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Becoming positive souls

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Introduction

The obsession with personal happiness seems to know no bounds today. In the last two decades, the preoccupation with individual well-being, positive emotions, and personal development has increasingly dominated therapeutic goals, professional psychological advice, and academic debates—engaging disciplines such as medicine, economics, education, political sciences, sports sciences, neurosciences, management, and business. It has also and powerfully shaped labour and educational matters, institutional interventions, technocratic strategies, political decision-making, and economic interests on a global scale.

In this regard, Cabanas and Illouz (2018) have recently argued about the strong relationship between happiness, power, and consumption in advanced capitalist societies. According to these authors, 20th-century capitalism has given birth to a powerful economy of happiness that thrives under both the premise and the promise that the pursuit of personal happiness is the worthiest goal in life to pursue, both for individuals and societies alike. A global and multibillion dollar industry of happiness has flourished by instilling in people the idea that the most functional way of living is to be fixated with their inner lives, to be continuously preoccupied in correcting their psychological flaws, and to be permanently concerned with self-development. In advanced capitalist societies, Cabanas and Illouz remark, happiness has become a social and moral injunction, a lucrative business, and a highly effective form of power and control that disguises its ideological assumptions under the neutralising rhetoric of positivist science (see also Cabanas, 2016).

The broadly popular field of positive psychology, founded in 2000, has undoubtedly played a crucial role in the institutionalisation and propagation of this individualistic ideology of happiness to virtually any sphere of everyday life. Presented as a revolutionary, scientific, and universal endeavour aimed to find the psychological keys of human happiness (Seligman, 2011b; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), positive psychology has nevertheless been comprehensively criticised from multiple fronts since it first made its appearance.

In addition to sociological and cultural critiques (e.g., Binkley, 2014; Ehrenreich, 2009), multiple analyses questioning the field's alleged novelty (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2012), universalistic aspirations (e.g., Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008), therapeutic efficacy (e.g., Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews, 2012), and scientific basis (e.g., Pérez-Álvarez, 2016) have also been
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compelling. In this line, Horowitz (2018) has recently stated that “virtually every finding of positive psychology under consideration remains contested (…) Controversies go well beyond the question of replication or reproducibility. Major conclusions have been challenged, modified, or even abandoned. Even what happiness means has been up for grabs” (p. 5). Thus, almost 20 years after its foundation, and despite its undeniably broad academic and cultural success, positive psychology does not seem to have fulfilled its scientific ambitions or delivered its promises of happiness as much as it has not been able to offer something substantially new from its cultural and popular predecessors (e.g., Becker and Marecek, 2008).

In this sense, although positive psychologists have made recurrent efforts to play down its ethnocentrism and popular roots, the positive therapeutic gospel preached by these scientists deeply inherits from the longstanding North American and individualistic belief in the power of individuals to heal and flourish by their own means. This belief has characterised self-help literature, self-esteem movements, television talk shows, and Alcoholics Anonymous therapeutic programmes in North America throughout the 20th century, as well as the influential spiritual therapies that developed amid the 19th century (Cabanas and Sánchez-González, 2012). As Moskowitz (2001) has noted, with the metaphysics of the power of mind over body as hallmark “[Americans] have been soul-doctoring for more than 150 years. Since the days of Phineas P. Quimby we have preached the gospel of recovery and practiced the therapeutics of happiness” (p. 259). Indeed, positive psychology is by no means stranger to this metaphysics. Rather the contrary, the field might well be regarded as one of the latest and most influential manifestations of a popular and spiritual tradition long convinced that individuals are solely responsible for their happiness and misery, that attitudes triumph over circumstances, and that the key to the good life lies with the power of positive thoughts to shape reality.

Building on previous historical analyses (e.g., Pérez-Álvarez et al., 2018; García et al., 2015), this paper argues that positive psychology’s primary goals, assumptions, and therapeutic techniques reveal a clear resemblance with those already popularised by Quimby and the New Thought movement in 19th-century North America. Due to length limits, the paper focuses on the similarities between Quimby’s “science of life and happiness” and positive psychology’s “science of happiness and flourishing”.

