



# Positive Psychology in a Secular Age: Exploring the Influence of Secularization on the Ideological Underpinnings of the Positive Psychology Movement

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Accepted: 27 September 2023

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## Abstract

Psychologists' assumptions about the world influence theory creation, hypothesis testing, and practical applications. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes how the historical process of secularization has shaped the worldviews of those living in the modern West, and how the particularities of that process have influenced our (implicit or explicit) theories of the human condition. Within this worldview, human nature is seen as understandable and describable without transcendent referents, and human flourishing is described in terms of authenticity and personal satisfaction. In this article, I continue the ongoing discussion regarding the ideological underpinnings of the positive psychology movement by connecting them to the process of secularization in the West. I argue that Western secularity influences the vision of flourishing that shapes theory, research, and application within the positive psychology movement. Psychologists and mental health professionals should be aware that our empirical and practical work runs the risk of imposing a vision of human flourishing that is particular to our current historical and geographic milieu, rather than being necessarily true of all of humanity.

**Keywords** positive psychology · flourishing · worldview · secularization · social imaginary

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An earlier version of some of the material in this manuscript was presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Convention, August 12, 2021

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In 1998, Martin Seligman gave his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, laying the foundation for the positive psychology movement (Seligman, 1999). This was followed up by an introductory article in *American Psychologist* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and from there, positive psychology has grown into a substantial presence in the field (Seligman, 2019). Positive psychology, “the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing and optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions” (Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104), aims at balancing mainstream psychology’s focus on understanding and alleviating suffering, by providing an equally-rigorous study of the ways in which a human life can go well. In the two and a half decades since its inception, positive psychology has found application in such varied areas as education (Gilman et al., 2009), religion (Kaczor, 2015), public policy (Diener et al., 2009), the military (Sinclair & Britt, 2013) and computer science (Calvo & Peters, 2014).

Positive psychology has also attracted its share of criticism. When van Zyl and colleagues (2023) reviewed the field, they identified 117 critiques and criticisms of positive psychology, grouping them into six major themes, ranging from methodological shortcomings to lack of proper theorizing. One major area of criticism for the movement involves examination of the (often implicit) worldview-level assumptions that structure the movement (e.g., Kristjánsson, 2013; Woolfolk & Wasserman, 2005).

The word *worldview* refers to a “philosophy of life that answers all of the most fundamental questions of human existence” (Nicholi, 2004, p. 4). A person’s worldview is culturally grounded, acquired through socialization processes, serves as a conceptual framework that orients that person in their understanding of the world around them, and contains “sets of beliefs and assumptions that describe reality... including human nature, the meaning and nature of life, and the composition of the universe itself” (Koltko-Rivera, 2004, p. 3). Within the philosophy of science, worldviews go by many names, including paradigms (Kuhn, 1996), and the hard cores of research programmes (Lakatos, 1978). These worldview-level beliefs lay out the standards, methodologies, values, and basic conceptual definitions that provide structure and grounding to a field of study and practice.

When psychologists bring their worldviews to the table, those worldviews influence theory creation, hypothesis testing, and practical application. As Gordon Allport put it, “all psychology rests on philosophical presuppositions of some sort” (Evans, 1971, p. 87), and if a psychologist does not explicitly identify the worldview that structures his or her ideas about the human condition, that simply means that the psychologist is being implicitly influenced by the worldview (Crossley, 2011). Franz (2021), drawing from research on the Dunning-Kreuger effect and motivated worldview defense, argues that psychologists, not being trained philosophers, are unlikely to have the metacognitive awareness to accurately assess and evaluate their philosophical commitments. In the same way that some psychologists who are not trained mathematicians responded to the mathematical debunking of the “critical positivity ratio” by downplaying or ignoring the mathematics (Friedman & Brown, 2018), psychologists may be motivated to respond to criticisms of their philosophical missteps by downplaying or ignoring the philosophy. Nevertheless, the missteps remain.

World-view-level beliefs about a field of study have concrete effects on research outcomes, as Hackney and Sanders (2003) found in their meta-analysis of studies involving religion and mental health. Those researchers found that differing ideas about the fundamental nature of religion lead to differing operationalizations of the construct of religiosity, and that those differences in operationalization produce widely-divergent results in empirical studies on the topic. To provide another example, Fowers (1993) argues that the majority of marriage therapists and researchers operate with the unspoken assumptions that the purpose of marriage is individual emotional fulfilment, and that the barriers to a good marriage are mostly technical problems of communication. These assumptions shape empirical research when psychologists choose measures of subjective relationship satisfaction as their indicators of successful/unsuccessful marriages, and they shape practical application when marriage and family therapists focus the interventions designed to enhance the communication skills of the relationship partners.

