
Positive Psychology, Francis de Sales and Character Formation: An Introduction

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Abstract: This study intends to show the convergences and divergences of the spirituality of Francis de Sales as compared to the recent and flourishing work of positive psychologists in furthering the dialogue between psychology and spirituality, especially in the important field of character formation or virtue education. However, the scope of this study will be limited to the character strength or virtue of humility and those virtues closely allied with it as an initial attempt to explore and encourage further research along this line.

Résumé : Cette étude a pour but d'entamer un dialogue entre la psychologie positive et la spiritualité de François de Sales et ainsi de promouvoir l'entraînement dans les vertus. Le champ de l'étude est limité à l'humilité et les vertus étroitement liées à elle comme une tentative initiale qui aura la possibilité d'encourager et d'avancer des recherches dans cette ligne.

Keywords

Francis de Sales, positive psychology, character formation, humility, gratitude, generosity

Mots clés

François de Sales, la psychologie positive, l'entraînement dans les vertus, l'humilité, la reconnaissance, la générosité

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Introduction

The first extensive study of the relationship of the teachings of St Francis de Sales (1567–1622) to modern psychological research was done by John Crossin. This work sought to show the convergences and divergences between the saint's teachings on the virtues and primarily the ideas of Erikson on the adult development life cycle. This author concluded: "The convergences [with Erikson's developmental psychology] indicate that Salesian spiritual theology has a firm basis in psychology. St. Francis' insights into spiritual growth fit together well with current psychological data on the human person's natural growth and development. Francis' system combines nature and grace in a valid and useful synthesis" (Crossin, 1982: 265–266).

Continuing along the path this author has carefully and profitably constructed, this paper intends to show the convergences and divergences of the thought of Francis de Sales as compared with the recent and flourishing work of positive psychologists in furthering the dialogue between psychology and spirituality, especially in the important field of character formation or virtue education. However, the scope of this study will be limited to the character strength or virtue of humility as an initial attempt to explore and encourage further research along this line.

Positive Psychology

Despite the hostility of Freud and others to religion and spirituality, in recent decades various schools of psychotherapy have viewed religion and spirituality in a more positive light. This has led them to deemphasize neuroses and pathologies and to stress character strengths or what philosophers and theologians commonly call virtue. Erikson's work pointed the way. As Crossin notes, "[Erikson was] concerned in many ways with the psychology of the normal person rather than with his/her aberrations" (1982: 130). A similar position was taken by Winnicott (1958).

Positive psychology builds on the work of Erikson, Winnicott and others and is considered to be "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions. Research findings from positive psychology are intended to supplement, not remotely to replace, what is known about human suffering, weakness, and disorder" (Seligman et al., 2005: 410). Two highly respected positive psychologists, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, see the roots of this science in the threefold mission of psychology prior to World War II: "curing mental illness, making lives of all people more productive and fulfilling, and identifying and nurturing high talent" (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000: 2).

Although we have learned a great deal in the aftermath of World War II in treating what's wrong with people, the almost exclusive emphasis on pathology caused the psychology profession to have a rather passive and narrow view of human nature. For instance, the behaviorists looked upon the person as primarily responding to external stimuli. This optic skewed our vision of what it means to be human and stressed the notion of victimology, that is to say, that seriously maladjusted people were victims of their biological make-up, environment and upbringing.

In the 1990s, there was a greater emphasis on a more positive and optimistic concept of the human person. Instead of asking what is wrong with a person, psychologists began to ask what makes human beings flourish, live happy and fulfilling lives. This naturally led some of them to delve into the ideas of the good life among the ancients, particularly Aristotle, Epictetus, Democritus, and also notable Christian thinkers like St Thomas Aquinas and St Augustine. In doing so, they were beginning to view the human person in a more positive light. This approach naturally left the door open to considering the influence of religion and/or spirituality on the lives of humans.

Paul Vitz makes the point that theories of personality propounded by psychologists such as Allport and Maslow “are really theoretical interpretations with no reliable methodology for scientific verification. They may contain practical and intuitive truths, but these truths are more like the knowledge found in the work of artists or artisans. . . . In short, psychotherapists using personality theories are operating with what can be called ‘applied philosophies of life.’ In this context a Catholic/Christian integrative framework is conceptually appropriate.” He goes on to state that “a Christian interpretation of personality begins by assuming that God exists and that He is a person with whom one is in relationship. This relationship has psychological consequences. . . . The assumption of theism is no less rational than the assumption of atheism” (Vitz, 2009: 42–43). The rational basis for theism gives a legitimate rationale for our study.

