

POSSIBILITIES FOR A CHRISTIAN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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Two streams of thought are examined: Nancey Murphy's recently-proposed approach to integrating psychology and theology, and the burgeoning positive psychology movement. Points of congruence and divergence are considered, and the potential for a mutually-advantageous interaction is discussed, with curiosity research serving as an example. Murphy's application of virtue ethics to the question of human flourishing provides positive psychology with a missing teleological component. Positive psychology provides conceptual, methodological, institutional, and applicatory resources that would be valuable to a Christian psychologist who wishes to make use of Murphy's neo-Aristotelian model of human flourishing.

"Positive psychology is the study of the conditions and processes that contribute to the flourishing or optimal functioning of people, groups, and institutions."

(Gable & Haidt, 2005, p. 104).

"I claim that Christian theology is properly the source of concepts of human flourishing that should inform the hard core of any research program in psychology."

(Murphy, 2005a, p. 25).

A decade ago, Randall Sorenson (1996) contrasted Reformed and Anabaptist approaches to the integration of psychology and Christian theology. Reformed scholarship is described as "systematic, erudite, and encyclopedic" in nature, seeking to produce an integrated system of thought in which theological conceptualizations of human nature and psychological theories work together to form an overall understanding of the

human person. The Anabaptist tradition, on the other hand, involves a distrust of systematic theorizing, preferring to emphasize practical concerns and the development of holiness in the personal life of the believer. Sorenson makes the case that the majority of published integrative work has been primarily Reformed in influence, an idea echoed by Struthers (2005), who considers "the essence of the spirit of integration" to be Kuyperian (Dutch Reformed) in nature. Seeking to advance the idea that integration is deeply personal as well as intellectually sophisticated, Sorenson (1996) urges a "dialectical interplay" between theological traditions.

One model of integration that demonstrates such an interplay of traditions is put forward by Nancey Murphy in *Why Psychology Needs Theology: A Radical-Reformation Perspective* (Dueck & Lee, 2005). Drawing on the theological ethics of John Howard Yoder (e.g., Yoder, 1972) and the moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre (e.g., MacIntyre, 1984), Murphy's approach to integration embodies the Anabaptist concern with practical application and personal spiritual growth, and exhibits the systematicity characteristic of Reformed scholarship.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine the potential for fruitful interaction between Murphy's integrative model and positive psychology, a burgeoning movement within psychology that encourages theoretical, empirical, and applicatory work on factors that facilitate or hinder human growth and flourishing. Points of congruence and divergence between positive psychology and Murphy's integrative thought will be considered, as well as possibilities for a mutually-beneficial interaction between the two approaches. Work done by psychological researchers and virtue ethicists on the topic of curiosity will serve as an example of this interaction and its benefits.

NEO-ARISTOTELIAN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

In his influential work *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) describes the "Enlightenment project"

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of providing an ahistorical, rationally-grounded, justification for universal moral principles. During the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries (approximately), a dominant idea in Western ethical thought was that moral quandaries would be resolved, and rival moral prescriptions adjudicated, if a universal system of rational morality could be developed.

This project, however, did not end well. MacIntyre traces the failure of philosophers to vindicate the various claimants for the promised universal system, resulting in Nietzsche's claim that morality has no rational nature beyond the expression of the individual will. Moral philosophy, then, is faced with a decision, to embrace Nietzsche or to return to one of the abandoned pre-modern moral traditions. MacIntyre considers Aristotelian thought to be the most philosophically powerful of the pre-modern systems, and his writings (MacIntyre, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1999) involve the vindication of a neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy referred to by many as "virtue ethics" (Spohn, 1992). Rosalind Hursthouse (1999) describes a neo-Aristotelian philosophy as one in which Aristotle's basic approach is accepted, but disagreements exist regarding specific topics (such as Aristotle's treatment of slavery and the status of women). In neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, one is concerned with the development of human beings toward their *telos*, or the realization of their ultimate purpose in accordance with their true nature (MacIntyre, 1999). The teleological approach can be summarized as the examination of ways and means to move someone from their current "untutored" state (what MacIntyre, 1984, called "human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be") toward a developmental goal ("human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realized-its-*telos*").

