The Power of Negative Thinking: 
Truth, Melancholia, and the Tragic Sense of Life

Robert L. Woolfolk

Princeton University

Abstract

In this brief essay I argue that the contemporary “positive psychology” movement fails to emphasize important aspects of human existence that are essential to human excellence. Through an explication of some historical, cross-cultural, and literary examples, I argue for the importance of a kind of “negative psychology” that is fundamental to an adequate comprehension of the human situation.

The advent of the contemporary “positive psychology” movement inspires many reactions. One, inevitably, is that of “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.” Maybe it’s my age, my generational sensibilities at work here, but I was there for the previous version of positive psychology and to me that still seems like the genuine article. Of course, even before the humanistic psychology movement there were incarnations of positive psychology in America, the Emmanuel Movement, the New Thought, the imported mantras of Emile Coué. Remember: “Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better.” Americans have always been dedicated to self-improvement and had little use for the tragic view of life. Indeed, American pop psychology has always been an explicitly positive psychology. The Dale Carnegies, Napoleon Hills, Werner Erhards, and Tony Robbinses of this world vastly outnumber the champions of human potential we remember from the 1960’s. Even before the advent of contemporary positive psychology a few mainstream behavioral scientists had gotten involved. There was David McClelland’s (1984) memorable project three decades ago to export the American achievement ethos to the Indian subcontinent, there offering a rather remarkable set of seminars for indigenous executives (called achievement motivation training). Although I can’t claim to grasp all the nuances of the current positive

†Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to: Robert L. Woolfolk, 18 Turner Court, Princeton, NJ 08540. Email: woolfolk@princeton.edu.
psychology, I don’t think this time around, it’s going to be very dionysian. No sex, no drugs, no rock and roll. It seems like you can explore positive psychology wearing a coat and a tie or high heels and without messing up your hair; it seems more a creature of the boardroom than the hot tub.

Advocates of positive psychology from Maslow to Seligman have suggested that psychology has been too focused on various negatives: disease, disorder, and defect, but I would submit that American psychology, contrary to that claim, has failed to adequately appreciate the importance of certain forms of “negativity.” I would submit negative thinking is not only valuable, but indispensable, and suggest that we give much too little attention to acknowledging, confronting, accepting, and perhaps even embracing suffering and loss. I want to suggest also that there may be worse things in life than experiencing negative affect. Among those worse things are ignorance, banality, credulity, self-deception, narcissism, insensitivity, philistinism, and isolation, all of which the program of positive psychology, as it is presently constituted, potentially seems to promote.

I shall not attempt a systematic or conclusive argument. There is not space and I am not certain the thesis is subject to demonstration. In lieu of argument, I shall confine myself to reporting some anecdotes, the implications of which, I hope, will be clear. The first of these takes us pretty far back. So hop in your imaginal time machines and let’s go back together. . . .

Almost twenty five hundred years have passed since the Great King of Persia, Xerxes, set out to wage war against the Greek city-states. Xerxes’ war against the Greeks had, in addition to those economic and political motives common to most wars, elements of vanity and of vengeance. Ten years earlier, Xerxes’ father Darius had sought to conquer Greece but had underestimated his foe and suffered humiliating defeat. But as the world’s reigning superpower in 480 B.C., the Persian Empire ruled by Xerxes was regarded as militarily invincible.

The Great King’s sense of omnipotence likely was at its high point when, arriving at the Hellespont commanding the largest army ever assembled, he paused before crossing into Europe. Seated upon a throne high above the multitude, Xerxes conducted a grand review of his forces. Ships filled the waters and soldiers covered the land, as far as the eye could see, and beyond. After a brief interval of self-congratulation, however, Xerxes began to weep profusely. He broke down. When asked to explain his distress The Great King exclaimed

I was overcome with pathos, sadness at the thought that even among all these thousands of men I behold, in one hundred years, not one will be alive. (Herodotus, 1987, p. 486)
The Power of Negative Thinking

