Positive Psychology and a Gospel of Happiness

"What is real happiness? How can I experience it? How can I live it?" As Christopher Kaczor notes in the Introduction to *The Gospel of Happiness*, these are questions that every thoughtful person asks. Where, however, might a thoughtful person go for help in answering these questions?

Thoughtful Christians, of course, go to the Bible, the lives of the saints, and the teachings of the Church. They might supplement what they learn there with the works of the philosophers: Plato and Aristotle from the ancients, Augustine and Aquinas, the Christian theologians. But they won't typically go to the discipline of psychology.

For one thing, traditional psychology has focused less on a positive path to happiness than on addressing the serious negatives that afflict many people's lives: depression and other mental disorders. For another, psychology has been—although with exceptions—a largely secular and sometimes even anti-religious academic domain.

Positive Psychology and Christianity Overlap in Seeking Happiness

Yet Kaczor noticed that in recent years many psychologists had embraced the positive: "Positive psychology" is the name given to a new approach that Martin Seligman initiated and that an increasing number of practitioners have pursued since the late 1990s. Positive psychology has attempted to find empirical answers to the question of what makes people happier and more resilient, and by what methods individuals can move in more positive directions.

To be sure, even the practitioners of this new form of psychology are generally not also practicing Christians;

Seligman himself doubts the existence of God. But Kaczor was struck by the ways in which the new positive approach tended both to converge with traditional Christian practice and to provide empirical evidence that traditional Christian practice works. Moreover, to judge from the findings Kaczor reports, positive psychology offers the kind of concrete practical advice that is often missing from Christian moral theology (although such advice has been found to a greater extent in the last century in the writings of leaders of Catholic lay movements such as Opus Dei and Communion and Liberation).

So it is with a bit of evangelical zeal—as his title signals—that Kaczor approaches the task of marrying the recent work of positive psychologists to the traditional moral practices, virtues, and teachings of Christianity. There is good news here, he thinks, that can greatly help those who find the injunction "Be therefore perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect" a tall order. And that good news is that the path to perfection is one of small steps—steps that can be described in helpfully concrete ways, and that almost anyone can practically adopt.

In its broadest outlines, the way of positive psychology is summarized in the acronym PERMA. Human flourishing is optimal when a life is characterized by *positive emotions*, *engagement*, *relationships*, *meaning*, and *achievement*. The importance of each item is underscored when one considers a life absent any of them. Life without positive emotions is characterized by depression; without engagement, by *acedia*; without relationships, by loneliness; without meaning, by shallowness; and without achievement, by stasis. Each of the items signified by PERMA thus contributes in recognizable ways to a well-lived life.

Christianity Deepens Positive Psychology's Approach

But is more needed? In particular, does Christianity bring

anything to the table, if positive psychology does such a good job mapping what Kaczor calls the “Ways to Happiness”? Kaczor argues that positive psychology falls short in six ways that require the correction that the truths of Christianity provide. The secular approach, to be brief, offers no answer to the problem of death, and no internal way of ordering the elements of PERMA. By contrast, Christianity offers the hope of life everlasting, and squarely places relationships at the forefront of a well-lived life.

Additionally, Christianity obviously acknowledges the existence of God and His Providence, and squarely acknowledges the reality of sin and guilt. The Christian faith, too, offers us direct communication from God, including the revelation of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ. Finally, it offers us a window into truths greater than those of the observable, material world. So while Kaczor thinks the achievements of positive psychology are a helpful guide to a good life, the “ways” of happiness cannot be a substitute for The Way.

Moreover, as Kaczor argues in Chapter Two, the ways of positive psychology are themselves enriched and deepened when paired with the Way of Christianity. Consider, for example, how faith is related to positive emotion (for many people at many times, it is a source of such emotion); to engagement (faith certainly deepens engagement in work, in marriage, in friendship); and to relationships, meaning, and even achievement (faith moves people to set goals for themselves, after all, which need to be met).