It is not only important for clinicians to study the values and beliefs that motivate their patients, but just as important for them to be aware of what values and beliefs they assume in working with their data. So Christian anthropology has, in this author’s view, relevance for understanding empirical evidence. The Christian conception of the human person as embodied, rational, free and relational does not replace empirical findings but rather provides a framework within which clinicians are aided to understand their own subject matter in several ways. First it can be helpful in organizing empirical data. Secondly, it can assist them in interpreting these data. “Thirdly, [Christian beliefs] provide a normative, cosmological, ontological, and eschatological backdrop for situating human existence in a disordered world. They provide answers to weighty transcendent questions such as the origin, nature, and destiny of the human person and the problem of evil” (Bruegger, 2009: 14–15). For these reasons, the Christian view of what it means to be human can be very relevant to the findings of positive psychology.

Francis de Sales’s spirituality is rooted in a very positive and optimistic Christian anthropology. The comparisons made in this study of his spirituality with the work of positive psychologists are based on this assumption and can be helpful to clinicians in making sense of their data and constructing theories for additional research. In turn the empirical findings of positive psychology can, in many instances, contribute to a deeper understanding of Salesian spirituality.

Some earlier psychological research did not find a dichotomy between religion and spirituality, a dichotomy that generally views the former as negative and the latter in a more positive light. Viewed negatively, religion generally connotes an institutionalized set of beliefs and rituals which tends to exclude others and becomes formalized and routinized without touching the heart of the believers or practitioners. Contrastingly, spirituality for many appears to be something more personal, unaffiliated with any specific religious institution, more eclectic, more open to their being a good person rather than

merely adhering to and being strait-jacketed by orthodoxy and communal religious practices (see Pew Forum, 2010). It is summed up in the expression, “I am spiritual but not religious” (see Wright, 2009: 1–6). Francis de Sales would not make such a dichotomy between religion and spirituality. For him, spirituality, the spiritual life or devotion, as he describes the latter, is living our religion more deeply, guided by the basic truths of the Catholic religion and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Pargament and Zinnbrunner have found that, despite the unfavorable view that many appear to have with regard to religion, in practice many made no distinction between the two. “Moreover both religion and spirituality can be expressed individually and socially, and both have the capacity to foster or impede well-being. . . . Spirituality represents the key and unique function of religion . . . spirituality is defined as a ‘search for the sacred’” (Pargament and Mahoney, 2009: 612). This notion of spirituality, namely, the acknowledgment of the transcendent, opens the way to a fruitful dialogue between positive psychology and De Sales’s spirituality.

Character Strengths or Virtues

The conception of what it means to be human is inextricably related to the nature of character strengths or virtues. It is our contention that the Christian anthropology of Francis de Sales that derives from the Judeo-Christian conception of spirituality can be of great value in understanding the underpinnings of positive psychology and human behavior. The term *Judeo-Christian conception of spirituality* as used in this paper is not the same as is to be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is much broader and more controversial. It designates a common belief held by both Judaism and Christianity about human nature, that is, that it is created in the image and likeness of God and involves thereby a basic orientation toward a personal God, who invites and empowers human beings to freely accept and enjoy His friendship by living a virtuous life in keeping with His commandments (see Pocetto, 1969; Fiorelli, 1984). Peterson and Seligman (2004: 602) approvingly explain the connections that two Christian thinkers, Nikolai Berdayev and John MacQuarrie, make between the biblical view of humanity and the capacity for transcendence, love and virtue.

The Genesis account of the creation of humankind had a preponderant influence in shaping the ideas of Francis de Sales on what it means to be human. For De Sales, the spirit, the *ruah* or the “breath of God,” is also the love that exists in the Trinity between the Father and the Son. So it is love, love of God, that makes us human (see Pocetto, 1969). Furthermore, this Holy Love or charity is what perfects and joins all of the virtues together and gives them their proper value. They are constitutive of our human nature: “God has sown in our hearts seeds of all the virtues, but they are so covered over by our imperfection and weakness that they do not appear at all or very little until the vital heat of sacred dilection [love] comes to enliven and resuscitate them, producing by them the actions of all the virtues” (De Sales, 2007, vol. 2: 218). In his view, without this love or without charity (the love of God) there are no true virtues because they are not capable of bringing us to our final destiny – union with God and with all who are united to God. This point will be further developed below.

Peterson and Seligman see virtues and character strengths as very closely and inextricably joined. By studying the ancients and the world's great religions and religious writers and devotees, they set forth ten criteria for determining six character strengths which, they believe, are universal and reflect our common humanity. They are: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Under these headings are separately clustered certain virtues that they consider to be closely allied with a specific character strength. For example, listed under humanity are the virtues of love, kindness, generosity, etc. For them, "Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers," whereas "Character strengths are the psychological ingredients – processes or mechanisms – that define the virtues. Said another way, they are distinguishable routes to displaying one or another of the virtues. For example, the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through such strengths as creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and what we call perspective – having a 'big picture' on life" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 13).

These classifications, whatever shortcomings they may have, form the basis for conducting experiments on the ways virtues are acquired, their interrelatedness, their positive psychological consequences, discovering effective interventions, etc. As these authors explain, the classification lists "bring with them rich psychological content and strategies of measurement and hence explanatory power out of the realm and reach of philosophy" (2004: 13).