Now from the perspective of positive psychology something is WRONG with this picture!!! Autocratic leader of the world's greatest empire, richest person on earth, 30-1 favorite in the upcoming war against the Greeks, at the height of his powers, and this guy is telling us that the paths of glory lead but to the grave. We sense the poor fellow probably needs a therapist, or perhaps an executive coach. And in timely fashion the narrator of this story, Herodotus, provides one in the person of Xerxes' uncle, Artabanus, who proceeds to tell him though it is true enough that no one there will be alive in 100 years and yes, that's a pity, but that the brevity of life is not its most regrettable feature. He says

In one's life we have deeper sorrows to bear than that. Short as our lives are, there is no human being either here or elsewhere so fortunate that it will not occur to him, often and not just once, to wish himself dead rather than alive. For misfortunes fall upon us and sicknesses trouble us, so that they make this life, for all its shortness, seem long. (Herodotus, 1987, p. 486)

Now this is some therapy!

We, who like Herodotus, know how this story turns out — that the war will be a disaster for Xerxes and the Persians — recognize the tragic resonances in Artabanus's downbeat approach, and understand that it befits the baneful future it portends. He belongs to an unfashionable school of therapy. This is therapy of the old school, Greek therapy, as practiced by Herodotus, Sophocles, and Socrates. Its aim is a kind of Delphic self-knowledge, sophrosyne, a Greek word that is refractory to translation, but one meaning of which is the knowledge that people have about themselves, individually and collectively, especially as that knowledge reveals human shortcomings and limitations, especially hubris and hamartia (North, 1966; Woolfolk, 1998). Self-knowledge has value because it allows us to promote what is best in ourselves and to minimize what is worst. It is prerequisite to and an essential part of virtue, excellence, the good life. From it we do not automatically derive pleasure or psychological well-being (Robinson, 1997).

If all this doesn’t sound much like what is stressed in the contemporary positive psychology movement, it is because it isn’t. Actually, it turns out that many of the individuals we admire most were negative thinkers, if not depressives. Many of the most important products of Western civilization have required negative thinking. In other times and places, great cultures incorporated in their worldviews elements of what I am calling negative psychology. We, of course, can find non-Western world views, as well, that accentuate the negative a bit more than do the authors of recent APA policy initiatives. Perhaps the obvious example of such a worldview is that of Buddhism.
Buddhism begins, famously, with a declaration of the existence of pervasive human discontent and misery, misery that is universal and not limited to retributive consequences for the iniquitous or to maladies of the unfortunate. Buddha’s First Noble Truth which forms the foundation for the Buddhist Weltanschauung, is that consciousness in interaction with the universe inevitably entails *dukkha* (and its Tibetan counterpart *sdik-bshngal*), often translated as suffering but also as pain, sorrow, unhappiness, dysfunctionality, dissatisfaction, frustration, angst, and even “stress”. Dukkha is ubiquitous, persistent, and unavoidable. From a Buddhist standpoint, it is not a cognitive distortion to see the world and human existence as dangerous, unsatisfying, painful, and meaningless; rather it is irrational not to see the world this way. Such negative appraisals can be thought of as the beginning of wisdom (King & Woolfolk, 2001).

Buddhism adopts this pessimistic outlook toward the availability of happiness in the natural course of human existence, because Buddhists believe that the world and human beings are simply not designed such that happiness or even satisfaction will be the normal lot of people; but rather that unhappiness and dissatisfaction will be the normal and natural condition. Some contemporary Buddhist scholars have argued that Buddhism or Buddhist societies may consider as “normal reactions” some of the psychological symptoms of depression, such as hopelessness and despondency, that Western psychiatry would consider to be despair of pathological proportions. For example the anthropologist, Obeyesekere, writing about the Buddhist culture of Sri Lanka, suggested that when examining many features of depression:

> I would say we are not dealing with a depressive but a good Buddhist. The Buddhist would take one further step in generalization: it is not simply the general hopelessness of one’s own lot; that hopelessness lies in the nature of the world, and salvation lies in understanding and overcoming that hopelessness. . .If [Buddhists] . . . are afflicted by bereavement and loss. . ., they can generalize their despair from the self to the world at large and give it Buddhist meaning and significance. (1988, p. 140)