In Book One of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that the *telos* of human activity is happiness. The happiness described is not the hedonic state of experiencing more pleasures than pains, but is *eudaimonia*, a form of happiness defined by MacIntyre (1984) as "a complete human life lived at its best" (p. 149). *Eudaimonia* has been variously described in terms of "flourishing" (Murphy, 2005a), "the human good" (Nussbaum, 2001), "optimal functioning" (King, Eells, & Burton, 2004), or "fulfillment in living" (Waterman, 1993). Eudaimonic happiness is achieved through the cultivation of those excellent character traits found in a fully-flourishing person (Nussbaum, 2001). These traits are referred to as "virtues" (*aretê* in Greek), defined by MacIntyre (1984) as "those qualities the possession of which will enable an individual

to achieve *eudaimonia* and the lack of which will frustrate his movement toward that *telos*" (p. 148). *Telos*, *eudaimonia*, and *aretê* are interlocking concepts, mutually defining and supporting each other. Descriptions of the *telos* are only possible by referring to the virtues of one who embodies that goal, the virtues must be understood in terms of the *eudaimonic* life they constitute, and *eudaimonia* is a life spent progressing toward the *telos* by developing and exercising the virtues. Rather than an unfortunate example of circular reasoning, this conceptual mutuality is taken as an indicator of the tight coherence of the neo-Aristotelian system (Kallenberg, 1997).

This approach to ethical thought has received mixed reviews within Christian circles, but has numerous strong supporters. Kotva (1996) claims that the Christian concept of sanctification is teleological in nature, making it well-suited for use by Christian students of human flourishing. Wilson (1997), while noting that Bible does not make explicit use of formal teleological statements along Aristotelian lines (see Delling, 1964, for uses of the word *telos* in the New Testament), claims that certain scriptural passages (e.g., Ephesians 4:11-16) do describe a developmental goal for humanity, which he believes is well summarized in the Westminster Catechism's teaching that the true end of humanity is "to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Hauerwas and Pinches (1997), focusing on the idea that a description of the *telos* is a description of the ideal person, claim that Christians may make use of teleological concepts with the Jesus serving as this ideal. An uncritical embrace of Aristotle's moral philosophy is not encouraged, though, as Aristotle's ideal man is not Christ-like in character (Casey, 1990). Though Thomas Aquinas is typically the central figure in discussions of Christian virtue theories (e.g., Foot, 1978; MacIntyre, 1990), Christian thought on the virtues spans theological traditions, encompassing representatives of such diverse approaches as Roman Catholic (e.g., Pieper, 1965), Baptist (e.g., Roberts, 1992), Lutheran (e.g., Meilaender, 1984), Methodist (e.g., Haerwas & Pinches, 1997), Brethren (e.g., Murphy, 2005b), Episcopalian (e.g., Tjeltveit, 2003), and neo-Evangelical (e.g., Henry, 1957).

NANCEY MURPHY'S INTEGRATION PROJECT

Murphy (2005c) proposes MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy as a metatheoretical

structure upon which to build a radically Christian program of psychological research and practice. Her proposal regarding the integration of psychology and theology centers around the use of theological ethics to define the nature of the universal human *telos* (Murphy, 2005a), and the use of empirical psychological research to determine the specific means by which humans can move toward that goal (Murphy, 2005c). Murphy's (2005b) description of the *telos* is derived from the ethical thought of John Howard Yoder, centering around an examination of the self-renouncing actions of Jesus. Murphy makes use of the term *kenosis* ("self-emptying," see Oepke, 1964) to describe this self-sacrificial principle. Kenotic renunciation of self is embraced by Murphy (2005b) as her formal description of the primary virtue of the ideal human. Research proposed in Murphy's writings involve an examination of kenotic versus non-kenotic modes of thought, feeling, and behavior, and correlated outcome variables within an overall teleological conceptual structure. Examples of research topics (in Murphy, 2005c) include: leadership styles, forgiveness, nonviolence, altruism, and the undermining of materialism. Clements and Mitchell's (2005) examination of the responsible use of minimal coercion in childrearing is an example of psychological thought within this approach.

