

# A LIFE WORTH LIVING

CONTRIBUTIONS TO POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY



EDITED BY MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI  
AND ISABELLA SELEGA CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

SERIES IN POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

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A Life Worth Living

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Series in Positive Psychology

*Christopher Peterson*

*Series Editor*

*A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*

Edited by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi

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Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi

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*High regards,*

Jim Clifton, Chairman & CEO  
The Gallup Organization

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A Life Worth Living

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# Introduction

MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

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The volume you are about to read is a collection of essays from some of the foremost scholars from around the world who identify themselves with the new direction in the discipline called “positive psychology.” This direction is distinguished by an interest in the more desirable aspects of behavior—what used to be called the “virtues”—as opposed to the recently more prevalent focus on pathology. If we imagine human experience as following along a bell curve with illness and despair at the left tail of the slope, joy and creativity at the other end, and the great majority of experiences around a middle neutral point, one could say that for the past half century or so psychology in the United States has been focusing almost exclusively on the left-hand tail of the curve. The goal of most psychologists has been to bring people whose lives were spent in regions of misery far below the mean back into a semblance of normalcy. Yet increasing numbers in the profession have begun to feel that without understanding what happens on the right slope of the curve, the best we have been able to do for people was not good enough. Even “normal” people need to grow, to hope for a better life, to change themselves into what they consider to be better persons. It is in response to this realization that positive psychology started to take shape in the last decade of the 20th century as a loose confederation of thinkers and practitioners with overlapping interests in positive psychological states.

Given the tenor of the contributions to this volume, I took the risky step of characterizing its content as dealing with *a life worth living*. For many scientists, this amounts to raising a red flag. After all, it is widely held that statements of value are outside the purview of science. So, if psychology is to be scientific, it should avoid dealing with issues such as what might or might not be worthwhile.

And even if we were somehow to agree on what a valuable life is, one could still argue that examining one’s life is not the way to reach it. Recent insights

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into the functioning of the mind suggest a conclusion opposite to the one attributed to Socrates: Introspection, reflection, and attempts at understanding ourselves are just side effects of having a hyperdeveloped frontal cortex, a dubious boon for a species that survived because of its relatively exceptional rational capacities. The subtext of evolutionary psychology is often that the most authentic way to live is in accordance with the ancient genetic programs we have inherited and to discount the more recent developments of the human species as “cultural” accretions of dubious standing and value.

Both of these critiques, however, are based on a parochial perspective on the human condition. When trying to understand what it means to be human, we cannot ignore what we value, and why. Nor does it make sense to conclude that the emergence of new capacities, such as that for reflection, is less important for the destiny of the species than the more ancient genetic programs that control so much of our mind and behavior.

Let us take the first of these two issues. It is an incontrovertible fact that, in every human culture that is known to us, certain outcomes of development have been considered more valuable than others. Some of these outcomes are universal—everywhere, for instance, a “good life” would involve health, freedom from need, the feeling that one has contributed to the well-being of one’s family, the respect of one’s peers. Other outcomes are more tied to the unique prescriptions of the culture, for instance, in a Hindu Brahmin’s life, after a man has provided enough resources for the comfortable existence of his spouse and progeny, the prescription for a worthy life includes retiring from the world to become a contemplative monk who has to beg for food at the edges of civilization. Whatever the understanding of a good life might be, it is not possible to understand the thoughts and emotions of people without knowing what they value about their own existence.

Of course, Western psychologists—especially developmental ones—have always held, explicitly or implicitly, to some version of an optimal life. For example, Erikson (1963), Loevinger (1976), Levinson (1980), and Vaillant (1993) all posit as the most desirable outcome of development a final stage of psychological integration—a point at which a person comes to accept his or her past, no longer seeks to change or achieve the impossible, yet is vitally connected to the immediate environment. Others have proposed the concept of *wisdom* as the culmination of personal development (e.g., Baltes, Glück, & Kunzman, 2002), or the achievement of a universalistic morality (Kohlberg, 1984), or of mature faith (Fowler, 1981). But the notion of a good life is not restricted to a single final outcome. It is even more important to realize that at each stage of life one can choose to live fully and well, or choose to indulge in self-pity and despair instead (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1997). All developmental theories from Erikson on have tried to describe age-linked turning points when physical or social maturation presents specific challenges and opportunities for a person; depending on

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the choice made at these points, the quality of a person's life is likely to take a new direction for better or for worse.

