Covering the Whole Spectrum of Human Experience: Positive Psychology Meets Existentialism in the Coaching Room

“We are living in a troubled age and a broken society”
(Paul Wong, 2010, p. 253)

“We struggle for survival, to meet basic needs every day, and we also strive for happiness, seek excellence, hope to learn and develop ourselves, and may do so every day as well, if we are fortunate enough. We attend to both sets of needs.”
(Alex Zautra, 2003, p. ix)

Existential
In lastingly difficult circumstances people face tough choices, anxiety, dilemma and conflict on a daily basis. The news are full of accounts of death, working meaningful jobs is considered a privilege and the consumerist society of individualistic western culture is at odds with our need to belong and creates a false freedom that Hirsch (1976) called the tyranny of small decisions. Existential thought is therefore more present than ever as people are more likely to be confronted with their ultimate concerns of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom 1980).

Positive
Yet, people, for various reasons, seem to strive more than ever for personal happiness, optimal functioning and excellence. It is to no surprise then that since its emergence in 1998 the field of positive psychology - the science of wellbeing, happiness and optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) - has experienced extraordinary growth (Yen, 2010). This essay will introduce how these two seemingly very different fields can benefit each other when integrated in meaningful ways. It will also suggest that and explore why a coaching context may be an ideal environment for the application of an integration of the two. Hence, his essay will introduce Positive Existential Coaching (PEC).

Growth
With rapid growth comes rapid media attention, especially when research findings can easily be interpreted (or in some cases even promoted by the researcher or author) as having found ‘the happiness formula’ or any other simple way to achieve happiness. Consequently the field of positive psychology seems to have acquired a reputation that over-emphasizes its focus on ‘hedonic happiness’ which makes it easy to regard it as a sort of ‘happiology’ “concerning nothing more than grinning yellow smiley faces [which] makes it difficult for positive psychology educators and researchers to be taken seriously and do their work effectively” (Hart & Sasso, 2011, p.91). Schumaker (2007) mourns that many psychologists and coaches have become ‘merchants of happiness’ promising people instant transformation, success and happiness and mass-marketing ‘happiness prescriptions’ as if it was just another feel-good commercial product¹ (Wong, 2011). Consequently, authors such as Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) have criticized what they perceived the field to be: as over-emphasizing the positive and ignoring the negative.² Wong (2010, p.4) noted that existential psychologists would feel particularly uncomfortable with these practices of simplifying and commercializing easy

¹ One of the pioneering figures in the field, Barbara Fredrickson infamously stated in an interview: “The curse of working in this area is having to distinguish it from Chicken Soup for the Soul” (Ruark, 2009).
² “Given that PP is just as much a popular culture movement as it is a fledgling academic discipline, it is not surprising that many people misunderstand the core content that preoccupies PP scholars.” (Hart & Sasso, 2011, p. 88)
happiness.” Van Deurzen in her book (Existential) Psychotherapy and the Quest for Happiness voiced similar concerns about positive psychology trying to establish shortcuts to wellbeing.

**Criticism**

Much of this early criticism can be dismissed fairly easily by the informed reader pointing to common misconceptions (e.g. confusing science with positive thinking or the law of attraction, as did Ehrenreich (2009)) or the research community’s strong commitment to the scientific method. For a good summary of responses to common criticism see Campos (2003). However, valid criticism exists and is best summarized by Lazarus (2003) who termed positive psychology “A movement without legs”. He criticized “errors in philosophical outlook, especially the tendency to […] keep the good and the bad separate […] studying research participants who find themselves living in idyllic circumstances” (Lazarus 2003, p.93). There are three points to consider in this statement:

1) Keeping the good and bad separate,
2) Research samples that are out of touch with the harsh realities of life and
3) Errors in philosophical outlook.