The primary message of this essay is that a resource exists in mainstream psychology which may prove amenable to use in Murphy's project. This approach to research and practice, formally inaugurated by Martin Seligman in his 1998 Presidential Address to the APA (Seligman, 1999), is an approach that shares Murphy's desire to encourage the psychological community toward a shift in perspective to include human flourishing and growth as well as pathology and turmoil. It also shares Murphy's intent to embed theoretical work within an explicit metatheoretical model of human nature, and in many cases it shares Murphy's indebtedness to Alasdair MacIntyre. It is the central claim of this essay that potential exists for fruitful interplay between positive psychology and Murphy's neo-Aristotelian approach to Christian psychology, with benefits to both systems.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology may be defined as "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). It is a movement that hopes to balance mainstream psychology's traditionally pessimistic view of human nature, and its focus on the study and alleviation of suffering, with a equally scientifically-rigorous and practically-applicable treatment of that which is uplifting and nutritive in life (Seligman, Parks, & Steen, 2004). Positive psychology should not be considered a well-defined and monolithic "school" of psychology, but as an "umbrella term" under which may be found a heterogeneous set of researchers giving thought to the psychological aspects of "the good life" (Peterson & Park, 2003; Bacon, 2005).

Research along these lines has typically emphasized a eudaimonic approach to development and happiness. Although it may be described in specific studies in terms of "well-being" (e.g., Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001), "growth" (e.g., Joseph & Linley, 2005), or "optimal development" (e.g., Lubinski & Benbow, 2000), the definition of happiness employed consistently involves eudaimonic flourishing rather than hedonic pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In some cases, the concept of the virtues is explicitly embraced (e.g., Cawley, Martin, & Johnson, 2000; Cameron, Bright, & Caza, 2004; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005), and MacIntyre's name is invoked as a source of inspiration for the overall conceptual approach (e.g., Leming, 2000; Tjeltveit, 2003; Jørgensen & Nafstad, 2004).

In considering the historical and philosophical antecedents of positive psychology, Jørgensen and Nafstad (2004) affirm the utility of rendering explicit the pretheoretical claims made about the nature of the human person in psychological theorizing, and state that "positive psychology strongly associates itself with the Aristotelian model of human nature" (p. 16), with the accompanying view of humans as motivated toward the achievement of a more highly-developed state of being.

Within this overall approach, specific areas of study targeted by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) are positive subjective experiences, positive character traits, and positive social institutions. Examples of the first area include Danner, Snowdon, and Friesen's (2001) research examining the connection between positive emotion and longevity, and the influential work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989) on the experience of "flow" (the perception of optimal challenge and the engagement of abilities). The Aristotelian emphasis on the virtues is readily seen in research

involving positive character traits, examples of which include Peterson and Seligman's (2004) volume *Character Strengths and Virtues*, and Roberts, Walton, and Bogg's (2005) study of conscientiousness and physical health. Positive institutions are climates that are nutritive to the development of the virtues (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Examples of research into these institutions include the work of the self-determination theorists on social environments that foster internalized motivation (e.g., Deci, Eghrart, Patrick, & Leone, 1994), and Larson et al.'s (2004) examination of positive developmental aspects of youth organizations.

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY AND MURPHY'S INTEGRATION PROJECT IN DIALOGUE

Certain fundamental elements within Murphy's integrative thought and the positive psychology movement demonstrate conceptual overlap. One such point of convergence is the reliance upon a broadly Aristotelian conceptualization of human nature. Especially notable is the strong presence of MacIntyre within both bodies of thought. Murphy (2004a) draws heavily from MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, a volume also prominent in many works that approach psychology from an Aristotelian perspective, including Dueck & Reimer (2003), Tjeltveit (2003), and Jørgensen & Nafstad (2004). As one of the most influential figures in the revival of virtue ethics, MacIntyre's ideas serve as a conceptual link between positive psychology and Murphy's neo-Aristotelian psychology.

Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) describe what they believe to be mainstream psychology's overemphasis on pathology and the reduction of pain (not an ignoble aim, just incomplete in scope), and call for a refocusing to include the building of strengths and the examination of strivings toward greater happiness and meaning in life. Murphy (2005c) also calls for a reorientation of psychological theory and research along teleological lines, the primary goal of which would be the assistance of moving individuals and groups toward the realization of their full potential. Murphy's approach to psychopathology involves a recasting of disorders in terms of factors that hinder teleological development. Approaching pathology in this way, in terms of hindrances to flourishing, may serve as another bridge between these streams of thought, as it echoes similar calls by self-determination theorists

(e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000), George Vaillant's ongoing research into the nature of positive mental health (e.g., Vaillant, 2003), Maddux, Snyder, & Lopez's (2004) chapter on a positive approach to clinical psychology, and Linley & Joseph's (2006) call for positive psychology to move toward a vision of mental health as unitary continuum of negative to positive functioning.

