

COMPASSION, SCIENCE, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: COMMENTARY ON MARTIN SELIGMAN

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Martin Seligman's interview is such a joy to read. I am thrilled with the confluence of journeys between myself and Dr Seligman on the alignment of prospecting science with the central importance of vision and future planning. I have always seen this as core to Jewish culture, ethics, and religiosity. I have made a lifelong pursuit of the marriage of science and religiosity, particularly as it focuses on the most enlightened elements of the human emotional and cognitive capacities. I saw Seligman et al.'s (2016) book on prospecting science as to some degree a secular embrace of the prophetic mindset of the latter Old Testament prophets (mainly Amos and Isaiah), as well as ancient rabbis such as Hillel, and this filled me with awe and hope. I didn't know that our mutual friend Rabbi Sacks (2011), of blessed memory, emphasised the optimism of linear history as fundamental to moral theology and messianic hope. I must admit that I never wanted to be too explicit with Rabbi Sacks about my veering towards Spinozism at the faith level of understanding God, as he might have been disappointed in me as a rabbinic colleague. But my path to Spinoza, combined with the traditional practice of my religion, constituted a deeper and fuller sense of God-consciousness – of a kind Spinoza would never have imagined practising himself.

A point of disagreement. This placement of God in the distant future that Dr Seligman proposes does not sufficiently capture the daily awe and

reverence that I think Spinoza, Maimonides, and many great scholars experience. The point is that nature and science can embody all that theology hoped for without the parts of religion that Spinoza rejected. I actually think scientists have a hard time internalising Spinoza's message. Spinoza already believed in something whole and complete, so he seemed completely unafraid of death. That is a classic faith position, but believing in the future and one's role in building it is much more fraught with risk. Speaking as someone who has spent so much time knocking on brick walls of conflict or hatred that I didn't know were brick, I think at some point your faith, optimism, and confidence have to be in something that you have not created but that is beyond you – something that hope will have created, brick by brick, in the march of progress. That seems like a challenge for me personally. I have simply lost trust in human creations, including organised religion when left to its own devices.

Spinoza intrigues me, but it was the deep personal writings on *compassione* as the essence of Judaism of my old friend Samuel David Luzzatto, a nineteenth-century Jewish Italian theologian and scholar, that launched me on my own decades-long journey of compassion research. I also took inspiration from Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson, two Europeans whom I found through Luzzatto. Luzzatto hated Spinoza because he felt Spinoza had no place for kindness, altruism, and generosity in his system of ethics and his psychology of the human being. I agree with that critique of Spinoza. Luzzatto (Gopin 2017) was deeply devoted to compassion but, at the same time, a very poor and unhappy man. Would Dr Seligman approve of Luzzatto's loving compassion and altruism, teaching it to generations of students, and being so unhappy? This is an interesting question for the psychology of happiness. Luzzatto stood staunchly for compassion and empathy with suffering – in a way that so many philosophers abandoned. I have tried to answer this dilemma in my latest book (Gopin 2022) by delving into the neuroscience of compassion versus what scientists call “empathic distress” through experiencing the pain of others. The only thinker I have seen who embraces compassion, happiness, and meaning all at once is the Dalai Lama, with his scientific take on Buddhism and the mission of the Bodhisattva.

There are some theological fine points here between PERMA's amorality of research and its application. By PERMA I mean Seligman's guide for happiness: P – positive emotion, E – engagement, R – positive relationships, M – meaning, A – accomplishments/achievements. There is Nature's operation on a-moral scientific rules. But its steerage towards

a compassionate, enlightened, and redeemed world does move PERMA minds to ultimately be drawn towards fashioning a world of less violence, more compassion, more equality, etc. It would be a nightmare for PERMA to end up as yet another tool of libertarian billionaires looking to leave humanity to its own devices while pursuing narcissistic pleasures and goals. Dr Seligman would undoubtedly agree.

