

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND ITS FRIENDS: REVEALED

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Positive psychology is the subject of debate. It has received significant criticism, to which its defenders have naturally reacted. Above all, this article, attempts to establish reasons for criticizing the bases of Positive Psychology itself: positivity and scientism. Against the strong emphasis on the benefits of positive affects, studies show that negative affects can be positive, just as positive affects can be negative. Positivity is not the positive side (because there is no such side). What Positive Psychology says it has found out scientifically about happiness does not seem to be anything that was not already known. Even its best theories, such as the Positive Activity Model and the Broaden-And-Build Theory are impressively trivial and plagued by tautologies. The clear fallacy of the positivity ratio is also shown. Finally, it is suggested that happiness is not sustainable as a principle of life (its pursuit is not universal nor the best thing to do in life) or as a scientific goal, unless at the cost of reifying the subjective experience.

Key words: Positive psychology, Happiness, Broaden-and-Build Theory, MacGuffin.

La Psicología Positiva está en debate. Ha recibido importantes críticas, a las que reaccionan sus defensores, como es natural. El presente artículo trata, más que nada, de establecer las razones de una crítica dirigida a los fundamentos mismos de la Psicología Positiva: la positividad y la cientificidad. Frente al marcado énfasis en los beneficios de los afectos positivos, los estudios muestran que los afectos negativos pueden ser tan positivos, como negativos pueden ser los afectos positivos. La positividad no está del lado positivo (porque no hay tal lado). Tocante a lo que la Psicología Positiva dice saber científicamente de la felicidad, no parece ser nada que no se supiera. Incluso las mejores teorías, como el modelo de actividad positiva y la teoría de la extensión-y-construcción impresionan por sus trivialidades según están plagadas de tautologías. Notable es también la falacia demostrada de la ratio de positividad. Finalmente, se plantea que la felicidad no es sostenible como principio de vida (su búsqueda no es universal ni lo mejor que hacer en la vida), ni como objeto científico, como no sea acosta de hipostasiar la experiencia subjetiva.

Palabras clave: Psicología positiva, Felicidad, Teoría de la extensión-y-construcción, MacGuffin.

This article was motivated by Carmelo Vázquez's article in the previous issue of *Papeles del Psicólogo* entitled, "La psicología positiva and sus enemigos: una réplica en base a la evidencia científica" (Positive psychology and its enemies: a reply based on scientific evidence) (Vázquez, 2013), which was, in turn, motivated by an earlier article of mine entitled "La psicología positiva: magia simpática" (Positive psychology: A nice magic) (Pérez Álvarez, 2012), which, in his words, were a "disproportionate" and "passionate" critique of Positive Psychology (PosPsy). Certainly, my critique of PosPsy is *radical*: complete and getting to the root, but not perhaps disproportionate with respect to what it merits, or unreasonably passionate.

It is radical because it gets down to the very roots of PosPsy in an attempt to show that it may be no more than the latest flowering of an American religious tradition, an

alliance with latest-generation consumer capitalism. A "typically American" psychology. And *complete* insofar as it touches on the scientific and empirical basis of PosPsy, as the supposed science of happiness. Radical here does not mean categorical or dissolvent, assuming that there is nothing good about PosPsy or proposing to throw it out the window.

Within this, as I conceive it, my critique is noble, because having taken PosPsy seriously, it attempts to make a critique (screening and discerning) very typical of scientific and philosophical questioning, knowing that philosophy is a friend to knowledge, not the "enemy". Another thing is whether that critique is correct or liked more or less. I also understand that critiques such as this are very appropriate for a journal like *Papeles del Psicólogo*, which has a section devoted precisely to "comparing opinions" and "discussions" (Forum). Any attempt at removing discussions such as this from "a space for legally practicing psychologists", under the pretext that "it should watch out for the good name of

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psychology and its professionals,” (Vázquez, 2013, p. 91), as Carmelo Vázquez intends, would be like that English lady who, apparently, when the theory of evolution was already unstoppable, and man was being said to have descended from the apes, said something like, “Dear God, don’t let the servants find out.”

Needless to say, a critique is respectful of people and authors, but not necessarily of their opinions, ideas or arguments, because they may be wrong, unsustainable, or sustainable but trivial. As Fernando Savater says in *“El valor de educar,”* (The Value of Education), “what is absolutely respectable are people, not their opinions;” and, “the right to one’s opinion consists of its being heard and discussed, not of watching it go by without touching it as if it were a holy cow,” (Savater, 1997, p. 137).

In a critique, people’s scientific and professional honesty is not in question. Positive psychologists do not need to say in their defense that they do what they do “honestly”. Of course, they do it honestly. That is not the point. However, not even scientists are exempt from cognitive fusion, attachment or quasi-religious adhesion to the doctrines they profess, which can limit the goodness of what they do without detracting from their honesty. Remember the famous restorer in Borja (Zaragoza) in the summer of 2012, who was doubtless completely honest when she made her restoration of the *Ecce Homo*.

A critique risks and admits reply. Carmelo Vázquez has made a documented reply argued, at times seriously and brilliantly (saying “at times” is not belittling, because even the Sun does not shine all the time). It is a response that “does justice” to the critique it responds to, so it also has to be taken seriously and merits a counter-response, without having to becoming snarled in replies and counterreplies. Carmelo Vázquez himself declares that “it is not his intention to continue with this discussion,” partly, he says, because he does not want to “contribute to feeding others’ CVs based on repeatedly judging their work,” (p. 106). Setting aside this apparent *arrogance*¹, unclear in any case, about whether he should write a hyphen after the *pre-*, the truth is that perhaps it would be better to set the arguments and establish the disagreements. Knowing how to be in disagreement is as much of interest as coming to an agreement is.

As far as I am concerned, it is not my intention to feed this debate unnecessarily either. Neither do I wish to respond one by one to each of the points that might have

its own response. Carmelo Vázquez himself responds to “some criticism”, but not all, as he says, so as not to punish the reader with “parasitic discussions” (P. 91). This is all very well. It is perfectly legitimate to organize the response however one deems best and space and time allow, and to watch out for the reader’s welfare. In this respect, it is possible that positive psychologists are especially thankful for this savings, as research on happy mood shows that one is less perseverant and “lazier” in “demanding cognitive tasks” (Alter and Forgas, 2007; Forgas, 2013). Nevertheless, the doubt remains about whether some of the most important criticism went unanswered only to keep from bothering the reader, or was it, might we say, “unanswerable”, such as the tautological nature of PosPsy discourses and research (the infallible relationship of well-being, positive emotions and satisfaction) and the hypostasis or objectification it incurs in by turning happiness into a science.

The purpose of this article is, above all, to establish my position, and make my arguments sufficiently clear, and in agreement with Carmelo Vázquez, let the readers form their own opinions (Vázquez, 2013, p. 106). Although the article begins with some observations on the reply, the rest of the article is a grounded and reasoned critique, which in my opinion, PosPsy deserves because of its polarization of psychology and doubtful scientific soundness.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE REPLY

Carmelo Vázquez’s response, acknowledged as what it is, documented, serious and worthwhile, still has some weaknesses, even ruses and *ad hominem* arguments. Only five are discussed here.

1. *Academic concepts taken as insults.* Anyone unaware of anything but the reply might think that the criticism of PosPsy to which I am responding is a pile of insults, since, as it says on the first page, “It is not easy to begin a rational discussion in response to some of the criticisms, which behind an educated appearance, lead to disqualifications which are in no way academic,” (Vázquez, 2013, p.91). He is referring to qualifying optimism as “contemptible” or “unscrupulous”, denouncing the “bad faith” of PosPsy literature, stigmatizing the activity of some colleagues as “magic” or talking about “despotic” happiness. *Duly* taken out of the context in which they are used,

¹ In Spanish, *Prepotencia*, *potencia*=power



these concepts could seem sharp remarks to someone who has not read the article of reference or does not have it at hand (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012).