While there are areas of fundamental overlap between these two approaches to psychology, there are also points at which the two diverge. When considering the virtues, for example, Murphy (2005b) focuses entirely on *kenosis*, with no mention of other virtues as relevant to the discussion. This is evocative of attempts by ethicists to identify a "supreme" virtue that incorporates all other virtues as subordinate, such as Aquinas' description of charity as "the end of the other virtues" (*Summa Theologiae* 2a2æ. 23, 8), without which none of the other virtues can truly exist. In contrast to Murphy's emphasis on *kenosis*, Kohlberg (1981) considers justice to be the supreme virtue. Fowers (2005) places the virtue of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) at the center of his work, while Baumeister & Exline (1999) consider self-control to be the primary "moral muscle." Other treatments of the virtues within this approach do not attempt to discern a hierarchical structure. Peterson and Seligman (2004) attempt no such hierarchical arrangement in their treatment of six distinct "core virtues" (courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence). Psychologists who wish to take up Murphy's proposed integrative program will have to examine this crucial difference, and decide which virtue or enumeration of virtues to adopt as the centerpiece of their research into eudaimonic development.

Another clear distinction between Murphy's version of neo-Aristotelian virtue psychology and the approach common to the positive psychologists is in their treatments of the notion of the *telos*. Closely following MacIntyre's (1984) claims that "any adequate teleological account must provide us with some clear and defensible account of the *telos*" (p. 163), Murphy makes her description of the universal human *telos* both clear and defensible in her discussion of the concept of *kenosis* (Murphy, 2005b).

In the writings of many influential positive psychologists, however, the notion of an objective universal human *telos* separate from expressions of personal preference is typically denied, ignored, or given fairly superficial lip service, leading Sundararajan

(2005b) to refer to the approach as a “happiness donut” with no core. Despite Jørgensen and Nafstad’s (2004) claim that positive psychology’s Aristotelianism places it within a tradition that is not shy about making universalist claims about a common human nature, and that eudaimonic flourishing takes place in accordance with that nature, Martin Seligman (described by Jørgensen and Nafstad as the foremost advocate of the movement) makes the claim that he rejects “the human ‘potential’ and ‘fully functioning’ view of eudaimonia,” as he finds these terms “elusive and culture-bound when explicated” (Seligman, 2002, p. 290). Seligman’s idea of *eudaimonia* involves the subjective feeling of fulfillment that comes from the exercise of the virtues toward meaningful goals. He leaves the choice of which goals are meaningful up to the individual. He describes, for example, the life of a person of faith, lived in service to God, to be meaningful for no other reason that the person in question believes it to be meaningful (p. 257). Similar subjectivist sentiments are expressed by Diener (2000), Peterson and Park (2003), and Linley and Joseph (2004b).

Is such an approach faithful to a neo-Aristotelian ethic as described by MacIntyre? As we have seen, the concepts of *telos*, *aretè*, and *eudaimonia* exist a tightly-knit relationship of mutual dependence, and MacIntyre (1984, 1988) has argued for the centrality of a conception of the *telos* to any attempt to describe the virtues and the nature of flourishing. MacIntyre’s (1984) description of the Aristotelian tradition centers around the necessary presupposition of “a crucial distinction between what any particular individual at any particular time takes to be good for him and what is really good for him as a man” (p. 150). Further on in the same volume, MacIntyre addresses the idea that a general concept of flourishing is all that is needed to consider questions of *eudaimonia* and virtue. He claims that such an approach ignores the historical fact that rival and incompatible accounts of the virtues have been developed (examples provided include the contrasting virtues described by Aristotle, Friedrich Nietzsche, David Hume, Benjamin Franklin, Jane Austen, and the New Testament). Widely-differing virtues are the result of widely-differing descriptions of the ideal human (MacIntyre, 1988, 1990), and any approach to *eudaimonia* is inadequate without deliberately addressing these differing *teloi* (Hauerwas & Pinches, 1997). Yearley (1990), comparing Thomistic and neo-Confucian perspectives on

courage, demonstrates that differing visions of human nature and the good life may even produce rival descriptions of the same virtue. Fowers (1998) discusses how rival definitions of “the good marriage” result in differing relational outcomes, and Tjeltveit (2006) examines the impact of rival conceptualizations of the *telos* on therapeutic goals.

