

CONSTRUCTING A MIDDLE GROUND BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY:
THE UNDERESTIMATED AND DISMISSED POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING
Matt Colombo

Many psychological studies conducted in the 1970's and early 1980's have shown that those individuals who are in a depressed state tend to be more realistic in their perceptions of self than those who are in the "normal" state. In "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health," Shelley Taylor and Jonathon Brown observe that those in the "normal" state tend to create what are termed "positive illusions" that include "unrealistically positive views of the self, exaggerated perceptions of personal control, and unrealistic optimism" (194). The implications of the results of these studies are quite overwhelming and may provoke disbelief in many, for the results essentially imply that most humans go about their daily lives shrouded in an illusion that causes them to judge themselves and their worlds in a self-serving way. Perhaps those who are offended by such a claim may be comforted in knowing that these positive illusions are, according to Taylor and Brown, often paths that lead to high self-esteem, high self-efficacy, and an optimistic outlook on the future (204). At the same time, however, one cannot ignore the power that feeling "down," thinking negatively, or being depressed (these are not synonymous, as will be explained later) exerts. According to Kay Jamison in her autobiography *Touched with Fire*, the "power" of these states is that they allow one to see oneself and one's world in a more realistic (although most often pessimistic) way (119). Society tends to shun negative thinking, often doing so at the expense of reality, and there is a true danger in this, for negative thinking has an integral role in reality, and, furthermore, in true mental health and fulfillment. To understand this argument, one must understand the dichotomy of illusion and reality by looking at what, specifically, is meant by positive illusion and reality, as well as what is meant by the "normal" state and "depressed" state.

What is in fact real is not easy to define, but, for the purposes of this paper, a functional definition of what is realistic will be that which is in accord with actual or agreed upon outcomes. Positive illusion is that which is changed from the real to conform to what is desired, despite results and common knowledge to the contrary. Although this understanding of positive illusion and reality may be elementary, it is fully functional for the purposes of this paper. As an example of positive illusion,

Christopher Layne, in "Painful Truths about Depressives' Cognition," discusses a positive illusion involving people believing that they can control the outcome of a roll of dice by rolling themselves rather than having someone roll for them (849). One can see how illogical a positive illusion such as this one can be, and although this one is not damaging, further examples will reveal the inherent danger in living in a world of fragile positive illusions.

Depression is a term that has an entirely negative connotation to the common person, as it brings along with it thoughts of sadness, guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness, displeasure, and, in its most extreme forms, suicide. Depression in and of itself is complicated: calling a person a depressed individual is somewhat ambiguous because of the various levels of depression and, furthermore, mood that exist. The best way to gauge these levels seems to be in the way that Nancy Andreasen does with her "Thermometer of Mood" in *Brave New Brain: Conquering Mental Illness in the Era of the Genome*. Her scale runs from -10 to 0 to 10, with the lower bound being major depression, "0" being neutral, and the upper bound being a manic state (223). The moods discussed in here will hover around the -3 to +3 range, or slightly depressed (exhibiting a generally low mood) to slightly positive. The stances taken henceforth will be taken with the preceding considerations in mind, with the focus being not so much upon depression, but on the negative thinking that virtually always comes along with the depressed state. The neutral to slightly positive range will be referred to as "normal" (for the sake of simplicity). Those who are severely depressed or severely manic do not fall within the scope of this research, although the implications of treating these extreme states will be discussed later.

Much of the relevant research and scientific literature to date has been a debate over which constitutes mental health, deceiving oneself with positive illusions or being committed to reality and the truth it constitutes. It appears, however, that the only way that mental health can be attained is through a mixture of both illusion and reality. Shelley Taylor, a health psychology professor at UCLA, and Jonathon Brown, a psychology professor at Southern Methodist University, are of the opinion that positive illusions are all that are needed to sustain mental health and well-being (193). On the other hand, in "'Take Away the Life-Lie...': Positive Illusions and Creative Self-Deception," David Jopling has said that a world of positive illusions is far too fragile, as it encases its inhabitant in a "protective bubble" that is subject to being popped, causing the inhabitant to make extreme and unfitting decisions (13). The

most sufficient stance on this issue has been taken by Roy Baumeister, a social psychologist at Princeton University, who has proposed an “optimal margin of illusion” (McAllister et al. 414). Baumeister’s stance is that both reality and positive illusion are required for mental health and ultimate fulfillment of the self. The problem is that negative thinking is, dangerously, being discredited and dismissed without consideration for its integral role in maintaining mental health and achieving fulfillment.