These concepts are academic, if anything. To begin with, “contemptible happiness”, not optimism, is a concept introduced by Gustavo Bueno in *El Mito de la Felicidad* (The Myth of Happiness), probably because of its denotative (meaning) and connotative (expressive) power, to refer to the subjectivist and utilitarian conception of happiness, disconnected from virtue, in which each goes his own way. It tends to cover the sense of the most usual and already overused expression of *carpe diem*, with regard to which the term “contemptible” is no doubt most effective. In any case, its use was explained and justified in the text. As we were saying, calling happiness contemptible, or a ‘a cur’², refers to its “canine (‘canalla’ from Latin *canis*, dog and Italian *canaglia*) sense of everyone for himself getting the most satisfaction out of the moment and opportunity, as happiness in modern times is disconnected from any virtue inserted in a wider sense (cosmological, theological-political), as it was in traditional conceptions,” (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012, p. 196). Needless to say, this concept was part of a larger discussion, arguable, but reasoned and reasonable.

The notion of “unscrupulous optimism” comes from Schopenhauer, and is elaborated on by the British philosopher Roger Scruton in his book, by the way, highly recommended, *The Uses of Pessimism* (Scruton, 2010). The book is directed at reasonable pessimists, compared to goodness according to which everyone is good by nature and there is always something or someone to keep it from its realization, and also against sellers of false hopes, among which we could include the promoters of the happiness industry. Its use in the text explains that it “refers to a view of the world as full of opportunities and a positive attitude about being and achieving whatever you want. The literature specialized in the subject reminds us of the *candid* optimism of *Pollyanna* and *Pangloss*,” and then goes on to explain these concepts, etc. (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012, p. 193).

The notion of “bad faith” (*mauvaise foi*), as will be recalled, is a concept introduced by Sartre (in *Being and Nothingness*) to refer to a sort of self-deception by which one denies his freedom (freedom is hard to

accept due to the confusion, fear and responsibility involved), and instead, behaves as an inert object, “objectified”, “irresponsible”, justified by one’s doing what he can or what he *should*. The passage in the article that referred to bad faith is the following: “The ease with which PosPsy and self-help literature talk about happiness cannot be more than a maneuver of Sartrean “bad faith”. So as not to face its own emptiness, this literature deceives and self-deceives, presenting what it is not as if it were, and what it is, as if it were not,” (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012, p. 198). As I understand it, the notion of bad faith (better than self-deceit or cognitive dissonance) is fundamental to psychology, for scholars, professionals and clients of therapy. In fact, rather than junk happiness self-help books, I would recommend *How to Be an Existentialist* by the British philosopher Gary Cox (Cox, 2010).

The notion of “magic”, taken from cultural anthropology (Frazer and others), refers to sympathetic magic, according to which “like breeds like”, in this case, positive thinking as an attracter of positive effects. The tautologies that plague PosPsy tend to confirm this notion. Without hiding the attractive effect that the expression “sympathetic magic” may have, it does not lack thematic sense for the argument according to which there seems to be a sort of “sympathy” between being positive and doing well (positivity as a pole of attraction, etc.).

Finally the notion of “despotic” happiness was introduced by French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky in his essay on the hyperconsumer society entitled *Paradoxical happiness* (Lipovetsky, 2007). As this author says, “The right to happiness has thus been transformed into a euphoric imperative which creates shame or discomfort among those who feel excluded from it. In an age in which “despotic happiness” reigns, individuals are no longer limited to being unhappy, they are now guilty of not feeling good,” (Lipovetsky, 2007, p. 323).

All these concepts, highly academic, and better to know them than not, far from impeding a rational discussion, situate such a debate on a more in-depth or higher plane, indubitably above and beyond, for instance, the Coca Cola Happiness Institute.

2. *Appropriation of what was already known.* Likewise, anyone who did not know any more about psychology

²Spanish: *canalla*=contemptible



than what PosPsy says, because they may have been “reset” by its arrival or allow themselves to be carried away by a first impression of this no doubt excellent article by Carmelo Vázquez, might think that everything good in Psychology began with PosPsy. Thus he presents positive psychologists as, “colleagues honestly concerned with understanding human well-being better,” (Vázquez 2013, p. 106). Well, all right. But what did psychologists do before PosPsy, or what do those who do not adhere to it do? Weren’t they interested in human well-being? Or were they, but not honestly?

From the audacity of its self-denomination, PosPsy now seems “positive”, claiming everything that has to do with positivity: positive emotions, well-being, growth, positive change after adversity, and posttraumatic growth. Concerning “posttraumatic growth”, something well known before, Carmelo Vázquez refers to the work by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) and Joseph and Butler (2010), doubtless pertinent and important. But these studies date back to the eighties and nineties, prior to PosPsy. The term “posttraumatic growth” itself dates from 1995. [It will be recalled that PosPsy was founded by Seligman in 2000, at home in his garden with his 5-year-old daughter, and launched like a papal “encyclical” from the presidency of the American Psychological Association, for our purposes, the Vatican of psychology.]

The basic concepts and empirical evidence of posttraumatic growth, as the authors themselves say, originate in the “general current of psychology,” representing PosPsy as a “continuation of this tradition” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p.3). From here on, the authors are not “served” by PosPsy, among other things, because their model was already proposed in 1998. However, PosPsy is served by their model. The same could be said of Joseph and Butler (2010), who of course, recognize the boost that the “positive change after adversity movement” received from PosPsy, but that, let’s say, this movement does not live from it nor at its expense. The fact is that just because something is “positive” does not necessarily make it PosPsy or unable to exist on its own. Further below, there will be other occasions to cite “appropriations of positivity” due the usual psychology.

3. *Positive pessimism and negative passion.* Carmelo Vázquez’s response abandons PosPsy itself at times

and adopts pessimism as his own strategy, denying positivity, which for once, is in the “enemy camp”. Thus, he himself adopts the pessimistic tone of hornets stirred up (“mad”) by jets of air blowing against them and their direction of flight, otherwise happily, toward the flowers. In this situation, hornets make “cognitive” mistakes, the authors of the study this hornet classification is based on say. The image of “pessimistic hornets” Carmelo Vázquez uses for comparison is opportune and daring. In the first great criticism of PosPsi by Richard Lazarus, this author said, in view of their response, that positive psychologists had reacted like a stirred up hornets’ nest (Lazarus, 2003). And Lazarus is right. The fact is that if anything characterizes that thing called science it is criticism. From the perspective of my critique, it can only be celebrated that PosPsy recognizes pessimism as a better option than optimism, even on this occasion.

On the other hand, passionate criticism is qualified, in this case to disqualify them. As he says, “passionate arguments should not have a prominent place in an academic discussion,” (Vázquez, 2013, p. 91), and then later goes on to defend passion as a better than normal condition, when he says that, “we need less normality and more passion,” (P. 104). In fact, passion is recognized among PosPsy strengths as something that makes life more worth living (Vallerand and Verner-Filion, 2013). Are science and academic discussion not *passionate*? And do people not know how to value arguments for what they say and the reasoning involved, however passionate they may be? What would we think, and not just Descartes, of the soul without passion?

4. *A funny way to position friends and enemies.* And it is also striking that the authors who criticize PosPsy cited in my critique, are somehow “qualified”, as if that discredited their critique, a sort of *ad hominem* argument as if their reasons were already disqualified for being who they are. Thus they are “labeled” as “indefatigable debaters,” “Foucauldian philosophers”, “experts in literature”, “Psychological therapy theorists”, “essayists” or “specialists in Aristotelian education”, leading us to understand that they do not “know” PosPsy or should not be meddling in it, as if it were a private park. However, “those” authors may be in a good position to evaluate PosPsy, precisely because of the conceptual platform from which they are observing it, with sights set high.