These usually implicit views of desirable developmental outcomes are being much more explicitly voiced since the inception of "positive psychology." The perspective of positive psychology is intended as a corrective both to the value-free stance of experimental approaches, on the one hand, and to the exclusively pathology-oriented views that have permeated much of clinical psychology, on the other. It is a loosely knit "movement" that was catalyzed by Martin Seligman in the year he became president of the American Psychological Association, with the help of several colleagues, present company included (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology could be described as an effort to revive some of the agenda that had mobilized humanistic psychologists in the middle of the 20th century. At the same time, it does not share Maslow's and Rogers's suspicion of abstraction and quantification, but tries instead to extend the scientific method to deal with aspects of experience that had been ignored during those decades of what has been characterized as the "dust-bowl empiricism" of the mid-20th century. The historical antecedents of positive psychology have been recently debated in various venues (e.g., Lazarus, 2003; Rathunde, 2001). Given how few years have passed since the inception of this movement, it seems pointless to ask whether it is just a fad or a permanent shift in the study of humankind (Lazarus, 2003). Every new field of inquiry could be mistaken for a fad at its inception; only in retrospect does its success seem inevitable.

Whether we are dealing with only a temporary blip in the progress of knowledge or a genuine sea change depends on whether the ideas advanced by positive psychologists will be found useful by at least some members of the next generation of scholars; whether the concepts they advance will enter the vocabulary of the human sciences; or whether the results they find are convincing enough to be accepted as part of what defines our understanding of reality. If positive psychology passes these tests, it will become a genuine paradigm shift in the human sciences (Kuhn, 1970). While it is clearly too early to pass judgment on the final outcome, the initial signs are more than encouraging. In barely a half dozen years, scholars who have identified themselves with this perspective have produced a prodigious number of articles and books. And while the quality of this scholarly outpouring is understandably varied, on the whole it is surprisingly high. Among the volumes that have appeared recently one should certainly single out the encyclopedic handbook edited by Snyder and Lopez (2002), which all by itself should validate the legitimacy of positive psychology as a subdomain within the discipline; the excellent textbook by Carr (2004); the rich collections by Aspinwall and Staudinger (2002) and Keyes and Haidt (2003); and the path-breaking biography cum history cum theory written by Seligman (2002). In addition, there is the slightly earlier volume



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edited by Kahneman, Diener, and Schwartz (1999), which could be seen as signaling the transition into the new paradigm. Other books inspired at least in part by positive psychology include investigations of the effects of materialism and materialistic goals (Kanner & Kasser, 2003; Myers, 2000; Schmuck & Sheldon, 2001) and studies of the ethics of professional behavior (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001).

All well and good, a critic might say, but what do these disparate contributions add up to? Positive psychology is apparently an attractive perspective for many scholars, but it lacks theoretical coherence. It is not unified by a central conceptual apparatus. In fact, the many contributions are not even linked in what one might call a nomological network—they remain discrete ideas or findings that share only a common attitude toward what matters about human experience and behavior. This lack of unifying theory might be remedied with time. For instance, the recent volume by Peterson and Seligman (2004) provides, if not a theory, then at least a theoretical framework in which most approaches to positive psychology can find their place. In my opinion, however, the main contribution of positive psychology to the understanding of human thought and action does not hinge on whether it will or it will not become a unified theoretical system.