Before delving further into the necessity of negative thinking in the attainment of mental health and ultimate fulfillment, the meaning of mental health and fulfillment must be explained. Mental health cannot exist without negative thinking, since negative thinking is inextricably linked to reality. Marie Jahoda, a British social psychologist, has said of the mentally healthy person that “mentally healthy perception means a process of viewing the world so that one is able to take matters one wishes were different without distorting them to fit these wishes” (qtd. in Jopling 3). According to Taylor and Brown, this view of mental health as corresponding to reality is one that is widely accepted in literature, although they happen to disagree with it (194). Yet the views set forth by Jahoda and Taylor and Brown do not sit right. A more sufficient stance is that mental health is sustained as long as one does not lose touch with reality, but also as long as one does not live entirely in reality. It is true that this definition of mental health conforms to the argument that there is a true danger in dismissing negative thinking, but it should at least be apparent, whether one agrees with this argument or not, that this stance has backing not only intuitively, but in other literature as well (Jopling 10; McAllister et al. 414; Teitelbaum 169).

Now that a working definition of mental health has been provided, what, then, is meant by fulfillment? Just as mental health requires some amount of negative thinking, so too does becoming fulfilled. It is first and foremost important to stress that fulfillment is not equal to happiness. Raymond Belliotti, a professor and Philosophy Chairman at SUNY-Fredonia, asserts in his book, *Happiness Is Overrated*, that “human happiness is not the complete satisfaction of all our desires; worthwhile happiness requires an accurate, positive self-appraisal; a measure of suffering is useful for worthwhile happiness” (94). Yet what Belliotti describes here as stemming from accurate appraisal and “a measure of suffering” does not seem to be happiness, but is better termed fulfillment. He says himself that “living a

valuable, significant, robustly meaningful life is of greater personal value than attaining happiness" (93). Fulfillment is not happiness because, as Belliotti states, happiness is a personal good, and also, since it is personal, it is not universally defined (92-93). Fulfillment will come from a measure of illusion, not without reality, with illusions allowing one to strive to achieve goals that may even be unrealistic, and reality allowing one to appraise one's situation without succumbing to a self-serving bias.

One of the main sources that reveals the true power of negative thinking and the role of negative thinking in reality is Christopher Layne's "Painful Truths about Depressives' Cognitions," in which he concludes that it is in fact "normals" (those in the normal state), and not depressives, that are cognitively distorted (851). According to Layne, many researchers and psychologists up until this point had concluded that "normals are rational, realistic beings and...therefore, any group that thinks differently from them must be irrational" (848). Layne points out, however, that studies have shown that normals are actually the ones who are often irrational. Two of these studies pertain to expectancies. The first, conducted by Lobitz and Post, shows that normals tend to claim that they will perform better on a given task, whereas depressed individuals assert that they will perform at the same level as others. The actual performance of the task confirmed that people's level of achievement was roughly equal. The second task in expectancies was in games of chance, such as the game of dice introduced earlier to define positive illusion. Normals felt that they could influence the outcome of rolling dice by rolling themselves as opposed to having someone roll for them, whereas depressives knew that the game was a game of chance, and therefore did not have what Layne terms an "illusion of control" (849). Layne cites a number of experiments which show that those in the normal state tend to attribute more personal responsibility to their successes than to their failures, whereas depressed persons exhibit a more balanced responsibility for both successes and failures.