The “debater” is James Coyne, Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and researcher in a Behavioral Oncology Program. Coyne reviews data and evidence of PosPsy in cancer “indefatigably”, perhaps because of the persistence in exaggerating its goodness beyond what evidence allows (Coyne, Tennen and Ranchor, 2010). With regard to Coyne’s critique, and in favor of “equanimity”, Carmelo Vázquez is right in saying that there should be an echo to the response they gave him (Vázquez, 2013, p. 99). But that echo was already made in the response of Coyne himself, as cited in my critique (Coyne, Tennen and Ranchor, 2010), and nothing has changed. Not because they are answered do things become “equanimous”. Insofar as the rest, it is interesting to follow Coyne’s Healthy Skepticism Project in favor of a critical role of scrutiny in health psychology, knowing that criticism is vital to the integrity and credibility of the health sciences, medicine and psychology (Coyne, 2010).

The “Foucauldian” is Sam Binkley, professor of Sociology at Emerson College (Boston). Precisely because he studies the roots of theory and research on psychological wellbeing using *foucauldian* analytical methods, Binkley is in condition to stress affinity for PosPsy with the neoliberal governmentality program: How the discourse of happiness participates in neoliberal policy and the advanced liberalism of our day (Binkley, 2011a; 2011b).

The “expert in literature” is Eric Wilson, author of a book entitled, *Against Happiness. In Praise of Melancholy*. It would be better not to read this book if you only want to keep thinking about happiness. The “therapy theorist” is Barbara Held, Chair of the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska, theoretical/philosophical and clinical psychologist. Perhaps because of “theoretical” and “therapeutic”, Held can see the “negative side of positive psychology” and the “tyranny” that it has become in the USA (Held 2002; 2004). The “essayist” is no other than Barbara Ehrenreich, scientific researcher and social activist, biologist by training, a cancer patient who bumped into PsyPos, which is applied in that area, and author of the indispensable *Smile or die* (Ehrenreich, 2011). She is also the author of *A History of Collective Joy* (Ehrenreich, 2008), which surely does no harm in evaluating positive

psychology. The “specialist in Aristotelian education” is Kristján Kristjánsson, Chair of Character Education and Virtue Ethics at the University of Birmingham. Because he has a firm footing in Aristotle, he relocates happiness beyond the industry it has given rise to and relates it to virtue (Kristjánsson, 2012).

It does not seem like these people are disqualified for giving their opinion on PosPsy, given their education, positions and conceptual platforms. Rather, what they have to say may be very important.

5. *Local winds, everywhere*. Carmelo Vázquez’s reply tries to “pass” off the “enemy” critiques as “local winds”, suggesting something like they are things that go on here in Spain, by authors who ignore not only what is happening in the rest of the world, but also the need for integration. Don’t they know how good PosPsy is, that it does not desire anything but people’s well-being? What is this about criticizing, aren’t we all colleagues? “But,” as he says in his reply, “local winds do not blow in this direction of harmony and construction,” (Vázquez, 2013, p. 106).

Setting aside that a critique is supposed to precisely “screen”, “discern”, not combine or integrate for its own sake (“screening” itself as an apparatus and an action gives a good idea of what critiquing is), there are critiques of PosPsy everywhere. Another thing is not wanting to face contrary winds, as it seems neither do hornets. “Enemy” critiques from one or another home base were just mentioned above (Coyne, Binkley, etc.). *American Psychologist*, the very journal that launched PosPsy, published an article in 2012 which makes PosPsy excusable, as having to describe everything that has always been known about psychology (McNulty and Fincham, 2012), and another in 2013, “demolishing” it as discussed further below.

But talking about “local winds”, the perspective of these Southern European homes might well be appropriate to perceive the “exoticism” of a “typically American” psychology. Both its religious base and combination with consumer liberalism converging in the “positive” individual (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012) are perhaps more easily perceived from “outside” than if one is submerged in the culture where PosPsy has its roots and has flourished the most. Although it would be enough to be up-to-date on the history of psychology to not be surprised by “novelties,” the air breathed in other places not only does no harm, but may even be favorable for



evaluating new currents. In these local winds, the lucid analysis by María Prieto-Ursúa, *ahead of its time* in perceiving the PosPsy fashion when it was at the height of its reception, is appreciated (Prieto-Ursúa, 2006).

The polarization of psychology into positive and negative is reviewed below, taking affects as the touchstone.

HARM DONE BY POSITIVE AFFECTS AND BENEFITS OF THE NEGATIVE

The distinction between positive and negative affects, no matter how well established, is tricky. Although it really makes no more sense than a pleasant / uncomfortable sign, this distinction introduces a dichotomy in values that ends up by prescribing some emotions to one and proscribing others. Under the tyranny of the positive attitude, not feeling happy is practically like being a failure. However, any emotion, however pleasant it may be, is functional, and therefore “positive”. Thus, negative affects have positive effects, precisely because of the experience of discomfort they cause. Without fear, one could not get very far in life and without shame one would not be a person. On the other hand, positive affects, in spite of everything, still have drawbacks.

In the context dominated by PosPsy, with its monomaniac emphasis on positive affects (happiness, well-being, satisfaction), it is not out of place to point out the harm that can be done by feeling too well, and the paradox of happiness and its dark side, as well as the benefits of negative affect and sadness. Who would have thought?

Happy, but perhaps conceited, selfish and sad

Too much happiness can be cloying and at the very least, interfere with living. It is certainly cloying when you are “so happy” that you do not need anything else and stay “stuck” in a state of well-being. Happiness interferes when it leads to risk behavior (poorly calculated adventures, reckless driving, galloping optimism, and trying everything). A happiness high can be a clinical condition of hypomania or mania, characterized by a persistent state of joy and optimism and relative absence of “negative” affects, so that everything rolls on wheels. Just as in depression, mania involves rumination, in this case, on “positive” thoughts like how well I feel and how happy I am (Gruber, 2011a; 2011b). There are very few people happier than bipolar disorder patients with an episode of mania.

Happiness is not appropriate or adaptive everywhere or all the time. A cheerful, jovial person may be slower, more confident and conceited (than a more fearful or pessimistic person) in detecting potential threats or possible deceit. The participants in an experiment in whom a state of positive, “happy” mood was induced showed a tendency to accept the truth of communications and were less able to detect deceit than those who were in a sad mood, who were more skeptical and skilful in detecting lies (Forgas and East, 2008). You can’t always go around being happy.

When something new has to be learned, freed from preconceptions and stereotypes, positive affect is not very positive for it. Happy people, in an induced state of positive, euphoric affect, seem to have a style of knowledge that is more *assimilated* to what they already know and is stereotyped, than *accommodative* to what is new with attention to details, different from the negative affect (Alter and Forgas, 2007, Forgas, 2011a, 2011b, Gruber, Mauss and Tamir, 2011). Happy people are also more likely to commit “fundamental errors of attribution,” consistent with overestimating personal internal dispositions and motives in explaining behavior observed in others, in detriment to external motives such as social role, the situation or circumstances (Forgas, 1998). Happy people may be somewhat *conceited*, now in the sense of vain, too proud and full of themselves to have to learn new things that challenge their security.

One’s happiness is not necessarily a blessing for others. Rather happy people tend to be selfish, thinking about themselves more than is fair to others. The infinite happiness predicted by the Dalai Lama surely refers to the world imagined by John Lennon, no heaven and no hell, nor countries, everyone living for the moment, in perpetual peace. Participants in an induced state of positive mood, cast the roles in the game (in a paradigm of experimental economy) more based on their egotistic impulses than those in a negative mood, who paid more attention to the rules of fair play (Tan and Forgas, 2010). It is like you deserve everything because you are happy. In another study, individuals in a state of positive mood were less courteous than those in a state of negative mood. “Happy” individuals seem to assess a situation more superficially than “pessimists”, who seem to be more sensible and take more details into consideration. Whereas individuals in a positive mood seem “bolder”, and do not need to go into details, individuals in a negative mood are more cautious and pay more attention



to detail, to rules and to appropriate usage in interaction (Morse and Afifi, 2013).