Even in its present exuberantly centrifugal phase, the perspective of positive psychology is enormously generative. First of all, it encourages young scholars to explore vitally important areas of human experience that until now were considered to be unreachable, if not unimportant. In the middle of the 20th century, for instance, Norman Bradburn wanted to entitle the book that contained the summary of the results of his years of study of life satisfaction “the psychology of happiness.” But he and his publishers concluded that, in the intellectual climate of the times, serious scholars would ignore a book with such a lightweight title, so it was eventually called *The Structure of Psychological Well-Being* (Bradburn, 1969). This kind of self-censorship is no longer necessary. Thanks in large part to what positive psychology has already accomplished, the usefulness of such “soft” concepts as happiness, hope, courage, gratitude, or enjoyment is recognized. They are no longer beyond the pale and can be actively studied, thereby adding to knowledge and to human well-being. If nothing else, this contribution alone amply justifies the existence of positive psychology.

Second, the idea behind the label of positive psychology acts as a catalyst for bringing together individual scholars who otherwise may have done their work in obscurity, at the margins of the discipline, unaware that many potentially stimulating peers were also laboring in the same vineyard. The sociology of science is clear about the enormous contribution that a supportive network can make to the development of a domain of study. Being able to exchange ideas, to validate each others' findings, or just to be cheered on often makes the difference between abandoning a field that seems fallow and persevering until success is obtained. Even such an independent genius as Galileo kept up his resolve in part because he was able to correspond across the continent with supportive col-

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leagues such as Johannes Kepler, receive curious visitors from all over Europe, and attract bright students like the mathematicians Torricelli and Viviani. That was 400 years ago. It could be argued that now all one has to do is turn to the Web and find out immediately who belongs to one's network of interests, worldwide. Yet the very abundance of this information has its own drawbacks. How can one sort out a promising colleague from the many who are not serious? In the 16th century, many worthy persons may have been ignored, but the ones whose names traveled far were likely to be worth visiting, even if it took a fortnight on muleback. In any case, by creating the label of positive psychology, a common forum was created, and researchers and practitioners from all over the world were able to get together and exchange ideas.

Finally, positive psychology, by providing a variety of financial supports, has made it possible for young scholars to pursue research in areas that a few years ago would have been completely underfunded. Thanks to the vision and energy of Martin Seligman and to the generosity of a few farsighted sources, such as the John Templeton Foundation, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Gallup International Positive Psychology Center, it has been possible to organize meetings and workshops, support small studies, and recognize with substantial prizes some of the best work done by junior scholars in the field. No matter how idealistic a group of talented people might be, without free time, work space, equipment, and clerical support, it is very difficult to produce research that will pass the muster of scientific journals. And all of these prerequisites depend on access to money.

These contributions to positive psychology—a common set of ideas and approaches, a network of social connections, and the first seeds of financial support—are necessary for any new advance in science to take hold. But of these three the most essential one, the one without which no movement can be called a science, is the first: a set of ideas and findings that adds to our understanding of how human life unfolds and what makes it worth living. It is to this first task that the present volume speaks.

This book collects a number of essential writings that are based on presentations given at the First International Positive Psychology Summit sponsored by the Gallup organization in Washington, DC. Of the many important papers presented at that meeting, a small number was selected to represent the variety of ideas and approaches, and their authors were invited to rewrite their texts in a format more suited to the general reading public. It is this selection that I now have the pleasure to introduce. Before each set of chapters, I have provided an executive summary describing how the chapter fits with the rest of the volume and what its main points are—at least in my opinion. While such a procedure might seem a bit presumptuous, its advantage is that it provides continuity to what otherwise risks being a too richly diverse set of perspectives.

Will these chapters add up to a complete and convincing argument about what kind of life is worth living and how one might go about it? Certainly not. That question is likely to remain open for as long as humans continue to reflect

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on their existence. But it is a question that needs to be asked again and again during each generation, to prevent our understanding of life from becoming outdated. What gives value to existence changes from one epoch to another. The Greeks believed that life should be dedicated to achieving immortal fame, which in turn resulted from committing heroic deeds. The Christians introduced the notion that worldly existence is just a preparation for eternal life thereafter and required a completely different set of virtues from those of classical antiquity. In China and India, exquisite forms of self-contained, harmonious conduct were developed as models for how a sage gentleman—the epitome of human achievement—should behave.