The aim of the paper is twofold. First, to raise epistemological concerns related to positive psychology’s presentation of old, spiritualistic, and ethnocentric ideas as apparently new, scientific, and universal truths about human happiness. Second, and relatedly, to show the strong continuity of positive psychology with a North American metaphysical tradition consecrated to bringing science and spirituality together in the understanding of human happiness.

In both regards, it is worth pointing out that the strong academic and popular influence of positive psychology might well contribute to deepening the problem of a therapeutic culture whose wide and global success has often relied less on the truth of its claims than on its ideological alignment and the marketability of its quick, simplistic, and individualistic solutions (see also Illouz in this book).

Quimby’s science of happiness

In the second half of the 19th century, numerous popular religious movements grouped under the umbrella of “New Thought” and deeply influenced by Emersonian Transcendentalism began to emerge in North America with a common goal: to individualise the divine and to turn spirituality into a practical tool at the service of personal healing (Satter, 1999).

These movements shared a common metaphysics based on the four following maxims: Material reality did not exist but was a mind creation; minds should be trained to unleash and
control their healing powers; society corrupted people’s minds with false and negative thoughts, the source of all personal illness; and human’s moral obligation was to achieve happiness in life and therefore reject the false Christian idealisation of suffering.

On this basis, New Thought presented itself as a revolutionary movement that would break away with oppressive religious dogmas and useless philosophies to focus instead on what helped people gain self-knowledge and find personal happiness. In his 1865 essay “Disease and healing”, Quimby (2008) put it as follows:

I BELIEVE now that the time has nearly arrived when the people will be prepared to receive a great truth that will give an impulse and set them investigating a subject which will open to their minds new and enlarged ideas of themselves and show man what he is and how he makes himself what he is.

(p. 257)

The New Thought movement would spread from Portland and Boston to the rest of the country in a matter of very short time, reaching its peak of influence in the Gilded Age up to the years of the First World War. However, it was not so much the alleged revolutionary doctrine as the marked therapeutic inclination which earned the movement tremendous success and widespread popular influence.

What we believe, that we create

Even though Quimby’s influence on New Thought was indirect, that is, through his disciples and followers more than through his writings, he is considered the father of the movement. Indeed, New Thought’s main concepts and therapeutic techniques are already found in Quimby’s works—a series of essays, notes, and letters first compiled in 1921 under the title The Quimby Manuscripts. These manuscripts, written between the 1850s and 1866, the year of his death, are based on his own experience as a spiritual healer. In his own words, Quimby claimed to practice a “science of health and happiness” based on “one simple fact”: that all individual’s “happiness and misery are of his own make” (Quimby, 2008: p. 315).

For Quimby, “what we believe, that we create” (p. 50). Quimby was indeed convinced that positive thoughts created or attracted positive and healthy outcomes just as negative thoughts produced disease and negative consequences. On this issue, Albanese (2007) has noted that this belief, “which lies at the heart of American metaphysics” and which is still present today in North American culture and many varieties of self-help literature (e.g., Rhonda Byrne’s 2006 bestseller The Secret), “is about what may be called magic” since “for the magical believer the trained and controlled human imagination brings one part of the world to operate or act on other ‘pieces’. In the eyes of the believer, such activity is an effective way to bring desired and seemingly miraculous change” (p. 7).

Nevertheless, Quimby did not see his doctrine as any magical or superstitious thinking. Rather the contrary, he insisted on the scientific truth of his method, which he frequently opposed to those of physicians. Indeed, rarely did Quimby miss an occasion to accuse physicians of being mere “quacks” and “robbers” interested in inculcating a pessimist and deceptive canon of denial that annulled people’s self-recovery capacities: “The course taken by the medical faculty in their mode of reasoning destroys man’s natural powers and makes him a mere tool in the hands of a quack” (Quimby, 2008: p. 295).

In Quimby’s view, sin was an invention of pastors as much as illnesses were a creation of physicians. For instance, in his essay “Outlines of a new theory for curing disease”, Quimby states from the beginning that
all medical practice claims that their mode of treatment is the best; yet no one has even hinted or dares to risk his reputation on the ground that disease is an invention of man and ought to be treated as an error or deception forced upon mankind by ignorance and superstition as slavery has been forced upon this country.

