THE CONSOLATION OF CHARACTER STRENGTH IN IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Roger Dawson and Nicholas Austin

S PIRITUALITY IN THE LAST forty years or so has benefited from a fruitful dialogue with psychology and the practices of counselling and psychotherapy. For example, the classic *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* by William A. Barry and William J. Connolly,[1] which originally appeared in 1982 and is still used to good effect, articulated an approach to spiritual direction that drew not merely on the renewal of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises, but also on the insights of psychotherapy in its discussion of such matters as listening, resistance, transference and supervision. It is not insignificant that Barry himself already had a doctorate in clinical psychology.

Of course, the relationship between psychotherapy and spirituality has not been unambiguously positive. Practitioners of spirituality often voice a concern that the properly spiritual is in danger of being absorbed by, or reduced to, the psychological. Barry and Connolly themselves are aware of the danger: 'with the emergence of modern theories of therapy and counselling, pastoral care had too often looked like a carbon copy of these secular models'.[2] The critical resources of theological reflection, therefore, become essential, giving a careful consideration of the relationship between spirituality and psychology. Indeed, the back cover of the book proudly proclaims, 'In thinking and practice [Barry and Connolly] have absorbed the insights of modern psychotherapy, but have not been absorbed *by* them'. They consistently emphasize that spiritual direction is distinctive in that its primary focus is upon helping a person in his or her relationship with God.

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[1] William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, revised and updated edn (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
[2] Barry and Connolly, *Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 144.

However, psychology does not stand still. It is a young science with a prodigious amount of new research continuously emerging. If the dialogue with psychology has been enriching in the past, it is worth asking whether recent advances may also have something to offer the theory and practice of spirituality.
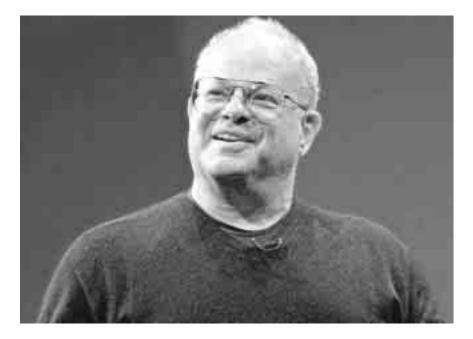
One such development is the new movement of 'positive psychology'. This approach to psychology is a response to the fact that, while we now know quite a lot about mental disorders, some of which have become highly treatable using psychological therapies, and while we know a lot about what 'most people do most of the time' (the mean and median in large groups of people), psychology has often neglected the scientific study of those who are thriving or doing well. Positive psychology, then, studies empirically, using the scientific method, what promotes human flourishing and what makes life worth living. It is unsurprising that the correlation between positive psychology, with its emphasis upon human flourishing, and Ignatian spirituality, with its corresponding emphasis upon consolation, has been noted.[3] So it is worth exploring whether, just as older psychological insights have aided the practice of spiritual direction, so positive psychology may have something important to contribute to the understanding of what it means to live in an Ignatian way.

The aim of this article is modest: it focuses primarily on just one element of positive psychology. The argument is that the process of identifying and using 'character strengths' reliably leads to an experience of what, in Ignatian terms, is called spiritual consolation, and even helps us to understand what lies at the core of consolation itself. After an explanation of the role of character strengths within positive psychology, their significance from an Ignatian viewpoint will be considered. Reflecting theologically on the dialogue between Ignatian spirituality and positive psychology, we shall then indicate some practical implications that arise from a comparison of the two perspectives.

Character and Signature Strengths

Martin Seligman, a US research clinical psychologist with an international reputation for his work on depression, is the leading figure in positive

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[3] Phyllis Zagano and C. Kevin Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology', *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006), 41–58; Tom Carson, 'Ignatius, Gratitude and Positive Psychology: Does Ignatian Gratitude Develop Subjective Well-Being?', *The Way*, 52/2 (April 2013), 7–19.