When everything goes well, there is no problem about expressing positive emotions. But when there are problems, exhibiting positive emotions (smiling and other implements of happiness) lead one to believe that everything is OK, when that is not the case, and probably not the best thing one could do. If things are really not going well, negative emotions, such as anger, indignation, sadness, fear or worry, may be more positive. Things do not get better either with such helpful positive self-affirmations as "I can," "I am adorable," "I am worth it," etc., which may or may not be true (excuse me). It is not surprising then, that studies show that self-bombarding with positive phrases is fine, or at least not harmful, for people who already have a high self-esteem and do not need it either, but harm those who need the words to be true the most, and end up feeling worse, farther from the ideal (Wood, Perunovic and Lee, 2009). The greatest commandment of our times seems to be the pursuit of happiness. It is as an unalienable right in the American Declaration of Independence alongside Life and Liberty. Setting aside for the moment innuendos in the meaning of "pursuit", seeking happiness entails paradoxes and has its dark side (Ford and Mauss, in press; Gruber, Mauss and Tamir, 2011).

Seeking happiness can therefore easily bring on contrary effects, such as deception, loneliness and depression (Mauss, Tamir, Anderson and Savino, 2011). Likewise, another study showed that people who valued happiness the most were also those who felt loneliest when they evaluated the "most stressful event" of the day before they went to bed (Mauss, Savino, Anderson, Weisbuch, Tamir and Laudenslager, 2012). Another study showed that those who expected the most to have a good time on New Year's Eve were probably disappointed in the following days (study cited by Ford and Mauss, in press). Something like this may occur every night you go out to "be happy," instead of going to have a good time, with no more pretensions or representations.

Experimental studies also show that valuing happiness highly ("feeling happy is very important to me") leads to less happiness and more disappointment, precisely in situations in which happiness was to be expected because of the positive emotional context involved. Studies of this type consisted of promoting valuing the importance of happiness in a group of participants selected at random by reading an article, for example, and comparing them

to another group that read a text that had nothing to do with happiness. In continuation, half of each group watched a movie inducing them into a happy or sad emotional state. The participants who were induced to value the importance of happiness felt less happy and more disappointed in the positive emotional context than the participants in the group in which the subject of happiness had not been mentioned. In the negative emotional context (the movie that induced sadness) there were no differences between the groups, probably because the context itself was justification enough for the "sad" emotional state, while in the other, one "had" to be happy (Mauss et al., 2011; Mauss et al., 2012).

The conclusion is that valuing happiness is not associated precisely with being happier, but with well-being and satisfaction and more depression. To attain the benefits of happiness, the best thing to do is not to do anything for it, but just take care of living which is plenty. Neither is it a question of eliminating negative emotions, but in accepting them positively, as a part of life. None of this is a prescription for happiness, but just a reminder that life is the way it is: a river, with pools, whirlpools, waterfalls, bends, and everybody knows where its leads to.

Eight good things about negative affect

Don't worry, be happy, is not always the best song. And if you are sad, it is not always a matter for concern. *Don't worry, be sad* also has its good things. If the state of happiness can bring unhappy consequences, the state of sad mood can bear at least eight benefits (Forgas, 2013).

1. *Better memory.* Within the well-known link between affect and memory, negative affect may influence whether one has a better memory of what happened. According to the above about their style being more accommodative to circumstances in the state of negative mood (sad), unlike the style which is more assimilative to preconceptions in the positive mood (happy), studies find that, in fact, negative mood contributes to better memory. Thus, in an experimental study, the sad witnesses to a fight showed less distortion than the happy ones. The result reflects the known phenomenon that sad people are more in harmony with their setting, while happy people seem to be more superficial (Forgas, 2013). If lucidity leads to pessimism, then what can we say about where optimism comes from?
2. *More accurate judgment.* Negative mood (unlike



positive) has an influence on first impressions (primacy effect), and weakens them. So people in a negative mood make more detailed judgments of others, based on later information, without keeping to the first impression as is usually the case with people in a happy mood (Forgas, 2013). In experimental economic studies, participants in a sad mood made more accurate, prudent decisions than happy people who were less accurate, more reckless and sustained higher losses (studies cited by Andrews and Thompson, 2009). It is not a coincidence, surely, that at the start of the crisis, beginning with the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers Bank in 2007, positive thought and optimism presided (Ehrenreich, 2011). Negative mood and depression are also associated with making better decisions in social dilemmas, which is understood to be due to showing more context-dependent behavior, and weighing costs and risks better (Andrews and Thompson, 2009). Studies cited by these authors also suggest that reflexive analysis on depression (unlike unproductive rumination) can improve understanding of what happened, facilitating clarification, growth and recovery.

3. *Less credulous.* Several experiments show, in general, that negative mood has a beneficial influence on reducing credulousness and increasing skepticism when judging the truth of rumors and “urban legends”. Negative affect improves attention to detail and may thus improve the ability to detect deceit. When participants in an induced happy or sad mood saw a video of a person accused of robbery being interrogated, people in the negative mood made more probably guilty judgments and were significantly better in detecting false clues. Likewise, the sad participants were less likely to accept facial expressions as genuine, in agreement with a more attentive, accommodating processing style associated with negative mood (Forgas, 2013).
4. *Reduction of stereotypes.* Negative mood can also reduce the implicit use of stereotypes. In an experiment consisting of the game “shoot/don’t shoot”, in which the player is the policeman who is supposed to shoot “bad guys” who are armed, but not those who carry cans of soda or a telephone (instead of a weapon). The task is complicated because half of the individuals wear Muslim turbans to induce stereotyping. Within the general tendency to shoot the individual with the turban, negative mood reduced and positive mood

increased this stereotyped tendency (Forgas, 2013).

5. *Motivational advantages.* People in a sad mood are probably more persistent in difficult tasks and less likely to adopt self-handicapping strategies in the event of failure than happy people, who, as mentioned above, are more conformist, on the way down (Forgas, 2013).
6. *Interpersonal advantages.* It was already mentioned that happy people are not necessarily a blessing to others, since they seem to be less connected to their audience. On the contrary, those in a negative mood seem to be more attentive and considerate (polite) when, for example, asking questions or and carrying on a conversation (Forgas, 2013). In this respect, shyness always used to be a favorable style for establishing relations and shy people used to be better liked than bold people, until social phobia was invented that pathologized it (Lane, 2011) and established the extroverted style type school of business (Cain, 2012).

On the other hand, sad mood can also be positive in attracting attention and care, more than going around playing it “cool”, which might cause you three problems: how bad you really are, deprivation of help from others you might need (but think you are “just fine”) and the incongruence between how you really are and how you show others you are (leading to deception, loneliness and depression).

7. *More fairness.* If as they say, a happy mood promotes selfishness (“I deserve it”), a sad mood promotes fairness (equality), beginning with a more equitable distribution in games such as those used in experimental economy. Again, the results show that negative affect can increase equality and concern for others (Forgas, 2013).
8. *More effective persuasion.* Better attention to context might be the basis of better quality in persuasive messages that people in a sad mood seem to have than those in a happy state. When happy and sad participants in an experiment were asked what persuasive arguments they would write for or against controversial subjects, those who were in a negative mood produced more persuasive, better-quality arguments than those who were happy (Forgas, 2013). As Forgas concludes, “the findings are in strong contrast with the unilateral emphasis on the benefits of positive affect of recent scientific literature and popular culture,” (Forgas, 2013, p. 230). Positive affect is not always beneficial or desirable, and on the other hand, negative



affect is not always harmful, but beneficial and desirable in many situations and respects.