One of the recurring critiques of positive psychology identified by van Zyl and colleagues (2023) centers around this tendency for theorists, researchers, and practitioners to shape their descriptions of the human condition around their assumptions about humanity, often without being aware that they are doing so. The positive psychology movement is a product of its time and place. Despite some positive psychologists' claims that their descriptions of the good life are universal and objective (e.g., Jørgensen, & Nafstad, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2001), it is in fact a WEIRD (Henrich et al., 2010) project, grounded in "a neo-liberalist ideology where optimal functioning and flourishing are seen as an individual enterprise" (van Zyl et al., 2023, p. 15), and rooted deeply in Western worldview-level assumptions about the nature of the self and personal fulfilment.

In this article, I will continue this line of thought, adding to the discussion regarding the ideological underpinnings of positive psychology. While some have focused their attention on the role played by neoliberalism (e.g., Burr & Dick, 2021), and others on utilitarianism (e.g., Davies, 2015), my specific project here involves connecting those ideological underpinnings to the historical process of secularization in the West, drawing primarily from the work of philosopher Taylor (2007). I begin with a description of Taylor's secularization account, followed by an examination of ways in which the historical process of secularization has influenced, and continues to influence, our views of human flourishing in the modern West. While Taylor's thoughts on secularity have been considered by specialists in fields outside of psychology (e.g. Kristjánsson, 2016), and psychologists have spoken on other aspects of Taylor's body of scholarly work (e.g., Kashima, 2005), the particular relevance of Taylor's work on secularity for the positive psychology movement remains relatively unexplored territory. I will describe how the secular West's vision of flourishing shapes theory, research, and application within this movement. Psychologists and mental health professionals should be aware that our empirical and practical work runs the risk of imposing a vision of human flourishing that is particular to our current historical and geographic milieu, rather than being necessarily true of all of humanity.

## 1 A Secular Age

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor (2007) explores the historical process “which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” (p. 3). Taylor rejects what he calls “subtraction stories” of secularization, which portray this process as one in which humanity merely exercised their universal rational powers to turn away from religion and toward an objective understanding of the world. Within the social sciences, such unilinear subtraction theories, which feature the idea that religion is a thing of the past, destined to fade as the world modernizes, have proven to be inadequate at describing historical and global patterns of religious change. Though such accounts might be personally compelling for irreligious individuals, their demonstrated inaccuracies (see Gorski & Altinordu, 2008 and Stark, 1999 for examples) have led many social theorists to a renewed interest in alternative approaches to describing our contemporary situation (Burton, 2020; Palaver, 2013; Yamane, 1997).

Rather than a unilinear theory, Taylor (2007) presents instead “a zig-zag account, one full of unintended consequences” (p. 95) that produced a particular view of the world and of the human condition, through a process that spanned five centuries. This account must also be understood to be a predominately North Atlantic story, having its roots in Latin Christendom, and not necessarily descriptive of cultures outside of the modern West (Künkler et al., 2018; Rectenwald et al., 2015). Secularization as it was experienced in North Atlantic cultures is neither straightforward nor universal nor inevitable.

Taylor (2007) uses the term *social imaginary* to describe the cultural worldview of the modern North Atlantic that is the focus of his inquiry: “that is, the way that we collectively imagine, even pretheoretically, our social life in the contemporary Western world” (p. 146). A social imaginary describes “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Distinct from a social theory, a social imaginary is a basic framework, operating by way of images, stories, experiences, and embodied social practices, and may not be explicitly articulated by the one who inhabits it.

One of the key features of the premodern social imaginary was that the boundary between the immanent and the transcendent was seen as “porous.” Within this imaginary, spirits, demons, and other supernatural forces can bring about material effects; physical objects are charged with spiritual meaning; temporality interacts with eternity; and nature points beyond itself to the divine (Taylor, 2007). From the standpoint of this worldview, the meaning of a physical object does not reside exclusively in the mind of a person who perceives it, or a community that defines it; an object’s meaning is inherent in the nature of the thing itself, and that inherent meaning is also infused with and incorporated into a spiritual reality beyond the thing itself. To understand an object, therefore, requires that we take into consideration its inherent transcendent meaning.