In keeping with the idea of Aristotle, who greatly influenced Francis de Sales primarily through Thomas Aquinas, positive psychology views virtues as valued in themselves and not for any ulterior motives (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 19).

What about natural abilities and talents? Are these the same as character strengths or virtues? Since they appear to be more inborn and unchangeable, they are less voluntary than virtue. "A second distinction between character strengths and talents is that the latter seem valued more for their tangible consequences (acclaim, wealth) than are the former. . . . Said another way, talents and abilities can be squandered, but strengths and virtues cannot" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 21). Virtues are further divided into those that are "tonic," that is, somewhat constant, and "phasic" (occasional). "This distinction has important measurement implications. A tonic characteristic (e.g., kindness or humor) shows itself steadily in a variety of settings, which means that it can be assessed by deliberately general questions posed to an individual and/or informant ('Do you like to tease others?'). A phasic characteristic comes and goes because it is relevant only in settings that afford it." Virtues can also be considered as "corrective" in the sense that they offset "some difficulty thought to be inherent in the human condition, some temptation that needs to be resisted, or some motivation that needs to be rechanneled into something good (Yearley, 1990, p. 16)" (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 23).¹

Francis de Sales and Virtue

Since Seligman and Peterson in their classification study rely on a number of sources that also influenced Francis de Sales regarding the nature of virtue, it should not be surprising to see some commonalities, although the terminology might differ. Among the ancients, De Sales highly regarded especially Aristotle and Epictetus, espoused Augustine's

teaching on virtues as exemplified in the *City of God* and those of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae* (see De Sales, 2003 and 2007). Interestingly, Peterson and Seligman acknowledge the convergence of Thomas Aquinas's list of virtues, namely the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity along with the four cardinal virtues of wisdom (prudence), justice, temperance and courage, with what they consider to be the six core virtues (2004: 47–48).

Virtue, in De Sales's view, is inseparable from reason, which he describes as "a good tree which God has planted in us, and the fruits that spring from it cannot help being good." Positive psychologists can appreciate the importance of reason emphasized by De Sales² when he states: "All virtues are virtues by their adaptation and conformity to reason. No action can be called virtuous unless it proceeds from the affection the heart has for the integrity and beauty of reason. Now if the love of reason possesses and animates a soul, it will do whatever reason wishes on all occasions, and consequently it will practice all the virtues" (2007, vol. 2: 212–215). This passage is very illuminating regarding the relationship between love and virtue or between the affective and cognitive aspects of virtue. For De Sales, virtue involves not only the intellect but also the will and the heart. There is no true virtue if there is not a love of the good that reason sees and points out in virtue.

Even though virtues must conform to reason, it is not in De Sales's mind the exclusive determinant of virtues. There must be an interplay of the heart, the seat of love, and the will, with reason or the cognitive faculty as noted above. For this reason, he does not subscribe to Plato's idea as expressed in the *Republic* that "Knowledge is virtue."³ It is obvious from human experience that many times we know what is morally good or evil but do not make the right choices through human weakness or limitations. So he criticizes Plato and Socrates for practicing idolatry even though they wrote about and understood the unity of God (De Sales, 2007, vol. 1: 95–96). Reason makes us understand the interrelatedness of the virtues. So the four cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, temperance and courage – touch upon each other and influence each other. They are called cardinal (deriving from the Latin word *cardo* meaning hinge) in the sense that all of the other moral or acquired virtues hinge upon them. Their interrelatedness is clearly described by De Sales: "Virtues cannot possess their integrity and sufficiency unless they are all present together, as all philosophy and theology assures us. . . . Prudence is not prudence unless it is temperate, just, and courageous. Fortitude is not fortitude unless it is just, prudent, and temperate. Temperance is not temperance unless it is prudent, courageous, and just" (2007, vol. 1: 214–215). This interrelatedness helps us to understand why some virtues hinge upon others and can only be fully appreciated in relation to other virtues, as we plan to show below.

It is love, charity or love of friendship with God that gives a special cachet to the Salesian nature of virtue and its perfection. Catholic virtue tradition makes a distinction between the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, which are infused or gifts of God and hence supernatural, and the moral, acquired or natural virtues. For those who are friends of God, charity flows over all of their virtues like a life-giving stream or river. In addition to this image, De Sales speaks of the theological virtue of charity or love as the sun that makes everything come alive and thrive. As mentioned above, all human beings have the seeds of the virtues in them but they are useless unless awakened or

drawn out by the sun of God's love. Like the sunflower, which throughout the day is attracted and turns toward the sun, "all virtues receive new luster and surpassing dignity from the presence of holy love" (De Sales, 2007, vol. 2: 202). De Sales appears to be implying here that all the natural virtues have some sort of affinity for and attraction to God's love just as the sun attracts and adds luster to the sunflower.

