



1. Signature Strengths

Re-marketing of Traditional Topics?

[: Signature Strengths :](#)

[Brief Intro](#)

Signature strengths (as opposed to talents) are moral traits of character, which are voluntary, measurable and acquirable with time, effort and determination. Strengths are a *trait* which can be seen across situations and over time, are *valued in their own right*, in absence of beneficial outcomes and are *ubiquitous* (for a full list of criteria of what makes a character strength see **Seligman, et al., 2005**).



Seligman suggests that 'the good life' (as opposed to the 'pleasant life') is achieved through using your signature strengths every day to produce 'authentic' happiness, and abundant gratification by using your signature strengths in the main realms of your life.

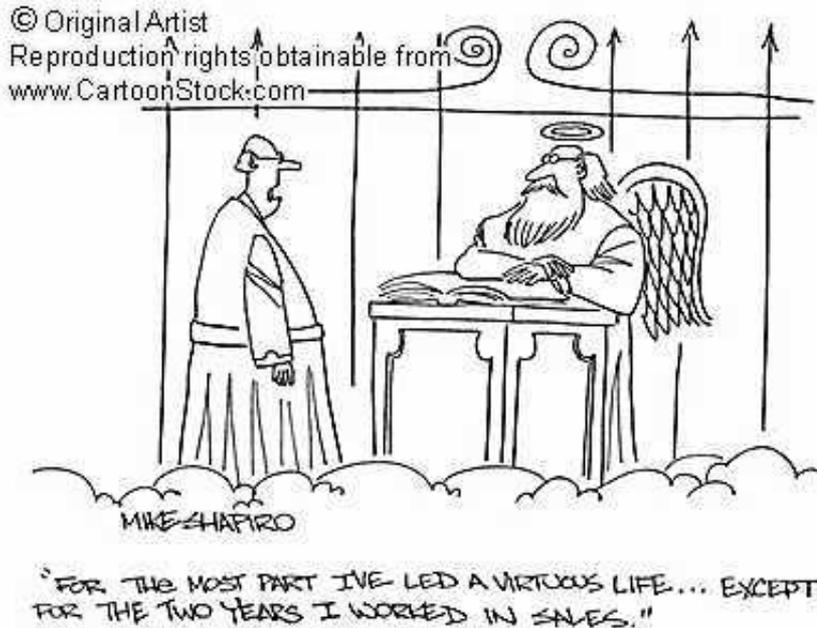
In Seligman's theory, *strengths* are the routes by which we achieve *virtues*. There are 6 ubiquitous virtues proposed by Seligman to exist:

- Wisdom and Knowledge
- Courage
- Love and Humanity
- Justice

- Temperance
- Spirituality and Transcendence

Each of these virtues can be achieved and exhibited through different strengths of character, of which Seligman suggests there are 24. The classification of character strengths are virtues is to positive psychology, as the DSM is to mental health diagnosis.

History / Traditional Topic



The virtues suggested by Seligman were compiled from across philosophical and religious texts including Plato, Aquinas, the Old Testament, the Koran, Buddha and Benjamin Franklin, from across 3,000 years, each with their own

cultural and historical traditions reflecting the zeitgeist of the time, but which Seligman believes to be ubiquitous.

Thus, these virtues are not new, and have existed throughout time in different forms. In this sense, the 'signature strengths' proposed by PP is a re-labeling of universal strengths which have been involved in philosophical, religious and academic controversies over how to live ones life for thousands of years (see **Schwartz & Sharpe., 2006** for a debate between Seligman's character strengths and Aristotle's idea - practical wisdom)

Strengths on the other hand are supported through institutions, rituals, role models, parables, maxims and children's stories (for a full explanation see Seligman's 'Authentic Happiness' 2007 edition; pg. 138-139). Thus, religious, educational and cultural mechanisms (to name a few) do exist to this day that promote the aquisition of strengths. Positive psychology thus can be seen as a re-marketing of promotion of these strengths for an adult audience.

Using ones strengths to achieve happiness is not a new idea unique to positive psychology. Self-help books are full of ideas of recognizing and utilizing ones own strengths. It has been suggested that by using affirmations (positive declaration of stating something is true - "I am brave" - we can succeed in anything, including those ideals suggested by Seligman's Character Strengths. Indeed, Seligman himself has suggested that practitioners already attempt to amplify the strengths of their clients, rather than repairing their weaknesses (**Linley, et al., 2010**).

Within psychology, the idea of human strengths is also not new. William James (see the intro for a discussion) was interested in 'human powers', about studying what they were, and about realizing how individuals can access them, and how to determine to which type a particular individual belongs (See **Pawelski 2003**). This reflects a similar sentiment as that suggested by Seligman's concept of signature strengths.

Key Paper

Schwartz & Sharpe (2006) considers the contributions of the positive psychology view on strengths and virtues, with the traditional ideas of Aristotle. A good overview of the historical debate on this topic, how ideas of strengths and virtues have changed with the times, and the potential limitations of the PP view of strengths.

Does PP add Anything New or is it Re-marketing?

Traditionally research looking into character strengths has examined each strength individually, rather than as a collective entity. PP thus has added to the field on research of strengths as a collective entity that need to be understood in relation to each other, rather than just separately. Indeed, **Linley, et al., (2007)** suggest that mainstream psychology lacks an integrated concept of strengths.



Positive Psychology may also in time be able to add something new by examining why signature strengths work (see **Linley, et al., 2010**). Though this may seem like common sense, positive psychology has proved in other areas that common sense may not always be correct. Does money make you happy? - yes, but only to a point. Common sense should not be taken for granted. The zeitgeist of the time will predict what is seen as common sense (it wasn't always common sense that the world was round) and thus investigating 'common sense' pathways to happiness does have some utility.

However, PP to really add something new to the area must scientifically resolve the debate on whether virtues are good, and whether having too much of certain virtues itself can lead to an un-happy life. The relationship

between strengths, virtues and happiness may not be as clear as first presumed, and it is in this domain that positive psychology may have something new to add to the field.

[If you were to read 3 papers...](#)

Linley, et al., (2007) discuss the VIA character strengths amongst the UK population. The paper looks at character strengths in relation to positive psychology, and suggests that PP has consolidated strengths as a collaborative entity, rather than singular strengths as in mainstream psychology.

Linley, et al., (2010) also looks at signature strengths in the context of positive psychology, focusing on the debate of *how* signature strengths may work. This highlights an area where positive psychology may broaden on the traditional ideas of using strengths, and facilitate in understanding how and why focusing of strengths may help, suggesting understanding strengths through PP may be useful.

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Linley, et al., (2007). Character Strengths in the United Kingdom: The VIA Inventory of Strengths. *Personality and Individual Differences*.

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Seligman, et al., (2005). Positive Psychology Progress: Empirical Validation of Interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410-421

Linley, et al., (2010). Using Signature Strengths in Pursuit of Goals: Effects on Goal Progress, needs satisfaction, and well-being, and implications for coaching psychologists. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 5(1)

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