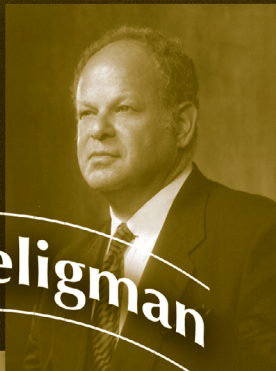


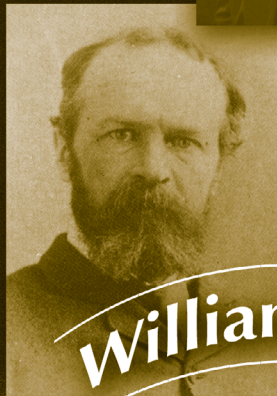


## Can Psychology Be Positive about Religion?

John Shook



Martin Seligman



William James

Over one hundred years ago, the Harvard philosopher and psychologist, William James, argued in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that religious beliefs and emotions can have positive value for people's lives. James's pragmatism demanded that a scientific psychology take people's religious beliefs seriously, not because science could directly judge their truth or falsity, but because such beliefs have practical consequences for the quality and meaning of life. James emphasized that psychology could study people's religious views scientifically only if it refrained from prejudging them. What matters is not whether a religious belief is factual or actually inspired by divine causes but whether a person's life is affected, positively or negatively, by holding that religious belief. James suggested that a person's religious belief could be pragmatically reasonable if holding that belief was important for that person's successful pursuit of a meaningful and happy life.

James viewed himself as a humanist, seeking wisdom needed for improving human happiness in this mortal life. He was often intrigued by notions of an afterlife. However, James demanded and sought empirical evidence and always required that religious notions be tested for their capacity to enhance people's welfare in the present. If one's definition of a humanist requires one to live entirely without any religious or spiritual concerns, James is excluded. Yet, he would in turn ask whether every possible religious hypothesis had been examined for practical value.

The better empiricist, like James, is one who is willing to confront all human experience and test all hypotheses pragmatically. One of today's great pragmatists is Paul Kurtz, who coined the term *eupraxsophy* to denote the search for a more coherent and meaningful worldview based on scientific methods. This humanistic search, according to Kurtz, "wishes to extend the methods of objective inquiry to all areas of life, including religious, philosophical, ethical, and political concerns that are often left unexamined." Humanism should not obstruct empirical research into any area of human experience.

In several ways, today's field of positive psychology has revived the spirit of James's pragmatic humanism and offers scientific assistance to Kurtz's eupraxsophy. While other "humanistic psychologies" were invented during the decades since James's time, positive psychology's recent growth has rested on much greater empirical research into happiness. Some of that research is summarized in Martin Seligman's book, *Authentic Happiness*, which discusses aspects of religious faith. Seligman, a professor of psychology and the director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, is intrigued, like James, by the impact of religious belief on personal happiness. Only a relatively small amount of research has been done in this area by positive psychology, but the preliminary conclusions are intriguing.

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Seligman is impressed by the way that such character strengths as “appreciation of beauty and excellence,” “gratitude,” “optimism,” “attachment to something greater,” “capacity for mercy,” “playfulness,” and “spiritedness” typically appear to enhance the chances of personal fulfillment. Seligman groups these character strengths under the label “transcendence,” because these strengths “reach outside and beyond you to connect you to something larger and more permanent: to other people, to the future, to evolution, to the divine, or to the universe.” *Transcendence*, as Seligman uses the term, must not be misunderstood as religion by another name. For example, some secular humanists identify belief in “the transcendent” (the supernatural, for example) with religion, so that any religious belief must involve the supernatural. In any case, Seligman deliberately uses the broader term *transcendence* instead, avoiding partisan debates over how to define *religion*, and includes character strengths that are quite independent from anything transcendent.