**Integration**

The first and second point have since been addressed and recent research shows that PP has increasingly entered the specialized areas of counselling psychology (Lopez et al., 2006) and health psychology (Schmidt et al., 2011). In support, Hart & Sasso (2011) used six different methodologies to find out what exactly positive psychology entails and have found support for the two research areas initially proposed by PP’s founding fathers Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), namely (a) the study of positive subjective experience and (b) positive personal traits; with growing attention on a third one, that hadn’t been anticipated and which addresses the above criticism, namely (c) resilience under conditions of hardship. Particularly the research areas of choice (tyranny and paradox of choice, Schwartz & Ward, 2004) and post-traumatic growth (PTG, Tedeshi and Calhoun 1996, Linley and Joseph, 2002) have demonstrated very well how positive psychology can inform and be applied to areas that were initially considered as negative. Establishing links to the existential realm they write: “[I]n integrating the positive and the negative within the context of post-traumatic growth, we have described a tragic hopefulness that encapsulates both a recognition of our existential position and inevitable mortality, and described how wisdom might be one positive outcome of the struggle with trauma (Linley, 2003). Despite this we still maintain a desire to live and grow and make the most of what we have (Linley, 2000, Linley & Joseph, 2002).

As proposed by many pioneers of the field (Seligman, 2002; Diener, 2003; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Boniwell, 2006), positive psychology was always meant to be integrated into mainstream psychology at a later date, hence the initial split between the positive and negative. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2003) wrote:

> “[W]e intended to do our best to legitimize the study of positive aspects of human experience in their own right—not just as tools for prevention, coping, health, or some other desirable outcome. We felt that as long as hope, courage, optimism, and joy are viewed simply as useful in reducing pathology, we will never go beyond the homeostatic point of repose and begin to understand those qualities that make life worth living in the first place. […] Unfortunately, there is a real

Kristjansson (2000) also proposed that PP ought to be less negative about life’s negatives and instead be more positive about life’s adversities and hardships. Literature on the positive psychology concept of post-traumatic growth (PTG, e.g. Tedeshi & Calhoun, 1996) provides a good example for the growth of the field overlapping into so-called ‘negative psychology’.
danger that positive psychology will become, to some extent at least, an ideological movement. Although those of us involved from the beginning are resisting this outcome as much as we can, to a large extent the future is out of our hands.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p.113-114)

**Philosophy**
Importantly, Csikszentmihalyi’s last sentence acknowledges the third criticism that Lazarus (2003) raised: The lack of a solid philosophical foundation in which to embed its knowledge; a problem that Linley and Joseph (2004) acknowledged as the field lacking a “solid theoretical, empirical and epistemological foundation, […] a theory that may account for and synthesize the research findings from the positive psychology tradition”(p.713); in other words: ‘legs’.¹

Now, as a science (which by definition is neutral and objective, Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011), positive psychology does not necessarily need legs. As Campos (2003) states, legs are the instruments that lead us somewhere. Science should be objective and open to emerging data without anticipating a certain course or destination. If, however, positive psychology were regarded as a movement with an agenda to go somewhere specific, then not having legs indeed resembles a critical problem, a problem that becomes profound reality as we try to apply - in practical ways - the knowledge that was extracted by science.

**Direction**
Considering the above, positive psychology indeed needs legs when it is to be applied in the coaching or therapy room because the process has a clear agenda: not simply to generate knowledge and explore but typically to move (forward) and go somewhere. Legs, following Lazarus (2003), can be a philosophical framework within which to embed the knowledge, concepts, tools and interventions that positive psychology has to offer. This essay therefore attempts to demonstrate how existential philosophy provides not only the legs that would allow PP to enter the helping-by-talking sector effectively⁵, but also a solid body in which PP concepts, knowledge, ideas, tools and interventions may be embedded into. I therefore argue that coaching is an ideal environment for an application of the integration of positive psychology into an existential framework. I believe that it will strengthen existential coaching practice by adding positive aspects of human existence into a field that is usually perceived as being concerned only with despair, anxiety, death, meaningfulness, isolation and daunting responsibility.