And behind the subtleties of such cultural inventions, there throbs always and everywhere the rhythm of biological life, which needs no external value or speculation to justify itself. The body knows that life is worth living. It is programmed to always seek out whatever outcome promises to maximize the probability of its survival—and the survival of the copies it makes of itself through reproduction. Living things do not seem to question the value of their existence—with one exception. That exception is us—modern men and women who sometimes wonder if struggling on is worth it and who always seek some larger purpose to add value to who they are.

Why we are like this, we do not know. A likely explanation points to the development of the prefrontal cortex in our ancestors tens of thousands of years ago. This new feature of the brain was a great boon to humankind: It allowed a person to collect, compare, and prioritize information from all of the other parts of the brain and then to decide which course to take. The old brain was built on simple stimulus-response principles: If an apple smelled good and you were hungry, you ate it; if you saw a serpent, you either fled or you attacked it; if the serpent appeared next to the fruit, you got confused. Sensory inputs that were relevant to the survival of the organism had specific pathways to areas in the brain that told the organism what to do, but these parts of the brain did not communicate much with each other. Chances are that if you live with a dog or a cat, you have noticed that the animal has definite opinions about its likes and dislikes and ignores everything else—even its own image reflected in a mirror.

The old brain is still active in our skulls. Much of what we experience and what we do is controlled by programs cobbled together by the selective forces of evolution. The way we respond to hunger, sex, threats, and other basic elements of life are just as stereotyped and “natural” as those of our animal companions. But the latest additions to the brain—the most recent layers of the temporal cortex and the prefrontal lobes—have brought some enormous changes to how we experience the world. Some of these changes have been liberating and have made us the most powerful organism on earth. But this power has its dark side.

The new areas of the brain are not directly connected to the senses that bring us information from the surrounding world. Their function is not to tell us what happens outside but rather what is happening inside in the other, older parts of

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the brain. We have evolved a metabrain, an organ that can integrate the contents of the single-purpose modules of the nervous system and that can manipulate, interfere with, and override the old connections between stimulus and response. This new organ—which is responsible for what philosophers have been calling “self-reflective consciousness”—has emancipated humans from strict genetic programs. With its help, we can make plans, we can postpone action, we can imagine things that do not exist. Science and literature, philosophy and religion could not have taken shape without it.

But an inevitable consequence of this new ability has been that we are also able to consciously deceive others about our intentions, to plot and to lie, to compare ourselves to others and to feel envy, and to experience greed. These undesirable consequences were largely the result of the realization of selfhood brought about by the operations of the metabrain. As the prefrontal lobes took on more and more of the task of synthesizing information from the rest of the nervous system, there slowly arose a corresponding datum of metainformation, the realization that there is an independent agent at work, making all of the important decisions, the center of the known universe. This agent, the outcome of our brain becoming aware of its own existence, eventually became identified with the essence of our self. It gave us a unique identity, separate from the flow of life. We became self-conscious, aware of our individuality.

The realization of individuality made possible by self-reflective consciousness is often considered the most precious achievement of our species. At the same time, some of our worst traits follow from it. Having realized that we are unique, distinct from conspecifics and other life forms, each human tends to conclude that the preservation of his or her individual existence is the ultimate priority. Selfishness and cruelty, which formerly existed mainly as tools for biological survival, now have become extended to protect the psychological needs of the self, for the metabrain cannot help but conclude that its own existence is the most precious thing in the world, and all other goals pale in importance compared to its preservation. The terror of nonexistence, the fear of death, has become one of the ruling motives of humans. Instead of getting the most out of living, we spend more and more energy in hoarding resources, in escalating desires, and in futile attempts to prevent the dissolution of consciousness.