The historical shift toward the modern Western social imaginary involved, among other things, the establishment of a “buffer” between natural and supernatural realities, such that one can fruitfully study and explain earthly phenomena on their own, without bringing spiritual dynamics into it. Taylor (2007) describes this way of explaining phenomena as the *immanent frame*. This shift to the immanent frame also influences the way in which we see society and the human condition. Society no longer is seen to point beyond itself to a transcendent purpose that should be fulfilled, and social hierarchies are no longer seen to reflect celestial hierarchies. Instead, societies are seen as organizations of rational, sociable beings, existing for the mutual benefit of the inhabitants. Societal phenomena are therefore explained without a transcendent referent, and practical measures are undertaken by means of instrumental rationality, guided by economic and utilitarian values.

This emphasis on human benefit and instrumental rationality is also seen in the portrayal of psychological phenomena and individual human flourishing within the immanent frame. In the premodern Western social imaginary, the good life for individual humans was bound up in the inherent transcendent meaning of a human life, which for Christians may be summarized by the words of the Westminster Catechism: “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever.” Human flourishing as described in this worldview does include enjoyment of the good things of earthly existence, but also points beyond itself to find its meaning and grounding in a right relationship with the Creator (Cherry, 2010; Strawn, 2012). As we will see, the question of the ultimate end or purpose of human existence creates substantial differences in the development of a psychology of human flourishing (Hackney, 2021; Sundararajan, 2005).

Though religious belief remains an option, the modern Western social imaginary allows for a “buffered self” that can be defined without transcendence, and an “exclusive humanism” that accepts “no final goals beyond human flourishing, not any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. In no previous society was this true... a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (Taylor, 2007, p. 18).

While Nineteenth-Century versions of this social imaginary tended to emphasize self-discipline and renunciation for the sake of the common good, Taylor (2007) refers to our current historical period as an “age of authenticity,” defined by “expressive individualism” (p. 299), a term also used by Bellah and colleagues (1985) in their examination of American culture. In the age of authenticity, the true, the good, and the beautiful originate within ourselves, and the good life is self-defined. This means that “each of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious and political authority” (Taylor, 2007, p. 475). Relationships, careers, and religions are valid and good if and only if they serve the ultimate goal of self-fulfillment. Specific goals within this overarching pursuit are grounded in emotive personal preference, and subject to change as one’s preferences change (Bellah et al., 1985).

## 2 Psychological Science in the Immanent Frame

MacIntyre (2016) points out that “in most cultures, perhaps in all, it is taken for granted that human flourishing is what it is taken to be in that particular culture” (p. 28). Taylor (2007) briefly describes ways in which the social imaginary affects psychologists’ attempts to understand and influence human lives. The construction of a buffer between the immanent and transcendent has marginalized religion in the eyes of psychologists and philosophers, to the place of an unnecessary add-on in scholarly attempts to understand the human condition (Gorsuch, 1988). The centering of the expressive individual self in definitions of the good life has produced therapies “which promise to help you find yourself, realize yourself, release your true self, and so on” (Taylor, 2007 p. 475). Fowers (2012) argues that current psychology is grounded in what he calls individualist instrumentalism: “Individualism takes the individual to be the ultimate social reality and views the autonomous pursuit and satisfaction of individually defined ends as the ultimate goods in life... Individuals pursue their chosen goods instrumentally, which means that they have subjectively predetermined ends, and they select the best strategies, techniques, and skills to attain those ends” (p. 2). In short, we in the West are culturally inclined to define happiness in terms of personal achievement and positive emotion (Uchida et al., 2004).

We may see the influence of this way of imagining the world when Western psychologists give central prominence to self-definition and individual subjective gratification in their views on what constitutes mental health, maturity, and success. We see this when Maslow (1962) defines mental health in terms of self-actualization and says that one’s primary life task is “to find out what *you* are *really* like inside, deep down” (p. 4). We see it when Albert Ellis encourages his readers to choose as the main purpose of their existence “short-range and long-range enjoyment” (Ellis & Harper, 1997, p. 114). And we see it when researchers use participants’ scores on measures of subjective satisfaction as their operationalizations of marital success (Fowers, 1993) and career success (Heslin, 2005).

## 3 Positive Psychology in the Immanent Frame

We can especially see the effects of expressive individualism in the positive psychology movement. In the early years after the movement was launched, Martin Seligman repeatedly claimed that positive psychology was objective and morally neutral (e.g., Seligman, 2002), studying the good life for humans but not imposing upon the field a particular vision of the good life. In an often-quoted and often-criticized passage, Seligman says:

“Imagine a sadomasochist who comes to savor serial killing and derives great pleasure from it. Imagine a hit man who derives enormous gratification from stalking and slaying. Imagine a terrorist who, attached to al-Qaeda, flies a hijacked plane into the World Trade Center. Can these three people be said to have achieved the pleasant life, the good life, and the meaningful life, respectively?”