Martin Seligman

psychology. Central to this approach, Seligman explains, is the focus on being a person of 'good character': possessing the virtues and strengths of character that contribute to living a good and meaningful life.[4] However, Seligman and his researchers found that psychology had no clear way of thinking about what this meant. While we have a reasonably good classification system for what is wrong with us, that is, the psychological disorders (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*),[5] until recently we had no means of classifying strengths, or what is right with us. A clear classification system is enormously helpful if we are to produce good scientific research.

However, Seligman is not merely proposing to fill a gap in psychological research, but advocating a more fundamental shift in the discipline. In the standard approach, there is a common view of change that can be described as the 'damage and deficit model of growth'. This model postulates that in order to grow or change or become fully functioning human beings, we

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[4] Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (New York: Free Press, 2002).
[5] See *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edn (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

need to attend to and focus on our weaknesses and problems; once these are resolved, then growth will follow. There is an intuitive appeal to this view, which is widely held in contemporary Western culture. Seligman points out, however, that while the damage–deficit model of growth is initially plausible, there is in fact minimal empirical evidence to support it! Indeed, when we look at the strategies of high achievers, we find that what they do is play to their strengths and deploy their positive qualities; as for their weaknesses, they live with them, 'manage' them and try to hold them in check. To put the matter succinctly: positive psychology suggests that personal development is best approached, not through the question, 'What should I be working *on?*' but rather, 'What should I be working *towards?*'

In order to address the problem of a lack of a classification system for personal strengths, the Chicago psychologist Chris Peterson undertook a major research project. A team of 55 researchers made a content analysis of about 200 major religious and philosophical texts from around the world, seeking to identify the values that these religions or philosophies sought to promote. What they found was a remarkable convergence among widely varying systems and, based on the content analysis, they identified 24 'character strengths', which they grouped under six core virtues:

1. Wisdom and Knowledge: cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge;
2. Courage: strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal;
3. Love and Humanity: interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others;
4. Justice: civic strengths that underlie healthy community life;
5. Temperance: strengths that protect against excess;
6. Transcendence: strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning.

Peterson and his researchers propose that, to be considered a person of 'good character', it is necessary to have at least one strength under at least four of the six headings. You can check this by calling to mind someone you know whom you would consider to be a fine person, a good example of humanity at its best; and then look at the 24 values and identify whether he or she meets this criterion.

Classification of Character Strengths[6]

1. Wisdom and Knowledge: cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge

• **Creativity** [originality, ingenuity]: thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualise and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it

• **Curiosity** [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering

• **Judgment and Open-Mindedness** [critical thinking]: thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly

• **Love of Learning**: mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; this is obviously related to curiosity, but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows

• **Perspective** [wisdom]: being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

2. Courage: emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

• **Bravery** [valour]: not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it

• **Perseverance** [persistence, industriousness]: finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; 'getting it out the door'; taking pleasure in completing tasks

• **Honesty** [authenticity, integrity]: speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretence; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions

• **Zest** [vitality, enthusiasm, vigour, energy]: approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or half-heartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

3. Love and Humanity: interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

• **Capacity to Love and Be Loved**: valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

• **Kindness** [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, 'niceness']: doing favours and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

• **Social Intelligence** [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

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[6] Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 29–30.

4. Justice: civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

• *Teamwork* [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

• *Fairness*: treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance

• *Leadership*: encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done, and at the same time maintaining good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

5. Temperance: strengths that protect against excess

• *Forgiveness and Mercy*: forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful

• *Modesty and Humility*: letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is

• *Prudence*: being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted

• *Self-Regulation* [self-control]: regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions

6. Transcendence: strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

• *Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence* [awe, wonder, elevation]: noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

• *Gratitude*: being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks

• *Hope* [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about

• *Humour* [playfulness]: liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes

• *Religiousness and Spirituality* [faith, purpose]: having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

There are several features of the character strengths that are worth noting. First, character strengths are *universal:* they can be found in the most remote cultures and lands, and in those with differing beliefs, religious affiliations and political preferences. Second, they are *elemental:* character strengths are the basic building blocks of goodness in the individual. They are our true essence, the core parts of our personality and are part of our 'best selves'. Third, character is *plural*. An individual's character is best understood as a unique profile of strengths with varying highs and lows. 'Character' does not simply mean honesty or integrity. People are not only honest, but also kind and humble, brave and hopeful, or wise and fair.