The Buddhists are not the only non-Westerners who are negative thinkers. Muslims, in general, see grief, sadness, and other dysphoric emotions as concomitants of religious piety and correlates of the painful consequences of living justly in an unjust world. The ability to experience sorrow is regarded a mark of depth of personality and understanding. In Iran, for example, sadness, grief, and despair are central to the Iranian ethos. Sadness for Iranians is associated with maturity and virtue. A person who expresses happiness too quickly often is considered socially incompetent (Good, Good, & Moradi, 1985).
The Power of Negative Thinking

The experience of sadness is valued also in Japan. There during the Tokugawa period, roughly between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries (1603-1868), one of the principal cultural projects of Japanese historians and literary scholars was that of interpreting ancient Japanese texts with the aim of identifying essential aspects of Japanese national character. Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) fashioned the concept of *mono no aware*, sometimes translated as “the persistent sadness that inheres in all things.” This concept was postulated to define an essential ingredient of Japanese culture and meant to characterize both a certain aesthetic and a capacity to understand the world directly, immediately, and sympathetically (Masahide, 1984). *Mono no aware* was thought to distinguish Japanese culture and mark its superiority to foreign forms of apprehension. The idea here is that of a sensitivity that involves being touched or moved by the world. This kind sensitivity to the world is thought to be inextricably intertwined with a capacity to experience the sadness and pathos that emanates from the transitory nature of things.

In the history of the West recognitions of the benighted nature of human existence are seen in many places: the doctrine of original sin, the contrast between the divine and the worldly, Stoic philosophy, and in the popular culture of the Late Middle Ages. Also in the West a commonly held view is that intelligence, creativity, and moral sensitivity are associated with melancholy. Aristotle, famously in the *Problemata*, wondered why all philosophers seemed to be melancholic. This query prefigures the Renaissance view that the cultivated individual inevitably will possess a melancholy temper, a proposition that foreshadows the contemporary evidence that depression and dysphoria, and hyperawareness of the sorrow of the world, are linked to genius. Shakespeare, as he does so often provides the prototype, one that in the context of the present discussion raises a question. Why is Hamlet so compelling to us, so irresistible? Why do we regard him the greatest creation of our greatest literary master? And let me provide a hint, it’s not because he is able to elevate his mood through the application of psychological techniques.

Hamlet doesn’t put a positive spin on things. He is too intellectually acute, too ironically perceptive to accept an artifice that might alleviate his distress. Characterologically speaking, we don’t know whether his melancholy and his nihilism emanate from a hypertrophy of intellectual consciousness, or rather from its apotheosis. But we are convinced that Hamlet sees the truth, faces it, and articulates it with unsurpassed eloquence. He understands that facet of human finitude that Herodotus has Xerxes enunciate at the Hellespont; he understands that and much more. Nietzsche (1873/1968) thought that Hamlet had peered into the essence of things, perceiving the horrible truth that
Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown:
Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.

Of course, the proponent of positive psychology here might rebut that no one really cares about a bunch of lugubrious European philosophizing or a lot of Eastern ideas that may have begun as rationalizations for the discontents of overpopulated, collectivist societies. This is America, not only the capital of psychology but the birthplace of the new economy, engine of global capitalism. We’re postindustrial, third wave. There are no limits. Nothing can stop the growth of the global information economy. Right? What a difference a year or two can make in such a view. But even with the NASDAQ crash and the chilling effects of terrorism, all in all, this is the land of opportunity, of self-improvement, and of positive thinking. Historically, Americans have been optimists and antagonistic to some of the tragic views mentioned here. But we have, at times, produced our share of negative thinking. Oddly enough, Tocqueville wrote that

In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men, placed in circumstances the happiest to be found in the world; yet it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brow, and I thought them serious and almost sad even in their pleasures. (Tocqueville, 1840/1969, p. 536)

Hey I’ll go Alexis one step further: To some extent it was negative thinkers that built America. Let me illustrate with a couple of examples.

