Faith, Hope and Love as expressions of human transcendence: Insights from Positive Psychology

by

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Abstract

The aim of this conceptual paper is to explore the meaning of faith, hope and love from the perspective of positive psychology. Within this theoretical framework, faith, hope and love can be seen as human expressions of transcendence. Faith is the acceptance of, and a response to, a greater power. Hope is the expression of ultimate concerns, and flows from an adequate grasp of the meaning of life and existence. Love, or altruism, is the choice to enter into relationships with others that enhance the humanity of those in the relationship. All these presuppose an attitude of breaking the boundaries of selfhood and going beyond the mundane, in other words, transcendence. Using the parlance of positive psychology, the paper examines also the possible relation between these character strengths of transcendence (faith, hope and love) and human wellbeing.

The objectives of this theoretical paper are twofold. Firstly, to explore the meaning of faith, hope and love within the domain of psychology. This is achieved by working within the theoretical framework of positive psychology, which considers faith, hope and love as character strengths that contribute to human wellbeing and happiness. The second objective then is to consider how these character strengths might contribute to well being. This is done by a brief review of literature on positive psychology.

Virtues and character strengths in positive psychology

In 1998, when Martin Seligman was elected as the president of the American Psychology Association (APA) he extended a clarion call to psychology to focus on wellbeing and happiness as it does on pathology and psychological disorder (Seligman, 1999). The stream of psychological accent that followed is referred to as ‘positive psychology’. This is not a new school of psychology but only a new approach.

It draws on from the history of psychology; and its interests are similar to that of humanistic psychology, but it differs sharply from it in that positive psychology embraces an empirical approach. It is the focus on existential questions with an empirical grounding that makes positive psychology unique (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 13). In just over ten years, this movement has now indisputably become popular. (For instance, in May 2010, Google delivered 461,000 entries on “positive psychology”; while on “humanistic psychology” it delivered 168,000 entries.)
Positive psychology sees happiness or wellbeing as an outcome of pleasant life: “pursuit of positive emotions about the present, past and future”, good life: “using your strengths and virtues to obtain abundant gratification in the main realms of life”, and meaningful life: “use of your strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are” (Seligman, 2003, p.127). These three contributing factors to wellbeing have an internal hierarchy. That is, due to heritability and habituation pleasures do not consistently contribute to happiness as much as meaningful life does. Somewhere in the middle is good life marked by a state of ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), which is also understood in the Aristotelian sense of ‘eudemonia’- doing and living well. More precisely, happiness is measured in terms of life satisfaction; and wellbeing, in terms of physiological and mental health.

Research, and even intervention based therapy (PPT; Cf. Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006), within positive psychology is led by a catalogue of core virtues and character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), which are also referred to as ‘Values in Action’ (VIA; Peterson, 2006). This catalogue of sanities lists 6 core virtues and 24 character strengths that are said to contribute to human wellbeing and happiness (Table 1). The VIA is meant to be a parallel to the existing catalogues of mental disorders, DSM-IV or ICD-10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Virtues</th>
<th>Character Strengths</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Wisdom and Knowledge</td>
<td>Creativity (originality, ingenuity), Curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience), Open-mindedness (judgement, critical thinking), Love of Learning, Perspective (wisdom)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Courage</td>
<td>Bravery (valour), Persistence (perseverance, industriousness), Integrity (authenticity, honesty), Vitality (zest, enthusiasm, vigour, energy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Humanity</td>
<td>Love, Kindness (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, “niceness”), Social Intelligence (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Justice</td>
<td>Citizenship (social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork), Fairness, Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Temperance</td>
<td>Forgiveness and Mercy, Humility (modesty), Prudence, Self-regulation (self-control)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Transcendence</td>
<td>Appreciation of beauty and excellence (awe, wonder, elevation), Gratitude, Hope (optimism, future-mindedness, future-orientation), Humour (playfulness), Spirituality (religiousness, faith, purpose)</td>
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Virtue here is defined as “any psychological process that enables a person to think and act so as to benefit him- or herself and society” (McCullough & Snyder, 2000, p. 1). Peterson and Seligman (2004) explain that virtues “are universal, perhaps grounded in biology through an evolutionary process that selected for these aspects of excellence as means of solving the important tasks necessary for survival of the species” (p.13). Although one of the criteria used to generate the list of virtues is
that “each strength is morally valued in its own right, even in the absence of obvious beneficial outcomes” (p.19), in positive psychology ‘virtue’ is not to be understood to carry moral implications in a philosophical or religious sense.