Rather than embracing an explicit description of an ideal human life, positive psychologists such as Seligman (2002) endorse ideas of *eudaimonia* that seem to be in greater agreement with the nonteological concepts of flourishing presented by Tiberius (2004), who rejects teleological thinking as “suspicious to modern eyes” (p. 312). Tiberius instead directs her attention toward eudaimonic theories that only specify a universal list of virtues that demonstrate cross-cultural overlap (the influence of this approach can be seen in Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005), an approach described by Hauerwas and Pinches (1997) as a filtering of Aristotle through liberal modernity. The definitions of *eudaimonia* endorsed by influential positive psychologists such as Peterson and Park (2004) or Linley and Joseph (2004b) may be less in line with MacIntyre’s take on Aristotelian ethics than Jørgensen and Hafstad (2004) describe them to be. Sundararajan (2005a, 2005b) has criticized Seligman, and those who follow his example, for their attempts to describe the way to “the good life” without the necessary articulation of the nature of the good life, and for simplistic and internally self-defeating claims to scientific value-neutrality. Drawing on Buddhist (Sundararajan, 2005a) and Confucian (Sundararajan, 2005b) thought, she demonstrates how a positive approach to psychology gains strength and focus by adhering to a well-articulated vision of the good life and the ideal human. Wong (2006), acknowledging the argument that descriptions of well-being cannot be divorced from the cultural worldviews that shape them, calls for an approach to positive psychology that eschews emphases on decontextualized universals, and instead supports a dialogue between rival conceptualizations of flourishing.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE DIALOGUE

To a Christian psychologist who is intrigued by the notion of a neo-Aristotelian approach to psychology, and who wants to maintain MacIntyre’s emphasis on a well-defined vision of the good life, Murphy’s

proposal appears to hold much potential. Positive psychology has an established track record of empirical research, and the beginnings of a set of practical applications (e.g., Linley & Joseph, 2004a), but does not specify the anthropological *telos* that a MacIntyrean approach requires. Murphy (2004b) contributes a description of a universal human *telos*, and calls for a program of empirical research leading to beneficial practical application. The application of the methods, measures, vocabulary, publication venues, and interventions of positive psychology to Murphy's proposed Christian approach to psychology shows the potential for a number of advantages.

First, this program of research would assist those who wish to maintain an authentically Christian approach to psychology while simultaneously engaging with the mainstream psychological community of study and practice. Christian academics frequently express a desire to enter into dialogue with the mainstream of their respective disciplines as equals, able to articulate a vision of our area of expertise that is both authentically Christian and true to the highest levels of scholarly quality (Marsden, 1997; Craig, 2004). Precedent for considering topics within positive psychology from the standpoint of a religious worldview already exists, as some positive psychologists (e.g., Brown & Ryan, 2003; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006) have imported ideas from Buddhism into their research. Though a neo-Aristotelian psychology in line with Murphy's project may be grounded in a theological anthropology which is incommensurable with the fundamental view of humanity endorsed by some of our non-Christian counterparts, the production of empirical research and practical interventions framed by the vocabulary of positive psychology and virtue ethics could provide points of contact for discussions between our worldviews, and could promote collaboration and mutual respect. Sundararajan's (2005b) critique of positive psychology via a Confucian vision of the ideal human life resulted in an approach to positive psychology with richer potential for explanation than Seligman's nonteleological "donut." An approach to positive psychology produced using a Christian vision of the ideal human life will also demonstrate an increase in power and focus compared to Seligman's model. This would not only be a benefit to Christians wishing to engage in the study of the good life, but to positive psychology in general through this collaboration.