Paradoxically, self-reflection also ushers in the possibility of self-doubt. As humans realized that they were independent individuals with a short lifespan, the question of what choices would lead to a meaningful life became increasingly urgent. After all, if the spark of consciousness only lasts a few heartbeats in the cosmic darkness, is there really any point in hanging on to life, when so much of it involves suffering? To answer this question, our ancestors—freed and unmoored from the implicit meaning provided by biological existence—had to come up with credible reasons that life was indeed worth living. The myths, religions, and philosophies of every culture have been in large part directed toward answering that question.

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Until quite recently, these explanations for what made life worth living naively accepted the evidence of the senses, including the information provided by the new brain. Just as our ancestors believed quite reasonably that the earth was flat and at the center of the cosmos, they continued believing as recently as the 20th century that consciousness gave a fairly accurate account of reality and that it was under the control of rational thought processes. Some took heart in the belief that inside their bodies there resided a soul which connected them to an immortal divinity. Others took comfort in the perspective voiced by Blaise Pascal, to the effect that humans might be a feeble reed in the immensity of the universe, but we are a thinking reed—and thus the unique masterpiece of creation. The realization of individuality brought about a sense of isolation and finitude, but it also gave the impression of autonomy and freedom. Trusting the creative independence of the mind, from the Age of Reason to the Atomic Age our ancestors could be at least somewhat confident that they could resolve the riddle of existence. But even this support was to be removed in time.

As the human sciences began to focus inward and examine the mechanisms of thought and choice, the innocent picture of the mind as a faithful mirror of reality began to change. When the objective glare of systematic analysis was turned toward investigating mental processes, one after the other the assumptions buttressing the autonomy of the mind began to crumble. For example, Karl Marx argued convincingly that “false consciousness” rules our perception of the world, distorting our judgments to fit our material interests. Sigmund Freud made us aware that supposedly rational decisions are often manipulated by unconscious needs. John B. Watson and B. F. Skinner demonstrated how much of what we do and believe is the result of random associations to pleasant and aversive stimuli. And these ideas were put forth even before the mighty wave of deconstructionism washed over the last remnants of our comfortable Victorian belief in reason, progress, and universal human values. Not many of the familiar props to human self-confidence have been left standing.

Even more recently, neuropsychology and behavioral genetics have come up with new and more systematic evidence that undermines a naive belief in the objectivity and autonomy of thought. The chemical basis of moods suggests that how happy or sad we feel does not depend on the operations of the mind but is determined at a lower level by molecular processes impervious to consciousness. Studies of twins suggest that the jobs we take, the kind of partner we marry, our political preferences, even the names we give our pets, are all substantially determined by genetic heritage. Given this flood of evidence, it is difficult to see how the human race could make its way out of a paper bag, let alone resolve the ultimate riddles of existence. Could it be that we are missing something when we apply the scientific method to understanding ourselves?

In the effort to reduce all human action to causes of a lower order—genetic programs, chemical impulses, economic interests—most investigators steadfastly ignore or discount any evidence to the effect that the mind can develop its

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own agenda independently of the various inputs it receives. If a man or woman does anything deserving praise, whether it is an act of courage or compassion, it is dismissed as due to circumstances external to the will or character of the seemingly virtuous person. This tendency is then reinforced by an opposite argument—that robbers and murderers are victims of circumstances who should not be accountable for their actions. Even though the currently prevailing victimology is grounded in a noble sympathy for the downtrodden, when applied wholesale it can result in a denial of responsibility that reduces human actors to the status of puppets manipulated by two strings: the genetic program and the forces of society.

As the 20th century wore on, concerned observers began to complain that the social sciences, into which the human sciences had morphed, were undertaking their debunking of naive anthropocentrism too gleefully. It was a great contribution to the understanding of who we are to trace and document the various ways our judgment is steered and clouded by factors originating outside consciousness and against which we are usually helpless because we do not even suspect their existence. But is it going too far to assume that men and women can be fully understood by prejudging in advance their nature? After all, chemists would be handicapped if they had to assume that molecular bonds obeyed the same rules as subatomic particles. And despite the recent flourishing of molecular biology, our understanding of living organisms would be severely restricted if we assumed that chemistry explained all that is worth knowing about animal life.