**Balance**
All coaches that the author (a student of Existential Coaching at the Existential Academy in London)⁶ has met that were practicing coaching from an existential angle, did not make their philosophical framework explicit and many even explicitly advised not too as it usually scared people and was perceived as too negative. At the same time positive psychology coaching (Biswas-Diener 2010) focus on positive aspects of human experience and, if unassisted, can only comfortably address its positive aspects.

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¹ Despite positive psychology having roots in humanistic psychology, Maslow (1962) being the first to have used the term positive psychology.

² By effectively I mean being able to recognize and work with the whole spectrum of human experience and being able to work with a wide range of clients while adhering to accepted ethical guidelines.

⁵ Integrating positive psychology into an existential framework might even lead to a revival of existential thought in a non-threatening manner, bringing it back into the awareness of people that were initially attracted by some of the promises that clever PP entrepreneurs have been marketing.
In stark contrast to existential psychotherapists, it typically utilizes psychometric assessment as well as tools and interventions validated by research (see for example Lyubomirsky, 2007). Encouraged by positive psychology’s media attention and non-existent regulations for coaching practice, many practitioners have adopted the public image of the field and hence offer short cuts to happiness under the false hood of this new science. It is therefore implied that, on the one hand, existential thought is in desperate need for something that may uplift it to a point that it can be openly applied, shared and utilized to enable clients to engage in life so that they may find what they seek (which is in most cases happiness, ultimately) and that positive psychology seems to be an ideal partner. On the other hand positive psychology coaching is in stark danger to lose its credibility due to its public image and its lack of ‘legs’ as an applied science within coaching. Hart and Sasso (2011) summarize this implication in their call for the field of positive psychology to become “more balanced, more humane, and more in touch with harsh existential realities” (p. 91).

In short, positive psychology offers conceptualisations, theories, empirical research as well as tools and interventions on all positive aspects of human experience while existential psychotherapy focuses mainly on the grim reality, core human inner conflicts and the source of people’s existential angst (anxieties stemming from a confrontation with their existential, unchangeable givens; unsolvable dilemmas resulting from simply being alive). Perspectives on existential coaching (Van Deurzen & Hanaway, 2012) opened up existential thought for clients outside of the therapy realm: people who are able to cope with life’s challenges but who nonetheless desire to ponder, reflect and get to know life better. I propose that Positive Existential Coaching has the ability to realize both disciplines’ full potential within the coaching or therapy room.

Overlap
In order to establish how these two seemingly contrasting fields overlap within the context of the coaching or therapy room, it is useful to consider the questions that people are most concerned with when entering a helping-by-talking relationship. Eventually (after unpacking what the client is truly concerned about) these questions are usually very similar, regardless if they are well functioning and want to become happier or improve otherwise or if they want to cope with trauma, hardship or despair. Wong (2010) suggests that “there are signs that positive psychology has come full circle to its existential-humanistic roots (King, 2001; Wong, 2009) and, in a first attempt to bring together the two disciplines of existential psychology and positive psychology, compiled the following six questions, that reflect the core existential dilemmas (as outlined by Yalom, 1980; Van Deurzen & Adams, 2011) as well as core areas of inquiry of positive psychology (by and beyond Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, as described earlier). He writes that “it is the spirit of asking tough questions and rejecting pre-packaged easy answers that characterizes existential psychology.” (Wong 2010, p.2). Since all these questions are ultimately linked to wellbeing in one way or another, they are very relevant to positive psychology. Table 1 lists these questions and the topic areas of both disciplines that they relate to in order to demonstrate considerable overlap and areas in which they complement one another.

7 “Test scores on personality, vocational interests and signature strengths can be helpful” (Wong 2010, p.3.). Also read Biswas-Diener (2010), Chapter six: Positive Assessment.