In all of the above, the question was never to defend negative affect *compared to* positive. This polarization (harmful positive and beneficial negative affects) was only used for the sake of the argument in an attempt to show that the positivity emphasized by PosPsy is unsustainable. PosPsy knows and recognizes, now, largely due to the criticism received, how negative positive affect can be and how positive negative can be, although everything is contextual and nothing is linear. PosPsy assumes the positivity of traditional psychology, which also now seems more interested in positivity.

In view of this, and according to Carmelo Vázquez, “a good fate for PosPsi would be its dissolution in mainstream Psychology” (Vázquez, 2013, p. 106). This “skepticism” about the entity of PosPsy already professed by Carmelo Vázquez in 2006, shows his admirable idea and intellectual coherence. As he said then, “what it now has of a ‘movement’, or rather, of fashion, will end up being dissolved without undo uproar in the usual work of psychology. [...], the most likely scenario is that what we now call Positive Psychology will be perfectly integrated in the daily work of future generations of psychologists and the analysis and measurement of well-being, of positive emotions, or of the effective improvements in the lives of people who receive our interventions will be the unquestionable way of doing things. [...] It is not of much interest to discuss whether Positive Psychology is trying to become a new focus of Psychology. [...] It is not a matter of creating another polarized variant of Psychology, but of keeping in mind, promoting and studying those aspects related to well-being and human happiness, even for shedding light on what is psychological suffering,” (Vázquez, 2006, p. 2).

To dissolve into mainstream Psychology, it might well be said, as in the movie *Bend of the River*: “We never should have left the Mississippi.”

In spite of everything, PosPsy is still out there, with its societies, congresses, specialized journals, replies and vigorous defenses, and even skeptics of the movement turned into its leaders. Is this because it is really a science, or is it really a “Quesalid” effect?

WHAT DOES POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY KNOW ABOUT HAPPINESS?

Happiness is the byword of PosPsy. Although it is not the only subject of its interest, because PosPsy is also

interested in character strengths, *resilience*, meaning, purpose, and commitment, and good relationships (Park, Peterson and Sun, 2013, p. 12), happiness is the center of gravity of all these subjects, as shown below, where the authors again invoke it to conclude that all of them together construct happiness (p. 13).

PosPsy alleges many benefits derived from happiness, claims scientific knowledge of it (uncommon), and also tells us how to achieve it. “In contrast with the common notion that happiness is the result of good things that happen to us in life, the results of experimental and longitudinal research show that positive emotions such as happiness and general satisfaction with life really lead to more academic and professional success, better marriages, good relationships, better mental and physical health, and greater longevity and resilience,” (Park, Peterson and Sun, 2013, p. 13).

The truth is that it turns out to be a delicate matter to place oneself in the position of PosPsy critic, because it might suggest that one is not in favor of positivity and people’s well-being. [For the relief of happiologists and expecting friendliness on their part, knowing that friendliness is an exercise in positive psychology, I take the liberty of saying that my critique of PosPsy was written, basically, during periods of well-being during vacations on the terraces in Oviedo, Costa Brava and Isla Canela. There is nothing to indicate that in any other context the critique might have been more positive.] A critique of happiness does not mean that one is defending the contrary: that happiness is a bad thing (although perhaps there are better things to do in life that pursue it), that it cannot be studied (in fact it has been studied for 25 centuries) or that it should not be procured (although everything seems to indicate that, for the time being, the greatest beneficiaries are the authors of books on how to achieve it).

In view of all of the above, let’s see what PosPsy knows about happiness. The research taken to do this probably has the highest scientific profile, the work by the group at the University of California led by Sonja Lyubomirsky, author of the book, “The Science of Happiness”, and the work by Barbara Fredrickson, of the University of North Carolina, also author of a popular book on *Positivity*. Lyubomirsky et al. themselves offer us a study entitled, “*What psychological science knows about achieving happiness*” (Nelson, Kurtz and Lyubomirsky, in press), following a *positive activity model* (Lyubomirsky and Layous, 2013). Fredrickson offers a mathematical theory



of positivity known as the *Broaden-and-Build Theory* (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005). However, before reviewing these theories, let's establish the position of the argument with regard to the empirical evidence of PosPsy.

Four things about the empirical evidence of PosPsy

1) All it needs is for "positive" aspects of life not to be positive, not even by definition. Speaking of well-being, no doubt, good is better than bad and positive better than negative. The ever-present, ubiquitous placebo, literally something positive that "pleases", may be what PosPsy has positive about it: a huge placebo, consisting of saying positive pleasant things that always *please* more than saying the contrary. When the PosPsy exercises are compared to careful placebo-exercises (not sloppy, arranged to win the intervention under study), their results are indistinguishable (Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). So either PosPsy is a placebo, undifferentiated from it, or the placebo is PosPsy, when it works as well as it does. Carmelo Vázquez himself seems inclined toward this second variant when he says, "the placebo intervention is also a uncontrolled positive intervention" (Vázquez, 2013, p. 103).

Not to leave out here another case of appropriation of positivity as belonging to PosPsy, this "appropriation" reveals, *malgré lui*, that PosPsy is then rather a "controlled" or "tamed" placebo. Since the positive intervention is indistinguishable from the placebo, to say now that the placebo is also positive intervention (when it works better) leaves, in any case, PosPsy in the land of the placebo: "Wild" PosPsy when the placebo is not "controlled" and "scientific" PosPsy (we assume) when the placebo turns out to be tamed in controlled studies and explained *ex post facto*.

2) PosPsy data are still largely tautological, no matter how much they are presented with all the scientific *habits* (methods, statistics, models, theories). It is not a matter of just correlating them with more or less the same (well-being, satisfaction, positive emotions), but also interventions where the result evaluated (for example, well-being) is practically the intervention itself (e.g., savoring positive memories). In the end, you find what you input. If you follow a diet rich in fructose, it should not be surprising to find high glucose levels in blood. The PosPsy meta-analyses (Bolier et al., 2013; Vázquez, 2013) in themselves do not make a discipline more scientific or more effective. Parapsychology also

makes use of them (Radin, 2006). Everything depends on what you input and *combine*. PosPsy interventions on which the meta-analyses are applied are not precisely characterized by being very demanding: in addition to tautological, the control groups are not very challenging (and when they are, the placebo-intervention is like the positive intervention).

3) Appropriation of what is positive: it would seem that anything that brings well-being, satisfaction, or flourishing is PosPsi, as claimed as evidence and allotted to their account. Posttraumatic growth has already been mentioned. Something similar occurs with behavioral activation, referred to now as evidence of PosPsy (Bolier et al., 2013; Mazzucchelli, Kane and Rees, 2010; Vázquez, 2013), although it dates from the 1970s. The fact that there is an "attractive intervention available for promoting well-being" does not mean that it is due to PosPsy nor explained by it. The same occurs with regard to psychological flexibility and acceptance (otherwise nothing new) on which the acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is based, and which now seem to be typical of PosPsy (Biswas-Diener and Kashdan, 2013). For a confrontation of PosPsy and contextual therapies see Pérez-Álvarez (2014, Chap. 8).

Curiosity is another "positive thing" that appears to have been discovered by PosPsy, showing that those who feel curiosity on a given day also feel more satisfied with their life (Biswas-Diener and Kashdan, 2013). PosPsy does not notice that curiosity is at the origin of philosophy (according to Aristotle), surely because the curiosity to which it refers more touristic and for leisure (jumping off diving boards and so forth) than philosophical (de *Sapere aude* or dare to think). However that may be, what is "positive" about curiosity was not just discovered by PosPsy. Friendship is another good thing that contributes to a good psychological life (Biswas-Diener and Kashdan, 2013; Park, Peterson and Sun, 2013). Epicurus, with his philosophy of friendship, would have been centuries ahead of PosPsy, as would Seneca. And what was lacking, the positive effects of depression and negative affect, are also now assumed as typical of PosPsy (Biswas-Diener and Kashdan, 2013).