Caught in spasms of physics envy, many social scientists joined the mechanistic, reductive approach to understanding human beings. Against them, as a natural backlash, there has arisen a highly vocal and sophisticated cadre who takes pride in an anarchic rejection of any claims to objectivity. Between these two extremes, there is an almost empty ground, upon which those scholars should stand who believe that a rational, empirically grounded investigation is still our best bet in reaching knowledge, but who also understand that in moving from one level of explanation to another, the most relevant questions might have to change.

This means, in the study of humans, that the effects of self-reflective consciousness must be taken seriously. For example, even if free choice cannot be proven to exist, a person who believes in its existence—for whatever reason—is going to behave differently from one who does not. When confronted with overwhelming pressures to cheat, a businessperson who believes in strict determinism is more likely to submit to pressure, compared to a colleague who believes that when everything is said and done a person is free to take a stance opposite to whatever forces have conditioned her behavior.

In this sense the idea—or meme—of “freedom” becomes an agent in its own right, distinct from its biological or social origins. The memes of justice, equality, human rights, and so on evolved in the minds of individuals reflecting on

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their experiences, were passed down from one generation to another, and were slowly adopted by increasing numbers of people so that by now they seem to be part of human nature. Of course, having forged such concepts as brotherly love does not mean that we actually implement the meme in which we believe. None of the fruits of consciousness determines entirely what we think or do—but none of the commands of genes or of society do so either. It is always a probabilistic process in which different and often contradictory impulses vie with each other for the command of our actions. But certainly any approach to human behavior that ignores entirely the new reality emerging in consciousness misses what is perhaps the most important part of what makes men and women human.

Positive psychology has emerged as such a strong and vital alternative because many psychologists, young and old, felt that if they followed the traditional paradigms they would miss the essence of this grand story. In the first chapter of part I of this volume, Csaba Pléh reminds us of the intellectual roots of positive psychology in Western thought and highlights how important the concepts of freedom, autonomy, and intrinsic motivation have been in several of the previous narratives of human nature. Christopher Peterson presents a classification of strengths as a starting point for mapping human potentialities. Dmitry Leontiev proposes a dynamic perspective for evaluating the course of a person's life in light of positive principles of development. Finally, Robert Emmons reviews research on spirituality, arguing for the importance of this dimension, which is so often neglected by the field. Together, these four chapters provide a varied yet interconnected introduction to how positive psychology differs from previous paradigms and to the range of theoretical issues it confronts.

Part II is focused on the nature of positive experiences. Barbara Fredrickson suggests an evolutionary explanation for why it is advantageous to be happy, while Daisy Grewal and Peter Salovey describe the benefits of emotional intelligence. Jane Henry rounds out this section of the book with a survey of therapeutic interventions and with suggestions for how positive psychology might revitalize the mental health profession.

The authors of the chapters in part III take a more long-term perspective and look at the developmental implications of positive psychology. Jochen Brandtstädter describes how learning to adjust goals leads to satisfaction later in life. Antonella Delle Fave presents cross-cultural data showing that objective hardships need not prevent subjective well-being. The team of Jari-Erik Nurmi and Katariina Salmela-Aro report on studies confirming the long-term benefits of personally constructed goals. The ill effects of materialistic goals are detailed by Tim Kasser. Kennon Sheldon suggests how our notions of declining capacities as one ages can be reversed if we look at later years from the perspective of positive psychology. And finally, the concluding chapter by Martin Seligman clarifies the contribution of positive psychology to therapeutic practice and to psychology in general.

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These chapters provide a powerful counterpoint to a mistakenly reductionistic psychology more impressed by objective measurement than by meaning. They show that subjective experience can be studied scientifically and measured accurately. Moreover, they make a convincing case for the importance of subjective phenomena, which often affect happiness more than external, material conditions do. If psychology is to be first and foremost a science that seeks to understand the inner workings of consciousness—as opposed to behavior, performance, and achievement—then these chapters inspired by positive psychology will make a much-needed contribution to the discipline as a whole.

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