8 Harvey and Pauwels (2003) write: “[P]ositive psychology seems too glib about the fact that loss is so pervasive in human life. At times, the positive psychology movement seems to want to stress the positive emotions to such a degree that it can dismiss the facts of regular loss and grieving, that in time become part of most humans’ lives.” (p.126)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Existential</th>
<th>Positive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Who am I?</strong> What defines me? Who am I when everything is stripped away from me and I am reduced to a naked lonely soul? Is there anything unique and special about me?</td>
<td>Isolation Personal world Relational world Authenticity (Heidegger, 1962) Wong (2010) added the existential dimension of “Personal Identity”</td>
<td>Identity Character strengths Positive personal traits</td>
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<td><strong>2. How can I be happy?</strong> Why am I bored? Why am I so dissatisfied with life? What is the good life? Why is happiness so illusive? Is this all there is to life?</td>
<td>Personal world, spiritual world, meaning/lessness, balance between the worlds, Wong (2010) added the existential dimension of “The pursuit of happiness”</td>
<td>A vast majority of positive psychology is concerned with these questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. What should I do with my life?</strong> How should I then live? How could I live in a way that my life counts for something? What is my calling? To what should I devote the rest of my life?</td>
<td>Meaning Ultimate concerns Life mission</td>
<td>N.A by neutral scientists. One-fits-all approach is sought after only by those within the ‘movement’.</td>
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<td><strong>4. How do I make the right choices?</strong> How do I know that I am making the right decision regarding career and relationships? How can I tell right from wrong? What do I know what is the responsible thing to do in complex situations with conflicting moral demands?</td>
<td>Choice Freedom Responsibility Dilemma</td>
<td>Motivation Goals Future focus interventions Values in Action (strengths)</td>
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<td><strong>5. Where do I belong?</strong> Why do I feel so alone in this world? Why don’t I feel at home in this planet earth? Where is my home? Where do I belong? How can I develop deep and meaningful relationships? Where can I find acceptance?</td>
<td>Isolation Physical world, social world, spiritual world, I-thou relationships (Buber, 1971) Hell is other people (Sartre, 1944)</td>
<td>Relatedness Self Acceptance as a pillar of psychological wellbeing (Ryff &amp; Keyes, 1995)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>6. What is the point of striving when life is so short?</strong> Why should I struggle to survive when life is transient and fragile? What is the point of building something only to see it swallowed up by death?</td>
<td>Meaninglessness through loss of ultimate concern (Tillich, 1952); Death; Frankl</td>
<td>Positive aging Goals Meaning Frankl</td>
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Table 1: Wong’s (2011) 6 existential dimensions

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*While the importance of meaning is highlighted in various contexts, attaching, creating or finding meaning is an individual task and cannot be addressed by empirical science.*
Coaching
It seems that, in the context of the therapy or coaching room, all of these questions address an even more prevalent 7th question: “How do I recover, when adversity hits and how do I prevent it from happening?”
This question combines a) the existential core stance of the inevitability of adversity and the necessity of engaging in these universal challenges with b) positive psychology research on resilience in the face of hardship and strengthening natural defences through building on the positives. And in one way or another all of the above questions are very much linked to the 7th. In order to provide the best conditions for such an endeavour, the positive existential coach will provide an environment in which it is safe to explore these questions; questions that are ultimately about happiness but which in many cases will lead through a rather grim-looking existential valley. Even when these existential issues do not surface to an extent that they need to be specifically addressed and explored in detail, merely noticing them provides an extensive and extremely useful framework of the client’s worldview (beliefs, values, goals).
Reflecting this view back clients will provides them with a strong foundation of character from which they are able to make difficult decisions and engage in life’s challenges. Phenomenological enquiry sits at the core of this process. Positive psychology theories, concepts, tools and interventions can assist engaging in the process by addressing people’s urge to overcome problems and to be happy through a positive framework. Hence PEC utilizes positive psychology (strengths, motivation, hope, optimism, gratitude, growth and flourishing, meaning, values, relatedness etc) to raise questions about, explore and reach ‘existentially approved goals’, which involves a process of exploration and challenging limiting beliefs and assumptions about the world until the goal is authentic and in line with ones values so that it may be approached with intrinsic motivation and the services of the coach become void. Most of the question raised above will be at the start of or at some point part of this process. As Wong (2010) summarizes:

“[A]ll six types of existential anxieties [see Table 1] are essential for human flourishing. […] People not only need to confront these negative existential givens, but they can grow as a result of such encounters [cf. PTG]. Properly understood, existential psychology is about the resilience of the human struggle for happiness and significance in the midst of suffering and death. […] It is through struggle and fortitude that we grow psychologically and spiritually. It is only through embracing life in its totality and wrestling with ultimate concerns that we can uplift humanity and improve the human condition.” (Wong, 2010, p.8)

Application
Epistemologically, many positive psychologist have adopted a positivistic stance and, motivated by early research findings and exploding public attention and pressure, are trying to identify cause-and-effect relationships in order to be able to apply the knowledge they find to the ‘real world’. Folkman and Moskowitz (2003) for example express this agenda very clearly: “It is not enough for our work to be interesting; it has to be useful” (p.123). On the other hand, many existential thinkers struggle to apply existential concepts to their lives in practical ways. Considering the overlap between the two fields outlined in Table 1, positive psychology may therefore help to make existential concepts more approachable and to raise more awareness of their existence and addressing the underlying obstacles that emerge when people seek happiness or even seemingly mundane goals in the coaching room. It can provide things that can be done (such as simple, linear and practical interventions) and engages clients in positive ways to approach existential challenges. Even though many positive psychology interventions and techniques might only have a short-term effect, they are effective in initiating a dialogue and may open the mind and creativity of the coachee enough to be able to welcome the
positive potential of engaging in existential topics.\textsuperscript{10} Additionally, positive psychology conceptualisations are extremely useful to maintain a positive future outlook and positive attitude during client sessions.\textsuperscript{11}

**Happiness**

"From an existential perspective, to live fully and happily, we need to engage what we most fear." (Wong and Tomer, 2011, p. 101)\textsuperscript{12}

As demonstrated, integrating positive psychology aspects into existential coaching offers a positive exploration of a traditionally dark subject matter. It is argued that a fuller understanding of life and its meanings enables better preparation for living well. On a direct practical level for example, Wong (2011) proposes that death anxiety can be counteracted by engaging in a meaningful and authentic life (p.103).

Interestingly, the first milestone in Positive Psychology literature was named “Authentic Happiness” (Seligman 2002). Even though there is criticism regarding the term being in considerable conflict with a Heidegerian definition of authenticity when compared to the book’s content, it clearly sends a message: There is more to happiness than enjoying oneself. Seligman moving away from the term happiness in research adopting instead the term flourishing (2011) mirrors this development. An existential take is that “authentic happiness rises from embracing suffering as the essence of the human condition.”\textsuperscript{13} [Life is] a series of paradox, predicament and problems. Life is also full of striving, questing and victories’(Wong, 2011, p.4). This quote links the topic back to where it started, to the inseparability of suffering and happiness.

**Duality**

The dynamic interplay between these dualities is the main hallmark of Existential Positive Psychology (derived by Wong, 2010), which proposes that “positives cannot exist apart from negatives and that authentic happiness necessarily grows from pain and suffering.” (p.4). Similarly Camus (1968) stated that “[t]here is no joy of life without despair” (p.56). This is to say that any form of coaching that does not address despair, hardship, adversity, pain or suffering, cannot lead to growth and personal development. Consequently, Wong – adopting an integrative stance towards the existentially and positive psychologically relevant topic of death and meaning – proposes a dual-system model of achieving the good life (Wong, in press) bringing together Terror Management Theory (TMT, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Shamel, 2004; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, & Maxfield, 2006) and Meaning Management Theory (MMT, Neimeyer, 2001; Tomer et al., 2008;Wong, 2008). It recognizes that death anxiety can have either a negative or a positive