Continuing along this line of the importance of love for true virtue, De Sales explains: "Charity so spreads its excellence and dignity upon the acts of the other virtues as still to leave in each of them the particular worth and goodness it possesses by its own natural condition" (2007, vol. 2: 207). This is a very clear statement of how grace does not destroy nature but rather enhances it by bringing out its own distinctiveness. Furthermore, charity makes all the virtues cohere and coherent: "Without the cement and mortar that bind together stones and walls, the whole edifice falls apart. Without nerves, muscles and tendons, the whole body would break up. Without charity the virtues can never sustain one another" (2007, vol. 2: 222). The various aspects of the conception of Salesian virtue are aptly summarized by John Crossin: "A virtue for Francis is a habit, is in conformity with reason, and is a strength of the soul. A Christian virtue is energized by love and grows in relation to other virtues" (1982: 78).

In agreement with the positive psychologists, De Sales makes a clear-cut distinction between natural inclinations or talents and virtue: "Certain inclinations are thought to be virtues and are not such but rather natural graces or talents. . . . It is not virtue to eat hardly anything because of one's nature, but it is truly a virtue to abstain from eating by choice. . . . Many men think that they have virtues as long as they do not practice the contrary vices. One who has never been under attack can indeed boast that he has never fled the field but not of being valiant" (2007, vol. 2: 215). This distinction emphasizes the importance of virtue as a habit acquired by frequent practice and generally honed under adverse circumstances; in other words, virtue is developed by the free choices that we make. This obviously has important consequences for both how empirical studies are designed and how the data from these experiments are to be understood.

Although De Sales stresses the importance and centrality of the heart in the spiritual or virtuous life, he is aware that passion, feeling, or our likes and dislikes might easily lead us astray. "Yet even the heart, where we wish to begin, must be instructed as to how it should model outward behavior and bearing so that by them men can see not only holy devotion but also great wisdom and prudence" (2003: pt. 3, ch. 23).⁴ This idea fits in very well with the position of positive psychologists who point out that all the virtues or character strengths are not to be practiced under all circumstances. For this reason, they make the distinction noted above between tonic and phasic traits. The tonic ones are those regularly practiced in all circumstances and situations except when common sense tells us otherwise. The phasic traits only come into play when certain circumstances are present, such as bravery when a situation warrants it (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 27).

This approach to the practice of character strengths or virtues closely parallels that of De Sales. He recommends specific criteria for the practice of virtue and sets down this general principle: "All that we must try for is to make ourselves good men and women, devout men and women, pious men and women" (2003: pt. 3, ch. 2). This statement should readily resonate with positive psychologists since their intended purpose of developing character strengths or virtues is to help us become good or better human beings.

Character Formation or Virtue Education

In this paper, “character formation” or “virtue education” will be used interchangeably. The word “character” of course can have both a positive and a pejorative meaning. In general, it conveys the idea of what characterizes a person, for example, “a person of good character” refers to one who is living a virtuous life, and “a person of bad character,” one who is not particularly known for virtuous living. The difference depends on the kind of choices we make. Stressing individual responsibility for determining the kind of person we wish to be is characteristic of both positive psychology and Salesian spirituality.

As noted above, this study will be limited primarily to a consideration of developing just one character strength or virtue – humility and the virtues closely allied with it.

The Virtue of Humility

What is of particular interest in considering the relationship of positive psychology, Salesian thought and virtue education, is the research that clinicians have done on the most unlikely of virtues – humility. Many people would primarily associate this virtue with the Christian religion. This is perhaps why Francis de Sales said that it was hardly known to most ancient philosophers. However, he notes, “Plato seemed to recognize it even toward God [in his book *On Laws*]” (1932: 86).⁵ To a number of people in our society, it is still viewed in a negative light because they uncritically associate it with self-abasement and a lack of self-esteem. The virtue of humility is viewed by positive psychologists as a corrective to the deleterious effects the Self-esteem Movement has had on our society: “If only people can feel better about themselves, the logic goes, they will be happy and behave well – and society will benefit. Individuals now view pride as not only acceptable but worthy, whether it takes the form of overestimating one’s good qualities and traits, viewing the self as better than average, or basking in unconditional praise despite lukewarm performance... By focusing attention on the benefits of positive views of the self, we can easily overlook the dangers. We can certainly overlook the benefits of some rather unassuming virtues: humility and modesty” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 462).

Tangney lists six characteristics of humility: “an accurate (not underestimated) sense of one’s abilities and achievements, the ability to acknowledge one’s mistakes, imperfections, gaps in knowledge, and limitations (often with reference to a ‘higher power’), openness to new ideas, contradictory information, and advice, keeping one’s ability and accomplishments in perspective, relatively low focus on self or an ability to ‘forget oneself,’ an appreciation of the value of all things, as well as the many different ways that people and things can contribute to our world” (2009: 485).