Our first example of an American negative thinker, is one who perhaps derives his negativity from being, one of America’s early graduate students. He was Princeton’s first grad student, as folks around Nassau Hall will tell you proudly. This man was known for his careful readings of the classics and the Enlightenment writers. But he was also a student of Hobbes and Machiavelli, and absorbed their skepticism and realism.

Human beings he wrote are inflamed “with mutual animosity, and are . . . much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.” (Madison, 1787/1961, Federalist 10). He believed that a problem with democracy is that “it would be the interest of the majority in every community to despoil and enslave the minority of individuals” (Madison, 1865, pp. 250-251) and “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” But in the real world he continued, “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” (Madison, 1787/1961, Federalist
51). In essence democratic republics had to be protected from those vices endemic to human nature.

So James Madison, the father of our constitution was able to peer into the darkness of the human heart and not blink. The American experiment succeeded as well as it has, in part, because Madison’s negative psychology generated the U. S. Constitutional framework with its protections, checks, and balances that structure and constrain the potential abuses of democracy.

The person who perhaps saved the American experiment was one so tender-hearted that he could not discipline his children, could not reject a lover, and once was completely unnerved by the sight of a baby bird that had fallen from its nest (Wilson, 1998). Abraham Lincoln tried a bit of positive psychology on himself in the form of jokes and stories, told with such skill that he developed a reputation as a humorist and a raconteur. But he was fundamentally a sorrowful man. He confessed to his law partner William Herndon, “if it were not for these stories — jokes — jests I should die: they give vent — are the vents of my moods and gloom.” (quoted in Burlingame, 1994, p. 106). His favorite poem was a doleful lament by William Knox entitled “Mortality”: 

Yea, hope and despondency, pleasure and pain,  
Arc mingled together in sunshine and rain:  
And the smile and the tear, the song and the dirge,  
Shall follow each other like surge upon surge.

In many ways he was like Hamlet, suffering from what he described as “the intensity of thought, which will sometimes wear the sweetest idea thread-bare and turn it to the bitterness of death.” (quoted in Oates, 1984, p. 37). A neighbor said that melancholy dripped from him. After one of the losses that permeated his life, an observer commented that she had never seen a man so bowed down by grief. He himself once said “if there’s a worse place than hell, I’m in it” (quoted in Burlingame, 1994, p. 105).

Yet he may have been the greatest man our nation has produced and as it was with Hamlet, his greatness derives directly from his capacity to engage, comprehend, assimilate, and express the great sorrows of this world. As a young man Lincoln had traveled in the South and there witnessed the atrocities of slavery. The image of human beings chained to each other never left him and was a continual source of agitation. His great heart ached for those whose lives were so wretched. He later remarked that if slavery is not wrong then nothing is wrong.

Now the positive psychologist might counter, “But Abraham Lincoln was a depressive, just think of what he could have accomplished with a little positive thinking with a less depressogenic cognitive style.”
One might as well suggest that Hamlet would have been a better play if the Prince had been able to effect a positive reframing of his complicated family dynamics. Lincoln’s intellectual acuity and his moral grandeur are inseparable from his unflinching relation to the pain of life. His nation had engendered an internecine perdition. Lincoln’s comprehension of that national condition is on display most notably in the second inaugural, in which he was able to apprehend and articulate the meaning of the Civil War through those memorable, dreadful images and analogies that could occur only to a negative thinker.

The “negative psychology” I have described and recommended here is not so much an antipode to contemporary trends in psychology as it is the description of another dimension or perhaps the exposition of an existential background. Arguing about whether we are better off studying health or sickness, strength or weakness, in some sense, oversimplifies psychology and makes it one-dimensional. If psychology is to avoid a banal and prosaic delimitation, it would be well advised to take heed of some ancient and cross-cultural sources that give prominence to the tragic, finite, and negative aspects of human existence.

References


The Power of Negative Thinking