\textsuperscript{10} It seems important to note that the author does not suggest to lure people into a coaching relationship under the hood of becoming happier but then confronting them with their existential reality. However, when exploring the 6 core questions that people sooner or later ask themselves, the responsible coach should be familiar with what they relate to. It is reasonable to suggest that a combination of existential thought and positive psychology is ideal to be informed about both extremes of human spectrum.
\textsuperscript{11} Further support for PP’s application in coaching comes from Held (2004) who proposed that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not beneficial to the advancement of the field of positive psychology and that individual differences are to be incorporated into its application. Coaching and therapy, typically delivered one-to-one, therefore seem to be ideal.
\textsuperscript{12} Existential Positive Psychology (EPP, Wong, 2011) advocates the following three types of mature happiness:
(a) Authentic happiness which flows from being an authentic person
(b) Eudemonic happiness which comes from being good and doing good
(c) Chaironic happiness which arises from our spiritual nature.
\textsuperscript{13} Which is also the first condition that Buddhism embraces.
impact, depending on how one reacts to it. He writes: “We can never escape from the reality of death, but we can always use our capacity for meaning, spirituality and narrative construction to transform death anxiety” (Wong, 2010, p.8.). Many other areas of concern that coaching clients bring into the coaching room relate in similar ways to both existentialism and positive psychology. Some examples are decision making (autonomy, choice, freedom), relationships (isolation, relatedness) and change (freedom, motivation, goals, adaptation, contentment/satisfaction). In the author’s view, all of these topics are dynamically linked and while studying them separately through empirical research is possible (and often necessary), in the coaching room they need to be approached from a whole-person perspective and put into context using a sound philosophical underpinning.

Future
Young-Eisendrath (2003) in the following quote summarizes the need for a sound philosophical understanding of the whole person:

“Solid psychological science requires much more than an adequate acquaintance with quantitative methods and tools of investigation. It requires a refined analysis of assumptions that we, as researchers, make; an ability to see the context in which we are asking our questions; and acknowledge of the implications of our hypotheses in relation to our assumptions and our context. In other words, we need a sound philosophical understanding of the ways in which we attempt to study ourselves.” (Young-Eisendrath, 2003, p. 170).

It is therefore absolutely necessary to adopt an integrated stance as the whole of human experience is likely to unfold right in front of the practitioner. I believe it is our responsibility to be able to - if not manage or work with – at least notice, appreciate or acknowledge the full spectrum of the client’s experience.

Therefore this integration might go beyond coaching and could inform the future of positive psychology’s application in the helping-by-talking sector.14 If positive psychology researchers and especially practitioners solidly integrated existential thought and let it inform their practice they would likely adopt a more balanced stance and could study and expand their field in perspective to life as a whole and with a better understanding of the human condition and the accompanying core dilemmas. From this stance they are likely to be more effective in researching what positive aspects may contribute to or how they might influence this condition.

Conclusion
Hart and Sasso (2011) exploring the contours and boundaries of positive psychology have suggested that a new identity is emerging for positive psychology in the second decade of the millennium, which Wong (2011b) celebrates as Positive Psychology 2.0. After Yalom (1980, 2009) had successfully rephrased existential thought in language that people can understand and relate to and brought its core concepts into a format that can be applied in the therapy room, its core philosophy has now successfully entered the realm of coaching (Van Deurzen and Hanaway, 2012).

Initiating the integration of both disciplines, Wong (2010, 2011) built first theoretical bridges between existential and positive psychology with regards to their roots, the duality of human experience and existential conceptualisations of happiness. This essay has added to and

14 To continue the metaphor, existential coaching can stand on its own two legs, even if it has no arms (grounding in empirical research, assessment and interventions) it can use to reach out to today’s public. However, positive psychology will have its arms busy preventing itself from constantly falling over. An integration will stand on firm legs able to reach out and embrace the full spectrum of human experience.
enhanced Wong’s model and demonstrated why and how an integration of the two disciplines may enter the coaching and therapy room with great success. It is concluded that positive psychology can be embedded into an existential framework, that this embedment fills the gap that had been the most difficult criticism to the field, and that the benefits include a focus on the whole spectrum of the client’s experience and the applicability and popularity among the whole range of the population in times where it is harder than ever to separate between happiness and despair.

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