We may accurately describe the Salesian view of humility as a truthful and grateful acknowledgment of both our giftedness and our weaknesses. This description coincides extremely well with the first two key features listed above. Humility inclines us not only to acknowledge our limitations but also to confront them. “Personal deficits will be addressed only if we are willing to see that they exist” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 470). De Sales understood how important this is for living a virtuous life or what he calls

“perfection,” and so he advises: “We must not be disturbed at our imperfections [deficits] since for us perfection consists in fighting against them. How can we fight against them unless we see them, or overcome them unless we face them.” When we are willing to keep struggling, to keep on fighting them, then we are not losers but winners: “To practice humility it is absolutely necessary for us to suffer wounds in this spiritual warfare, but we are never vanquished unless we lose our life or our courage. . . . Fortunately for us, in this war we are always victorious provided we are willing to fight” (2003: pt. 1, ch. 5).

Distilling what they have learned from a number of research projects on humility, Peterson and Seligman give a workable descriptive definition of humility that can serve as a basis of comparison with the ideas of De Sales: “What, then, is the essence of humility? We believe that humility involves a nondefensive willingness to see the self accurately, including both strengths and limitations. Humble individuals will not willfully distort information in order to defend, repair, or verify their own image (cf. Swann, 1997). For humble people, there should be no press toward self-importance and no burning need to see – or present – themselves as being better than they actually are. . . . They should also not be particularly interested in dominating others in order to receive entitlements or to elevate their own status. On the other hand, humility should not lead people to take harsh or condemning approaches toward themselves, magnifying weaknesses and severely punishing failures while overlooking strengths and successes” (2004: 463–464).

De Sales speaks of both an exterior humility, which he equates with “wisdom,” and a more interior humility, which he states is a love of our abjection, a love of our lowliness, our nothingness and our pettiness. At first glance, this appears to be nothing more than a self-abasement that leads to devaluing and degrading oneself. This interpretation would be inconsistent with his optimistic anthropology. De Sales’s definition of humility as loving our abjection might initially convey a negative view of the virtue of humility. But as one writer has accurately and insightfully explained: “To love our abjections is to love ourselves as we are loved, in our wholeness. It is also to have compassion for ourselves. It is to see that the true place of transformation is not in our gifts but in our weaknesses. It is to know ourselves wounded yet beloved and thus to know each other most truly. . . . To love our abjections is to shatter the images of self-perfection we would like to project. It is thus to enter into the mystery of loving all that is human, and from there to begin to love all humans truly” (Wright, 1993: 87).

A number of positive aspects (compassion for self, a sense of self-worth, connections with other people) pointed out by the psychologists are all delineated in this accurate understanding of what De Sales means by loving our abjections. From De Sales’s perspective, the character strength of humility is seen not so much as open-mindedness but as open-heartedness, that is, true humility opens us up to love, to a true self-love and love of others. Notice how this agrees with the notion that humility does not make us devalue ourselves: “In relinquishing the very human tendency toward an egocentric focus, persons become ever more open to recognizing the abilities, potential, worth, and importance of others. . . . Our attention shifts outward, and our eyes are open to the beauty and potential in those around us. As Means, Wilson, Sturm, Biron, and Bach (1990) observed, humility ‘is an increase in the valuation of others and not a decrease in the valuation of oneself’ (p. 214)” (Tangney, 2009: 484).

Where Salesian humility diverges most importantly from the position of most positive psychologists is that we are transformed not so much by developing our strengths, but by working on our weaknesses, “the true place of transformation.” The idea that true humility makes us have compassion for ourselves is an expression De Sales uses in urging us to be gentle toward ourselves when we commit some fault or sin. “If we rebuke our hearts by a calm, mild remonstrance, with more compassion than passion against it and encourage it to make amendment, then repentance conceived in this way will sink deeper and penetrate more effectually than fretful, angry, stormy repentance” (2003: pt. 3, ch. 9).

In a very real sense, humility is the signature strength for De Sales because it makes us most resemble the heart of Jesus, along with the virtue of gentleness. “It is not without reason that [humility] is called the foundation of all virtues, for without it, there is none; and although it is not the first, charity and love of God surpassing it in dignity and excellence, yet they have such sympathy and alliance, that one is never without the other” (1987: 6). This relationship is clearly emphasized when he states: “Humility is not only charitable, but gentle and flexible. For charity is an ascending humility and humility a descending charity” (1969: 1042).⁶ Furthermore, the prominence that he gives to this virtue in his spirituality reveals, as one writer expresses it, that: “A humble heart is virtue’s point of departure. The humble person craves virtue” (Havard, 2007: 126). De Sales would readily subscribe to this idea.

The love of our abjection leads to a total self-acceptance because we come to recognize that we are loved and accepted by God just as we are – in our blessings and in our brokenness. We will return to this idea of self-acceptance and humility in helping us seek effective interventions for its practice. One playwright understood the importance of self-acceptance: “Men are born broken. Living is mending, and grace is the glue” (Eugene O’Neill, “The Great God Brown,” in O’Neill, 1941). Virtue education for both the positive psychologists and De Sales emphasizes that “living is mending,” in other words, living a virtuous life helps us to mend and be who we are.