Virtues are expressed in character strengths. “Character strengths are the psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.14). Character strengths are trait-like and are measurable in terms of individual’s behaviour that includes thoughts, feelings and actions. The universal occurrence of these virtues and character strengths, especially in cultural and religious traditions of the world, has been duly acknowledged (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp.40-50; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Snyder & Lopez, 2007, pp.23-50).

Faith, Hope and Love as character strengths of transcendence

Our main concern in the present paper is the set of character strengths that form the core virtue of transcendence. Transcendence is classified as consisting of “strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.30). Transcendence is expressed in character strengths (Peterson, 2006b, p.33) that include appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour and spirituality (that includes religiousness and faith). Love is listed under the core virtue of humanity. I would like to suggest that we consider love as a character-strength of transcendence. Love, as defined by positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.304) presupposes the ability of a human person to forge connections beyond oneself in altruism. How are faith, hope and love defined within positive psychology?

Faith
Positive psychology groups faith, religiousness and purpose, under the character strength of spirituality. “Spirituality and religiousness refer to beliefs and practices that are grounded in the conviction that there is a transcendental (non-physical) dimension of life” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.600). These beliefs and practices may be expressed in having coherent positions about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits in the larger scheme; having beliefs about meaning of life that shape and provide comfort (Peterson, 2006b, p.33).

In simple terms, it is an acceptance of the existence of, and a meaningful response to, a greater power. The greater power could be understood in a myriad of ways, but often, as that which provides a larger scheme for the universe. Individuals may express this acceptance and response to the greater power in a variety of ways, in many cases, as surrender to an awe-inspiring reality. In most religions, this greater power is identified as a person – God – worthy of relationship and worship.

Hope
“Hope, optimism, future-mindedness, future-orientation represent a cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance towards the future” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.570). In more precise terms, this stance consists in “expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be
brought about” (Peterson, 2006b, p.33). Thus, hope is expressed in ‘agency thinking’: “I am not going to be stopped” (Synder, Lapointe, Crowson, & Early, 1998).

In other words, ‘hope’ is articulated in optimism and positive outlook about life and people around. According to Seligman (1991) optimistic people are so highly goal-oriented that they are able to distance themselves from negative outcomes. Being goal-oriented is often related to the adequate grasp of the meaning of life and existence. Therefore, Emmons (1999b) has associated hope to “ultimate concerns.” Hope is linked to the human ability to imagine, that is, to see what is not here and now. This is referred to as state-hope. From this ability flows an outlook that all is going to be well even here and now. This is referred to as state-hope (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2005). This sense of hope could often emanate from one’s belief in the existence of a greater power, and/or from a humanistic acceptance of the goodness of humanity. In any case, hope calls for an attitude of transcendence.

**Love**
Positive psychology has a more restrictive understanding of ‘love’ that is distinct from ‘kindness’. Love is a specific way of relating to individuals with whom there is a long term relationship. This relationship is generally mutual, but always enhancing the growth and humanity (human life and dignity) of those in that relationship. It could be expressed in physical and emotional intimacy (Peterson, 2006, p.32), but also with the freedom for choice. Peterson and Seligman (2004) distinguish three types of love: affection, care and passionate love:

Love represents a cognitive, behavioural, and emotional stance toward others that takes three prototypical forms. One is love for the individuals who are our primary sources of affection, protection, and care… [like] a child’s love for a parent. Another form is love for the individuals who depend on us to make them feel safe and cared for... [for instance,] a parent’s love for a child. The third form is love that involves passionate desire for sexual, physical, and emotional closeness with an individual whom we consider special and who makes us feel special (p.304).

Love is also related to two other character strengths that are associated with interpersonal relationships: Kindness and forgiveness. Kindness is different from love, in that, it is the attitude of compassion, generosity, care to any human person, even to strangers. It is an ability to reach out to another person without expecting anything in particular, except the joy of relating itself. Compassion becomes significant when the troubles of the other person are serious, not self-inflicted, and the agent of compassion is able to picture oneself in the same predicament as the one in trouble (Cassell, 2005, p.435).

Forgiveness is a growth-promoting way of handling relationships that are strained. At a deeper level, it is an expression of transcendence, because, in forgiveness the individuals wish to go beyond their immediate reactions to hurt, that is, anger and wanting revenge. At one level, forgiveness could be expressed in a dialogical request for redress; on another plane, it could also be a gratuitous offer of mercy and openness to reconciliation. Forgiveness has an intra-psychic consequence within the individual who forgives, in terms of healing of the hurt, and an inter-psychic consequence between the individuals, in terms of their willingness to re-establish the relationship (Baumeister et al, 1998).
The role of Faith, Hope and love in human wellbeing

The core mission of positive psychology is to proactively promote research and come up with preventive techniques that will contribute to health, wellbeing and happiness (Seligman, 1998, p.2). Health is considered in a comprehensive perspective, inclusive of physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. And health and wellbeing are perceived as correlates of happiness (Seligman, 2002). Here, we will briefly review some literature to examine to what extent faith, hope and love may play a significant role in human wellbeing.