(p. 274)

Quimby meant no simile here. For him, ill people were slaves in the hands of disease-mongering physicians driven only by profit and blinded by the narrow idea that all disease is physical.

One of Quimby’s main criticisms against the medical practice of his time is that physicians overlooked and neglected the mind. Quimby had a point. The narrow physiological models and aggressive medical treatments of the time proved rather inefficient against severe and widespread afflictions in North America such as neurasthenia (also called “American nervousness”), an emotional condition (anhedonia, anxiety, depression, fear of responsibility) with somatic correlates (exhaustion, pain, weakness, sleep disturbances) that specially affected the middle and upper class. As Meyer (1965) pointed out in his historical account on neurasthenia, Americans suffered differentially, a “few millions” more than others. These few millions were found more typically in the North and East than in the South and West, among professional and business classes that among farming and working masses. In short, nervousness beset the most advanced people, the successful people, the people who most fully indulged modern civilization. Evidently they were the victims of their own creation.

(p. 26)

Indeed, neurasthenia seemed to respond to cultural and social grounds (e.g., increasing over-demanding lifestyles, the strong clash between traditional and modern values, emphasis on emotional repression and individual responsibility) rather than to physical or mental causes—as neurologists of the time such as George Beard also admitted. And yet, although Quimby erred in the explanation as much as physicians did, his spiritual therapy had a much better fit within an individualistic tradition convinced that therapy could be isolated from society, health from politics, and happiness from structural conditions; that social problems, in short, stemmed from psychological causes instead of the other way around.

Spiritual therapy

Through the years, Quimby developed a series of mind-changing exercises aimed at helping patients understand the “great mind power” they had “over their own states” and their surrounding world. These exercises ranged from those based on the scrutiny of one’s thoughts in search of negative beliefs (“errors”) that caused self-doubt, anxiety, or pain, e.g., “You are made to believe you are not so good as you ought to be: your belief puts restrictions on your life (…) Remember that every error has its reaction, but an unravelling of error leads to life and happiness, while the winding it up leads to disease and misery” (Quimby, 2008: p. 112), to those encouraging to mentally focus on pleasant experiences and inner bodily states, e.g., “Imagine yourself sitting in a chair with the lower lever or spine at right angles with your limbs. This [will] relieve the stomach, take the pressure from the aorta and put out the fire so there can be no heat. This will produce a change in your feelings and the change is the cure” (p. 128), to speaking positive self-affirmations, regular meditation, and praying. For Quimby, any relief that patients might feel after these exercises, no matter how temporary, provided evidence of the power of the mind to shape people’s reality.
It is worth noting, though, that whereas Quimby was convinced of the truth of his healing doctrine, he was nonetheless reluctant to take those patients that did not fully believe in his doctrine. Quimby seemed to be aware that part of the efficacy of his exercises relied on the authority and prestige he had earned along the years as well as on patients’ acceptance of his healing doctrine—humanist psychologist Carl Rogers, for instance, acknowledged something similar about the efficacy of his client-centred therapy (see Pérez-Álvarez et al., 2018).

Quimby’s mind-changing exercises soon became part of the therapeutic acquis of new generations of healers, preachers, and writers claiming to have discovered the keys to human health and happiness. Little did Quimby know, though, that his gospel would end up putting health issues aside to instead set the foundations for a new religion of success that would increasingly link happiness to personal achievement and the power of the mind with the acquisition of wealth. From Helen Wilmans’s (1831–1907) bestseller The Conquest of Poverty (1899), to the works of authors such as Wallace Wattles (1860–1991), Elizabeth Towne (1865–1960), William Atkinson (1862–1932), Orison Swett Marden (1850–1948), and Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993), they all spread the idea that if Quimby’s doctrine had been able to unleash people’s self-recovery powers, the same principles could be applied to personal success and development.

Peale’s bestselling self-help book The Power of Positive Thinking is an excellent example of this. Presented as an easy-reading and practical manual aimed at teaching applied spirituality and mind-changing exercises to help people to lead happier and more successful lives (Peale, 2003), Peale merged already rooted metaphysical assumptions with emerging psychotherapeutic jargon (e.g., conditioning, suggestion, habits, attitudes, cognitive attributions, etc.) in a rather eclectic and unconvincing albeit appealing way, especially for a new breed of businessmen deeply convinced that the secrets to personal success rested on the correct management of their psyche and the ruthless power of will to achieve any personal goals.