Developing the Virtue of Humility

It certainly is essential that we have an accurate concept of humility if we are going to understand how to inculcate it by appropriate interventions and to be able to measure it, at least on the level of reason or of what is empirically verifiable. To get a better handle on it, both the clinicians and De Sales warn against a false idea of humility. It is noteworthy to show how closely their ideas converge. Self-deprecation is not humility: “The excessively self-deprecating person can be seen, in some important respects, as *lacking* humility. Consider the person who repeatedly protests, ‘Oh I’m not really very good in art. I never did very well in art class at school. Oh, *this* little painting that I did really is nothing. I just whipped it together last night. It (*my* painting) is really nothing.’ Such apparently humble protests betray a marked self-focus. The person remains at the center of attention, with the self as the focus of consideration and evaluation” (Tangney, 2009: 484). This same idea is humorously conveyed by De Sales when he states: “We often say that we are nothing, that we are misery itself and the refuse of the world, but we would be very sorry if anyone took us at our word or told

others that we are really such as we say” (2003: pt. 3, ch. 5). For De Sales, this is a revelation of self-promotion and self-centeredness or focusing on the self and therefore the very antithesis of humility.

Even though Peterson and Seligman suggest such strategies as “self-report questionnaires, scenario methods, proxy measures for *low* humility, e.g., narcissism, entitlement, self-enhancement . . . comparing evaluations of the self to evaluations by others,” for measuring the state of humility, empirical studies are few and far between, primarily because of the divergent conceptions of this strength (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 465, 473; Tangney, 2009: 484). Interestingly, the interventions for enhancing this strength may be found among a number of religious practices: “Christian devotional literature suggests a number of behavioral techniques that could work against self-enhancement, ranging from doing menial chores to washing another person’s feet. . . . Seeking forgiveness or keeping a gratitude journal might also be humbling, as each of these behaviors might make people more aware of their indebtedness to others. The development of close relationships might also facilitate greater humility and modesty. For example, some research suggests that the self-serving bias is reduced or eliminated in the context of friendships (W. K. Campbell et al., 2000). Modest self-presentations are also more likely between friends than between strangers (Tice et al., 1995)” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 473–474).

Incidents of shaming do not contribute, in the view of some positive psychologists, to increasing humility. Humiliating or embarrassing situations generally make people ashamed of themselves and apparently foster self-focusing: “With regard to experiences of humility ‘in the moment’ [i.e., measuring states of humility rather than a disposition of humility], currently there is no established self-report measure of state of humility” (Tangney, 2009: 486–487). The Exline et al. technique for inducing a sense of humility needs to be modified according to Tangney, who notes: “some modifications to the instructions may be necessary in order to more consistently elicit stories of ‘true’ humility rather than shaming experiences” (2009: 487). However, these shaming experiences, which De Sales would call “abjections,” can be, in his view, the occasions for practicing the virtue of humility because they precisely remind us of our deficits or limitations.

The refinement of De Sales’s psychological sensibilities is particularly evident when he gives some interesting examples of abjections. “A young gentleman or a young lady who refuses to take part in the dissipated conduct of a debauched group or to talk, play, dance, drink or dress like the rest will be scorned and criticized by the others and their modesty will be called fanaticism or prudery. To love this is to love our own abjections.” There are faults that we commit that do not harm anyone, such as breaches of etiquette, but which cause us embarrassment. “Humility does not require that we should deliberately commit such faults, but it does require that we should not disturb ourselves when we have committed them.” When he says “we should not disturb ourselves” with recriminations, he is implying that this would be a form of self-focusing. It is on these occasions that we feel small and experience a challenge to our sense of self-acceptance. For him, the best kinds of abjections or embarrassing situations are the ones “which come to us accidentally or because of our state in life” (2003: pt. 3, ch. 6).

Gratitude, Humility and Generosity

We noted above how the virtues are interrelated and interact with and influence one another. This is especially true for the way De Sales closely links the virtues of gratitude, humility and generosity. This linkage appears to be supported by the numerous and profitable studies on the virtue of gratitude. But first let us see how gratitude is viewed by positive psychologists.

“Gratitude is a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift be a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty. The word gratitude is derived from the Latin *gratia*, meaning ‘grace,’ ‘graciousness,’ or ‘gratefulness.’ . . . Prototypically, gratitude stems from the perception that one has benefited due to the actions of another person” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 554). So for these researchers, the virtue of gratitude is almost akin to the notion of grace, of a totally undeserved gift. In their estimation, it is rated very highly since they approvingly cite Cicero, who says, “gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others” (2004: 555).