Fourth, while character strengths are relatively *stable*, they can and do change. They are part of our personality, which we know is enduring, especially after the early twenties yet, at the same time, they can be understood as habits that are formed through repetition, and therefore are not to be confused with gifts or talents with (or without) which we are born. A person becomes brave, for example, by repeatedly behaving with courage in the face of risks and dangers. Character strengths, then, can be *developed* through practice or via deliberate intervention: people can learn to be more curious, more grateful, more fair or more open-minded. The key is practice.

Character strengths also have important consequences: the result of using our character strengths is likely to be connected to many benefits, such as increased subjective happiness. They can, however, be overused or misused in an unbalanced or even harmful way. For example, creativity can be misused in computer hacking or writing viruses; the overuse of curiosity can lead someone into a dangerous situation or be intrusive; and the brave person may be an al-Qaeda terrorist. It is therefore important to recognise that the strengths are interrelated, and other strengths, such as prudence, kindness or social intelligence, can help us from overusing or misusing certain qualities.

In order to study character empirically, Peterson and his collaborators developed a measure of character strengths, the Values in Action (VIA) questionnaire.[7] While some may have reservations about quantifying or measuring such human qualities, it is essential to scientific study to define valid and consistent means of measurement: imagine physics without weights or measures. We now have such a means of measuring many of the positive traits found in human beings, which helps us to identify what is potentially strongest and best in individuals.

The VIA questionnaire identifies the strengths in rank order and, since positive psychology is concerned with what is right with us rather than what is wrong with us, the top five strengths of each individual are very significant. These are known as 'signature strengths': we use them across a variety of settings (at home, at work, among friends), and feel authentic and energized when we do so; these strengths feel like the 'real me' and others usually recognise them as qualities of the individual; people are usually determined to use their signature strengths come what may ('try

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[7] The questionnaire was devised by Peterson and Seligman with the help of their students (*Character Strengths and Virtues*, 627). It can be taken at https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/questionnaires/survey-character-strengths.

and stop me'). Moreover, proper use of the strengths in turn strengthens them, which is good for the individual and good for other people.

Signature Strengths and Consolation

This, then, is how positive psychology has approached the question of character and signature strengths. But what is their significance for Ignatian spirituality? We may take as our starting point the characteristically Ignatian focus on experience.

In several workshops that I (RD) have done with young adults, I have asked them to complete the VIA questionnaire beforehand and to bring their results to the workshop. Typically they are somewhat bashful about describing their signature strengths, but these strengths are clearly important to them. The atmosphere in the room deepens quickly and becomes quite highly charged and emotional. Others who know a person will often confirm and affirm the results.

Significantly, when people take the VIA questionnaire and are presented with the results identifying their signature strengths, there is reliably—even predictably—an experience that is characterized by energy, by life: 'this is me', 'this is me at my best' and 'this is who I want to be'. They feel more confident in themselves and the world, and more hopeful about the future. There is an experience both of being confirmed in their positive identity as possessing certain strengths, and simultaneously of extending them or being empowered to do so. Furthermore, this recognition of one's character strengths points the way to extending and confirming this positive experience: by naming our signature strengths we are given encouragement in finding new and creative ways to exercise and develop them in future.

How might this be interpreted from an Ignatian perspective? Our suggestion is that the experience of coming to know one's signature strengths, and learning to live them out in new and creative ways, can legitimately be regarded as an experience of spiritual consolation. Within the Ignatian tradition, it is proposed that there are two 'spirits' at work in the world and in our lives: the Good Spirit, which is leading us to God, inviting us and drawing us closer to God, appealing to our 'true selves'; and the Bad Spirit, or the 'enemy of human nature', which is opposed to God and tries to draw us away from God, attracting us to what gets in the way of our journey to God, tempting us to depend on it and appealing to our baser nature or 'false selves'. Within this perspective, consolation is seen as a characteristic mark of the Good Spirit, who tends to work, at

least in those progressing in the Lord, by encouraging and consoling. Desolation, in contrast, is often a sign that the Bad Spirit is at work, harassing the soul and attempting to discourage it in its path towards what is good and true and holy.

