reflective Happiness Exercises or Program are NOT a therapy for depression, nor are they a substitute for therapy or for medication. All scientific demonstrations of effectiveness are statistical. This means that the large majority of people benefit, but some people may not. Your privacy will not be invaded. Your responses are privileged and private.' (<http://www.reflectivehappiness.com/Happiness/Program.aspx>)

<sup>15</sup> 'This is the condition we have called psychic negentropy, optimal experience, or flow. It obtains when all the contents of consciousness are in harmony with each other and with the goals that define the person's self.' (Isabella S. Csikszentmihalyi 'Flow in a Historical Context: The Case of the Jesuits', in *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies in Flow in Consciousness*, edited by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella S. Csikszentmihalyi [New York: Cambridge UP, 1988], 232-248)

<sup>16</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'The Flow Experience and its Significance for Human Psychology', in *Optimal Experience*, 15-35, here 24.

Csikszentmihalyi first reported the concept of 'flow' in 1975 while studying boredom and anxiety, and since then he and his colleagues have undertaken detailed scientific study of 'flow'-like experiences.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of 'flow' emerged from interviews in which people described optimal experiences in terms of the metaphor of being carried along in a current. Csikszentmihalyi lists eight components of enjoyment within the 'flow' experience:

- (1) the task is challenging and requires skill;
- (2) we concentrate on what we are doing;
- (3) the task has clear goals;
- (4) the task provides immediate feedback;
- (5) there is effortless involvement;
- (6) we have a sense of control;
- (7) our concern for self disappears;
- (8) the sense of duration of time changes as hours feel like minutes.<sup>18</sup>

Can we regard the Spiritual Exercises, and the daily Examen, as means to increase personal openness to experiences of 'flow'? Might 'flow' allow one to be more open to the movements of the Spirit? Perhaps, for all that there are major differences between Ignatian spiritual ministry and the training offered by Positive Psychology, one can speculate that Ignatian disciplines may enhance the possibility of 'flow'-like experiences, and that there are parallels between these and the secular techniques of Positive Psychology. Perhaps, too, there are affinities between 'flow' and the increase in felt experience of the theological virtues, faith, hope and love, that lies at the foundation of Ignatian consolation.

<sup>17</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 1975); *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper, 1990); 'Learning, Flow and Happiness', in *Invitation to Lifelong Learning*, edited by Ronald Gross (New York: Follet, 1982), 167-187; 'The Flow Experience', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, volume 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 361-363.

<sup>18</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 49.

### ***Gratitude, Secular and Spiritual***

It also seems that Positive Psychology and Ignatian spirituality can learn from each other as regards the understanding of gratitude. Several years ago in this journal, Jesuit psychologist Charles Shelton offered a psychology of gratitude within the context of the Spiritual Exercises. In so doing he warned against the over-idealization of gratitude. Shelton reported three constituents of any experience of gratitude emerging from a survey of more than a hundred people:

- Someone offers a gift: the recipient may be under some obligations or duty, but the sense of gift goes somehow beyond this;
- The one who receives the gift interprets the giver's altruistic motives correctly;
- The gift triggers positive feelings in the one receiving, and often leads them, in their turn, to offer a further gift—either back to the giver or onward to some third party.

On this basis, Shelton suggests that gratitude is a 'self-renewing dynamic of gift and goodness' and 'that gratitude is the giving away of goodness'.<sup>19</sup>

In a later piece, a contribution to *Psychology of Gratitude*, a Positive Psychology book, Shelton reflects as a psychologist on gratitude specifically within the context of an Ignatian retreat. He reports that his psychological training, combined with an understanding of virtue ethics, helps him to be alert to an over-idealizing gratitude. He writes:

I have witnessed retreatants concluding their retreats with a fresh perspective on the world in which everything is viewed as a gift for which the person feels gratitude. However, such optimistic exuberance sometimes covers up or gives an overly optimistic interpretation of issues needing to be addressed, such as personal pathologies that are often crippling, relationships that are unhealthy, or naïve perceptions of a complex world that need reappraisal.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Charles M. Shelton, 'Graced Gratitude', *The Way*, 42/3 (July 2003), 138-150.

<sup>20</sup> Charles M. Shelton, 'Gratitude: Considerations from a Moral Perspective', in *Psychology of Gratitude*, edited by Robert A. Emmons and Michael E. McCullough (New York: Oxford UP, 2004), 259-281, here 263-264.

Psychological understanding of a positive emotion such as gratitude can serve to promote a healthy and questioning realism about spiritual experiences.

### ***Practical Considerations and Applications***

Positive Psychology speaks of ‘enabling institutions’, and religious spirituality—or religion—can be clearly considered as one of these. Equally, the positive emotions and character traits of Positive Psychology correspond only in part to the traditional Christian virtues, or to the gifts of the Spirit. How far can we go towards regarding Ignatian spirituality as a Christian expression of Positive Psychology, and Positive Psychology as a secular version of Ignatian spirituality?

We have noted how a psychological understanding regarding a positive emotion such as gratitude can enable us to ground our talk and experience more fully in reality. Could Positive Psychology’s insights regarding other positive emotions help us in a similar way, informing spirituality without trivialising it or introducing a conflict? Conversely, could some features of Ignatian spirituality, such as the Examen, enhance the development and expression of positive emotions and ‘Signature Strengths’? These are questions worth researching. There are rich possibilities here for character development, mental health, and spiritual formation.

Let us imagine, for example, a person engaged with Positive Psychology who also practises the Ignatian Examen. Sensing similarities between the Positive Psychology practice of reviewing the day through gratitude and the Ignatian practice of the Examen, the person experiments with recollecting the day based upon the use of his or her ‘Signature Strengths’. Perhaps the person takes the ‘Signature Strength Questionnaire’,<sup>21</sup> and achieves high scores in one ‘Core Virtue’—let us say (1) Wisdom and Knowledge—and in particular regarding ‘Signature Strength’ (1): Curiosity and Interest in the World. Perhaps the profile includes two ‘Signature Strengths’ in Core Virtue (6) Spirituality and Transcendence: (18) Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, and (24) Zest/Passion/Enthusiasm. As the person uses the questionnaire to become aware of these ‘Signature

<sup>21</sup> Available at <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/>.



Strengths', he or she can reflect upon the day's activities in terms of personal use of these gifts. The individual can recall moments in the day when these 'Signature Strengths' allowed 'flow', be grateful for the others who have helped, and recognise God's presence throughout the day, even when, and perhaps especially when, there was no personal 'flow'.

By using Positive Psychology's ideas in the context of the Examen, this person can perhaps more readily identify the use or non-use of personal psychological gifts and spiritual charisms. The Examen's focus on spiritual movements is enriched by an explicit attention also to personal psychological strengths. And of course the same interaction can occur when

it comes to unfreedoms, weaknesses and sinfulness. Though it is important never simply to confuse grace and nature, they remain inseparable; indeed, grace builds on nature.

Equally, we need to bear in mind all that has been said about Christian spirituality's ambivalence regarding the simple pursuit of happiness, and its discouragement of a preoccupation with personal self-development. One might regard Positive Psychology as encouraging a form of Pelagianism, the belief that the self can form and reform its nature without recourse to the grace of God. Moreover, a Christian sense of the reality of moral evil may lead us to qualify Positive Psychology's implicit assumption that whatever happens in life allows for the experience and expression of positive emotions and strengths. If Christians appropriate Positive Psychology,



they must nevertheless remain open to the paradox of Christ's message, to the claim that the surrender of personal fulfilment proves to be the truest teleology. 'Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' (Matthew 10:39)<sup>22</sup>

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