No matter how appropriate these data may be for sustaining PosPsi, or even that they are of common knowledge, they still should not be appropriated as if they were their own discoveries. As mentioned above,



PosPsy ends up by discovering what was already known.

- 4) After all, the PosPsy exercises seem no less than trivial and exotic to a foreign observer daring to think the least bit. Perhaps in the American context, “techniques” such as feeling thankful at the end of the day (counting blessings), writing letters of gratitude, savoring positive events, or practicing optimistic thinking fit in with the culture, people do not perceive their simplicity and exoticism. The virtue of simplicity (Lyubomirsky and Layous, 2013) approaches foolishness here. Now it is going to turn out that after 25 centuries, the key to happiness is in two or three techniques such as those above. “For Goodness Sake!” Sancho would exclaim, imagine seeing giants here.

Is expressing gratitude now a “scientific” version of saying grace, “We thank thee O Lord for the food we are about to receive...?” What would anyone who has a real problem or is even looking for happiness, and who thinks just a little, think of “savoring” memories or daily events? What would the elementary school teacher or city policeman think if they received a letter of gratitude for something from somebody they did not even remember? Practicing optimistic thinking, as if optimism could be practiced suddenly like that, sounds like a joke, like the one about the Pope when he saw some emaciated children and asked why they looked like that, and they said it was because they did not eat. So the Pope told them, Children, you have to eat! You have to be optimists! As if one could suddenly start practicing optimism without having done a Master’s in Business Administration at Harvard Business School, where this extroverted style came into fashion (Cain, 2012).

Since neither data or techniques make sense outside of the context of theory, let’s take a look at the theories of Lyubomirsky and Fredrickson, which as mentioned, are probably the best available.

Positive-activity model

The Positive-Activity Model by Lyubomirsky et al. was developed to understand the mediating variables that explain or might explain how and why positive activities work to improve happiness (Layous and Lyubomirsky, in press). Positive activities are those such as the following: in addition to those mentioned above (appreciation, letters of gratitude, savoring positive events and practicing optimistic thinking), acts of kindness,

affirmation of one’s most important values, use of strengths, practicing self-compassion and meditation on positive feelings. Happiness is defined as subjective affective (experiencing positive emotions) and cognitive (satisfaction with one’s life) well-being.

What the positive activity model tries to explain are the mechanisms of how and why positive activities increase well-being. Likewise, it tries to identify the modulating variables that best fit activities to the person. The model proposes and confirms (attention!) that positive activities give rise to greater positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and satisfaction of basic needs, which, in turn, foster happiness. In other words, “continue the authors, “just as improved levels of Vitamin C explained how and why eating citrus fruit led to the reduction of scurvy, our model posits that more positive emotions, positive thoughts, positive behaviors, and need satisfaction explain how and why performing positive activities leads to greater happiness.” In the conclusions, the authors end by saying, “In a relatively short time, psychological science has made great strides in understanding how people can achieve happiness. Using some of the most effective methodologies available, researchers have found that happiness can be attained via simple, cost-effective, nonstigmatizing, self-directed activities, such as writing gratitude letters or keeping an optimism diary,” (Nelson, Kurtz and Lyubomirsky, in press).

In view of all of the above, in fact, there is enough research in the processes and “mechanisms” to provide work to occupy the lives and *vitae* of researchers. As the authors conclude, “Future studies should continue to investigate how and why particular positive activities work to increase happiness, and should continue to implement randomized controlled trials to understand the causal role of potential mechanisms or factors,” (Nelson, Kurtz and Lyubomirsky, in press). Numerous contributions to their own curriculum vitae are expected.

Broaden-and-Build Theory

The broaden-and-build theory by Barbara Fredrickson, the most complete formulation of which includes a positivity ratio (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005), probably represents the most complex model of human flourishing. In comparison to that spurious equation that distributed happiness in percentages (50% genetic, 10% circumstances and 40% activities), the *positivity ratio* is presented as an empirically grounded mathematical



equation. In this perspective, happiness is described as a self-propelled spiral triggered by a positive emotional “spark” or several little starter sparks.

The most relevant aspect of the theory is a distinction, in the evolutionary perspective, between positive and negative emotions, due to the extent of their effects. While negative emotions *reduce* the behavioral urge to specific actions of survival (like attack or flee), positive emotions *broaden* the range of thoughts and actions (explore, play), facilitating generativity and behavioral flexibility. In contrast to negative emotions, which according to this theory would be direct and immediate, the benefits of positive emotions are indirectly propagated and long-term. “Although positive affect is transient, the personal resources accrued across moments of positivity are durable. As these resources accumulate, they function as reserves that can be drawn on to manage future threats and increase odds of survival. So experiences of positive affect, although fleeting, can spark dynamic processes with downstream repercussions for growth and resilience,” (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, p. 679).

If the traditional perspectives sustain that positive affect marks health and *present* well-being, the broaden-and-build theory goes beyond that and suggests that positive affect also produces health and well-being in the *future*. Several studies have shown that positive affects measured at the beginning predict increases in well-being several weeks later (as many people will have found after their vacation). “This evidence,” say Fredrickson and Losada, “motivates our prediction that positive affect is a critical ingredient within flourishing mental health,” (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, p. 679). Along this line, they suggest a sort of “butterfly effect” or dependence on initial conditions consisting of flourishing in a spiral starting from short happy moments.

To this supposed butterfly effect of positive affects, the authors apply differential equations taken from fluid dynamics (“Lorenz equations”) to describe emotional changes over time. Based on the previous data of Chilean psychologist Marcial Losada, on which the nonlinear dynamic model was applied to the functioning of high-performance teams, it was shown that high levels of positivity were linked to 1) broader behavior repertoires, 2) greater flexibility and resistance to adversity, and 3) optimal functioning (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, p. 682). The famous *positivity ratio* of 2.9013, accurate to five digits, is derived from the differential equation of emotional changes over time. According to this ratio, and

rounding off, three positive affect experiences to one negative would be the minimal optimum proportion for a flourishing spiral. Since positivity does not grow linearly (too much positivity is not good), there is also a maximum point at which the “complex dynamics of flourishing” disintegrates and instead of flourishing, languishing begins, specifically, at the *positivity ratio* of 11.6346 (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005, p. 684).

This “law” would hold true on all levels, individuals, couples and teams. As the authors say, “Our discovery of the critical 2.9 positivity ratio may represent a breakthrough,” (p. 685). The *positivity ratio* could be the discovery of the century and a unique moment in the history of human social sciences, if it were not, as in the end it turns out to be, lacking in any basis whatsoever. The *positivity ratio*, in spite of being widely cited (although Carmelo Vázquez does not stress it, which suggests prudence on his part) and its suspicious precision, had not been critically reviewed until now. But the British graduate student in psychology⁹ Q 1 F E U Nicholas Brown and two coauthors, one of whom is the physicist Allan Sokal, have recently published an article in the same journal demolishing the *positivity ratio* (Brown, Sokal and Friedman, 2013). [It will be recalled that Sokal is famous for that article in 1996 in which he parodied postmodern theorization in fashion at the time, and which, however, was published in an important journal on cultural studies, without their noticing that, as he himself explained, it was “a pastiche of left-wing cant, fawning references, grandiose quotations, and outright nonsense, structured around the silliest quotations [by postmodernist academics] he could find about mathematics and physics, formulated by academics in humanities generically called ‘postmodern’.” Sokal is also coauthor (with Jean Bricmont) of the book appropriately entitled “*Intellectual Impostures*.”] The bad part of intellectual impostures is that a serious journal can publish such “silliness” as well written as they are fallacious and as superficial as they are hollow. The good part is that, because of criticism, knowledge is corrected and can progress without false harmonies and spurious constructions. Science is not a matter of adjacent “concord” and “constructions”, which is fine for condominium owner associations and campgrounds, where some people can camp next to others.