Quimby’s gospel of self-recovery is thus not only essential to understand the subsequent courses of North American metaphysics and its more than 150-year-long devoutness to the power of the mind. It is also essential to understand the modern foundations of a therapeutic culture that with varying degrees of assimilation by different cultures (e.g., Nehring et al., 2016), has been increasingly preoccupied with self-fulfilment and firmly persuaded that the yardstick of happiness and success, health and progress, is not social or political but of a psychological and subjective nature.

Thus, following Moskowitz (2001), it might be well said that “with his spiritual practice Quimby forged not only a fundamentally new vision of religion and medicine but indeed a new morality (...) designed to secure happiness (...) This new perspective links Quimby to the modern therapeutic project” (p. 14). As we develop hereunder, perhaps nowhere in current academic psychotherapeutic thinking does this link show clearer than in positive psychology.

**Positive psychology’s science of happiness**

The quest to bring spirituality and science together in the understanding of human health and happiness is still very alive in North America today (Mosley, 2006). Perhaps, no other institution like The John Templeton Foundation, founded in 1978 by Presbyterian elder, stock investor, and philanthropist Sir John Templeton (1912–2008), has more actively advocated to rekindle and spread the New Thought doctrine in North America in the last 40 years. Self-described as an “unfailing optimist” and convinced that “scientific revelations would be a goldmine for revitalizing religion in the 21st Century”, Templeton invested hundreds of millions of dollars to “encourage the relationship between science and religion” and to “bring together scientists,
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Theologians, medical professionals, philosophers, philanthropists, and other scholars to plan programs and help publish the tremendous opportunities for new spiritual information through research” (Mosley, 2006: xvii).

Templeton’s financial involvement in both the foundation and dissemination of positive psychology has been crucial (Horowitz, 2018). Since the appearance of the field in the year 2000, the Templeton Foundation alone has invested tens of millions of dollars in positive psychology’s research programmes for the study of positive health, positive education, resilience and mindfulness, positive neuroscience, transcendence and spirituality, hope and forgiveness, and the power of will and perseverance in goal achievement, to name a few. Seligman himself has repeatedly acknowledged the crucial role of the Templeton Foundation in the success of positive psychology. This includes the creation of the Positive Psychology Centre in Pennsylvania; the creation of a global institutional network of scientific journals and publications; Ph.D. and Master’s programmes; specialised courses in positive psychology; symposiums and workshops; and generous scholarships and prizes for senior and young researchers under the name of the Templeton Positive Psychology Prize — considered the largest monetary award ever given in psychology.

Further, Templeton did not only contribute to the field financially. Templeton’s oeuvre and figure were of remarkable intellectual and moral reference, too. For instance, his works are quoted by Peterson and Seligman (2004) in their influential Character Strengths and Virtues. A Handbook and Classification, and his figure was an important source of inspiration for the inventory of universal and positive virtues and strengths developed by these authors. Further, Templeton himself even wrote the 2002 preface for the very same Handbook of Positive Psychology (Snyder and Lopez, 2002) that declared the independence of the field. In Templeton’s (2002) own words:

It gives me great joy to know that so many scientists—many of whom have contributed to this landmark volume—are striving to inspire people to develop a more wholesome focus on the positive aspects of life. I am convinced that one day these scientists will be recognized as visionary leaders, whose research helped to identify, elevate, and celebrate the creative potential of the human spirit (…) In fact, I am more optimistic than ever that one day soon (…) scientists will publish findings that will advance humankind’s understanding of a spiritual principle that has been at the core of my own life’s purpose.

**Bringing spirituality and science together**

Although positive psychology is not a uniform field—some differences might be found depending on the author and country—there is a dominant psychotherapeutic discourse in which it is not hard to find clear spiritual basis and explicit religious interests. This is especially evident in the most prominent North American figures of the movement—but not exclusively: As a recent review on the field points out, a large number of positive psychological studies worldwide “investigate constructs such as gratitude, mindfulness/meditation, strengths, coaching, hope, or spirituality, as key predictors of well-being” (Donaldson et al., 2015: p. 5).

