Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Preface

It is with great pleasure tinted with a touch of pride that I am sitting down to write an introduction to this collection. I can safely say that of the many books written on positive psychology in the 15 years since its inception, this one provides the best evidence that the perspective has matured into a coherent and fruitful conceptual domain, offering fresh directions for theory and research, and the promise of becoming a major sub-field of psychology.

I became involved in positive psychology because of an increasing unease with the image of man that has emerged in the last century. Following the lead of the other sciences, psychology in the 20th century tried to break the reality it was studying into the smallest possible units of analysis. The great success of physics had been the discovery of sub-atomic processes; biology became a serious science after it evolved into microbiology; even philosophy tried to reach wisdom by the analysis of "protocol sentences". Not surprisingly, psychologists followed the trend – even while it was becoming increasingly clear that analytic precision in the other sciences was coming at the price of a loss of synthetic understanding. So from Wundt's labs in Leipzig to Skinner's mazes at Harvard, behavior was broken down into its smallest units, and then put back together as the scientific representation of what mice and men were like. So psychology provided us with a picture not unlike what is given to a customer who wanders into a hall of mirrors at an amusement park: here he looks like a skeleton, next he looks like a hippopotamus . . . all the pictures are sharp, they are real. But we know they are not true representations of ourselves: it is the way that the mirrors were built that creates these phantoms. Unfortunately, this realization has not yet dawned on many who read the accounts of who we are, based on some of the research psychology has spawned. They do not realize that just as the mirror in the amusement park distorts our true image, the conditions in the laboratory experiments often distort what our thoughts, values, and behaviors are truly like. This is why reading a volume like the present one, which tries as much as possible to describe and interpret human behavior in its real complexity, and in realistic contexts, is so invigorating.

This volume also makes a unique contribution in clarifying what Seligman has called the "third pillar" of positive psychology: namely, positive institutions. Thus far, institutions have been studied mainly in terms of what they contribute to the first two "pillars" – to positive experiences or to character strengths. The editors made a wise decision in focusing the volume on *positive change*. By so doing, they have foregrounded an aspect of positive psychology that rarely appears in the literature. Currently institutions – family, schools, workplaces – are seen as providing experiences that produce either positive or negative affect in people. The research questions are of the type: why do children dislike schools? Why do lawyers hate their jobs? Of course, these are important questions, but if pursued exclusively they narrow the scope of our

understanding until we risk validating the caricature of our critics, and turn positive psychology into "happiology" – a search for hedonic well-being, with a short and shallow future.

In their magisterial introduction, the editors outline a much broader view of the relationship between the "three pillars". The relationship is not all one-way, they point out. How we feel about them determines the future of institutions just as much as we are being affected by them – by the technology, economy, and social arrangements into which we are born. This perspective, first articulated by Professor Fausto Massimini at the University of Milan, and built upon by Paolo Inghilleri in his powerful book translated into English as *From Subjective Experience to Cultural Change*, is clearly articulated in the Introduction of this volume, and serves as the theoretical foundation for most of what follows.

The two chapters following the Introduction also make an indispensable contribution to the emerging domain of positive psychology. Those who write in this new field (myself included) spend a great deal of effort reassuring their readers that positive psychology is not developing as an antithesis to the existing field, but rather builds on and tries to enrich previous knowledge. Yet we rarely bother to show how the synthesis between general and positive psychology could be accomplished. Chapters 2 and 3 in this volume are exemplary first steps in that redressing this unfortunate state of affairs.

Each if the remaining ten chapters opens up a new window showing different vistas of how an understanding of flow and optimal experience interacts with some fundamental aspect of the human condition, ranging from technology to the environment, from politics to psychotherapy, from sports to business, from everyday experiences to the intergenerational transmission of values and skills. Each of these vistas promises an exciting intellectual adventure for the interested scholar to embark on. I wish I could go on and on, exploring the ideas that these chapters present. But my role in this venture is similar to that of a curator introducing an exhibition of contemporary art to a visiting audience. The visitors have not come to hear the curator, but to experience the art directly. To do so all you have to do is turn the page.