Layne, however, does not really engage in the debate over whether being realistic or having positive illusions promotes mental health and well-being. This task is taken up by Taylor and Brown, who claim that reality, and by extension, negative thinking, are not needed for mental health and well-being. They assert that

The individual who responds to negative, ambiguous, or unsupportive feedback with a positive sense of self, a belief in personal efficacy, and

an optimistic sense of the future...will be happier, more caring, and more productive than the individual who perceives this same information accurately and integrates it into his or her view of the self, the world, and the future. (205)

Their main argument is that positive illusion and distortion of feedback actually promotes well-being and mental health, whereas an accurate perception of self and the world tends to lead to poorer mental health and a lesser feeling of well-being. According to David Jopling, in a world where people who are considered realistic are praised for being “down-to-earth,” this claim seems to be outrageous and counterintuitive (2). It does not make sense to the average person that distorting reality should indicate mental health and should be a source of well-being. Yet Taylor and Brown make a case for it. It does make sense that some distortion of reality in the form of positive illusion is necessary for overall well-being. If all negative input and all negative events are taken in exactly as they are, and the good is not seen in any of it, then one can see how a person’s mental health and well-being would be negatively affected. At the same time, one can also see how a person cannot be ultimately fulfilled living in a completely illusory world that is not grounded in reality. Reality cannot exist without a measure of negative thinking, which is illustrated in the following example from David Jopling.

In a digression from and in opposition to Taylor and Brown’s article, David Jopling writes a critique of their article which hints that reality, which at certain points must correlate to some negative thinking, is essential in the mix of well-being and mental health. He argues that “positive illusions diminish the range of reactive other-regarding attitudes and emotions that people can adopt” (1). This presents a complete contradiction to Taylor and Brown, who claim that positive illusions promote caring for others, promote social bonding and the tendency to help others (198). Yet Jopling makes a convincing case for the necessity of negative thinking in reality through Henrik Ibsen’s play, *The Wild Duck*. Jopling explains how two characters in the play, Ekdal and Werle, represent the extremes of self-deception and reality, respectively, to the point where they are insensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others (neither are mentally healthy, judging by the criteria set forth thus far). Jopling points out that Ekdal exhibits irrational optimism, unrealistic positive self-evaluation, and immunity to negative feedback (11)—all characteristics which are part of Taylor and Brown’s positive illusions. Ekdal is so absorbed in his own plans

and dreams, which are hardly realistic, that he cares little about others. When Werle, a man who is committed absolutely to the truth, reveals to Ekdal that his daughter is the result of an illegitimate affair, Ekdal breaks down. He responds by trekking out on his own and leaving his family when confronted with this reality. Here Jopling states his main point: "Had he not been living so deeply encased in the protective bubble of self-serving illusions, he might not have been so helpless in confronting the situation; and he might have been more realistic and balanced in his response" (13). If Ekdal had been able to deal with negative thoughts and interpret them more realistically, he would have been able to avoid his extreme reaction and prevent the breakdown of his life of illusion. Jopling realizes the necessity of negative thinking in reality and illustrates the dangers of too much illusion through his example in *The Wild Duck*.

How can all of this information be reconciled and how can it be organized in a way that is meaningful? The answer seems to be contained in Roy Baumeister's "optimal margin of illusion" hypothesis. According to Baumeister, as explained by McAllister et al.,

there is an optimal margin of illusion for healthy, psychological functioning—a small positive distortion is optimal. Those who distort less than the optimal level have too realistic a view, which is depressing; behaviorally this may cause them to be hesitant to take on the more challenging projects that could lead to significant successes. In addition, those who distort more than the optimal level would suffer from an inflated view of themselves, which might lead them to undertake projects beyond their capabilities resulting in failure and posing a threat to self. (415)

This optimal margin can be illustrated by Jopling's literary case study, which presents two characters outside of the "margin." To be overly realistic, as in the case of Werle, is to become essentially fanatical and committed to correcting all of the illusions in the world. Such an extreme sense of reality can be prompted by negative thinking or depression. According to Kay Jamison, "Depression forces a view on reality, usually neither sought nor welcome, that looks out onto the fleeting nature of life, its decaying core, the finality of death, and the finite role played by man in the history of the universe" (119). Short states of depression (mild depression, that is) should thus not be feared, as they keep one in touch with the real. These states may allow one to

make realistic assessments of the self and the world. This is not to say that depression should be sought and glorified, but only that it has a true power in seeing reality. On the other hand, if one lives in the “protective bubble” of positive illusion that Jopling describes, any sharp jab at that bubble can pop it and leave the inhabitant vulnerable and broken. To live in an overly illusory world, like the one suggested by Taylor and Brown and illustrated by the character of Ekdal, is unhealthy. Such a world of positive illusions may lead to illusory happiness, but ultimate value, fulfillment, and well-being cannot be achieved in such a world. Some positive illusions, however, are necessary; as T.S. Eliot has said: “Human kind cannot bear very much reality” (qtd. in Jamison 119). The positive illusions of everyday experience and the reflective state of negative thinking are both necessary in sustaining mental health and well-being.