“The answer is yes. I condemn their actions, of course, but on grounds independent of the theory in this book. The actions are morally despicable, but the theory is not a morality or a world-view; it is a description. I strongly believe that science is morally neutral (but ethically relevant).” (p.303).

Kristjánsson (2013) and Sundararajan (2005) point out the incoherence of this claim to moral neutrality while attempting to define the good life for humans. Others accuse positive psychologists in general, and Seligman specifically, of operating within a set of tacit moral assumptions about the nature of flourishing (e.g., Woolfolk & Wasserman, 2005, show that Seligman operates from an assumption that the good life is about subjective feelings), and argue that these assumptions are instantiations of the particular values of modern Western individualism. When Seligman (2002) presented his formula for the good life as “a life wrapped up in using your signature strengths to obtain abundant and authentic gratification” (p. 249), he was being neither objective nor neutral, but instead was endorsing the particular moral vision of, to use Taylor’s terms, expressive individualism within the immanent frame.

While many criticisms of the movement involve the claim that positive psychologists are endorsing a moral vision while claiming not to endorse a moral vision, there are exceptions to this pattern. In his more recent work, Seligman appears to have abandoned his earlier claims of neutrality. In his 2019 article in *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, he gives his overall thoughts on the positive psychology movement, presenting the reader with an unabashedly-moral message: “The impulse to build what is positive in life, to build temples yet undone, is by no means confined to the university. There is a moral vacuum in religious and secular morality and in our politics. Toward what might the moral compass point?” (p. 21). He proposes a vision in which his theory of happiness serves as a point of universal moral orientation, “grand enough and believable enough to live one’s life around” and “to center politics and religion around” (Seligman, 2019, p. 21). A clearer and more unequivocal endorsement of a worldview that recognizes no goals beyond human flourishing would be difficult to imagine.

While Martin Seligman is the “Father of Positive Psychology,” and many of the criticisms of the movement have focused on his words, the influence of the modern Western social imaginary on positive psychology extends well beyond its founding figure. The positive psychology movement is where we find Ed Diener recommending that nations’ public policies be shaped around subjective well-being (e.g., Diener et al., 2009). It is where we find C. R. Snyder and Shane Lopez (2007) arguing that the “true benefits” of spirituality are the increases in one’s personal sense of meaning and of purpose, rather than any transcendent considerations such as the salvation of one’s soul. It is also where we find Csikszentmihalyi (2014) claiming that “Optimal experience is the ‘bottom line’ of existence. It is the subjective reality that justifies the actions and events of any life history” (p. 209).

Statements such as these may be intended to be unfiltered observations about a universal human nature, but they are in fact historically and culturally particular. Marecek and Christopher (2018) argue that an emphasis on self-definition and the maximization of enjoyment is the result of positive psychology’s grounding in an individualist view of the self that is indigenous to middle-class America: “a view that

holds the self to be bounded and self-determining and that emphasizes its interiority” (p. 85). Similarly, van Zyl and Rothmann (2022) argue that “positive psychology is mainly individualistic in nature and positions the self as the center of the proverbial universe” (p. 4), a description of positive psychology’s guiding worldview that fits well with Taylor’s (2007) description of our secular North Atlantic milieu.

#### 4 Alternate Formulations of Flourishing

Numerous positive psychologists have been calling for a greater appreciation of cultural diversity in the field’s approach to happiness and flourishing (e.g., Delle Fave & Bassi, 2009; Lomas et al., 2021). One form that such increased diversity might take would be a recognition that Western positive psychology is not the only possible positive psychology. If the current dominant approach to positive psychology is indigenous to our particular cultural and historical milieu, what would a psychology of flourishing look like if grew in a different soil than that of secular Western modernity?

Shorn of the secular buffer that was erected to encapsulate the natural world, such an alternative would be a positive psychology that sees the self as porous, and is unafraid to include transcendent referents in explanations of the human condition. Marecek and Christopher (2018) and Joshanloo (2014) describe such a psychology as one that sees people as defined by community and rooted in physical place, emphasizes self-transcendence over self-enhancement, looks at ways in which we are transformed by interactions with the world, sees the potential value in suffering, and is open to cosmological forces, re-centering religion in formulations of well-being.