Secular humanists should ask whether Seligman’s notion of transcendence is helpful or harmful to a scientific and naturalistic worldview. Recently, I interviewed James Pawelski, Director of Education and Senior Scholar at Penn’s Positive Psychology Center, to ask about his views of positive psychology’s aims and principles. In reply to the question, “Can positive psychology be viewed as a contribution to the tradition of humanism?” Pawelski replied, “Certainly, in the broad sense in which any science is a humanistic endeavor. Going beyond the science itself, many positive psychologists would be in sympathy with general humanistic claims. Seligman argues, for example, that free will is a key component of positive psychology. As private individuals, positive psychologists differ in their commitments; as with any similar group of scientists, some are naturalists and some are supernaturalists. But, as positive psychologists, they are scientists, committed to empirical investigation in accordance with the scientific method.” Pawelski went on to add, “Positive psychology is no more and no less consistent with a naturalistic worldview than is any other field in the social sciences.”

From a perusal of the primary texts produced by Seligman, a devotion to the methodology of science is indeed evident, complete with James’s demand for initial scientific neutrality towards subjects. Aligned with James’s empiricism, positive psychology—at least in the hands of Seligman and his followers—refuses to first assume either the validity or falsity of religious claims; it is sufficient to investigate how people rely on their religious beliefs.

Although positive psychology may remain faithful to empirical neutrality at the outset of its investigations, we may still wonder about potential conclusions of future research into religious beliefs and their connections with happiness. Is it possible that some conclusions of positive psychology could be interpreted as scientific evidence of the value of supernatural religion? To this question, Pawelski replies, “I’m sure someone somewhere is going to try to make that further claim. To make such a claim now, however, is to go beyond what is scientifically known. Studies seem to indicate that religious persons are happier than nonreligious persons. But we don’t yet know in which direction the causal connection runs. Does religion make people happier? Does happiness make people religious? Or does some third thing make people both religious and happy? Even if it turns out that it’s religion that makes people happier, we still wouldn’t know

what the causal agent in religion is. Is it participation in a close community? Is it the avoidance of vices and risky behavior? Is it the release of stress and anxiety? Is it participation in religious ritual? Is it divine grace? This last option is certainly a possibility, but I can’t imagine how positive psychology or any other science could ever prove (or disprove) such a thing.”

It is reassuring to humanists and naturalists to hear Pawelski’s confidence that positive psychology should not prove to be a scientific field that attempts to deliver judgments about the reality of the supernatural. Pawelski concluded the interview by addressing this concern. He added, “Does happiness have a supernatural source? I know of no positive psychologist who would disagree with me when I say that this question lies outside of the purview of positive psychology.”

Nevertheless, the spirit of James hovers over these new scientific developments. James required of reasonable beliefs that they positively contribute to a person’s ability to lead a meaningful and satisfactory life. If *reasonable* means only “practical” in this Jamesian sense, then it is possible that positive psychology’s investigations into transcendence will show how some religious beliefs are reasonable independent of their being true or false (while other religious beliefs may prove by the same standard to be unreasonable). And probably, we will not have to wait long for a few enthusiasts to try to combine empirical results from positive psychology with James’s pragmatic standard of reasonableness to mount an attack on scientific naturalism. Do supernatural beliefs in an afterlife or in transcendent divinities actually enhance happiness? If so, then such beliefs cannot be unreasonable. This “pragmatism” might reunite religion and science, as James hoped.

We may prepare for this unfortunate eventuality by a reminder, as Kurtz’s writings always supply, of the highest standards of scientific inquiry. No hypothesis may be accepted as reasonable until it has been repeatedly used to make risky predictions about future events, and, until those predictions are confirmed, the hypothesis must be viewed with skepticism. James’s version of pragmatism first seeks out conviction, not skepticism, which unfortunately reverses the genuine scientific attitude. A naturalistic humanism should require that any proposal to enhance the character strengths of transcendence must be compatible with *all* of science’s knowledge and not merely with personal satisfaction. As secular humanism elaborates and deepens its worldview and way of life, positive psychology can become a powerful ally by scientifically studying those character strengths of transcendence (*not* the transcendent) capable of promoting the happy life. Positive psychology, by remaining faithful to the scientific ideal, will contribute to eupraxis. In the meantime, not even the pursuit of happiness should be permitted to arouse the transcendental temptation toward supernaturalism. ■■

### Further Reading

- Robert Emmons, “Spirituality: Recent Progress,” in a *Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Csikszentmihalyi, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 62–81.
- William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902).
- Paul Kurtz, *Embracing the Power of Humanism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
- Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002).