Examples of this discourse indeed abound. Already the 2002 Handbook of Positive Psychology contained numerous articles specifically addressing the relationship between spirituality and happiness. These articles range from those claiming to “have found that religion and spirituality are positively related to positive affectivity but are unrelated to negative affectivity” (Watson, 2002: p. 114) to those relating spirituality with developed creative attitudes, higher personal authenticity and life-meaning, and human potential (e.g., Averill, 2002; Pargament and Mahoney, 2002), emphasising the application of therapeutic strategies “to increase client
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awareness regarding their innate personal spirituality so that they may reap the benefits” (Lopez et al., 2002: p. 706), or acknowledging that “the word spiritual has taken on meanings that echo many of the themes emphasized in positive psychology (e.g., caring, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, hope, love, meaning, nonviolence, responsibility, and wisdom)” (Mahoney, 2002: p. 750, italics in the original).

In this line, one of the Positive Psychology Centre’s main line of research, coordinated by Seligman and developed by Vaillant, had two main objectives. First, to “combine the integration of findings from cultural anthropology, brain imaging, and evolution with the study of individual lifetimes that reflect a deep spiritual component”; and second, to inquire “on the role of spirituality in successful living” (Seligman, 2005: p. 7). Following on from this project, three years later Vaillant (2008) would publish Spiritual Evolution: A Scientific Defense of Faith, a book devoted to the defence of the evolutionary basis of religiousness, its relation to happiness, and the definition of spirituality as “the amalgam of positive emotions that bind us to other human beings — and to our experience of ‘God’ as we may understand Her/Him” (p. 5).

Lyubomirsky has actively defended the relationship between spirituality, health, and happiness, as well. In her book The How of Happiness: A New Approach to Getting the Life You Want, Lyubomirsky (2007) defends that “religious people are happier, healthier, and recover better after traumas that nonreligious people” (p. 228). Lyubomirsky disregards that the higher happiness of religious people is related to mutual support, sense of community, or institutional care. “I don’t believe it”, she claims: “Regardless of whether you are involved with a formal religious organization, your health and happiness may benefit simply from you having religious faith” (p. 250). For Lyubomirsky, spirituality is a subjective property that can be managed and controlled through mental exercises to get profitable returns on our health, happiness, and everyday coping with stressors, adversity, and disease. As she stresses within the book:

**Spiritual people are happier than nonspiritual people**, have superior mental health, cope better with stressors, have more satisfying marriages, use drugs and alcohol less often, are physically healthier, and live longer lives. People who perceive the divine being as loving and responsive are happier than those who don’t (p. 232, emphasis added).

In this line, Lyubomirsky further concludes with a rather straightforward statement:

**Scientists can no longer ignore the powerful influences of spirituality and religion on health and well-being.** If nothing else, the statistics should compel them. In the United States alone the vast majority of individuals, about 95 percent, believe in God. If you so choose, and in your own way, you can harness the benefits of faith to improve your happiness and your life.

*(p. 239, emphasis added)*

Examples of a positive psychology discourse devoted to bringing spirituality and science together in the study of human happiness are not only found in handbooks and monographs. Conferences, specialised courses, seminars, and scientific papers by positive psychologists evidence this discourse, too. For instance, in 2007 a special issue on positive psychology stated the commitment of the field with the exploration of the relationship between spirituality and happiness, further stressing the critical role that positive psychology has played in fuelling this kind of research:

the emergence of the positive psychology movement has fueled attention on the question of not just whether religious and spiritual beliefs and behaviors are related to the absence
of problems in mental health, but also whether they are related to the presence of positive emotional and psychological states.

(Joseph et al., 2006: p. 209–210)

Focused on issues such as the offering of “a vehicle for the reconciliation of psychology and religion” or the development of “a framework within which to understand the development of Christianity as an example of growth through adversity”, the special issue stressed the scientific basis behind these studies: “Traditionally, these are topics associated with religious and spiritual thinking, now that they have become the focus for empirical positive psychology, we can begin to investigate their role scientifically” (p. 211). The special issue finally concluded that “the evidence is supportive of the idea that religion and spirituality have beneficial effects”, thus establishing a tight relationship “between religion and happiness” (p. 210).