Consolation, then, is a spiritual state characterized by energy and a sense of life; it may be challenging, but there is a sense of 'yes, I can do this—with God's help', leading us to feel more faithful, more loving and more hopeful. It seems, then, that there is reason to understand the energizing experience of recognising and using one's signature strengths as an experience of spiritual consolation.

Of course, it might be objected that the concept of character strengths is a purely secular one, and that there is a danger here of falling into the trap we noted at the outset, namely of reducing the spiritual to the merely psychological. While there may be some weight to this objection, it must be recognised that there is also the opposite danger of unduly separating the spiritual from the psychological. While theology struggles to articulate the exact relationship between the 'natural' and 'supernatural', it would be a distortion to see grace as operating purely on its own plane, divorced, as it were, from the realm of all that is authentically human.[8]

We would argue that the truly human coincides with God's creative and redeeming will for us and, indeed, that Ignatian spirituality is particularly characterized by a fundamentally positive view of human nature: since God made us and since God can only create good, all created things, including human beings, are basically good, even if seriously tarnished at times by the reality of sin. One of the implications of this perspective is the core insight that underlies Ignatian spirituality, namely, that it is possible to 'find God in all things', and that it is possible to seek for God at work in any area of human life and activity.

The truly human coincides with God's creative and redeeming will

Moreover, if we examine Ignatius of Loyola's own description of spiritual consolation, there is at least the suggestion of an overlap with the experience we have been describing. Of course, Ignatius does not use the modern language of 'character strengths', but rather that of the 'virtues'. For the theology of his time, the language of the virtues (and their contrary,

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[8] It is, of course, characteristic of the Ignatian approach to 'finding God in all things' to resist strongly any separation between the human and the holy. For the theological debate concerning nature and grace see Stephen Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992).

vices) was the primary conceptual tool for understanding and promoting growth in the Christian life. Indeed, the language of the virtues is found throughout Ignatius' writings. Every Jesuit is familiar with Ignatius' famous portrait of Father General in the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*, which essentially lists the virtues desirable in the leader of the order and, by implication, in all its members: virtues such as love of God and neighbour; practical wisdom in decision-making; strength of character or fortitude in persevering in long-term projects and withstanding the attendant hardships and disapproval; and an emotional temperance or moderation.[9] There is an impressive overlap here with the character strengths recognised by positive psychology.

It is also striking that the classical list of the three theological virtues (faith, hope and love) and the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance), which would have been standard in Ignatius' time, corresponds rather closely to the six 'core virtues': transcendence (faith and hope), love and humanity, wisdom (prudence), justice, courage (fortitude) and temperance. For Ignatius, any increase in the theological virtues is, paradigmatically, an experience of consolation: 'under the word consolation I include every increase in hope, faith, and charity' (Exx 316). It is not unreasonable, then, to claim that an experience of confirmation in the virtues and character strengths recognised by positive psychology is at least potentially one of consolation, especially when these character strengths are recognised as enabling us to identify our 'true self' and move towards the person whom God created and redeemed us to be.

The Practice of Ignatian Spirituality

If our analysis is correct, what are the implications for the practice of Ignatian spirituality?

The first implication has to do with the sense of direction that an awareness of our strengths can bring. The advice is that we should make decisions and build our lives around using and deploying our signature strengths. Using them is good for us, good for others and good for the communities to which we belong. This insight is a valuable tool for discernment, enabling us to find a way forward in the many decisions of life, both big and small. It is a concrete way of identifying our 'best selves' and moving towards being the person whom God created us to be—and indeed the person whom we want to be.

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[9] *Constitutions* IX. 2. 1–10 [723–736].

One of Ignatius' great insights in the Rules for Discernment is that, for people making progress in the spiritual life, the Good Spirit characteristically gives them strength, courage and delight, so that they may persevere in the good. The spiritual life is not simply about resisting the Bad Spirit and avoiding temptation, but primarily about cooperating with the grace of God, which helps us to move forward in the good. This approach fits well with the encouraging focus on recognising and exercising one's 'signature strengths', rather than focusing primarily on eliminating unwelcome patterns of behaviour.