Yet it is negative thinking that needs to be emphasized here since it is too often “remedied” at the expense of reality. The common notion that people should always feel good about themselves has caused the power that negative thinking holds, in terms of realistic appraisals of the self, to be not only underestimated, but often shunned as well. It does not take any body of research to realize that an optimistic outlook is often adopted as a defense mechanism for shortcomings and failures. One must only think about the number of times that one has been told or told oneself that “You’ll do better next time” or “It wasn’t your fault, it had to happen that way,” even when saying such things is unwarranted. Yet realistically thinking out a problem, which will often involve thinking negatively, is the power that breaks through these often meaningless and counterproductive statements. Raymond Belliotti, the author of *Happiness Is Overrated*, poses the question, “Should everyone be happy?” (89). His answer is a resounding “no.” He notes that “worthwhile happiness demands deserved self-approval, not merely accommodation to world outcomes” (90). This refers back to the point that it is necessary to have a firm grip on reality to be truly fulfilled. Surely people must have positive illusions that they thrive upon, and this is not a bad thing. But living in an entirely illusory world, such as the one described by Taylor and Brown and portrayed by the character of Ekdal, is one that, while perhaps providing an illusory happiness for the person living in it, is ultimately devoid of meaning. How can one possibly be considered to be mentally healthy if he or she takes all feedback, regardless of its nature, as positive? The answer is that one cannot, just as the major depressive cannot. A life of positive

illusion based upon the self-serving distortion represents an extreme, just as a life of stark realism (or, perhaps, “negative illusion”) in major depression does. Living in a world without negative thinking is living in an illusory world, one that does not promote mental health or lead to true fulfillment.

Christopher Layne poses a set of questions at the end of his article which must be addressed here: “Could it be that some psychotherapies cure depression by helping the depressive erect a defensive screen against reality? Are there intervention strategies that shatter the defensive screen, force the client to face reality, and thereby produce an iatrogenic depression?” (852). By treating depression, is reality being deconstructed and replaced with illusion? The answer is yes, and erecting this “screen” is justified as long as it is not all-encompassing and does not allow for a false sense of accomplishment and self-esteem. Some illusion is necessary to survival, for those afflicted with severe depression are often so pessimistic that even their extreme realism becomes an illusion, but one that is life-threatening rather than self-esteem promoting. So why not treat those people with an inflated sense of self and illusory beliefs? It is not too often, in fact it is unheard-of, that one hears of someone seeing a psychotherapist or a psychologist for being unrealistically optimistic. Yet illusions of how good things are can be just as damaging as illusions of how bad things are. In his book *Illusion and Disillusionment*, Stanley Teitelbaum, a practicing psychotherapist, says that “While most therapeutic approaches reinforce the patient’s need to retain a hopeful attitude toward the future, [Omer and Rosenbaum] emphasize the importance of the work of despair, which involves letting go, and giving up hopes for the fulfillment of unrealistic expectations” (264). Those who exhibit the extreme of major depression on the opposite side of Andreasen’s scale (the positive side) should thus also be treated. Although it is not necessary (and perhaps unjust) to impose depression upon an unrealistically optimistic person, it is necessary to give that person a reality check, should a truly fulfilling life wish to be pursued. Although not necessarily a causal relation, exposing someone living in an illusory world to reality may provoke a state of depression.

In addition to the example of Ekdal and Werle in *The Wild Duck*, another case study may be helpful in seeing more clearly the danger of a loss of negative thinking. Stanley Teitelbaum presents the case of a college student named Chip who reports that he has been “feeding [himself] an illusion” (186). Chip was well-liked by many and was very personable, and yet he realizes that his “nice guy” attitude is just

something that he has adopted as a mechanism for preventing any further chance of being neglected, as he was neglected when his parents divorced (185). Chip admits that he is not as fulfilled (not as “together,” as he terms it) as he thought he was. According to Teitelbaum, this lack of fulfillment stems from his past inability to deal with negative thinking and to allow his negative thoughts to come through the façade he put up. Although one might argue, as Taylor and Brown most certainly would, that Chip was just fine (mentally healthy and fulfilled) with his nice guy attitude and personality, it is also true that his mental health and fulfillment were superficial. Once he took a serious look at what he was doing and came to a bump in the road, he realized that he was not truly fulfilled. If he, like Ekdal, had been able to deal with negative thoughts more appropriately, he would not have come to a sudden crash that brought with it a feeling of emptiness.