Faith and Wellbeing
There is a growing body of empirical studies that has identified significant links between religion, spirituality and health (reviewed in Hill & Pargament, 2003). For example, Cook (2004) identified 265 published books and papers that had studied relationship between spirituality and addiction. Another area where there is convergence between religious transcendence and issues of health and wellbeing is in discussions on coping (Pargament, 1997). Religious coping examines how people seek significance in times of stress; “that significance may be material (e.g., a house), physical (e.g., health), social (e.g., intimate relationships), psychological (e.g., meaning), or spiritual (e.g., closeness with God)” (Pargament, 1997, p.216).

Research works on mindfulness also bring together spirituality and wellbeing. Mindfulness, which is the age-old process of cultivating awareness in Buddhist traditions, is seen in positive psychology as a means to facilitate novelty, flow and optimal experiences. Its relation to spirituality is duly acknowledged (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, pp. 243-261). Mindfulness is increasingly used in clinical contexts. Although “empirical literature supporting its efficacy is small,” there is a growing support for the claim that “mindfulness-based intervention can be rigorously operationalized, conceptualized, and empirically evaluated” in the context of health and wellbeing (Baer, 2003, p.140; see also Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Hope and wellbeing
The insight of positive psychology is that happiness and wellbeing are seen as being clearly associated with goal, purpose and meaning-making. Not surprisingly, to a great degree, depression and suicidal behaviour, and to a lesser degree, alcoholic abuse, are correlated to hopelessness (Schotte & Clum, 1982). This hopelessness is understood as the absence of purpose in life, and more precisely, the lack of self-efficacy and problem-solving abilities (Heppner & Lee, 2005).

Similarly, optimism is seen to be highly correlated with ‘social interest’ (Barlow, Tobin, & Schmidt, 2009). Social interest (originally from Adler) is the disposition to spontaneously build a sense of connectedness with humankind. This in turn is said to have a positive impact on mental wellbeing.

Love, kindness, forgiveness and wellbeing
In medical profession, compassion is taken to be an inherent aspect (Barber, 1976). In a lighter vein, a large dose of TLC (‘Tender, loving, care’) could cure most ailments! Rather than evaluating the effect of love and its related character strengths on the one who is on the receiving end, our focus here, however, is on the one who practices these character strengths.
There is enough empirical evidence to show that people who are altruistic, sociable and display empathy are consistently happier than others. On the other hand, people suffering from depression are generally self-absorbed, distrustful and focus defensively on their own needs (Seligman, 2002).

Research evidence on the correlation between forgiveness and mental health and wellbeing is also abundant (McCullough & Witvliet, 2005). On the one hand, the experience of forgiving others is associated with mental wellbeing (Reed & Enright, 2006) and physical health (Thoresen, Harris, & Luskin, 2000). On the other hand, the experience of being forgiven by God was related to fewer depressive and anxious symptoms (Exline, Yali, & Lobel, 1999). Interventions to facilitate forgiveness also show significant decrease in grief, anger, and anxiety after treatment (Coyle & Enright, 1997).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at faith, hope and love from the perspective of psychology. Working within the theoretical framework of positive psychology, it has considered faith, hope and love as expressions of human transcendence. As character strengths they contribute to ‘good life’, and as expressions of transcendence they pave the path towards ‘meaningful life’. In the living of good life and meaningful life, people realise their life satisfaction and wellbeing.

This psychological treatment of ‘virtues’ that have hitherto been subjects of theology and philosophy might seem rather odd in the ears of the experts of these latter intellectual endeavours. To consider these human realities as the sole property of some intellectual endeavours and not others would be to impoverish their understanding. In this sense, the psychological treatment of faith, hope and love, remains a necessary approach even if not sufficient. On the other hand, to avoid the risk of reductionism, psychology needs to develop deeper conceptual framework on these virtues with the help of other disciplines even before they are operationalised as measurements. Positive psychology has done a lot of work in grounding the concept of character strengths in the philosophical, cultural and religious traditions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). Therefore, positive psychology lends itself for dialogue with philosophical and theological traditions.

References