We saw that Seligman criticized the 'damage–deficit' model of human growth. Many Christians will recognise a very similar assumption about growth in the spiritual life that often manifests itself in preaching, pastoral care and spiritual counselling. In particular, the Roman Catholic consciousness at times still struggles to overcome the legacy of the old-style moral theology that dominated pastoral practice before the Second Vatican Council. Its presupposition was that moral progress is achieved primarily through recognising, confessing and uprooting one's sins. As contemporary theologians have pointed out, this style of ethics was excessively focused on the negative.[10] Ironically, while considered a 'traditional' way of doing moral theology, it had in fact eclipsed the much older, but more forward-looking approach of medieval theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas,

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[10] For a critique of the 'moral manuals', see John Mahoney, 'The Influence of Auricular Confession', in *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, The Martin D'Arcy Memorial

with their characteristic focus on the virtues, beatitudes, and gifts and fruits of the Spirit. As Thomas himself claimed, the desire for the good is a more powerful motivator than the avoidance of evil.[11] Ignatius was keen that Jesuits be familiar with Thomas's substantial treatment of the virtues in his great masterwork, the *Summa theologiae*.[12]

It is probable that, despite the efforts of contemporary theologians to regain something of this positive approach, the old moral theology still looms large in the consciousness of many Christians. Alternatively, Christians may be influenced by the wider culture's susceptibility to the psychological damage–deficit model, and put much of their energy into resolving their 'issues'. The focus upon character strengths and virtues may prove a more fruitful strategy for progress in the spiritual life than an excessively inward and negative focus on trying to rid oneself of besetting sins or neuroses.

Some may be concerned that there is a risk of arrogance or overconfidence here, or that this approach may be counter to humility, which is so central to discernment (for example in the Two Standards, Exx 146). In the Christian understanding, humility does indeed involve an honest recognition of sin, and also an acknowledgement that we can make no progress without the grace of God. However, humility, to paraphrase the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is based on knowing myself as I really am,[13] and so involves a realistic and honest assessment of self and our place in the world. What is required is not the false humility that belittles the goodness that is in us, but rather a humble yet honest recognition of our strengths that gives the credit for them primarily to God's grace at work in us. The experience that Christians have in recognising their signature strengths and being invited to own and exercise them is not characteristically one of sinful pride, but consolation.

A humble but honest recognition of our strengths

Western Society

A second implication concerns formation in genuinely human values in a social context that can undermine them. There is growing evidence from

Lectures, 1981–1982 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 1–36; James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (London: Continuum, 2008).
[11] *Summa theologiae*, 1.2, q. 60, a. 5, ad. 4.
[12] John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard UP, 1993), 146.
[13] *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 1961), 78: 'In itself, humility is nothing else but a true knowledge and awareness of oneself as one really is'.

social psychology that Western cultures are becoming increasingly self-focused and even narcissistic.[14] Indeed, the values that these Western cultures seem to prize and promote include good looks, youth and fitness, wealth, status, the exercise of autonomy, assertiveness and competitiveness. In what is often referred to as a 'celebrity culture', famous people are the icons of these values, and it is assumed that they will have high self-esteem and be successful and happy. Some of these, such as fitness and autonomy, can be good; however, none of these values was identified by Peterson and Seligman in their survey. Indeed most of them are either innate (you have them, or you do not), unstable or hard to attain. Moreover, while they may help their owners to feel good about themselves (though this can be by no means guaranteed), they can leave others feeling inadequate. In other words, this can be a 'zero sum game'. In contrast, proper use of character strengths is not only good for the individual, it is also good for others and for the organizations to which individuals belong.