Negative thinking is often dismissed by society and its true value often not realized. This dismissal and underestimation is dangerous since negative thinking has a real and essential value in promoting mental health and fulfillment. Thus, the pessimist should not be looked down upon or considered mentally unhealthy, as so often such a person may be. The extreme optimist should also be regarded with a wary eye. Although one can perhaps survive for some time on pure positive illusion, there will eventually come a time when this illusion will be challenged and when the inhabitant of this illusory world will realize a lack of true fulfillment. Illusions do have their value, but the bottom line is that “Truth matters to people, even if it is at the expense of feelings of well-being, self-satisfaction and social adjustment” (Jopling 15). Negative thinking and positive thinking both have their roles in truth, and in reality. Some happenings and circumstances in life are inherently negative, and need to be taken as such. To remove negative thinking from the spectrum of human thoughts, as may seem to be desirable, is extremely hazardous, as it removes from people not only truths, but also reality, mental health, and true fulfillment.

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COMMENTARY: Lindsay Minton

The fact that some people think that rolling dice in their own hands will grant them more luck than if someone else rolls it for them made me chuckle. Okay, so maybe I'm a negative thinker, and I'm just being cynical. I just want to laugh at these people for their silly illusions. Naturally, I was drawn to Matt Colombo's paper about the power of negative thinking, titled, "Constructing a Middle Ground between Illusion and Reality: The Underestimated and Dismissed Power of Negative Thinking." Matt's paper pulls the reader through the back-and-forth history of the study of positive and negative thinking. Among the differing views of psychologists over the years, the important message of this paper shyly emerges: "The problem is that negative thinking is dangerously being discredited and dismissed by society, without consideration for its integral role in maintaining mental health and achieving fulfillment."

Who would have thought? Television shows and bookstores are saturated with messages like "boost your self-esteem" and *Avoid Negative Thinking: Choose To Be Positive* (Chad Tacket). We learn about self-esteem, and that negative thinking is "bad," in Middle School and High School Health classes. "Quick-fix" and "self-help"

are cultural necessities in our society. So the idea that a healthy dose of negative thinking can lead to better mental health can be a surprising, yet comforting, one.

The ultimate importance of this paper boils down to its relevance in our society. Which brings me to a question: Why not present the reader with solid case examples? There must be, and undoubtedly are, famous cases in our society of successful negative thinkers—whether they be politicians or celebrities. While a close reading of *The Wild Duck* provides literary insight into the issue of negative thinking, a real life example may have been better suited for this paper. Even with this lack, Matt's research still succeeds in making me *think*. And I am now a little more comforted to know that my negative thinking could lead to a better tomorrow.

RESPONSE: Matt Colombo

Thank you, Lindsay. I am extremely pleased to read that my paper has made you *think* about the issue that I have brought up. It was my goal, after all, to have people think about and realize an issue that I feel is relevant and important in society and in everyday life. If people can also apply what they have taken from my paper to their lives and realize that negative thinking can be a catalyst for promoting worthwhile and fulfilling change, then my goal and my expectations will be even exceeded. I certainly agree with you when you say that some additional solid examples from the “real world” could serve to strengthen my paper. At the same time, it was not really my intention to prove that people who think negatively are successful, but only that *everyone* can and should harness negative thinking to realistically examine their shortcomings and needs for change. Also, it is often true that one does not have to look far from his or her immediate environment to find people who are “down to earth,” although they may not be the most optimistic people. It is also not terribly difficult to find people who are coasting through their lives without realistic assessments of the things that they are doing. It is up to the individual to decide who is better off, and I hope that my paper has helped people to reach an informed decision on such a matter.

For those of you who have read all the way to this point, thank you for reading my work. Whether you agree with what I have said or not, I hope that you have at least seen and considered a new perspective, and taken something of worth from it.