Positive therapy

In addition to discourse, positive psychology’s most characteristic therapeutic exercises also bear a strong family resemblance with those devised by Quimby and other New Thought writers and practitioners during the twentieth century—for instance, some empirical analyses have shown the notable similitude between both, arguing that significant differences are only found in the higher emphasis of positive psychology on scientific jargon (e.g., Cabanas and Huertas, 2014). In this regard, whereas presented in a language heavily aligned with the standards of natural science (e.g., evolutionism, neuroscience, cognitive–behavioural therapy), positive psychological therapy inherits from New Thought’s hallmark assumptions such as the power of individuals to control their psyche at will or the ontological distinction between positivity and negativity—similar to what Quimby’s metaphysics called truth and error, respectively.

Regarding the positive-negative distinction, positive psychology has been widely criticised for its excessive reliance on the premise that positive emotional and cognitive states (e.g., optimism) produce desirable and functional outcomes whereas negative emotions and thoughts yield unhealthy and dysfunctional results (Held, 2004; Ehrenreich, 2009). Perhaps, no one has defended this premise more bluntly than Seligman (2002), affirming that negativity is “maladaptive in most endeavors”, this presumably accounting for why “pessimists are losers in many fronts” (p. 178). Accordingly, the father of positive psychology has further insisted that, contrary to negativity, positivity is always beneficial for individuals, even if that meant to be positive “at a cost perhaps of less realism” (p. 129).

Drawing upon these postulates, positive therapeutic exercises aim at promoting a positive outlook of oneself and the world on the basis that control over one’s thoughts and emotions have a causal effect on health, behaviour, and circumstances. Examples of these techniques range from those consisting in changing cognitive styles, i.e., the way individuals rationalise the causes of their successes and failures (Reivich and Gillham, 2003); to those focused on cultivating optimism —defined as “an individual difference variable that reflects the extent to which people hold generalized favorable expectancies for their future” (Carver, Scheier, and Segerstrom, 2010: p. 1) to making frequent positive self-affirmations (Weis, 2012); to training hope—defined as “goal-directed thinking in which people perceive that they can produce routes to desired goals (pathways thinking) and the requisite motivation to use those routes (agency thinking)” (Lopez, Snyder, and Pedrotti, 2003: p. 94); to exercising gratitude and forgiveness—both defined as abilities that individuals must develop in order to increase positive affect and inspire a sense of transcendence (Peterson and Seligman 2004); to practising meditation and mindfulness—with the aim of
instructing people on how to focus and gain control over their inner, spiritual landscape (Snyder and Lopez, 2007); to counting your blessings (Seligman, 2011b); or to praying (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Positive psychological interventions based on these and similar techniques today have a widespread influence and diffusion in the spheres of psychotherapy, education, management, and professional counselling on a global scale. Whether more or less explicitly, a weighty share of these positive intervention programmes explicitly focuses on promoting spiritual thinking and practice as having a significant and positive impact on personal happiness.

Encompassing an extensive range of issues—including workers’ productivity and alignment with organisational values (Schnell et al., 2013), post-traumatic growth after tragic life events (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004), or positive ageing and longevity (Vaillant, 2008)—positive interventions are applied to a wide range of public and private institutions, including hospitals (Monod et al., 2010), schools (Holder et al., 2010), or the army (Pargament and Sweeney, 2011). Examples of these interventions also abound. Regarding the army, for instance, the 145$ million programme Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF), conducted by the U.S. Army since 2008 and supervised by Seligman at the Positive Psychology Centre—and considered the most substantial investment not only in positive psychology, but in the history of psychology at large—is a good example of the strong spiritualist leaning of positive psychology’s therapeutic interventions and initiatives.

The programme, consisting of different training modules including resilience, mindfulness, positive emotions, or self-development, and introduced with the objective to “create a force as fit psychologically as it is physically” (Seligman, 2011a), highlights the importance of the spiritual fitness module. This spiritual module was specifically devised to promote spirituality as significant to increasing soldiers’ overall happiness, strengthening the bond of units, encouraging healthy lifestyle choices, and mending feelings of moral injury. According to Seligman (2011b), the importance of the module was based on the fact that there was “considerable evidence that a higher level of spirituality goes hand in hand with greater well-being, less mental illness, less substance abuse, and more stable marriages, not to mention better military performance” (p. 149).

