

Conditions of Happiness One-page Paper 5

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Recently, there has been a growing backlash against theories and books claiming to promote happiness. As the father of Positive Psychology, Martin Seligman and his works have ineluctably been under attack from various scholars and writers. As Seligman's critics differ widely in their arguments against positive psychology, this paper will respond primarily to criticisms raised by Cederström and Spicer in their book *The Wellness Syndrome*, in view of the arguments presented by Seligman in his book *Flourish*. I would contend that Cederström and Spicer's criticisms are logically flawed and based on a misrepresented interpretation of Seligman's theory on well-being. Through this analysis, we can better assess the merits of both sides of the debate.

The presence of logical fallacy is evident in *The Wellness Syndrome*, undermining the validity of its arguments. The authors base much of their criticism on Seligman's overemphasis on personal responsibility¹, which "implies that all of the drawbacks that one might experience are not the product of a complex series of circumstances, but ultimately down to one's own doing" (Cederström & Spicer, 2015, p.80). In fact, positive psychology proposes five elements that contribute to individual well-being, which are mere descriptions of what well-being comprises as seen from "the task of positive psychology is to *describe*, rather than *prescribe*, what people actually do to get well-being" (Seligman, 2011, p.80). This is equivalent to saying: if a person attains well-being, he has one or more of these traits. However, the reasoning Cederström and Spicer adopt has the form: if a person is not happy, he does not have any of these traits. It then becomes one's personal responsibility to have some of the traits of well-being in positive psychology. This clearly commits the inverse error², possibly in an attempt to tweak the theory of positive psychology so that it can be more easily attacked. Yet, doing so severely hampers the cogency of the authors' reasoning and makes their subsequent criticisms appear unfair and contrived. Therefore, the presence of logical fallacy invalidates their criticism against positive psychology regarding individual responsibility to be happy.

Moreover, Cederström and Spicer equate positive psychology to the pursuit of happiness and in turn criticise positive psychology by attacking happiness, ignoring the other elements of well-being. Seligman suggests that well-being comprises five aspects: positive emotion, engagement, meaning, positive relationships and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011, p.16). However, Cederström and Spicer focus too narrowly on the notion of happiness or pleasure. They claim that "we are bombarded with the command at all times and places to seek pleasure" and "this form of lifestyle, dictated by the rules of the pleasure principle, we think will help to maintain a pleasant, balanced life." These statements reduce the pursuit of psychological well-being to a

¹ This point was brought up by Daniel and further developed by me during class discussion.

² The inverse error is a logical fallacy of the form: "If p then q. Therefore, if not-p then not-q."

shallow search for pleasure, ignoring deeper or more long-lasting concepts like engagement and meaning. On the surface, the authors' criticism appears more persuasive when directed at the pursuit of pleasure, since it is widely believed that pleasure should not be our sole value in life. Nevertheless, upon closer examination of both sides of the debate, the overall argument presented by Cederström and Spicer does not adequately address all aspects of Seligman's theory. Consequently, this misrepresentation of Seligman's positive psychology makes their criticism less potent.

In conclusion, I believe that *The Wellness Syndrome* is riddled with unfair criticisms of Seligman's theory on well-being, arising from logical errors as well as an inadequate representation of positive psychology. Moving on, it would be insightful to study more on whether positive psychology has become the scapegoat of larger problems rooted in our modern societal and cultural values.

Word count: 597 words

References

1. Cederström, Carl & André Spicer, "The Happiness Doctrine", *The Wellness Syndrome*, Wiley and Sons, 2015.
2. Martin Seligman, *Flourish: a Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, Free Press, 2011.