Second, the adoption of an established (though still nascent) tradition of empirical study would be of

tremendous benefit to Christian psychologists wishing to incorporate an empirical component into their integrative work. One aspect of Murphy's integration project is the explicit call for empirical studies of eudaimonic flourishing, and the variables that facilitate or hinder that process. Positive psychology has distinguished itself in terms of empirical rigor (Seligman, et al., 2005), and has established institutional supports for the empirical study of flourishing, including scholarly meetings (e.g., the International Positive Psychology Summits), research centers (e.g., at the University of Pennsylvania), publication venues (including the *Journal of Happiness Studies* and the recently-launched *Journal of Positive Psychology*) and funding sources (such as the Positive Psychology Network and the Templeton Foundation). This, along with the option of using interventions, methods, and measures that have already been developed and validated, represents an established set of resources available for Christian psychologists who wish to engage in empirical study within Murphy's neo-Aristotelian approach.

Third, while Murphy's approach to the virtues centers exclusively around the concept of *kenosis*, multiple approaches to the virtues exist. Those wishing to address specific virtues such as gratitude (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) or wisdom (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000), or conduct research involving alternate tables of virtues, but maintain Murphy's overall teleological approach, would find resources (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) within positive psychology capable of supporting such a task. A few possibilities within Christian thought on virtues include the triumphant virtues of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, Aquinas' catalog of four cardinal and three theological virtues, and Roberts' (1992) classification of emotion virtues, behavioral virtues, virtues of will power, and attitudinal virtues.

Finally, the addition of voices that speak from a biblically-informed approach to human nature may provide a needed corrective to the philosophical statements embraced by some influential positive psychologists, particularly when it comes to questions of the inherent goodness of human nature. Positive psychology grew in large part out of a desire to correct what was seen as mainstream psychology's overemphasis on the negative aspects of human existence. However, some (e.g., Held, 2005; Tan, 2006) may feel that the description of humanity put forward by many prominent positive psychologists is

too positive. Seligman (2002), for example, puts forward the claim that "there is not a shred of evidence that strength and virtue are derived from negative motivation" (p. xi). Linley & Joseph (2004b), in describing positive psychology's fundamental views on human nature, explicitly reject that there is any "evil" component to humanity, claiming instead that whatever undesirable behavior a person exhibits, it is entirely due to "the absence of facilitative socio-environmental conditions" (p. 718). Statements like these may lead some to reject positive psychology outright, especially Christians who wish to hold to orthodox anthropological positions such as the inherent sinfulness of humanity, and who may be put off by Seligman's (2002) caricaturing of this doctrine in his influential self-help book (p. x), and his enthusiasm for Robert Wright's theological musings (p. 258-260). Peterson and Park (2003) have expressed a willingness to consider an anthropological approach that combines good and bad elements in humanity, and Krueger & Funder (2004) have phrased their call for the reorientation of social psychology in terms of a view that balances the negative and positive aspects of human cognition and behavior, a desire also expressed by terror management theorists Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon (2000).

Those who wish to find this more balanced view of the person would find it in Christian theological anthropology. Hodge (2001), in his systematic theology, follows the description of humanity being created in the image of God, making our basic nature "distinguished from all other inhabitants of the world, and raised immeasurably above them" (p. 97), with his claim that our status as sinners is in inescapable fact of our moral nature (p. 130). McDonald (1981) states the "double truth that 'man has more grandeur than the Milky Way; but how easy evil is for him'" (p. 120). Grenz (1994) puts this double truth as follows: "We are a mixture of good and evil, of godly beauty and diabolical hideousness, of unlimited potential and of tragic failure. In theological terms, we are God's good handiwork, but we have fallen into sin" (p. 181).

When psychologists call for a view of humanity that eschews both excessive pessimism or excessive optimism, Christians can provide an answer that better accounts for empirical observations of the negative and positive aspects of human behavior. A Christian positive psychologist can balance an appreciation of the inherent goodness of our created status with a realistic awareness of the darkness of the distortion of that status.

CURIOSITY: THE DIALOGUE IN ACTION

An examination of the treatment of curiosity as a personality trait may serve as an example of this integrative dialogue in action. Curiosity may be found in the research literature described by some as unequivocally good (e.g., Holmes & Holmes, 1991; Fredrickson, 1998; Reio, Petrosko, Wiswell & Thongsukmag, 2006). It is credited with fostering academic success (Peters, 1978), serving as the impetus for scientific research (Van Zelst & Kerr, 1954; Fullam, 2003), buffering against metabolic and cardiovascular ailment (Richman et al., 2005), and facilitating healthy aging (Swan & Carmelli, 1996). Peterson & Seligman (2004) survey a wide range of associations between curiosity (and similar constructs such as interest, novelty-seeking, and openness to experience, all of which are treated as varieties of curiosity) and positive psychological variables, classifying curiosity as a strength of character.