Hope and charity similarly give purpose and meaning to each of these areas. The effect holds true for other Christian virtues and practices, such as prayer, gratitude, or forgiveness. Each of these “ways” helps to deepen the approach to happiness that positive psychology encourages.

The Benefits Go Both Ways

Kaczor's point in this book, however, is that the helpful effects go both ways. The practices of positive psychology can aid Christians in their classical practices and virtues. The struggle to pray, to be grateful, or to forgive is well-known to many. Positive psychology, with its empirical approach, can provide help in identifying the smaller "ways" by which we can make progress in a life of prayer, gratitude, or forgiveness.

Gratitude, for example, is fostered by the practice of giving more consideration to all that went into what we have: all the work of all the people, all the materials from so many places. What Kaczor calls "gratitude density" is increased by deliberately drawing to our own attention such mundane facts—to use Milton Friedman's example, borrowed from Leonard Read—as what went into the creation of a single pencil. When we extend that reflection vertically, our relationship of gratitude to God will likewise be deepened as we come to realize that all we have is a gift from Him.

Forgiveness is also the subject of empirical study. Such study shows, not surprisingly, that forgiving people are happier than unforgiving or resentful people. But it also shows how simple practices can foster habits of forgiveness. Because, for example, forgiveness is blocked by the natural "fight or flight" response we have when we are threatened, we can encourage forgiveness by slowing down our breathing and achieving calm.

We also need to attend to the narratives we tell ourselves; victim narratives block forgiveness and downplay personal responsibility. In a way, such narratives provide our "enemies" a second victory over us: the deprivation of agency. Kaczor draws our attention to the work of Fred Luskin of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project, who summarizes progress towards forgiveness in the acronym HEAL: hope, educate, affirm, and long-term commitment.

In the two final chapters, Kaczor considers the "way of

virtue" and the "way of willpower." Positive psychology takes the formation of good habits as a central part of its program, thus converging on both Aristotle's and St. Thomas Aquinas's focus on the relationship between virtue and happiness. Many of us are in the grip of bad habits, and Kaczor offers advice for identifying the cues, routines, and rewards that lead us to cycle repeatedly through the behaviors to which our bad habits lead. Having done so, we can begin to work on the development of new, better habits. Kaczor notes that generally we will be more successful in cultivating these if we start small, with discrete tasks that will aid us in fostering a single virtue rather than an overwhelming plan to develop all the virtues at once.

Small Steps, Big Rewards

Kaczor concludes, "*The Gospel of Happiness* is good news indeed." By and large, he argues his position well; there is a lot here that could be helpful for someone seeking to live a better life, particularly for a Christian seeking to find small, concrete ways to make progress in his or her faith.

But two important aspects of a flourishing life are given less attention than they would require in a full picture of human well-being. These are, first, those basic human goods that are essential and constitutive features of human flourishing. Identifying basic goods—does the list include human life? Aesthetic experience? Marriage?—is necessary to set the ends in view of which a life may be lived meaningfully and with engagement. Without recognition of true goods, our positive emotions will be inadequately oriented and our achievements suspect. Worst, our relationships will be misunderstood and ill-pursued if we do not understand sociality itself as a basic good, and recognize the set of such basic goods as *the common good* for the various forms of human community.

Second, and related, an adequate account of human flourishing must make reference to those moral absolutes—negative

proscriptions—that protect the basic goods in our lives. It seems unlikely to me that many, if any, of the proponents of positive psychology adequately recognize the good of marriage, for example, and the need for the variety of norms governing sexuality in the Christian tradition to protect this good. Similarly, moral absolutes protect the goods of human life, of knowledge, of personal integrity; agents willing to damage these goods, whether intentionally or negligently, surely jeopardize their own prospects of happiness in ways that might well be opaque to practitioners of the new positive psychology.

Drawing attention to these important aspects of a well-lived life is not intended as criticism; Kaczor's focus in this book is elsewhere. Attending to that focus, and to the marriage of Christian practice with positive psychology, is an exercise sure to reap great personal rewards.

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