Whereas most positive psychologists have vouched for the efficacy and relevance of the CSF programme, the initiative has been severely criticised since its inception. One of the first and harshest criticisms came from the Coalition for an Ethical Psychology, which raised several ethical concerns about the involuntary enlistment of soldiers in the programme; moral doubts regarding efforts to build indomitable soldiers; and concerns about spirituality training inappropriately promoting Christianity (Eidelson and Soldz, 2012). The commission also raised concerns regarding the scientific validity and effectiveness of the programme, highlighting that the “CSF evaluation research appears to be deeply flawed and recent claims that the program ‘works’ appear to be a gross misrepresentation of the data” (p. 1). Similar ethical, methodological, and technical issues were also raised by many other scholars (e.g., Dyckman, 2011; Phipps, 2011; Friedman and Robbins, 2012), including design problems; lack of pilot testing and control groups; use of non-empirically validated resilience training on soldiers; and significant revisions and improvisations on the modules due to their lack of impact (see also Brown, 2015).

Considering these and other criticisms, it might be hence argued that the most ambitious project of positive psychology up to date seems not only to expose some of the several scientific insufficiencies that the field has been dragging since it made its appearance in academia. It also reveals the strong continuity of the movement with a North American metaphysics long devoted to promoting happiness through personal means and to bringing science and religion together in the quest for the psychological and universal keys to the good life.
Conclusion
Numerous scholars from multiple disciplines, including sociologists (e.g., Binkley, 2014), psychologists (e.g., Christopher and Hickinbottom, 2008), historians (e.g., Horowitz, 2018), and critical commentators (e.g., Ehrenreich, 2009) agree that the therapeutic gospel preached by positive psychologists is deeply rooted in a North American culture characterised by strong individualistic and consumerist values. Although less frequent, the marked spiritual basis of the field has also been the subject of criticism (e.g., Becker and Marecek, 2008). Following on the latter critical trend, this paper has aimed at stressing and illustrating, both at a theoretical, practical, and institutional level, the strong resemblance and continuity of positive psychology with a North American metaphysical tradition (i.e., New Thought) long devoted to bringing science and spirituality together in the understanding of human happiness.

Yet, despite the explicit and recurrent pretences of positive psychologists to bring together science and religion, a specific and convincing proposal from these scholars on the articulation between both remains to be seen. In the absence of such a proposal, what positive psychologists often seem to do is to take for granted that the simple application of correlational methods to the study of typical religious concepts (e.g., transcendence, gratitude, meditation) itself provides enough justification for the compatibility between a religious (metaphysical, spiritualist) and a scientific (materialist, naturalist) framework. This not only denotes a vague and reductionist understanding of the religious, but a naïve and superficial understanding of science, as well.

Most importantly, positive psychology’s therapeutic proposal entails the risk of accepting that complex social, cultural, and structural problems (e.g., generalised anxiety, depression, loneliness, stress) have individual causes and fixes. Quick and simple exercises such as counting blessings, writing forgiveness letters, expressing gratitude to relatives and strangers, or regularly practising meditation, to name some of the most recurring positive psychological advice, are offered as both remedies to people’s problems and psychological keys to lead more fulfilling and successful lives. Such remedies not only reveal the marked spiritual and ideological content underlying the positive therapeutic gospel preached by positive psychologists (e.g., the belief in the power of optimism and positive thinking to shape reality, the privilege of psychological over social explanations, or the strong emphasis on personal responsibilisation in health and illness, success and failure). They also run the risk of trivialising and simplifying the complex texture of people’s suffering by offering naïve and individualistic solutions to complex human issues.

Perhaps, it is time to consider emerging post-therapeutic sensibilities (see, Wiener, Epstein, and Duda in this book) as alternatives to simplistic and reductionist (and spiritualist) approaches to human happiness and suffering as that proposed by positive psychology. Such sensibilities might help in building more robust and comprehensive frameworks that develop the virtues of therapy and get rid of most of its many vices.

Note
1 Retrieved from: http://www.templetonprize.org/sirjohntempleton.html

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