Brown, Sokal and Friedman demonstrate (not give an opinion) that apart from conceptual and mathematical errors in the concrete application made by Fredrickson



and Losada, the application of the Lorenz equations to modelling changes in human emotions over time lacks any justification at all (Brown, Sokal and Friedman, 2013, p.2). These authors establish five conditions which must exist for the application of differential equations to natural and social systems, none of which are met in the original studies by Fredrickson and Losada (2005). What there is in the work by Losada, according to Brown, Sokal and Friedman, is an abundance of mathematical formulas whose only function, they say, is to create, without justification, an equation that is intended to describe a relationship between the ratio of Positivity and Negativity, which curiously, provides good data fit (Brown, Sokal and Friedman, 2013, p. 10). But even if previous studies were correct (which they are not), the derivation made by Fredrickson and Losada (2005) of a critical minimum positivity ratio is "entirely unfounded," and "no more than an artifact" (Brown, Sokal and Friedman, 2013, pages 11 and 12). The case is that there is nothing inherently implausible in the idea that people with a higher ratio of positive to negative emotions are better off. However, the idea that people with a positivity above a certain figure are significantly better off than with one below it, "simply because this number has crossed some magic line, is not supported by any evidence," (Brown, Sokal and Friedman, 2013, p. 12). The apparent credibility of the application of differential equations extracted from the domain of natural sciences to describe human interactions seems to be justified, more than anything else, by the linguistic similarity between elements in the technical vocabulary of fluid dynamics and the metaphors used to describe the dynamics of human interactions (emotional "spark", "butterfly effect").

Critical analysts such as Brown, Sokal and Friedman should save much future work devoted to elucidating whether the attempted *positivity ratio* is 3 to 1 or 8 out of 10 (Nelson, Kurtz and Lyubomirsky, in press) and stop duping people with false measurements, as Fredrickson herself does not deprive herself of doing in her popular book: *Positivity: Top-Notch Research Reveals the 3-to-1 Ratio that will Change your Life* (Fredrickson, 2009). What discredits psychology are pseudoscientific formulas and formulations such as these found in the science of happiness and in this case, in PosPsy, not the critiques.

The *American Psychologist*, the journal in which the *shredding* critique by Brown, Sokal and Friedman appears, naturally offered the authors concerned the opportunity to defend their theory. While Losada has not

yet replied, Fredrickson has recognized the fiasco, and in her own image, tried to save "the baby" (the idea of positivity) from being thrown out with the "dirty" bathwater (improperly applied mathematical equations) (Fredrickson, 2013). The supposed *positivity ratio* has now become heuristic affirmations, such as, "higher is better, within bounds" (Fredrickson, 2013, p. 7). The author continues defending, as is to be expected, her *theory of positive potentiation*, according to which, positive emotions provide benefits (p.3), to later say that everything depends on context and the "dose" (p.7). To finish with this, the truth is, that this did not require mathematical equations, or even a theory with a proper name.

To calibrate the hypotheses and findings of PosPsy it would be sufficient to ask people, for instance, a taxi driver. Positive psychologists would do better to go to their research centers by taxi from time to time and ask the driver (several just to be sure) about their "hypotheses" about whether being well is better than being bad, if "positive" affects, "positive" relationships" and a "positive" life are related more to "negativity" or "positivity", etc.

Possible "Quesalid effect"

There does not seem to be any science in view and the empirical evidence is what it is. The PosPsy leaders themselves are skeptical about its entity, and yet, leaders. What can be happening? Perhaps a "Quesalid effect". It will be recalled, as told by Lévi-Strauss (in *Structural Anthropology*), that Quesalid was an "involuntary" shaman who lived at the beginning of the 20th century in Vancouver (Canada). He began to be interested in shamanism as a skeptic of its functioning, and went to a "school for shamans" and learned the "techniques". To his surprise, it worked, and people kept coming to seek his help. In the end, he was the chief shaman of the tribe. Then, due to his success, and doing well, he had to defend his "science". It is as if one ended up being captain of a ship out there when one never should have left the Mississippi.

HAPPINESS, A MacGuffin FOR POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Two broad conclusions are arrived at from the sections above. One is that positivity makes no sense as the basis of a psychology with its sign. Positive affect can be as negative as negative can be positive. The other broad



conclusion is that the supposedly scientific knowledge of PosPsy is not really anything that was not already known. In that case, how is it that PosPsy is so *buoyant*, so successful, with fortune and growing happiness? Perhaps it is because it is buoyant, in the sense that a ship is said to be, because it has a light load and does not go very deep. And it may be precisely this that keeps it fashionable and superficial, on the crest of the wave.

We have been discussing happiness as if it were a clear and distinct idea. But as a matter of fact, it is not known what happiness really is, and is something different depending on for whom, and not even the same over time. Although PosPsy defines happiness operatively as subjective well-being and satisfaction with life, this only displaces the question to what is meant by well-being. For the case in hand, we are back where we were.

Any discipline that wishes to present itself as the “happiness science,” must pose deeper questions. And not because it poses them, whatever happiness is, remains necessarily delimited as an “object of science,” because it may be that, to paraphrase Saint John of the Cross, “not even human science is sufficient to know how to understand it” (Climbing Mount Carmel [In Spanish Carmelo]). But this way at least, the study of happiness would not be so superficial. It would not be enough to climb Mount Carmel and have “divine union” there, for our case, a harmony of some knowledge with another, with everything found “in communion”. More than that, it would be necessary to climb the Picos de Europa³ of philosophy, which whether we like it or not, is involved in the study of happiness (Pérez Álvarez, 2012). Insofar as what can be done here, two general basic questions are posed below. Even though they are arguable, let’s just put them forward to establish the argument and agree to disagreements. The two questions have the same beginning: the *unsuitability* of happiness as:

- ✓ A principle of life and
- ✓ Scientific object

The unsuitability of happiness as a principle of life

1) It is not known what happiness is. Happiness is not a categorical term that says something in itself, but empty, *uncategorical*, at the expense of determining with a diversity of contents and values, at times contradictory with each other. “The *tragic* happiness of someone who is getting revenge is surely not the same

type of *corny* happiness of someone watching a sunset,” Pérez Álvarez, 2012, p. 198). As Aristotle said, even for the same person, happiness is health if he ill, wealth if he is poor and so on. Everyone wants to be happy, said Seneca, but when they look for it, they are groping in the dark. What the different contents and values could have in common is a *subjective feeling of well-being*. But this is like saying nothing, because it could be anything, to begin with, whatever you say it is. One study shows up to 17 types of subjective well-being (Diener and Chan, 2011, p. 26).

- 2) Whatever happiness is, it is inseparable from activities and contexts beyond the subjective “moment”. The experience of subjective well-being is intertwined in the course of activities and contingencies that form part of what we do and what happens in the thread of the circumstances of life. The preponderance that *subjective* well-being takes on today over everything else responds more to a modern condition, understandable in historical terms (utilitarianism, consumerism, etc.), than to its intrinsic nature, definable and objectifiable in itself.
- 3) Happiness is not a universal phenomenon. “The human being,” said Nietzsche, “does not aspire to happiness; only the English do that,” probably with the utilitarianism that arose there in mind. But today perhaps it is the Americans who do it the most. As the British journalist residing in the USA, Ruth Whippman says, the American way of pursuing happiness is exhausting: Am I happy? Happy enough? As happy as everyone else? Could I be doing more about it? “The goal is so elusive and hard to define that it’s impossible to know when it’s even been achieved – a recipe for neurosis,” (Whippman, 2012). The Dalai Lama would do better in reviewing his affirmation that the purpose of life is happiness. As if people did not have more important things to do.

The fact is that happiness, far from being a universal aspiration is not something that everyone seeks, and is even aversive for many people (Joshanloo and Weijers, in press). Studies show that happiness is not always what is most valued, but may often something aversive and feared. People refer to more than one reason for fearing happiness (Johanloo and Weijers, in press).