Though some psychological treatments of curiosity (e.g., Loewenstein, 1994) are ambivalent in their approach, describing curiosity's potential for both beneficial and detrimental correlates, Peterson and Seligman (2004) devote little space to the possibility that curiosity may have the potential for harm, speculating that any undesirable behavior motivated by curiosity may be the result of combining this strength of character with insufficient levels of conscientiousness or overexposure to inappropriate media. Reio et al. (2006) give the topic of curiosity's possible vicious side even less attention, speaking only of the possibility that curiosity could be indulged in ways that "might be illegal or taboo" (p. 131). Does this optimistic portrayal of a misguided but laudable desire for knowledge do justice to the grotesque voyeurism that Augustine associated with gladiatorial bloodsports in his *Confessions*, or the more recent but equally grotesque voyeurism that prompted over 237,000 recorded visits within three days to one of the websites that hosted the video of Nicholas Berg's beheading (Aylward, 2004)? Similarly, viewing curiosity with unbalanced positivity does not adequately account for curiosity's role in such activities as childhood firesetting (Kolko & Kazdin, 1989), substance abuse (Wills, Sandy, & Shinar, 1999), consumption of violent media (Aluja-Fabregat, 2000), adolescent gambling (Gupta, Derevensky, & Ellenbogen, 2006), and high-risk sexual behavior (VanZile-Tamsen, Testa, Harlow, & Livingston, 2006).

Gilbert Meilaender's (1984) chapter on curiosity from a Christian virtue perspective provides an

account of the desire to know that better fits empirical observation, and operates from a more balanced view of human nature. Drawing from such thinkers as Augustine, Aquinas, and John Henry Newman, Meilaender argues that “the appetite for knowledge is not virtue but the raw material out of which we make either virtue or vice” (p. 151). While Meilaender does not explicitly utilize Murphy’s description of *kenosis* as the ethical ideal, he emphasizes similar concepts, describing self-sacrifice (p. 41) and “a self-giving spirit” (p. 172) as central to Christian virtue, and repeatedly quoting Iris Murdoch’s statement that the primary task of morality is the defeat of “the fat relentless ego” (Murdoch, 1970, p. 52). Meilaender’s account of virtue and of curiosity is therefore applicable to this discussion.

Meilaender distinguishes between the virtue of curiosity and the vice of curiosity based on criteria such as the ends toward which the novelty-seeking behavior is directed, our attitude toward the pursuit of knowledge, and the means by which that knowledge is acquired, all of which may be understood in terms of their self-serving versus self-giving (kenotic) characteristics. Seeking knowledge out of a desire to better understand and appreciate creation is virtuous curiosity (similar to Murdoch’s claim in *The Sovereignty of Good* that aesthetic appreciation requires checking self-absorption in order to really experience beauty), while seeking knowledge to feel a self-inflating sense of power or to feed the belief in one’s superiority over the less-informed is vicious curiosity. Seeking knowledge for the mere experience of sensory stimulation is an empty pleasure at best, a selfish demand to be amused at worst. It is a vice to regard certain forms of knowledge as legitimate topics for inquiry. Meilaender’s (1984) examples include curiosity about “how my neighbor’s wife performs in bed; how human beings respond to experiments harmful to their bodies, or even to suffering; how the development of a fertilized egg could be stimulated to produce a monster rather than a normal human being; how to preserve a human being alive forever. I may wonder, but it would be wrong to seek to know” (p. 140). To seek such knowledge would require methods that violate and exploit others, making the operation of that form of curiosity incompatible with a self-sacrificial life.

This approach to the virtue and vice of curiosity provides clarity and coherence to explanations of the positive and negative outcomes of sensation-seeking. Hypotheses may be generated and tested

regarding curiosities that either feed or starve the “fat relentless ego,” inspiring and guiding empirical research, demonstrating the heuristic value of this approach. Practical applications may acquire greater focus and benefit by specifically encouraging virtuous forms of curiosity. In addition, viewing curiosity as being either self-serving or self-sacrificial provides a balance not seen in some examinations of this trait. From this brief example, then, it is clear that a teleological psychology incorporating theological ethics has the potential for significant benefits to our inquiries into what it is to be human.

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