Parsing Optimism

Martin E. P. Seligman and the Science of Happiness

A notable trend in contemporary psychology has been a renewed focus on philosophical issues regarding human value and happiness. Led by the psychologist Martin E. P. Seligman, this 'positive psychology' movement focuses on human strengths and character. Core to these principles are the attributes of human personality that make behavior resilient to the stresses of a modern age. Primary among these is the concept of optimism. However it may be argued that optimism and its various metaphorical offshoots such as 'flow', 'intrinsic motivation' and the like are all aspects of the same thing, and may derive naturally from contemporary definitions of reinforcement or reward that are rooted in our very biology. In other words, if you define your terms, and in particular the term of 'optimism', you end up converging on a new concept of reward that quite naturally fits into a definition of reward that is not only biological but behavioristic through and through. As I propose below, the pending irony of 21st century psychology is that if we are to become virtuous and happy, a behaviorism will lead the way.

If one were to define two conceits of the modern mind that form loops both trivial and profound, it would be the age of anxiety matched by the antidote of optimism. Of course, before the age of psychological euphemism people had much more reason to be anxious than the traffic/work/income tax challenged folk of today. Arguably, the difference between now and then is that needs for basic survival have been replaced by subtler insecurities ironically emerging from an age of leisure. Simply put, although we are magnitudes wealthier, more secure, and healthier than our ancestors, our reported happiness has been trending not upwards, but down. This of course belies the economic maxim that an increase in economic goods parallels a rise in psychological goods. In other words, if we're so rich, why are we so unhappy? The answer goes to the core of what unhappiness or happiness is. In a static sense, we all know the feeling, literally. It's an affectsive, emotional thing that we can allude to but not fully describe. In an active sense, we may not know it better, but at least it seems, well, actionable. In its simplest form, happiness is based ultimately on how how one will perceive the world. To look 'optimistically' upon things is a cure seductive in its simplicity, and packaged with the rhetoric of psychology has become a veritable industry in itself. The better or bright side of things has been grist for a publication mill of self help books that essentially play
variations of the same thing: namely the evocation and implemention of an optimistic way of life.

What is optimism? In the trivial sense, it is the cognitive act of appraising the increased likelihood of good things. Optimism energizes behavior, focuses and sharpens thought, and in its exercise, feels good. Sometimes optimism arises when we realistically appraise our circumstances and competencies, and on other occasions it occurs when we purposively shade or distort our perception of the world. Self help maxims notwithstanding, it certainly is to our emotional interest to accentucale the positive; yet in all philosophy, whether the academic or popular kind, optimism never rises above euphemism to explanation. Ultimately, it is a matter of words, of defining one's terms. The French philosopher Voltaire said that all debate and confusion arise from failing to define what you're talking about. The controversy over the uses and philosophy of optimism is no different.

Profound Optimism

What is optimism? It is of course the appraisal of the high likelihood of good things, but optimism explained must implicate not just what we appraise, but how we appraise. Combined, they provide a new perspective of optimism that is simple and profound.

1. TO BE OPTIMISTIC IS TO BE UNCERTAIN.
We are optimistic that the sun will shine, but not that the sun will rise. To cohere to the logic of optimism, we can never be optimistic about things that are certain, for if we had perfect knowledge of all things past and future, optimism could never be.

2. OPTIMISM IS AFFECTIVE
The perception of a positive uncertainty, such as a raise, an accomplishment, or just a sunny day represents a transition from a lesser to a greater likelihood that a good thing will occur, or in other words is a reconciliation of a prediction error that bodes future benefit. This estimation, whether of real (actual) or virtual (modeled) events is known to us respectively as good fortune or hope, but also has a very real neurological basis, namely in the heightened production of neurochemicals or neuromodulators such as dopamine that arouse and fix attention, increase the efficiency of thought, and subjectively, feel good. Moreover, the more good things we appraise, and the more important they are the better we feel, as we can shift our perspective from one good thing to another.

3. OPTIMISM MAY BE CONSCIOUS OR NON-CONCIOUS
The act of perceiving information does not necessarily entail a verbal or metaphorical label. Intuition, foreboding, or 'gut-level' feelings represent nonconscious estimations of the world that we are aware of not verbally, but emotionally.
4. OPTIMISM MAY BE GENERAL OR SPECIFIC.
We may be optimistic of success in all of our endeavors, or optimism may represent the likelihood of a positive outcome of a specific performance, or even aspects of a performance. Thus an individual may be optimistic about 'life', about his success in a game of chess, or about a move in chess.

The fact that optimism must be defined by affective (how we feel), cognitive (how we think), and behavioral (what we do) criteria removes it from the breezy linguistic usage as a mere metaphorical artifact or thing, and provides a unifying explanatory basis for the many metaphorical species of pleasurable behaviors or behavior sets that are optimistic to the core. For example, whereas optimism may reflect a generalized appraisal of likely good things, 'obsession' or 'passion' may reflect our heightened arousal when these good things are extremely important, and 'interest' may reflect the moment to moment or molecular appraisal of likely plot twists in a novel, inspiring ideas to an artist, or winning moves in athleticism, and may vault to 'peak' or 'flow' experiences when those moment to moment events are important and continuously perceived.

In all of these shades, optimism represents wanting, the moment to moment estimate of having. But wanting is nonetheless separate from having in all of its aspects from the physiological to the psychological, and ironically, is viewed by behaviorist and biologist alike as the very stuff, the essence of reinforcement.

The Inversion of Reward

In economics, reward is a natural thing, and is essentially and simply described. But in psychology, it has of late become a doubtful and even notorious thing, because as we have noted, happiness does not correlate all too well with material wealth. According to the 'methodological' behaviorism of B. F. Skinner, reward is a discrete instance where we have obtained something, and is scarcely different from the economic model that indexes well being to the accumulation of things, whether measured by individual possessions or GNP. Yet modern biological and radical behaviorisms have inverted this maxim to equate reward or reinforcement with 'wanting', and not 'having'. These discrepancy based models of reinforcement or reward equate reward with the positive apprehension of choice that in simple terms is no more than optimism.

The implications of this are profound, yet have scarcely been plumbed. If wanting, not having, is the essence of value, then it matters little what we have than how we want it. To prolong and accentuate positive desire, whether known as ambition, hope, or flow or simply looking forward to a new day puts psychology square not against behaviorism, but economics. It shall be interesting to say the least to see how these new perspective will bode for human happiness and the future of the race.