³Peaks of Europe: a range of mountains in the northern coast of Spain



- ✓ Being happy brings bad things: after happiness comes unhappiness, as after a rise comes a fall; one would not have to be a Taoist to undertake this dialectic and give and take of happiness; you can be sure that if you are happy now, you are not going to be later on.
- ✓ Being happy can make you feel like a “worse person”; if you are suffering from injustice and marginalization, being happy suggests that you are taking things too lightly; one can hate happiness because you would feel unworthy of it knowing that others are suffering.
- ✓ The expression of happiness can be bad for you and for others in some cultures: it can annoy others and awaken envies and the “evil eye”, which in the end could be harmful.
- ✓ Pursuing happiness can be bad for you and others: because of the paradoxes that it entails, self-complacent egoism, deviation of commitments to the community, and negligence of others. Well-being in many cultures involves more socially compromised emotions (feeling of community, friendship and shame), as well as social harmony, than the *subjective* well-being, concentrated on one’s feeling good, with high self-esteem and little shame (Gruber, Mauss and Tamir, 2011, p. 228).

As the authors conclude, “The evidence that we have gathered not only places the universality of valuing happiness highly in doubt, but also shows that different beliefs about it lead some people and groups to fear it,” (Johanloo and Weijers, in press).

- 1) Better things to do in life. A better goal than happiness could be a significant, valuable life that makes sense. A significant life may not necessarily be happy and a happy life may not be very significant or valuable, but even somewhat insignificant and self-complacent. Although happiness and significant life have much in common, studies show that they are different life experiences (Baumeister et al., 2012). While happiness would be a more basic experience rooted in the natural tendency to satisfaction and subjective comfort in the present, a significant life would be more complex, rooted in cultural values that may include difficulties, dissatisfaction, discomfort and the performance of activities which are not precisely pleasant. Significant life also involves integration of the past, present and future, accepts one’s life (as happy as it may be) and projects it beyond the moment, without

it mattering how easy or hard it is (Baumeister et al., 2012).

PosPsy also talks about a “significant life” with regard to education, beginning with Seligman et al., but in practice it sticks to the typical exercises on “write three good things” that occur each day for a week and think about them (“why they occurred”, “what they mean”) and on “use one’s characteristic strengths” (Seligman et al., 2009). Although they refer to a series of benefits, in keeping with what is known about the paradoxical effects of the pursuit of happiness and of promoting self-esteem, one should not be too optimistic. Thus, the exercise on “three good things”, in addition to leaving out a “good” part of life, may easily lead to deception and loneliness from the paradoxical effect, as we know from the experiments cited. With regard to “one’s strengths”, we know what culture and cultivating self-esteem lead to: inflated egos and narcissism.

The unsuitability of happiness as a scientific object

- 1) Suspicious science. Happiness has been debated for over 25 centuries, so its keys are hardly going to be discovered only now. Apart from this, it is already hard to establish the rules of psychology as a behavioral science, much less suddenly establish a science of happiness. The fact is that what is *scientifically* known by PosPsy about happiness is already of common knowledge, when not just straight foolishness, as shown above. Most of the scientific credentials of PosPsy seem to be “data”, as if that already made it a science. Appealing to “data”, “facts” or “empirical evidence” does not go beyond the popular conception of science (Chalmers, 2012, p. 1). The “data”, if they say anything “scientific”, is in the context of a conceptual platform, theory or model. From what we have already seen, the best PosPsy models and theories are, so to speak, “for use around the house”, internal consumption. They do not stand up to scrutiny. The largest “conceptual platform” in PosPsy is still *malaré lui*, the neoliberal ideology in the tradition of positive individualism (Cabanas and Sánchez, 2012; Pérez Álvarez, 2012).
- 2) Happiness, more than just about science. The subject and problems of happiness surpass their consideration as a *scientific object*. If, on one hand, happiness is an *idea* that crosses many fields, it is more than a scientific category, and on the other, science is not the sponsor of all knowledge, nor the last word. Happiness is a



clear example of how scientific knowledge remains below the phenomenon, unless it is by reducing it to trivial findings.

- 3) From hypostasis to imposture. How is it that happiness cannot be studied scientifically? Of course it can, and in fact it is. PosPsy does it. And it is done at the cost of hypostasis, reifying or objectifying the subjective experience as an aspect common to the multitude and diversity of contents and values of happiness. Hypostasis here means extracting, decontextualizing and overdimensioning the subjective experience, now converted into an object and instrument, as it is an inseparable aspect of the whole course of activities, vicissitudes and circumstances of life. The cropping and delimiting of a subjective aspect should not be considered an achievement or finding, but hypostasis. The subjective experience of well-being with regard to the river of life is like phlogiston to combustion: it may be like smoke, which exists (as experience exists), but without the fire it is not anything great to be called an "object" of science. To build a science from subjective well-being, as much as it is methodically studied, comes close to imposture, if we recall what it has really contributed: nothing not already known, trivialities and even fallacious indices.
- 1) Scientific iatrogenesis. The reification of subjectiveness may not lead to knowledge never before seen, but it is not innocuous. The study of happiness, with its instruments (scales, ratios) and procedures (exercises, courses), lends itself especially to the known effect of institutional reflexivity, according to which the scientific knowledge itself reworks the phenomenon under study, changing it and adulterating it to some extent (sensitization, hyperreflection). In particular, the consideration of happiness as an instrument for "greater academic and professional success, better marriage," etc. (Park, Peterson and Sun, 2013, p. 13), instead of a derivation of how you are doing in life, can end up leading to paradoxically Pyrrhic benefits (Ford and Mauss, in press; Gruber, Mauss and Tamir, 2011; Lipovetsky, 2007; Whippman, 2012). In the end, the science of happiness solves problems created by the science of happiness itself.

A MacGuffin

As it is neither principle of life nor scientific object, the "critical" question is to explain the *bonanza* that happiness literature is enjoying. Perhaps the key is in

"pursuit", more than in finding and having. In the movie *In Pursuit of Happiness* (directed by Gabriele Muccino in 2006), the main character realizes that, "It was right then that I started thinking about Thomas Jefferson on the Declaration of Independence and the part about our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I remember thinking how did he know to put the pursuit part in there? That maybe happiness is something that we can only pursue and maybe we can actually never have it." Was Jefferson "smart" enough to do that to keep people entertained? The fact is that people, beginning with the Americans to whom the Declaration of Independence was addressed, are the same ones to whom Whippman refers today as seeking happiness without knowing what it is, where the important part seems to be the pursuit itself. The pursuit of happiness reminds us of spy movies. The "trick" of spy movies is not so much what they are looking for (a formula, a secret code, a diamond), as the elusive search. What they are looking for, and it could be anything, is what makes the movie work and makes it so intriguing. That element of suspense that makes the plot progress, but which in itself is unimportant is a *MacGuffin*, according to the expression invented by Hitchcock. Hitchcock himself explained it to Francois Truffaut: "The word comes from the music halls. One man says, 'What's that package up there in the baggage rack?' And the other answers, 'Oh, that's a MacGuffin'. The first one asks, 'What's a MacGuffin?' 'Well,' the other man says, 'it's an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.' The first man says, 'But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,' and the other one answers, 'Well then, that's no MacGuffin!' (*Interview: Alfred Hitchcock and François Truffaut*).

There are no lions in Scotland, but there is a suitcase over the travelers head with a gadget in it. The traveler with the suitcase has kept up the intrigue and pursuit by the other traveler, in our case, the science of happiness and self-help literature (in the suitcase and over one's head). As Whippman suggests, happiness seems to work like a MacGuffin, but, as she says, this "elusive MacGuffin is creating a nation of nervous wrecks," (Whippman, 2012).

The end of *The Maltese Falcon* can clarify the rest, when they ask what the bird (a MacGuffin) people are killing each other for is made of, Sam Spade's (H. Bogart) Shakespearean answer is, "The stuff that dreams are made of."



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