There is a very important point here that the purely secular construct of scientific investigation may miss. The astonishing human progress that Steven Pinker (2011, 2018) and others (Tupy & Pooley 2022) demonstrate with numbers and statistics from the last 500 years has only happened due to that extra spark in the billions of human souls who insisted on applying all that science to life-saving over death-inducing goals, for example, towards generosity over greed, towards life, and away from the needless death of humans or the death of the Great Barrier Reef. Sure, hundreds of millions of people have died in tech-enhanced wars, and millions have died in the past in the name of religion. But we would not be here at all, with 8 billion souls and a massively increased lifespan, without endless altruism combined with endless science. It cannot be forgotten that there has been a humanitarian essence of motivation in the hearts of millions of scientists throughout history. That essence is compassion and love for life, which surely has natural roots in the evolution of natural cooperation and sacrifice. But this trend towards life-affirmation also just as often has deep roots in an incredible diversity, across the planet, of spiritual faith, hope, and visions of the future.

This drive to compassion and humanitarianism that cuts across religious and secular lines in the hearts and minds of millions of scientists is an essential element driving science towards far more good than harm when you add up the results statistically. I think that is why Einstein and others were so saddened by the dual possibilities of splitting the atom – precisely because they did not have a cold-hearted fascination with whatever nature’s power might be or human manipulation might make of it. Some scientists have taken that route, but most are with Einstein and have sought a way forward for humanity – a way of curiosity, of compassion, of wonder, of love of the universe and love of humankind. Dr Seligman has uncovered hard evidence that generosity and care for others is the highest form of human happiness (as has been observed by philosophers throughout history but has been unproven). I think the use of PERMA is a great way to steer the world towards the good and ultimately towards a powerful merging of optimistic science and redemptive theology.

In reacting to the increasing worry that I and others share with Dr Seligman over academic radicalisation, we should look at historical and sociological trends in the uses of ideology for generational replacement. Superior research being absent, ideological fads and groupthink have brought about the replacement of successive generations of academicians. This reality throughout time puts wokeness in a different light. I think we need more research into rational and irrational trends in academia and into the negotiation and competition over power that is generational and manufactured by identity-based separations and illusions. I have watched the degradation of my field at its origins due to an ideological shift away from empirical discovery and towards PC ideology and fashion. It was not like this 30 years ago. We had different forms of generational academic struggle, which, as I said above, is a normal generational process of replacement and evolution of thinking and research. But there is now afoot a strange undoing of academia itself, of empirical investigation itself, which is unnecessary. Postmodern critiques of previous work could easily provide an evolution of scientific knowledge, not its destruction. In my mind, the situation arises from the angry drive of the amygdala to fight, which overtakes the rational mind of inquiry. The postmodern critique of flaws in objectivity to date due to cultural and gender differences are most welcome and are easily incorporated into the rational mind of empirical science, but not by undoing it at its core, not by questioning any one group or religion or identity's capacity to investigate. That is just the return of the brain stem's tendency to go to war, as opposed to an attitude of shared inquiry that keeps growing and evolving, combined with a realistic optimism about positive growth and evolution:

The good life involves finding happiness through the daily use of your inherent strengths across various aspects of living. The meaningful life, however, incorporates an additional element: employing these same strengths to advance knowledge, power, or goodness. A life that achieves this holds profound meaning, and should God be present at its culmination, such a life is sacred. (Seligman 2011: 224)

This quote is amazing. Sometimes what you thought was good was not so good, so the crisis is not one of meaninglessness versus meaningfulness, but of meaninglessness because what was good was not as good as you thought or maybe even not good at all. The added layer of aging is that you

cannot get back the years it would take to switch. I get the sense that what Martin Seligman is studying is science, but what he is asking of people with resilience, a futuristic or optimistic outlook, is really an act of faith. Because the future is completely unknown, the time one has to build the future could be one year, twenty years, or a day. Faith and hope in one's own legacy and the legacy of the world are deeply altruistic and beyond any possible narcissism.

This interview is phenomenal. So much of my previous two books (Gopin 2017, 2022), as well as my next book on prospection and building the future, are indebted to Seligman's pioneering work on positive psychology, and now also to his revolutionary work on prospection science (Seligman et al. 2016). I have to report the same reaction from my students, who consider the simple turns of phrase used by positive psychology inquiry and the intervention recommendations of positive psychology to be life-changing for them on a personal and family level, let alone in their application to political and social change. On their own, my students have applied these ideas to family conflict management and resolution without my prompting, and they have then written about the results in their essays for class. I am very excited about the future of this approach.

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