There is a correlation between the virtue of gratitude and spirituality or religiousness: “Those who regularly attend religious services and engage in religious activities such as prayer or reading religious material are more likely to be grateful. Grateful people are more likely to acknowledge a belief in the interconnectedness of all life and a commitment to and responsibility to others. . . . In terms of basic personality dispositions, grateful people are more open to experience, more conscientious, more extroverted, more agreeable, and less neurotic than are their less grateful counterparts” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 562). Humility along with optimism, empathy and “intrinsic religiousness” is seen as an enabling factor for gratitude. “Finally, the ability to perceive the elements in one’s life and life itself as gifts would appear essential” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 564).

The greatest factor that inhibits gratitude is narcissism, which makes people “exhibit an exaggerated sense of self-importance that leads them to expect special favors without assuming reciprocal responsibilities. The sense of entitlement combined with their insensitivity to the needs of others engenders, whether consciously or unconsciously intended, interpersonal exploitation. Gifts are transformed into rights, eliminating the need for grateful reciprocation. Expressions of gratitude are acknowledgments that one is dependent on other people for one’s well-being, and therefore not self-sufficient” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 564). It should be pointed out that narcissism is the very antithesis of humility and hence a formidable inhibiting factor.

Understanding inhibiting factors helps us to gauge the effectiveness of certain interventions. As noted, humility is the foundational virtue for De Sales. It is primarily engendered, sustained and strengthened by the virtue of gratitude. As he states, “Knowledge engenders acknowledgement (or gratitude).” The knowledge he is referring to here is the knowledge of the many blessings and gifts we have been given. A consideration and acknowledgment of not only the general gifts we share in common with others (life, intelligence, health, friends, etc.) but especially of our particular or individual gifts and talents, greatly foster the virtue of humility: “As the particular benefits he has conferred on us affect us more powerfully than those we share with others, they must be

considered more attentively.” Then he goes on to explicitly link gratitude with humility: “A lively consideration of graces received makes us humble because knowledge of them begets gratitude for them” (2003: pt. 3, ch. 5).

The question arises, “What are some specific practices that can assist us in cultivating this attentiveness to our gifts and talents and thus engender a greater sense of gratitude?” It is especially here that positive psychologists recognize and even recommend certain techniques that are consonant with, or explicitly parallel, religious exercises like meditation and an examination of conscience. Peterson and Seligman suggest certain spiritual retreats that focus on the notion of life as a gift, specifically Jesuit spirituality (2004: 566). Francis de Sales, as a student of a Jesuit education, was very familiar with this spirituality, which helped him enormously in formulating his own. The “four-step, behavioral-cognitive approach” put forth by T. Miller (1995) for acquiring gratitude closely resembles the Salesian method of meditation.

The four steps are as follows: “(a) identify nongrateful thoughts; (b) formulate gratitude-supporting thoughts; (c) substitute the gratitude-supporting thoughts for the nongrateful thoughts; and (d) translate the inner feeling into outward action. By following these four steps, people supposedly are able to ‘want what they have’” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 566). These steps correspond with the second, the Considerations, and third parts (Affections and Resolutions) of De Sales’s method of meditation described in his classic work, *An Introduction to a Devout Life*. He calls meditation “mental prayer” or “prayer of the heart” because it is not only a cognitive exercise but also has an essential affective and voluntaristic aspect. So the first three steps correspond to what he calls the considerations or the mental or cognitive aspect of meditation. Since the considerations are intended to lead to affections or affect our heart and will, this is the way that we can “translate the inner feeling into outward action” or what De Sales calls resolutions (see 2003: pt. 2, chs 1–9). De Sales is very wary of the kind of prayer that leaves us feeling good without doing good, and so he warns: “Virtues meditated on but not practiced sometimes inflate our minds and courage, and we think that we are really such as we have thought and resolved to be” (2003: pt. 2, ch. 8).

Interestingly, some additional research appears to confirm the effectiveness of meditation for engendering gratitude:

Somewhat surprisingly, people who “thought” about their benefactor showed more enhanced positive affect than those who “wrote” about their benefactor. This raises the important issue of how people might best cognitively process their blessings or reflect on their benefactor to enhance gratitude. For example, simply listing as many blessings as possible may not create the kind of cognitive processing that maximizes gratitude. Similarly, recent data from Lyubomirsky’s lab (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, and Dickerhoof, 2006) suggest that thinking about a positive event in a reliving – repetitive – manner enhanced emotional well-being more than writing or thinking analytically about positive events. Can one overanalyze a grateful event? Lyubomirsky’s studies (see chap. 63) suggest that analytic thinking might be detrimental to gratitude and this has important implications for gratitude interventions. (Watkins et al., 2009: 440–441)

These experiments appear to validate the Salesian method of meditation, principally by its focus on the person and Passion of Jesus rather than on the many blessings we have received

from him, since the research shows “more enhanced positive affect” in thinking about the giver of the gift than merely writing “about their benefactor.” De Sales stresses that the act of gratitude expressed for some good deed must be motivated by “a loving, gentle, agreeable and dutiful spirit and must consider more the affection of the benefactor rather than the benefit [received]” (1932: 26, 71). Although De Sales’s method is repetitive, it is not performed primarily to grasp the subject intellectually but rather to be affected by it in a positive and life-changing fashion. De Sales insists that meditation is different from study because the cognitive function (the considerations) has as its purpose to elicit positive affects, which he calls affections that are intended to lead to resolutions.