Preliminary examples already exist of such alternative approaches to positive psychology. Rao and Paranjpe (2016) discuss positive psychology from an Indian perspective, embedding their notions of optimal psychological functioning in Hindu beliefs about the human condition. Noferefski and Tavakol (2022) developed and carried out some initial tests of the effectiveness of positive psychotherapy in Iran, a psychotherapy that is grounded in Muslim teachings about divine goodness. Wong (2009) describes how positive psychology would be different if it were structured upon Buddhist ideas about human life and enlightenment. Christian positive psychologists (e.g., Hackney, 2021) are engaged in a project of developing a positive psychology that is built upon theological concepts such as humanity having been created in the image of God, the person of Jesus as a model of flourishing, and the role of the Holy Spirit in a life lived well.

As rival worldviews provide different definitions, goals, standards, and practices, they are incommensurable (MacIntyre, 1988). Unable to agree upon first principles, those who operate within a non-secular psychology would find the social imaginary of the secular West to be unacceptably truncated, and those who operate within the social imaginary of the secular West may find lives that are described as “good” by a non-secular psychology to be incomprehensible. MacIntyre (2016) puts it: “The good life, the fulfilled life, may be and often is unhappy by the standards of happiness studies” (p. 202) because such persons aim at goals that are not endorsed by expressive individualism (Hackney, 2023).



## 5 Moving Forward into Pluralism

The great majority of the global population expresses a religious affiliation (Grim et al., 2016), a trend that is projected to only accelerate as time goes on (Pew Research Center, 2015). Combine that with the increase in the proportion of immigrants to Western countries from non-Western points of origin (Jensen, 2015), and many practicing psychologists in the West have begun paying attention to religion as an ineliminable component of clients' cultural worldviews (Gladding & Crockett, 2019). A secular standpoint is not "neutral ground" in mental health practice (Cook et al., 2011), and even non-Western countries that we would describe as "secular" will not have experienced secularization and secularity in the same way that Taylor described North Atlantic cultures (Künkler et al., 2018). Both clients and psychologists filter their experiences through their cultural worldviews, and inattention to these issues can have negative repercussions for all involved (Koenig, 2008). Failure to address the question of secularity "may mean that mental health practice sleepwalks into unnecessary conflict or evades necessary differences" (Crossley, 2011, p. 31).

Lack of attentiveness to cultural particularity has already been shown to impact the outcomes of applied positive psychology. Lambert and colleagues (2023) found Western-inspired positive psychology interventions to be ineffective when applied to participants in the United Arab Emirates. Sarı Arasil and colleagues (2020) carried out a positive psychology training program in Turkey, with the results indicating an increase in life satisfaction, but accompanied by decreases in social intelligence and increases in relational anxiety and avoidance. Moving in the opposite intercultural direction, Gebauer and colleagues (2018) found that Westerners who engaged in a "secularized" version of Buddhist mindfulness meditation displayed increases in self-centeredness.

If psychological accounts of human flourishing are unavoidably embedded in cultural worldviews, and as MacIntyre (1988) argues, such worldviews are incommensurable, it may be that the best way forward for the field is to embrace pluralism and begin thinking in terms of multiple "positive psychologies" (Hill & Hall, 2018), with religion/irreligion being one component of that plurality.

Several psychologists have proposed practical ways forward in this endeavor. Oishi (2010) calls for greater awareness of cultural differences in local understanding of happiness when developing measures for use in cross-cultural studies. Martínez and Di Martino (2018) encourage greater employment of research methods such as Participatory Action Research, which are grounded in the regional particularities of participants' cultural lives. Many clinicians have called for assessment of clients' worldviews and spiritual lives (e.g., Josephson & Wiesner, 2004), and overt employment of religion in therapy (e.g., Koenig & Pritchett, 1998; Nielsen et al., 2001), while others call for more training in religion for psychotherapists (e.g., Josephson et al., 2010). Similar moves by positive psychologists might prove to be useful in helping the field to broaden beyond Western parochialism.

While Seligman (2019) wishes for positive psychology to "turn the world" (p. 21) toward a globally-unified vision of well-being, the future of positive psychology may instead be a plurality of visions that turns our understanding of well-being toward greater complexity. To a certain degree, worldview plurality already exists

within positive psychology, as we can find representatives of differing philosophical traditions such as existentialism (Wong, 2016) and Aristotelianism (Fowers, 2005) within our considerations of human flourishing. The addition of worldviews outside of modern Western secularity would increase that plurality. To switch from a visual metaphor to an auditory one, the future may be a conversation in which voices from Buddhist positive psychology, Islamic positive psychology, Christian positive psychology, Hindu positive psychology, and many others engage as equals with Western secular positive psychologies. Such a conversation would acknowledge that different groups of people have their own perspectives on human flourishing, and would facilitate the pursuit of flourishing in ways that respect that particularity.

**Funding** There is no funding source.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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