The character strengths, then, provide a better value system, and one more consistent with the Christian vision of what is deep and lasting, than the fleeting satisfactions widely proposed by the dominant culture. We often encourage young people to follow their dreams and believe that they can attain them if they work hard enough. But what if their dreams have been corrupted by a consumerist, celebrity culture that orientates them towards an illusory happiness? We do no favours to the next generation if we fail to convey to them our deep conviction that what is truly meaningful in life, and most likely to lead to an enduring sense of consolation and flourishing, is not having beauty, wealth, fame and 'success', but living and acting with wisdom, justice, hope and love.

Another implication, following closely upon the last point, is for parenting and education. In 2007 a UNICEF report placed Britain at the bottom of a list of 21 industrialised countries in the way it treated its children and adolescents.[15] The report not only singled out child poverty as a cause of the problem, it identified a factory-like education and training system, poor relationships with family and friends, and a low sense of well-being. Moreover, in early August 2011 Britain was shocked

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[14] For example, Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before* (New York: Free Press, 2006); Jean M. Twenge and Keith Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement* (New York: Atria, 2013).
[15] UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, *An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A Comprehensive Assessment of the Lives and Well-being of Children and Adolescents in the Economically Advanced Nations* (Florence: UNICEF, 2007), available at http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/ rc7_eng.pdf.

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Rioting in London, August 2011

by an outbreak of rioting and looting in our cities. These and other moral scandals suffered by the British people have led them to question what value system we are passing on to the next generation.

In the face of challenging events and dispiriting evidence, public policy responses tend to focus on interventions that change or reduce problem behaviours. For example, interventions in response to drug abuse or knife crime lead to the provision of information on the effects of drugs or on the consequences of drug use (for example, prison), or the use of scanners in railway stations to detect knives. However, this leaves out the 'actor' as a moral agent: our actions proceed from character, and such interventions rarely provide solutions based upon the invitation to develop it.

The evidence from positive psychology is that those who are of 'good character' (having at least one strength in at least four of the six 'core virtues') are far less likely to abuse drugs, get involved in knife crime or engage in rioting and looting. These activities are desolating for many on a societal level, and in terms of Ignatian spirituality are sources of 'false consolation', at best, for those engaged in them. Indeed, we can ask ourselves what our economic situation would be now if some of the values of temperance or prudence or fairness had been exercised by our banks over recent decades.

The implications are that one of the tasks of parents and teachers is to foster and encourage growth in character and virtue. This is very different from vague injunctions to 'live the dream' or 'follow your bliss', and promises that 'you can be what you want to be': few of us get to be professional footballers or astronauts when we grow up.

Progress in the Lord

We have focused here on just one aspect of the potentially fruitful dialogue between positive psychology and Ignatian spirituality: the recognition and exercise of character strengths as disposing us towards consolation. There are other aspects of positive psychology that may provide additional insights. For example, the concept of 'flow', or positive engagement, and its opposite, 'psychic entropy', have clear parallels with the concepts of consolation and desolation, and may suggest a way to renew the practice of the Ignatian Examen of Consciousness. Furthermore, the positive psychology approach to counselling, and the empirically researched interventions that it suggests, may have value for the practice of spiritual direction.

What is clear is that, just as Ignatian spirituality has in the past been helpfully informed, without being supplanted, by psychology and the practice of psychotherapy, so the emergence of the new school of positive psychology offers new opportunites. We have argued that positive psychology invites us to recover important elements in the Ignatian tradition that can become obscured by an underlying damage–deficit model of human and spiritual growth. Positive psychology has confirmed by empirical means the virtues recognised by Ignatius of Loyola, which were so central to his understanding of the Christian life.

While it is important to avoid a too hasty identification of the character strengths posited by positive psychology and the Christian virtues in all their theological richness, an Ignatian humanism invites us to respond positively to these human virtues. The character strengths provide direction and a useful tool for discernment, helping us to persevere in the good to which God calls us; they help to counter the disvalues of a consumerist, celebrity culture and instead cling to values more in conformity with authentic human flourishing and the Kingdom proclaimed in the gospel; and they provide a basis upon which to cultivate positive values in the next generation. Indeed, the humble recognition of our signature strengths and the delight we discover in exercising them may constitute a genuine experience of consolation in the God who is the source of all good, helping us, in the words of Ignatius, to 'make progress in the Lord'.

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