In his spirituality, however, the virtue of humility is not solely acquired by contemplating one’s gifts. This virtue is based not only on a knowledge of one’s self, but also on actions which authenticate it, in particular the virtue of generosity. “The humility that does not produce generosity is undoubtedly a false humility” (De Sales, 1945: 76). A contemporary author associates humility with generosity when he states, “Humility is the ambition to serve” (Harvard, 2007: 27). De Sales explicitly ties the Delphic oracle, “Know Thyself,” to the virtues of humility and generosity: “Humility believes we can do nothing on our own when we consider the knowledge of our poverty and weakness. On the contrary, generosity makes us say with St. Paul: ‘I can do all things in him who strengthens me.’ Humility makes us mistrust ourselves, generosity makes us trust in God. You see the two virtues of humility and generosity are so joined and united to each other that they can never be separated” (1945: 76).

De Sales clearly asserts the association of the virtue of humility with that of self-knowledge or self-understanding. The same association is made by some positive psychologists: “Because identity development is a necessary condition for the presence of humility or modesty, factors that facilitate this process will undoubtedly foster the development of these two virtues, namely, ‘appearance of attachment, the development of a sense of self, the emergence of independence in infancy, openness to new experiences, experience with decision making, and life review and integration in old age’ (Santrock, 1996, pp. 332–333) These factors and other disciplinary and family interaction styles only indirectly foster the development of modesty and humility. Direct influences (both positive and negative) on these virtues remain unexplored to date” (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 471). If the virtue of humility is approached primarily from the point of view of self-acceptance (see Pocetto, 2008), then it becomes rooted in an accurate and truthful self-evaluation or self-knowledge, which De Sales states is engendered primarily by considering not only the gifts we have in common with others but, especially, our individual gifts. In this way, gratitude and generosity become practically inseparable from humility. So the experiments that are done on the virtue of generosity under the rubric of humanity, along with those on gratitude, should be useful in understanding how to develop and increase the virtue of humility.

Conclusions

The validity of Salesian Christian anthropology as a legitimate basis for providing a framework within which to organize and, more importantly, to interpret the data of empirical studies should provide ample opportunities for a mutually enriching dialogue between positive psychology and the optimistic spirituality of Francis de Sales. The view

of human nature espoused by De Sales suits very well the position of positive psychologists that humans are capable of shaping their lives by the choices they make rather than being shaped by forces outside of their control. This, of course, entails responsibility for our actions and our lives and is a welcome antidote to a victim and entitlement attitude inimical to virtuous living.

This brief study was undertaken in the hope that it might be of some help to both educators and counselors in their work of guiding others, especially the young, along a tried and empirically sound way for developing character or inculcating virtue. Salesian spirituality as a method for virtue education has encouraged, inspired and aided countless thousands to live a virtuous life mainly through the *Introduction to a Devout Life*, which could be aptly called an "Introduction to the Virtuous Life." In this work, De Sales gives many practical examples, some of which we have noted, on how to choose and practice virtues both tonic and phasic.

This study was limited to considering the virtue of humility. The close relationship between the character strengths of humility and gratitude as understood and promoted by De Sales can perhaps assist researchers to refine their studies by studying more closely how one impacts the other. Since positive psychology notes that gratitude is one of the character strengths of youth, perhaps studying interventions that foster gratitude along with self-acceptance can yield empirical data that can assist in determining how best to promote the virtue of humility.

Peterson and Seligman note the need of familiarizing themselves with the role of theology: "Although archival and empirical data suggest a link between religiousness, spirituality, and a range of prosocial outcomes, there is need for a greater attention to the specific theological (i.e., doctrinal) beliefs that are central in producing these outcomes. In particular, the field will benefit from more substantive attention to the role of theology in shaping the core beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and psychological as well as physical health outcomes experienced by religious individuals" (2004: 621). This frank admission of a "greater attention to theology" in the lives of others demonstrates an open-mindedness to the value and influence of theological beliefs that augurs and argues well for a continuing, profitable conversation between positive psychology and Salesian spiritual theology in fostering and furthering virtue education.

Notes

1. For several critiques of Positive Psychology, see: Held (2004, 2005, 2008); Schwartz (2005); and Gable and Haidt (2005).
2. By stressing the value and importance of reason, De Sales's teaching establishes some common ground with the positive psychologists for dialogue.
3. For a different interpretation of this saying, see Leroy S. Rouner (1993: 141).
4. Precise page(s) cannot be cited because this translation has different printings and hence different pagination.
5. All translations from this work are the author's.
6. The translation is the author's.

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